5. **An Exploration of African Digital Cosmopolitanism**

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**Abstract**

Normative articulations of cosmopolitanism have recently come under criticism for their omission of non-Western cosmopolitanisms. As a result, cosmopolitanism from below has emerged, bringing with it a sharp focus on alternative forms of cosmopolitanisms. One such alternative is digital cosmopolitanism, which this chapter explores from an African positionality. A range of important African voices and platforms have emerged within the African and global diasporic digital discursive space. This chapter highlights some of these and asks if and how they might collectively constitute an African digital cosmopolitanism rooted in African digital representational agency that counters cynicism about the agency of Africa and Africans.

**Keywords:** digital cosmopolitanism; African digitality; cosmopolitanism from below

### 5.1 Introduction

I have been engaged in the African digital sphere for over a decade—as a blogger, researcher and activist—and have had the privilege to watch African digitality evolve in that time. From my beginnings as a blogger, firstly for a Zimbabwean community blogging network called Kubatana and then onto my personal blog *Fungai Neni*, I have witnessed space grow for more critical engagement and debate through uptake of social media and what I refer to as African self-initiated platforms. In 2012, I founded a women’s web-based platform called Her Zimbabwe, which has been researched academically multiple times (Carelse, 2017; Leccese & Lanson, 2015; Mpofu, 2016; Mpofu, Leurs, K, and S. Ponzanesi (eds.), *Doing Digital Migration Studies: Theories and Practices of the Everyday*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2024 doi 10.5117/9789463725774.CH05


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and received various local and international accolades in its time of operation over the next five years.

Retrospectively, I realize that my thinking on implementing the project was always rooted in positioning Zimbabwean women’s discourse within a cosmopolitan frame of reference. The idea for the project arose from my Master’s dissertation which sought to understand how Zimbabwean women in Zimbabwe, and Zimbabwean women in the diaspora, could better connect and share experiences. My thesis recommendations—which suggested exploring what the digital discursive space could offer towards Zimbabwean women’s community building efforts—developed into what then became Her Zimbabwe. Eventually, this digital discursive space became not only a space for Zimbabwean women to connect to each other across different geographical locations, but also a space for non-Zimbabweans to engage with Zimbabwean women’s narratives about themselves and with more general feminist issues. This, as well as my interactions in other digital spaces, has made me curious to give meaning to this worlding experience of Africans engaging within African and global digital spaces, and how this recentres discursive power and disrupts the conventionally accepted top-down flows of information from the West to the “rest” (Machirori, 2022).

5.2 Scope and Aims

There is a long history of the conception of cosmopolitanism as a normative idea of the world (Christensen, 2017; Delanty, 2014; Harvey, 2015; Ponzanesi, 2020), as well as a moral and ethical responsibility, with deep roots within philosophical thought. In this form, the idea of the global citizen references a figurative way of life, or of being in the world.

Over the years, however, this version of cosmopolitanism—what we refer to as normative cosmopolitanism—has experienced what Delanty (2012) refers to as a “paradoxical fate” and has come to be viewed by some scholars as a “tainted utopia” (Rose, 2015). This is largely because most uses of the concept have tended to be figurative and/or vague, as a result of cosmopolitanism’s ancient roots in ethical and moral thought. Further, the historical complicity of cosmopolitanism with amoral and oppressive systems such as colonialism and slavery, as well as its heavy affiliations with class elitism, privilege and other exclusionary socio-political practices have seen the concept come under scrutiny. It has been observed that the values and principles of German philosopher Immanuel Kant—one of the foremost thinkers within normative cosmopolitanism studies—remained rooted in
the West and its notions of civilization (Mignolo, 2000; Papastergiadis, 2012, Ramadan, 2015, Uimonen, 2020), with some of his works making claims of inferiority of non-white racial groups (Harvey, 2015; Kleingeld, 2007).

Another critique of normative cosmopolitanism is its orientation towards “the other” and “others,” particularly migrants and/or minorities. These groups are commonly viewed in two ways: either as naïve powerless subjects who can only perform Western worldliness (and therefore cosmopolitanism) or as subjects who ought to be grateful (ingratiating) for the hospitable cosmopolitan care of those hosting them (Christensen, 2017). Normative cosmopolitanism also tends to call for a breaking away of minorities from their local and national ties in efforts towards assimilation.

In the following chapter, I explore recuperative forms of cosmopolitanism which challenge these normative stances. Despite cosmopolitanism emerging from a Western genealogy, the term is now being used more and more within a post-Western context to interrogate the nexus between the local and global (Delanty, 2012): what we may reference as cosmopolitanism from below (Ingram, 2016; Kurasawa, 2004; Neilson, 1999). One of its many forms is digital cosmopolitanism. Digital cosmopolitanism explores the power of the internet, and other digital tools and platforms, to distribute worlding experiences created by digital publics and counterpublics who re-centre discursive power by challenging the idea of static flows of communication (fixed in the direction of the West to the rest of the world).

In introducing the idea of African digital cosmopolitanism, my aim is to employ digital cosmopolitanism from an African worlding viewpoint. My intention is to highlight how a continent and its people—often maligned as lacking agency and currency—are appropriating Western digital tools to share complex, humorous and even latent counternarratives to African cynicism to build rich continental and diasporic solidarities and to transmit African culture globally. In so doing, I see them positioning the world in Africa, and Africa in the world.

5.3 African Self-Representation Within the Digital Sphere

Early into the 21st century, certain forms of African self-representation have gained significant global mainstream traction. This is, in large part, as a result of the convergence of technology, diaspora and culture (Gabay, 2018; Nothias, 2019). At the same time, increased digitality is creating avenues for Africans on the continent to engage with the African diaspora—and the world—and push back against reductive narratives about Africa, and
Africans, as inherently inept and lacking agency; what is often referred to as Afropessimism. Featuring diverse African content that broaches culture, identity, feminism, sex and sexuality from a continental and diasporic outlook, blogs and multimedia channels have served as crucial outlets for activism, conversation and community. Some of the more prominent of these blogs and platforms include Africa Is A Country, This Is Africa, Okay Africa, MsAfropolitan, Voices of Africa, HOLAAfrica! and What’s Up Africa. As the examples show, many of these online spaces deliberately draw attention to their Africanness even as they challenge a simplistic stance on the continent. The phrase “this is Africa,” for instance, was popularised through the Hollywood movie, Blood Diamond, as a trope to refer to corruption and perceived danger across the continent (Dokotum, 2014). Therefore, when a platform like This Is Africa appropriates the phrase to name itself, it challenges the negative connotations associated with it to claim a new narrative that cultivates digital agency. Furthermore, it unsettles a static notion of Africa.

The same is evident with the website Africa Is A Country, launched in 2009, whose name intentionally plays on the way many outside Africa still view an entire continent of 54 vastly different countries as one undifferentiated space with a singular narrative, or as the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) cautioned in her viral TED talk, “the danger of a single story.” The website is thus named to destabilize the existing narratives of the African continent and, as the blog’s founder Sean Jacobs further reflects, “to capture how Africans think about their continent in dynamic relation to one another and to globalization” (2015), while simultaneously declaring that “Africa is indeed a ‘country,’ an imagined community whose ‘citizens’ must reinvent the narrative and visual economy of Africa” (2016).

Published for African women, by African women, HOLAAfrica!’s documentation of alternative narratives about African women’s sexuality establishes an empowered counterpublic that enables African women to “carve out an existence” in the broader conversation about women's sexuality, rather than confine them to the margins (McLean & Mugo, 2015). The site thus serves as a “mirror that is held up to other African women” while simultaneously reflecting back to the world, thereby enabling all women to engage with alternative views that challenge dominant narratives about a collective (sexual) identity (Mugo & Antonites, 2014).

Despite social media use still being concentrated among Africa’s “digital elites,” Twitter, or X as it is now known, is an indisputable discursive force in Africa’s social media terrain (Royston & Strong, 2019). Twitter’s adoption among Africans was driven by two key Twitter moments, namely the 2011 Arab Spring and the 2010 FIFA World Cup, with the latter constituting the
first case of a global Twitter experience geographically centred in Africa (Royston & Strong, 2019). The centring of the African continent gained further impetus through other memorable contemporary events such as the Obamas’ visits to Senegal, Tanzania and South Africa in 2013 (#POTUS/ #FLOTUSinAfrica), the death of Nelson Mandela in 2013 (#Mandela, #Madiba), and the 2015 visit of Pope Francis to Kenya, Uganda and Central African Republic (#PopeinAfrica, #PopeBars).

Twitter has also facilitated space for Africans to build community, entertain and challenge Western stereotypes (Cheruiyot & Uppal, 2019). The amorphous group of Kenyans known as “Kenyans on Twitter,” or #KOT, that initiates and discusses various political issues via Twitter (Nyabola, 2018) provides a pertinent example. When Kenya is derided by Western media, or when a national tragedy strikes, #KOT and its ancillary hashtags have had focused impacts, such as getting Western news media to apologize for nonfactual reportage on the country (Kaigwa, 2017; Tully & Ekdale, 2014) and crowdfunding for issues of social concern (Nyabola, 2018). When CNN referred to Kenya as a “hotbed of terror” in the 2015 build up to US President Obama’s visit to the country, #KOT rallied under the hashtag #SomeoneTellCNN to share their disapproval of the broadcaster’s framing. In the 24 hours after the news story, the hashtag was used more than 75,000 times (Nyabola, 2018), and as a result of the overwhelming response, CNN International’s managing director flew to Kenya to apologize personally for the report (at the time, Kenya was a major advertiser on CNN’s international channel).

A recent significant shift in audience demographics has occurred as these newer social media platforms have dominated. While Facebook and Twitter users now tend to be in their 40s, Instagram is attracting users in their 30s, and TikTok is attracting those in their 20s and younger—often referred to as Gen-Z (Haenlein et al., 2020) for entertainment. Nevertheless, activism, knowledge-building and information exchange are also important features of TikTok. Because of the visual nature of presentation of the social media narratives that Instagram and TikTok convey, they stand a greater chance of gaining the attention of the news media and contributing to shaping narratives about activism-related causes such as American police brutality against black victims (Eriksson Krutrök & Åkerlund, 2022).

As mentioned, TikTok is Gen-Z’s domain. As such, it affords researchers an opportunity to “observe the process of generational self-definition in a social context” through the self-representations that Gen-Z shares on the platform (Stahl & Literat, 2022). This, along with the popularity of other platforms like Snapchat and Twitch, has given rise to the emergence of a range of new young social media influencers (Haenlein et al., 2020).
One such social media influencer is the Senegalese and Italy-based TikTok sensation Khaby Lame. Stitching his own videos with problematic “life hack” videos and hardly ever speaking, Lame provided humorous commentary by performing a signature shrug of his shoulders accompanied by a look of bemusement. As Horowitz and Lorenz (2021) observe:

Using the social media app’s duet and stitch features, Mr. Lame, 21, capitalized on the momentum of viral and often absurdly complicated life hack videos ... by responding to them with wordless, easy-to-understand reaction clips in which he would do the same task in a much more straightforward manner.

In June 2022, Lame became the TikTok user with the highest number of followers across the whole platform. He currently has 162.2 million followers (as of December 2023).

Another striking example is the 21-year-old Kenyan Instagrammer and TikToker, Elsa Majimbo, whose videos first went viral during 2020’s Covid lockdown. In an interview with Teen Vogue, for which she made the cover, King (2021) notes that Majimbo’s digital style stood out among the emergent TikTok and Instagram voices at that time because of her simplicity:

Her props weren’t fancy. No filters were used. She manages to be confident without seeming self-absorbed. Usually, her setup involves a face-to-camera take in a spare room of her family’s Nairobi home, potato chips in hand, and thin, black 90s-style sunglasses on her face. Viewers weren’t transported to another world but more so were made to rationalize the ridiculousness of the one they were in.

King’s article points to the universality of Majimbo’s aesthetic, which goes beyond just an appeal to Gen Z; she stands out because she narrates an experience that is both very local and globally translatable. In a piece that I wrote about her, I note:

In one of her early lockdown videos posted to Instagram on April 27, 2020, Majimbo pokes fun at people who keep insisting that “We are going out after lockdown”, and quips, “Are we going to pay for my Uber?” (2022)

There was, also, a universalizing element to Majimbo’s anti-sociality that resonated with many users globally, as they navigated the pandemic. Majimbo—with 2.5 million Instagram followers, 1.5 million TikTok followers
and over 350,000 Twitter followers (as of December 2023)—also uses her platforms to discuss political issues such as the colourism she has experienced as a darker-skinned Kenyan, political protests and movements on the continent such as the 2020 Nigerian #ENDSARS movement against police brutality, and race protests under the global #BlackLivesMatter hashtag in 2020. She has since been engaged by international media and brands including Valentino, Comedy Central, Bumble, the Nickelodeon Kids’ Choice Awards and Netflix’s sub-brand Strong Black Lead.

Similarly, 23-year-old Lasizwe Dambuza, with 1.5 million Twitter followers, 2 million Instagram followers and over 800,000 YouTube followers (as of December 2023), has been able to nurture an audience based on his humorous skits that provide incisive commentary on South African socio-political issues. For instance, during 2020’s Covid-related lockdowns, Dambuza produced videos that poked fun at the various double standards—across race, class, gender and healthcare access—that different people with Covid-19 were experiencing. Furthermore, Dambuza has been open about being gay since the inception of his YouTube channel in 2017, and his videos often discuss his experiences as a gay man in South Africa, broaching many cultural responses to homosexuality (Andrews, 2021).

It is crucial to situate these young African digital cosmopolitans as both local and global digital citizens, engaging in multiple political discussions and thus shaping a global digital youth culture informed by local, intra-continental and global astuteness. As Jacobs (2015) observes, the irreverent youth culture of both young Africans on the continent and within the African diaspora cannot be ignored as it contributes significantly to online political culture and the cultivation of a specific kind of African modernity.

Examples such as the ones that I broach point to how African digitality is allowing Africans to engage in their own conversations while simultaneously providing worlding experiences. The examples also show how Africans online are using digital platforms and spaces to connect to one another and the world, therein building important solidarities that seek to redress different manifestations of the status quo. In the following section, I substantiate the concept of cosmopolitanism from below as briefly introduced earlier.

5.4 Cosmopolitanism From Below: A Response to Normative Cosmopolitanism’s Deficiencies

Kurasawa (2004) uses the concept of cosmopolitanism from below in an effort to demonstrate that cosmopolitanism is a transnational practice in which
participants “construct bonds of mutual commitment and reciprocity across borders through public discourse and socio-political struggle.” Kurasawa does not view such transnational social integration as requiring cultural assimilation, but rather as acknowledging global diversity which can be advanced through “criss-crossing webs of affinity between multiple groups from around the world” in a decentralized and dynamic fashion.

This mixing, therefore, does not lend itself to the loss of individual and collective cultural distinctiveness (Kurasawa, 2004; Sen, 2015). Rather, connection patterns remain diverse, incomplete and non-universal with engagement enriched by embracing the dynamics of local and cultural specificities, rather than avoiding them. A clear example of this is the previously discussed platform, HOLAAfrica! HOLAAfrica!’s contributors, for instance, hail from various African countries including Nigeria, Namibia, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania and Zimbabwe and are encouraged to make submissions in local African languages (Mugo & Antonites, 2014). And so HOLAAfrica! simultaneously influences global discourse around queer women’s sexuality (setting a global agenda and challenging the established notion that knowledge production around sexual diversity flows from the West to the rest of the world), while shaping a continental and even vernacular perspective.

Thus, cosmopolitanism from below does not signify “placelessness,” or “being from nowhere or everywhere at once” (Kurasawa, 2004) but instead embraces multi-layered identities and attempts to accommodate different cultural ways of thinking and acting and to listen to the voices of those often erased from normative cosmopolitan discourse. And so, such cosmopolitanism sees those engaging with it acknowledging and addressing uncomfortable problematic power differentials and surrendering positions of control, thus forming transnational bonds of solidarity and reciprocity through critical discourse and socio-political struggle. I now briefly introduce the concept of adjectival cosmopolitanisms, which falls under cosmopolitanism from below.

5.5  Adjectival Cosmopolitanisms

Referred to as adjectival cosmopolitanisms (Harvey, 2015), or “new cosmopolitans-from-below,” (Neilson, 1999, p. 2) many forms of hybrid cosmopolitanisms have recently emerged. These include, for example, postcolonial cosmopolitanism, vernacular cosmopolitanism, subaltern cosmopolitanism, discrepant cosmopolitanism, indigenous cosmopolitanism, feminist cosmopolitanism, Afropolitanism and digital cosmopolitanism
and can be read as a “corrective to hegemonic cosmopolitan projects” (Zeng, 2014, p. 140). This family of concepts, which sits under the broader umbrella of cosmopolitanism from below, seeks to assess the usefulness of cosmopolitanism as an analytical concept in today’s society. Glick Schiller and Irving (2015) observe this practice of linking cosmopolitanism with modifiers that connote its opposite meaning (such as vernacular, ghetto and rooted) as a way of challenging the easy equation of cosmopolitanism with mobility and itinerancy—as previously discussed—thus challenging normative cosmopolitanism’s conceptual boundaries and analytical utility. This, in turn, pushes the concept of cosmopolitanism to greater rigour.

Ponzanesi (2020) assesses that the emergence of these cosmopolitan neologisms attests to the need to preserve the ideals of cosmopolitanism while also being conscious of emerging new realities. This is crucial because the common conflation of minoritarian perspectives with the subnational, and cosmopolitanism with the global, denies the worldliness of the former and particularity of the latter, thus robbing each of conceptual complexity. Furthermore, the compound form of these cosmopolitanisms marries two concepts together in such a way that new meanings emerge. For example, subaltern cosmopolitanism can be imagined as neither “subaltern” nor “cosmopolitan,” but instead as a naming practice of thinking and connection that is transgressive and entails the border crossing discussed earlier. Ponzanesi further notes that the pluralization of cosmopolitanism into cosmopolitanisms recuperates cosmopolitanism by opening it up to other forms of cosmopolitanism that have been erased within history and classified as “unauthorized forms of cosmopolitanism” (2020, p. 2). And so, reclaiming them becomes a politically defiant act for those who are often othered. I now place my focus on digital cosmopolitanism.

5.6 Digital Cosmopolitanism

New digital tools and platforms have long been recognized for their role in generating new forms of community and engagement which blur the boundaries of the private and the public (Hull et al., 2010), enabling the emergence of virtual social spaces that are neither geographically bounded nor bordered and which allow for “the discursive construction of hybridized cultures” (McEwan & Sobre-Denton, 2011). Due to the popularity of social media, more people are connected through the internet and digital and social media. This has facilitated a “global-local orientation to the world that allows individuals to engage in virtual community-building and participate in communication
to build ‘global citizenship’, thus fomenting contact spaces for intercultural communication and consciousness raising (Sobré-Denton, 2016; Ponzanesi, 2020). An example of this is the #AfricansInUkraine hashtag. With 5.8 million views (as of May 2022), the hashtag represented an important digital node of crowdsourced knowledge and activism with Africans in Ukraine, and globally, shedding light on the plight of Africans during the Ukraine crisis. Just as importantly, the hashtag was also furthered by non-Africans who posted videos to inform and educate their own audiences.

By its very nature, the digital is cosmopolitan in that it allows for fluidity and multiple forms of knowledge, and knowledge-making. As such, there is a growing body of work that looks at cosmopolitanism in the digital age. Ponzanesi (2020, p. 4) states that:

Digital cosmopolitanism is, therefore, intended as the power of the internet to engage with the other and shape new networks of solidarity, contributing to intercultural exchanges, global justice, and new types of subpolitical activities/counterpublics.

A postcolonial framework highlights how, through the nexus between technological innovation and migration, new challenges and opportunities have emerged for redefining cosmopolitanism in the digital era with the emergence of “a new citizen of the world, who is both rooted and routed, and whose global interactions are marked by the use of social networks” (Ponzanesi, 2020). In this vein, it is interesting to look at the hyphenated identities of some of these African digital cosmopolitans. Minna Salami, the author of the MsAfropolitan blog, identifies as “a Nigerian-Finnish and Swedish writer and social critic” (Salami) and lives in the United Kingdom. Sean Jacobs, the founder of Africa is a Country, is of South African origin and lives and works in the United States. One of the cofounders of HOLAAfrica!, Tiffany Kagure Mugo, is a Kenyan living in South Africa. The act of being rooted in African identity, but also being routed to various localities and contexts via migration and mobility, adds complexity to the idea of flows of communication. Where, then, do we locate Africa and then the West, if the African digital cosmopolitan is deeply enmeshed within both?

Hall (2019) further notes that virtual articulations of cosmopolitanism occurring via these technology-mediated networks are opening space for “soft cultural cosmopolitan relationships” which are characterized by curiosity and openness towards other cultures, with mutual reflexivity emerging from these intercultural exchanges. This is no surprise as cosmopolitanism
is intrinsically linked to notions of mediation, voice, solidarity, hospitality, space and openness.

With the popular uptake of TikTok, a new social media channel through which young Africans can express creativity and political consciousness has emerged. A few African moments that have gone viral continentally and globally via TikTok. One such is the #JerusalemaChallenge. The #JerusalemaChallenge was sparked by an Angolan dance troupe’s dance routine to the South African hit song *Jerusalema* by Master KG and featuring Nomcebo Zikode. The hashtag (which had generated 652.2 million TikTok views by May 2022) inspired similar videos from around the world of people dancing to the song and challenging others to do the same.

The fact that a gospel Zulu song became an anthem for collective Covid-19 solidarity and entertainment is significant. Many users would not have understood the words of the song or even identified the religious genre it belonged to. Given the restrictive regulations of the time—and limited opportunities for travel and engagement with other cultures and cultural spaces during Covid-19—it makes sense that this trend would enjoy virality. As Kabir notes:

> Like the revival of line dances during the Black Lives Matter protests, “Jerusalema” went viral during the coronavirus pandemic because the dance challenge enacted a simple way to connect and build community: especially at a time when people were hungering for these possibilities.

As with the example of the #AfricansInUkraine hashtag, #JerusalemaChallenge points to emergent digital solidarities from below.

Sobré-Denton (2016) further views virtual cosmopolitanisms as “a space for social justice and intercultural activism” that brings together local and rooted activists through social media, thus allowing for a transnational exchange of ideas, amplification of voices and increased momentum for movements beyond what might be possible within local grassroots activism. Mobility is thus reconceptualized as not just physical, but also digital, which opens cosmopolitan practice up to new areas of analysis. Cosmopolitanism from below—and by extension, digital cosmopolitanism—is not synonymous with the travel exploits of normative cosmopolitanism since one can be cosmopolitan without leaving their birthplace and within contexts of stasis; all that is needed is “a fundamental openness to otherness ... rooted in the imagination” (Eze, 2015). Cosmopolitanism from below, therefore, opens itself up to the possibilities of “solidarities from below” whereby individuals and groups from different parts of the world form political alliances of a
networked character, featuring thick global social relations. Digitality aligns with this as it allows for the mobility of hashtags and conversations even within contexts where physical travel is not always possible.

5.7 African Digital Cosmopolitanism

What then makes these different platforms and voices constituent of an African digital cosmopolitanism? While they have disparate audiences, uses, politics and forms, I see them collectively creating a digital cosmopolitanism that is uniquely African because of the uniquely pessimistic idea of Africa that prevails globally. In their own different ways, they inscribe Africa and African culture, history and practices into the global digital discursive space, while simultaneously creating their own digital space that the world can engage with.

I see African digital cosmopolitanism creating new counterpublics which challenge cynicism about African agency. Some of these emerge through active efforts to build communities of practice (such as blogging platforms). Jacobs (2016) discusses the form of *Africa is a Country* as a space that broaches the offline and online divide, as well as an academic journal and an open-source journal. That he also refers to *Africa is a Country* as an open-ended journal and blog (as opposed to a website) seems to be with the intention to position it in a sense of communality and semi-informality.

Yékú (2017) observes that in the online African literary space of blogs, authors and readers have cultivated agency to contribute to these narratives and challenge the idea of storytelling as consisting of a singular voice of authority as was more evident during the print era (Yékú, 2017). What emerges is a decentralized medium of communication that is based on participation and interactivity pointing to “ideas that gesture back to the representational strategies of oral literature in pre-colonial Africa” (p. 262). Thus, the African digital cosmopolitan turn, and its new forms of storytelling, can be seen as contributing to a return to the more open-ended and fluid forms of precolonial African storytelling. It is important, however, to nuance an understanding of oral cultures where—as (Ong, 1982) observes—thought and expression were sometimes structured and ordered in ways that could also be deemed conservative and highly systematic in efforts to avoid a loss of knowledge.

Other counterpublics, however, emerge less consciously; for example, when an individual like Majimbo appropriated Instagram and TikTok to share a Kenyan narrative of a global pandemic which gained extensive and
universalizing social media traction, thus latently pushing back against mass scepticism around Africa’s capacity to survive the Covid-19-crisis. A similar argument can be made for the #JerusalemaChallenge and other viral African social media trends that emerged during the pandemic, such as the #GhanaPallBearers hashtag. The Ghanaian pall bearers are a group of men who engage in flamboyant funeral rituals in which they dance as they carry the coffin of the deceased on their shoulders. They were first featured on BBC Africa in 2017, but only went viral via the #GhanaPallBearers hashtag early in 2020 in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. The group quickly became the face of global efforts to encourage people to stay at home, and to sanitize their hands, and were edited into several videos of people engaging in risky behaviours (e.g., reopening of malls and in-person protests) as part of public health messaging. The search term “dancing pallbearers” was mentioned at least 60,000 times by English-speaking Twitter in April 2020, representing more search queries for the term than in the previous history of Twitter altogether (Paquette, 2020). Ultimately, all these acts of self-inscription into the global digital discursive space challenge ideas around Africans’ perceived incompetence at fashioning their own narratives about their own lives, building communities and solidarities therein.

In the previous section, I asked where we then locate Africa and the West, if the African digital cosmopolitan is enmeshed within both. What then, is the meaning of the qualifier “African”? In his paper at an international conference on African literary futures hosted at Bayreuth University, Cole (2017) asks this pointed question. What does it mean to deliver such an address at a European university in a country which played an infamous role in Africa’s colonial history with the Berlin Conference of the late 1800s serving as the officialization of Europe’s “Scramble for Africa”? In offering a response to what makes the conference African, even if it is held beyond the geographical bounds of the continent, Cole (2017) states:

So, what makes this an African conference, paradoxically, is the fact that we are here, in Germany—against all odds, from Kant, via Hegel, to Wagner and the present forms of exclusion, which cannot imagine Africa. Our Africa, we insist, must be understood in as capacious a sense as Europe is.

And so, just as Cole calls for a dynamic understanding of the complex and contradictory facets of an African conference taking place in Europe, I take a similar stance on qualifying a digital cosmopolitanism that is African. This is not, however, to equate digital cosmopolitanism, operating within
a postcolonial and political framework of cosmopolitanism from below as already discussed, with Kantian and Hegelian perspectives. Far from it. It is instead, a further politicization of this discourse which seeks to insert Africanness within two realms—cosmopolitanism and digitality—that have historically marginalized it. This worlding experience situates Africa in the world and the world in Africa, by challenging linear and top-down ideas of knowledge flows. And so, it becomes less about such digital cosmopolitanism challenging flows of information in a linear sequence (from the West to the rest of the world) and replacing it with another (from the rest of the world to the West). Flows are far more complex and, sometimes, even contradictory and represent multiple mobilities, formats and identities that cultivate digital agency.

But it is important to state that elites exist, even among minorities. Since cosmopolitanism manifests within an unequal world, it is not equally accessible to all; as such, what seem like free choices made from a cosmopolitan outlook are essentially governed by social, financial and economic capital. Privilege, class and power still play significant roles within cosmopolitanism from below, and therefore digital cosmopolitanism. Lindell and Danielsson (2017) define this capital as cosmopolitan capital; that is the resources that individuals make use of to gain or maintain their positions in fields of influence as these increasingly become transnational. This is evident within African digital cosmopolitanism where platforms and actors make use of different forms of capital to elevate their various agendas and profiles. Cosmopolitan capital often dictates who is listened to, and who is not. And this can lead to the closing of spaces for other voices as others become more dominant.

Would Khaby Lame, granted Italian citizenship only in 2022 despite having lived in the country for almost all his life, have attained this status if he had remained an unknown factory worker as he had been before becoming the TikTok sensation he now is? An exploration of (digital) cosmopolitan capital brings with it conversation around the exceptionalism often expected of Africans to be deemed acceptable within Western spaces. A further point of conversation is how such exceptionalism then creates schisms between African diasporic voices and African continental voices. For example, who gets to give a TED Talk about Africa? And from what positionality? Diasporic platforms and voices, with their proximity to the West, have sometimes been read as not being representative of the “real” (situated) Africa, and even sometimes seen as crowding out space for non-diasporic African platforms and voices. As Adenekan and Cousins (2014) observe, the cosmopolitan perception of contemporary African discourse is problematized by the
idea of the cosmopolitan (in this instance, the cosmopolitan writer) as the mouthpiece—and thus a key gatekeeper—of African culture. Werbner (2006) further questions where to place minority elites within postcolonial nations who are concomitantly seeking multicultural or global citizenship, while attempting to uphold their vernacular cultures which are seen as a hindrance to the universalising ideals of cosmopolitanism.

The fact that social segregation by gender, language, class and tribe still thrives and that most Africans still have little or no access to the internet (Yékú, 2017; Dabiri, 2016; McLean & Mugo, 2015) further complicates the idea of African digital cosmopolitanism. And even among those who are privileged to have access, there are still authoritarian governments—ready to effect internet shutdowns at the first signs of mass online dissent—to contend with. A thoughtful example to look at within the realm of collective sociality and intracontinental discourse is the hashtag #IfAfricaWasABar, which went viral on Twitter in 2015 as it crowdsourced the perspectives of Africans about different countries within the continent through personalizing them as stock characters in a bar. While mainly humorous, these personalizations simultaneously spoke to socio-political and historical issues relating to different African countries’ nationhoods, and perceptions of self and one other. A few examples include the following:

"#IfAfricaWasABar the Nigerians manning the toilets would be making more money than the bar itself."

"#IfAfricaWasABar Zimbabwe would be that unemployed guy who can surprisingly afford to turn up everyday."

"#IfAfricaWasABar you know Mauritius, Seychelles and Cape Verde would be sitting up in the VIP, judging the rest of us."

Because the hashtag was in English, most participation was from Anglophone Africa and its diaspora (Cheruiyot & Uppal, 2019). Of the 200 tweets analysed in Cheruiyot and Uppal's study, only 21% were geolocated to an African time zone or location, which was largely confined to urban populations, reflecting an urban bias in terms of technology access. Furthermore, they observed an aesthetic to the bar which is imagined in the tweets as “modern,” with wines and spirits served on a bar counter or table, by bartenders. They note:

The idea of a local village beer joint ... was out of the picture for most tweeters. The tweet exchange suggested that the engagement involved the affluent, urban and perhaps young Africans.
Equally, one can ask what version of Africa is being conveyed digitally. Is it representative? But a counter to that line of questioning is also important to interrogate. Does it have to be representative and can it ever really be, given that we are already collapsing a continent of over 50 countries into one collective imaginary?

5.8 Conclusion

As has been shown from the beginning of this chapter, the whole cosmopolitan project constitutes a paradox of multiple contradictions. This further complicates it while simultaneously salvaging it, raising questions around how it can be employed as a framework for assessing worlding experiences.

Amid these multiple tensions, cosmopolitanism from below—and its attendant adjectival forms—offers a space for the “other” to create and share various forms of cosmopolitan practices that would otherwise be overlooked by normative cosmopolitan projects. Digitality further allows us to expand the range and reach of these cosmopolitan practices. It has been especially meaningful in an African and diasporic context for the continent and its voices to inscribe their digital cosmopolitan practices into the greater digital discursive space, while also creating strong counternarratives, and counterpublics, to Afropessimistic stances. This, I believe, is playing an important role in challenging the linear colonial model that sees Africans as passive recipients of Western knowledge and culture. There is agency, creativity, robust politics and complex networks and solidarities to be found within African digital space.

As a practice, African digital cosmopolitanism counters dominant, and often negative, ideas about African (digital) agency and opens up an important further gateway analysing African digitality and cosmopolitanism. With regards the latter, it is important to note that my omission of debates around Afropolitanism has been deliberate. The concept offers rich thoughts and counterthoughts around what an African cosmopolitanism might look like, but requires far more printed space and time to be effectively incorporated within this conversation. In many ways, I embody my own research; an African rooted within the continent but simultaneously routed to the world through many profound experiences and engagements that I would not otherwise have had without my digital access and curiosity. Many questions still abound around what African digital cosmopolitanism may look like more substantively. My hope is that this chapter offers a starting point.
References


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About the Author

Fungai Machirori is a Zimbabwean digital practitioner and commentator who straddles the world between theory and practice. Her main area of academic interest is digital sociology with a focus on identity, agency and discursive power within African digitality. She runs The Digitally Native Podcast where she explores themes around digital cultures from an African standpoint and also extensively writes – academically and non-academically – about African digitality.