

BOOK REVIEW

Anima Adjepong. *Afropolitan Projects: Redefining Blackness, Sexualities, and Culture from Houston to Accra*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021. 201pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. £94. Cloth. ISBN: 9781469665184.

Ever since Taiye Selasi popularized the term “Afropolitan” in her widely disseminated essay “Bye-bye Babar” in 2005, the debate for or against the politics of the term and its game-changing potential has never really come to any conclusion. Perhaps that goes to show, almost a quarter of a century after Selasi’s unravelling of the multiply-rooted identity of the Afropolitan, that there are still things beyond quick dismissals or facile celebrations to discover about the disputed appellation. Anima Adjepong’s take on what she calls “Afropolitan projects” is a good example of that, even if a more solid definition of what qualifies as project would have been helpful. Still, the book is a fine illustration of how Afropolitan debates and scholarly work of the current moment are anxious to combine global(ized) articulations of African sensibilities with local manifestations of how they unfold in real-life terms. If Selasi’s project in 2005 was to “complicate” the idea of Africa and what it means to be African, then Adjepong’s 2021 project advances significantly on that initial goal because it succeeds, as it were, in complicating the term “Afropolitan” itself. Indeed, Adjepong complicates the term far beyond the stale binary of for or against. In a timely gesture to incorporate the lived lives of a diverse selection of interlocutors from Houston to Accra into sociological analysis, Adjepong takes measure of their quotidian practices and observes and queries their everyday lives in illuminating detail. “Afropolitan” remains a highly contested term, and the book never loses sight of how and why this is so, as it remains mindful that Afropolitan ideas attract mainly class-privileged and globally itinerant Africans. Yet, at the same time, Adjepong thinks favorably about how Afropolitan projects have been instrumental in debunking negative stereotypes and presumptions about Africa and Africans. Adjepong’s lively prose, fusing the academic and the conversational, engages the reader, who in just six chapters shifting between Houston and Accra comes to appreciate that to be Afropolitan can involve conservative, elitist, and exclusive politics just as it can involve radical, democratizing, and inclusive ones. Adjepong’s subtle study does not want to engage in a polarized debate; to explore, disseminate and be reflective, also about possible idiosyncrasies, turns out to be far more constructive.

This book deserves credit for many reasons, but three deserve particular mention. First of all, its transatlantic scope in fact challenges the assumption that “Afropolitan” is descriptive of a migrant or diaspora identity associated with an irreversible exit from Africa and passage into the West. Not here. Many Afropolitans in the West, like many of Adjepong’s interlocutors, do return to Africa

and resettle, or perform multiple journeys in and out of Africa. This calls into question the conventional conception of diaspora that takes the impossibility of return for granted and, moreover, the book's interest in intercontinental African migration validates the point that Afropolitan projects in Africa are not dependent on the assistance of the West or of returnees to thrive. Adjepong appears to make a move toward redrawing the territorial and conceptual maps that shape Afropolitan thinking. The concrete examples drawn from the interlocutors (although not all of them identify as Afropolitan) substantiate such a move.

Second, Adjepong's critical intervention to interlink the term Afropolitan with the established theoretical ideas inherent to the postcolonial, the black diaspora, and the Black Atlantic is intriguing. The proposed cross-fertilization would, it is argued, highlight Africa as a vibrant, modern, contemporary continent. Where the black diaspora still grapples with the irretrievable loss of former or ancestral homeland while the Black Atlantic, despite its focus on the dialectics of ruptures and continuities, tends to freeze Africa in historical time and space, Adjepong's intervention makes it possible to understand Africa in new ways, and also actually, as a diasporic domain of trans-African migrations.

And third, Adjepong's study most convincingly plows new ground in its uncovering of an unfortunate bias in Afropolitan responses to sexual rights and liberties. The interlocutors seem to confirm that bias. The Houston Ghanaians, for example, have adopted Christianity and its community of belonging as a levelling Afropolitan project that grants them a space within the nation whereby they can be, simultaneously, both citizens of America and Africans of the world. However, this conservative yet class-levelling Afropolitan project is unwilling to include, let alone address, the concerns of those whose sexuality does not conform with conventional Christian norms. Compulsory heterosexuality (Adjepong's term) thus emphatically sabotages the otherwise empowering drive inherent in the Houston project. The lively and progressive vibe of class-privileged Ghanaians in Accra, as also evidenced by the worldly outlook of the interlocutors, is another troubled case in point. Here, queer sexualities remain critically unaddressed and without a supportive lobby. The tacit acceptance that queerness conflicts with heterosexual normativity is explained away with the argument that sexuality belongs in the private sphere. In Adjepong's analysis, however, it is symptomatic of how difficult it is to overcome the homophobia inherent in African patriarchal culture and so, otherwise inclusive Afropolitan projects in Accra also neglect the urgent task of openly promoting sexual freedom and combatting violence against the LGBTQ+ community. Does it take a diasporic Ghanaian sociologist who identifies as queer to push for awareness and recognition of this unacceptable bias? Not necessarily, but it does make a difference to know exactly where one finds unfinished business in need of serious Afropolitan inquiry and self-introspection. Kudos to Adjepong for making the call.

Eva Rask Knudsen 

University of Copenhagen Copenhagen, Denmark

erask@hum.ku.dk

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