

Theorizing the Afropolitan Past and Present

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The evocative cover for this issue, by the Nigerian photographer Emeka Okereke, features the participants in the Invisible Borders Trans-African Project during their trip to Bangladesh in 2019.¹ We were drawn to it because it reflects and transcends so many of the ideas associated with the ideal and the challenge of the Afropolitan. Par excellence, the term *Afropolitan* signals mobility, but one often connected to the Global North or to the largest cities on the African continent. Without any context, it is not possible to know that the image is of Bangladesh from the landscape—a low seawall, a busy road, the speeding car rendered motionless. The viewer can only search the expressions of the people standing together and apart, facing and turned away from the camera, for clues. It is also not entirely clear who is from the Trans-African Project and who is from the Bangladeshi Drik Network partnered with them.² The viewer is put in the uncomfortable situation of assuming who might belong and who might not, raising a central question about the Afropolitan who seeks to transcend such borders.

The photograph appears on the cover of the *Trans-Bangladeshi*, a newsletter that Invisible Borders published in Dhaka as part of its project. From the newsletter's essays, poems, and photographs, we learn some of the stories and interests of the participants. Next to the cover image is the opening reflection, "Let's Try On New Clothes," by the Nigerian writer Kay Ugwuode. The short essay uses the metaphor of "trying on clothes" to reflect on how countries can outgrow their colonial borders. She also describes the initial meeting with their Bangladeshi counterparts

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as a fraught moment when they “try each other on like clothes,” wondering if their cross-border collaboration will “fit.”³ Indeed, Okereke, who took this particular image, themes the series of photographs from his trip—featured as a coauthored Curated Space in this issue—as a “search for intimacy.” In discussing the images with his colleague and friend Mathangi Krishnamurthy, he notes the paradox, as an “Afropolitan in Asia,” of being seen and not seen in encounters “full of warmth” that simultaneously “deflect[ed] intimacy.” The cover image evokes this duality. At the same time that the idea of a group of artists traveling and creating in Bangladesh suits the common image of the globe-trotting Afropolitan, the unexpected context and the ambivalent emotions around mobility, encounter, and borders complicate the narrative.

This photograph is a fitting introduction to the different set of questions this issue asks about what Achille Mbembe described in 2007 as the fundamental “paradigm of itinerancy, mobility, and displacement” shaping African and African diaspora history.⁴ Rather than only thinking of Afropolitanism in the present or as part of “Afrofutures,” we asked contributors also to explore and theorize the potential for Afropolitan pasts.⁵ In his essay in this issue, David Schoenbrun analyzes the quotidian “rhythmed mobility” of the Afropolitan in his story of *vashambadzi* (Shona for travelers) in fourteenth-century southern Africa. He suggests ways to get at the stories of mobile Africans before the explosion of slave trades that would carry away millions, and before the formal imposition of European colonialism. The afterlives of both processes still shape how the continent and its histories are seen today, and some proposed the concept of the Afropolitan precisely to disrupt those powerful narratives. But the contributors to this issue suggest that Afropolitanism can be a useful framework of historical analysis in a much broader time and space. Their articles analyze the Afropolitan from itinerant artisans in fourteenth-century southern Africa to a sixteenth-century outpost in Latin America, West African kingdoms and port cities in the waning decades of the Atlantic slave trade, a hair salon in twenty-first-century Paris, and a busy roadway in Bangladesh before the world knew COVID-19.

Afropolitanism: Origins, Uses, and Opportunities

To date, much of the focus on Afropolitanism, as a present-day phenomenon, has occurred in literature, sociology, philosophy, and popular culture.⁶ The strongest critiques of Taiye Selasi’s original short musing in *LIP Magazine* in 2005 object to how the ideals of transnationalism and mobility inevitably refer to Western models of leisure and style that commodify a jet-setting African experience.⁷ Scholars who have attempted to reclaim and redefine the Afropolitan still often only debate their activities in the twenty-first century. In his essay “We, Afropolitans,” the literary scholar Chielozona Eze lays out a manifesto defining an Afropolitanism rooted in a universalism that does not extend from the European Enlightenment but from an

ethos in African communities that recognizes the interconnectedness between mobility and home. For Eze, mobility is not in the physical movement but in the mind and fabric of the self: “We, Afropolitans, believe in the ever expanding universe in which we are the centres; . . . We are fitted not just with double-consciousness; we possess multiple consciousness, for we perceive the world from multiple perspectives.”⁸ But the “we” Eze is referencing is unclear, perhaps purposefully. Eze’s Afropolitans may be women and men of some means, but they are defined by their interiority rather than their upward mobility, making for the possibility for a much more expansive “we.”

Many scholars have continued to evoke the term despite the backlash, seeing in it a shortcut to allude to transnationalism or to a cosmopolitanism that at least claims to move beyond the Western trappings of the term.⁹ Though historians of Africa and the African diaspora have not shied away from debating and theorizing about transnationalism and cosmopolitanism, the term *Afropolitan* has mostly remained a domain of literary scholars, theorists, and, occasionally, sociologists. The historical work in this issue takes a more interdisciplinary approach even when using archival and primary sources. In engaging the Afropolitan as a historical as well as contemporary subject, our contributors tend to coalesce and overlap along three key lines of critical inquiry: visual culture, narrativity, and intersectionality. Their approaches to these themes are diverse yet very much in dialogue. For example, the authors critically examine images occurring in historical art, photography, and mixed media but also create powerful images through their own texts. Narrative can offer a mode of analysis and also raise questions about the politics of knowing. Contributors to the issue propose innovative, transnational, and intersectional theoretical frameworks that recognize race, place, and gendered Black life. We follow our thematic discussion of the articles with an overview organized by their order of appearance in the issue. While the order of the articles follows a certain narrative arc, the juxtaposition of the different texts also disrupts chronologies and geographies, just as Afropolitans often have.

Theorizing the Visual in Images and Texts

The scholar Nicholas Mirzoeff observes that “the emerging global society is visual.”¹⁰ Indeed, the politics of the Afropolitan are often connected to imagery, whether in visual media or conjured in literary and, here, historical texts. The idea of the Afropolitan may be most readily evoked in fashion and consumer culture, but the term also evokes a powerful visual aesthetic associated with urbanized landscapes both within and beyond the African continent, past and present. In her study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Dahomey, Elizabeth Fretwell analyzes images and descriptions from traveler accounts to show how Dahomean kings and elites used multiple kinds of cloth, styles of dress, and accessories to establish status, legitimacy, and power. In a very different setting in sixteenth-century

Latin America, Antonia Carcelén-Estrada reveals how the famous painting *Los dones de Esmeraldas* refers to a complex history of local Indigenous trade networks, maroon communities of fugitive slaves, and colonial politics, though many observers may misunderstand the iconography behind the dress, gestures, and politics of the Indigenous artist who painted it. The global visual society that people see in the present had precedents in the past that operated on a different scale.

Similarly, Patrícia Martins Marcos deconstructs the Portuguese national imaginary as white and male through the study of art, performance, and photography in what she calls countervisual *quilombismo*. Mirzoeff defines countervisuality as “the assertion of the right to look, challenging the law that sustains visibility’s authority to suture its interpretation of the sensible to power, first as law and then as the aesthetic.”¹¹ Martins Marcos focuses on the ways Black artists and activists transform and resignify space in Portugal, where the long history of a Black presence is often forgotten. Her essay resonates with Dawn Fulton’s discussion of Francophone African women writers in Paris and how they create written and visual portraits of themselves in different areas of the city. Discussing the mundane—including food, fashion, and hair—the women claim space and belonging for themselves and their families, countering another European imaginary that often elides its colonial past and history of diversity.

The articles that include images differ from the Curated Spaces and Afterword by visual artists, who center the image as the story and forcefully evoke Mbembe’s discussion of the Afropolitan as worlds-in-movement. Héctor Mediavilla shares a collection of photographs from the International Fashion Festival in Africa (Festival International de la Mode en Afrique, or FIMA), which started in Niger in 1998. Through contextualization with behind-the-scenes imagery and interviews, Mediavilla reveals fashion pieces that reflect different African sensibilities and Western influences. Emeka Okereke and Mathangi Krishnamurthy take us to a very different setting in Bangladesh in the discussion of the photographs Okereke took during the Invisible Borders Trans-African Project, a collaboration between African and South Asian artists. The discussion between Okereke and Krishnamurthy frames their own movements in the world as very different postcolonial subjects, as they reflect on Okereke’s photos of people embracing, a child being held, and a bird perched on the side of the road as part of his theme on the “search for intimacy.” The photos and conversation remind the reader and viewer of the reality of postcolonial subjects in movement across national borders that are artificial dividers from colonial times. In “Does Afropolitanism Apply to the Americas?,” Aniova Prandy also plays with the ideas of forced mobility, the implied lack of mobility of slavery, and fugitivity through the use of sugar, satin cushions, and iron collars—all of them open, save one. Her work demands the use of all the senses to engage the different textures, colors, and even the bittersweet taste.

As the sensory nature of Prandy's visual art reminds us that texts can also incite the senses, David Schoenbrun's sample of creative nonfiction set in fourteenth-century southern Africa does similar work through text. The descriptions in the story of the young couple Mma and Tswan provide a visceral portrait of Afropolitan mobility. The smell of burning grass, the taste of water flowing from a stream, the feel of the foot on the landscape, the stories told in rock art, and the sight of a stone-built walled city all bring to life a different sense of space in the distant African past. As many of our contributors suggest, the limits of the archive can partially be remedied through creative narratives, unusual sources, and artifacts we encounter and struggle with to move historical narratives forward.

The Politics of Storytelling

The theoretical framing by the visionary literary scholar Saidiya Hartman has been a crucial source for historians engaged in the practice and politics of storytelling about the past. Hartman's scholarship on African American history has posed interlocking theories of critical fabulation and narrative restraint to trace not only the stories found in the "mortuary archive" but also Black life in the fugitive, radical freedom dreams of young Black women.¹² Her theory of "critical fabulation" calls for the scholar to paint as full a picture of Black lives as possible to recuperate, if not the details, then the moods and experiences of lives consumed by the archive, in other words, "to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done."¹³ But, struggling with the potential violence of even this creative act, Hartman also insists on the author's use of narrative restraint and refusal to fill gaps and provide closure for what has been lost.¹⁴ With these kinds of frameworks in mind, our contributors both theorize narrative as a tool of historical analysis and create new narratives that evoke the Afropolitan.

Paulina Alberto takes up these questions of narrative as analysis and creative power in the form of a seminar she offers on what she calls "racial storytelling," which uses recent historical fiction alongside foundational historical texts about race in Argentina. She operates from the premise that stories have disproportionate power to persuade, convey meaning, shape how we engage others, and linger as we navigate our quotidian lives. Students not only learn how such stories are constructed and marshaled but also how they can be transformed or countered. The experience and experiment with storytelling helps students engage with and begin to understand the challenge of antiracist work.

David Schoenbrun offers theorization and a sample of a new narrative that challenges understandings about Africa's distant past and how the concept of the Afropolitan might also inform that time and space. He calls for a "deeper history of the Afropolitan" to reach a new plateau of historical inquiry. His intervention searches for a history where absences and silences of the traditional archives are

filled with what he calls the “unusual archives”—evidence found in a plethora of diverse sources within archeology, linguistics, art history, historical and climate ecology, landscape history, and geography. He proposes a creative nonfiction to demonstrate the mobility of Africans before the fifteenth century. In his wonderfully evocative essay about a fourteenth-century couple making their way in and around Great Zimbabwe with *vashambadzi* (travelers), he posits that ceramicists, weavers, healers, and others walked African coasts and interiors and “discovered” the African continent and shaped its histories.

Both Alberto and Schoenbrun are fundamentally concerned with the power of storytelling, albeit in different times and spaces in the history of Africa and the African diaspora. While several of our authors are interested in creating new narratives of African and African diaspora history through their analysis, Schoenbrun powerfully reminds us of some of the limits in extant historical methods, which can be especially acute for historians of Africa. The powerful narrative force and documentary evidence of the histories of slave trades and colonialism has meant that other continental histories of movement and mobility still remain to be written. Thus, both Alberto and Schoenbrun demonstrate how storytelling holds enormous potential for students and scholars to move past inadequate methodologies and to amplify silenced perspectives. Stories enable us to witness, draw multidirectional and multidimensional connections, and testify against racialist absurdities. Storytelling can impact how data is used and how meaning is inferred from archival records. Storytelling can uplift and mobilize; it is a practice central to apprehending Black subjectivities on the continent and in its diaspora, because stories can validate and restore.

Beyond the Intersectional Afropolitan

To tell the story of the Afropolitan, a shared, albeit constructed, racial identity might seem to be central. However, Mbembe and others have insisted on contrasting capacious and flexible categories of the Afropolitan with Pan-Africanism or, more specifically, Afrocentrism.¹⁵ Viewing Africa, and especially South Africa, as a locus of Afropolitanism, Mbembe emphasizes that Africa is not bounded by race and that diverse people can (and have for centuries) claimed Africa as a home and marker of identity.¹⁶ But the assumed and reductive opposition between Pan-African and Afropolitan models may foreclose analytical possibilities to center complex racialized identities. In her essay, Martins Marcos critiques this particular focus of Afropolitanism “beyond” race and proposes *quilombismo* (fugitivity or *marronage*, meaning escape from slavery) as a theory informed by praxis. It is significant that the term *quilombismo*—theorized as a verb, theory, and arts movement by Brazilian scholars—does not translate directly into English, where *maroon* is a noun or adjective. She suggests that creative attention to a broader formulation of fugitivity and diaspora could lend itself to what Mbembe calls for as a “planetary reading of [our] predicament” that does not resort to race or nation.¹⁷

At the same time, a fully realized Afropolitan should also engage critically with gender and sexuality, among other things.¹⁸ While some scholars have shown how the central Black feminist theory of intersectionality is both marginalized and policed, scholars also still need to attend to intersectionality in their approach to transnationalism in gender and sexuality studies in the Global North.¹⁹ For example, scholars of Africa have questioned whether intersectionality captures all of the forces at work in African contexts.²⁰ Also, the common narrative of the origins and theorization of intersectionality often ignores early and continued contributions from outside the United States. Martins Marcos notes the concept of *améfricandade*, developed by the Black Brazilian feminist Lélia Gonzalez in the 1980s to account for the particular global experience of Black and Indigenous people, especially women. Thus Martins Marcos frames a theory around these practical theories of race, gender, diaspora, and fugitivity precisely in an effort to transcend persistent “analytic traps.”²¹

Similarly, Carcelén-Estrada analyzes art, the colonial archive, and orality as an “archive of memory” to work with Afropolitanism and critique it at the same time. Citing common portrayals of Afropolitanism as a “universalizing cosmopolitanism and privilege,” she analyzes a deeply racialized and gendered sense of the Chocó (the Pacific coastal region spanning northern Colombia and Ecuador) defined by a critical Black feminist practice tied to the geography and a long history of struggle against colonial and neocolonial “extractivist” practices. Carcelén-Estrada’s use of gender analysis is expansive as she uses the famous painting *Los dones de Esmeraldas* not only to reveal how Indigenous and Black women are excluded from official narratives but also to show how the Indigenous painter Gallque subtly challenged the Spanish crown he was serving by representing the maroon leader Arobe and his sons as well as his own masculine and autonomous self as an Indigenous man.

After exploring the gaps in the colonial archive and how women scholars, in particular, have challenged the omission of women of the African diaspora in a region known for its *palenques* (free Black communities) and African-descended communities, Carcelén-Estrada concludes with historical and contemporary examples of Chocoan women using orality in songs and community organizing as part of their own processes of self-fashioning. Deeply engaged with visual, textual, and oral archives alongside intersectionality as a decolonial approach, Carcelén-Estrada may push beyond some of the limits of intersectional praxis and her own critique of Afropolitan scholarship. In her discussion of the ways that charged debates over intersectionality have hamstrung Black feminist praxis, Jennifer Nash proposes a process of reclaiming a space of “radical freedom-dreaming and visionary world-making.”²² Indeed, Carcelén-Estrada intellectually embraces Chocoan expressions of a Blackness as defined by femininity, sexuality, and joy. At the same time, by recognizing Chocoan women’s activism as both inherently local and yet potentially “translatable,” Carcelén-Estrada ultimately provides another possible way to define Afropolitanism.

Given that one of the inescapable themes in writing on the Afropolitan is its association with rampant consumerism and commodification, it is worth examining this theme in light of intersectionality and calls to rethink approaches to it. Critics (and defenders) of this trope often point to ubiquitous African-themed merchandise as a problem or a promise. However, in the long history of merchandising Blackness in fashion, scholars such as Monica Miller and Tanisha Ford have shown that there are ways in which commercialization can be turned on its head not only for aesthetic purposes but also for political effect.²³ Here, this question is addressed in differing historical and contemporary contexts. For example, Fretwell and Ndubueze Mbah reveal how consumption of cloth and/or European forms of dress buttressed the status of elites in Dahomey and returned Liberated Africans in Old Calabar, often at the expense of the enslaved. Both authors point out the poignant and troubling relationship between African elite wealth and the vulnerability of others to enslavement.

For the contemporary period, Dawn Fulton argues that the Black women writers she samples purposefully create women characters who engage consciously with fashion in an effort to underscore Black (women's) life and joy as a direct counterpoint to Afro-pessimism. Perhaps the most obvious nod to the iconography of fashion and consumption is Mediavilla's discussion of FIMA. Yet Mediavilla notes that the founder and participants in this event see it as a pathway to promote and redefine development in West Africa through their own networks and exchange. FIMA seems to work within Western ideals of consumerism and development, and FIMA organizer, Sidahmed Seidnaly, who is now known as Alphadi, was able to acquire international partners for the event. However, the origins of FIMA in landlocked Niger initially worked outside of Western priorities and initiatives. In these ways, FIMA in Niger encompasses the multilayered meanings of the Afropolitan. Niger is a diverse, majority-Muslim African country that evokes a long, complex, and ongoing history of migration in central Africa, as old trans-Saharan routes are plied today by people seeking ways to manage the treacherous crossing of the Mediterranean to reach Europe.²⁴ Mbah's evocation of a discrepant cosmopolitanism that enjoins elite travel of people, products, violence, and inequality could not be more apt when contrasting that reality with the luminous and everyday images from FIMA. In the end, however, it is not simply a derivation of Western-style fashion or ideology on display during the festival. FIMA should be a reminder of how products and ideas can be vernacularized and transformed into something new, in this case, on the edge of the Sahara Desert.

Overview of Articles

We chose to begin the issue with two research articles that adroitly theorize the Afropolitan as a historical phenomenon in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century West Africa, before the formal onset of European colonial rule across the continent. But the push and pull of the transatlantic slave trade also shaped the different ways

that Afropolitanism was manifest in the kingdoms of Dahomey and Old Calabar. In the first article, Elizabeth Fretwell analyzes how the elite sartorial culture of Dahomey was based in the circulation and adoption of cloth and styles of dress from African and European sources as a means of distinguishing elites from the general population and the enslaved who crossed the Atlantic or who labored in Dahomey itself. Crucial to Fretwell's argument is the fundamental history of exchange between Dahomey and neighboring communities and polities. She relates the threads of this integrated regional exchange to the woven cloth produced on different types of looms that allowed Dahomean weavers to produce quality cloth valued for its "composite parts." In fact, traders on the coast to the south of Dahomey exported "Allada" cloth, which had diverse regional origins, before Africans began importing myriad types of cloth, yarn, and clothing in exchange for captives. These origins of the aesthetic use of imported cloth partly fueled Dahomey's expansion and reputation as a military force in the region.

Perhaps no event better showed this connection between cloth and military power than the annual customs (*Hwetanu*) ceremony. While European travelers often highlighted the month-long event for the practice of ritualized human sacrifice, their descriptions and drawings depicting it also revealed how much the festival served as a means to collect, display, and distribute cloth. The celebration, which often drew African and European outsiders, also allowed the Dahomean leadership and other elite attendees to display their differences through particular types of dress, cloth as gifts, and even draped cloth as decoration. It is worth noting that woven Yoruba "Oyo" cloth remained a top choice as a gift despite a market flooded with imported cloth from Europe (often produced in South Asia).²⁵ The king and other elites would assemble that combination of clothing items from near and far to indicate the power and reach of the kingdom. Elite women and men would layer different types of *pagne* (cloth used to wrap the body) as well as hats, jewelry, and other accessories that contrasted with the more basic coverings that the majority of people wore. Fretwell interprets this difference as a way for elites to signify their "belonging" to a wider world. She thus raises the question of how different Africans may have seen themselves as part of or excluded from different worlds. However, she reminds us that broader, diverse African worlds that extended into the hinterland had preceded and continued with the incorporation of Africans into a wider Atlantic.

In contrast to Fretwell's focus on elite insiders, Ndubueze Mbah highlights the mobility and self-fashioning of "Liberated Africans," who returned to Old Calabar from Sierra Leone in the later nineteenth century as self-described "Black Englishmen." Mbah theorizes their Afropolitan identity, in terms of their dispersion as well as their attempts to immerse themselves back into Old Calabar society, to the consternation of British palm oil traders and local Old Calabar elites. Like Fretwell, Mbah exposes how the processes of the slave trade interacted with the activities of

the Liberated Africans, who in this instance forged “freedom papers” to undermine local elites as well as to enrich themselves. Mbah analyzes the indeterminacy of the Liberated Africans’ activities as an example of what James Clifford has described as “discrepant cosmopolitanism,” a cosmopolitanism deeply tied to the violent forces and inequality that shaped people’s movement.²⁶

Mbah’s article highlights the improbable journey of Liberated Africans, who had been intercepted by naval forces after the 1807 Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade went into effect. People were “emancipated” in Sierra Leone, among other places, though their freedom was often circumscribed by apprenticeships, forced marriages, or forced relocation, making the story of these Liberated Africans that much more remarkable.²⁷ Almost one hundred thousand people landed in Sierra Leone; about one-third of them had been enslaved in the region of the Bight of Biafra, where Old Calabar was an important port city. After 1850, an untold number of Liberated Africans returned to Old Calabar. Rather than consider them disappeared, Mbah argues that Liberated Africans and what he calls their “Afropolitan freedom politics” emerge through their petitions, through complaints about them in British archives and from Old Calabar elites, and in the British attempts to ultimately deport them back to Sierra Leone. Liberated Africans frustrated African and European officials because of the way they tried to turn ideals about free trade (in palm oil) and free (slave) labor to their advantage. When Liberated Africans returned, they not only adopted an identity as “Black Englishmen” to counter their marginal outsider identity, but they also “embodied” emancipation in their status and used ideas such as freedom as a political right to undercut the Old Calabar social order. The returnees’ use of petitions and “freedom papers” to redeem the enslaved also countered the protected status of Old Calabar elites, who could trade palm oil and retain enslaved people in an era when the Atlantic slave trade, but not slavery, was illegal. However, the Liberated Africans were using the redeemed slaves as domestic servants and trafficking them to other locations such as Fernando Po (Bioko), an island that is part of what is now Equatorial Guinea, as indentured labor, thereby evading the British law abolishing the slave trade. When the redemption practices of the Liberated Africans challenged the status quo too much, however, the British banned them to protect domestic slavery and the power of the Old Calabar elites.

Like Fretwell, Mbah uncovers the “underbelly” of an Afropolitanism that relied not only on African innovation but also on the exploitation of others within slavery and capitalism. While the personal histories and activities of the Liberated Africans of Old Calabar appeared contradictory, these Afropolitans also reflected their times and the possibilities and limits of radical anti-imperial politics. In telling their story, Mbah also highlights the work involved in reading against and along the grain of sources to reveal deeply “archived subalterns.” Similarly, the reflective essays that follow use creative and thoughtful readings of archives, literature,

monuments, and photographs to render visible other possibilities for Afropolitanism, despite the afterlives of slavery and empire.

In her essay, Antonia Carcelén-Estrada questions traditional archives for their systematic silence of Black women's voices in the history of the Esmeraldas in Ecuador. Instead, she favors "orature" (oral literature) produced by and for Black women in the Esmeraldas region of Ecuador to reconstruct a past that affirms their right to exist and live in a dignified community. She begins with the famous 1599 painting *Los dones de Esmeraldas* by Andrés Sánchez-Gallque to question the dominant narrative of the people in the Esmeraldas. Carcelén-Estrada observes how the painting creates "an image (and a gaze) that disregards power and gender relations in the production of historical sources, archives, and narratives by completely omitting African diaspora women from the historical imagination." This distortion evolves from colonial times to the present in the dominant historical narrative, assisted by the structural violence of the state and its neoliberal policies of development, which dispossess and displace Black women.

Against this structural violence, Black women in Esmeraldas are rewriting history and reimagining the past as a strategy that searches for a "memory in-place" to reject migration and dispossession. In this sense, these women cannot afford the idealized middle-class (or elite) mobility often associated with Afropolitanism; their lived experiences demand a different type of identification and activism. Instead, these women employ oral histories to identify "colonial differences and class privileges, and demand to be visible in the making of Esmeraldas's history while using that history to stop the migration to urban centers" and create sustainable economies at home. These women are building alternative archives, orature, to write a counter-narrative in which they are at the center of Esmeraldas as a territory and a Black community. Thus Carcelén-Estrada challenges linear ways to measure time by introducing the dominance of Black women behind the painting of *Los dones*. She triangulates this colonial history with contemporary Black women's activism to combat the "nostalgia" and "amnesia" of Ecuador mestizo elites, who fixate their gaze on the history of conquest. Instead, Carcelén-Estrada documents the decolonial knowledge that centers Black women's experiences of resilience, struggle, and rebellion.

Patrícia Martins Marcos offers the themes of *quilombismo* and diaspora to make Afropolitanism more inclusive and to engender a "dialectic" between the concepts. Martins Marcos evokes the long history of marronage in opposition to Western epistemologies in the Lusophone world that render Blackness "unthinkable" and "inherently foreign" and thus make Black people appear ineligible for citizenship. She draws on the idea of the *quilombo* as a historical place of refuge against slavery and *quilombismo* or fugitivity as a practice and an epistemology that challenges Lusophone myths of nation and empire.

To contextualize countervisual practices in contemporary Portugal, Martins Marcos documents how Black artists and activists like the Angolan Kiluanji Kia Henda or the Afro-Luso-Brazilian trio Aurora Negra (Black Dawn) employ visual *quilombismo* as a form of countervisuality—what Martins Marcos calls counter-visual *quilombismo*—to establish the right to be and be seen in the national narrative. Using their physical presence to interrupt hyperwhite, sanitized spaces such as the Portuguese World Exhibition of 1940, Black artists create a maroon moment to insert themselves within national borders. Or, in the case of the Guinea-Bissau-born woman politician Joacine Katar Moreira, by staging an official photograph in front of colonial murals in the Parliament’s “Noble Hall” to stare defiantly back at the viewer and represent her own “historicity and self-determination.” Occupying monuments to conquerors is one strategy of countervisual *quilombismo* in which photographers capture for posterity a disruptive moment in which Black women, children, and men redefine the narrative of white conquest.

In her contribution, Dawn Fulton challenges the image of a white Paris and past images of Black Paris through her analysis and alternative reading of three contemporary Francophone African writers—Léonora Miano, Rokhaya Diallo, and Lauren Ekué—who write about the Afropolitan experiences of middle-class Black women in Paris in new ways. Fulton recasts the most common critiques of excessive consumerism and apoliticism in Afropolitanism. She notes how Miano and Diallo defy what Diallo calls the image of Paris as a “monochromatic city” beyond the common areas associated with Black activism in favor of a kind of “permeation, a claim to ubiquity that doesn’t lose its hold on the particular, highly personalized definitions of home.” The “staunchly bourgeois” protagonists in Miano’s fiction and the stories and images in Diallo’s book of portraits of Black women sporting their natural hair in Paris also challenge previous (often masculine) narratives of migrant misery and victimization by highlighting the music, film, and visual media that define the daily routines and livelihoods of Black women in twenty-first-century Paris.

Fulton particularly focuses on the characters in Lauren Ekué’s writings to show the possibility of reconciling consumption with political consciousness by “affirming a fundamental historical awareness in the very act of dismissing it.” A key example of this subtle “discursive maneuver” occurs when the protagonist of Ekué’s *Icône urbaine*, Flora d’Almeida, subtly refers to her own lack of experience with the histories of “slavery, segregation, dictatorship, ethnic wars or apartheid” and pushes those histories aside as a “Pandora’s box [that] will remain well sealed.” Fulton also highlights Ekué’s attention to the particular ways gender shapes the “intersection between capital and ethics.” Ekué’s protagonists are aware of the limits of self-empowerment through consumption: they “find their wallets ‘mutilated’ by these relentless beauty regimens.” Ekué’s uses of language and literary format also play with this Afropolitan practice of reconciling consumption with activism. She writes for people who are not “traditional” readers, a conscious decision that informs

her informal style. “Beneath the apparent superficiality of Ekué’s short sentences and abundant exclamation points,” Fulton argues, “lies a determination to forge a studied sociological landscape while merging vectors of readership across class, race, and education.” That a character as seemingly apolitical and “hyperconsumerist” as Flora can remark on the connections between slavery and the commodification of Black celebrity, or tease a potential future career using media to change the image of Black women, also reveals a tension between the individualist Afropolitan and the possibility of a more radical collective politics. Ekué thus transforms consumption into “symbolic capital” that has the potential to empower Black women and reaffirm their agency. Fulton’s readings and reflection challenge understandings of Afropolitanism by expanding its definitions and potential strategies for political activism.

Opportunities to imagine new narratives for Afropolitanism are also highlighted by Paulina Alberto in her essay for our feature Teaching Radical History. Alberto presents powerful anti-racist pedagogies by examining racial ideologies as “stories” to understand “how these ideas circulate, persuade, shape behaviors, influence life chances, and persist in the Americas and beyond.” She teaches students to identify, debunk, and deconstruct racial stories through the study of historical narratives, primary sources, and literature and guides them through the ways in which metanarratives of the modern states of Argentina and Brazil were created. She provides an example from her own research on the early twentieth-century rise and fall of Raúl Grigera, a Black Argentine performer who immediately evokes the image of the Afropolitan in yet another time and place. Alberto also tests her students’ skills by asking them to extrapolate their analysis to the contemporary United States. Moreover, Alberto pushes her students beyond traditional analysis, asking them to critically and constructively write their own racial stories—“countermyths”—that oppose the stories they have studied in class. Alberto equips students with the categories of analysis that have been developed by Black scholars and critics of the past and present. Students remark that they feel “empowered” by the knowledge and skills, with perhaps one of the most powerful lessons being that “anti-racist work . . . is never stable and never done.”

Shifting from the way students might imagine new narratives in the future, David Schoenbrun searches for the deeper roots of Afropolitan mobility in early African history in his Intervention in this issue. In an effort to write beyond Eurocentric paradigms about Africans, he suggests sampling early Afropolitan stories of “cultured mobility.” Schoenbrun recognizes that more technical sources for the earlier period are less accessible, and he argues for combining the theory of Afropolitanism with creative nonfiction. Using the figure of the *vashambadzi*, the Shona word for a purposeful traveler, he describes African landscapes shaped by the “rhythmed mobility” and communal work of ordinary farmers, artisans, and healers.

In many ways, Schoenbrun's thoroughly innovative approach engages themes and concerns shared by his fellow contributors related to the archive and evidence as well as narrative, as discussed above. Schoenbrun is not only creative in how he deploys historical linguistics, archeology, and explanatory footnotes to give content and shape to his story; he is thoughtful about issues of affect and moral belonging that express the interiority of his characters through their skills and networking, personal relationships, and ultimate successes and/or failures. His main characters are a young couple, Mma and Tswan, who start their marriage on the road with *vashambadzi* artisans. Mma's skills as a weaver and the work of her husband, Tswan, as a hunter sends them through towns, a destructive fire, trial by ordeal, and interaction with long-distance ivory trade routes, with devastating consequences. Inspired by Hartman's call for "narrative restraint" and respect for gaps, "black noise," and unfinished business, Schoenbrun leaves threads of his narrative undone, respecting these past Afropolitans' "persistence of movement," as he tells the story of Mma, Tswan, and their fellow coast walkers. The article works as a profound intellectual intervention that deploys creative nonfiction as a novel form of historical analysis.

The issue ends with three photographic essays that embody, question, and reimagine the Afropolitan. The photographer Héctor Mediavilla attended the International Fashion Festival in Africa (FIMA) at the urging of the writer Lauren Ekué. The festival's founder, Sidahmed Seidnaly, now known as Alphadi, represents a spin on the classic story of an Afropolitan. He was born in Mali, raised in Niger, and trained in France and through global fashion networks, but he is based in Niamey, Niger, outside the typical "Afropolitan city." Alphadi established the festival in 1998 to create jobs, promote tourism, and foster peace in the region, though the subsequent rise of Islamism has led to protests against the images projected by FIMA. Despite interruptions and even the relocation of the event, Mediavilla was able to attend it in Niger in 2013 and 2016. Focusing his photographs on the preparations for the festival and the daily lives of some of the designers and models, he sought to show where "glamor coexists with precariousness." His approach is not unlike some of his photography on *sapeurs*—the famously well-dressed African trendsetters and self-described artists who Mediavilla photographed against Congolese rather than Parisian landscapes. For Mediavilla, the seeming contradictions in the festival and the images it produces fit well with an expansive view of the Afropolitan that Eze describes as "not half this or that . . . [but] this *and* that."²⁸

Emeka Okereke, whose photography graces the cover and opens our introduction, contributes a collaborative essay with his colleague and friend Mathangi Krishnamurthy, a South Asian anthropologist. They discuss Afropolitanism in relation to the series of photographs he took during his project in Bangladesh. Having originally met in Chennai, India, Okereke and Krishnamurthy ruminate on their own Afropolitanism and "Asiapolitanism," remarking that despite how they seem to represent a quintessential cosmopolitanism, "Brownness, Blackness, and gender

complicate everything.” Indeed, Krishnamurthy describes Okereke as a “hiding presence” in his photographs because his subjects do not engage him or his camera. She suspects correctly that he took the photographs in this way because his presence would have otherwise caused a stir. Okereke agrees that the photographs reflect a non-encounter/encounter because our powerful, multilayered identities often make any border crossing a paradoxical moment. He concludes that the photographs thus represent a search for a “portal of transcendence” where all encounters are possible, where hybridity and intimate negotiations are commonplace. For him, that “needful utopia” is Afropolitanism.

In the Afterword, the visual artist Aniova Prandy describes how she has come to see her latest award-winning installation, *The Sugar Maafa*, as an Afropolitan practice after recently learning of the term. Using the Swahili word for disaster, *maafa*, her artwork effectively tells the story of the remaking of the Caribbean after the fifteenth century through the multivalent symbolism of sugar, silk cushions, and iron collars, representing the transatlantic trade, enslaved labor, capitalist profit, torture, and marronage. Prandy sees the term *Afropolitan* as decolonial because of the way it reimagines people, societies, and histories. She embraces the term and closes our collection by affirming the Afropolitan in all their possibilities.

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Melina Pappademos is the director of the Africana Studies Institute at the University of Connecticut. She researches and teaches widely on politics and culture in the Caribbean, Cuba, and the African diaspora. Supported by Harvard University, Ford Foundation, and Fulbright-Hays, her first book, *Black Political Activism and the Cuban Republic*, won the Southern Historical Association's Murdo J. Macleod Best Book Prize in 2012. Her current project examines Blackness and culture in twentieth-century Cuba.

Lorelle Semley is professor of history at College of the Holy Cross. Her books include *Mother Is Gold, Father Is Glass: Gender and Colonialism in a Yoruba Town* (2011), the award-winning *To Be Free and French: Citizenship in France's Atlantic Empire* (2017), and, most recently, with Roger Little, *Louis Joseph Janvier, Une chercheuse: Roman d'un Haïtien* (2021). She has published widely on gender, urban, and legal history in Africa and the African diaspora. Her current book project on Black Bordeaux has been supported by an ACLS Fellowship and NEH Fellowship.

Notes

1. The Invisible Borders Trans-African Project, <https://invisible-borders.com/>.
2. Participants: Borders Within—Bangladesh, <https://bangladesh.borders-within.com/about-borders-within-bangladesh/participants/>.
3. Ugwuede, “Let's Try On New Clothes.”
4. Mbembe, “Afropolitanism,” 27.

5. Samatar, "Toward a Planetary History of Afrofuturism."
6. Coetzee, *Afropolitanism*. The book reprints articles published in a special issue of the *Journal of African Cultural Studies* in 2016. Wawrzinek and Makokha, *Negotiating Afropolitanism*; Ede, "Afropolitan Genealogies." The scholarly references are too numerous to cite, as are popular culture references to the Afropolitan in fashion, music, and design, including the South African fashion magazine *The Afropolitan*.
7. Selasi, "Bye Bye Barbar." The most commonly cited critiques of this vein of Afropolitanism are Emma Dabiri, "Why I Am (Still) Not an Afropolitan," and Grace Musila, "Part-Time Africans."
8. Eze, "We, Afropolitans," 117.
9. Black scholars writing on the African diaspora have been writing global histories well before the "transnational" turn in US history. Kelley, "'But a Local Phase of a World Problem.'" The common reference to a new cosmopolitanism is the work by Kwame Anthony Appiah. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*. For a more direct discussion of Kant and race that broaches new possibilities of the cosmopolitan, see Mills, "Black Radical Kantianism." For a literary discussion of Black cosmopolitanism, see Nwankwo, *Black Cosmopolitanism*.
10. Mirzoeff, *How to See the World*, 5.
11. Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 25.
12. See an example of the arc of Hartman's work, from *Scenes of Subjection* to *Lose Your Mother* to *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.
13. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 11–12. Marisa Fuentes refers to the way enslaved women's lives appear or don't appear in the archives as a form of "mutilated historicity" (*Dispossessed Lives*, 6).
14. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 12.
15. Balakrishnan, "Afropolitanism and the End of Black Nationalism"; Mbembe and Balakrishnan, "Pan-African Legacies."
16. Membe, "Afropolitanism," 28; Eze, "We, Afropolitan," 16.
17. Mbembe and Balakrishnan, "Pan-African Legacies," 31.
18. However, we recognize that neither heteronormative nor queer or transgender sexualities are addressed directly in this issue. On the questions of queer Afropolitan analysis, see Adjepong, *Afropolitan Projects*, and M'Baye, "Afropolitan Sexual and Gender Identities."
19. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*.
20. Meer and Müller, "Considering Intersectionality in Africa."
21. Mohanty, "'Under Western Eyes' Revisited."
22. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*, 130.
23. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion*; Ford, *Liberated Threads*. For a visual example of the aesthetics and politics of Black dress, see Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson's documentary of the 1969 Harlem Cultural Festival, *Summer of Soul (. . . Or, When the Revolution Could Not Be Televised)* (US, 2021).
24. Brachet, *Migrations transsahariennes*.
25. Kobayashi, *Indian Cotton Textiles in West Africa*.
26. Clifford, "Traveling Cultures," 108.
27. For a map of the expanse of locations where people were brought in Africa, the Americas, and Asia, see the overview map from the digital humanities project *Liberated Africans*, <https://liberatedafricans.org/about.php>.
28. Eze, "We, Afropolitans," 117.

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