

# Chapter I

## Introduction – Writing Race in the Moment of Afropolitanism

“We all know the truth: more connects us than separates us. But in times of crisis the wise build bridges, while the foolish build barriers. We must find a way to look after one another, as if we were one single tribe.”

*T’Challa*

“Whatever of good may have come in these years of change, the shadow of a deep disappointment rests upon the Negro people.”

*W.E.B. Du Bois*

“I have always felt like I want to change the course of history.”

*Opal Tometi*

### 1 Imagining Diaspora under the Sign of Africa

Afropolitanism, that much is certain, is a quintessentially 21<sup>st</sup>-century phenomenon. The term itself was popularized by Taiye Selasi in 2005 in “Bye-Bye Babar (or What is an Afropolitan),” an essay for the British magazine *The LIP*. While Selasi’s coinage most prevalently served as a new identificatory label for an African-descendant bourgeoisie in Western metropolises, described as “the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you” (2013: 528), the concept also featured slightly earlier in the writings of Achille Mbembe, drawing attention to the fluidity, mobility, and cultural hybridity already proper to the African continent. As Justus K. S. Makokha and Jennifer Wawrzinek, the editors of the first academic publication on Afropolitanism, put it, both Selasi and Mbembe “describe a novel critical term, at whose core are questions of borders and spaces of new African identities” and which denotes “Africans at home and abroad who subscribe to anti-nativist and cosmopolitan interpretations of African identities” (2011: 17–18).<sup>1</sup> In its wider reception, Afropolitanism has sparked a myriad of de-

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<sup>1</sup> In the following, when needed, I will distinguish the two notions of Afropolitanism as “diasporic” and “continental,” even though my focus lies on the former. Keeping in mind that Africa itself, as Gikandi describes it, is a “shifting signifier” that means something different in South Africa than it does in Kenya, and therefore means something else in Brazil or in the USA, those distinctions are of course already very general (2016: 47–48).

bates, with reactions ranging from affirmative praise to critical skepticism, e. g. in Binyavanga Wainaina’s 2012 speech “I am a Pan-Africanist, not an Afropolitan” or in Simon Gikandi’s endorsing of the concept, framing it as a “new phenomenology of Africanness” and a “way of being African in the world” (2011a: 9). While there is a plethora of publications trying to discern the normative value of Afropolitanism as an identificatory concept, label, politics, ethics, or aesthetics,<sup>2</sup> the working definition of Afropolitanism adopted in this book comes closest to the one formulated by Ryan Thomas Skinner in “Why Afropolitanism Matters” (2017). Skinner also wishes to retain the idea of Afropolitanism as a “polysemous and [...] ‘floating signifier’” that is less defined as a “good idea as it is [...] ‘good to think with’” (3). Indeed, in order to neither fix nor blur the polysemy or multidirectedness of Afropolitanism, and in ways elaborated in the following, this book conceives of Afropolitanism first and foremost as a historical and cultural moment. More precisely, I investigate a selection of Afropolitan novels, which could mean literature written by authors deemed to be Afropolitan or featuring Afropolitan characters but is here defined as literature written and received in the moment of Afropolitanism, that is, a certain historical constellation that allows us to glimpse the shifting and multiple silhouettes which Africa, as signifier, as real and imagined locus, embodies in the globalized, yet predominantly Western, cultural landscape of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> How does one capture a moment? In “Bye-Bye Babar” Selasi historicizes Afropolitanism through an often-quoted narrative, referencing the increased African emigration to the Global North since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century: “It isn’t hard to trace our genealogy. Starting in the 1960s, the young, gifted and broke left Africa in pursuit of higher education and happiness abroad” (2013a: 528). In the context of the United States, it is indeed the 1965 Hart-Celler Immigration Act that is most often cited as inaugurating the emergence of a “New African Diaspora,” epitomized by Sam Robert’s statement in the *New York Times* that “[f]or the first time, more blacks are coming to the United States from Africa than during the slave trade” (2005: section 1.1.).<sup>4</sup> Yet Selasi also offers another time frame, one marked by matters of cultural representation. Somewhere “between the 1988 release of *Coming to*

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<sup>2</sup> See Dabiri 2014; Eze 2014: 234–247; Gehrmann 2015: 1–12; Balakrishnan 2017: 1–11; Knudsen and Rahbek 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Here, I lean only partly on the influential work by Valentin Mudimbe because, in a diasporic imaginary, the symbol of Africa is not first and foremost characterized by lack or deviance. For further discussion on the image of Africa, predominantly from a Western perspective, see Mudimbe 1988 and 1994: cf. also Mbembe and Nuttall 2004: 347–372.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on this demographic shift, see Kondadu-Agyemang et al. 2006; Shaw-Taylor and Tuch 2007; Falola et al. 2017.

*America* and the 2001 crowning of a Nigerian Miss World,” she writes, “the general image of young Africans in the West transmorphed from goofy to gorgeous” (2013a: 529).

For the purpose of my argument, I would like to trace Selasi’s timeline into the more recent past. Three years after Selasi published her essay, the Studio Museum in Harlem produced the show “Flow” that showcased young diasporic African artists. In 2011, the Houston Museum of African American Culture hosted a symposium with the title “Africans in America – The New Beat of Afropolitans,” the same year in which the Victoria & Albert Museum in London organized the evening event “Friday Late: Afropolitans.” In the following years, the global literary marketplace was flushed with narratives by young diasporic authors like Selasi herself, who were praised for their cosmopolitan, transnational outlook and for their post-melting pot sensibilities and were deliberately marketed under the slogan Afropolitanism. So far, this reads as a fairly impressionistic yet straightforward succession and success story for Selasi’s young, hip, and artistically gifted Afropolitans. Yet I would extend this timeline by adding a few related snapshots: In 2013, Beyoncé sampled another one of these authors, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, further cementing Adichie’s pop-cultural fame. Three years later, 2016, Kendrick Lamar closed a spectacular Grammy performance by showing a silhouette of Africa inscribed with the word “Compton.” And in 2018, Ryan Coogler’s Marvel franchise *Black Panther* became one of the most successful movies of all time. In this timeline, Selasi’s historization of the Afropolitan moment comes full circle, as the emergence of Afropolitanism is bracketed with two Hollywood representations: from *Coming to America*’s garishly stereotypical, traditionalist kingdom of Zamunda to the equally monarchist yet Afro-futuristic kingdom of Wakanda.

By adding these elements, the narrative changes in two important ways. For one, it is no longer about individuals labeled as Afropolitans but frames Afropolitanism as a larger diasporic discourse or mode of signification. Conceived by Selasi as the result of complex historico-political trajectories made visible through cultural representations, it marks how, in a global yet US-dominated cultural imaginary, the African signifier has evolved into a hypervisible and highly valuable symbolic currency: from goofy to glamorous, backward to vanguard. Secondly, this narrative relays how the contemporary diasporic imaginary goes beyond issues of identification and othering but is instead marked by various degrees of projection, rejection, citation, sampling, and collaboration. Contrary to claims that Afropolitanism is first and foremost a renunciation of Black diasporic unity or solidarity and “instead seeks to reimagine an Africa apart from Blackness,” I argue that, particularly in the US, it marks a moment of intense re-signification of Blackness and diasporic solidarity (Balakrishnan 2018: 576).

While Teju Cole in “On the Blackness of the Panther,” a thought-provoking meditation on Hollywood fantasies, Bandung-solidarity, and African complexity, has criticized how films like *Black Panther* rely on the image of Africa “as trope and trap, backdrop and background” (2018: para. 15), he can be credited with fashioning a similarly effective trope himself: Africa not only in, but as index of the entire world. In “At Home in Brooklyn,” an article for an exhibition catalogue featuring the works of Wangechi Mutu and others, Cole describes these artists as various instances of “what happens when Africa meets Brooklyn” (2014a: 30). Pondering his NYC borough, a place characterized by the author’s intimate sense of belonging, Cole frames his experience of feeling at home in the world with a reflection on the famous 1972 photograph taken by the Apollo 17 space shuttle, showing, for the first time, our “blue marble.” He writes:

Just one continent is visible from the angle at which that photograph was taken. It was as though the earth presented itself with an indexical representation of all it contained. The planet puts its best face forward for its first formal portrait, and one continent happens to be visible in its entirety: Africa. (Cole 2014a: para. 12)

Like many other protagonists of the Afropolitan moment, Cole is actively inscribing Africa into a Black diasporic imaginary by claiming an (at least) two-tier type of belonging, in his case to a traditionally Black neighborhood like Brooklyn and the continent of Africa. At the same time, he identifies the substantial “energy flows” between the physically mismatched pair of Africa and Brooklyn as an indexical “picture of the world right now” (ibid.). If anything, *Black Panther* signals a similar will to (re)imagine the contemporary diaspora – or global humanity for that matter – unfolding in and across differences and under the sign of Africa. As King T’Challa’s voiceover during the film’s final scenes implores: “We all know the truth: more connects us than separates us. But in times of crisis the wise build bridges, while the foolish build barriers. We must find a way to look after one another, as if we were one single tribe.”

The rubric of Afropolitan literature is as flexible as it is expansive, ranging from generational definitions to questions of genre, setting, or subject matter. Among the Anglophone novels and short story collections that usually make these ever extending lists are Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go* (2013), NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* (2013), Chris Abani’s *The Virgin of Flames* (2007), Chinelo Okparanta’s *Happiness, Like Water* (2013), Dinaw Mengestu’s *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007), Sefi Atta’s *A Bit of Difference* (2013), Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street* (2007), and Brian Chikwava’s *Harare North* (2009). For this study, a selection of three major Afropolitan novels has been made – major in that each of them has become an international bestseller –

which, to my mind, best capture what is both popular with and popularized by these literatures. Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016) are all deliberate investigations of the US, exploring the questions of Blackness and diaspora from, at minimum, bifocal and, as I will argue, pronouncedly metahistorical perspectives. Incidentally, these authors also represent the full spectrum of contemporary African/US-American relations, at least in respect to citizenship and positionality. Teju Cole, who was born in the US in 1975 yet grew up in Nigeria and returned to the US as a teenager, holds both citizenships and has referred to this duality as being "not 100 percent at home in either of them" (2017: para. 7). Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born in Nigeria in 1977 and moved to the US for university education. She is Nigerian, staunchly and outspokenly so, but has permanent resident status in the US, traveling back and forth. Yaa Gyasi was born in Ghana (1989) but raised in the US from the age of two, thoroughly undergoing what is commonly understood as the 'immigrant experience.'

Afropolitan literatures pose different sets of questions, some transnational, some intra-continental, some intradiasporic, and the following study is most interested in the latter. Rather than distinguishing merely between "Western-facing" and continental-facing literatures, as some commentators have, it is useful to differentiate further and acknowledge that the Afropolitan moment is also characterized by an Americanization of African fiction. An important and, due to this study's focus, overlooked role in this development is, of course, played by international publishing industries, which also mirrors the shift from Europe to North America. For example, the renowned Heinemann African Writers Series (later Penguin African Writer's Series) began in 1962 and was finally discontinued in 2003 after dwindling sales and diminished relevance over the prior two decades (its last publication was Ike Oguine's *A Squatter's Tale*, incidentally a novel about a Nigerian immigrant in the US). Yet all of the authors discussed here, and many others of their moment, have been picked up and promoted by US-American publishing houses. Regardless of the fact that African literatures have always had a bifurcated publishing history (with Heinemann based not only in London, but also Ibadan and Nairobi), the debate about the major role of Western publishing houses is usually flanked by references to a vibrant, if commercially limited, publishing scene on the continent, e.g. Chimurenga or Kwani Trust (which was also 'exposed' for being 'Western-funded'). More recent publishing companies like Cassava Republic, hailed as "the first African publish-

er to open a subsidiary outside the continent,” complicate matters further by straddling multiple markets with impressive aplomb (Fick 2016: para 5).<sup>5</sup>

The US-American backdrop of the novels discussed here already adds a particularly defining and indeed ‘new’ spin to the émigré, exilic, or immigrant African novel of prior generations, which usually detailed African sojourns in Europe. While the protagonists in Buchi Emecheta’s *In the Ditch* (1972) or Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977) would often encounter members of diasporic communities – hailing from other parts of Africa or the Caribbean, thus illustrating the fact that the Black Diaspora<sup>6</sup> is made up of multiple diasporas – a US context shifts the framing of these different diasporic trajectories from the geographical to the temporal, rendering the contemporary diasporic imaginary primarily a conversation between the old and the new. Consequently, within the Afropolitan moment it is also possible to speak of an Africanization of (African) American fiction. In this sense, Afropolitan literature describes what Stephanie Li, in an *American Literary History* issue on contemporary African American writing, describes as one of its most salient features: “the impact of a generation of African-born or -identified authors like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Teju Cole, and Mfoniso Udofia, who all bring a contemporary diasporic perspective to US race relations” (2017: 632). Of course, the impact of this conversation is not limited to the diaspora, not only because “the shape of diaspora is the shape of the globe” (Wright 2013: 15). By rebranding and simultaneously complicating the “lazy but necessary signifier” that is Africa (Hall 2003: 32), Afropolitan negotiations of Blackness embody yet another instance of Stuart Hall’s notion of Black popular culture as a globally effective “site of strategic contestation” (Hall 1993: 108). Yet, as the following discussion will show, it is in the context of the US that shifting significations of Blackness develop the strongest ripple effect and the moment of Afropolitanism manifests as a particularly crucial historical constel-

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5 See also Clarke 2003; Adesokan 2012; Nwaubani 2017.

6 While this study uses the terms African Diaspora and Black Diaspora sometimes interchangeably, a few clarifications are in order. Generally, my focus is on the Black Diaspora, precisely because it links Afropolitanism to various discourses on Blackness. At the same time, the notion of an African Diaspora can be helpful to emphasize the centrality of the African signifier as opposed to a distinct and ultimately severed notion of New World diasporic Blackness. It is also helpful when relating to the so-called newness and oldness of Black American groups hailing from Africa, as well as stressing the pivotal role of Africa in a global Black imaginary. However, the usage of African Diaspora occurs in the full knowledge that African does not exclusively signify Black and that an African Diaspora may subsume different racial groups. Because of this, and because I am also wary of terms that may obscure the specificities of anti-Blackness, this study generally favors the usage of Black Diaspora and, when referring to the African Diaspora, implicitly means Black African Diaspora.

lation. While the Afropolitan moment can surely be characterized as a symbolic and representational shift that has bestowed these hugely successful literatures with cultural currency, I conceive of it as mode or moment in which the shifting role of Africa in the global imaginary is part of an ongoing diasporic conversation determining the sometimes uneasy negotiations of race, nationality, and Black identity between the so-called old and new diaspora. In this, I follow Yogita Goyal's assertion that "now the new diaspora writes back," as well as her call that we need new diasporas, meaning we need new concepts and understandings of how Africa and its global dispersion may signify in the 21st century (Goyal 2017c: 659).

### 1.1 The Moment of Blackness and the Discourse of Postness

As these works are predominantly set, produced, and received in a US context, the supposed "newness" of the perspectives of a "Non-American Black" (Adichie 2013) or "Newly Black" (Chude-Sokei 2014) generation of artists needs to be questioned, contrasted, and related to more established diasporic epistemologies. Afropolitan writing, engaged in US-American racial discourses and championing a Black subjectivity that forgoes the formative trauma of slavery, thus runs the risk of being mobilized in opposition to African American subjectivity or as stand-in or proof of a post-racial paradigm. Thus, one of my key concerns is to find a nuanced and productive way to illuminate the notion of (historical) change symbolized and addressed by these novels while remaining wary of the rhetoric of postness, newness, turns or paradigm shifts. The Afropolitan moment, as a lens or tool that is "good to think with," allows me to reflect on history and temporality in a manner that traces the various entry points, origins, futures, and trajectories but also limits of Blackness in the contemporary diasporic imaginary. As these texts foreground different epistemic positionalities toward the Black Diaspora and its generic conventions through their respective treatment of temporality, historiography, and the transnational imaginary, I intend to frame them as articulations of a particular moment without neglecting that these novels are in continuous conversation with earlier or other traditions and epistemologies.

The aspect of *newness* that is often ascribed to the Afropolitan as another variant of postness, introduces another important framework for this study and one that is equally dependent on the notion of Afropolitanism as a moment. Why should one want to capture a moment if not to signal or indicate change? And who, in the course of this young century, has embodied the notion of change and the historical constellation of the Afropolitan better than Barack

Obama, the American son of a Kenyan immigrant? As scholar Paul Tiyambe Zeleza asserted, Obama's "multiple racial, religious, cultural, spatial, and social identities and affiliations make him the quintessential subject and sign, signifier and signified of a 21<sup>st</sup> century transnational African consciousness and solidarity" (2011: 37). Zeleza, who has elsewhere developed a system of "flows" when writing about the linkages between Africa and its diasporas (2019), identified the "age of Obama" as one of potentiality, a chance to regroup and refocus Pan-Africanism by seriously engaging the "overlapping diasporas in the US" and examining how they relate to their respective homelands and Africa as a whole (2011: 37). More or less independent from the fact that Obama would never implement a radical politics "committed to profound social change" (2011: 34), Zeleza predicted that the symbolic value of Obama's presidency, his impact on a Pan-African or larger diasporic imaginary would remain profound. As the son of a Kenyan immigrant and symbol "of black citizenship and African globality, who projects a new image of the African arrival and presence in America," Zeleza notes, "Obama reconnects the old diaspora to Africa and vice-versa in more immediate, intimate, and innovative ways" (2011: 38). Generally, Obama's presidency had a particularly galvanizing effect not only in (Black) American contexts, but throughout the diaspora and the African continent, symbolizing euphoric hope as well as intense disappointment.

In *Seeing Through Race* (2012), W.J.T. Mitchell develops the notion of the 'teachable moment' apropos Barack Obama's attempt to contain the controversy around the arrest of Professor Henry Louis Gates in 2009. Mitchell uses the pedagogical notion of the teachable moment and his interpretation of race as a medium to see through rather than look at, in order to pose "the more general notion of race as a global issue in our time – our 'moment' as it were" (2012: 2). In this, he is particularly wary of the rhetoric of postness, which he describes as "temporal substitutes for a positive historical description that has not yet found its proper name" (45). At the same time, he notes that our contemporary moment is marked by a "post-racial consensus" (60) that has allowed many white Americans to ignore these issues – at least until, through violent spectacles of police violence, "anti-Black racism becomes *visible*" (54).

Arguably, 2020 provided a tragic abundance of such spectacles. In particular, the brutal killing of George Floyd seems to have engendered a level of awareness that – if not in quality, then perhaps in quantity – seems to have broadly refuted the prevailing "post-racial consensus" that Mitchell identifies. Yet, if anything, the enhanced visibility of racist violence and its political responses, such as the US Movement for Black Lives, have highlighted the tenacity of post-racial claims amidst a pandemic that – contrary to the levelling effect of an ostensibly universal threat – has disproportionately affected African American communities

(Jean-Baptiste and Green 2020). The pervasiveness of post-racial thinking should not be surprising – given the complex ways in which race and racism structure contemporary societies. Even where it is not deliberately harnessed in favor of white supremacy, post-racialism acts as a cognitive shorthand, blanketing these often thorny complexities in lieu of lofty egalitarian or universalist ideals.

In a similar vein, the tendency to resolve and dissolve racial difference in claims of universality is also proper to Afropolitanism, which, as a concept, has always been embedded in theories of cosmopolitanism. This semantic kinship has triggered negative responses by critics who see in it not only a premature invocation of post-racialism but also warn against the uncritical appropriation of Enlightenment concepts relying on Eurocentric notions of exclusion. An outspoken critic of Afropolitanism, scholar Cheryl Sterling argues that the necessity to push back biological race concepts does not “eradicate racism or the history of racialism” that undergirds a concept like cosmopolitanism (2015: 121). In the wake of an increasingly globalized and demographically intertwined 21<sup>st</sup> century, she notes, “the continued sublation of the Black subject” persists, thus calling for a persistent reminding of the world that Black lives matter (*ibid.*).<sup>7</sup>

Notably, in terms of racial politics, the years of Obama’s presidency – and their aftermath – have become more emblematic of stagnation or backlash than transcendence or advancement. Rather than prematurely signaling progress, then, one could still consider the ‘moment of Obama’ as ushering in a renewed and intensified discussion on race and racism, a ‘teachable moment’ one could say, that markedly affected Afropolitanism. Because Afropolitanism gains the most symbolic currency within this historical period, it is perhaps also unsurprising that its discourses mirror the affective economies triggered by Obama’s presidency. The novels under discussion were all published post-2008, precisely because the Afropolitan moment dovetails with and derives sub-

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7 Sterling also points toward the discrepancy between the political actuality that has transpired through the Black Lives Matter movement in the US and the prevalent academic insistence on the virtuality and constructedness of race, indicating a post-racial paradigm shift that sees race identification or race-based theorizing as outdated modes of thinking (2015: 120). Having argued earlier against Paul Gilroy’s positionality in *Against Race* (2000), Sterling turns to the concept of Kwame Anthony Appiah’s rooted cosmopolitanism, which, she notes, is exemplary of the way “such work is used in academe as a key articulation of an idealized post-race trajectory” (*ibid.*). Sterling identifies both Appiah’s and Gilroy’s critiques of racialized discourse as theoretical positionalities that argue against the viability of race as “a paradigm in modern day constructs” (*ibid.*), rather than as critiques of the detrimental, and very real, effect of racism around the globe. For Sterling, these positions seem representative of a distinct, and perhaps even hegemonic, academic stance that shuns race-based theorizing as a defunct remnant of the past.

stantial momentum from the so-called post-racial moment, allegedly sealed by the advent of US America's first Black president. Equally premature, I argue, are initial interpretations of Afropolitan writers and fictions as being beyond race or about divesting Africanity from Blackness. The tensions arising from the conundrum of post-Black African cosmopolitanism is reflected in the literature, as well as in its criticism.

In 2011, in the wake of much enthusiasm around Afropolitanism, Gikandi hailed this “new phenomenology of Africanness” as a way to “embrace and celebrate a state of cultural hybridity – to be of Africa and of other worlds at the same time (2011a: 9). Five years later, Gikandi's assessment of literary Afropolitanism struck a notably minor key. In an interview with the authors of *In Search of the Afropolitan*, he observes that “this elite group of Afro-cosmopolitans has adopted Afropolitanism, not as a celebration of living a global life, but as anxiety” (2016: 49). Interpreting this affective change as a response to what he calls “the incomplete project of transnationalism, or of globalization,” Gikandi notes his surprise at the persistency of identifications and the fraught need for cultural affiliations in these literatures (ibid. 51). For him, the most interesting question is why “these identifications do not disappear and coalesce into a certain cosmopolitan prose?” (ibid. 50). Works by Teju Cole, Sefi Atta, and particularly Tayie Selasi's *Ghana Must Go*, the first novel that was prominently marketed under the notion of Afropolitanism, express for Gikandi less of the term's confident global belonging but indeed “a constant failure to live in that world” (ibid. 49). Likewise, and particularly for the US-American contexts that these novels fictionalize, Louis Chude-Sokei detects “a sense of loss, of transformation and decline” in the literary texts of these newly Black American authors (2014: 53). Ascribing this to the complicated intradiasporic relationship, the unanswered questions and uneasy negotiations of racial solidarity and diasporic unity, he concludes: “These palpitating moments of discontinuity and Pan-African brokenness draw attention to the great width and depth of difference, of arguably different diasporas that assume the intimacy of a shared name but which can no longer assume a shared experience, much less shared politics” (55).

Adopting a similar, yet ultimately less bleak view, I would contend that the questions of race and Blackness are still too vexing to “coalesce” into cosmopolitanism. However, I agree that complicated intradiasporic conversations on these matters do play out in these texts, and that these often uneasy conversations defy the comforting notions of hybridity or Pan-African unity of prior decades. In particular, Afropolitanism challenges received notions of Blackness in the US. While the idea of post-racialism has been at least identified as a dangerous myth, Afropolitanism often hypostatizes in a post-Black discourse signaling a reconfiguration and regrouping of US-American Blackness rather than its

overcoming. In many ways, the notion of post-Blackness in public discourse similarly retains and reconfigures its subject matter – like the other discourses on postness constituting Afropolitanism, e.g. the postcolonial or postmodern. Rather than disappearing, then, established modes of Black signification, both within the US and in the global context of the Black Diaspora, have mutated and differentiated in a way that cannot be captured by the temporal category of posterity, at least not if one understands Blackness as a complex intersection of identities that cannot be neatly mapped onto a necessarily limited, national narrative of linear progress but is much better grasped through the elasticity of a moment. Indeed, elaborating on his definition of a moment as a more productive tool to preserve and see through, rather than censor, the issue at hand, Mitchell writes: “Ranging between the expansiveness of an epoch, a period, or an era, and the singular, decisive character of an event, the moment is arguably the most elastic term in the lexicons of time and history” (2012: 2). It is precisely this temporal elasticity that lends itself so well to the project at hand. In order to illuminate the complex negotiations of Blackness and the African signifier in the Afropolitan novel, a temporal metaphor seems most apt to encompass both historical and experiential configurations of Blackness without erasing and substituting one for the other or re-installing hierarchies that privilege narratives of authenticity.

In order to trace this development more closely, it is worthwhile to return to the “foundational” text of Afropolitanism, Taiye Selasi’s “Bye-Bye Babar (or What is an Afropolitan).” Critics who consider the rejection of Blackness one of Afropolitanism’s most salient features, often refer to the following passage from Selasi’s essay:

[T]he way we see our race – whether black or biracial or none of the above – is a question of politics, rather than pigment; not all of us claim to be black. Often this relates to the way we were raised, whether proximate to other brown people (e.g. black Americans) or removed. Finally, how we conceive of race will accord with where we locate ourselves in the history that produced “blackness” and the political processes that continue to shape it. (2013a: 530)

For those inclined to perceive Afropolitanism as a “willingness to break from received racial molds,” this paragraph indicates “the need to reconfigure African identity outside of Blackness” – as if that were a prerequisite for the true “worlding” of the African subject (Balakrishnan 2018: 577). Indeed, the crucial sentiments behind Selasi’s otherwise rather matter-of-fact definition of Blackness as a social, historical, and political construct seem to be the notions of agency and choice. She posits “the way we see our race” (emphasis added), defying the heteronomy of racialization, and also “not all of us claim to be black,” mean-

ing not all of us *choose* to be Black. Underlying the question of choice is the possibility of rejection, the “I prefer not to” and “I’d rather not” that suggest the disavowal of racism and the negation of solidarity and add to the perceived snobbery and slight that many associate with Afropolitanism.<sup>8</sup> However, while the observation that for many members of the new diaspora racial solidarity or Black identification is not given but negotiated surely holds true, Selasi’s utterances must also be understood as part of a cultural and political discourse in which the notion of what constitutes ‘authentic’ Blackness is unstable, even, or especially, for African Americans. Rather than taking the willed divestment of Blackness as an Afropolitan *a priori*, I would argue that Selasi’s hyperbolic and polemic text from 2005 signals not only the ‘will’ and ‘need’ of its performative agency, but also a profound insecurity and apprehension around the category of Blackness. More than a decade later, it becomes clear that this ambiguity is proper to the Afropolitan moment, particularly to how it pans out in the United States.

In 2001, Harlem Studio museum director Thelma Golden defined “Post-Black” as “characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labeled ‘black’ artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness” (2001: 14).<sup>9</sup> The post-racial declarations of the Obama era were primed by this discourse of post-Blackness. As a figure, Obama crystallized several different yet related trajectories, all coalescing around the 21<sup>st</sup>-century version of Du Bois’s inquiry into “the strange meaning of being black here in the dawning of the Twentieth Century” (*Souls* 3). Not only the demographic fact of overlapping diasporas, but also debates around post-Soul aesthetics or post-Civil Rights-politics were bundled by the symbol of Obama, creating highly charged nodes of interpretations.<sup>10</sup> The debates around Obama’s racial identity were particularly indicative of these shifts, illuminating the overarching discourse of post-Blackness. In the most controversial piece, Debra Dickerson’s “Colorblind,” the author put it bluntly:

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**8** Implied, too, in the notion of “choice” is the most crucial difference between the African diasporas of old and new, the element of choosing to come to America, albeit for oftentimes pressing reasons, rather than being abducted.

**9** The coining of the term “Post-Blackness” is usually ascribed to Thelma Golden and artist Glenn Ligon, who developed it in relation to “Freestyle,” a show curated by Golden in 2001. Incidentally, “Freestyle” is also the forerunner for the above-mentioned “Flow,” focusing on new diasporic African artists. See Campbell 2007: 317–330.

**10** The question whether Obama’s presidency signaled an end or shift from Civil Rights politics informed countless political commentaries, which seamlessly connected with the realm of cultural politics and aesthetics, for example when Obama’s memoir, *Dreams from My Father*, was associated with post-Soul aesthetics. See Ashe 2010: 103–15.

Obama isn't black. "Black," in our political and social reality, means those descended from West African slaves. Voluntary immigrants of African descent (even those descended from West Indian slaves) are just that, voluntary immigrants of African descent with markedly different outlooks on the role of race in their lives and in politics. At a minimum, it can't be assumed that a Nigerian cabdriver and a third-generation Harlemiter have more in common than the fact a cop won't bother to make the distinction. They're both "black" as a matter of skin color and DNA, but only the Harlemiter, for better or worse, is politically and culturally black, as we use the term. (2007: para. 10)

Already the immediate reactions to this, however, conveyed the true complexity of this issue, namely that the debate was very much imbedded in a general reevaluation and questioning of the American category of "Blackness." As a *Poplicks* blogger named O.W. writes:

I hear what she's saying here but does that mean that a third-generation Harlemiter shares the same perspectives as every other African American (of slave-descent) in every other part of the country? Does the Blackness experienced or internalized by said Harlemiter equal that of a Black person from Baldwin Hills? Or Chicago's Southside? Or Hunter's Point? The point here is that you can't have it both ways: either Blackness is a fixed identity (a philosophy that plays all too well into racist hands) or it's broad enough to include a range of Blackness beyond just the authenticating force of slavery's legacy. (2007: para. 7)

Hence, without even having to take up the issue of his Kenyan heritage or his biracial background, journalist Touré was able to state: "Post-Black means we are like Obama: rooted in but not restricted by Blackness" (2011: 12). Notably, the optimism signaled by the earlier instances of Post-Blackness soon made way for more critical assessments of that discourse's cultural and political merits. And this, in turn, also affected Afropolitan literatures. In his glum analysis of how the protagonists of novels like Ike Oguine's *A Squatter's Tale*, Teju Cole's *Open City*, or Adichie's *Americanah* intersect, or rather fail to intersect with Black American culture, Chude-Sokei argues that the aforementioned "sense of loss, of transformation and decline" is in fact "paradigmatic, not only of contemporary African writing and the waves of immigration that impel it, but for the wider context of the new cultural politics of a black America that is deeply in the throes of what theorist Judith Butler would call a 'category crisis'" (2014: 53–54).

It is possible to interpret the novels selected for my analysis as various responses to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century failures epitomized by the US – which was seen as a driving force of an incomplete project of globalization – and particularly those shortcomings associated with the figure of Obama: the extension of the color line into the foreseeable future and the incessant demotion of Africa's role in global and diasporic relations. For those who ever believed in it, Obama's notion of change, his vision of a "more perfect union," has fallen flat in the light

of a violent and seemingly unchanging status quo. To many ears, then, Du Bois's description of post-Emancipation America in *The Souls of Black Folk*, that “[w]hatever of good may have come in these years of change, the shadow of a deep disappointment rests upon the Negro people,” sounds strangely familiar (2007: 10). The disappointments born from that hopeful moment, its impact on how the US, the Black Diaspora, or the world narrates its notions of political progress, often translates into pronouncedly pessimist metahistorical positions that equally play out in the Afropolitan novel – already impacted by the pessimist outlook of post-independence African literatures. Seen from the more austere of these perspectives, the notion of progressive historical change has been fatally undermined, if not inverted, as the contemporary political moment is characterized not by progress, but by a sense of endless repetition and constant return, marked by what Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman describes as the “perpetuity of crisis” (2017: 687) and haunted by what Saidiya Hartman has coined the “after-life of slavery” (2007: 6).

Yet, as Vinson Cunningham writes in *The New Yorker*, “Obama’s truest political gift, perhaps, was the ability to let a thousand flowers of expectation, born of history, bloom” (para. 5).<sup>11</sup> The same moment that allowed Obama to signify and thwart the prefigured fulfillment of a promise – marking the final success of Black liberation, its telos and icon – also made way for Black Lives Matter, “the most significant political uprising since the Civil Rights era” (Li 2017: 633). As a digital movement, Black Lives Matter has effortlessly transcended borders; morphing from an online hashtag to galvanizing grassroots activism around the globe. The anti-racist protests occurring around the globe in the summer of 2020 were driven in large and significant parts by the concerted efforts of various local Black Lives Matter groups, many of which had formed amidst the wave of global demonstrations following the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner in 2014, and who had since worked often independently but determinedly for racial justice.

In an article titled “The Changing Same,” referencing the term coined by Amiri Baraka, George Lipsitz places the recent decade, along with its premature promise of a post-racial society, on an anti-progressive, static timeline that he calls the “Katrina-Ferguson-Conjuncture”:

A decade that began with the organized abandonment and yet punitive confinement of impoverished Black residents of New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 culminated with the manipulation of the Grand Jury process to make sure that no charges would be brought against the killer of Michael Brown in Ferguson in 2014. Along the way, a racial-

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11 For longer discussions of Obama’s presidency, see Dyson 2016 and Coates 2017.

ly orchestrated economic crisis produced the greatest loss of assets in history for Black and brown people. Vehement rhetoric, violent acts, and vile policies have targeted immigrants of color, producing mass deportations and detentions. [...] In popular culture and political discourse, online and in the streets, in private acts of discrimination and in public policies [...] racism continues to be learned, legitimated and legislated. (2018: 16–17)

While Lipsitz accedes that the Katrina-Ferguson-Conjuncture is also an oppositional conjuncture, carrying the seed for change, he identifies the present as a time of uncanny returns: “Words uttered decades ago could just as easily have been spoken yesterday. The #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName movements of today are new, but their core concerns eerily echo James Baldwin’s observations from 1963” (ibid. 16). Critical voices like Lipsitz often describe the political present as a reiteration of the Civil Rights movement to highlight the continuity of racism that underlies what Joseph R. Winters has called the “agony of progress.” Yet there are crucial differences that may also affect the way one thinks about notions of historical change, repetition, and continuity. While it is not a secret, it is often overlooked that one of the three female founders of Black Lives Matter, Opal Tometi, is a Nigerian-American who understands anti-Black racism as a global problem and has made immigration a core issue of BLM’s political work.<sup>12</sup> Conscious of how her experiences intersect with those of African Americans, she has repeatedly emphasized how “black immigrant experience in the U.S. must be understood not in contrast to the African American experience but as an integral part of it” (Noel 2016: para. 24). Surely, Black Lives Matter is already a feminist intervention into a narrative told and retold by the kind of singular men that Hazel Carby identifies as race men – men like Du Bois, Obama, or even the fictional T’Challa, who reiterate what Wright terms the “heteropatriarchal” stakes in Black counterdiscourses – but it is also an Africanist intervention, a repetition with a difference.<sup>13</sup>

All of the authors discussed in this book have, in one way or another, reflected on the ways in which their Blackness intersects with American notions of Blackness, as well as their Africanness. For example, in “On the Blackness of the Panther,” Cole describes how, after moving to the US, he was often forced to abandon his ethnic or national modes of narrating the self in favor of a subsuming, and eternally ‘othered,’ Africanness (2018: para. 10–12). Cole names three stages of becoming: the first notion of being ‘African’ interpellated him as a strange “other,” followed by a Pan-African sensibility engendered by inhab-

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<sup>12</sup> For an excellent discussion and political contextualization of Black Lives Matter, see Taylor 2016.

<sup>13</sup> See Carby 2018; Wright 2005: 10–13; 229–231.

iting “mutual spaces with Africans” who had equally been placed in this category and who shared the “still fresh” experience of colonialism: “African, whatever else it was, was about collectively undoing this assault.” Concomitant with this awakened political consciousness was the journey of becoming Black, which, however, proved “more complex”:

“Black” was something else. It was in a sense more inclusive. [...] [I]t took in all that colonial hangover and added to it the American experiences of slavery, slave rebellion, Jim Crow, and contemporary racism, as well as the connective tissue that bound the Black Atlantic into a single territory of pain – which brought all of the Caribbean into its orbit – as well as European, Latin American, and global diasporic blackness.

Yet the connective properties of the vast and multifaceted spatio-temporal network of the Black Diaspora could also be undermined by narrow conceptions of the category ‘black.’ Cole continues:

But “black” was also more restrictive because, in everyday language, “black” (or “Black”) was American black, and “American black” meant slave-descended American black. [...] To be black in America, that localized tenor of “black” had to be learned, it had to be learned and loved. [...] We learned black and loved black – knowing all the while, though, that it wasn’t the only black.

Generally, the negative assessment of both the cultural context and the affective range of Afropolitan literatures holds only partially true, as especially more recent artworks by these newly Black Americans offer complex and self-confident explorations of the category of Blackness. Apprehending American racial formations through the moment of Afropolitanism, it becomes apparent that the scope of Blackness has expanded and continues to expand and that many artists, rather than signaling intrdiasporic breaks and rifts, have grappled with this “category crisis” in an ultimately reconciliatory manner.

In an article on Yaa Gyasi and the artist Toyin Ojih Odutola from 2017, Selasi observes a very similar process. Here, she revisits precisely her statements on race and Blackness from “Bye-Bye Babar.” She writes:

In 2005 I wrote an essay describing an Afropolitan experience: the decidedly transcultural upbringing of many Africans at home and abroad. How such Afropolitans negotiate that second divide – not between black and white, but between black and African – often depends on where they are raised, whether among or apart from African-Americans. Gyasi and Ojih Odutola typify the distinction. (2017: para. 5)

In this text, Selasi sets out to investigate not only these artists’ shared West-African backgrounds, but particularly their Southern upbringing in Alabama, depict-

ing Blackness as an intersection of multiple lines of identification. Selasi asserts how both artists offer particularly astute observations on race in America:

This, perhaps, is the answer to my second query: how two young African artists came to articulate America's racial complexities so beautifully. Gyasi and Ojih Odutola consider themselves black but have not always. In order to feel at home in that identity they've had to study, understand, expand it. Finally, their work insists that we "just look" – and expand our vision too. (para. 15)

What Selasi is saying here thoroughly undermines the notion of Afropolitanism being primarily about a divestment of Blackness or a transcending of race in favor of a global and/or neoliberal African identity. Rather, we begin to understand how this moment is also marked by complex and ever-changing significations of racial identity. Afropolitanism, thus contextualized, is not overdetermined by a rejection, but rather by an investigation and negotiation of Blackness. The complex ambiguities of Afropolitan novels articulate this distinction quite elegantly. Even a novel like *Ghana Must Go* that undoubtedly de-emphasizes the importance of race and foregrounds the dimension of class cannot ignore how racial formations structure social reality but rather interrogates an authenticating understanding of Blackness. *Ghana Must Go*, along with Selasi's essay from 2005, signals an important element and a stage of Afropolitanism that is important to investigate yet should not statically fix the temporal transience and dynamism of this moment. As Selasi concedes in her article on Odutola and Gyasi, not only have these two African-born artists bridged the "representational chasm" in which this immigrant group was largely absent from popular culture, but they have sublimated the attaining "story of unbelonging, an account not of double consciousness but triple" into becoming "two of the finest observers of race in America" (Selasi 2017: para. 1–3). I argue that all Afropolitan novels discussed in *Making Black History* can be understood as performing this kind of labor: studying, understanding, and expanding Blackness in order to "feel at home in that identity."<sup>14</sup> Considering how heavily overdetermined

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<sup>14</sup> Rather than identity, however, which functions via exclusions and always threatens to reintroduce what this discourse seeks to challenge, it might be more apt to envision Blackness as a 'networked set of identifications,' and diaspora as a 'space' in which Afropolitanism (re-)in-scribes Africa as a something other than a site of lack and separation. As James Clifford (1994: 302–338), expanding on Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, writes in his seminal essay "Diaspora": "Identifications not identities, acts of relationship rather than pre-given forms: this tradition is a network of partially connected histories, a persistently displaced and reinvented time/space of crossings" (1994: 321). For further discussion of diaspora space, see Brah's

these issues are, this is certainly not an easy or comfortable conversation to have – a balancing act that clearly shows in these carefully constructed novels, which appear highly aware of how the texts and authors have circulated and signified in public discourse. What follows is a brief overview over two distinct yet closely connected discourses impacting Afropolitan literatures.

## 1.2 The Extranationality of African Literature

African literature has often been defined in terms of national or nationalist literature and interpreted as a response to either colonialism, nation-building, post-independence disillusionment, or globalization. A lasting theoretical contribution to this mode of thinking is Fredric Jameson's much debated "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" (1986) and his reading of African fictions as "national allegories." Notably, these kinds of nationalist readings were almost always folded back or lumped into a greater whole – as African, internationalist, third-world, or postcolonial literature. In many cases, and even after the passing of Cold War world-mapping, dominant Africanist scholarship often interpreted African literature's transnational dimensions as extensions or projections of purportedly Western influence and ideologies. So much so that – in another widely influential, as well as contentious, analysis of African literature – scholar Eileen Julien explained the popularity or canonizations of one set of African novels over the other with the former's so called "extroversion," which is "characterized above all by its intertextuality with hegemonic or global discourses and its appeal across borders" (2006: 681).

Yet, when viewed differently, the interpretation of African literatures as transnational or extroverted rather than static and nation-bound is neither merely the result of influence or projection nor an arbitrary effect of history, but kind of its point. In *Globalectics* (2012), a slim volume synthesizing a few of his lectures, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o theorizes what he calls the "globalectic imagination" of African writing. Ngũgĩ traces the genealogy of the African novel through the impact of colonial education, decolonial movements, and key events such as the 1962 African Writers Conference at Makerere University in Kampala or the 1956 First Congress of Black Artists and Writers in Paris – where Fanon inaugurated the transnational thrust of what would later become 'third world' or 'post-

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*Cartographies of Diaspora*, which formulates diaspora space as a concept that "foregrounds the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put'" (2005: 16).

colonial literature' by outlining the notion of 'Negro literature.'<sup>15</sup> Generally, this genesis narrative of the African novel has been similarly described by most Africanist scholars.<sup>16</sup> Bypassing the various origins and founding myths of the African imaginary tradition prior to the colonial experience, and focusing on what Irele has called the "africanization of the novel as a form of narrative," the African novel emerges during the era of independence and indeed as a particular genre, molded to fit a huge variety of different national backgrounds and experiences, yet recognizable in its main ideological thrust (Irele 2009: 8). Irele identifies the beginning of this process as one marked by the dialectic relation of Africa and Europe and aligns this with Jameson's notion of the "national allegory," as the critical consciousness reflected in the novels of the post-independence era transpires through what he calls "new realism" and a notably pessimist, often dystopian representation of 'failed' African states (2009: 10). Since the 1990s, however, Irele and other commentators have observed a creative burst and renewal of the form, through novels addressing urban milieus, the notion of global Africa and African diasporas. Faced with the vast scope of the African novel, Irele asserts that it "seems legitimate to propose the label 'African novel' as a generic term, covering written works in all the languages [...] that have enabled and continue to sustain the narration of the African experience as it continues to unfold in all its multiple dimensions" (ibid.). In *Globalectics*, Ngũgĩ also concedes the synthetic nature of African literatures, at least from a linguistic and geographical perspective. He also emphasizes the binding force of an inherent transculturalism, which echoes Fanon's assertion that it "is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows" (Fanon 2001: 199). Ngũgĩ writes:

Outside the fact of language, writers from the colonial world always assumed an extranational dimension. We talk of African literatures, for instance without batting an eyelid. [...] In terms of nations, Africa has more than fifty. But African literature always saw itself as

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<sup>15</sup> In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon later formulated: "Colonialism did not dream of wasting its time in denying the existence of one national culture after another. Therefore, the reply of the colonized peoples will be straight away continental in its breadth. In Africa, the native literature of the last twenty years is not a national literature but a Negro literature" (2001: 212).

<sup>16</sup> While Ngũgĩ is acutely aware of the politics of English in the African novel, as shown by his seminal "On the Abolition of the English Department" (1972), it is his son Mukoma wa Ngũgĩ, who, in *The Rise of the African Novel* (2018), formulates an important intervention into the established genealogy by revisiting the complexities of its founding moments, particular the linguistic diversity of South African fiction at the time, and thus documenting the historical contingency of Anglophone dominance in African writing.

beyond the national territorial state, assuming, at the minimum, the continent for its theater of relevance and application. (2012: 54)

Ngũgĩ adds historical depth and continuity to the global impetus of what many have described as watershed moment in African literatures, assigning the latest wave of contemporary diasporic writing variably to a third, fourth, fifth, or Afropolitan generation of African writers. Ngũgĩ frames the global orientation of African literatures as an intrinsic feature and not merely a contingent, historical development born from Western influence or global forces. Describing his early work at the Nairobi literature department, he notes how “[f]or us, the point of departure was East Africa, radiating outward to Africa, the Caribbean, and African America, Latin America, Asia, Europe, and the rest. The organizing principle was one of from here to there. Hereness and thereness are mutually contained” (2012: 58).

These positions also counter what some critics fear to be a dilution of the concept of African literature. In “Bursting at the Seams: New Dimensions for African Literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” Thomas A. Hale proclaims that the “21<sup>st</sup> century will be the century of African literature” (2006: 19), yet he also warns:

One can argue that these writers are invigorating, reshaping, and renewing the literatures of Europe and North America as they extend the range of African literature today. It is not clear, however, to what extent these writers will fall into a no-writers-land that is neither African nor European. One wonders if they will be co-opted into a new literary context, or simply become pioneers in a new global village of world literature. (18)

Writing about the difficulty to account for the global aspect of African literature, Madhu Krishnan notes how the “idea of Africa” in predominant scholarship “remains caught in a critical schism between authenticity and cosmopolitan attachment” (2014: 4). Concomitant with this, she notes, is the tendency to analyze these literary works as either aesthetic or political, reifying the kind of critical compartmentalization that not only reproduces an oftentimes dated image of Africa in crisis but also fails to account for the ways that form, content, and context co-constitutively affect “the creation and dissemination of a global Africa” (2014: 5–6). Krishnan’s study, therefore, reads contemporary African fictions as global texts, drawing not only on textual analysis, but also on the discursive and material circuits surrounding and shaping these works, in order to illuminate what she calls a “geopolitical aesthetic” of Africa.

An integrative view of African literature’s in-built extranationality proves a helpful framework for today’s increased visibility of global or diasporic African literatures. Most importantly, it is a framing that avoids outdated and often paternalistic indictments of African literature as mostly externally controlled, ex-

troverted or subjected to market forces – and thus befits the self-confidence of the Afropolitan moment. The global orientation of African literature thus fulfills a function that goes beyond being “recognized” by the West and expresses its Afropolitan – read: fluid, transcultural, modern – reality. Along those lines, Eileen Julien has also recently revisited her notion of the extroverted novel:

If writing to the world is not the only or the primary function of contemporary African novels and texts, I believe it is nonetheless a critical one. From the years of colonization to the present, modern African writers, particularly novelists, have indeed had transcontinental publics. It could be argued that these writers, like those of Asia, Latin America, and the periphery of Europe, were and are *necessarily* more worldly than Northern counterparts of one or two centuries back and even those of today [...] And while I should not like the world to mistake a subset of narratives with particular themes and features as the sum total of what the African imaginary is and has to say, I would not want African authors to turn a blind eye to global audiences and hegemonic power to which African realities and stories are intimately bound. (2018: 9)

Yet whether one frames Afropolitan literature as an expression of African literature’s “globalectics” or “geopolitical aesthetics,” the contentious notion of global literature, its appendix of audiences, markets, and appetites, looms large. While a detailed engagement with the scholarship on world or global literature exceeds the scope of my analyses, there are a few basic aspects to keep in mind when considering the complex positioning of Black African writers on a global stage.

### 1.3 The Dilemma of the Black Writer

There are certain critiques of the global novel, such as the one issued by the editors of *n+1* in “World Lite,” that maintain an unabashed nostalgia for the “programmatically *internationalist* literature of the revolutionary left” (Saval and Torrici 2013: 13). This kind of comparison reads romantic at best, and, as Krishnan reminds us, tends to perpetuate a stereotypical image of Africa in crisis. For critics of an apparently de-politicized, middlebrow global fiction, the culprits are easy to be found: Not only corporate publishers, but also universities – and in particular creative writing programs – become ready vessels for neoliberalism, peddling the “tastes of an international middlebrow audience” (Saval and Torrici 2013: 14) and training a “global elite” (8). Combining the insights of Mark McGurl’s widely discussed *The Program Era* (2009) with Graham Huggan’s “The Postcolonial Exotic” (2001), Kalyan Nadiminti argues that “the influence of the American MFA program” has led to the evolution of a “a new realist style,

one that is deeply inflected by both global capitalism and programmatic writing” (2018: 376). The MFA writing program, according to Nadiminti, becomes “not merely a networking agent but a crucial training ground of American globalism in a post–Cold War literary world” (2018: 377).

Surely, such analyses expose some of the most insidious, neo-imperialist mechanisms behind, as Huggan put it, “the globalisation of cultural production” (2001: 4). However, this kind of criticism, although heavily relying on a materialist critique of globalism, often loses sight of other, equally troubling sides to the argument. Much contempt for the perceived dominance – and aesthetic inferiority – of the global novel, as well as the complaint that writing programs are ‘producing’ what some regard as ‘too many’ minority authors, should be eyed with enough suspicion to account for the fact that this might also be part of a reactionary effort to maintain a social status quo. Consequently, these efforts are often coded in aesthetic terms and invested in discussions of artistic value, thinly veiling elitist claims to cultural hegemony. To some degree, this also concerns leftist Western intellectuals pining for the kind of revolutionary subject that remains ever subjugated, but it most certainly plays out when, for example, a white British critic huffily declares the end of the Booker prize because the shortlist’s “superficial multicultural aspect conceal[s] a specifically North American taste” (Hensher 2013: para. 1).

Contrary to this, author and creative writing professor Aminatta Forna notes that “as the centre in literature begins to shift away from the Anglo-American writer towards writers with different backgrounds we are witnessing a backlash” (Flood 2014: para. 7). In “MFA vs. POC,” a much-noted article from 2014, Junot Díaz provides a glimpse into the ways in which the hegemonic status quo has long since been maintained. Writing about the “unbearable too-whiteness” of MFA programs, he explains:

Too white as in Cornell had almost no POC – no people of color – in it. Too white as in the MFA had no faculty of color in the fiction program [...] Too white as in my workshop reproduced exactly the dominant culture’s blind spots and assumptions around race and racism (and sexism and heteronormativity, etc).

In my workshop there was an almost lunatical belief that race was no longer a major social force (it’s class!). In my workshop we never explored our racial identities or how they impacted our writing – at all. Never got any kind of instruction in that area – at all. Shit, in my workshop we never talked about race except on the rare occasion someone wanted to argue that “race discussions” were exactly the discussion a serious writer should *not* be having. (para. 3)

While Díaz’ text mostly deals with memories of his own writing program of the 1990s, very similar concerns were raised by Claudia Rankine in her AWP (Asso-

ciations of Writers and Writing Programs) keynote in 2016, where she noted how, in these programs, “certain life experiences are said to belong to sociology and not to poetry. To write beyond the white imagination’s notion of normality and normality’s traumas is to write ‘political poetry,’ ‘sociology,’ ‘identity politics poetry,’ ‘protest poetry’ – many labels but none of them Poetry” (Rankine 2016: para. 11).

Apart from structural shifts creating new areas of friction, these debates also point to the often-documented dilemma of the Black or minority writer who, in return for her admission into the illustrious circle of published literature, is faced with having to perform the status of ‘otherness’ – a process which often enough results in the repudiation of that status. In the context of the US, the pressure to ‘represent the race’ as well as the question of whether Black literature constitutes ‘art or propaganda’ is usually linked to the debate between Alain Locke and W.E.B. Du Bois. While both Locke and Du Bois converged on the social significance of literature and literary representation, Locke proposed a literature that was more in tune with his notion of the term “New Negro” and which, through “artistic self-expression,” or what he later calls “purely artistic expression,” aspired to universal values rather than denoting what was commonly understood as “the Negro problem” (Locke 1992: xxvi). Du Bois, on the other hand, argued for the necessary political situatedness of any illocution, pointing toward the very concrete constrictions of publishing. Most famously, Du Bois maintained that “all Art is propaganda and ever must be” (1926: 296).

This “great debate,” as Leonard Harris calls it, around the social role of literature is often used to signpost the two most dominant theoretical strands of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Black aesthetics, in particular during the Harlem Renaissance, but it extends well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, notably through Kenneth Warren’s proposition of the end of African American literature. In *What Was African American Literature* (2011), Warren claims that “African American literature was a post-emancipation phenomenon that gained its coherence as an undertaking in the social world defined by the system of Jim Crow segregation” (107). Controversially discussed and often quickly dismissed, Warren’s intervention nevertheless cuts to the core of an ongoing “debate over the efficacy of a racially grounded solidarity as a basis for resistance to injustice” (Hayman 2015: 128). This debate and its implications for literature actually transcend the realm of African American cultural production and thereby mark a historical continuity.

The Harlem Renaissance was, of course, also part of a “‘new’ black internationalism” (Edwards 2003: 2). Throughout history, the notion of the Black international, Pan-African, or African writer’s role was likewise never without contestation. In 1956, at the First Congress of Black Artists and Writers in Paris, Alioune Diop, Léopold Senghor, Aimé Césaire, Richard Wright, Frantz Fanon,

and others had anything but singular views on what constituted national or international culture, and consequently the role of the Black writer, even as the opening statement by Senghor insisted that “African Negro Literature and art” were “functional and collective” and thus necessarily “committed” (1956: 56). The various critiques leveled at the essentializing tendencies of the concept of “Négritude,” particularly by figures like Fanon and Wright, have been well documented.<sup>17</sup> Wole Soyinka most famously transferred these debates into the context of Anglophone African literature, when, at the Makerere conference in 1962, he declared: “I don’t think a tiger has to go around proclaiming his ‘tigritude.’” Later, Soyinka clarified that he wanted to distinguish between propaganda and “true poetic creativity” (Jahn 1968: 266). Likewise, Nigerian writer Christopher Okigbo declared: “There is no such thing as African writing. There is only good writing and bad writing.” On the same grounds, Okigbo later declined a prize by the Festival of Negro Art (Nwakanma 2010: 182). And Zimbabwean author Dambudzo Marechera put the sentiment quite simply: “If you are a writer for a specific nation or a specific race, then fuck you” (Ashcroft 2013: 79). Of course, these kinds of polemics are first and foremost leveled at external ascriptions and the specific heteronomous demands on Black and/or African art. The variously polemic or remedial responses triggered by these conscriptions, however, reveal a particularly insidious double bind, as Mbembe writes in *On the Postcolony*:

The uncompromising nature of the Western self and its active negation of anything not itself had the countereffect of reducing African discourse to a simple polemical reaffirmation of black humanity. However, both the asserted denial and the *reaffirmation* of that humanity now look like the two sterile sides of the same coin. (2001: 12)

Relating these debates back to the current situation of Black and minority writers in Western institutions and literary markets, it becomes clear how fraught the issue of ‘writing or not writing race’ continues to be. In a way, there is ‘no way out’, or at least no easy way. Even though race, racialization, and identity make for not only valid but important and complex literary topoi, the structures of institutions which, following Sara Ahmed (2012: 43), often allow “an act of inclusion to maintain the form of exclusion” continue to conscript writers of color into the double role of not merely exploring, but performing these themes as the embodiment of ‘a problem.’ In this sense, admission into these spaces is predicated on the performance of difference rather than on the realization of actual change. Acknowledging this aporia however, may translate into its transference

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17 See M’Baye 2009: 29 – 42; Rabaka 2015; Bernasconi 2002: 69 – 83.

rather than incorporation, by wielding it as a tool rather than a burden. Thus, Ahmed's solution is to defiantly own the status of "killjoy" and continue to disrupt and unsettle. Rankine suggests a similar approach, noting that writing is "is and should be an arena full of discomfort as we try to keep present the differences that keep us in relation" (2016: para. 43).<sup>18</sup> And it is possible to interpret Wole Soyinka's addendum to his notorious "tigritude" comment – a tiger doesn't proclaim, "he pounces" – in a similar vein. Rather than declaring difference – qua existence, or rather, admittance – writers can try to affect change through actions, and the choice of 'improperly' political topics as a literary subject may well be one of them. In "The Writer in the African State," Soyinka thus explicitly advises writers to address their political realities. "[T]here can be," he writes, "no further distractions with universal concerns whose balms are spread on abstract wounds, not on the gaping yaws of black inhumanity" (1967: 356).

Facing these "gaping yaws" and occupying an "arena of discomfort" while still being heard is a difficult task for any writer. It is worth carefully examining how it affects these widely popular authors, who are granted a wider platform than many and appear to self-consciously navigate the representation of Blackness. The following analyses will attend mostly to the textual representation of Blackness and to the ways in which the representation of race is itself thematized. There are, however, also important extratextual angles to this. One is the way the authors self-define; another is how the texts and authors are read or appropriated. As mentioned above, many of these novels were received as proof or sign of a post-racial age and described with the still young terminology of a post-racial aesthetics. While each of the novels indeed investigates and questions received notions of a particularly US-American episteme of Blackness and a somewhat outdated notion of Pan-African solidarity, it is striking how often their nuanced explorations were first stripped of their ambiguity and then folded back on to their authors, reducing them to post-racial taking heads. More than once, for example, *Americanah's* often satirist description of an esoteric American race discourse was mobilized for articles running some version of 'race is over' or 'even minorities are tired of talking about it' or indeed showcasing Adichie's smiling face under the headline "Race doesn't occur to me." The fact that Adichie had applied this comment to Nigeria, or, often in the same context, put it in past tense and declared that she now considers herself "happily black," was omitted by the kind of sensationalist media representations feeding into the no-

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<sup>18</sup> Rankine, most notably through her *Racial Imaginary Institute*, also specifically advocates the exploration of whiteness, thus echoing what Mitchell describes as an unquestioned "time of 'White Mythology'" posing as a post-racial moment (2012: 5).

tion that the new visibility of Africans signaled not only a distraction from African Americans but an end to race politics. This narrative, as Goyal notes, framed the diaspora as “some kind of zero-sum game, where only one community could assume center stage in a kind of Darwinian free-for-all” (2017c: 643).

I would argue that, paradoxically, the literature of these African-born or identified authors was thus framed as an instance of the “New Negro” paradigm, even and precisely when they were dis-identified with US-American Blackness. In “Afro-Modernity,” Michael Hanchard traces several trajectories of the “New Negro” discourse in the Americas, concluding how “the New Negro’s evidenced discomfort with forms of behavior that could have been – and often were – negatively associated with slavery by white and black alike would become the basis for a key dilemma of black aesthetics and cultural production throughout the diaspora” (1999: 259). Read as a paradoxical iteration of the “New Negro,” one that had not only left behind the painful memories of slavery but simply lacked them and thus signaled not only a change but an end to its very category, Afropolitan authors were indeed conscripted into a variety of related discourses, some political or cultural, others socio-economic. Noticeable in discussions that framed the African story as somehow distracting from the African American story, Goyal writes, are the fears of commentators “as African immigrants become the US’ latest model minority” (2017c: 643). Read in this way, their “entrepreneurship, habits of industry, and cultural values of hard work and discipline seem only to rebuke African Americans and blame them for their continuing subordination or malaise” (ibid.). These scenarios, reminiscent of how other Black immigrant groups have historically been pitted against African Americans, capture and enlarge only one aspect of diaspora identification, namely its uneasy articulations of unity, fraught negotiations of identity, and, most of all, its vast socioeconomic and cultural diversity.

While I generally regard Afropolitanism not as a secession but as part of a long tradition of transatlantic, intradiasporic entanglements, it is true that this moment challenges the most intensively theorized constituent of both African American and Black Atlantic consciousness: the centrality of the Middle Passage. In order to further contextualize this, the following section provides an overview of the two most prominent theorizations of Blackness relying on that centrality, Paul Gilroy’s seminal *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and US-American Afro-pessimism, one of the most prominent correctives to post-racialism in contemporary academia. Though the two intellectual frameworks differ greatly, both share a distinct form of historicism that prioritizes the epistemological effect of slavery and the Middle Passage.

#### 1.4 An African Atlantic: Provincializing the Middle Passage Epistemology

Highlighting the ways in which the events of African American past formations speak to or are entangled with current-day migration, Roderick A. Ferguson has called for a decentering of African American history and a repurposing of African American studies (2011: 113–131). For him, a more lateralized African American studies could be a tool for questioning the hegemonic valences and ideological implications behind these concepts – despite the danger of being co-opted or subsumed under the broad academic rubrics of transnationalism, globalization, or cosmopolitanism. Other scholars like Simon Gikandi, Natasha Barnes, and Michelle M. Wright have also argued against a conception of diasporic unity grounded in the experience of slavery alone.<sup>19</sup> Afropolitanism certainly enacts a necessary intervention into what Wright has called the “Middle Passage Epistemology” by exhibiting diasporic Black experiences that do not draw their main cues or epistemic origins from the transatlantic slave trade (alone) but narrate their specific histories in relation to colonialism and/or socioeconomic changes like globalization. Yet this kind of dialogue remains highly charged and contested, both outside and inside the academy. The uneasy relation between Afro-pessimist theorizing and Afropolitanism often appears unresolvable, as particularly the optimism associated with the early Afropolitan moment seems thoroughly antithetical to it.

Neither encompassed by the notion of a coherent school of thought or political movement but a self-described “project” or “enterprise,” Afro-pessimism as a whole strongly diverges from the reparative rhetoric that, according to Afro-pessimist theorist Jared Sexton, often buttresses Black cultural and historical scholarship. For example, the same global imperative of the Afropolitan moment that Ferguson views as a chance for African American Studies, signals danger for Sexton. Whereas Ferguson writes that the “contours of globalization, generally, and global migration, specifically, provide an opportunity to fashion an African American studies organized around heterogeneity and radical non-identity of black racial formations” (2011: 116), Sexton warns against a latent global didacticism toward African American studies, and Black Americans in general, which he interprets as a barely concealed imperative to ‘get over oneself,’ to transcend and graduate in order to become “truly worldly and cosmopolitan” (2011: 8). While not entirely denying the existence of Black (social) life, Sexton notes, Afro-pessimism insists that this sociality is excluded from the modern world sys-

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<sup>19</sup> See Gikandi 1996: 1–6; Barnes 1996: 106–107; Wright 2015.

tem: “Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but is lived underground, in outer space. This is agreed” (2011: 28).<sup>20</sup>

Crucially, from an Afro-pessimist perspective, a more inclusive repurposing of African American studies is easily co-opted by a post-racial argument that signals not only a “fresh perspective” on American racial politics but, most importantly, severs its constitutive ties to the past. In the field of African American studies especially, the posting, shelving away, and neatly categorizing of past epochs proves problematic in light of ongoing racial violence. Yet it is not only in these violent spectacles but also in the everyday and the mundane that scholars like Sexton, Saidiya Hartman, or Frank B. Wilderson identify an “afterlife of slavery” that bars all periodization but rather intimates the continuation of a century-old “racial calculus and political arithmetic” that “has yet to be undone” (Hartman 2007: 6). Here, it is neither the “antiquarian obsession with bygone days [n]or the burden of a too-long memory” that keeps the past alive and well understood, but a sense of permanence or even simultaneity of past and present (ibid.). Theorizing this state of permanence, Afro-pessimist scholars often draw on the work of sociologist Orlando Patterson, who, in *Slavery and Social Death*, develops the concepts of “social death” and “natal alienation.” Patterson describes the slave as a “socially dead person” that is isolated from “all ‘rights’ or claims of birth” and without any “right to any legitimate social order” (1982: 5). For Afro-pessimist thinkers, the “highly symbolized domain of human experience” that Patterson sees embodied by slavery exceeds the historical event and continues to condition the Black body (1982: 38).

In the blurring of historical demarcations and the assertion of not only history’s inevitable return but its ongoing presence, Afro-pessimist theorizing can be linked to broader concerns in both African American and Black Atlantic studies. The inclination to excavate and actualize the past’s hauntings, as well as the theoretical centrality of the Middle Passage, embed Afro-pessimist critique in the ongoing effect of an ‘archival turn’ in literary studies in general, and diaspora studies in particular – albeit under a different, decidedly pessimist sign. In *Archives of the Black Atlantic*, Wendy Walters describes the archival turn as having engendered a “reading of the past for which we may have either no evidence or compromised evidence, and yet which must be imagined as possibility” (2013: 2). This imaginative attachment to a traumatic past and the recurrent revisiting thereof affects a wide range of contemporary Black studies. In “On Failing to

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<sup>20</sup> Extending the Afro-pessimist project beyond his own moment, Sexton also claims that to read Du Bois – properly, that is – is to understand how, contrary to what is widely accepted as his cosmopolitan or Pan-Africanist stance, there actually is “no place like home” (2011: 8).

Make the Past Present,” Stephen Best has termed this particular historiographical mode “melancholic historicism,” and traced its ur-moment to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) and Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*. Best argues that this mode has become somewhat paradigmatic, and he criticizes its “promotion of a feeling to an axiom” (2012: 464). In a 2017 issue of *American Literary History*, Patricia Stuelke warns against what she calls the “American antiblack tragedy trap: a double bind that locks black subjects into the infinitely recursive roles of universal tragic martyrs or pathological tragic victims” (755). In the same issue, Margo Natalie Crawford historicizes in the tried and tested rhetoric of “turns,” by describing similar developments as “The Twenty-First-Century Black Studies Turn to Melancholy” (2017: 799–807). Crawford, who after the publication of Best’s essay had already begun to theorize “postmelancholy,” now concedes that 21<sup>st</sup>-century African American theory and literary criticism are indeed characterized by a recurring or continuous turn to melancholy. Commenting on Jermaine Singleton’s *Cultural Melancholy: Readings of Race, Impossible Mourning, and African American Ritual* (2015) and Joseph R. Winters’s *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress* (2016), Crawford writes: “How does it feel to move on with unresolved grief? [...] These recent texts signal that we are now, in black studies, developing the new frames – and new grammar – that can make legible the ‘jam-full of contradictions’ of black life in the afterlife of slavery in the twenty-first century” (2017: 805).

The 21<sup>st</sup>-century “turn to melancholy” in Black Atlantic studies constitutes less a turn than a continuation – given that the inaugural scholarly text on the Black Atlantic also formulates a distinct “reading of the past [...] which must be imagined as possibility” through the notion of a ‘slave sublime’ that becomes knowable only through the experience of the Middle Passage. At the heart of Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* lies the focus on rhizomatic maps of entanglements rather than singular roots, as a push back against definitions of Blackness that threaten to recede into cultural parochialism or racial essentialism. Yet its extraordinary scope and poststructuralist unmooring notwithstanding, the main coordinates of Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* are clearly located and demarcated. While wary of the ways in which Blackness is easily submerged under “the smooth flow of African American exceptionalism” (2002: 120), Gilroy offers no different provenance or alternative technique for locating Black consciousness, other than perhaps digging deeper – meaning, he too prioritizes African American (male) Blackness by centering figures like W.E.B. Du Bois, Frederick Douglass, Martin Delany, and Richard Wright and predominantly tracing the concentric spreading of Black American culture. Framing his inquiry into a Black British identity that exceeds both nationality and nationalism, he concedes that he first needed to make “an intellectual journey across the Atlantic.” In “black America’s histories

of cultural and political debate and organization” he finds “another, second perspective” – the “lure of ethnic particularism and nationalism” notwithstanding – which helps him orient his own position (ibid. 4).

Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* remains an influential and highly important text, despite drawing criticism for its narrow Euro-Atlantic and Anglophone focus and its centering of predominantly male, modernist intellectuals. Various scholars, Yogita Goyal, Simon Gikandi, and Michelle M. Wright among them, have pointed out how the Black Atlantic framework eclipses the African continent.<sup>21</sup> By conceiving of Blackness as a quintessential New World identity, characterized by the epistemic rupture of the Middle Passage, Africa necessarily recedes or “figures as an object of retrospective rediscovery, rather than as an active agent” (Law and Mann 1999: 308). Arguing against essentialist and Afrocentric notions of Blackness that rely on genealogical and traditional ties or biological ‘roots,’ Gilroy fashions Black Atlantic culture as a kind of counterculture of modernity, following Zygmunt Bauman, that actually better embodies the ‘true’ claims of modernity. This fundamental understanding of the modernist potential derives from the experience, or memory, of slavery. Gilroy notes how, despite or particularly because of the “racial terror” of slavery inherent to Western civilization and thought,

blacks in the west eavesdropped on and then took over a fundamental question from the intellectual obsessions of their enlightened rulers. Their progress from the status of slave to the status of citizens led them to enquire into what the best possible forms of social and political existence might be. (2002: 39)

Black Atlantic culture, necessarily blurring the boundary between the aesthetic and the political, is thus either adamant in bringing the enlightened claims of modernity to their logical conclusion, what Gilroy terms a discursive “politics of fulfillment,” or, in seizing modernity’s inherent and violent contradictions, aims to expressively limn its utopian overcoming through what he calls the “politics of transfiguration” (ibid. 37).

Throughout *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy attempts to redefine the meaning of tradition, prying it from the hands of those who value it as a culturalist, meaning racially essentialist, link to African origins. This “wrench[ing] open” of tradition, as James Clifford describes it in his discussion of the book, allows Gilroy to con-

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, a special issue of *Research in African Literatures* from 1996, edited by Simon Gikandi and featuring contributions by Natasha Barnes, Colin (Joan) Dayan, and Ntongela Masilela that specifically tackle the incompatibility of Gilroy’s Black Atlantic and African modernity (Gikandi 1996).

struct a notion of Black Atlantic culture that is fluid rather than fixed, self-generating and self-referential rather than derivational or estranged from its source (Clifford 1994: 321). At the same time, the terms tradition and memory are again limited because memory first and foremost pertains to the “ineffable, sublime terror” of slavery (Gilroy 2002: 215) that is then “actively preserved as a living intellectual resource” through the “expressive political culture” that marks the Black Atlantic tradition (ibid. 39). Gilroy’s privileging of the Middle Passage Epistemology in the making of Black culture certainly disrupts Afrocentrist romanticizing of pre-modern Africa. However, as Goyal notes, it does not “provide any alternative way of thinking about Africa” and instead reifies its role in Atlantic culture as static and passive (Goyal 2014: v).

Framing Africa as passive witness is surely not mandatory to thinking about the horrors of the Middle Passage, but it might be a tacit continuation of that conceptualization of Africa as helpless victim or abject non-place that Mbembe (2001: 4) describes: “More than any other region, Africa thus stands out as the supreme receptacle of the West’s obsession with, and circular discourse about, the facts of ‘absence,’ ‘lack,’ and ‘non-being,’ of identity and difference, of negativity – in short, of nothingness.” It is precisely this brand of Afropessimism, as a globally mediated discourse on the African continent as hopeless heart of darkness, that Mbembe sees confronted by Afropolitanism as a “way of being in the world, refusing on principle any sort of victim identity” (Mbembe 2005: 28–29).<sup>22</sup> However, as Mbembe adds, this “does not mean that it is not aware of the injustices and violence inflicted on the continent and its people by the law of the world” – and this awareness certainly also pertains to the transatlantic slave trade (ibid 30). Mbembe’s later work *The Critique of Black Reason* (2017) is thus a conscious attempt at rereading the African American history of Blackness from a continental perspective and expanding a myopic vision of the Middle Passage Epistemology. In a conversation with Theo David Goldberg, Mbembe elaborates on how he wanted to “take seriously the idea that Black, or blackness, is not so much a matter of ontology as it is a matter of historicity or even contingency” as well as “contest those lineages of blackness that use memories of trauma to develop discourses of blackness as ontology” (Mbembe 2018: para. 4). What is being contested here, are Afro-pessimist perspectives in which Blackness is not only an ontological, socially and philosophically pre-determined and political category, but the kind of political ontology from which a

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<sup>22</sup> See Ebanda De B’Beri and Louw (2011: 335–346) for a discussion of Afropessimism as it relates to the continent. Here, the term denotes a certain skeptical and/or hopeless attitude toward Africa’s political and economic developments, particular in comparison with other ‘developing’ regions. The hyphenated Afro-pessimism denotes the US-American school of thought.

global civil society derives its notions of lack and non-being by “dividing the Slave from the world of the Human in a constitutive way” (Sexton 2011: 23). By emphasizing, instead, the effect of “historicity or even contingency” in the making of Blackness, Mbembe draws a sharp distinction between his own and Afro-pessimist theorizing.<sup>23</sup>

While it is important to distinguish between continental Afropessimism that paints a derelict picture of post-independence Africa (particularly through media coverage) and American Afro-pessimism as an umbrella term for contemporary political, historical, aesthetic, and theoretical approaches that radically problematize anti-Blackness and the afterlife of slavery, both instances converge on the point of African agency – or the lack thereof. The self-described “unflinching paradigmatic analysis” of Afro-pessimist theories tends to negate the historical and political agency, or even the existence, of Black subjects in general, including African agency.<sup>24</sup> Elaborating on the incompatibility of Africa as a “homeland” for its diaspora, Frank Wilderson notes:

But the fact of the matter is that captivity and social death are the essential dynamics which everyone in this place called Africa stands in relation to [...] [W]hat Afro-pessimism is saying is that a Black African diaspora is fundamentally different from any other diaspora, because any other diaspora has actually been dispersed from a place that has sovereign integrity. And Africa has never had sovereign integrity; since it has gained conceptual coherence as Africa. [...] Africa has always been a big slave estate. That has been and still is the global consensus. (2016: 9)

The demographic fact of those very visible and active African diasporas in the US that carry with them very concrete and coherent notions of their respective homelands challenges this sentiment. But it also reveals the particular myopia on which it relies. I would argue that Wilderson’s, and by extension Afro-pessimism’s, rendering of a Black ontology as lack and non-being is just as reliant upon the ‘emptiness’ of the African signifier as the racist epistemologies that

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**23** It is important to note that, these crucial differences and a few intellectual skittles aside, Mbembe’s writings, in particular his notion of “necropolitics” and his bleak assessment of the “Postcolony,” have actually proven a fertile intellectual ground for the US-American brand of Afro-pessimism. In *Red, White, & Black*, Wilderson explicitly lists him as an Afro-pessimist, among Hortense Spillers, Ronald Judy, David Marriott, Saidiya Hartman, Frantz Fanon, Kara Keeling, Jared Sexton, Joy James, Lewis Gordon, George Yancey, and Orlando Patterson (Wilderson 2010: 79).

**24** To be fair, even though there is a utopian dimension to Afro-pessimist thinking, a certain “knowledge of freedom” that is discernable only through the crucible of slavery, it also offers no agent of change in the figure of the New World subject.

rendered Africa “the supreme receptacle” of the West (Mbembe 2001: 4). However, this process of projection is fundamentally challenged by a contemporary African diaspora that fills this blank or negative space with its very own, if often conflicting, presence. This issue is now particularly charged as many members of the new African diaspora in the US, and most certainly the majority of Afropolitan writers, hail from West African countries, e.g. those areas from which most enslaved African were taken and which, with the exception of Ethiopia, figure most prominently in Afrocentric notions of the ‘motherland.’<sup>25</sup> At first glance, this West-African kinship would suggest a distinct reckoning with the common history of slavery and enslavement, probing issues like lineage, tradition or complicity and perhaps triggering feelings of guilt, avowal, or forgiveness. Despite, or perhaps precisely because of, these loaded issues, the topic of slavery has structured the cultural encounters between old and new diasporic communities in the US much less overtly, or at least differently, than former (intra-)diasporic or transnational Black discourses. An example that is more recent than 19<sup>th</sup>- and early- to mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century Pan-Africanism would be the long and fruitful linkage between South African and African American cultural production. As scholar Neville Choonoo notes, the 20<sup>th</sup>-century dialogue between South Africa and Black America has been characterized by “interplay” or even “kinship,” founded on notions of diasporic solidarity and commonality (2015: 30). The crucial difference between South Africa and Nigeria is, of course, the former’s history of Apartheid and settler colonialism, but I would argue that this circumstance also profoundly implicates the semantics of slavery and Blackness transmitted within this exchange. Here, slavery is much more than a historical fact or experience. It actually represents the same system or effect of white supremacy that is implemented by Apartheid. And in this sense, American Blackness comes to be defined as a product or response to this racist order and is able to travel outside of its national framework. This is part of the “moment of Blackness,” as Mitchell describes it in *Seeing Through Race*, that was “never exclusively confined to the African American population of the United States” but was “disseminated most notably in the apartheid struggle in South Africa, which was accelerated by the example of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States” (2012: 60).

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<sup>25</sup> Akinbi (2017) cites Okun Uya’s estimation that the highest number of African slaves came from West Africa, particularly Nigeria and Ghana. He also notes that “the twentieth century migration of Nigerian immigrants [...] to the United States has been unprecedented” (98). According to the United State Bureau census (2008–2012), Nigerians and Ghanaians (West African) now constitute the largest African immigrant group in the US, followed by Ethiopians and Kenyans (East African) and Egyptians (North African). See Falola and Oyebade 2017: 3.

While various anticolonial independence movements were also implicated in that moment of Blackness, South Africa provided a much more durable ground for political recognition, even in the decades following ‘the wind of change’ on the continent – precisely because slavery had transmuted from a historical, discreet event to a mutable and mutating system. “African Americans,” Choonoo writes, “saw in South Africa a common Black experience under White hegemony” (2015: 30). The political situation of South Africa under Apartheid, together with its status as a settler colonial nation, allowed for “spontaneous and mutual” intradiasporic recognition, particularly during the 1960s and onwards (ibid. 36).

Obviously, one could even further investigate how the gulf of the imaginary, the effect of the mythical idea Africa, implicates today’s diasporic encounters. A generation removed from the internationalist, Pan-African ambitions of Du Bois, the Black American search for African roots was mostly characterized by what Choonoo calls a “naive interest in African culture” (2015: 38). This is also why South Africa offered an “easy access” for interconnectedness, allowing many intellectuals to forge concrete political linkages (ibid.). These concrete political ties were less prone to implode the mythical ideas of the motherland, simply for lack of direct confrontation. This confrontation, however, is now occurring with the heightened influx of West African immigrants to the US. Yet confrontations are mutually constituted. A recurring Afropolitan narrative recounts African immigrants’ indignation at being conscripted into the racial hierarchies of US society – usually upon realizing that “black is at the bottom of America’s race ladder” (*Americanah* 105). Consequently, African immigrants often adopt the model minority narrative ascribed to them, emphasizing their distinctness from African Americans. Culturally however, and the pervasiveness of white supremacy and institutional racism notwithstanding, Africans in America are also benefactors of the Black Power movement and the symbolic shifts brought about by African Americans who, as Paula Moya notes, have done “important decolonizing work through their sustained efforts to delink African ancestry from notions of biological inferiority” (2015: 128). Yet at the same time, these symbolic acts have often remained just that: symbolic and steeped in Afro-centric mythology. As Africans position themselves apropos and within systems of signification that alternately (de)value or (mis)recognize them, this creates a complex environment marked by different and often ambiguous modes of rejection, adoption, and appropriation. In sum, both the limited framework of Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* and the singular focus on South African similarities have, despite their productivity, done little to complicate the naïve or reductionist role that Africa often plays in the diasporic imaginary.

Perhaps it is unsurprising then, that Frank Wilderson has little to no use for Africa in his theorizations, *except* for South Africa, where he spent five years as one of only two American ANC members and about which he extensively wrote in his memoir *Incognegro* (2018). In the case of South Africa, Afro-pessimist thinking is able to extend its Middle Passage Epistemology through an understanding of apartheid as a mutation and extension of the logic of enslavement. For Wilderson, it is evident that “slavery is and connotes an ontological status for Blackness; and that the constituent elements of slavery are not exploitation and alienation but accumulation and fungibility” (2010: 23). Today, with the intensified diasporic encounters between West-Africans and African Americans, I argue that it may be precisely the historico-geographical proximity of these groups that renders slavery a somewhat blatant, mutually constitutive historical fact, rather than a system or effect of white supremacy. In this context, slavery might present itself as a shared trauma, a history of exploitation, or even a system of labor that implicates but not exclusively defines what it means to be Black.

It becomes clear that for theorizations centering on the Middle Passage, like Afro-pessimism or Gilroy’s Black Atlantic mapping, slavery really is a way of thinking, an epistemology, and particularly a way of thinking about (and constituting) Blackness. As Colin Dayan wrote in response to *The Black Atlantic*, the Middle Passage thus becomes a “metaphor, anchored somewhere in a vanishing history” rather than locating a complex node of global history (1996: 8). In relation to Blackness, the effect of this is twofold. For one, subjects who do not refer to or regard themselves through this epistemology may not be considered or consider themselves Black. Secondly, it installs a certain hierarchy or primacy of experience that sidelines all other modes of Blackness and submerges alternate histories. Conversely, however, Afropolitan narratives that insist on their own routes to becoming Black automatically counter the hegemony of the Middle Passage Epistemology and provincialize it as merely one of multiple modes, metaphors, and histories of Blackness.

In many ways, Afropolitanism seems incompatible with the tenets of Afro-pessimism. However, as my readings of the novels aim to show, their relation isn’t simply reducible to antagonism or irreconcilableness but rather an uneasy negotiation of sometimes similar, and oftentimes diverging conceptualizations of Blackness. In short, the Afropolitan moment – as it plays out in the US and in the novels selected here – both challenges and reconfigures the distinct tradition of diasporic cosmopolitanism that is often referred to as Black Atlantic culture. Afropolitan narratives intervene in the Middle Passage Epistemology in ways that need not refute Afro-Pessimist concepts of fungibility or social death as much as challenge or lateralize their singular mode of plotting African American

racial formations in linear rather than rhizomatic ways. As Ferguson asserts: “Contemporary black migrations productively derail the project of African American history. [...] [N]ew African American subjects question the utility of grounding African American history within a line of descent that starts with the middle passage, moves to slavery, proceeds to Emancipation, stops briefly at Reconstruction, passes through Jim Crow segregation, and arrives at civil rights” (2011: 115). While Afro-pessimist theories certainly denounce the notion of a linear progress in the afterlife of slavery, they still rely on linearity as they propose instead “a reverse linear narrative indicating that no *Black* progress has been made” (Wright 2015: 8).

Instead, a synchronistic exploration of Blackness in the moment of Afropolitanism allows me to approximate Wright’s theorizations of Blackness as both construct and phenomenology. In *Physics of Blackness*, Wright develops the concept of “spacetime,” where historical constructs of Blackness and progress are associated with temporal linearity and the interpretative moment of non-linear experience is linked to the phenomenological manifestations of Blackness (2015: 4). In light of demographic shifts she identifies as belonging to a post-WWII moment, Wright notes that the “question of defining Blackness has become more urgent as the collectives that perceive themselves through these multiple histories find themselves encountering each other more frequently” (*ibid.*). She proposes that

the only way to produce a definition of Blackness that is wholly inclusive and nonhierarchical is to understand Blackness as the *intersection* of constructs that locate the Black collective in *history* and in the *specific moment* in which Blackness is being imagined – the ‘now’ through which all imaginings of Blackness will be mediated. (18)

The Afropolitan moment may help explore what Crawford terms the contradictions of “black life in the afterlife of slavery in the twenty-first century” by relating it to the larger framework of the global Black Diaspora, highlighting not only the disparate socioeconomic and epistemic subject positions of a Black imaginary but also the subordination of narratives that are *not* routed through the Middle Passage or rooted in Gilroy’s notion of the slave sublime. Read in this way, the literatures under discussion shift rather than replace the centrality of the Middle Passage Epistemology, countering what Adichie, in a famous TEDtalk, described as the “danger of a single story” (Adichie 2009a).<sup>26</sup> One example of this would be

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<sup>26</sup> Here, Adichie used the phrase in relation to dominant stereotypes about Africans, immigrants, or ‘others’ in general, which become hegemonic and suppress alternative narratives.

their exploration of (post-)colonial traumas, highlighting how these traumas are just as intrinsic to global and diasporic history. Rather than identifying Afropolitan literatures with a distinct break with the kind of literatures which, following Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, actualize the (re-)memory or afterlife of slavery, these literatures could be read as a reminder that there are other historical traumas that also speak to the diasporic imaginary. As Goyal notes, reading a novel like Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* in posttraumatic terms, like some critics have, is only possible "if the only traumatic template allowed to a black writer is that of slavery and its afterlife" (2017c: 646). Whether plotted as linear progress narrative or as Afro-pessimist reversal, it becomes clear that the Middle Passage Epistemology has long determined not only the centrality of historicism in Black and diasporic writing but also whose history is conducive to African American and Black Atlantic racial formations. Despite the fact that many 20<sup>th</sup>-century literary and intellectual movements such as Négritude or the Harlem Renaissance have been described as a "cycle of reciprocities" (Irele 2001: 72) between Africa and New World diasporas, evoking the image of call and response, most models have ultimately prioritized the concerns of diasporic communities or reinstated US-American hegemony. With the Afropolitan reconfiguration, an *African* Atlantic imaginary transpires in which Gilroy's notion of a "living memory" of slavery (2002: 198) gives way to the active presence of Africa.

Even in this configuration, it is important to take the notion of diasporic reciprocity seriously, rather than pitting one model against each other. If painted in broad and decidedly binary strokes, Afropolitanism is often conceived as a futuristic, race-less cosmopolitanism and mobilized in opposition to a racially inflected African American or Black Atlantic parochialism centered on the memory of slavery.<sup>27</sup> In many ways, this perspective simply reiterates the spatial separation

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This sentiment has often been linked to the so-called "poverty porn" debate, launched in particular by Helon Habila's critique of NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*.

<sup>27</sup> For example, in scholarship that focuses on Afropolitanism as a continental phenomenon, the waning importance of racial signification as a binding element for African cultural integrity is read as an effect of the cosmopolitan turn in African studies that "presented Africa's multiracial societies as harbingers of a futuristic post-racial order" (Balakrishnan 2017: 8). However, this interpretation conceives of similar discourses in diasporic Afropolitanism as a mere consequence of this disassociation of "African identity from Blackness" rather than relating these debates to their immediate contexts, e.g. the post-racial discourses that accompanied Obama's presidency in United States (Balakrishnan 2018: 579). If used as a lens to investigate intra-diasporic race discourses, it becomes clear that the discourse of post- and newness impacts the moment of Afropolitanism on all sides of the Atlantic. What this also reveals is that the moment of Afropolitanism encompasses both continental and diasporic dimensions, that these dis-

of the Middle Passage in temporal terms. The focus on rifts and disassociations, however, is not only a somewhat limiting, if tried and tested, way of conceptualizing the Black Diaspora, it also fails to recognize precisely how the legacy of slavery figures in these narratives. While it is obvious how the primacy of the Middle Passage threatens to trump the traumatic role of colonialism in the making of modern Blackness, the Afropolitan moment does not only provide counterweight to the damaging effect of a “single story” by presenting new or neglected narratives, but also by inverting the perspective on slavery itself. While the history of slavery has affected Africa and the diaspora unevenly, this does not mean that they aren’t *both* affected. One particular pitfall of emphasizing the unequal positionings toward the history of transatlantic slavery is a latent disregard for the traumas that the slave trade wrought on the African side of the Atlantic. Already, the absence of institutionalized memory culture around the slave trade has created an epistemological lacuna that is directly taken up by Yaa Gyasi’s novel *Homegoing*. It is also addressed by the narrator of Teju Cole’s *Every Day Is for the Thief*, who, during his visit to Lagos, muses about the “chain of corpses” forging a “secret twinship” between Lagos, the former largest slave port, and New Orleans, “the largest market for human chattel in the New World” (112). Consequently, he criticizes that this “history is missing from Lagos. There is no monument to the great wound” (Cole 2014b: 114). This aspect is very much part of the labor that these Afropolitan works and authors are performing: a thorough reckoning with history, an investigation of how it implicates and involves them, as the history of Blackness. In this sense, Afropolitanism is indeed motivated by the vision of a better, more perfect union, marked by mutual recognition and historical culpability. I describe this motivation as the novels’ diasporic desire.

In “Afropolitanism and the End of Pan-Africanism,” Balakrishnan accredits the shortcomings of Afropolitanism as an African philosophy of history to its inability “to reckon with the agency of Africans in the dispersion of diaspora: the betrayal at the heart of the symbol ‘Black’” (2018: 581). She claims that what might have served as a “powerful point of reflection: a reckoning in the form of unity,” has “not occurred” (*ibid.*). Yet the literary explorations discussed in this book – cautious of and attentive to its dilemmas and mobilized by a deep-seated diasporic desire – certainly belie this pessimist statement. Indeed, all three novels convey what British-Sierra Leonean writer Aminatta Forna described in an interview: a nuanced understanding of how “the legacy of slavery

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courses affect each other reciprocally, and that the diasporic discourse of Afropolitanism is not a byproduct of its continental counterpart, just as the diaspora is not a mere byproduct of Africa.

breaks differently on each side of the Atlantic.” Moving to the US, Forna elaborates, allowed her to discover a “sharp distinction in how she claims her past and how others view that history through skin color” (Otosirizee 2017: para. 12). We find this realization in all three texts, along with the same willingness or desire to explore and perhaps blunt the sharpness of this distinction through reckoning with that history, formally and thematically.

As such, the Black Diaspora reveals itself as a geographical space, mutually constituted by both homeland and diaspora, as well as a distinctly temporal community that is both imagined and probed by these texts. Acknowledging reciprocity thus also means understanding that the Black Diaspora is in fact this Janus-faced entity, mobilized by the push and pull of homeland and diaspora, past and future. What I aim to show in my readings of Afropolitan fictions is that while the shift toward imagining diaspora under the sign of Africa certainly correlates with post-racial discourses, these processes aren’t necessarily mutually defined and much less causally related. Newly Black Americans may question the category of Blackness, but they are nevertheless Black. Afropolitan fictions may reverse the perspective on the Middle Passage, but they are not revisionist. Diasporic desire is marked by the hope for an antiracist future, but it does not renounce racist pasts and presents. Hence, what connects these novels apart from emerging in the moment of Afropolitanism is their respective investigation of “history through skin color,” or what I propose to call race in/as history.

## 2 Writing Race in/as History

By ‘making Black history’, Cole, Adichie, and Gyasi investigate the historicity of Blackness and the ways in which it implicates them, rather than treating Blackness as a specific condition that automatically includes or excludes them or an ontological fact that is inherited or rejected. In this, and rather than primarily signaling the shifts and turns of post- and newness, these fictions are just as attentive to notions of stasis, repetition, and tradition as an accumulation of certain ‘structures of feeling.’<sup>28</sup> As such, the novels are responding to these struc-

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<sup>28</sup> In *The Long Revolution* (1961), Raymond Williams elaborates on a given culture’s “structures of feeling” in respect to selective ancestry. He writes: “In a society as a whole, and in all its particular activities, the cultural tradition can be seen as a continual selection and re-selection of ancestors. Particular lines will be drawn, often for as long as a century, and then suddenly with some new stage in growth these will be cancelled or weakened, and new lines drawn. In the analysis of contemporary culture, the existing state of the selective tradition is of vital importance, for it is often true that some change in this tradition – establishing new lines with the

tures selectively, if not necessarily consciously. As expressions of diasporic desire, however, they appear to employ this knowledge strategically, wielding time as the medium with which Blackness is negotiated. Like time, race can be made malleable in literature, it can be condensed, extended, or repeated, it can be foregrounded or surreptitiously rendered, but neither race nor time can be simply explained away. Because race, as Mitchell writes, is a “*time-based* medium that both has a history and itself narrates history,” it becomes a particular interesting topos for narrative fiction (2012: 21).

## 2.1 Raced Temporalities

I have chosen to describe these contemporary diasporic texts as belonging to or emerging in the historical moment of Afropolitanism not only as a way to bypass the open debate on whether the Afropolitan denotes a useful or problematic mode of identification, but also because I want to draw attention to the central role of time and temporality in these novels. The moment thus becomes another descriptor of the ‘race and time’ of any social articulation, defining Afropolitan discourse as a historical constellation and an investigation of what Stallings has called a “race-time continuum,” reminding us that race and time are both “basic social discourses that reverberate off each other” (2013: 194). In her discussion of “CP-Time,” colored or conscious people’s time, in Paul Beatty’s *Slumberland*, Stallings argues that Black culture and identity have been quite thoroughly investigated in spatial terms, focusing on notions such as dispersal and displacement in national or geographical frameworks. However, she notes, “little work has been done to examine the impetus to create the temporal placement and displacement of black identity and culture, as well as its intersections with diaspora and transnationalism” (Stallings 2013: 194). The issue of temporality has been extensively explored in postcolonial theorizations of diaspora and race, most famously in Homi K. Bhabha’s *Location of Culture* (1994). Bhabha elaborates on the post-colonial time lag and other discourses of disjunct temporality in order to display “the *problem of the ambivalent temporality of modernity* that is often overlooked in the more ‘spatial’ traditions of some aspects of post-modern theory” (2004: 342). In a similar vein, Gilroy identifies the protagonists of *The Black Atlantic* as belonging to “non-synchronous communities” (2002: 174), marked by a “syncopated temporality” (202). Hanchard defines the notion of “racial time”

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past, breaking or re-drawing existing lines – is a radical kind of contemporary change” (Williams 2001: 69).

as “the inequalities of temporality that result from power relations between racially dominant and subordinate groups” (1999: 253).

This focus on temporality, in particular in relation to Blackness, is already inherent in Fanon’s most infamous ‘primal scene’: the instance of racial interpellation in “The Fact of Blackness” from *Black Skin White Masks* where Fanon details the effect of a child’s public exclamation: “Look, a Negro [...] I’m frightened!” He recounts how being hailed a frightening thing, an “object in the midst of other objects” when all he desired was to be “a man among other men,” causes him to substitute Merleau-Ponty’s corporeal schema with a racial epidermal schema, which is in turn constituted by a “historico-racial schema” (2008: 82–84). Confronted with this initial interpellation in a white environment, Fanon discovers his “blackness, [his] ethnic characteristics” (84–85).

Fanon’s “The Fact of Blackness” is a dense text, exploring notions of (non-) recognition and visibility, ontology and metaphysics, which have acquired a certain universality in postcolonial theories but take on a heightened significance in relation to Critical Race and Black Studies.<sup>29</sup> Questions of temporality and historicity, however, are just as central to these disciplines. History, in most cases, is a problem. Regardless of whether the word denotes lived experience, academic discipline, or dominant episteme – it is either fraught with painful memories, complicit with exploitative structures or the principal author of race, “our deadliest fiction” (Spillers 2003: 379). The history *of* race denotes a periodization that obscures its contingency and projected finitude by claiming the eternity of myth or the timelessness of science. The history *in* race is first of all an accumulation, Fanon’s historico-racial schema made up of “legends, stories, history, and above all, historicity” (2008: 84).

Both the history in race and the history of race inform the “historical, instrumental hypothesis” that constitutes the fact of Blackness and that triggers in Fanon only two kinds of responses: Either radically freeing oneself from the prison of history, rejecting any claims made by the past and becoming one’s “own foundation” (2008: 180), or, when the colonized intellectual decides to use the past for “his people” [sic], he should do so only “with the intention of opening up the future, of spurring them into action and fostering hope,” while, most importantly, also supplementing his efforts through political action (2001: 187). This defiant position toward history emerges from a distinct temporal position, what Bhabha calls the “time lag of cultural difference” that is born from a “temporal

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<sup>29</sup> Fanon scholar Lewis Gordon organizes what he calls “several stages” of academic engagement with Fanon as moving “from that of ideological critique to postcolonial anxiety to engagement with his thought” (2007: 5).

break” or “caesura” in the “continuist, progressivist myth of Man” (2004: 341). Relating Fanonian temporality to the notion of postcolonial and subaltern agency in general, he writes:

Fanon destroys two time schemes in which the historicity of the human is thought. He rejects the “belatedness” of the black man because it is only the opposite of the framing of the white man as universal, normative – the white sky all around me: the black man refuses to occupy the past of which the white man is the future. But Fanon also refuses the Hegelian-Marxist dialectical schema whereby the black man is part of a transcendental sublation: a minor term in a dialectic that will emerge into a more equitable universality. Fanon, I believe, suggests another time, another space. (ibid.)

For Bhabha, Fanon resists rather than deplores the heteronomous temporal ordering by the West, gaining agency by occupying and speaking from the interstices of time and history. It is noteworthy that for Bhabha, Fanon anticipates an alternative time of Blackness that also conditions a different spatial scheme or space, or perhaps even a different world, indicating what he describes as the shift of the cultural location of modernity “to the postcolonial site” (Bhabha 2004: 360). This process, which he also identifies in the temporal strategies of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, is marked by the “translation of the meaning of time into the discourse of space.” Bhabha describes this as an active and willed performance, a “catachrestic seizure of the signifying ‘caesura’ of modernity’s presence and *present*,” which insists simultaneously on an analysis of power that thinks through both sexuality and race, a critique of the nation’s inherent imperialism, and the reconfiguration of teleological class-consciousness through the “doubling and splitting” of race (ibid.). While Bhabha’s high hopes for postcolonial narratives align with the “writing back” paradigm that has become somewhat synonymous with certain definitions of postcolonial literature, Afropolitan narratives don’t quite map onto his paradigm as neatly. They do, however, also translate the “meaning of time into the discourse of space” by voicing what Bhabha describes as a “vernacular cosmopolitanism which measures global progress from the minoritarian perspective” (2004: xvi).

At least in the sense of these texts being (post-)postcolonial novels, one could thus state that – without suggesting that the two can ever be fully pried apart – the centrality of temporality has somewhat replaced spatiality. The importance of issues such as (involuntary) exile and displacement or the interplay between center and periphery largely recedes for a generation characterized by a global, and surely privileged, ease of mobility. What increases is a textual mobility through time, yet not as reenactment of history, the conjuring of a ‘pre-modern’ idyll or the countering of alleged African ahistoricity. These writers are not mainly writing back to some colonial center, and neither are they merely reflect-

ing on their respective African homelands from a diasporic distance, even though both modes inform their texts. In the aftermath of what Mbembe and others have identified as the “planetary turn of African predicament,” theirs are attempts of writing themselves into the world as global citizen, as African *and* as Black cosmopolitan (Mbembe 2016: 31). Via the “epistemological proposition” of Afropolitanism, they draw attention to their own privileged perspective on the world (ibid.) However, due to their intimate experience with hegemonic epistemologies, they are simultaneously acceding to the impossibility of theorizing globally. The distance they have gained is not necessarily geographical but temporal; they are drawing on the multiangular shape of history, both exhibiting and occupying discrete vantage points, specific relations with and toward the past. Indeed, deliberate Afropolitan movements through history limn a particularly transnational vantage point, the ability of relating oneself in and as the planetary. This perspective also resembles Wai Chee Dimock’s understanding of the particular scale enlargement of *deep time*, which draws on a notion of planetary entanglement that exceeds the chronology of an individual nation. As Dimock writes: “[T]he concept of a global civil society, by its very nature, invites us to think of the planet as a plausible whole, a whole that ... needs to be mapped along the temporal axis as well as the spatial, its membership open not only to contemporaries but also to those centuries apart” (2007: 5). Shunning the inherent spatial hierarchization of a single elevated viewpoint, these texts do not only rely on a transnational or multilocal perspective but limn the planetary configuration of the Black Diaspora along a temporal axis and through specific chronotopes.

Of course, as Mikhail Bakhtin’s seminal work on the literary chronotope shows, temporality is an intrinsic element of literature. While time, as topos and formal element, represents a fundamental building block and major preoccupation particularly of modernist writings, it is indeed noteworthy how these contemporary literatures explore the deceptively blunt realization that both “time and race are social discourses reverberating off each other.” An example of how the dimensions of race and time relate would be the notion of hair in *Americanah*, the novel’s “third protagonist,” as Rask Knudsen and Rahbeck (2016: 243) write, or, as I describe it, the Proustian cookie that triggers Ifemelu’s childhood memories. As such, however, it is not just a temporal device to structure the narrative but also indexes both psychological and social temporality. Arguably, Black hair carries broader historical and collective significance than Proust’s very personal, yet ostensibly universal, memory of his aunt. *Homegoing*, on the other hand, investigates Black temporality on multiple levels and, quite literally, through fragmentation and repetition, while *Open City* echoes Fanonian moments of interpellation and, through its pronounced dialogism, offers contra-

puntal readings of history that simultaneously comment on diasporic metahistoricism. While these raced temporalities are formally woven into the fabric of these texts – through topos, trope, or syntax – notions of history or historicism seem to play out much more discursively, as extra- or contextual referent. In fact, however, these topics are so overdetermined that it might be better to speak of a certain diasporic meta-historicism that also profoundly – and formally – affects these literatures.

## 2.2 Diasporic Historicism or the Search for a Usable Past

Generally, I argue that the 21<sup>st</sup>-century vantage point of Afropolitan literature is particularly metahistorical insofar as it already encompasses and reflects on the role of temporality and history in earlier diasporic writing, both fictional and academic. Diasporic literature in the moment of Afropolitanism is thus able to draw on these notions, as both intertext and direct referent. It is noteworthy that most academic theorizations of Black cosmopolitanism are occupied with historical formations, most notably in *The Black Atlantic*, but also, for example, in Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo's *Black Cosmopolitanism* (2014) or Brent Hayes Edwards's *The Practice of Diaspora* (2003). The growing scholarship on Afropolitanism allows for a much-needed update of these concepts, developing a contemporary model of diaspora while drawing on the historical depth prompted by a comparative reading with concepts such as Black Internationalism or Pan-Africanism. On a smaller scale, I aim to integrate these concerns by showing the significance of temporality in contemporary diasporic literature and the impact of decades of diasporic historiography.

For scholar Markus Nehl, the influence of 20<sup>th</sup>-century historiography is a distinguishing feature of contemporary diasporic fiction. In *Transnational Black Dialogues* (2016), Nehl identifies a “second generation neo-slave narrative” in novels like Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008), Yvette Christiansë's *Unconfessed* (2006), or Marlon James's *The Book of Night Women* (2009). These texts, he argues, draw on antebellum slave narratives and 20<sup>th</sup>-century neo-slave narratives but are also influenced by the cultural politics of the Black Power era and the adjacent “radical reconceptualization of the historiography of slavery” (24). Nehl suggests that, through this dense intertextuality, these neo-slave narratives “not only try to fill in the gaps of the historical record but also self-reflexively comment on the dangers and limits inherent in their attempt to reconstruct the history of slavery from today's perspective” (32). The novels under discussion are also characterized by this heightened self-reflexivity and intertextuality, mobilized by an acute awareness of the ongoing legacy of slavery and colonialism

and the necessity of inscribing these counter-histories into the present. However, in Afropolitan literatures, slavery becomes merely one of a cast of diasporic cornerstones, albeit an important one. Generally, and perhaps more so than other literary fields, the literatures of the Black Diaspora are implicated by the quest for ‘usable pasts’ as well as the discursive struggles surrounding them. The notion of a ‘usable past’ itself has a complex and divergent history, taking on slightly different connotations in different contexts. What follows is a brief glimpse into the two contexts that most affect Afropolitan fictions, e.g. the US-American and the postcolonial African.

In its many iterations within academic and public discourse, the notion of a ‘usable past’ has always been linked to issues of cultural values, norms, and identities. In the context of the US in particular, the process of consciously selecting and appropriating the past was motivated by an inquiry into ‘what it means to be American’ and also aimed to indicate ‘what America *should* be,’ thereby designating so-called usable and unusable pasts. First schematized during the Progressive era – yet clearly already informing the creation of a white Anglo-Saxon racial imaginary – the quest for America’s usable pasts spawned numerous debates throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, often feeding into discussions about (literary) canons or other debates generally subsumed under the so-called culture wars, by raising questions of inclusivity and diversity.<sup>30</sup> In the 1990s, David Thelen and Roy Rosenzweig conducted a large survey that focused on personal relations with and attitudes toward history, published as *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (1998). The survey of more than 1,450 individuals revealed, among other things, a strikingly diverse appropriation and function of history among different racial and ethnic groups. Accordingly, the notion of distinctive African American pasts has been explored both in terms of their reciprocal relation to a wider, normative idea of American history and identity and, in accordance with popular culture theories à la John Fiske or Stuart Hall, as an actively employed toolkit for the creation of personal and collective identity.

The term ‘usable past’ also gained importance in the context of Africanist historiography, albeit with different connotations. While Progressive era historian Brooks lamented a “sterile” past and argued for lending it “living value” (1918: 338–339), the colonial context provided a much more vexed notion of

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**30** For the earliest mention of the “usable past,” see Brooks 1918. Here, the pragmatic and didactic function of history is stressed in opposition to an idealized Puritan heritage. Mid-century discussions of the term reflect the increased influence of cultural studies, e.g. Susman 1964. For its use in literary studies, see Reising 1986. For more recent overviews on its contested applications, see Nash et al. 2000; Launius 2013.

the historical archive and its impact on lived experience. The impact of imperial historiography installed a particularly sharp distinction between ‘official’ and ‘popular’ or ‘recorded’ and ‘lived.’ As J.M. Coetzee put it in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, “[e]mpire” and its creation of “the time of history” made it impossible for Africans to “live in time like fish in water” (1983: 133). A similar sentiment resonates in Ousmane Sembène’s denouncing of Western historiographers as “chronophages,” eaters of time (Murphy 2000: 177). As a consequence of this contested relation to the colonial archive, as well as the epistemic gaps it produced, post-independent national historiographers were often quick to emphasize unwanted ‘unusable pasts,’ in the same way that the national instrumentalization of history often overrode the personal or experiential one. As Cooper (2015) writes:

African and African-American intellectuals long sought to counter primitivizing ideologies of their times by pointing to narratives of African state building. The real breakthrough in writing African history occurred as colonial rule was crumbling and the quest for a usable past – notably a usable national past – attracted young scholars in Africa and beyond (286).

This project, however, soon created its own forms of discontent. The nationalism inherent in those early quests for usable pasts is even more significant if one follows scholar Bogumil Jewsiewicki’s contention that “the post-colonial state is an extension of the colonial state model,” hence also sidelines popular historiography and eclipses historical narratives of anti-nationalist insurgency (1989: 4). This sentiment is echoed by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, who, wary of all kinds of official Kenyan historiography, deplores the “state historians, whose role it is to give rational legitimacy to the traditions of loyalism and collaboration with imperialism” (1993: 98). Ngũgĩ also contends that the “people’s real history of struggle and resistance” has produced its own historians – unofficial historians like himself, but also those unwilling to further corroborate the state-sanctioned, sanitary narrative of nation building (*ibid.*). Indeed, as Falola writes, by the 1980s, the “confident tone in nationalist historiography began to change to one of despair” (2011: 410). As a countermeasure, scholar Terence Ranger had already advocated a somewhat depoliticized notion of a “usable past for Africa,” one that more closely resembled a definition of the term as lived experience and pragmatic social tool (1976). In accordance with the idea of the “invented tradition,” which Ranger later developed in his eponymous work with Eric Hobsbawm, Ranger sought to de-mystify African historiography and wrench it out of the hands of corrupt political elites, who had in turn inherited it from racist colonial rulers.

There are a few aspects in these discourses that can help illuminate the notion of Afropolitanism as diasporic iteration, particularly within the US. For one,

the shift from passive consumption to active appropriation matters here, as well as the attention to societal hierarchies and cultural hegemonies. Secondly, the fact that negotiations of usable pasts are almost always national projects needs to be carefully parsed. Deeply enmeshed in American mythologies of purity and plurality, the question of usable/unusable pasts determines the often subtle but crucial shifts between narratives of assimilation, hybridity, or difference.<sup>31</sup> In the United States, the so-called new African Diaspora symbolized by Afropolitanism is thus thrice conscripted by – while notably pushing against – nationalist narratives.<sup>32</sup> Afropolitanism marks the moment when the old narratives of Black Nationalist solidarity but also the national framing of assimilationist immigrant fiction and that of the exilic or émigré novel are questioned.<sup>33</sup> These diasporic fictions are not singularly marked by aspirational melting pot narratives or, in its reversal, by anti-aspirationalist narratives of return. Rather, they are characterized by a complication of either of these paradigms, often combining both. A good example is Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016), a novel that was celebrated precisely for its renunciation of the American Dream, purportedly showing its collision with “immigrant reality” (PBS 2017). Yet where that novel's ending, the protagonists' return to Cameroon, merely truncates rather than questions its fairly straight-forward assimilationist story line,<sup>34</sup> others, like Adichie's *Americanah*, Sefi Atta's *A Bit of Difference* (2012), or Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018), offer protagonists who are not primarily preoccupied with mapping onto the progressive linearity of national time – a change that is not solely ascribable to these characters' financial privilege but also a willed change in perspective.

In the same way that the “era of disillusionment” and its links to contemporaneous historiography affected African fiction, Afropolitan literature conveys a

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<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Paul 2014, particularly chapter 5.

<sup>32</sup> Nationalism, here, includes the nationalism of post-independence African states, American civic nationalism, and the cultural nationalism of a Black Power movement that threatens to misrecognize and conscript African immigrants into a mythologized and monolithic notion of Africa. For a deeper discussion of the relationship between the latter two, see Singh 2004.

<sup>33</sup> As Balakrishnan notes, the repudiation of nationalism is not only a distinguishing feature of Afropolitanism, but one that may also serve as a binding function for its diverse iterations: “And thus, in the end, it may be said that Afropolitanism's symbolic potency – of these disparate elements – reduces to one: its abdication of nationalism as a political project” (2018: 578).

<sup>34</sup> In its historicizing of national time, here the banking crisis of 2008, the novel's plotting suggests an extreme form of cultural assimilation, as it explores the economic ascension and financial crash of an aspirational Cameroonian couple and their WASP employers in a strangely unproblematic analogy.

specific historicism.<sup>35</sup> Neither disappointedly shunning political history nor glorifying narratives of national progress, the novels under discussion nevertheless heavily historicize the moment of Afropolitanism. *Homegoing*, for example, traces over two hundred years of diasporic history into the early 2000s, while *Americanah* historicizes Nigerian military rule, ‘multicultural’ Britain, and Obama’s election. *Open City* navigates the tense post-9/11 climate of New York and Brussels. Other contemporary fictions like Esi Edugyan’s *Half-Blood Blues* (2011), Yvonne Adhiambo Owour’s *Dust* (2013), Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi’s *Kintu* (2014), Novuyo Rosa Tshuma’s *House of Stone* (2018), and Namwali Serpell’s *The Old Drift* (2019) also revisit crucial moments of African and diasporic history, often illuminating the more hidden paths that have led to the present. Identifying Afropolitanism as space, analogous to Avtar Brah’s definition of diaspora space as a conceptual category, the author and blogger Minna Salami notes how the imaginative “glocal” space of Afropolitanism is equally characterized by its pronounced historical anachronisms (Rask Knudsen and Rahbeck 2016: 157). And it is not only because “the internet is Afropolitan” – the fact that a wealth of information is literally at their fingertips – that Afropolitan writers and artists move so frequently in and out of time (Mbembe 2015). Their revisiting of the past occurs in and with the full knowledge of how today’s political presents are shaped by past trajectories and how these pasts have ultimately timed and positioned themselves. To paraphrase Martin Luther King Jr., these anachronisms inquire into many arcs of history, subtly interrogating if and how they may have bent toward justice.

While these novels cannot be neatly aligned with or co-opted by earlier nationalist or internationalist projects, the notion of a ‘usable/unusable past’ has not disappeared. Through active negotiation rather than passive consumption, the novels under discussion probe if and how history bears upon the present and whose pasts may actively constitute the contemporary diasporic imaginary. The latent distinction between the usable and unusable already affects what could otherwise be interpreted as arbitrary or self-sufficient metafictional play. Moreover, the deliberate and earnest exploration of pasts, both usable and unusable, counters what Ella Shohat has critiqued as the “ambiguous spatio-temporality” of the postcolonial (1992: 102). Arguing against certain “ahistorical and universalizing” (ibid. 99) tendencies in postcolonial theorizing, Shohat writes: “The term “post-colonial” carries with it the implication that colonialism is

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<sup>35</sup> Key texts that fall into the period of post-independence and deal with the appending notions of arrested development and disillusionment are, for example: Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968); Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Devil on the Cross* (1980); or Chinua Achebe, *A Man of the People* (1966).

now a matter of the past, undermining colonialism's economic, political, and cultural deformative-traces in the present" (ibid. 105).

The notion that the past has left its "deformative-traces" in the present also resonates with Anne McClintock's critique that much of post-colonial theory may feign to dismantle "the imperial idea of linear time" yet reintroduces it through the term's emphasis on posterity (1992: 85). As such, the "post-colonial scene" emerges "in an entranced suspension of history, as if the definitive historical events have preceded us, and are not now in the making" (ibid. 86). These auto-critiques of the postcolonial correspond with an important aspect of these novels' pronounced (meta)-historicisms, anachronisms and explorations of asynchronous or repetitive temporalities. It exposes the simple fact that "trauma doesn't care about time." That sentence, uttered by the contemporary psychiatrist Paul Conti on a popular medical podcast, relays how Freud's theories, despite generally having lost much of their clinical significance, continue to inform the study of trauma temporality.

### 2.3 Timing Historical and Racial Trauma

The timelessness of trauma is central to Freud's model of psychic representation. What Freud observed in the shell-shocked WWI soldier's constant reliving of painful experiences led to his development of the death drive and also confirmed his belief that "unconscious mental processes are in themselves 'timeless'" (1955: 28). The "'daemonic' force" of the death drive notwithstanding, Freud interpreted the compulsion to repeat as an attempt at mastering the original trauma. Yet he also understood this as a temporally indefinite endeavor given the fact that, regarding unconscious mental processes, "time alters nothing in them, nor can the idea of time be applied to them" (ibid.).

In literature, one form of mastery is indeed form itself. Hence, yet another way that these texts can be read as meditations on race and time is through their metafictional play on genre. Following Goyal's notion of "genre as the presence of the past in the present," all three readings explore how these contemporary texts navigate the generic conventions of diasporic literature (2010: 10). In many ways, if not all, these explorations also illuminate questions of race and racialization as they sometimes navigate, sometimes strain at not only the ghostly presence of violent diasporic pasts, but also their textual conventions. Considering the traumatic nature of these pasts, it is unsurprising that this kind of metafiction rarely takes an ironic or self-parodic stance. At times, however, the novels' use of metafiction does provide a metacommentary that questions the critical purchase or ethico-political value of specific modes of writing trauma.

Conditioned by the abovementioned impetus of determining usable pasts in a contested discursive arena, both the historical novel and so-called trauma fiction are common genres in Black Diasporic writing.

Historically, literary and cultural approaches to trauma theories are rooted in Holocaust studies, yet numerous scholars have endeavored to widen trauma theory's analytical framework or productively relate it to racial and colonial violence.<sup>36</sup> Michael Rothberg, whose *Traumatic Realism* (2000) forms one of the key texts of trauma studies (among them Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* from 1985 and Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* from 1996), has also added his critical heft to the call for decolonizing and globalizing trauma studies. Among some of the core issues at stake in "Postcolonial Trauma Novels," he lists "the articulation of race and space; the uncanny historicity of colonial (and other forms of) violence; the intergenerational transmission of trauma; and the problem of unequal recognition of disparate traumatic histories" (2008: 226).

Many of these different theorizations converge on a critique of Caruth's notion that "trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures," by revealing how Eurocentric notions of trauma aren't actually always transferable (1995: 11). In fact, prevalent models such as PTSD or processes such as acting out, moving through or witnessing trauma may not be universally applicable or differently achieved. Trauma theory, as Craps writes in *Postcolonial Witnessing*, should thus always "take account of the specific social and historical contexts in which trauma narratives are produced and received, and be open and attentive to the diverse strategies of representation and resistance which these contexts invite or necessitate" (2013: 43). For example, in "The Question of 'Solidarity' in Postcolonial Trauma Fiction: Beyond the Recognition Principle," Hamish Dalley questions whether contemporary postcolonial literature's revisiting of traumatic historical events can really be understood as attempts at achieving recognition, or even solidarity.<sup>37</sup> As Dalley observes, not only do postcolonial and trauma studies appear to complement each other, exemplified by the emergent field of postcolonial trauma studies, but the very terminology of trauma theory – its focus on metaphors of invasion, disturbance or assimilation – already lends itself to narrativizing the traumas of colonialism and slavery. Further-

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<sup>36</sup> See Ifowodo 2013; Visser 2011; Craps 2012; Borzaga 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Aware of the abovementioned auto-critiques of (postcolonial) trauma theory, particularly in relation to potentially Eurocentric theoretical lenses that are treated as trans-human universals, Dalley's article identifies as particularly limiting literary approaches the focus on individualized recognition, as well as the anxious apprehension of literary modernism, as a non-linear and intentionally estranging, privileged aesthetic form of trauma representation (Dalley 2015: 369–392).

more, most trauma theories implicitly or explicitly develop a trajectory that moves “from pain to recognition to solidarity,” thus privileging what Dalley considers the most productive, albeit ambiguously demarcated, convergence of trauma and postcolonialism (2015: 373). That said, contemporary postcolonial texts seem to draw on these convergences in unexpected ways, as they offer a range of different, and often conflicting, subject positions. Among the vast range of literary traumas in fictions like Adichie’s *Americanah* or Okey Ndibe’s *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, Dalley identifies those of the colonized, colonizers, and what he calls transnational proletarians (2015: 372). By conducting a comparative analysis of ostensibly incomparable sites of trauma, Dalley aims to reveal a fundamental ambivalence of contemporary postcolonial literature regarding the ethico-political purchase of prevalent trauma discourses.

This ambiguity certainly informs the Afropolitan novels selected here, as all works appear to dramatize the realization that – not only with regards to the disparate members of the contemporary African diaspora but also in terms of addressing differently positioned audiences – “recognition is more complex than it may appear and that, even when it seems unquestionably desirable, it does not necessarily lead to solidarity” (Dalley 2015: 372). Hence, these novels draw attention to the limits of an empathetic recognition that is not grounded in a critical reckoning with historical and material circumstance. Solidarity, they suggest, cannot be grounded in the realization of an other’s humanity and vulnerability alone, but must come replete with a deeper understanding of – and desire to change – the conditions that make traumatizing structures possible.

Apart from various historical traumas that are metafictionally commented upon or revisited, there is also the more insidious, and less distant, trauma of racialization that repeatedly surfaces in these novels. The notion of racial trauma is already apparent in Fanon’s primal scene in “The Fact of Blackness,” where, following the initial event, his sense of self appears to be disintegrating, disassembled by the transfixing gaze, the awareness of his body splitting into dizzying, nauseating multitudes. He writes: “My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day” (2008: 86). Here, racialization is immediately equated with trauma, as the scene threatens his physical and psychological integrity and is also ‘compulsively’ repeated throughout the essay. Generally, it is important to distinguish between historical traumas and traumas of racialization in these fictions. Compared to other traumas, the temporality of racial trauma is often marked by the move from the historical to the transhistorical, thus approximating the ‘timelessness’ of trauma temporality. While this move diminishes the facticity or historicity of the event – a central concern of much of historical trauma fiction – it does reveal Black

temporality as an effect of the conflicting poles between which Black subjects hover: having no history and, simultaneously, too much of it.

Rather than striving for the kind of historicity that is suitable for contesting ‘official’ historiography, traumatic scenes of racialization suffer from the weight of a historicity assuming the guise of the eternal. This distinction also roughly corresponds with the difference between a (postcolonial) historicist investment in subaltern or contested historiography and that of (Black American) melancholic historicism. The latter cares much less about the facticity of the past – the horrors of slavery have been well documented and, with few exceptions, are institutionally recognized – than about its effect on or extension into the present; or put differently: it is less about the past not *being* the past, than about it not *having* passed.<sup>38</sup> Here, repetition really is inevitable, if not eternal, as the present is gripped by the afterlife of slavery and its appendant “racial calculus and political arithmetic” that “has yet to be undone” (Hartman 2007: 6). Positioned amid these sometimes closely related diasporic historicisms, the selected novels represent the temporal communities of the Black Diaspora in unique ways. Apart from historicizing rather than ontologizing Blackness, these texts remain both attentive and resistant to the concept of race in/as history. Resistance, while sometimes analogously structured, it is not the same as rejection. In the following literary analysis, another aspect of the complex node of race and history transpires, something much more elusive that may also take the form of an opening, a wedge with which to uncouple this fateful schema. These openings are unable or simply cannot dare to imagine a time- and race-less future and translate instead into a call for stopping time, for brushing history against the grain, if not even ending it. In continuation of the heavy Benjaminian influence on diasporic writing via the work of Gilroy and others, this call is mobilized by the desire “to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed” (Benjamin 2003: 392). And, as I argue, it is the historical constellation of Afropolitanism, marked as it is as a repetition with a difference, that allows these texts to appropriate the past as it “flashes up in a moment of danger” (ibid. 391).

In this sense, there is another dimension to repetition that is neither blind to the effect of its original trauma nor invested in a futile undoing or reversing of time but endeavors to recognize, through repetition, what happened and what

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**38** This is of course a rather sweeping statement with regards to how the former category corresponds with (postcolonial) historical trauma fiction. As Dalley argues, it would be equally reductive to read these novels’ treatment of historical events merely as “struggles over discursive power,” as this position “misses crucial dimensions of its realist epistemology.” Complicating this would mean understanding their knowledge claims as “neither naively mimetic nor comprehensible as a play of ungrounded signifiers” (2014: 10–11).

might have changed. From this perspective, all of the novels can be read as earnest explorations of other people's pasts that, through emphatic transference and historical awareness, inscribe and implicate a range of diasporic positionalities. Far from signaling rifts and fissures, their often distanced and distancing metahistoricist stance is employed in order to understand others and oneself in relation to them. The Afropolitan moment thus emerges as a historical constellation through which the Black Diaspora is able to refract and reflect itself. In reading and interpreting the texts accordingly, the term race in/as history attempts to convey how race can be curiously situated in the past and firmly envelope the 'now' through which that past is imagined.

### 3 Conclusion: The Challenges of Afropolitan World Making

Objectively, the global moment of Afropolitanism affords a greater visibility to people of African descent, be it in the world of visual arts, media, literature, or business.<sup>39</sup> Yet parallel to what commentators have described as a positive rendering of what is usually a negative 'African exceptionalism,' Afro-pessimist thinkers like Wilderson have contended that the "ruse of analogy erroneously locates the Black in the world – a place where s/he has not been since the dawning of Blackness" (2010: 50). While especially the irreducible antagonism at the heart of Afro-pessimist arguments nullifies Afropolitanism as an attempt to locate a Black positionality in the world, particularly as an analogous appropriation of a humanist concept such as cosmopolitanism, *Making Black History* argues that the Afropolitan moment is ambiguously constituted by optimism *and* pessimism, hope *and* anxiety, and that much of its negative affect is already apparent in the uneasy negotiations of Afropolitanism as a label. As scholar Chielozona Eze has noted, the fusing of African and cosmopolitan suggests that the African cannot "just be cosmopolitan" (2014: 240). A reading of *Ghana Must Go* and other novels as profoundly anxious expressions of transnationalism suggests the same: Why is it so hard to live in the world as an African? Are Africans not of this world?

I want to argue that this uneasy 'worlding' indeed helps situate the moment of Afropolitanism apropos contemporary notions of critical race theory. For Afro-pessimist thinkers, the world is defined by anti-Blackness in such a way that al-

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<sup>39</sup> This visibility is multicausal but often variably linked to market forces, an exoticizing appetite for 'otherness,' colonial guilt, and political progress (after all, 2015 to 2024 is the UN International Decade for People of African Descent), or an emphasis on the exemplary agency of African actors (cue "Africa rising" or model minority narratives).

lows only one conclusion: the end of the world. As Wilderson asserts in an interview: “We’re trying to destroy the world” (2014: 20). Yet how does this worlding or unworlding occur in the Afropolitan novel? Rather than unequivocally asserting global social belonging, Afropolitanism has always conveyed more ambiguity than certainty, echoing concerns that are not entirely unlike Afro-pessimist concerns. However, rather than rendering Blackness an ontological position overdetermined by the social death of the slave, these novels investigate Blackness as a mutually imbricating history. Stretching and probing the global Black imaginary, they also interrogate the historicity of anti-Blackness, bringing together Hegel’s eclipsing of African agency, the social death of the slave, as well as the neocolonial and anti-Black carceral state.

William David Hart, in a survey of the most important trajectories of critical race studies from W.E.B. Du Bois to Hortense Spillers, distinguishes broadly between two modes of theorizing anti-Black racism. One is a strictly materialist conceptualizing that renders racism either an effect or an enabler of capitalism. The other trajectory understands Blackness (also) as an ontological position of Western metaphysics. For the latter thinkers, Afro-pessimists chiefly among them, the “ideological needs of capitalism do not explain the perdurance of anti-Black racism, its virtually limitless scope, its metastatic reproduction, and the depths of its pathological animosity” (Hart 2018: 14). By highlighting not only the historicity of race and Blackness but also its actual equation with or mutual imbrication with the idea of history and temporality, the novels under discussion strike a particular balance. Relying neither primarily on transhistorical metaphysics nor on historical materialism, they reveal how the fictions of race and racism, of whiteness and Blackness, are indeed constituted by both. Similar to the way that, for many, capitalism seems inextricably bound up with very idea of national time and global history, allowing for a ‘no alternative’ mode of imagining, so are our common narratives of capital H history and national progress deeply invested in the endless reproduction of race and racism.<sup>40</sup> Yet by making ‘Black’

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<sup>40</sup> For an investigation of the linkage of “progress,” “national time,” and “race struggle,” see Michel Foucault’s fourth lecture in *Society Must Be Defended*. Here, Foucault distinguishes between a “struggle between races,” the discourse of races (or popular struggles), which is anti-hegemonic, revolutionary and the “discourse of race,” which is biological or medical and requires state sovereignty to preserve the notion of purity. Viewed as discrete discourse, however, the historical discourse of race marked the movement from the temporal narratives of antiquity and “introduced us into a form of history, a form of time that can be both dreamed of and known, both dreamed of and understood, and in which the question of power can no longer be dissociated from that of servitude, liberation, and emancipation” (2003: 84). Foucault defines the discourse of race struggle as a polyvalent, mobile discourse that can morph from an oppositional or revolutionary – and often eschatological or biblical – discourse that struggles against

history rather than ontology, they highlight how temporality and historicism carry a heightened significance for the Black Diaspora as a whole, but also, ultimately, how they express the hope that the shackles of the current world ordering *can* be broken and, along with anti-Blackness, may actually recede into history. Unequivocally, if to varying degrees, these novels do not simply project into the future but also attend to the particularly urgent manner in which race in/as history manifests itself in the contemporary context of the US. In addressing and reflecting this urgency, they signal the very solidarity they are accused of lacking – even though this solidarity takes a different guise than the assumed sameness of old.

The following readings are predominantly invested in how these novels negate or negotiate ethico-political belonging – to various worlds, yet particularly the Black Diaspora – through their often-metafictional play and engagement with temporality and historicity. As such, they are investigations into these novels' intradiasporic world making. "In its multispatial and multitemporal dimensions," Ngũgĩ writes, "the novel literally can bring all spaces and times within itself" (2016: 8). But how do these novels speak to, dismiss, or actualize Black Diaspora legacies, presents, and futures? These questions need to be carefully parsed, since all three novels employ these elements to varying degrees and effects. As Cole's *Open City* probes both the generic confinements and the limitations of a (diasporic) solidarity grounded in the recognition of trauma – or, rather, the limited empathic transference engendered by an aesthetic sublimation of trauma – diasporic histories appear almost hopelessly gripped by the kind of historicism that conditions a melancholic response as much as it bars an actual engagement with the present. The gleam of hope merely anticipated in *Open City* is hyperbolically realized in Adichie's *Americanah*, as genre-induced, libidinal attachments to a rosy, perhaps even race-less, future wrest its protagonists from the overdetermining reach of history and back to the mother country. Gyasi's *Homegoing*, on the other hand, employs both the forward push of futurity and the backward pull of historicity as a novel that flashes the hopeful potential of restoration and connection across the rupture of the Middle Passage, without trivializing the long-lasting effects of slavery and its aftermath.

These subtle renderings of diasporic temporalities accrue specific meaning if one acknowledges that Afropolitanism emerges in a moment when both the

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oppressive forms of power, for example in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century post-revolutionary project of writing a history of "the people," to using that same eschatological or biblical discourse in order to disqualify "colonized subraces" (2003: 77).

promise of a post-racial US-America and that of Black diasporic unity are called into question. Against this discursive background, I argue that Blackness – like time – is not only investigated, probed, stretched, and made malleable by these novels. It is also employed, purposefully, as a form of truce and as earnest endeavor signaling diasporic desire, hope for unity, and imagined collectivity.

At the same time, it is fair to say that the extraordinary critical acclaim and commercial success of these novels was at least partly fueled by an iteration of the “New Negro” paradigm. Authors and works were, sometimes, peddled as spokespersons for a version of Blackness that has not only surpassed, but even bypassed the disgraceful history of slavery. Their contested position within the cultural landscape, as well as an acute awareness thereof, is reflected in Teju Cole’s laconic statement: “I’m an Afropolitan, a pan-African, an Afro-pessimist, depending on who hates me on any given day” (Bady 2015: para. 36). Surely, these authors were conscious of how their success could be mobilized and pitted against African Americans and often went to great lengths to assert that they were “happily black” (Adichie), “black on all sides” (Cole), or that slavery “affects us still” (Gyasi).<sup>41</sup>

Should we read their perspectives on slavery, their investigation of US race relations, and their employment of race in/as history as an act of duty? That would be too easy and most likely unconvincing. Could it, then, be an act of love? While they are marked by a diasporic desire that indeed strives toward “a more perfect union,” infusing the space of diaspora with a renewed, multilateral sense of kinship, this is not an entirely selfless act. They are expanding Blackness in order to insert their positionality, amplifying their voices and their perspectives. Their giving shape to the sign of Africa in the moment of Afropolitanism is also a conscious inscribing, not only into the US, or the world, but into the time and space of diaspora *as* the world. Particularly within the political and cultural context of the US, however, it is a precarious balancing act to do both: to challenge but not to undermine. My readings attempt to trace this balancing act, and to show how these novels are carefully constructed narratives that, in one way or another, help us acknowledge that there can never be a single narrative on anything – and certainly not on Blackness. Rather than supplanting or making Blackness disappear, these texts purposefully probe and navigate race in/as history. By actively (re-)inscribing Africa into the diasporic imaginary, they alter and make Black history.

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<sup>41</sup> See Segal 2013; Adeleye 2016; Gyasi 2017.