

Despite its size and diversity, the African continent is a place that throughout history, especially scholarly history, has been simplified, stereotyped and exploited. African Studies have an extensive theoretical past but a particular theory or way of life, 'Afropolitanism', formally labelled in 2005, was a significant development and is still widely discussed today (Oxpol 2015; Balakrishnan 2017; MsAfropolitan 2015). Afropolitans are a class or grouping of individuals who have links to Africa but are not tied there, instead having connections and commitments across the world (Oxpol 2015; CNN 2012; Selasi 2005). The term 'Afropolitanism' is not without controversy and has become widely used and debated in literature (Dabiri 2016; Dabiri 2017; Kasanda 2018; Skinner 2017) but also in the lives and experiences of citizens. This essay will argue that Afropolitanism can and does offer many possibilities such as the reclaiming of identities and histories lost or skewed by colonisation and offering alternatives to Afro-pessimism (Telep 2021), giving space to understand and mediate conversations and relationships with women, the LGBTQIA+ community and other marginalised groups and allow for an increase in African voices. It will also look at the potential drawbacks and criticisms of Afropolitanism such as claims that it is extremely elitist and is just another example of the ways that African nations and individuals are judged by western standards (Dabiri 2016; Dabiri 2017; Haensell 2021; Anasidu 2022; Pahl 2016) as well as the potential issues with amplifying the voices of Africans with economic, geographic and social mobility whilst continuing to ignore the experiences of the most marginalised (Balakrishnan 2017). This essay will argue that Afropolitanism certainly provides a greater space for the voices of those with connections to Africa and has the potential to allow for improvements to the lives and experiences of the consistently marginalised in the continent, but it is not a perfect theory and certainly requires adaptation and development to ensure it works to represent the experiences of as many Africans as possible.

Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, there has been a focus in “Black emancipatory thought” (Balakrishnan 2018: 575) on the way that Blackness is inextricably connected to Africa. It wasn’t really until the 21<sup>st</sup> century that studies of Africa began to move their focus away from the racial connection or Black nationalism associated with Pan-Africanism, Afrocentrism, Négritude and Garveyism (Balakrishnan 2018; Oxpil 2015; Gbogi 2022). The concept of Afropolitanism, credited to Taiye Selasi (2005) and Achille Mbembe, was central to this transformation and change of direction (Balakrishnan 2018). Gilroy’s 1996 text, *The Black Atlantic*’ was revolutionary in its discussion of diaspora and suggestion that due to the significance of diasporic movements, Africa no longer needed to be the central point of studies of African existence (Chude-Sokei 1996). Afropolitanism furthered this and encouraged the imagination and reinvention of “an Africa apart from Blackness” (Balakrishnan 2018:576). The concept’s departure from a racial focus, and instead on the creation of the idea of ‘citizens of the world’ who are invested in the continent and use “African cultures in creative ways to change perceptions about Africa” (CNN 2012) offers significant possibilities as the African continent is not a purely Black space. One only has to look at the ‘rainbow nation’ of South Africa for example, where a fifth of the population is not Black to see that if we want a concept and theory that represent ‘Africanness’ and the connections of those to the continent, then it cannot be one tailored to only one race. In a world where racial divisions and tensions still exist, we ought to strive for a celebration of difference and diversity, rather than an encouragement of separatist notions (MsAfropolitan 2011). This shows that Afropolitanism’s focus on the people rather than the pigment creates the possibility for an Africa and a world that doesn’t see race as a thing for division.

Throughout history, and unfortunately even today, the continent and people of Africa have been depicted as agentless, as impoverished victims and as individuals stuck in the past

(Selasi 2005; Nyamor 2019). Afropolitanism provides a counter, and potential solution to these pervasive tropes and to the Afro-pessimistic attitudes that frame the Black, but more significantly African experience. The African continent is often an ‘othered’ space deemed to be separate from the rest of the world, particularly from the Global North (Ede 2018). Afropolitanism challenges this by showing that “there is no world without Africa” (Kroeker 2022: 123), and there is no part of Africa untouched by the world (Kroeker 2022).

Afropolitanism provides the possibility to push for the acknowledgement of Africa’s place and importance in the world, proving the continent is not just a former colonial subject but a place of growth and the great movement of individuals between states within the continent but also beyond (Selasi 2005). Afropolitans, who Selasi described as a new generation of young African emigrants, do not just belong in Africa (Selasi 2005). They might for example have been born in Lagos, raised in Edinburgh, studied in Hong Kong, and now live in Toronto (Selasi 2005). There is not one single place that is ‘home’ to them (Akom Ankobrey 2018); they are at home all over the world. Afropolitans truly are “not citizens but Africans of the world” (CNN 2012). Afropolitanism offers countless possibilities by focusing on ‘routes’ rather than ‘roots’; it does not restrict individuals to the African continent like its predecessors such as the ‘Back to Africa’ movement of Garveyism (Encyclopedia of Chicago 2004) or Négritude (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2023) but rather looks at the way Africans have connections and ties across the world. It allows for the celebration of the movement of individuals across the globe and shows the interconnection of Africa and the world, presenting the continent not as an agentless place stuck in the past but one with ideas, with successful individuals, and one deserving of a seat at the table in world discussions.

Afropolitanism creates possibilities for African countries and individuals to have a respected voice in international conversations as well as proper recognition for the ways that they contribute economically, culturally and in everyday life.

The concept of Afropolitanism is highly debated and one of the major critiques is that it is just another exclusionary theory and understanding of what it means to be African (Dabiri 2016; Dabiri 2017). Afropolitanism depicts a certain type of African; an intelligent, culturally, and politically aware individual with connections across the globe (CNN 2012). It portrays a kind of African that the western media does not often show which is why Afropolitanism is so important as it shows that the continent is not a homogenous clump of suffering, impoverished and uneducated individuals (Nyamor 2019), however it is not representative of the large majority in the continent. Critics of Afropolitanism like Emma Dabiri argue that the concept essentialises this success of Africans and works to perpetuate images of “Africa rising” (Dabiri 2016:106), of a continent full of successful people who can travel freely and are welcomed across the world. She believes that Afropolitanism’s aim of creating an image and understanding of Africa in a positive light to counteract the harms of Afro-pessimism means it refuses to acknowledge that for the vast majority of Africans, there is no possibility of free movement as no country in the west has a positive immigration policy towards African nations (Dabiri 2017); the western world works to *keep Africans in Africa* (Dabiri 2016). Afro-pessimism, the concept Afropolitanism hopes to work against, was focused on the poverty and suffering of African individuals but it silenced their voices (Nyamor 2019; Dabiri 2016). Afropolitanism continues this silencing (Dabiri 2016). Whilst it amplifies African voices and experiences, it only does that for the success stories; it neglects to offer a voice to the millions of Africans living in abject poverty with little or no possibilities or hopes for the future, stuck in a vicious cycle of exploitation and suffering (Nyamor 2019). Afropolitans are fighting extremely hard to convey the dangers of the single story of Africa’s suffering offered by the west but in doing so they are doing what they fear most; they are creating a single story of Africa (Akom Ankobrey 2019). Critics of the concept don’t take

issue with the fact that Afropolitans are generally wealthier, more educated and have a greater capacity for movement than most Africans, but they are concerned that Afropolitans don't admit this privilege (Dabiri 2016; Kasanda 2018; Skinner 2017). They are worried that the movement is heading in the same direction as 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism; the privileged speaking for the many, and pretending their struggles and experiences are universal when they are actually very far from it (Kasanda 2018; Dabiri 2016; Skinner 2017). While Afropolitanism offers the possibilities of greater involvement and inclusion in the western world and respect from those in the Global North, it does not offer any possibilities for most Africans as it simply reinforces their place at the bottom of the social ladder. In their efforts to amplify the narratives of 'Africa rising', it could be argued that Afropolitans cause the sinking of the hopes of most Africans and as such, do not offer any real opportunities for the continent they are desperately trying to shape and save (Dabiri 2016).

There are also concerns that Afropolitanism is merely a palatable rebranding of the current system of western dominance and the African continent as second-class citizens (Dabiri 2016; Dabiri 2017). The term itself is a combination of 'Africa' and 'cosmopolitanism', a very common theoretical perspective in the west (Balakrishnan 2017; Skinner 2017). Critics of the concept argue that it is un-'Afro'; it may set out to celebrate Africanness but in reality, it judges Africa on its "ability to produce African-flavored versions of Western convention and form" (Dabiri Chapter 2017: 204). If western countries are still the benchmark, then African nations will always be chasing them, instead of being judged by what development, security and success looks like for them (Dabiri 2016; Dabiri Chapter 15; Haensell 2021; Anasiudu 2022; Pahl 2016). One could argue then that Afropolitanism therefore does not provide possibilities and opportunities for Africans, or at most only the very few who follow western standards and norms, and instead merely pretends to give Africans freedom, agency and

respect whilst continuing to uphold the western attitudes that prevent the continent from being viewed as an equal in the international sphere.

Afropolitanism has largely been studied with reference to the present but some of its most powerful observations and spaces of opportunity come from the past- long before Selasi even wrote about the concept (Carrasquillo et al. 2022; M'Baye 2019; Allen 2021). One such example of this is the homosexual and transgender community in Dakar, Senegal which existed for centuries, but this essay will pay particular attention to the period of the 1940s and 1950s (M'Baye 2019). Marginalised communities and individuals in Senegal affirmed their identities as tolerant, adaptive and creative Africans who did not allow for imposed colonial ruling and ideas to restrict their expression (M'Baye 2019). Studies of the LGBTQIA+ community in Africa have been extremely limited due to a mixture of African attempts to ignore this past and the west's failure to engage with it seriously (M'Baye 2019). Michael Davidson, a British traveller, wrote a travelogue of his experiences of the LGBTQIA+ community in Dakar. One encounter he describes is that of a "*tapette*" (M'Baye 2019:11)- the French word for an "effeminate homosexual" dressed in bright, traditionally feminine clothing being treated like any other customer in the bar. Davidson notes that this occurred at least a decade before western men publicly began to push for the freedom to wear such clothing (M'Baye 2019). This is proof that Senegal, and the African continent generally, was once a place of great freedom and diversity and was perhaps even 'ahead' of the west showing that Afropolitanism- this connection of Africa and the rest of the world, and appreciation of African culture, success and agency- has always existed, it has just been ignored by the west (Ede 2018). This idea is furthered by "the general Senegalese cosmopolitan philosophy of "*sutura*" (M'Baye 2019:5), a Wolof term that means all individuals are treated as equals deserving of privacy and respect. Homophobic and

transphobic attitudes were not inherent to 'Africanness'; they were brought by colonisers and Africa's resistance to the LGBTQIA+ community is an ugly remnant of colonisation (Stonewall 2020; Black Perspectives 2021; M'Baye 2019; Guardian 2014; Minority Africa 2020). Afropolitanism, therefore, provides huge possibilities for the LGBTQIA+ community in Africa as it pushes for Africa to shrug off the homophobic colonial residue and return to an open, adaptive and inclusive attitude that would allow for the overturning of legislation that persecutes the community and introduces protective measures instead.

Afropolitanism does not just offer possibilities for the LGBTQIA+ community, it also provides a space for the improvement of the lives of women (Gbogi 2022; Akom Ankobrey 2018; Lyle 2018; Pahl 2016; Skinner 2017). Minna Salami, author of the blog Ms Afropolitan, is a key figure in feminist Afropolitan discussions (Skinner 2017). She describes how tradition chains African women and prevents them from gaining full access to their rights (Skinner 2017). She argues that to tackle this, African women need to create their own traditions. Salami gives many examples of how this is being achieved through the setting up of "matriarchal villages", reinvention of art forms and women engaging in "queer marriage" (Skinner 2017: 12). African women are re-shaping "what it means to be a citizen of the African world today" (Skinner 2017: 13) by creating a feminist Afropolitanism, which makes the possibility of achieving gender equality in Africa and across the globe more realistic.

Selasi noted three areas which Afropolitans create their identity when she first wrote about the concept; "national, racial, cultural" (Lyle 2018: 103) but there is at least one missing aspect in her definition, sexuality (Lyle 2018). A powerful example of the way that Afropolitanism can be expanded to create greater possibilities and opportunities for African

women is through Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel, *Americanah*, a story about a young Nigerian woman named Ifemelu who tries to navigate her Africanness and the challenges of racism, sexual assault and finding identity after moving to the United States (Lyle 2018; Pahl 2016). Ifemelu experiences sexual abuse and coercion at the hands of a nameless tennis coach who offers her a job to sexually pleasure him (Lyle 2018; Adiche 2013). Despite agreeing to this, Ifemelu quickly realises that she has no agency and is forced to do things she doesn't want to, losing complete control of her body but more importantly, of her voice. While the novel focuses briefly on the experiences of Obinze, a fellow African immigrant who has a strong friendship and at times sexual relationship with Ifemelu, the novel is mostly from Ifemelu's perspective which challenges traditional understandings of Africa as a patriarchal space (Lyle 2018; Pahl 2016). By the end of the novel, Ifemelu epitomises what Afropolitanism is all about; she is an individual who is confident and assured of her identity and worth in the world and has connections and a sense of belonging across the globe. This shows how Afropolitanism can offer opportunities and possibilities for individuals, particularly young women, to find their sense of meaning in the world and to forge an identity outside of traditional power understandings. Afropolitanism offers other females as it offers the chance to claim agency, particularly in terms of their sexuality. Kimberly Springer notes that Black women are always viewed as either "hypersexual or asexual" (Springer 2008: 77), as sluts or as victims; they are never offered a space to be comfortable in their sexuality in a way that is accepted by society. Although Ifemelu initially struggles to process her traumatic sexual assault, she eventually regains her sense of self and has pleasurable sexual relationships with other men and feels at ease with her body and her sexuality, thereby defying the binaries Springer notes Black women are often subjected to (Lyle 2018). This is further proof of her status as an Afropolitan as Afropolitanism is about "being comfortable anywhere in the world whilst refusing to take an identity of a victim"



(Ucham and Kangira 2015: 43). Afropolitanism, therefore, offers great opportunities and possibilities for African women, particularly Black women, by allowing them the ability to explore their sexuality outside of the binaries of victimisation or promiscuity which will be a significant step forward in undermining the patriarchal nature of African society and allowing women to participate equally, across the globe.

In conclusion, Afropolitanism revolutionised studies of Africa as it was one of the first concepts to not rely on race or Black nationalism which allows it to give Africans of all races the possibility to re-invent what it means to be African outside of the western image of impoverished, agentless, Black individuals. The concept is not without its flaws and the criticism that it is elitist and only represents a minority of Africans is unfortunately valid. Whilst it is successful in its aims to celebrate Africanness instead of being ashamed of it, it does not provide the 'average' African with a voice, just like most of the concepts that came before it. However, Afropolitanism does provide the possibilities and opportunities for marginalised groups like the LGBTQIA+ community and women to reinvent themselves and work to change their place in African society and the world. Afropolitanism provides a theoretical base and the possibilities to mediate discussions on local, national and global scales to improve the lives of all, not just a few. The concept is not perfect, and it will most likely be replaced by more inclusive theories in the future but for now, it provides something vital that Africa has been denied for far too long- hope. It provides the hope that Africa will finally be granted the opportunity to break free from the colonial past and western perceptions and take its rightful place at the international table.

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