‘Carpe DM’: Seizing the Afropolitan Day

HLONIPHA MOKOENA

On the west-facing side of Constitution Hill in Johannesburg, a mural by the artist Dada Khanyisa entitled “Afropolitan Tea Party,” completed in 2017, lends character and gravitas to an otherwise nondescript wall. Constitution Hill is the seat of South Africa’s Constitutional Court as well as the former site of the Women’s Gaol and Old Fort, where many anti-apartheid activists (and prisoners of war) were detained without trial. The fact that Khanyisa’s work sits so comfortably outside the country’s highest court is in itself a comment about what the term “Afropolitan” may mean for South Africans who visit the court or drive by the mural. To many, the term is associated with the radio station Kaya FM, which describes itself as the “Home of the Afropolitan.” From this popular perspective, the idea is denuded of its political meaning and is instead associated with celebrity culture.

In its vivid and monumental positioning, the mural presents a group of seven cosmopolitan types of all shades in the middle of taking a conventionally displayed high tea—macarons, petits fours, Swiss rolls, and other confections gorgeously arranged on a three-tiered cake stand. Rendered in Khanyisa’s distinctive cartoon-like style, these Afropolitans are holding cellphones, some busily taking selfies as they partake of their high tea. These smart devices are a recurring theme in Khanyisa’s work—they show the ubiquity of social media and the selfie in the self-definition of urban Africans. In the mural, the figures strike the pose that has come to epitomize the selfie—the bent L-shaped arm with the cellphone cupped in the hand.

Beyond just satirizing the vanity of the subjects, Khanyisa is also drawing comparisons between Afropolitanism and aesthetics. It is as though, in the aftermath of Africa’s liberation and independence movements—and South Africa’s late arrival to the independence pantheon—the utopia of autonomy and self-determination is no longer the only available expression for what it means to be an African. A kingdom of aesthetic diversity has catapulted African artists and writers onto the world stage as icons and embodiments of the Afropolitan moment.

Whereas for an earlier generation the spirit of Africanness would have been visually expressed by an AK-47 and a clenched Black Power fist, for Khanyisa’s generation, being an African is about connectivity and instant messaging. Even in jest, Khanyisa shows awareness that this is a generational question. The pun “Carpe DM”—the title of another work of theirs (the artist’s preferred pronoun)—encapsulates the predicament of what has been called South Africa’s “born free” generation.

Plainly stated, this predicament is about how to shape novel utopias when the very concept of a utopia has been made redundant. By the time apartheid ended in South Africa in the 1990s, the principal ideas that had shaped African liberation movements since the 1950s—African nationalism, Pan-Africanism, Third Worldism—had all been challenged by the reality of post-independence dictatorships and fraternal strife. For these young Africans, there seemed to be only two choices: nostalgia or Afroturism. (The latter is an umbrella concept that covers technology, culture, literature, and the arts, and is characterized by reimagining the planet’s future through black and African eyes. Afropolitanism is often thought of as a version or branch of Afroturism.)

The clash between the philosophical stances of nostalgia and Afropolitanism erupted into a conflagration with the #Fallist movements, namely Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall. These movements began in 2015, when university students demanded free and decolonized education, but also the inclusion of authors like Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko, and Thomas Sankara in their curriculum. The nostalgic iconography resuscitated by the Fallists stands in sharp contrast to what Afropolitanism espouses.

In place of the deceased saints of African thought, Afropolitanism holds up the present-day diaspora African as the epitome of the age. Instead of “roots,” the Afropolitan has crafted a winged
and polyglot existence of impermanent and mercurial identities. Instead of “home,” the Afropolitan has laid claim to the entire globe, and even the galaxy, as the site of Africans’ future and present. Instead of abiding by ideological correctness, the Afropolitan philosophizes with the sickle and the hammer—by being sensitive to global histories of class and exploitation while borrowing Nietzschean ideas to propose the possibility of African or black superheroes. This mix of ideas glimmers with the sheen of cosmopolitan aesthetics.

PART OF THE WORLD

The term “Afropolitan” is often credited to the novelist Taiye Selasi, who declared in a 2005 essay, “We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world.” (Selasi was born in London to Ghanaian-Nigerian parents and grew up in Massachusetts. Her 2013 debut novel, Ghana Must Go, touches on themes of belonging, home, and diaspora.) As an assertion of worldliness and a transcending of borders and bounded identities, the term has been questioned and sometimes rejected by critics who describe it as a mere expression of bourgeois aesthetics.

For our purposes, the term is still useful because it has been taken up by others. To further elucidate its meaning, the South African–based Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe posits: “Afropolitanism refers to a way—the many ways—in which Africans, or people of African origin, understand themselves as being part of the world rather than being apart. . . . Afropolitanism is a name for undertaking a critical reflection on the many ways in which, in fact, there is no world without Africa and there is no Africa that is not part of it.”

In combination, the Selasi and Mbembe definitions captured the mood of the turn of the century, but also posed the question of what comes next for Africa and its diaspora of Afropolitans. The uneasy tension that Afropolitanism creates between politics and aesthetics, ideology and sentiment, is the main reason the idea has not given rise to a new lexicon for young South Africans—except in the arts, where many have adopted what might be termed a worldly sensibility.

Again, this is not exactly a radical departure in African thought. Earlier thinkers took similar positions, notably Léopold Sédar Senghor, the poet who served as the first president of Senegal, and who wrote volubly about what at that time he called “African-Negro Aesthetics.” Rather than attempt to upend Senghor, the modern Afropolitan simply takes it as a given that he or she is the repository or custodian of a historically valid and culturally unique “African civilization,” and that this has imbued the self with a particular “rhythm” that expresses itself artistically. Whether one reads the work of James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Zadie Smith, or even Taiye Selasi, one becomes aware of being in the presence of a deftly deployed cosmopolitan erudition that nonetheless navigates by a compass that points back to Africa. Thus, for example, Smith in her essay “The Shadow of Ideas” explains a sense of uncanny identification in the following terms:

I saw myself as some kind of a decorative Moor, the kind who does not need to wrestle dolphins or anything else, a Moor of leisure, a Moor who lunches, a Moor who needn’t run for her livelihood through the public squares. A historically unprecedented kind of Moor. A late-capitalism Moor. A tourist Moor. The sort of Moor who enters a public square not to protest or to march (or, in an earlier age, to be hanged or sold) but simply to wander about, without purpose. A Moor who has come to look at the art. A Moor who sits on the lip of a fountain and asks herself: “What, if anything, is the purpose of the artist today?” A Moor with the luxury of doing that.

In one stroke, Smith ironically affirms her “Moorish” heritage while registering her awareness of the urgency of the present dilemmas that confront the peripatetic Afropolitan. For Smith, it is the dilemma of being afforded the luxury to ruminate about art while remaining cognizant of the historical reality that in an earlier age, on the very same spot, she would have been sold as someone’s property.

REINVENTED IDENTITIES

In the specific case of South Africa, the Afropolitan moment was announced by (among others) the author and academic Njabulo Ndebele, who called for the “rediscovery of the ordinary” and the rejection of protest literature and its characteristic concern with the spectacle of oppression and resistance. That was in 1984. His essay has been underread, in
part because even at the time it seemed to be calling for the impossible. How could a black South African living through the inferno of apartheid's total onslaught not adopt a voice of indignation?

The other Afropolitan moment that has been ignored is the speech by Nelson Mandela, who had just been inaugurated as president, at the opening of the first democratically elected Parliament on May 24, 1994. Mandela read an English translation of a poem written in Afrikaans by Ingrid Jonker (1933–65), “Die Kind” (The Child). The poem was originally written as a protest against the Sharpeville massacre on March 21, 1960, when police killed 69 people and wounded many others at an anti-apartheid demonstration in a township south of Johannesburg. The last stanza of the poem reads:

The child is the dark shadow of the soldiers on guard with rifles Saracens and batons the child is present at all assemblies and law-givings the child peers through the windows of houses and into the hearts of mothers this child who just wanted to play in the sun at Nyanga is everywhere the child grown to a man treks through all Africa the child grown into a giant journeys through the whole world Without a pass.

This journeying through the world—whether in actuality or creatively—is what constitutes Afropolitanism as both a historically unprecedented (to use Zadie Smith's formulation) and a radically transgressive mode of being an “African.” Whether one regards it as the opposite or even as the negation of Pan-Africanism partly depends on one's understanding of what the latter term refers to. If one expects Pan-Africanism to address only the “unification” of the African continent and the eradication of colonial borders, then the two ideas will eventually diverge. But if one understands Pan-Africanism as a signifier of all the possibilities of reinvented and reinvigorated diasporic and black identities, then there is space for Afropolitanism in Pan-Africanism and vice versa.

In a different time and under different circumstances, the Martinican author and Negritude philosopher Jane Nardal proposed exactly such a fusion when she coined the term “black internationalism” (in an essay published in 1928) to describe a movement animated by a “turning back toward Africa.” In its simplest form, Afropolitanism is simply another term for the black internationalism to which writers and thinkers such as Nardal, Baldwin, Jonker, Morrison, Ndebele, Smith, and others have given voice under different guises.