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Afropolitan projects: African immigrant identities and solidarities in the United States

Anima Adjepong

Department of Sociology, The University of Texas, Austin, USA


ABSTRACT

This article explores how Africans born or raised in the United States employ ethnicity to understand their racial and cultural identities. I argue that African immigrants engage positive narratives about Africa along with their experiences of anti-black racism to articulate identities as “Africans of the world”. I call this articulation of identity Afropolitan projects. The Afropolitan as an ethnicity is not meant to shield Africans from anti-black racism, but instead helps articulate a particular relationship to this form of inequality. The following analysis derives from a qualitative case study of a voluntary association comprising Ghanaians primarily raised in the United States. I find that the group’s identity is as much about being black, African, and American as it is about being middle-class, Christian, and heterosexual. Through their Afropolitan projects, this group emphasizes solidarities with a global middle-class heterosexual patriarchy while foreclosing solidarities with working class, queer, and other people of colour.

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Popularized by novelist Taiye Selasi’s (2005) essay “Bye-bye Babar”, “Afropolitan” refers to people who were either born or raised in the West but maintain affective and physical ties to Africa. The Afropolitan is a contested identity. Some scholars argue that the “Afropolitan” rejects African identities as victimized and offer a cultural and aesthetic space in which an already hybrid, modern, transnational African sense of self can thrive (Mbembe 2007; Gikandi 2010; Eze 2014). Others have criticized what they perceive as a crude cultural commodification of the identity (Bosch 2016); the way it elides economic, social, and political inequalities that many on the continent still face; its marginalizing of working-class African immigrants without the cultural capital to attain Afropolitan status (Dabiri 2016; Ede 2016; Musila 2016); and its advancing of anti-black, postracial discourse (Sterling 2015). Others still express ambivalence about the Afropolitan, arguing that this

CONTACT Anima Adjepong  adjepong@utexas.edu

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identity makes possible an important challenge to the dominance of Western identities as the marker of modernity (Eze 2016; Pahl 2016). Debates around the meanings of Afropolitan highlight the important contestations and manoeuvrings of contemporary Africans in articulating an identity and a place in a global world order.

This article draws on pop-cultural meanings attached to an Afropolitan identity in order to examine how a voluntary organization comprising primarily U.S.-raised Ghanaian immigrants position themselves as “Africans of the world”.¹ The Afropolitan as an identity is still emerging. However, its meanings exceed the intentional use of the term. As “Afropolitan” is increasingly projected to a broader audience, it tends to hail middle-class Africans living outside of the continent (Ede 2016; Pahl 2016). In this article, I identify efforts to formulate an identity as “Africans of the world” as an *Afropolitan project*. Such a project is a group effort to convey a particular African sense of self in conversation with other selves. Eze (2014) describes the Afropolitan as a “cultural face” of the cosmopolitan that is rooted in an African historical experience of colonialism (see also Pahl 2016). I posit the Afropolitan as a black ethnicity (Hall 1991, 1996) noting that those who identify with the term sometimes make claims to being black in particular cultural, historical, and social ways.

Not all Afropolitan projects are the same. However, they are all concerned with advancing a modern non-victimized narrative about Africa. This paper focuses on one specific instantiation of Afropolitan projects. The following case study finds that the Afropolitan projects of one voluntary association involves ways of belonging as black, Americans, Ghanaians, Africans, middle-class, and heterosexual people, along with a range of other discordant identities. I argue that collating these different axes of belonging involves a fusion of already hybrid identities, that have the potential to destabilize the fixity of particular identities such as African or black, thereby allowing for solidarity to emerge across differences (Hooker 2009; Mignolo 2011; Eze 2014; Pahl 2016). And yet, as critics who consider the Afropolitan an elitist identity have shown, these projects can also reinforce oppressive modes of belonging and as such marginalize other people (Dabiri 2016; Ede 2016; see also Anthias 2001).

While the Afropolitan has been examined as a cultural phenomenon in online spaces and commodity cultures (Eze 2014; Ede 2016; Pahl 2016), how people engage with these practices in their everyday daily lives has not received much attention. This research considers the Afropolitan projects of Ghanaian immigrants in order to illustrate the complicated ways this group deploys new narratives about Africa to articulate their identities. Positing the Afropolitan as a black ethnicity asks us to reconsider the idea that immigrants of colour use ethnicity as a distancing mechanism (Waters 1994, 1999; Treitler 2013). Instead, considering the Afropolitan as an ethnicity sheds light on how

Afropolitan projects make possible and/or foreclose different solidarities. Below I outline the key debates about black immigrants, ethnicity, racialization, and black identities and describe my qualitative methods and case study. My findings discuss how Afropolitan projects can simultaneously create new ways of belonging for Africans as black middle-class people in a modern world, while excluding other Africans, black, working class, and queer people from this narrative. I conclude by outlining the potentials and pitfalls of a dominant Afropolitan project concerned with middle-class heterosexual respectability.

Ethnicity, diaspora, and Africans in U.S. immigration studies

Large numbers of Africans began migrating to North America following their countries' independence beginning in the mid-1950s, to pursue higher education and with the intention of returning (Takougang 2003; Arthur, Takougang, and Owusu 2012). However, increasingly, Africans are moving to North America to stay (Takougang 2003; Konadu-Agyeman, Takyi, and Arthur 2006; Takougang and Tidjani 2009). Between 2000 and 2009, the percentage of black Africans migrating to the United States increased by eighty-eight per cent (McCabe 2011; Capps, McCabe, and Fix 2012). Recent scholarship on African immigration to the United States offers insights into how these diverse communities navigate the complex racial, economic, political, and social terrains of their lives (Alex-Assensoh 2009; Arthur 2009, 2010, 2012; Okpewho and Nzegwu 2009; Halter and Johnson 2014). Others have examined educational status and employment opportunities for African immigrants, noting that although Africans have the highest level of educational attainment compared to other migrant groups, they are still amongst the lowest earners (Dodoo and Takyi 2002; Nesbitt 2002; Capps, McCabe, and Fix 2012). Additionally, studies have examined the settlement patterns of African immigrants in North America, showing that although African immigrants are increasingly moving into suburbs, they remain in neighbourhoods that are distanced from white Americans (Freeman 2002; Takougang and Tidjani 2009; Vang 2012). The aforementioned studies contribute to the limited knowledge we have in the social sciences about this fast-growing immigrant population in North America.

Contemporary studies about African immigrants in North America often rely on U.S. American "ethnicity paradigms" in making sense of these black immigrants' place in the United States (Pierre 2004; Steinberg 2007; Taylor 2013; Omi and Winant 2014). Ethnicity paradigms conflate race, which involves categorizing people based on a supposed immutable "unity of physical, mental, personality, and cultural traits" (Montagu 1997, 52) with culture, which includes attitudes and beliefs, religion, language, and group identification. Substituting race with ethnicity sustains assimilation as a teleological

prophecy for immigrants, while at the same time marking some immigrants (and other Americans) as beyond the “melting pot” (Pierre 2004; Spickard 2007; Treitler 2015).

Claims to ethnicity as resistance against racism constitute ethnic projects (Treitler 2013). Ethnic projects are social actions groups undertake to “foster a perception of themselves as ‘different’ from the bottom and ‘similar’ to the top of the racial hierarchy” (Treitler 2013, 4). Within a U.S. American context, these projects produce “ethnic winners and losers” who arrange themselves into a racial hierarchy anchored at the top and bottom by white and black respectively, and organized by ethnicity. Treitler (2013) identifies the ethnic projects of black immigrants as struggling because although they work to distinguish themselves from native-born American blacks, they are not successful at approximating whiteness. Likewise, failed ethnic projects are those undertaken by black Americans including the children of black immigrants who eventually become indistinguishable from other black people. Ethnic projects offer important ways of thinking through historical configurations of racial belonging in the United States. Importantly, Treitler’s (2013, 2015) theorizing about ethnic projects highlights the ways in which ethnicity and race can be mutually reinforcing concepts within U.S. immigration literature (see also Brown and Jones 2015).

However, identifying the ethnic projects of black immigrants and black Americans as failures discounts the important ways that black people are challenging dominant negative conceptions about blackness as well as articulating the diversity of their black experiences. Likewise, dismissing black ethnicities as a way of distancing black immigrants from U.S. blacks cedes ethnicity to permanent colonization by racist discourses (Hall 1996, 447). Hall’s (1991, 1996) theorizing about ethnicity as a contested term is helpful in this regard. He argues that although ethnicity has been deployed as a way to disavow the realities of racism, the term also “acknowledges the place of history, language, and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity” (Hall 1996, 447). Identifying “black” as a political, historical, and cultural category that comes into being in response to different repressive regimes including but not limited to colonization and slavery destabilizes black as a fixed set of practices and/or experiences and allows for understanding “‘Blackness’ as a unity of diversity” (Hall 1991; Wright 2004, 6). Likewise, Wright’s (2015) analysis of blackness as a “when” and “where” makes room for a consideration of multiple iterations of black identities that do not discount the viability of other black identities.

For black immigrants, Pierre (2004) has convincingly shown how “narratives of ethnicity” frame these immigrants as outside of U.S. processes of racialization while at the same time marking them as a model minority. Pierre suggests that the ways black immigrants are pitted against black Americans identifies them as possessing particular cultural values that distinguish

them from both white and black Americans. Chacko's (2003) study of the U.S.-born and/or -raised children of Ethiopian immigrants is an example of how immigration studies deploy ethnicity. She argued that the Ethiopian-Americans in her study formulated a non-racialized "ethnic identity" that referred back to their conception of themselves as African. They took pride in their cultural and historical heritage and maintained ties to their parent's country, while becoming American by, for example, losing their parents' language in favour of English. Similarly, Mensah and Williams (2015) used survey data with Ghanaian and Somali residents of Canada to show that experiences of racism, along with socioeconomic status play a vital part in the degree to which the African immigrants they surveyed asserted particular ethnic identities and their belonging in Canada. These two studies (Chacko 2003; Mensah and Williams 2015), like many others, posit immigrant ethnicity as a protective mechanism against racism and anti-blackness (Guenther, Pendaz, and Makeke 2011; Portes and Rumbaut 2014).

Increasingly scholars are challenging this perception of immigrant ethnicity as a form of protection against racism. In particular, the attention researchers such as Adekunle and Williams (2013), Arthur (2010), Halter and Johnson (2014), and Zeleza (2010) are paying to questions of belonging, race, and ethnicity, offer important revisions to current theorizing about black/African diaspora and "new ethnicities" (Hall 1991, 1996). For example, Clark (2008) examines how the children of African immigrants leverage their multiple identities to claim belonging in the United States and in their respective African countries. Her study suggests that these multiple identities include an intentionally African sense of self as well as a racialized American sense of self, produced as a result of U.S. racial logics that identify them as black. More recently, Showers (2015) has shown how African immigrants experience their African identities as a source of discrimination and not a distinguishing protective mechanism. These researchers ask that the meanings and uses of ethnicity be revisited in immigration literature.

The diversity within black experiences, ranging from the particular historical trajectories that bring one to a black consciousness, as well as the intersections of race, class, sexuality, and nationality constitute new ethnicities (Back 1996; Hall 1996; Alexander 2002). Paying attention to this diversity of blackness allows for new solidarities to form intra-racially, across racial lines, as well as in conversation with different experiences of repression and domination because, like everyone else, black people belong to several collectives at once (Wright 2013). Likewise, recognizing the diversity of black identities can extend how scholars understand black people's connections with one another and with others.

With regard to the Afropolitan, Pahl (2016) suggests that its extroversion makes it potentially radical in effecting a "decolonial option" (Mignolo 2011) in which difference is not imbued with inequality. Yet an individualist

Afropolitan instinct detracts from its radical potential (Ede 2016). Divergent ideas about the politics and potential of Afropolitan raise pressing questions about this black identity. First, in what ways is Afropolitan a black ethnicity? Second, what are the limitations of the Afropolitan in connecting black people with different experiences? Finally, what narratives about Africa does the “Afropolitan” make possible and what narratives does it silence? The following discussion begins to answer the above questions through an examination of the Afropolitan projects of a group of Ghanaian immigrants living in Houston, Texas. I contend that these projects constitute local politics that although concerned with the particularities of group members’ experiences, scales up to larger questions of belonging as black, Ghanaians, Africans, Americans, and middle-class global citizens. I show that in collating these identities, this group’s Afropolitan projects foreclose solidarities with working class and queer black/African people and instead align itself with respectability and middle-class progress.²

Methods

This article is based on an eighteen-month long qualitative study of an organization comprising primarily U.S.-raised Ghanaians, which I call the Metropolitan Connection of Ghanaian Houstonians (MCGH). Ethnographic methods are especially suited for studying culture and understanding the ties that migrants form over time across national borders (Clifford 1997; Levitt and Schiller 2004). I complemented my ethnographic observations with in-depth interviews to learn about individuals’ thoughts about belonging, identities, and their interpersonal relationships (Pugh 2013; Jerolmack and Khan 2014). My access to the MCGH was in part facilitated by the fact that like many members, I was born in Ghana and have lived in the United States half my life.

The research took place between June 2014 and December 2015. During that time, I conducted observations at events the group organized and spent time informally with group members, taking field notes within twenty-four hours of each interaction. The events I attended included monthly meetings, happy hours, fashion shows, picnics, discussion forums on different topics of interest including public health and cultural education, volunteer activities, and birthday parties and weddings. I also conducted a total of fifteen semi-structured in-depth interviews. These interviews lasted about ninety minutes on average with the shortest interview going for fifty minutes and the longest for four hours. Eleven respondents were active participants of MCGH and four were non-members who participated in events but had not formally joined the group. In-depth interviews focused on members’ identities, their thoughts about Ghana and Africa, and their lives in Houston. In addition to in-depth interviews, I had over thirty informal conversations with multiple MCGH members, which contribute to my general

analysis of MCGH's Afropolitan projects. My interview analysis included a careful reading of all transcripts to identify dominant themes. I coded for themes about belonging, gender, sexuality, race, class, and Africa as a cosmopolitan, modern space. I use pseudonyms for all names and organizations.

Findings: the Afropolitan project of the MCGH

The membership of MCGH is primarily composed of the college-educated U.S.-raised children of Ghanaian immigrants.³ The group has about twenty active participants who attend meetings and volunteer at events.⁴ Members are between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-three years old. Although many of the group members were born in Ghana, most have lived in the United States anywhere from eleven to twenty years. All but one of the eleven MCGH members I interviewed had at least a bachelor's degree. Three members either had or were working towards postgraduate degrees. Of the four non-members I interviewed, three were still completing their bachelor's degrees and one was applying to medical school. The high educational status of MCGH members and non-members I interviewed reflect national statistics that African immigrants typically have high educational attainment, suggesting a fairly privileged black population (McCabe 2011).

MCGH founders explained to me that they wanted to organize a group for young Ghanaians to facilitate networking, learning about their culture, and "giving back to the community" of Ghanaians in Houston. The organization created a mentorship and tutoring programme, organized field trips to the University of Houston and levied group members' knowledge of navigating higher education in the United States to help other young Ghanaians attain four-year degrees. MCGH also wanted "to bridge" what they saw as a "gap between those born there [in Ghana] and those born here [in the U.S.]". By those born here, MCGH was referring to newly arrived young Ghanaians rather than to its membership, the majority of whom were also born in Ghana. The primary difference between "those born there" and "those born here" was that unlike new arrivals, MCGH members had received most of their education in the United States, felt more acclimatized to life here, and were often class-privileged compared to many of the newly arrived Ghanaians. Although MCGH identified the "gap" as one of acclimatization, part of the divide that MCGH members identified was based on class and educational status. Such distinctions constitute in part, the Afropolitan projects of the MCGH.

The MCGH engages several activities that produce an Afropolitan identity and sustain their Afropolitan projects. First, the group stages cultural performances identified as Ghanaian or more generally African. Second, it articulates individual and group ties to a cosmopolitan urban Africa through, for example, sartorial choices and pop-cultural connections. Likewise this

project is operationalized through the group's imposition of middle-class, heterosexual boundaries of belonging. Additionally, the MCGH Afropolitan projects articulate a particular black ethnicity rooted in an African identity. Finally, although these Afropolitan projects are sustained through group efforts, they begin from the individual (Ede 2016). An Afropolitan, first and foremost, is an individual. MCGH Afropolitan projects represent the collective boundary-making of a particular group of individual Afropolitans who share similar interests (see Wimmer 2013; Brubaker 2014; Jenkins 2014). In the case of the MCGH, their Afropolitan projects facilitate how individuals articulate their middle-class black identities as Christians, Ghanaians, and Americans. The importance of the individual within Afropolitan projects contributes to a collective belief in the inclusivity of the group, even as the MCGH alienates queer and working-class Ghanaians without college degrees.

Below I show how Afropolitan adequately represents the black ethnicity that MCGH members and other interview respondents espoused. I follow this discussion with an illustration of how MCGH's Afropolitan projects operate through middle-class heterosexual politics.

Black identities and Afropolitan as a "new ethnicity"

The following section uses interview data to present the Afropolitan as a "new ethnicity" that describes black Africans.⁵ An African ethnicity arises in two instances. First, the continent's colonial history flattened the diversity of its people, cultures, and histories into one homogenous identity. Here, African ethnicity refers to a racialized underclass dogged by a single dangerous narrative of war, disease, and general backwardness. In the second instance, African ethnicity emerges out of a collective effort by Africans to displace the negative connotations associated with the continent. This new African ethnicity includes pan-Africanism, which emphasizes Africa for Africans and "[abjures] any obvious cultural identification with the West" (Eze 2014, 235). Here, an African ethnicity portrays a positive story that overturns fetishistic and objectifying narratives about Africa and its people and celebrates tradition and African culture within the geographic boundaries of the continent. In both instances, this ethnicity is simultaneously racialized as black and African, although these identities are accentuated in different contexts. In contrast to African ethnicity, the Afropolitan renews the meanings of African by presenting an identity that is rooted in a contemporary Africa and interconnected with Western education, upward mobility, disparate political views, black racial consciousness and postracial aspirations.⁶ Afropolitan identity exceeds the boundaries of the African continent to assert belonging in the world. This ethnicity remains racialized as black and African, but also merges cultures and breaks down the boundaries of what these identities mean.

For several respondents, an important aspect of being African in the United States was that they were black. For example, Yaa, a Ghanaian born in Houston distinguished herself from the “American community” by explaining that the north Texas town where she began college was “predominately white over there, so I feel like I’m too, I won’t even say Ghanaian, I’m too African for that”. For Yaa, there was not a distinction between African and African-American, instead in addition to “skin colour”, she also “[felt] like they [African Americans] can trace their ancestors back to Africa and I’m from Africa”. Likewise, Cindy, a twenty-nine-year-old marketing manager and MCGH member who had lived in Houston for eleven years described “feeling almost like a specimen” in the small “primarily Caucasian” East Coast town where she lived before moving to Houston. Cindy concluded, “I like that I can be African in Houston”. Like Yaa, as with several others, Cindy contrasted African with white, highlighting the racialization of this ethnicity as a black ethnicity.

Of the fifteen young Ghanaians I interviewed, four were born in Texas and one in Europe. And yet with the exception of one U.S.-born Ghanaian, all respondents identified as African. Amongst the people I interviewed, nearly half told stories of being called “African booty scratchers” or being made fun of for their dark skin and accents while in middle school. Now as adults, these respondents wanted to embrace and reclaim what they saw as “Africa’s rich culture”. This embracing of a positive narrative about Africa is, in part, what the Afropolitan offers (Mbembe 2007; Selasi 2013; Eze 2014). As Emefa, a twenty-six-year-old MCGH member born in Austin explained,

I think that to ask where I’m from is another broad question. It stems from where did you grow up? Where is home, and also where are you from when it comes from the cultural side and the family side? ... Where are your original roots? So if somebody that I know ... were to ask where are you from, of course I would say Ghana because that’s where my home is, that’s my origin. But if an employer or something [were to ask, I’ll say], I’m from Austin because that’s where I grew up, that’s where I was born.

Like other respondents, Emefa’s thoughts on the question “where are you from?” perform the kinds of manoeuvres that Selasi (2005) describes in her essay “Bye-bye Babar”. These manoeuvres are signs of the Afropolitan for whom this question cannot elicit a single answer but instead traces the roots and routes that help articulate her sense of belonging. In Emefa’s case, home is in Austin and home is in her ties to Ghana. Although specifying that she is from Ghana, Emefa understood African as “the U.S. standard definition” for black people. She was an African-American because she was black and also because this identity provided a language to claim her ties to Ghana, to Africa more generally, and also to the United States, where she was born.

Although fourteen of fifteen respondents identified as African, Jordan called himself an American because “I was born here, I went to school here, [I like American] sports and entertainment”. Despite identifying as American, part of Jordan’s American identity was experienced through what he described as “the struggles” of being African-American. He understood these struggles as being “already at a disadvantage in the community, so finding ways to step above what you’re being perceived as ... so that you can continue to rise up in your community”. Although Jordan shared a sense of disadvantage as an African-American, he also distanced himself from this struggle, later on referring to “the struggles, which African Americans are facing in *their* community” (emphasis added). For Jordan this distancing was in part because he did not want to “become just a regular African American but ... stay true to my roots”, which included “cultural clothing [and] the level of respect which Ghanaians have for each other”. From Jordan’s perspective, the difference between black and African-Americans was found in their cultures and histories. This difference recalls Hall’s (1996) definition of ethnicity as rooted in claims about culture and acknowledges the diverse ways in which black identities are constituted (see also Alexander 2002; Maylor 2009; Wright 2015).

Although interview respondents, including Jordan and Emefa described above, saw themselves as culturally different from black Americans, they did not distance themselves from black identity. For example, Esther, a twenty-three-year old who had lived in Houston since she was nine years old explained,

Sometimes we try to separate ourselves like, I’m not black American, I’m African, but I feel like when people are on the outside, people that are not black, when they look at this group of people, all they see is black.

This external perception as black was important to how MCGH as an organization addressed issues of racism. During the time of my fieldwork, Black Lives Matter was actively organizing against the extra-judicial killings of black people in the United States. MCGH organized discussions to help educate community members about how these current events would affect them. Describing one such discussion Hassan, an MCGH officer recalled teaching people how to,

Just conduct yourself, you know, the things you ought to do, just put your hand on the [steering wheel], just warn the officer of every little move that you’re making, just save the day, save your life. We talked about something that everybody seemed to be aware; we talked about just knowing that you’re not special just because you’re from Africa.

MCGH sought to educate its members about police violence against black people by teaching members about the things that black people are expected

to do in the presence of police. By discussing ways of protecting themselves from particular kinds of police violence, MCGH members were also acknowledging that regardless of a perceived cultural difference, that is, regardless of their ethnic identity, they were not immune to anti-black racism in the United States. Several other respondents agreed that “you’re not special just because you’re from Africa”, explaining their belief that they moved through the world as black people in a country that did not value black lives. Recognizing this fact, the MCGH Afropolitan project was not about distinguishing members from the “bottom of the racial hierarchy” (Treitler 2013). Instead, these black immigrants also tended to understand that being perceived as black Americans meant that they were, in many ways, black Americans. An Afropolitan identity articulates this black ethnicity by affirming respondents’ claims to Africa (more specifically, Ghana), and also to the United States.

Although aspects of MCGH Afropolitan projects are rooted in U.S.- specific black identities, these projects also engaged class and sexual politics. I turn now to a discussion of how class and sexuality shaped the ethnic identity of MCGH and their overall Afropolitan projects.

The class and sexual politics of MCGH Afropolitan projects

The MCGH meets in a church in southwest Houston. The church is nestled between a hair salon and a store with a permanently closed sign on its front door. The pavement in the large parking lot is full of potholes. Meetings take place on the last Sunday of every month after church and members are typically still dressed in their church clothes – trousers and button down shirts, blazers and African print ties and dresses, colourful shoes, and purses. The meeting room is arranged like a small classroom with rows of five red padded chairs facing the front separated by an aisle. In this room, the group’s Afropolitan projects come to life. These Afropolitan projects involve hosting events ranging from an inaugural ball to education fieldtrips and panels about marriage customs and traditions.

The MCGH inaugural event was an occasion where many of the group’s investments in normative heterosexuality and projecting a middle-class status and were articulated. The inaugural event had two masters of ceremonies (MCs): one was an East Coast transplant to Houston who had two Ghanaian parents and had completed high school and university in the United States. This MC was chosen in part because he spoke fluent Akan, a Ghanaian language that would endear him to the Ghanaian adults in the room; the other was Houston-born to a Ghanaian father and a black American mother. The MCs introduced the group by noting that “we all went to college” or “we will soon have doctors in our midst”. This language alienated the young Ghanaians in the community who did not attend college. One

MCGH member who did not have a college degree reflected on why several of his friends without post-secondary education did not join the group. He noted: "because we don't feel comfortable coming here because all that you guys talk about is your degree, your cars, you know, or like how you're going to school or the friends that you play with". Although MCGH articulated a mission to "bridge a gap", they had difficulty reaching out to "those born there" who had not attained the same credentials as they had. The MCs also explained to those present that the group wanted to learn about not only "our roots in Ghana but also our roots in Houston". Additionally, the MCs implored the Ghanaian adults to teach members about Ghanaian marriage traditions and customs. As one MC explained, the desire to learn about marriage customs was because "we are a cultured people who do things according to culture".

In keeping with the claims of being a cultured people invested in learning about heterosexual dating and marriage rituals, the group organized an event in February 2015 to address these issues. This event comprised a three-panel discussion including two men and a woman from different Ghanaian language groups and occurred at a Nigerian-owned nightclub in southwest Houston. The panelists had all been married for over twenty years, a point that the evening's MC made sure to highlight. Because marriage traditions among different language groups in Ghana are very similar, the panelists relayed the same general information, all laden with overt Christian messages including the importance of marrying a Christian and providing the bride-to-be with a bible as part of her dowry. The panelists also insisted on the importance of performing a traditional ceremony at the family home as well as a Christian wedding ceremony to have the church bless the marriage. Additionally, the panelists unanimously found it important that the MCGH members try and marry someone from their parents' Ghanaian ethnic group, and if that was not possible, then at the very least a Ghanaian. During these events, I often found it difficult to participate. As a queer Ghanaian, marriage traditions left me feeling alienated. The group's assumption and promotion of heterosexual norms and rituals did not leave much room for someone like me to ask questions or take part in the excitement and cultural sharing that the panel discussion was meant to produce.

In interviews and informal conversations, MCGH members disclosed that they would personally prefer to marry a fellow African, followed by a black American before anyone else. But most importantly, many noted, they would want to be with someone (of a different gender) that respected their culture. By asking that the adults in the community teach them about marriage rites, MCGH members highlighted their investment in reproducing culturally rooted and Christian-based gendered relationships and sexual norms. Their efforts to learn about and perform such rituals were part of the group's

Afropolitan projects meant to articulate their attachment to an Africa constructed as heterosexual and culturally rich.

MCGH's events, including the inaugural ball, the insistence on reproducing heterosexual marriage rituals, their field trips to colleges, and the care taken to include an Akan-speaking MC at community-related activities were all part of the group's efforts to show that they cared about, in the MC's words, "our roots in Ghana and our roots in Houston". Pierre (2013) has shown how the language of tribal customs and institutions not only served to subsume racialization in colonial Ghana, but also became a frontier on the fight against colonial rule. By reproducing "native customs" in Houston, MCGH members continue this project by claiming their particularity as Ghanaians who are proud of their history in a global economy. The focus on marriage traditions also highlights the ways in which heterosexuality organizes MCGH Afropolitan projects.

The hybridity of Afropolitan identity is tied to an implicit politics of race, class, and heterosexuality. In his discussion of hybridity, Young (2005) notes that culture is constructed through a notion of difference, meaning that by seeing others as different in racial, sexual, and classed ways, one's culture becomes articulated through race, sexuality, and class. This explanation of culture suggests that the hybridity of Afropolitan projects are the cultural difference these projects claim (Mbembe 2007; Eze 2014, 2016; Ede 2016). Its classed dimensions do not make room for working-class people or people without post-secondary degrees, making this Afropolitan identity one that is exclusive to a very specific population of Africans. As Anthias (2001, 628) has argued, hybrids "may be tied to violence and alienation, as receivers or producers of culture". The MCGH cultural performances along with its insistence that "we all went to college" reveal an investment in the status distinctions of the Afropolitan and the ways in which it excludes those who cannot achieve this status. Likewise, the urgency to reproduce this cultural difference underlies heterosexual politics of MCGH's Afropolitan projects. As such, cultural endeavours, which are invested in middle-class heterosexual respectability, foreclose solidarity with working class, queer, uneducated Ghanaians, and other people of colour, and identifies instead with middle-class American and African ways of belonging.

Conclusion: black identities, solidarities, and Afropolitan projects

The preceding analysis shows how one group of U.S.-raised children of Ghanaians engage in Afropolitan projects that claims blackness as an African identity, re-narrates Africa as a modern cosmopolitan, cultured, heterosexual space, and asserts belonging as middle-class citizens of the United States.

By positing the Afropolitan as a black ethnicity that is culturally, geographically and historically situated, this article invites scholars to rethink how black African immigrants engage with questions of race and ethnicity. Rather than framing immigrant ethnicity as a distinguishing and protective mechanism I show that Afropolitan as a black ethnicity affirms a specific history and culture, while also allowing for solidarities with (at least) middle-class black people along with others. Afropolitan projects interrogate the meanings of black and African and advance a rethinking of culture and belonging (Hall 1990; Hesse 1997). Likewise, a focus on the cultural specificity of Afropolitan projects shows how at the same time that this project of black diaspora challenges essentialist ideas about race and ethnicity, it can also be invested in heteronormativity (see Gopinath 2005). Importantly, how MCGH members see themselves as black aligns with a racialized class (and sexual) politics that is largely unconcerned with the interests of poor, queer, and working-class blacks in the United States, much less poor and/or queer African immigrants. The importance of a college education and the reproduction of heterosexuality within the group means that MCGH Afropolitan projects convey a very particular privileged African sense of self that as I have shown above, alienates people who do not fit this mould.

Although the MCGH Afropolitan project facilitates engagement with a particular kind of racialized middle-class politics, this project also forecloses solidarities with working class and queer black and African people. The middle-class, heterosexual consciousness of this group's Afropolitan projects means that the group remains largely unconcerned with an inclusive politics that is conscious of the concerns of other less-privileged Africans. The narratives that this Afropolitan project make possible include narratives about a "traditional" African sensibility as well as an African reality devoid of social and economic inequalities. Finally, by constructing Africa as a heterosexual cultural space, these Afropolitan projects excise queer sexuality from the continent's borders and as such exclude queerness from its narrative.

Whereas the cultural politics and identities of black immigrants to the United States have been largely portrayed as protecting them from anti-black racism and distancing them from American blacks, I have shown that this is not the case. Instead black ethnicities are differentiated through class, educational status, sexual, and racial politics. Afropolitan projects provide a conceptual framework for understanding the ethnic identities of U.S. Africans without flattening out the diversity of this black population or disconnecting them from other black people. In so doing, this framework offers a more complete understanding of how class, education, sexuality, and cosmopolitan outlook amongst other political claims inform black identities not only in the United States but also abroad.

Notes

1. With few notable exceptions in academic spaces, including Gikandi (2010), Mbembe (2007), and in the *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, the term Afropolitan is primarily employed in popular culture, on the Internet, and in selling commodities. For example, in 2014, Blitz the Ambassador, a Ghanaian born hip-hop artist living in Brooklyn, released an album titled *Afropolitan Dreams*; an online shop selling African-derived clothing and accessories calls itself the Afropolitan shop; Meet-Up groups in urban centres around the United States for young Africans call themselves Afropolitan (such as Afropolitan HTX, Afropolitan NYC, and Afropolitan Miami); an online feminist blog by 'Nigerian-Finnish writer' Minna Salami is titled *MsAfropolitan*. These are only a few examples of the ways in which Africans living outside of Africa are using Afropolitan. I have not come across the term used by Africans in Africa.
2. See White (2001) for a discussion of how the quest for respectability encourages conformity to larger social norms without challenging its racist and gendered logics.
3. I resist using the language of immigrant generations because in many ways, it marks some Americans, in particular racialized Americans, as always-alien citizens, not quite belonging to the symbolic boundaries of the nation (see Ngai 2004). The racial exclusiveness of generational language guides me to refer to MCGH members as U.S.-born or raised Ghanaians. I call group members Ghanaians in recognition of their chosen identity as such.
4. Official membership exceeds twenty people, however in the year and a half that I conducted observations a core of about twenty members actively participated at volunteer events and meetings. More members always showed up at parties and other fun social activities.
5. Neal (2016) has recently invoked Afropolitan to include African-Americans.
6. In "Bye-Bye Babar" Selasi posits racial identity as a matter of politics rather than pigment, noting, "not all of us [Afropolitans] claim to be black".

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