Research Article

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Lived Afropolitanism: Beyond the Single Story

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Abstract: It has been several years since the term "Afropolitanism" was coined and instigated an intense debate in both the offline and online world. Although Afropolitanism is celebrated for highlighting positive depictions of Africa, it has also been criticised for its supposedly exclusive and elitist focus. Several scholars have distinguished Afropolitanism from Pan-Africanism by framing it as the latter's apolitical younger version. Following the discussion around these perceived differences, this paper investigates how Afropolitanism negotiates the African diaspora discourse in relation to Pan-Africanism. Thus far, the study of Afropolitanism has remained mostly limited to the field of literary and cultural studies. In order to move the discussion on this term further, this paper explores the lived experiences of twelve black Londoners with Afropolitanism and Pan-Africanism. By using the notion of "performance," I show that Afropolitanism and Pan-Africanism are constructed and deconstructed in both diverse and overlapping ways. The narratives emerging out of this dialogue question the centrality of the Middle Passage epistemology and the tendency to essentialize experiences in the African diaspora discourse.

Keywords: diaspora, cosmopolitanism, race, resistance, homeland

Introduction

"Is Pan-Africanism dead or alive?" This question served as the debate contention of London's *Centre of Pan-African Thought*'s first event on Friday 3, June 2016.[1] On the day of the debate, a group of predominately black people gathered in a neo-classical lecture hall in London to discuss Pan-Africanism's present state of affairs. Audience members were invited to fill in polling cards to vote in response to the central burning question. In spite of the many obstacles that people identified, 57 out of the 75 visitors agreed that Pan-Africanism is still alive today. However, throughout the evening, participants addressed the difficulty of making Pan-Africanism appealing to a younger generation of black youth coming of age in Britain. In order for it to remain relevant, speaker Jo Dash argued that it is necessary to move from "victimhood" to "warriorhood." He continued that it means that "we have to try something new in order to achieve something new."

Meanwhile, a series of "isms" and descriptors have entered the "marketplace of styles and identities" (Kirmse). Afropolitanism, Afrofuturism, Afrocentrism, Afropunk and Afropean among others, have gained (renewed) popularity with the advent of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media among young people of African descent (Osekre). One of those *isms*— Afropolitanism—generally described as

1 In the event announcement, Pan-Africanism was described "as the idea that people of African descent have common interest[s] and should therefore be unified." The call for unification referred to in the event description, has been deployed in a collective struggle against a common (white) oppressor throughout time (Ifeknuwigye 317).

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cosmopolitanism with African roots (Gehrmann 61; Toivanen), forms the focus of this study. The term was popularised by Taiye Selasi in her introduction of the "newest generation of African emigrants," also known as "Afropolitans." Members of this "scattered tribe"—as Selasi calls them—continue to have strong ties to the African continent but know at least "two G8 cities like the back of their hands" (Gehrmann 61).

Afropolitanism has been the subject of intense debate in both the offline and online world ever since the term was coined. Many scholars (Dabiri; Abebe; Santana; Kigotho) have drawn a sharp distinction between Afropolitanism and Pan-Africanism in order to brand Afropolitanism as an "apolitical narrative of transnational consumer lifestyles" (Pahl 77). Yet, the controversy surrounding the term urges us to reconsider the call for a more inclusive understanding of the African diaspora (Zeleza; El Tayeb). In spite of the criticism, Afropolitanism is credited for illuminating gaps within the field of African diaspora studies (Wasihun).

The historical study of the African diaspora in the US (Africana Studies), which is often conflated with Paul Gilroy's framework of the Black Atlantic, still centres the Middle Passage in the formation of the African diaspora (Edwards 61). In the process, "Africa" merely figures as a static and silent presence. Moreover, the discourse is characterised by the uncritical application of the Black American experience to other parts of the world and perpetuates the marginalisation of Black Europe (El Tayeb 44-45; Zeleza; Wright, *Physics of Blackness* 14). Therefore, it is important to explore how Afropolitanism critically revises transnational frameworks for transnational processes (Skinner).

In order to capture the complexity of African diasporic experiences, it has become necessary to interrogate ideas such as diaspora, cosmopolitanism and Pan-Africanism (Ede 88). Therefore, this study examined how Afropolitanism negotiates the African diaspora discourse[2] in relation to Pan-Africanism. The study of Afropolitanism has been mostly limited to literary and culture studies (Wawrzinek & Makokha; Gikandi; Knudsen & Rahbek). Although disciplinary boundaries may be arbitrarily defined, Anthropology is rarely involved in the discussion. This is reflected in the great lack of empirical data on this phenomenon (Lavie & Swedenburg 18; Hassan 10). In order to fill this gap, I attempt to mediate between literary and cultural studies and the study of lived experiences. In qualitative research, the lived experience approach privileges experience "as a way of knowing and interpreting the world" (Boylorn 490). Moving "beyond the text" (Weate 27) contributes to a deeper understanding of Afropolitanism and Pan-Africanism.

This interdisciplinary journey takes me to London: the hub of diverse African diasporic communities. Rather than taking the concept of the "African diaspora" for granted, I attempt to show how categories within the diaspora are constructed according to power relations (Brah 183). This begins by exploring "Afropolitanism" and "Pan-Africanism" in relation to the concept of the "African diaspora." Following this, I ground this study in the local context to explain how dynamics of everyday life give rise to forms of transnational community. Rather than imposing ideal types of the *isms*, the notion of "performance" is used in the subsequent sections to look at the reappropriation of Afropolitanism and Pan-Africanism in the everyday lives of black Londoners.[3] By dissecting these performances, I show that Afropolitanism is not necessarily at odds with Pan-Africanism but refashions this legacy. Through the act of unpacking, Afropolitanism's multifaceted nature allows us to experiment with the concept of the "African diaspora."

African Diaspora Discourse

In a 2015 TedTalk, Taiye Selasi suggested: "what if we asked, instead of 'where are you from', 'where are you a local?'." According to her, the latter tells us more about "who and how similar we are." This is based on the idea that "identities" are shaped by local experiences. Selasi calls herself "multi-local" because

2 The notion of the "African diaspora discourse" is explicitly used to critique the hegemony of the United States in the study of the African diaspora. It is important to mention that the African diaspora is studied in different ways in many parts of the world. For further discussion of African diaspora scholarship, see Olaniyan & Sweet.

3 My group of interlocutors consists of a mix of UK based people of Afro-Caribbean and West-African descent. This also includes persons who are categorised as "mixed race" in the British context.

she feels at home in several places in the world and privileges culture over country. This sense of self is characteristic for the Afropolitan that Selasi sketches (Hassan 14; Gikandi 10).

> You'll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes…; others merely cultural mutts: American accent, European affect, African ethos… we are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world.

Taiye Selasi's Afropolitanism offers a refreshing counter-narrative against the overexposure of stereotypical images of Africa that prevail in the Western public discourse (Gikandi 9). Contrary to the "single story"[4] of Africa as a poverty-stricken country, Afropolitanism seems to provide visual evidence of the "Africa Rising" narrative. This Afro- optimistic perspective mostly focuses on booming economies and growing middle classes in Sub-Saharan Africa (Makokha 93; *Why I am (still) not an Afropolitan* 105). It challenges the view of an isolated and marginal Africa by showing its involvement in global processes that shape our everyday reality (Gikandi 11). Moreover, while Africa has a passive role in Gilroy's Black Atlantic, Africa appears to reconfigure diasporic connections in Selasi's framework actively. Minna Salami who is known for her Pan-African feminist blog *Ms. Afropolitan*, even argues that Afropolitanism differs from the concept of the "African diaspora" in terms of its situatedness. While the diaspora often takes place outside of the continent, Salami's Afropolitanism "exists both on the continent as well as in the diaspora" (*My Views on Afropolitanism*).

Although "Afropolitanism" appears to highlight Africa's *agency* in the African diaspora discourse, cultural commentator Emma Dabiri argues that it silences the voices of the majority of Africans (*Why I Am Not an Afropolitan*). Precisely because "Afropolitanism" is often used in relation to young African elites in order to affirm the idea of progress in Africa ("Africa Rising"), Dabiri fears that it becomes Africa's next single story (*Why I Am (Still) Not an Afropolitan* 105). Yet, Dabiri and several other critics refer to consumerism as one of the main challenges to Afropolitanism. In their view, fashion and luxury items dominate the "Afropolitan" experience and therefore lacks transformative potential (*The Pitfalls and Promises of Afropolitanism* 202, see also Bosch Santana; Ponzanesi; Toivanen).

While Afropolitanism has been under scrutiny for supposedly focusing solely on individual self-empowerment through consumerism, Pan-Africanism has been praised for its collective emancipatory goals (Ede 91). It has therefore been argued that Pan-Africanism is better equipped to deal with issues regarding the emancipation of black people anywhere in the world. The main concerns of Pan-Africanism[5] have changed depending on the historical circumstances.[6] Pan-Africanist discourses developed in the 18th century at the time of slavery and in turn gave rise to the term "African diaspora." Yet it was not until 1965 that this concept received renewed attention due to the efforts of historian George Shepperson (Olaniyan & Sweet 5). Inspired by the traditional notion of the "Jewish experience," Shepperson conceptualised the "African diaspora" in terms of the impact of the forced migration of enslaved Africans: an eternal desire to return to a "lost" home and the emergence of a collective identity.

Early uses of the term emphasise dynamic processes as it responds to political oppression and dislocation from a place of "origin" (Butler 30; Raman 22). The "African diaspora" is thus not simply a "neutral" concept but linked to particular activist agendas, ranging from the abolitionist to the anti-(neo) colonial struggle (Butler 23; Fryer 272). In this framework, the diasporic subject becomes the "savior of history" merely by occupying a position at the margins. This rests on the idea of the diaspora "as filled with the potential of the dissident outsider." According to Parvathi Raman, this particular reading is evident in Clifford and Gilroy's work, which presents a romanticised notion of the "diaspora (22-24)."

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4 In 2009 the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie gave a TedTalk entitled 'the Danger of a Single Story', which addresses the problem of stereotypes.

5 Edwards distinguishes Pan-Africanism from pan-Africanism in order to draw attention to the diverse narratives that emerged out of the main historical movement. The latter situates francophone Pan-Africanism and Négritude within the wider frame of the African diaspora (49).

6 Mbembe identifies two types of solidarity within the Pan-African discourse: a racial and transnational solidarity, and an international and anti-imperialist solidarity (26).

This perspective implies that Afropolitanism can only become part of the African diaspora discourse if it carries a transformative capacity. Understandably, these assumptions helped to come to terms with the legacy of transatlantic slavery. However, it runs the risk of overlooking black cultural practices that are not necessarily considered subversive (Monson 14). Hence, an understanding of the history behind the concept of "diaspora" helps to make sense of the criticism on Afropolitanism's perceived lack of concern with social and political change.

Yet, rather than turning to a debate that reduces Afropolitanism to Pan-Africanism's negative counterpart, I am more interested in exploring how these concepts interact with one another. For example, while renowned intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois advocated racial solidarity through the ideology of Pan-Africanism, he also promoted his cosmopolitan vision. According to Salami, Du Bois developed an "Afropolitanistic theory" which entails the principle that "societies where people are enriched by one another's differences are desirable" (*Afropolitanism and Identity politics*). Instead of presenting this tension as a problem, it is more useful to look at how tactics are strategically employed depending on particular moments (Shelby & Gilroy 117-19; Lavie & Swedenburg 4-5).

Afropolis London: Methods and Context

In light of the perceived tension between Pan-Africanism and Afropolitanism, this paper draws on an empirical study conducted from June to August 2016 which includes the views of twelve black Londoners on both concepts. My group of participants (see table 1 below) consists of a mix of people of Afro-Caribbean and West-African descent, between the ages of 23 to 50.

Table 1: Group of research participants

Name[7]	Occupation	Ethnicity
Nigel Stewart	Founder of the Centre of Pan-African Thought	British Jamaican
Sana	Filmmaker and founder of a creative art platform focused on African narratives	British Ghanaian-Maltese
Auntie Akosua[8]	Barrister	British Ghanaian
Minna Salami	Writer, speaker and founder of the Ms. Afropolitan blog	Finnish Nigerian
Rose	Freelance writer, black community centre employee and organizer of *Meetup* group Afropolitan Elite	British Jamaican
Yemi	Student and fashion designer	British Nigerian
Eric	Broadcaster at an Afropolitan radio station	British Ghanaian
Sarah	Event planner and organizer of Meetup group London Afropolitans	British Nigerian
Cece	Event planner and fellow organizer of London Afropolitans	British Jamaican
Ama	Freelance writer	British Nigerian-Sierre Leonean
Linda	Writer and co-founder of an African literary platform	British Ghanaian-Lebanese
Imani	Student	British Ghanaian-Nigerian

7 In order to respect the anonymity of my interlocutors, I use pseudonyms, unless a person has consented to the disclosure.

8 Madam Akosua preferred to be referred to as 'auntie'. According to her, this is part of the 'African tradition': 'in the African context, someone doesn't have to be your biological child to be your child. That is why you say auntie to me. It does not mean we are related by blood.'

Among this group, Pan-Africanism is fiercely advocated by Nigel Stewart, Sana and Auntie Akosua. Their shared interest in Pan-Africanism is reflected in their activities as community organisers in London. The rest of the participants actively engage with Afropolitanism, and some express an interest in both concepts. In order to avoid the risk of predefining Afropolitanism in my search for research participants, I made use of *MeetUp* to locate Afropolitan groups. *MeetUp* is an online social networking portal that facilitates online meetings and helped me to connect with Afropolitan Elite and London Afropolitans.

Through participant observation at events (found online) where ideas around Pan-Africanism and Afropolitanism circulate, I met the rest of my interlocutors. This ranges from debates about the practical relevance of Kwame Nkrumah's Pan-Africanism to the Africa Writes Festival. Following this, I organised semi-structured interviews with participants about their construction of Afropolitanism and/or Pan-Africanism and its manifestation in their everyday lives. Expressive culture proved to be an important medium as most interlocutors shared their interests also through literature and writing, arts, fashion and activism. As I see myself as one of those "likeminded individuals," this research is inevitably shaped by my positionality. Being a young woman of Dutch Ghanaian and Surinamese background, I felt drawn to discussions around cultural identity on a personal and intellectual level. On the one hand, it required me to examine my assumptions closely and even more critically. On the other hand, my subjectivity enabled me to smoothly navigate the online and offline world.

London is the place where my interlocutors work/reside and their creativity flourishes. Edward Said points at the relevance of using the Western metropolis' as the focus of study because it provides extensive insight in the intellectual and artistic production of artists of African descent in Africa and the diaspora throughout history[9] (Hassan 13). The city also has a special status among my interlocutors, which they expressed by referring to the diversity that characterises cosmopolitan London.[10] The 2011 census records that London's population is made up of Indian, Pakistani, Jamaican, Polish, English, Ghanaian and Nigerian communities, among countless others. 36.7 per cent of this group was born outside the United Kingdom, compared with 13 per cent for the UK as a whole (*Diversity*). Against this background, London was set apart by interlocutors from what was seen as a less diverse and racially accepting Britain. In the wake of Brexit, London's distinctive place identity has been reinforced more than ever (*Petition for London Independence Signed by Thousands after Brexit Vote*).[11] Due to London's perceived unique position, Salami calls London the only place in Great Britain where she could live as a person of African heritage ("*Pretty*").

The statistics show London's large, heterogeneous black population,[12] which includes both established and more recent migrant communities.[13] The presence of diverse and overlapping diasporic journeys has therefore inevitably led to the incorporation of different migratory phases in African diaspora studies in Europe: from movements of Africans in the colonial period to current refugee flows[14] (Anthias 1; Ifeknuwigwe 320-21). Hence, it is not surprising that London is significantly influenced by Africa. Salami even describes London as *afropolitan*, but she distinguishes it from *Afropolitan* cities in the African continent. In her view,

9 Like many other political traditions such as Négritude, Pan-Africanism was largely created in cosmopolitan metropoles (Butler 24). London served as the symbolic centre of the movement because it was first and foremost the place where diverse African diasporic agents converged (Fryer 272). London is also often mentioned as one of the places where "Afropolitans" reside, both in popular culture and in the media, as well as in academic studies (Makokha 18).

10 Werbner argues that migrants, refugees and exiles often feel a sense of rootedness in the cities where they live rather than the whole country in which they settle. This is related to the presence of extensive social networks (573).

11 Unlike vast swathes of England, the overwhelming majority of Londoners voted to remain in the EU. According to the petition's organiser James O'Malley, London is "radically different" from the rest of Britain as a "world city" and hence deserves to remain in the EU.

12 The Black African community is the largest non-white group in Greater London with a population of 577 thousand in a city of 8.17 million residents (*Ethnic Group*, 16).

13 It is important to mention that the census produces *abjects* in many different ways; those who remain invisible from the official view such as the many undocumented migrants (Werbner 573). Although the journeys of undocumented migrants are part of the historical continuum within the African diaspora in London, this group is often marginalised in classic conceptualisations of the diaspora (Ifeknuwigwe 324).

14 Zeleza reminds us that the nature of the African diaspora is not exclusively defined by the phases mentioned earlier. For example, in *Staying Power*, Fryer points out that communities of people of African descent have been established in London as early as the 16th century.

the latter (with a capital A) are "automatically imbued by African history, myth, culture, geographies and lifestyles" while this is not the case in London (interview). The intimate connection between Africa and the diaspora is reflected in the construction of "home" of Linda, the British Ghanaian-Lebanese co-founder of an African literary platform:

> To me, Ghana was home in terms of my home in London. So what I ate at home, my friends, my family, the traditions, how we interacted; these are the things I understood as Ghanaian to me.

In the imagination of most interlocutors, London thus appears as an *Afropolis*: a city that is decidedly African and cosmopolitan (Byala 210).

Due to different experiences with and understandings of "cosmopolitanism," it is important to not simply present the idea of a harmonious community of cosmopolitan citizens. Müller points out that power defines the accessibility of "cosmopolitan" positions. This perspective reveals the exclusionary practices that occur in the city (Massey 3420). For example, in a telling article in the Evening Standard, London is described as a place where "Afropolitans" unwind and occupy million-dollar residences in the city. Yet, meanwhile, the underclass is further pushed out from the centre in processes of gentrification (Massey).

As the discourse around Afropolitanism has elitist connotations, it is important to remain aware of how the concept could potentially obscure inequalities. At the same time, the controversy surrounding Afropolitanism has signalled the need to recognise the diaspora as a heterogeneous category differentiated along the lines of class and so on (Brah 196; Neumann & Rippl 160-61). Despite Dabiri's important contribution to a wider debate on class inequality in Africa, her critique and that of many others mostly zoom in on luxury lifestyles and thereby essentializes Afropolitanism (Knudsen et al. 48-9). Hence, ironically, the narrative of the African elite is turned into Afropolitanism's single story. Rather than denouncing the term, Salami pointed out that the criticism of the term helps her to polish the concept. As one of the self-proclaimed intellectual shapers of the concept, cosmopolitan London represents a space to Salami that enables her to explore the problems with Afropolitanism (interview). In light of the tension between cosmopolitan conviviality and exclusion, the next section addresses how Afropolitanism relates to the experiences of black communities in London.

Performing *isms*

In order to move beyond Afropolitanism's "single story," this section focuses on how it is performed. The concept has thus far been discussed in relation to Selasi's identity politics, but Salami firmly moves away from this sphere. She rather sees Afropolitanism as a philosophical paradigm that informs her direction, purpose, goals and psychology (interview). Therefore, Afropolitanism and Pan-Africanism are not mutually exclusive but strongly intertwined (*My views on Afropolitanism*). It is thus not a matter of *being* an Afropolitan; it is about *living* Afropolitanism. The notion of "performance" helps to challenge essentialist conceptions because it draws attention to what one *does* rather than what one *is* (Salih 55). It is therefore commonly deployed to point out the situated, interactional nature of identity performance (Müller 3417). This study draws on this approach to show the multiple ways in which Afropolitanism is manifested. First, I will zoom in on the experiences of individuals attracted to Afropolitanism and Pan-Africanism. Who do these concepts speak to?

This question led me to London's Afropolitan Elite on *Meetup*, a group "dedicated to the beautiful, successful and ambitious black men and women of London." On a regular basis, events are posted in the group under the umbrella of black arts and culture. Rose created the group in 2015 after returning to London from a four-year period in Paris. Rose's time in this city had heightened her awareness of her "blackness" due to experiences of racism and her involvement in a black expat group consisting mostly of African Americans. Rather than bound to the London Metropole, political, cultural and intellectual developments thus have to be understood as grounded in a transnational diasporic community (Patterson & Kelley 27).

Having grown up outside of black communities in London as a result of urban segregation, Rose felt the need to reconnect and include more black people in her social network. In spite of this desire, Rose is aware of the exclusionary logic behind the term "elite." Yet she has reappropriated it according to her own vision, resulting in the opening line on the home page: "If you are beautiful inside, successful to your own standards and ambitious in the constant creation of yourself, then THIS GROUP will speak to YOU." The term "elite" thus stands for confidence rather than a high (financial) status in society.

For Rose personally, Afropolitan Elite creates the opportunity to celebrate her success without feeling guilty for separating herself from black working-class communities. This dynamic is reflected in the wide range of activities of the group: from black empowerment community events in Brixton to African literary festivals in Central London.[15] It challenges Hassan's concern over limiting the focus to the middle class and offspring of well-to-do diasporic Africans by using the term Afropolitan. Yet Rose emphasises that though the group highlights "blackness," it does not allow any space for "complaining." As the organiser of another *Meetup* group for women of colour (WOC), she maintains a strict distinction between "tackling whiteness" (WOC group) and "decentering whiteness" ("Afropolitan Elite"). In contrast to the WOC group, Afropolitan Elite focuses solely on embracing "blackness" through black arts and culture. Rose's perspective intersects with Mbembe's idea of Afropolitanism as different from Pan-Africanism, in the sense that it refuses any form of victim identity. However, this does not mean that it loses sight of injustices against people of African descent (28-29). Afropolitan Elite rather celebrates how black people are able to thrive in the face of oppression.

While this group mainly uses the African heritage as a source of inspiration to indulge in arts and culture, other interlocutors translate their understanding of it into activism. Nigel Stewart, the founder of the Centre of Pan-African Thought, is one of them; he organises a range of events to tackle "miseducation" among other things. Stewart shared that the absence of "Africa centred" teachings in his education led to a struggle with his "self-identity." This was rooted in experiences of exclusion and marginality, which were reinforced by his lack of contact with black people while growing up in a predominantly white neighbourhood outside of London. Through Pan-Africanism, Stewart developed "racial pride," which according to him, shapes the "African diaspora," and is the foundation for success in life. He, therefore, believes it is of utmost importance to pass the Pan-African narrative on to black/African youth as this would enable them to fight against institutional racism (interview). In his vision, a rediscovery of "African identity" is part of the Pan-African political project (Hall 223).

Diasporic Consciousness

Stewart's and Rose's experiences illustrate Clifford's argument about the inherent tension in diaspora discourses. Negative experiences nurtured a diasporic consciousness and in turn, resulted in an alternative (positive) sense of attachment (28-29). Rather than identifying as Jamaican—where his parents were born—or as Black British, Stewart first and foremost sees himself as "African." This sense of self went along with a denouncement of Afro-diasporic identifications in general in favour of a primordial affiliation. While Stewart strongly states an unbroken connection to Africa in the spirit of Pan-Africanism, Rose firstly highlights cultural hybridity that is at the heart of Gilroy and Hall's anti-essentialist theory, as a self-identified Afropolitan. Her conceptualisation of the African diaspora invokes Hall's vectors of similarity and difference. On the one hand, the first vector gives grounding with the past (similarity). On the other hand, the second one reminds us that this sharedness is based on discontinuity (difference): the experiences of slavery, colonialism and migration (Hall 227). Yet Rose's Afropolitanism is not limited to "Middle Passage blackness"[16] but incorporates a wider diversity of black identities (Wright, *Middle Passage Blackness*; El Tayeb 45). In other words, to Rose, "it can encapsulate whether you're African, mixed, Caribbean- whatever

15 Rose is not the organiser of the events but selects them according to her own strict criteria.

16 "Middle Passage Blackness" refers to the domination of the African-American experience as shaped by Transatlantic Slavery, in diaspora studies (*Wright, Middle Passage Blackness*).

heritage you have."

Although it is reflected in different ways, both Stewart's Pan-Africanism, as well as Rose's Afropolitanism, is about embracing the African background in the face of overwhelming odds. In doing so both equate blackness with Africanness, but this understanding cannot be taken for granted according to Rose. She, therefore, struggles with her membership policy as it only allows black people to become members of the "Afropolitan Elite" in order to "keep it a safe space." But what makes a proper black subject? (El Tayeb 44). The use of "political blackness" in the British context further shows the constructed nature of "race."[17] This movement centers a black signifier in order to draw attention to racist practices that affect non-whites as racialized subjects (Brah 13-14). Moreover, this example highlights that the role of the diaspora can be marginal in anti-racist movements (Anthias 12).

Although Rose recognises the significance of this anti-racist strategy, she believes that it obscures the unique African and Caribbean experience in Britain. In this context, Afropolitanism does not open up space for new alliances like in Mbembe's philosophical reading of the term. His Afropolitanism is accessible to white South Africans, Asian diasporic Africans and other groups (Gehrmann 65). He further argues that Pan-Africanism does not capture the complexity of "identity" in a globalised world in the way that Afropolitanism can. Rose rather emphasises how Afropolitanism allows coming in terms with "blackness." According to her, it "alludes to many different aspects of your identity as a black person." Rose used the metaphor of the city to exemplify her thoughts on the term further:

> If you're in a metropolitan city, anything happens. It is constantly changing; constantly evolving and I think it is that same thing. It is the idea of the new black. You don't have to stay in that same box that you're put in or given, but you can reinvent it and still be your beautiful black self.

Placing Afropolitanism in this historical genealogy forms the starting point for understanding the rise of diasporic identifications at particular historical conjunctures (Raman 29). In contrast to Mbembe's and Salami's view on Afropolitanism as aracial (*My views on Afropolitanism*), the "Afropolitan Elite" approaches the African diaspora within the logic of race. At the same time, Rose's complex desire to construct an inclusive black subjectivity draws attention to the "messiness" of black European identities (El Tayeb 50).

Intersection of Performances

In the previous section, I zoomed in on Afropolitanism and Pan-Africanism as performed by individuals navigating urban life. In order to place these performances in a wider context, I investigate how Afropolitan and Pan-African sensibilities are seen to be at play and interact with one another. Pan-Africanism, for example, is performed in different ways among my interlocutors. A few believe it is first and foremost about promoting human rights for all human beings. However, most interlocutors emphasise the idea of solidarity between people of African descent[18] globally. Similarly, Stewart emphasises that Pan-Africanism itself is merely a word: "I can call it black power, whatever. It doesn't matter. It just embodies the fact that we [people of African descent] have to unify to solve our problems." According to Stewart, the term has to be linked to behaviour in order to gain meaning. In line with the notion of "performance," he shared that he would "die a happy man until the moment comes that it is popular to say: 'I'm doing Pan- Africanism." This dynamic approach shows the problem with uncritical readings of *isms*.

The ambiguity of *isms* is further exemplified in the heavy criticism on the consumerist version of Afropolitanism in academic works, at the expense of other performances of Afropolitanism. By merely identifying as Afropolitan, one risks coming across as elitist and superficial (Pahl 76-77). This is due to the set of assumptions attached to the label such as that Afropolitanism starts with style rather than substance (Bosch Santana). Dabiri expresses

17 In my interview with Rose, she referred to British Algerian Malia Bouatti becoming the first black women to head up the National Students of Union. Rose's perspectives relates to the idea of 'blackness' in vogue, as argued by Charlie Brinkhurst-Cuff.
18 There are many equivalent definitions of the category of "people of African descent." The United Nations defines this group as descendants of the African victims of the Transatlantic and Mediterranean Slave Trade.

her concern over what she perceives as the "commodification of African culture through fashion and lifestyle." According to her, Africa is imagined as more "authentic" after the over-consumption of Black American culture by this mobile Afropolitan class. Hereby Dabiri points to the fact that "Afropolitanism" is heavily employed to promote "African inspired fashion" (*Why I am (still) not an Afropolitan* 105).

Indeed, simply a quick google image search for "Afropolitan" reveals pictures of mostly black women wearing "African inspired" fashion and accessories (*Why I am (still) not an Afropolitan* 105). Although it extends beyond the scope of this research, the visible presence of women and their role in the movement cannot be overlooked.[19][20] It points at the importance of acknowledging that diaspora experiences are always gendered (Ifekwunigwe 322; Campt & Thomas). One of the "members" of this female-dominated space, British Nigerian fashion designer Yemi, provides a more nuanced view on the phenomenon:

> I look at magazines and at what people are wearing in the streets in Africa [Lagos] and try to mix that with what is happening here in London, in Dalston. Creating something that is unique.... It just feels very Afropolitan because it is not typical African fashion. I'm creating my own prints inspired by both cultures.

It is not simply about using Africa as a "fresh source that is ripe for picking" as Dabiri claims. For Yemi, Afropolitanism represents "authentic creativity that comes from the motherland" but is situated in a diasporic context. This was reflected in Yemi's Afropolitan Fashion and Music Pop Up show, which took place on July 7, 2016, in Dalston. It was presented as an event that provides the "perfect fusion between urban East London and the cosmopolitan energy found across African cities." Rather than turning to a timeless Africa, Afropolitanism provides Yemi with the tools to merge a hybrid mix of influences in a "third space"; a "newness that enters the world" (Bhabha). Selasi states that this approach typifies the "Afropolitan consciousness."

This is in contrast to the dominant idea of the cultural base of Pan-Africanism among the majority of my interlocutors. According to them, returning to "African culture and values" is at the core of the ideology. Auntie Akosua used a proverb in my interview with her to reinforce a sense of authenticity: "no matter how long a log has been in a river, it doesn't become a crocodile... What makes you an African? It is DNA." Similarly, these Pan-African values were instilled by Sana's Ghanaian father during her upbringing. He feared that Sana would face identity struggles due to her mixed heritage (half Ghanaian and half Maltese), and felt that Pan-Africanism overcame the problem of non-belonging. Afropolitanism, on the other hand, highlights how intergenerational differences produces diverse diasporic subjectivities. Whereas parents are able to take their connection with Africa for granted as first generation migrants, children might mainly know their parent's country of birth through stories or occasional holidays. Afropolitanism allows interlocutors to engage with their heritage in their own distinct ways (see also De Witte 265).

From Shame to Pride

In order to understand the renewed interest in "African" or "Afropolitan" fashion among young people, it is important to situate it in within a larger context of Afro-cool aesthetics. Marleen de Witte describes Afro-cool as the passion to engage with a creative Africa through an emphasis on aesthetics in fashion, music and art (285). At most Africa or black culture-related events that I visited during my fieldwork period, I found myself surrounded by people wearing "African inspired" outfits, natural hairstyles wrapped around colourful scarves and other fashionable accessories. Additionally, most interlocutors referred to the popularity of Afrobeats in the UK mainstream as part of the trend mentioned earlier. According to many, this has contributed to a shift in perception towards Africa: from African roots as a source of shame to a source of pride. While the Caribbean community used to dominate the black British cultural sphere, interlocutors

19 Abebe conceptualises Afropolitanism as a movement that is led primarily by young women of colour.
20 On the relationship between African fashion and feminism, see Sika (2013).

argued that it is increasingly becoming "cool" to be African.[21]

On July 31, 2016, people joined in the performance of Afro-cool aesthetics at the Jazz Refreshed festival in London. Members of the *Meetup* group "London Afropolitans" were among the many fashionably dressed visitors. The festival was in line with the group's aim of "bringing culturally savvy black professionals" together to revive a more "niche" aspect of black culture. Although organiser Cece emphasised that the group was not politically oriented, fellow colleague Sarah recognised the importance of celebrating that we are able to *live* Afropolitanism in the public sphere today. Contrary to Selasi's narrative, Sarah argues that Afropolitanism is not a recent phenomenon but that it has existed since the early presence of African migrants in diaspora spaces. As a daughter of a Nigerian father and a white British mother, she described the racism she and her mixed family faced in a white neighbourhood outside London in the 1960s. Signs reading "no black, no Irish, no dogs" were a common sight in Britain and symbolises the overt racism of the time (Sherwood 4). In Sarah's view, the Afropolitan spirit awakened in the private sphere where members of the small Nigerian community gathered to find comfort and joy in their shared heritage. In the face of hostility, the social environment thus provides a sense of security and protection in the African diaspora (Akyeampong 209-10).

Although Afropolitanism appears to thrive on aesthetic appeal, it thus simultaneously engenders a critical consciousness. In fact, style has always been an important visual marker of "African consciousness" (De Witte 273). These examples of participants' lived experiences illuminated some of the complexities that are often neglected in engagements with "isms." Exploring how Afropolitanism is performed, reveals how people live through and respond to experiences (Boylorn 490), which precedes labels. In the next section, I address the notion of "home" as part of gendered diaspora experiences by elaborating on the interest in "Afropolitan" literature among my interlocutors.

Diaspora Blues

Recounting the history of Afropolitanism, Selasi claims that it started as a novel phenomenon with her short article as a key document (Makokha 18). Over time, the term intruded literary spaces, which is reflected in the label "Afropolitan literature." According to Linda, who leads an African literary organisation, this particular genre challenges the assumption that African literature only covers heavy topics such as poverty, famine, and corrupt governments. Notwithstanding the problems that Afropolitanism brings with it[22], Linda does recognise the significance of a term that encapsulates the complexity of diaspora experiences. To illustrate this, Linda described a fragment of Teju Cole's *Open City*:

> This [Nigerian] doctor is looking for home but he goes to Brussels, and that in itself shows that a Nigerian does not necessarily feel like his first place to call home is Nigeria... I think for readers, especially those coming from the West, this is interesting. This is not someone going back to Nigeria to discover their roots. This is not someone going Kunta Kinte on us.

This quote not only shows the recognition of "home" beyond the idea of the "mythical" homeland (Brah). It also problematizes the imposition of a phenomenology of "Africanness" that obscures diverse self-perceptions and is not simply defined by an uncontested notion of "blackness" (Wright, *Middle Passage Blackness*). The majority of my interlocutors who share an exclusive interest in Pan-Africanism, on the other hand, performed the desire to firmly refuse any identification with the national community in favour of the (imagined) homeland. To them, life in England is merely a temporary station as they espouse a real or symbolic return to Africa. This proclamation is strongly connected to experiences of social exclusions (Brah 193).

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21 Paul Gilroy states that the shift has to be understood against the background of the transformation of Black British communities: "We are moving towards an African majority which is diverse both in its cultural habits and in its relationship to colonial and postcolonial governance (cited in Hancox)."

22 Linda questioned the usefulness of the concept "Afropolitanism" for several reasons, one being the linguistic implication of the term. According to Linda, "Afropolitanism" seems to deny the fact that Africans have always been "global." She also critiqued the wide-coverage of so-called "Afropolitan writing" (focused on the diaspora) at the expense of "African literature."

It is the emphasis on hybrid ways of being African in so-called "Afropolitan" narratives that drew several interlocutors to the realm of Afropolitanism. As a Ghanaian who is "too much of a Londoner" in terms of her local experiences, Linda believes that Afropolitanism illustrates the "diaspora blues"; a poem by Ijeoma Umebinyuo.

> So here you are,
> Too foreign for home
> Too foreign for here
> Never enough for both.

The poem reflects the specific diaspora sensibility as discussed by most interlocutors involved in Afropolitanism. Blogger Ama described how her "diaspora blues" led to the creation of a blog dedicated to nostalgic memories of growing up as a British girl of Nigerian and Sierre Leonean descent in London.[23] She recalls the days that recent Nigerian immigrants collectively reconnected with "home" in communal spaces in the 1980s in London. In the same spirit, Ama attempts to "create a sense of community and identity" by sharing humoristic anecdotes in the online world through her blog titled "the Thrifty Afropolitan." However, Ama notes that she does not call herself an "Afropolitan" outside of the online world. She rather performs Afropolitanism on her blog to demonstrate how she navigates between different cultures as a "child of the diaspora." Afropolitanism thus allows Ama to situate her experience in the African diaspora discourse, which is exemplified in her selection of "Afropolitan memories" in one of Ama's blog posts:

- School pack lunch placed in an ice cream tub, much to your embarrassment, whilst all your other friends had nice, child-friendly tupperware. To be fair, this only lasted for a short period of time (thanks Dad for the intervention).
- Sandwich fillings—when your mum decides to make your packed lunch for a school trip and includes sardines, mackerel, boiled eggs- basically the smelliest fillings she can find deliberately designed to embarrass you. Meanwhile, all your friends are eating Dairylea and cheese and ham.

In this context, the concept of Afropolitanism appears to capture the idea of a sense of belonging that is not fixed but a dynamic, contentious process (Lavie & Swedenburg 16; El Tayeb 78). It undermines William Safran's diaspora model which returns to the "Jewish experience" as a reference point (Clifford 249; Raman). One of its central features concerns a longing for a lost home, which still dominates in the field of migration studies in Europe. El Tayeb questions the usefulness of this model because it places migrants either without or within the nation-state and potentially reproduces the myth of a white Europe (51-54). This trope has previously been challenged in Gilroy's hybrid *Black Atlantic*. Yet, Afropolitanism illuminates diasporic perspectives beyond this particular transnational space. It is constructed by my interlocutors as a tool to creatively play with the insider/outsider tension without the need to resolve it (El Tayeb 54). It is this *third time-space*, a position of *in-betweenness*, from which particular diasporic sensibilities are produced (Lavie & Swedenburg 16).

In other words, my interlocutors' Afropolitanism, forces us to explore transnational practices that cannot be reduced to the dichotomy of an essentialist "home" and a "hybrid" diaspora. Home is rather the "lived experience of locality" (Brah 192). At the same time, the desire to mark a physical place elsewhere as home draws further attention to experiences of marginality and the urge to overcome it (El Tayeb 60).

Discussion

It is hard to pinpoint when Afropolitanism came into existence. Yet the heated debate surrounding the term at dawn at the century signalled the need to rethink the concept of the African diaspora. In this research, I embarked on an interdisciplinary journey to ground the debate on Afropolitanism and Pan-Africanism

23 Thrifty Afropolitan initially started as a blog focused on resourceful living in the African diaspora. For more stories, see thethriftyafropolitan.com.

in lived experiences. In doing so, I attempted to undermine the tendency to treat *isms* as if they are fixed. It overlooks the fact that both concepts have to correspond to changing everyday realities in order to 'stay alive'. By employing the notion of "performance," I stressed the different manifestations of the terms. However, solving this issue by using a plural form—Afropolitanisms and Pan-Africanisms— as Ede and Shepperson suggest, could potentially result in a search for authenticity (Olaniyan & Sweet 51; interview Salami). There is thus no straightforward answer possible to the question of how Afropolitanism negotiates the African diaspora discourse in relation to Pan-Africanism. It would require the policing of terms while they overlap and diverge depending on the context, and are constantly in flux.

In the works of many, however, Afropolitanism becomes the radical "other" in relation to African diasporic politics. This understanding is inseparable from early uses of the concept of the African diaspora. As shown, the term was introduced to reinforce the idea and practice of Pan-African unity. In theory, however, it differs from the notion of the "African diaspora" as the latter does not contain the political overtones. However, in practice, the African diaspora discourse explores diasporic practices through a lens that is ingrained in black traditions of resistance (Edwards 51-53). Consequently, the diasporic subject is constructed as inherently subversive in character by virtue of being at the margin (Raman 2003). In light of Afropolitanism's participation in Afro-cool aesthetics, it is important to consider what constitutes the political. It might turn us to a philosophical debate about the roots of the term, but it is necessary to reevaluate some of the basic assumptions that underpin the African diaspora discourse in future research.

As Afropolitanism is often defined by its perceived problematic characteristics, most critics have overlooked lived narratives that expand our understanding of the African diaspora. In fact, it could be argued that Afropolitanism would not have such resonance if it was solely the exclusive property of the African elite (Skinner 4). This is reflected in the multiple performances of Afropolitanism by my mixed group of interlocutors. To most of them, Afropolitanism represents a gendered third space in which they can engage with their "African heritage" in their own terms. Although Afropolitanism forces us to move beyond the Middle Passage epistemology, Africa still mostly exists in the diasporic imagination. Pan-Africanism, on the other hand, is strategically performed to transcend the state of in-betweenness. The different views regarding the notion of "home" further show that the "identity of the diasporic community is far from fixed or pre-given" (Brah 183). Furthermore, it highlights that the African diaspora by definition is an "unfinished entity" (Gilroy cited in Ifeknuwigwe 317).

In order to resist the hegemony of African diaspora in the United States, several scholars (El Tayeb; Ifeknuwigwe; Brah) have drawn attention to the experiences of black populations in different European nation-states. However, I attempted to shed light on diaspora experiences beyond national paradigms by focusing on the "cosmopolitan" city. This could provide insight into forms of identification that create a "temporary sameness," reflected in anti-racist solidarity for example. This reality urges us to problematize the idea of the "African diaspora" (Anthias). In this research, however, Afropolitanism and Pan-Africanism mostly attracted members of particular black diasporic communities. Therefore, it includes a far from representative sample of the African diaspora. Hence the emphasis on "race" as an organising factor, counters philosophical conceptualisations of "cosmopolitanism" and "Afropolitanism" as aracial. This often reflects the social ideals of the theorists rather than the lived realities of people on the ground (Müller 3418). To them, performing Afropolitanism and Pan-Africanism in London opens up space to escape restrictive forms of categorisation in the process of imagining alternative futures.

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