

Royston, Reginold A. (forthcoming in 2016) "At Home, Online: Affective Exchange and the Diasporic Body in Ghanaian Internet Video." in *Migrating the Black Body: Visual Culture and Diaspora*. Raphael-Fernandez, H. and L. Raiford eds. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

At Home, Online:

Affective Exchange and the Diasporic Body in Ghanaian Internet Video

Reginold A. Royston

Abridged version, please contact author for full paper, citation.

Introduction

In the YouTube series *An African City*, the main protagonist, Nana Yaa, narrates her transition from life as a publicist in New York City to her homeland Ghana, in voice-overs reminiscent of Sarah Jessica Parker's character Carrie in the HBO series *Sex and the City*. In an episode titled, "He Facebooked Me",¹ Nana gives an exposition on Africa's contemporary "rise," against the backdrop of chaotic street scenes and fervent construction projects in the capital city Accra:

According to *The Economist*, Africa is the next frontier in ICT [Information and Communications Technology].² According to *The Financial Times*, technology is driving Africa's transformation. According to the publication, *African Renewal*, Africans are coupling their already extensive use of cell phones with a massive interest in social media. According to the experience of five African women, this may not be such a good thing.³

Consisting of 10-minute "Webisodes," the short-format, dramedy chronicles the rocky homecoming and romantic follies of a group of globe-trotting "returnees" — a vernacular term referencing those Africans who were born or schooled in the West and are now seizing opportunities back on the continent. Nana Yaa, has left the corporate world to make things anew

in Ghana, where her parents enjoy comfortable lives as business and government elites. At the outset of this particular episode, the homeland-migrant has just received a Facebook message from her U.K.-bred ex-boyfriend, stating that he is now engaged to a “local” Ghanaian woman, whom we find out later speaks perfect Ashanti/Twi, unlike Nana who grew up in the U.S.

Much of the lives depicted in *An African City* reflect the real world experiences of the actors and show’s producers. Nicole Amarteifio, the writer and director, attended Brandeis and Georgetown universities in the U.S. and worked as a social media coordinator at the World Bank. Maame Yaa Boafo, the actress who plays the returnee Nana Yaa, is a Ghanaian-American, who has never lived in Ghana.⁴ Both a reflection and a product of what online is often hashtagged as #TINA, (This Is the New Africa), *An African City* revels in the newfound chic discourse about Africa in media broadly, stoked in part by foreign wonder over a cell phone “explosion” in this part of the developing world, as well as economic and arguably some political success stories coming out of Ghana, Nigeria, Cote D’Ivoire, Kenya, and South Africa in the first decade of the new millennium.

This narrative of success abroad, triumphant return, and cultural solidarity among a millennial generation of African transnationals has coalesced around the term Afropolitanism, introduced by writer Taiye Selasi, philosopher Achille Mbembe and others.⁵ Competing views on this African modernity and its entanglement with globalization have simultaneously embraced and excoriated the Afropolitan concept. I deploy the notion here in order to mark its encroachment into popular discourse and to highlight the multivalent lifestyles that the “experience” conjures up, and some which have often been ignored in the critique.⁶ Emerging digital media such as *An African City* embrace a reading of African cosmopolitanism that is wrapped in glamour and fashion. In contrast, another Web series I discuss below, *Azonto in Real*

Life (ARL), invokes a populist experience of this transnationalism, as it is ensconced in mass-cultural phenomena such as *hiplife* music. This digitally-enabled cultural flow finds analogous expression via film, international beauty contests, and evangelical ministry among Africans abroad. These practices, not solely enraptured with a discourse of glamour, could be described as *Afropolitanism from below*, though the audience for these media often cut across class divisions. But beyond the overlapping claims of identity, nationalism and class that are embedded in this emerging cyberculture, I seek to highlight the ways the Black body is deployed as an indispensable tool in this contemporary politics of representation, especially in the facilitation of a global political imaginary around the nation-state, in this case Ghana. Internet video, though a privilege of networked geography and “early-adopters,” allows producers and participants to engage in what I term *affective exchange* that is, at its most robust experience, an embodied diasporic practice that produces “real-time” sociality.

The Afropolitan Mediascape

The YouTube homepage for “Africa’s first Web series” states: “*An African City [AAC]* tells the story of five successful women who confide in one another about their love-lives and find new ways to deal with being a 21st century woman in Africa.”⁷ This confluence around techno-utopianism and Afro-optimism is not simply born out of frustration of Africa’s marginalization in the *longue duree* of technological and economic development.⁸ The continent has been experiencing an upsurge of commercial and political interest in the past fifteen years. Ghana’s gross domestic product in 2011 (15 percent) and 2012 (8 percent) was projected to grow faster than any other country’s GDP in the world, with Nigeria also being a top-ten growth country in those same years.⁹ The World Bank has re-classified nations such as Kenya and

Ethiopia from “developing” to “middle-income” economies in the last three years, signaling an emerging African “middle class.”¹⁰ China and India have partnered to build dams and ICT centers in Ghana; Arab states have invested in agricultural projects in Eastern Africa, with Qatar lending millions to build a port in Kenya.

An African City's introductory narrative suggests that technology is also key to this discourse of an “Africa rising.” Africa has been the fastest growing market for mobile phones since the mid-2000s, and currently boasts more than 600 million mobile subscriptions up from 250 million in 2008.¹¹ Vernacular tech practices also abound, such as with Kenya's M-Pesa application, an immensely successful text-message money transfer service.¹² In the rhetoric of the “rise,” African nationals who have returned home to set-up businesses and re-establish roots are especially significant, in part due to African transnationals gaining more visibility in Western popular culture, academia, and business. This phenomenon magnifies an exceptionalist narrative, beginning, perhaps most dramatically, with the election of U.S. President Barack Obama, son of a Kenyan émigré — a fact often cited by online bloggers who herald a new Afro-Cosmopolitanism. The discourse conflates the growing popularity of global Black celebrities such as actors Lupita Nyong'o and David Oyewole, soccer players Asamoah Gyan and Kevin-Prince Boateng, and designer Ozwald Boateng, among many others, with economic and political stabilization in Africa itself. In *An African City*, this is played out as a drama of the “arrived,” with Nigerians, Tanzanians, Angolans, Sierra Leoneans, Black Americans, and Brits dropping into the series with similar backstories of professional success in the West and a desire to return home. Since 2013, however, rising inflation and an energy crisis in Ghana, and torrential elections and violence from militants in Nigeria and Kenya have cooled this discourse, with *The Guardian* among others now disputing the efficacy of a yet another “African Renaissance.”¹³

What follows is an examination of a cyberculture that can be properly classified as Afropolitan, though the label can also be applied to the emerging heterogeneous media of digital practices, organizations and tech policies taking shape on the continent. Anthropologist Arjun Appaduari has described the intersecting institutions and consumptive practices of media as not simply constitutive of one kind of public sphere, but rather a *mediascape* of sociocultural flow. According to Appaduari, this space is inherently multivalent, uneven, and particularistic given the asymmetry of global capital and distribution of technology. He states that in such an information environment, "... many audiences throughout the world experience the media themselves as a complicated and interconnected repertoire of print, celluloid, electronic screens and billboards."¹⁴ Media scholar Okoth Fred Mudhai has describes Africa-based media organizations as central to this particular mediascape, especially in broadcast and Web forums on the continent, given the geographic disjunctiveness of the audiences, languages and borders.¹⁵ His notion of an African mediascape speaks to the enduring socio-political imaginations of Pan Africanism. This serves as an important departure for what can now be experienced as a global continuum of African media practices that, like the Afropolitans, are "global in focus" and "rooted in Africa," In the transnational productions I discuss below, the Afropolitan adage can also be flipped, with the media sources themselves "focused" on Africa, though their production headquarters may be based anywhere, particularly in diaspora.

Ghanaian radio stations CitiFM and JoyFM are but a few examples: They broadcast multiple feeds online, and repost morning shows to YouTube. At a different scale, media firms such as South Africa's Multichoice cable network provide television feeds to viewers throughout the continent, including channels and movies in local languages such as Hausa, Twi, and Yoruba.¹⁶ Internet service providers such as MTN (South Africa) and GLO (Nigeria) with

network service in multiple African markets, configure a digital infrastructure that bridges both fiber-optic and cellular networked publics. These same firms are now also providing YouTube programming and sponsorship of live events, extending their brands and linking their users. GhanaWeb, a popular news site and online exchange for diasporans, is based in The Netherlands and reports that most traffic originates from the U.S. or Europe.¹⁷ In Accra, radio stations and television VJs group music from South Africa, Cote D'Ivoire, Senegal, Kenya, Liberia, as well as the U.S. and the United Kingdom in the same programming. As such, this contemporary media flow is reflective more broadly of what I would term an *Afropolitan mediascape* — a global media ecosystem and set of practices with a collectivizing discourse on Africa.

While variously neoliberal and Pan-African in character, online filmic interventions such as *AAC* and *Azonto in Real Life* do more than work at the representational level. These productions also provide what feminist scholar bell hooks describes as an “oppositional gaze,” in this case, directed against the common portrayal of Africa as historically backwards.¹⁸ That legacy includes “White savior” flicks such as *Blood Diamond* (2006) and *The Constant Gardener* (2005). As visual narratives, these epics find affinity with British colonial cinema in Nigeria and India during the 1930s. Media scholar Brian Larkin describes the practices of publically showing of imperial news reels as an effort to produce “...a particular sort of modern colonial subject. Technologically adept, forward thinking, mutable, this subject was formed by the criss-crossing of new communication networks.”¹⁹ Against this history, these Web shorts inject an oppositional practice of representation, via small-scale, user-generated content, deploying networking and high-definition cameras to recognize and produce new exemplars of African modernity.

It would be easy to analyze diverse media forms from across the continent (including hybrid technologies such as global television channels, transnational blogs and online radio, etc.) as objects that make information flow “horizontal.”²⁰ However, the multivalent and unequal distribution of these technologies reflects enduring urban-rural, religious, linguistic, political, infrastructural, and economic divides in Africa, that produce fragmented experiences rather than seamless webs of connection. Only 17 percent of the African continent has consistent access to the Web.²¹ While mobile penetration officially number at 100 percent in some countries, as of 2015, only 20 percent of these users have smartphones with robust interactive and streaming apps that enable video-based cyberculture.²² If the continent’s digitization has only transformed elite and professional usage, Africa’s communities in the West have had access to a different Internet. Country-wide average download speeds in the U.S. and Europe typically figure at 50 Mbps and above.²³ Cost for landline Internet (as a percentage of annual income), is also comparatively much cheaper in Europe and the U.S. Broadband for mobile devices (faster than 3 Mbps download speed), while pricier, is nearly ubiquitous in the West. Africa’s “new” diasporas of the late-twentieth century, living in Europe and the U.S., have benefited tremendously in the Internet Age, eliding the disjunctive global flows that marked diaspora engagement prior to the 1990s. In many ways “real-time” sociality of the Internet age, where it is available, has overcome the boundaries of “life-abroad,” specifically the time lag that Léopold Senghor and later Brent Hayes Edwards describe as a condition of *décalage*, i.e. a fragmented chronoscape between migrants, the homeland, and the broader African diaspora.²⁴ According to the ITU and Internet sea-cable mapping service Telegeography, the majority of global Internet bandwidth and traffic is facilitated by underwater fiber-optic cables linking Europe and North America.²⁵ In the case of Africa’s digital diasporas, this West-facing structure provides not

simply a benefit for banks and dominant conglomerates such as Verizon and Airtel, but also for Africa's online communities, social networks of ex-patriots and children of immigrants living abroad.²⁶ As narratives of the twenty-first-century African, projects such as *An African City* and *Azonto in Real Life* are in the minority of digital practices emanating from the continent and its diaspora, but they also represent a rising tide of "early adopters," advancing digital cultural production for the Global South.²⁷

The Diasporic Body and the Returnee's Gaze

What's striking, however, is that while shows like *AAC* and *ARL* reaffirm the imagined community of Ghana's national identity, the projects are not framed as diasporic or the diasporic experience. Instead, these cosmopolitans in their content, presentation and subject matter, reflect a desire to be seen as part of a national discussion of belonging, rather than foregrounding life-abroad: The use of terms such as "African," "Ghanaian," "Nigerian," and "West African" in many ways stands in for discourse that is diasporic in nature, forgoing serious discussion of ethnicity ("tribalism"), region, religion, and party politics that are key to shared identities in the homeland. These digital actors are participating in what seems like a national discourse on the surface. However, given their geographic position, modes of exchange, and access via the West, their concerns and discourse can reasonably be critiqued as those of the diaspora. In these digital spaces, the global connection and social imaginary of Ghana, Nigeria, and Africa in general can often be routed through diaspora rather than nation-based networks.

In the analysis and theorizing below, I examine different approaches towards claiming both cosmopolitan agency and connection with the homeland by these two recent exemplars of diasporic Internet video from Ghana. The two Web programs, *An African City* and *Azonto in*

Real Life also share approaches towards digital embodiment that go beyond visual representations. In these ventures, the Black body can be seen as a tool of representation for diaspora-homeland connections, a signifier of the unity of diasporic and homeland media publics, and through reenactments and performances (especially via dance), it is a physical site of cultural production and identity construction. New Media — the digital technologies of the Internet Age, with the affordances of user-generated broad- and narrow-streaming of information, and of linked tools for sociality, creativity and surveillance — seem an undisputable enabler of these reflexive transnational ties. For political theorist Benedict Anderson, the “imagined community,” central to a nation’s identity, is the product of the media apparatus of the state and the narratives of belonging it facilitates within its polity.²⁸ These visual projects go beyond the discourse of diaspora-homeland media, conjoining the dispersed and grounded notions of a national imaginary that is also global.

In May 2014, *An African City* premiered on YouTube primarily promoted through viral marketing, and later a strong media push. Print and blog reviews appeared in outlets such as *The (U.K.) Guardian*, *Ebony* magazine, and a host of influential Africana-centered sites such as *Shadow and Act*, and *Bella Naija*. As a returnee-centered drama, the series is striking in its stylization: The kind of African women portrayed are not just full-bodied “strong black women,”²⁹ but independent, sexually confident, and vocal in attempting to untether themselves from deep cultural obligations, and contemporary social mores of religion, graft, patronage, and respectability that is part of the social terrain of urban Accra.³⁰ The dialog renders an undeniably African transnational life, with complaints about generators, importing cars (and vibrators), relations with house-help (servants), trips to sparkling new malls, the shabbiness of the international airport, traffic on one of the many dusty roundabouts, finding a job, going on dates

just to get an apartment, abstinence vs. indulgence, sex without condoms, and boyfriends with questionable hygiene.

The setting of the series is significant in that Accra is not simply the capital of Ghana, but historically, one of the first such Pan-African hubs for entertainment, labor, and most importantly, political foment. The country's first president Kwame Nkrumah hosted future African and Caribbean presidential leaders and Black American luminaries such as Richard Wright in the years immediately following independence in 1957. W.E.B. Du Bois was buried there in 1963. His wife Shirley Graham Du Bois would help establish the nation's first public broadcasting service.³¹

AAC is framed as an antidote to the typical images of children with distended bellies, violence over coltan and oil, and perennial corruption. Instead, Nana Yaa and her cadre of Afropolitan professionals are adorned in boutique trends from diaspora and homeland designers. In Accra, they share laughs, cocktails and spend lazy afternoons in the over-white gleam of a striving urbanite's marble-tiled condominium. A document in contemporary African visual splendor, *AAC* shows the protagonists on dates at miniature golf courses, and at all-girl pool sessions at exclusive hotels. Describing the show in an interview, the director Nicole Amarteifio, specifically identified a gendered intervention in the enterprise: “[T]his could be a moment to change the narrative of the African woman. The African woman does not always have to be the face of an anti-poverty campaign. Rather, she can be the face of everything beautiful, trendy and modern.”³²

The style of the show attempts to powerfully encode a new visual realism in African cinema. Ghana and Nigeria's local film industries, called “Ghallywood” and “Nollywood,” respectively, are typically strong on story nuance, interpersonal drama, and cultural reference.

With key exceptions such as Leila Afua Djansi's *Sinking Sands*, these films suffer in cinematography and other aspects of production, in-part due to their quick turnaround times.³³ While not always precise, *African City*'s videography consistently is produced with warm, golden lighting, rendering the subjects in great detail and emotional richness with close-up shots. This is a vital innovation in the cinema-photographic canon, given the film industry's long history of configuring dark skin as a problem. Richard Dyer's historical work on photography and racism, most notably "Lighting for Whiteness" (1997), describes a technological and ideologically driven quest on the part of film developers and mass-market firms such as Kodak to prioritize the perfection and reproduction of Whiteness, often making white skin appear to be lighter than the actual White models. Instruction manuals and training techniques expressly described ways to calibrate film and cameras using such terms as "normal," "preferred," and "pleasing" in the discussion of White flesh.³⁴ *An African City*'s visual fidelity is in part due to what seems the extensive use of high definition (HD) cameras, technology which has become more ubiquitous and affordable, as well as a budding film aesthetic pursued by filmmakers such as Biyi Bandele (director of the film version of *Half of a Yellow Sun*) and Andrew Dosunmu (*Mother of George*).

The body, as a narrative tool, figures in other ways as well, make-up and fashion for instance. While the materialist dimensions of the fashion industry chiefly consists of styling around make-up, jewelry and fabrics, the central tool in the fashion designers' kit is the model herself — the bodies of the actresses serve as a canvas for the art. Amarteifio takes such similar care across all 10 episodes to portray Nana Yaa as an ordinary and yet naturally beautiful subject, filming her in mundane shots as walking across broken pavement, stopping to adjust, then abandoning high-heeled shoes stuck in a rut. Group mid-shots capture her young crew from

head-to-toe in crisp, iridescent dresses and sculpted hair. They sparkle in the warm light of an exclusive restaurant. Even the less-glamourized scenes, for instance shots of the protagonist's sweat-patched armpits as she navigates local bureaucracy, attempt to humanize Nana Yaa without making her base or transgressive.

Amarteifio's vision then is in many ways the outcome of an Afropolitan gaze, producing iconography and cinematic signs that read beauty, humanism, and glamour onto subjects typically rendered diseased, abject and dangerous, especially in comparison to what the anti-colonial philosopher and activist Frantz Fanon would describe as the "epidermis" of Western civilization.³⁵ This Afropolitan gaze is hardly an even-handed practice, however. In *An African City*, a chief source of comic-relief is the dullness of the homeland population: In one episode, a gateman's stunted English and out-classed desire for one of the young women is the butt of a joke. Slimy real estate agents and government officials are poorly lit. Their parochial fashion sense and lack of charm is the basis of revulsion, and cinematic flatness. A scruffy-faced postman is duped into believing a dildo is a backscratcher. While there are other more equal encounters, the inequities between the educated, cultured traveler and the "locals" of the homeland are on main display: The stars of the show receive the best visual treatment, pathos, and sympathy, while everyday Ghanaians are portrayed less than favorably at times, and certainly less glamorously. In the "Facebook" episode discussed earlier, the camera shoots back and forth between energetic close-ups of the returnees engaged in debate. The camera eventually pans out to a mid-shot to reveal a dour waitress, restlessly standing next to the table awaiting orders. Her russet brown flesh is without make-up, and she remains unremarkable during her brief moment on screen.

⁵ Taiye Selasi, "Bye-Bye Babar," *The LIP Magazine*, March 3, 2005,

<http://thelip.robertsharp.co.uk/?p=76>; Achille Mbembe, "Afropolitanism," in *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, ed. Njami Simon and Lucy Durán (Johannesburg, South Africa: Jacana Media, 2007); Afropolitan as a term has also been embraced by transnational Ghanaian artists such as Blitz the Ambassador, and Derrick N. Ashong, whom the author has interviewed about this subject.

⁶ See discussion and references in Emma Dabiri, "Why I'm Not An Afropolitan," Africa is a Country [blog], January 21, 2014, <http://africasacountry.com/2014/01/why-im-not-an-afropolitan/>;

⁷ Amarteifio, "He Facebooked Me."

⁸ Ebere Onwudiwe and Minabere Ibelema, *Afro-Optimism: Perspectives on Africa's Advances* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003).

⁹ World Bank, "Ghana: World Development Indicators: 2014," World Bank Publishers; United States Department of State, 2011. Bureau of African Affairs, "Background Notes: Ghana: Economy," <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2860.htm#history>, accessed Sept. 23, 2011; "Africa Rising," *The Economist*.

¹⁰ World Bank, "Ghana," 2014.

¹¹ GSMA, *Sub-Saharan Africa Mobile Economy 2013* (Groupe Speciale Mobile, 2014); M. Rao, *Mobile Africa Report 2011: Regional Hubs of Excellence* (Mobile Monday,) http://www.mobilemonday.net/reports/MobileAfrica_2011.pdf.; accessed November 1, 2011.

¹² Erik Hersman, "Mobilizing Tech Entrepreneurs in Africa (Innovations Case Narrative: iHub)," *Innovations: Technology, Governance, Globalization* 7.4 (October 1, 2012): 59–67, DOI:10.1162/INOV_a_00152.

¹³ Bruce Gilley, “The End of the African Renaissance,” *The Washington Quarterly*, October 2010. Accessed at DOI: 10.1080/0163660X.2010.516612, September 01, 2014; Jostein Hauge, “Africa’s Economic ‘Rise’ Does Not Reflect Reality,” *The Guardian*, accessed January 22, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2014/sep/03/africa-economic-rise-does-not-reflect-reality>.

¹⁴ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 35.

¹⁵ Okoth Fred Mudhai, Wisdom Tettey, and Fackson Banda, *African Media and the Digital Public Sphere* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

¹⁶ Sean Jacobs (Africa is a Country blog) “Shifting African Digital Landscapes,” London School of Economics and Political Science. Accessed March 18, 2015 at <http://www.lse.ac.uk/publicEvents/events/2015/03/20150317t1830vNT.aspx>,

¹⁷ Roberto Bezzicheri, CEO GhanaWeb, personal interview (October 2013).

¹⁸ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992)

¹⁹ Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

²⁰ Dalberg Research, *Impact of the Internet in Africa*, 2013, http://www.impactoftheinternet.com/pdf/Dalberg_Impact_of_Internet_Africa_Full-Report_13Apr2013_vENG-Final.pdf; “Measuring the Information Society” (Geneva, Switzerland: International Telecommunications Union, 2014), https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/publications/mis2014/MIS2014_without_Annex_4.pdf.

²¹ *Measuring the Information Society*, 2014.