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Afropolitanism as critical consciousness: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's and Teju Cole's internet presence

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Critiques of Afropolitanism that dismiss the concept because of its links to consumerism and commodification assume an unchallenging compliance of those considered as Afropolitans with dominant ideologies of consumption and the rule of capital. Considering Taiye Selasi's article 'Bye-Bye Babar', this seems plausible, but it is also a reductive interpretation that effaces the transformative potential of Afropolitanism. The literary works and online presence in public discourses of writers labelled Afropolitan show that they challenge and revise the present world order in the way that Walter Mignolo and other theorists of decoloniality envisage in their concept of 'critical cosmopolitanism'. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Teju Cole, for example, implement Afropolitanism as a critical assessment of global culture that defies a reduction of the concept simply to its commercial dimension. In their own ways, Adichie and Cole explore the affordances and the limitations of the internet, mobility and globalization.

Keywords: Afropolitanism; cosmopolitanism; decolonial theory; internet literature; Twitter

1. Introduction

> I'm an Afropolitan, a pan-African, an Afro-pessimist, depending on who hates me on any given day. I embrace all those terms. However, labels: they always apply, except when they don't. (Cole in Bady 2015)

These vague words by Teju Cole summarize his position towards present-day identity labels. His statement negotiates a middle ground between the two main positions towards the label 'Afropolitan': one that supports the concept and one that considers it as a celebratory, apolitical and commercially driven phenomenon. Cole might be regarded as self-consciously neutral, or less sympathetically, described as indifferent; but he also expresses a refusal to comprehend these labels as exclusionary, separate categories, preferring to describe them as reconcilable and coexistent. This perception concurs with Cole's larger objective to generate inclusive social thinking and a 'more peaceful internationalism' (Cole in Meyer 2014) through his works, which is ingeniously articulated in one of Cole's Twitter projects, namely 'The Time of the Game'. In 2014, Cole asked his Twitter followers to submit photos of their TV screen showing the final match of the soccer world cup, which he, together with information designers from New York University, assembled into a 'synchronized global view of the World Cup' (Meyer 2014). Thus, Cole acknowledges the different 'non-governmental democracies' of, for example, the screen, the football or the camera. Despite unequal access to the internet and 'multiple uses of screens', these technologies overlap sufficiently to create what he calls 'public time' (a corollary to public space) (Meyer 2014). In effect, his project advocates an 'alternative internationalism', a

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'testifying [of Twitter users] to each other's existence' on a global scale. This, as I will develop in the following, is one implementation of Afropolitanism as a form of critical cosmopolitanism which demonstrates that some articulations of the concept can also be politically transformative.

I contend that many African diasporic authors express a globally orientated critical perspective in their literary and cultural works that does not merely praise the possibilities of globalization but more importantly examines persisting power differentials and injustices. Many of these globally positioned authors inhabit a specific location in contemporary society, constituted of their financially enhanced, mobile position and their personal history. Accordingly, 'Afropolitanism' as a concept acknowledges not only a certain position *in* the world, but expresses a certain disposition *towards* the world.[1] Mignolo (2000) and other advocates of the theory of 'decoloniality' distinguish between, on the one hand, cosmopolitan projects that emanate from the interior of Euro-American modernity[2] and seek inclusion through homogenization, and, on the other hand, critical cosmopolitanism that is formed from the 'exteriority of modernity (that is, coloniality)', exterior as the 'borderland', the 'outside that is needed by the inside' (724). Mignolo decries Eurocentric cosmopolitan projects or 'global designs' as he calls them, which draw new lines of exclusion and are 'oblivious to the saying of the people that are supposed to be emancipated' (723). He therefore demands the development of critical cosmopolitan projects that promote 'social organization based on reciprocity, communal (instead of individual) values, the value of wisdom rather than [Eurocentric] epistemology' (742). This distinction is insightful because it theorizes a position from which the current world order of cultural and socio-economic stratifications is challenged and criticized. But it is controversial in its reliance on and perpetuation of a binary of 'inside' and 'outside', a conceptualization of the system of 'modernity' that it tries to overcome.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Teju Cole have both been raised in Nigeria and have then studied in the USA and live mainly there. Accordingly, from the viewpoint of decolonial theory, they might be 'classified' as 'internal others' of a Euro-American sensibility, having developed a 'double-consciousness [that] lies at the very foundation of border thinking' (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006, 211).[3] They are positioned, in the language of Mignolo and Tlostanova, 'precisely where the "problem" appears and the solutions are being played out' – at the '"borders" between the color (and gender and sexuality) line and the epistemic line' (214). Mignolo and Tlostanova define critical border thinking and critical cosmopolitanism as an epistemology that is created by those outside the powerful centres, as an orientation that is 'pluri-topic and engendered by the violence of the colonial and imperial differences' (211). Scholars of decolonial theory like Enrique Dussel, Anibal Quijano and Ramón Grosfóguel emphasize the binary between the powerful centre and the abject, silenced periphery; however, these categories are not fully applicable to the experience of these diasporic African writers. Cole and Adichie both describe experiences of racial discrimination in American society,[4] but they also share an enhanced position in terms of mobility and resources, which is amplified in the differently organized virtual world. Social media and the internet, their reach and the new possibilities and limitations they represent, complicate the position of writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Teju Cole by adding virtual possibilities of critique and innovation to the physical reality of publishing.

The concept of critical cosmopolitanism as a 'double-consciousness' that is formed at the 'cracks' between privilege and exclusion illuminates the distinctively African experience of the contemporary global society of the writers examined here. It also emphasizes that their positioning allows these writers a critical perspective from which they conceptually deconstruct impermeable social boundaries, hierarchies and power differences. However, Adichie's and Cole's instantiation of Afropolitanism as critical cosmopolitanism in their social media presences also subvert and complicate the underlying binary that decolonial theory assumes. I argue that, in their works, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Teju Cole express a form of critical

cosmopolitanism, in that they reintroduce an ambivalence, a multi-layeredness of meanings to the public and online conversations about mobility, globalization and cosmopolitanism from a specifically Afro-centric perspective. Their positioning and their creative works, nevertheless, also challenge and subvert the underlying binary in decolonial theory.

I read this specific locatedness of Afropolitanism in conjunction with these authors' 'extroverted orientation' which, here, takes its cue from a distinction proposed by Eileen Julien. Julien distinguishes between African novels that are oriented inwards, to a national readership, and, contrastingly, the 'extroverted African novel' as a type of narrative produced at the 'cusps of worlds, […] negotiat[ing] semiotic systems and inscrib[ing] asymmetries of power' (2006, 696). She quotes Pratt to define these novels as a phenomenon of 'the "contact zone," a social and […] discursive space "where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination"' (Pratt qtd. in Julien 2006, 684). Although this concept acknowledges the global orientation of these writers, it seems to disregard that their works are also, if differently, successful in the authors' country of origin Nigeria. These works are read and discussed in Euro-American spaces, but also on the African continent. Afropolitan writing, I suggest, constitutes one category of African literature by writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Teju Cole who navigate a transnational space in their writings, and engage with issues in their works that resonate on a national and global level since that is their daily reality (as it is for many of their readers). Their works substitute the 'multicultural hybrid' (that has been dominant in postcolonial writing and theory) with complex and dynamic 'patterns of mixing, blending, combining and then falling apart' (Ekotto and Harrow 2015, 8). Multiple affiliations in the social domain remain reversible and keep changing. Adichie and Cole display an African cosmopolitan 'sensibility', which means 'not so much that they are, or present themselves as, socially mobile and multiply affiliated as that they respond to and creatively rework metropolitan demands for cultural otherness in their work' (Huggan 2001, 26). The extraversion that Julien associates with the engagement with global issues is articulated by these writers also in their openness to depart from conventional literary genres.

The opportunities and limitations represented by the internet and the role it plays in contemporary society exemplify my argument. Its infrastructure deconstructs global binaries, but its uses may recreate inequalities in the global society. As one phenomenon of 'thickening globalism' (Nye 2002), the internet's distribution demonstrates the interconnection and interdependence of global social networks. The internet is not accessible to everybody – globalization 'implies neither equity – nor homogenization' (Nye 2002), but it does affect and recreate daily life of those who do have access. Especially the way social media is used in everyday life exemplifies a distinction that, as Mbembe points out in the Chimurenga Chronic (2015), is often confused: 'Internet is a means, it is not the end.' In other words, online activism remains ineffective if it does not overcome the distinction between the virtual and the physical world, a notion that is expressed in Teju Cole's works through his aesthetic articulation of doubt towards the transformative potential of language and literature. Social media offer new modes of connection, interaction and identification in the social world, and, as more and more writers demonstrate, it opens up new horizons for literary practice. For example, Binyavanga Wainaina,[5] a Kenyan writer with a very active Twitter account, published his short story 'I am a Homosexual, Mum' in the blog *Africa is a Country* in order to announce his sexual orientation. His revelation in January 2014 followed Uganda's and Nigeria's introduction of new laws against homosexuality and raised attention on and beyond the continent, with discussions on Twitter, Facebook and other online media. Examining Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's and Teju Cole's presence online in conjunction with the two meanings of Afropolitanism that will be explained in the following, I want to develop how Afropolitanism might be helpful to analyse these writers' presence in the online and the 'real' world.

2. Afropolitanism

Although the origin of the term 'Afropolitanism' is difficult to trace, it is clear that its discursive uses revolve around two predominant conceptualizations which were first significantly shaped by Achille Mbembe and Taiye Selasi. Mbembe's understanding of the term is expressed in an essay of the same name in which he outlines the movements of people from, within and to Africa (2007). He promotes an image of the world and its peoples as constantly moving and mixing, opposing this to what he calls nativism. Nativism is a bio-racism that, in its mild form, glorifies diversity and, paradoxically, in a more radical version, fights for maintaining cultural and racial purity and tradition. This 'illusion' of purity, Mbembe argues, is the basis for this bio-racism that translates from the individual to the communal or national level into political regulations that allow or disallow people to do what people have always done: Move and find a different life elsewhere. Afropolitanism, as conveyed by Mbembe, acknowledges migration as a natural human phenomenon, re-establishes an 'awareness of the interweaving of the here and there' and undermines national boundaries (28). Chielozona Eze is another scholar who tries to promote an understanding of Afropolitanism as a critical concept. In his summary of Mbembe's position, he emphasizes that Afropolitanism involves a revision of African identity in its abandonment of 'victimhood as a starting point of discourse and self-perception' (240). He emphasizes the possibility that Afropolitanism establishes; to leave behind an oppositional, victimized position that 'Africa' is conventionally assigned to, allowing instead for more nuanced and differentiated subject positions that Afropolitans inhabit.

The concept 'Afropolitanism' has since gained much attention in regard to its second dominant perception: Taiye Selasi coined a popular understanding of 'Afropolitanism' in her essay 'Bye-Bye Babar' (2005) in which she describes the promising situation of 'the newest generation of African emigrants'. Thus, the phenomenon appears as an alternative to 'Afropessimism' and the representation of Africa determined by deprivation and misery, as Simon Gikandi states in the anthology *Negotiating Afropolitanism* (2011, 9) and, instead, focuses on the 'condition of possibility' (10). Selasi in an essay titled 'Taiye Selasi on Discovering her Pride in her African Roots', published in 2013, suggests that 'Bye-Bye Babar' has to be understood as less uncritical and celebratory than it is often interpreted. Her relation to Africa, she says, was in part determined by Western stereotypes and pain and she writes that 'what [she] needed was some other way to know [her]self as African, apart from as heir to [her] parents' hurts'. Accordingly, Selasi's and Mbembe's attempt to re-establish African identity concur in that they try to overcome the victim-position.

The term itself suggests that 'Afropolitanism' is a form of 'cosmopolitanism', and in fact, the critique raised against the two phenomena is comparable. According to Bill Ashcroft, cosmopolitanism forestalls to be a productive concept due to its associations with 'urbanity, sophistication and wealth' – the need for material resources to 'travel freely, to experience and participate in other cultures for long periods' and thus, to be cosmopolitan (Ashcroft 2010, 76). A celebratory excitement with this phenomenon, so the critics argue, obscures the structural differences that disallow major parts of the global society to be 'cosmopolitan'. Conceptualizing cosmopolitanism as a 'state of mind' entails that it is being located in 'an empty space' (Ashcroft 2010, 76). This obscures the subject position of the cosmopolitan and disregards the power hierarchies of global migration and travelling. The experience and reality of refugees and labour migrants, for example, might not be affected by an ideology of empathy, curiosity and tolerance towards strangers.

Translating these points of critique back to Afropolitanism, Brian Bwesigye in the online forum *This is Africa*, for instance, expresses his fear that Afropolitanism develops into a 'new single story', focussing on well-off African emigrants and thereby 'eras[ing] African realities

from the literary landscape' – realities of poverty that stand in contrast to those described by Taiye Selasi. The concept is seen as the 'crude cultural commodification' (as Stephanie Bosch Santana (2013) quotes Binyavanga Wainaina saying in her piece published on *Africa in Words*) and appropriation of 'Africa' by capitalist culture, as in the way Graham Huggan theorizes the 'postcolonial exotic'.[6] Emma Dabiri's critique of Afropolitanism on the blog *Africa is a Country* revolves around the pre-eminence of commodification (2014). The assumption is that what is seen as African culture becomes globally commodified, and it is not simultaneously able to change the terms of global power relations. Sandra Ponzanesi examines the same argument in her analysis of *The Postcolonial Cultural Industry* (2014): the fear that difference is transformed 'into a blended and familiar other that meets expectations and can be relegated into neat categories' (43). She objects that 'the fact that they are successfully marketed by transnational entertainment corporations does not necessarily mean that they have become commodity without an edge' (3). This argument might be valid for some articulations of Afropolitanism as well: Although writers like Adichie and Cole inhabit an elite position in society that does not mean that their creative works invariably perpetuate and reinforce structural power differences.

The statement 'The Internet is Afropolitan' that serves as the title for an interview with Achille Mbembe in the Chimurenga Chronic can also be understood in reverse: Afropolitanism 'grew up' online. Susanne Gehrmann develops in her article 'Cosmopolitanism with African Roots' how the controversy around the concept, as well as its quick propagation, is unthinkable without the cyberspace (2015). Most of the discussions about the concept are to be found in online forums and blogs, and many contemporary African writers experiment with online and social media channels and thus certainly also market their literary work. The concept's vigour on the internet distinguishes it from earlier paradigms like pan-Africanism. As will be highlighted in the following, the internet is a crucial factor in the definition of Afropolitanism.

The developments described above suggest that the question should less be to determine whether Afropolitanism is an elitist phenomenon but rather if and how it can also be critical and transformative.[7] Selasi's later essay clarifies that 'Bye-bye Babar' has been largely misunderstood. It should rather be seen as an attempt to depart from Afropessimism and to add an imagination of what might be called an African middle-class experience to the meanings attached to 'Africa' in the global community. This attempt, however, does not 'claim to speak for all' (as Emma Dabiri fears in her blogpost 'Why I am not an Afropolitan' (2014)) and is not supposed to become the 'single story' of Africa. The conversations around the phenomenon demonstrate its multiple layers, and the persisting presence of history in 'success stories' of privilege and mobility. The following discussion will show that Afropolitanism cannot be conceptualized as only an apolitical narrative of transnational consumer lifestyles. Instead, it may be reinvigorated as a helpful concept to describe and analyse an articulation of critical engagement by contemporary African writers with issues of justice and humanity in a globalized world.

3. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

In *Americanah*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie makes the main character Ifemelu a blogger and after the publication of the novel, she transfers this fictional blog into the real world (wide web) beyond the novel. The story begins with Ifemelu's visit to a hair salon in Princeton, and, in a series of flashbacks, tells the tales of her coming of age, including her move to America without her boyfriend Obinze, her discouraging experiences searching for a job, and several of her love affairs. These and other experiences are all affected by racial strictures that determine the social relations in the American society depicted in the novel. The blog Adichie creates for Ifemelu inside the novel (as well as its spin-off on the internet) exhibits a strong political and social commitment. It negotiates the hierarchization of cultures and criticizes the

white-centredness of the US environment depicted in the novel, and chronicles everyday incidents of racism. Adichie describes her motivation to include the blogging element in her novel thus: 'I wanted this novel to also be social commentary, but I wanted to say it in ways that are different from what one is supposed to say in literary fiction' (Adichie and Rifbjerg 2014). Ifemelu launches the blog 'Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black' as an anonymous space to share and talk about her observations. In *Americanah*, the blog is initially only mentioned in passing ('Years later, a blog post would read …' (Adichie 2013, 157)), then it is separated out from the standard text by being printed in a different font and with distinct layout. Finally, it appears online, outside the novel, under the name 'The Small Redemptions of Lagos' (Adichie 2014).

The development of the blog offers a critical perspective on the internet, in that it is represented as relatively liberating, but also with intimidating dynamics. Although the 'internet pretends that it is salvation', as Mbembe contends (Chimurenga Chronic), the development of the blog in the novel depicts that it is also a very fierce and competitive space. Ifemelu becomes aware that, in relation to race, the internet allows her to touch on issues and to express opinions that she feels unable to address in the workshops, the character is shown to run in the novel (Adichie 2013, 389), but it is also a space where insults are expressed without restraints or censorship.

Focusing on the participatory dimension of blog writing, the novel explores how the process of writing is democratized, in the sense that Ifemelu and her readers negotiate topics and values together, but also appropriated by the readers on the internet. Ifemelu is, as Serrena Guarracino shows, 'dispossessed of her own writing' and restricted in her agency as a writer by the readership of her blog as the blog develops into a 'shared space' of 'cultural debate' (2014, 16). The more Ifemelu's readers influence her writing, the more she draws back and allows the blog to develop into an egalitarian space for different voices to speak out. She is excited about the development of the blog; however, readers and their comments also deeply distress her, becoming, 'in her mind, a judgemental angry mob waiting for her' (391). The novel lists the range of responses to the blog-posts – the different ways it is consumed – affirmative and hostile, angry and thrilled (391). As Ponzanesi reminds us, 'audiences are not only critical but also multiple and differentiated' (2014, 47). The fact that Ifemelu is not able to predict which blog posts will be 'successful' (drawing attention and comments) makes clear that the process of meaning making cannot be determined by the blogger, but is to a great extent decided by the recipient. The novel assesses the role of the author, and takes into account 'the critical role of readers and spectators worldwide and their readerly transformations of texts' (Julien 2015, 26). The blog first turns into a site where opinions are created and negotiated, a place of 'dialogic cosmopolitanism' that enables a 'different conceptualization of […] democracy' (Mignolo 2000, 744). But successively, the internet also becomes a sphere that allows for hostile and dehumanizing infringements.

Strikingly, Adichie impedes the role of the reader in the online blog 'The Small Redemptions of Lagos', in that it does not allow readers to comment. In contrast to Ifemelu in the novel, Adichie claims back her authority as the author, seemingly inspired by the fictional experiences of blog writing she explored in the novel. The online blog takes advantage of new audiences that might not be reached by the novel, but curtails the possibility of creating meanings collectively.

Although the experiences depicted in the novel should not be taken as autobiographical information, they do elucidate Adichie's carefully honed public persona. Adichie keeps her private life private and has an eye on how the media portray her.[8] She withdrew a personal article about depression that she had submitted to *The Guardian* earlier, but contrastingly, she has an essay published in *The New York Times* (2015) about her father's kidnapping in Nigeria. Considering these two incidents in conjunction indicates that Adichie deploys an intimate story about her family to explore issues of Nigerian society, but simultaneously, she tries to be in control of

publicly available information about her. The story about her father is not a journalistic discussion of kidnappings in Nigeria, but offers insight into the emotional impact of a family member being kidnapped, and thematizes her standing as a writer in Nigerian society. Adichie has become a writer with a celebrity status similar to that of actors and musicians which is a result of her success as a writer, but also of her own 'marketing'. In that respect, the statements she makes about the performer and singer Beyoncé in an interview with *olisa.tv* are equally valid for her own image:

> It's a shame that we live in a world so blindly obsessed by celebrity – an actor or musician talking about a social issue should not be a reason for the press to pay attention to that issue, because they should pay attention to it anyway – but sadly it is what it is. Ours is an age in which celebrities have enormous influence.

The internet and social media (Nwonwu 2015) appear as a space that enhances the possibilities of outreach, while simultaneously it forestalls control of how and where messages and information travel.

In the Chimurenga Chronic interview, Mbembe deliberates:

> the kind of self that emerges in the crucible of these new [internet] technologies, and how these technologies become an extension of ourselves and erase the distance between the human and the object. Human beings are no longer satisfied to simply be human beings.

He develops that, since the internet is 'in the service of the ideology of consumption' the human being has to negotiate subjection to that ideology, too. Adichie's presence online and the publicity around her person demonstrate that this development also affects the position of the author in society. The exploration of the sphere of blogs on the internet mirrors Adichie's own position at the intersection of postcoloniality and postcolonialism, market and critique. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has been called 'Afropolitan',[9] a label she resents, 'yet her public persona and her work have been appropriated by the Afropolitan global community', as Serrena Guarracino observes (11). The role of the reader that is explored in the novel seems to play a dominant role here as well, determining the process of meaning making and compromising the authority of the author by imposing a label that Adichie does not agree with.

One blog post in the novel, about the politics of hair, shows how intricately connected culture and consumerism are: After venting her anger about common views of natural and relaxed black hair, Ifemelu lists – and thereby advertises the products she uses for her hair (379).[10] Ifemelu then decides to put up advertisements and even more, she receives 'support' and credits for her blog that become part of her income when her audience grows (388). 'Support. That word made the blog even more apart from her, a separate thing that could thrive or not, sometimes without her and sometimes with her' (387). Her feelings about the development of the blog demonstrate her ambivalent relationship with the fact that 'the "raw and true" writing that had fist prompted her to open the blog has slowly become an exacting job' (Guarracino 2014, 17). The novel explores through the micro-cosmos of the blog the undeniable interrelation between culture and consumerism, a relation that is intensified in the digital sphere.

Besides the reader's determining role, the label Afropolitan, in the predominant consumerist understanding of the term, has probably been imposed on Adichie because of her online presence: Her speeches on Youtube are popular not only in African literature discourses; a feature of her in *Vogue* in March 2015 where she shows readers of the online magazine what she wears every day introduces her to the readership of this fashion magazine, and her appearance in a music video by Beyoncé again addresses an altogether different audience. It is vital to ask if Adichie's work displays African-ness to enhance its value as a commodity in the way that Afropolitanism is accused to do by Wainaina and Dabiri, for example. Adichie demonstrates her critical awareness of market forces in her explorations of social media in the novel and in her careful navigation of her own

presence online. Beyond that, Adichie's discussion of women's magazines in *Americanah* indicates that Adichie is politically motivated to appear in its online website: 'It was absurd how women's magazines forced images of small-boned, small-breasted women on the rest of the multi-boned, multi-ethnic world of women to emulate' (223)[11]. Adichie's own mere presence in a women's magazine like *Vogue* offers readers a different body aesthetic and makes the magazine more diverse. This suggests that her works

> relate to the market with a contrapuntal attitude that both endorses and critiques it, embracing instead of removing the dichotomy between postcolonialism as anticolonial critical practice and postcoloniality as the marketability of exoticism in commercial as well as academic terms,

as Guarracino contends (4). In other words, Adichie accepts and strategically uses her specific position in the market to address the challenges of contemporary global society. Instead of perpetuating Euro-American understandings of, for example, race or gender, she openly criticizes policies and cultural practices through these 'mainstream' channels.

Adichie's novel and her presence in online media exemplify how social media writing and the construction of meaning is contested in the dialogue of writers and readers and between the demands of the market and social critique. Writers need to navigate these sometimes opposing influences sensitively, especially in the spaces of social media. There, the distinction between reader and writer becomes less clear, and writing appears in a distinct form, both public and anonymous. Publicness, publicity and the forces of 'mainstream' trends further determine the genre of online writing, linking back to the concept of Afropolitanism. Adichie experiments with social media and the concomitant visibility of authors and bloggers both in her novel and online, and exemplifies how writing and the author's presence in the cyberspace can be a tool for social commentary and transformation, nevertheless, one that needs to be managed carefully.

4. Teju Cole's literary use of Twitter

Teju Cole's biography in itself can be read as a record of cosmopolitanism: He was born in Michigan, USA, and grew up in Lagos, Nigeria. He returned to the USA at the age of 17 and went to college and university there. He currently resides in Brooklyn, but his online presence on Facebook and Twitter attest to his international travels. Cole is highly acclaimed for his books *Open City* (2011a) and *Every Day is for the Thief* (2007), a travel account which was first published as a blog online (Hemon 2014, 77). Although his projects on Twitter are also repeatedly mentioned, little critical attention has been paid to his literary experiments with social media.

In his keynote lecture at the 2015 African Literature Association conference in Bayreuth, Germany, Cole introduces Twitter as an African city in order to demonstrate the internet's importance in revolutionary movements on the African continent like, for example, the Arab spring. He emphasizes the connection, but also the distinction between people marching in the streets and people talking about it on social media. This allusion to the 'confusion of means and ends' that Mbembe also points out runs as a thread through Cole's internet projects. Adichie's publicly accessible social media presences on Facebook and Twitter are operated by her publisher to post news about her. Cole, in contrast, uses Facebook autonomously to point out new articles by or about him, and to offer deliberations about society, recent events and personal anecdotes. Thus, unlike Adichie, he does not appear as a distant celebrity, but creates a kind of intimacy in interaction with the Facebook community. Besides his projects on Twitter, he used the medium similarly, but he has refrained from using Twitter since July 2014.

One of the Twitter projects is the 'small fates' series that Cole was running from 2011 until 2013. According to his website, it was a by-product of his research for a book about Lagos, originating from the brief news sections in Nigerian newspapers. The small fates are 'compressed

reports of unusual happenings' that provide a snapshot of human life and experience in Nigeria. Stylistically and content-wise, these 'small fates' are similar to the French 'faits divers', small stories with a 'deranged' causality that were written by Félix Fénéon and published in the French newspaper *Le Matin* around 1906.[12] On Twitter, Cole provided several hundred small fates as 'complete in themselves', out-of-context incidents inspired by Nigerian newspapers, as he explains on his website (Cole 2011d):

> @tejucole 29.12.2011: Love is complicated. With a double-barrelled rifle, Hadezia, in Abuja, widowed herself. (Cole 2011b)
>
> @tejucole 29.12.2011: The Anambra treasury officer, Innocent, who stole N66.5 million in pension funds, insists he was hypnotized. (Cole 2011c)

All incidents are situated in a Nigerian city or village which is mentioned along with the Nigerian state, which evokes familiarity for Nigerian readers, and exposes a clear distance to non-Nigerian readers. Cole distinguishes on his website between reactions to these place names which he expects (and receives) from Nigerian and non-Nigerian readers (Cole 2011d). Some tweets contain a linguistic local reference, 'enriching the irony' for Nigerian readers with local knowledge (Cole 2011d). For non-Nigerian readers, these news stories markedly 'emerge from [a] spatial and historical location of the colonial difference' (Mignolo 2000, 741). Nevertheless, most of them are 'perfectly legible' to any reader, as Cole contends. His concern with non-Nigerian readers – which he elaborates in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, for example – might suggest that he writes for a largely North American readership; however, his focus there seems to be grounded in the Canadian interview context. The explanations on the website clarify that, firstly, he has a large Nigerian audience, and, secondly, that they belong to his implied audience, too.

The tweets allow for multiple readings, depending on the reader's background, but they emphasize the 'connectors' – the ordinariness of social daily life, the satisfaction readers derive from the irony of the stories – between different social communities, cultures and epistemologies. The small fates evoke a kind of familiarity as they describe everyday life incidents like a grandfather taking care of children, or disputes among married couples, though most times culminating in murder, violence or other gruesome deeds of passion. Cole thus confirms Julien's concept of 'extroverted' African literature as an interpretation of 'Africa' for non-African readers. He builds an alternative archive of life in Nigeria that contributes to our shared social (online) world, making visible a, from a non-African reader perspective, marginalized component of the international community. However, the 'introvertedness' of the tweets and the way they address Nigerian readers complicate Julien's model because it does not account for this orientation. For these Nigerian recipients, Cole reaffirms their culture, a 'Nigerian modernity, full of conflict, tragedies, and narrow escapes'. Unlike the other articles in French newspapers that are about 'big people', the *faits divers*, and also the small fates, 'are stories about little people made big by publicity or the press' (Jullien 2009, 66). Cole acknowledges 'ordinary people' with these tweets, and establishes new solidarities amongst Nigerians and beyond national borders. Cole describes his motivation thus:

> The idea is not to show that Lagos, or Abuja, or Owerri, are worse than New York, or worse than Paris. Rather, it's a modest goal: to show that what happens in the rest of the world happens in Nigeria too, with a little craziness all our own mixed in. (Cole homepage)

One aspect of the 'little craziness' Cole refers to might be the magical mode of knowing that is implicated in many tweets. Hypnosis, *juju* and witchcraft are casually, in a matter-of-fact tone, intermingled with realist descriptions of human interaction. Thus, Cole acknowledges and revalorizes a mode of knowing that is conventionally relegated to an inferior position in societies that are dominated by rational and logical thinking, in Nigerian but even more beyond. In this kind of

news, magic and mystical beliefs that are otherwise dismissed as superstition are represented as valuable alternatives to the conventions of rationality. Cole thus advocates an 'epistemic diversality', which Mignolo considers as the necessary basis for 'political and ethical cosmopolitan projects' (743).

Cole's reference to a 'modest goal' implies that he is hesitant about the effects of (internet) literature. This links the small fates to an analysis of *Open City* by Vermeulen (2013). Vermeulen contends that Cole's novel 'responds to the prevalent critique that cosmopolitanism is unable to effect change beyond the domain of culture' (42). This seems equally valid for the small fates series, and is even extended in another Twitter project that Cole carried out: His '7 Short Stories about Drones', a contribution to the debate on drones and the legal and moral implications of their deployment that more explicitly exhibits Cole's political commitment. Cole tweeted these in January 2013, at almost the same time that his essay 'A Reader's War' on US President Barack Obama's foreign policy and his conduct in the 'global war on terror' was published in *The New Yorker* magazine (Cole 2013a). This simultaneity illustrates his motivation to use Twitter in the first place, as a strategy to establish new audiences:

> Maybe it's just a generational thing where I don't think that print media has to be the be-all and end-all. A lot of the people I want to be read by, a lot of the people I want to speak to, are not people who have subscriptions to *The New Yorker* or *The New York Times*, so it's important for me to speak to them in this way also. (NPR 2014)

Although his readerships on Twitter and in *The New Yorker* are probably different, they might still be constituted by people with similar interests. Cole experiments with different genres and media, departing from conventional literary ways and thus expresses resignation towards the power of literature to effect change. He points to an article about drones in the final tweet of the series (Cole 2013b), reminding of 'the need to supplement [literature's] aesthetic performance with a more materially effective program' (Vermeulen 2013, 44).

> @tejucole 14.01.2013: 1. Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself. Pity. A signature strike leveled the florist's. (Cole 2013c)
>
> @tejucole 14.01.2013: 2. Call me Ishmael. I was a young man of military age. I was immolated at my wedding. My parents are inconsolable. (Cole 2013d)
>
> @tejucole 14.01.2013: 3. Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather. A bomb whistled in. Blood on the walls. Fire from heaven. (Cole 2013e)

The 'seven short stories' are modified first sentences of seven classics of 'world literature', interrupted by a drone strike.[13] Thus, each of these first sentences alludes to the full novel which it uses as its origin, only to subvert the story that could have been, through the newly written brutal ending caused by the 'unmanned aerial device'. Stylistically, the tweets are similar to the small fates – concise and unsentimental, 'exuding a dark humor and a dark wit' (Jullien 2009, 66). Although literature may be assumed to make the reader aware of power divisions and inequalities in the real world, Vermeulen regards this 'dry, nearly affectless' tone that also dominates in *Open City* as signalling 'the insuffiency [sic] of such merely imaginative exercises' (45). Cole does not strain for effects or try to provoke pity for human lives in distant war areas in a sensationalist way. The way he summons these lives simultaneously seems to doubt its own effectiveness, raising the question if this summoning leads anywhere.

A consideration of the impression of these tweets needs to take into account the medium of Twitter, a place where one often finds 'unpolished' language and news lines. Cole himself says that 'it's really weird to see them sprinkled into a Twitter stream full of Justin Bieber and cat videos' (Interview Zhang). Even without recognizing the literary origins of the tweets – and this may be the case for anybody but members of the educated class – the carefully crafted language and sentence structures stand out. The tweets replicate the 'haiku esthetic – […] the

reader is struck by the poetic force of these miniature narratives that suggest so much while saying so little' (Jullien 2009, 68). The shortness of the tweets reinforces this effect and increases the weight of each word. By contrasting daily life business like buying flowers or celebrating a wedding with the sudden impact of the drone, the tweets amplify their intensity. Cole deploys a dry, technical register that only implicitly alludes to and circles around death – the reader is asked to engage, to make the connection and to complete the picture. The tweets imitate the register that is used by news media and the government (which Cole criticizes in the essay) and masks the violence inflicted on human individuals ('levelled', 'immolated').

Taking all seven tweets together, the set refers to a canon of 'world literature' and represents what might be called 'global modern civilization' and its cultural achievements. The novels, as a whole, stand for moral progress and tolerance towards difference and complexity. Cole collates the set of global society's high art with the 'war on terror', metonymically represented by the drones. He boldly eradicates the main characters of a fraction of the global cultural heritage, juxtaposing these noble and praised achievements with a contrastive product of globalization. Enforcing the irony between what this global society praises itself for, and the killing of civilians that is also an integral part of it (as the essay by Cole and the report point out that Cole refers to in his last tweet), he makes a highly critical statement of what globalization means.

Simultaneously, Cole expresses resignation towards literature itself in this project. He imagines how Barack Obama's 'keeping the country safe' ('A Reader's War') could ultimately turn back on itself, and thereby questions the moral progress that the novels attest to. Considering the limited effect that these tweets might have, these doubts seem justified: The short stories' literary astuteness might bypass most recipients on Twitter, and be understood only by educated readers who are not different from the subscribers of *The New Yorker* that Cole mentions in the quotation above. Thus, even though the medium of Twitter reaches new audiences more easily, the literary manoeuvre of this project is mainly self-referential. Beyond this, despite its critical stance against Euro-American domination in the global society, the tweets also inhabit a Eurocentric perspective. The novels originate mainly from Europe and the USA, reaffirming a Eurocentric conception of 'valuable' literature.

In his '7 short stories' as well as the essay 'A Reader's War', Cole contemplates the value of literature for society and connects this to a critique of the cost of lives that the US government accepts in the war on terror. The tweets, in their unsentimental tone, create space and demand time to consider how drone strikes in war areas annihilate human lives. Like in the small fates, Cole interrogates the medium of literature, experimenting with unconventional channels and trying to reach new audiences. He does not rely on conventional media like the novel, engaging instead in a 'more minimal, aesthetic program' (Vermeulen 2013, 55).

5. Conclusion

The presence of Adichie and Cole on the internet exemplifies what one might classify as the diverse layers of Afropolitanism. Other than online presences like 'The Afropolitan' magazine, the Afropolitan shop or even Taiye Selasi's social media presence which embody a celebratory version of Afropolitanism, Adichie and Cole introduce a more critical and innovative element to the cyberspace. These two writers challenge and deconstruct power differentials, evoking transnational spaces that are largely devoid of the stratifications of the real world. Adichie and Cole thus extend Julien's concept of 'extrovertedness', demonstrating that their concern with global issues is also 'introverted' and Afro-centred. Their literary works allow for multiple readings for an 'external' and 'internal' readership.

In the blog featured in *Americanah*, and continued outside the borders of the novel, and in her presence in social media, Adichie explores new forms of publicness and publicity that accompany

the internet and social media. She also devotes attention to the close relation between culture and consumption, one that is also a major point of critique towards the concept of Afropolitanism. The novel's exploration of social media writing illuminates how Adichie carefully and strategically navigates her own presence online and the publicity associated with her position as a writer. The connection between culture and consumption is represented as an entanglement that may subject the writer and his writing, but which can also be used strategically.

Teju Cole refrains from this public positioning and rather invests in critical experimentation with social media. He focuses on exploring the potential of language and literature in digital spaces, trying to be 'just to the others out there whose lives we do not think about' by 'telling their stories' (Zhang 2013). He articulates cosmopolitanism as an ideology of empathy and tolerance; nevertheless, he also negotiates the limitations associated with literature, independent of the medium or genre that is used for distribution.

Both Adichie and Cole are concerned with the question of readership. Adichie negotiates the modified role of readers, moving from a fictional US context in the novel to predominantly Nigerian implied readers of the blog that is continued outside the novel. Cole reverses this movement, writing for and about Nigerians in the 'small fates' but inhabiting a Eurocentric position in the 'Seven Short Stories about Drones'.

It is undeniable that many writers who are labelled Afropolitan – like the two examined here – inhabit a privileged subject position and enjoy global mobility, which, nevertheless, proves less relevant in the space where the phenomenon is most active: The internet. The writers demonstrate a strong political engagement in their works, challenging dominant ideologies of capitalism, cultural hierarchies and globalization. The way they implement Afropolitanism in social media cannot be reduced to – but neither separated from – its commercial dimension that many critics of the phenomenon emphasize. The way these writers examine power differentials of globalization shows that something that is commercially successful can still be critical and transformative.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. My understanding of the concept concurs with that of Chielona Eze, who defines Afropolitanism as an ethical principle in his articles 'Transcultural Affinity: Thoughts on the Emergent Cosmopolitan Imagination in South Africa' (2015) and 'Rethinking African Culture and Identity: the Afropolitan Model' (2014). Like Walter Mignolo, Eze distances his interpretation from the cosmopolitanism that was envisioned by Immanuel Kant.
2. Scholars of decoloniality define the interplay of modernity and coloniality as the dominant power matrix structuring all dimensions of society along hierarchical lines: Economy, history, knowledge, knowledge production and epistemology, language, gender, religion, race and ethnicity each mark a site of modern, and thereby also colonial difference (Grosfuguel 'Transmodernity' 2011, 6).
3. Teju Cole describes his position in American society in an interview with Wachtel (2012), saying: 'I think because I grew up in Nigeria […] I have the foolish bravery of the outsider in thinking I can come in here and write about this city.' He also refers to himself as an 'alien'.
4. Cole describes experiences of racial discrimination in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel. Following the publication of Americanah in 2013, racial discrimination in the USA from a Nigerian perspective is a predominant topic in interviews with Adichie. See, for example, Barber (2013).
5. Wainaina, in his plenary address, 'I am a Pan-Africanist, not an Afropolitan', delivered at the 2012 African Studies Association of the UK (ASAUK) conference, according to Stephanie Bosch Santana's account presented in her essay for the blog *Africa in Words* (2013), clearly rejects the term and concept at that time, but offers a different opinion in an interview with Binyavanga Wainaina and Gemma Solés

(2014). There, he refers to Mbembe's idea of Afropolitanism as 'a different idea than the one that got picked up as a sort of commodity'.

6. According to Huggan, the postcolonial exotic marks the intersection between the regimes of value of postcolonialism (anti-colonial, working towards the dissolution of imperial epistemologies and institutional structures) and postcoloniality (closely tied to capitalist markets, capitalizes on the circulation of ideas about cultural otherness) (28).
7. Teju Cole refers to this in an interview with Aaron Bady:

> The discourse around Afropolitanism foregrounds questions of class in ways the 'I'm not Afropolitan' crowd don't want to deal with and in ways the 'I'm Afropolitan' crowd are often too blithe about. Collectively, we could do better. The phenomena described – Afropolitanism, pan-Africanism – are real, and interesting, and discomfiting, and for very many of us, no matter how we squeal, the shoe fits. (http://post45.research.yale.edu/2015/01/interview-teju-cole/, 16 September 2015)

8. Adichie talks about this incident at length in an interview with Chiagoze Fred Nwonwu for *olisa.tv*, saying that she 'would never have agreed' to the captions of the article which made her feel 'sensationalising and cheap' (Nwonwu 2015).
9. See, for example, 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: The Afropolitan Anthropologist' (http://afrolibrarians.com/2013/12/12/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-the-afropolitan-anthropologist/; accessed 8 May 2015).
10. For an introduction into the politics of hair, see Shirley Anne Tate's *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics* (2009).
11. Women's magazines are similarly assessed in a situation where Ifemelu and Curt sift a range of magazines for ethnic representation of women (375).
12. Teju Cole acknowledges this inspiration on his website www.tejucole.com.
13. Teju Cole uses *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) by Virginia Woolf, *Moby Dick* (1851) by Herman Melville, *Ulysses* (1922) by James Joyce, *Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison, *The Trial* (written 1914, published 1925) by Franz Kafka, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Chinua Achebe and *The Stranger* (1942) by Albert Camus.

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