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### Introduction

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de Witte, M.; Spronk, R.

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## Introduction

### *'African': A Contested Qualifier in Global Africa*

*Marleen de Witte*

Department of Sociology and Anthropology,  
University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
*m.dewitte@uva.nl*

*Rachel Spronk*

Department of Sociology and Anthropology,  
University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
*r.spronk@uva.nl*

On 8 January, 2014, the online forum for African opinion, arts and music *This Is Africa: The voice of a new generation*, published a feature by editor Siji Jabbar, titled “A conversation about African identity in a globalised world with Tope Folarin, Caine Prize-winning author of ‘Miracle’”:

When the Nigerian writer Tope Folarin won the Caine Prize for African Writing last July, some of the coverage that followed wasn't about the winning story itself but rather about the fact that Tope wasn't born in Africa and had – at the time of announcement – visited Nigeria only once, as a baby. On the one hand that aspect of the coverage revealed the trouble many have today in accepting the diversity of African identities; abroad we complain when others who have problems with the fullness of our being try to limit it by asking that question, ‘Yes, but where are you really from?’, then we turn around and, out of fear that what it is to be African will dissipate if we don't hold fast to and protect a fixed and narrow idea of THE African identity, do the same to one another.

Ultimately, the diversity of African identities is something we will all have to come to terms with eventually as it's likely to become a much needed strength in our increasingly globalised world – and this diversity is set to grow, not contract. Besides, being African is about much more than where you were born or grew up. And for fans of literature or popular fiction, the more African identities there are the greater the variety of stories to be told, read, thought about and discussed. If each story reflects

something of ourselves and something of other ways of being African in the world, surely that's something to look forward to.

Preparing this special issue on 'Africanness' and the multiple ways in which being 'African' is debated and embodied in today's globalized world, we could have chosen from many examples published on websites, in the print media, on blogs and many more.<sup>1</sup> What makes someone or something African? What does it mean to be African? When does someone's or something's Africanness become important? And on whose terms? These questions are currently hotly debated on diverse fora, by various groups and individuals, and on different continents. Authors like Jabbar above capture aptly what this special issue is about: it explores the different ways in which the qualifier 'African' is and has been employed, as well as challenged, in self-identifications in Africa and its diasporas.

Currently, a global revival of discourses on being African seems to be in full swing, including a flourishing interest in so-called African cultural products and aesthetics on an international scale. From the celebrated identity of 'Afropolitans', a term first coined in 2005 by Ghanaian-Nigerian writer Taiye Selasi (then Tuakli-Wosornu) to denote the new generation of young Africans working and living in cities around the globe, belonging to no single geography, but feeling at home in many (Tuakli-Wosornu 2005), to the renewed concern with African roots, history, and self-styling among 'Afrocentrics' in the Americas and in Europe, this revival is characterized by great diversity, global movement and creative mixture. These new African globalities and the multiple ways in which Africanness is lived on the ground complicate any oversimplified understanding of 'Africa' or 'the African diaspora', as well as any easy distinction between these terms. They urge us to interrogate the mutable experiences of Africanness throughout the trajectories of a 'global Africa' (Sims and King-Hammond 2010).

As Emmanuel Akyeampong (2000) emphasizes in his historical examination of these trajectories, at the centre of the global dispersion of people of African descent lies, of course, the global political economy, and the capitalist demand for labour in particular: from the massive shipment of enslaved

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1 As this special issue's central preoccupation with the heterogeneous use of the adjective 'African' starts from the premise that 'Africa' and its derivatives 'African' and 'Africanness' do not exist outside the various discourses that produce(d) it, and can therefore impossibly be used as analytical terms, the terms 'Africa', 'African', and 'Africanness' should be read as between quotation marks throughout.

Africans to the plantations in the New World to the waves of African migration to the global North in search of economic opportunities or political safety in more recent times. Significant historical changes have radically diversified the nature and composition of African diasporas (see also Byfield 2000; Patterson and Kelley 2000; Zeleza 2005, 2010). Every era has sustained particular links with the African continent and given rise to particular notions of Africa and African identity that differ and intersect in complex ways between 'old' and 'new' diasporas (Koser 2003). Due to advances in telecommunications, digital media, and travel, the African continent, its diaspora of enslavement, its diaspora of colonialism, its diaspora of postcoloniality, and its most recent diaspora of the post-Cold War era (Piot 2010) now exist in closer intertwinement and interaction than in any previous period (cf. Byfield 2000). As a result, debates on Africanness have assumed an unprecedentedly global character. Imaginations of Africa developing in diasporic settings do so in greater exchange with those coming from Africa itself. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (2010: 6) even suggests that "Africa' ... is more 'African' today than it has ever been because it is increasingly a construct produced and consumed across the continent itself, from sports to television to politics, from the All-Africa Games to Big Brother Africa to the African Union". Many current notions of what is African also defy such distinctions between diaspora and continent as they develop exactly in their moving between the various locations and actors of global Africa – most notably so in fashion, music (e.g. Shipley 2013), and art (e.g. Sims and King-Hammond 2010).

Clearly, the adjective 'African' as used in the plentiful "I am African"-statements around the world, is open to countless interpretations and contestations. Many people, institutions, social movements, enterprises and cultural projects struggle with the question of being African, trying to define the category of African in multiple, often contradictory ways, thus constituting a "minefield of African identities" (Adibe 2013). Navigating through this minefield is a personal and often emotional exercise. It is also political, intimately related to power structures in local settings and in the world at large. As the articles in this issue show, claiming Africanness is invariably a political statement – implicitly if not explicitly – that is situated in a long, global history of mutually reinforcing discourses of (often racist) representation and African/Black self-redefinition (to which we will return below). Increasingly also, being African is presented, at times even marketed, as hip and fashionable, making the option of becoming African attractive to new urban generations who embrace Africanness as part of their lifestyle (De Witte this issue; De Witte and Meyer 2012). We see it on online platforms like the above-mentioned *This Is Africa*, dedicated to binding young people to a positive and hip image of Africa; we see it in the Afropoli-

tan answer to the *Sex & the City* series, *An African City*; and we see it in the African-inspired looks of black American celebrities such as Erykah Badu and India Arie.

This issue brings together different perspectives from across global Africa to explore how this revival of being African is played out in different localities: South Africa, the Netherlands, Kenya and Jamaica. The authors focus on the question of why and how Africanness has come to matter in specific settings. Rather than taking Africanness for granted, as many accounts tend to do, they explore who claims an identity as African, under what circumstances, and what inspires them, considering the local stakes and urgencies in discussions about Africanness. This collection of articles thus addresses how Africanness is made, remade, and unmade, negotiated and materialized, manipulated, and stylized. The authors focus on the multiplicity and malleability of claims to Africanness and describe and analyze how it gets fleshed out and put into practice. Where do different notions and aesthetics of Africanness come together, and what conflicts may arise over competing versions? What are the similarities and differences between a South African entrepreneur marketing the *vuvuzela* as African heritage (Jethro, this issue), Kenyan young urban professionals claiming to “be African the modern way” as a way to transcend ethnic divisions (Spronk, this issue), a mixed-race Caribbean-Dutch stating “I was born in Curaçao, raised in the Netherlands, but I am simply African” (De Witte, this issue), and a Jamaican turning away from the icons of Africanness produced in the past in favour of the ghetto as a focal point of black identity (Modest and Jaffe, this issue)? These questions are important not only to show the diversity of discussions about Africanness and to tease out shifts in understandings of being African. Especially, they take us beyond the abstract level of intellectual discourse to reveal the contradictions and ambiguities in the ‘work’ the figures of Africa and Africanness do when concrete actors situated in interactive social contexts employ them. In other words, these questions direct our attention to the empirical, messy world of complex networks of power and conflicting moralities in which Africa and Africanness nevertheless manage to become very real – and consequential – for the users of these figures.

It has become somewhat commonplace to say that Africa does not exist. It is an invention (Mudimbe 1988; Appiah 1992), an idea (Mudimbe 1994), an imagination, a construction that does not exist outside the discourses that continue to produce it (Mbembe 2002). These discourses, scholars such as Mudimbe, Appiah, and Mbembe have argued, are first and foremost a European construct. From their first contact with the African continent, Europeans produced essentialist notions of Africa that have profoundly influenced con-

temporary ideas about Africanness and what it means to be African. In *The Idea of Africa* (1994), Mudimbe traces the conquering Western narratives that have created a particular notion of Africanness as Europe's quintessential 'other', beginning with Greek stories about Africa, through 'the colonial library' to contemporary postmodernist discourses. Eighteenth-century traders, nineteenth-century missionaries, and late nineteenth–early twentieth-century colonial officials all produced accounts of Africa and the African to construct the superiority of white over black people. Depictions of Africa as a 'dark continent' and its inhabitants as savage, barbaric, primitive, or child-like, founded on the notion of race and on the premise of a natural inferiority of the black race, served to justify their respective projects of slave trade, conversion to Christianity, 'civilization', and colonial domination. Importantly, such stereotypes continue to resonate today.

The first African intellectuals to be formally educated since the early 1900s were schooled by missionaries. Most often, they were Christian converts. But, "as beneficiaries of the Christian civilizing mission they refused to define themselves in the image of their colonial benefactors. Rather they redefined themselves, combining the best of the two worlds into what became a modern African identity and a unique contribution to African modernity" (Ndletyana 2008: 5). At the centre of these redefinitions was the notion of being African. Throughout the 1900s, African intellectuals became more and more politically active in taking up issues such as the transatlantic slave trade, imperialism and colonialism (Falola 2004: 148–149). Their debates about African nationalism as the prerequisite for Pan-Africanism evolved in close interaction with notions of Africanity outlined by Pan-Africanist thinkers in the transatlantic diaspora. "The idea of one Africa uniting the thoughts and ideas of all native people of the dark continent", W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, "stems naturally from the West Indies and the United States" (1946: 7). Here people of distinct ethnic origins became so united in experience and so estranged from their particular places of origin that they began to think of Africa as one land and of themselves as one people. Strongly influenced by the rich tradition of restoring the African that ensued, African nationalism advanced by African intellectuals and leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah, Leopold Senghor and Cheikh Anta Diop, always contained some notion of cultural reaffirmation and race liberation. Formulating ideas about African personality (Nkrumah), Negritude (Senghor), and the cultural unity of Black Africa (Anta Diop) involved outlining Pan-African characteristics. "Philosophers sought to elaborate African philosophies [... and] historians set out to tell Africa's past, not merely to glorify it and its ancient kings and empires as some were wont to do, but also to establish the humanity of the people in Africa" (Falola 2004: 149).

These intellectual endeavours in response to colonial domination and racial oppression have also been criticized, however, which shows the political volatilities of debates on Africanness. According to Appiah (1992), African-American Pan-Africanists such as Crummel, Blyden, and Du Bois took for granted the essential distinction between the black and white races that had been used to justify the colonization of Africa. They thus not only accepted the very terms of the ideology of the domination of Africans, but also set the tone for the debate on African identity in Africa itself. As Mbembe argued in his polemic essay, "African Modes of Self-Writing" (2002), in formulating notions of Africanness, African intellectuals, instead of radically rejecting colonial assumptions, reappropriated the fundamental categories of the Western discourse that they claimed to oppose, thus reproducing their dichotomies, foremost that of 'blacks' versus 'whites'. In this issue, Rachel Spronk recognizes the persistent power of colonial, dualistic constructions of race and Africanness in a so-called 'economy of claims' concerning Africanness in Nairobi, despite a long and varied history of decolonization in local public debates. Concurrently, the daily life practices and aesthetics of urban young professionals transcend the critical terms of these debates on Africanness in Nairobi, be they 'African', 'Western', 'traditional' or 'modern'. Although reaffirming African identities may thus risk essentializing race, this cannot be taken for granted but needs to be investigated empirically. As Marleen de Witte describes, new generations in multicultural Amsterdam engage with racial categorizations as well as with colonial and postcolonial histories in various, often critical, ways. Despite the rise of a new Afro-Dutch category that transcends identifications as Surinamese, Antillean or Ghanaian, the issue of blackness remains a bone of contention in new, inclusive formulations of Africanness.

The tradition of thinking about Africanness from a transatlantic perspective is heavily inflected by the particular history of the slave trade and the struggles of Afro-descendants in the new world, and particularly by scholars based in the United States. This unique history has resulted in an overwhelming body of literature, especially in cultural studies, including many classics on the topic, such as the writings by Stuart Hall (1993) (who sadly passed away at the time of writing this introduction), Paul Gilroy (1993), bell hooks (1981), Manthia Diawara (1992) and many others. Such classics have become part of the variety of contexts in which people debate and practise Africanness. Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993) takes up a central place in this canon. His concept of the Black Atlantic has been particularly insightful for deconstructing the idea of the black race, divorcing it from any African essence, and demonstrating its fluidity and mutability by placing it in the transatlantic space of creolization. Its canonical influence, however, has also come under critique for universalizing a particular

Atlantic, Anglophone, indeed American understanding of the African diaspora (Zeleza 2005; 2010) and marginalizing other histories and genealogies that do not foreground 'Black Atlantic' routes (Wekker 2009: 282).

This issue's perspective on 'global Africa' – rather than the African diaspora or Africa and its diaspora – is informed by the recognition that the genealogies of the adjective 'African' are multiple. The question is where, when and how these different genealogies intersect. Is the Pan-Africanism from the 1960s the same as the Pan-Africanism celebrated today during Ghana's Panafest? How is today's 'New Pan-Africanism' (Mustapha 2012) or 'Afropolitanism' (the networked individualism of 'Africans of the world') informed by or different from the older Pan-Africanism? Names like W.E.B. Du Bois, Kwame Nkrumah or Bob Marley have become household names in many settings and continue to inspire many people: their names are mentioned in public debates, their images appear in popular culture, and their works circulate among younger and older generations alike. A particular point of attention then is the relationship between current formulations of Africanness and the long traditions of outlining Africanness among African, African-American, and Afro-Caribbean intellectuals. Our interest is to see how these canons and traditions relate to people's experiences as they are embedded in specific socio-economic and political settings, and in personal biographies. Wary of what Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has called 'the danger of a single story' (2009), we contend that the black Atlantic perspective dominant in much of African Diaspora Studies cannot function as a unifying framework to explain Africanness in all its diversity. Rather, we seek to account for both the globalizing power of this framework and the local particularities of the forms – including popular culture, bodily fashions, embodied practices and political discourses – through which people express their concerns with Africanness and blackness, as well as the intersections and disjunctures between them.

This issue therefore takes inspiration from Stephan Palmié's (2007) suggestion to treat Africa and Africanness not as ontological givens, but as questions to be empirically investigated with regard to *both* the historical forces and discursive formations that lastingly 'Africanized' the continent and its people, *and* with regard to the various strategies by which actors on the continent and outside it employ specific notions of Africanity. All contributions, to use Christopher Davis' phrasing, analyze Africanness as a project rather than a primordiality (Davis 1999: 72), a project that invariably appears contested and unfinished. Projects of Africanness often imply matters of cultural heritage, popular culture and creativity. In his contribution, Duane Jethro describes the reinvention of the *vuvuzela* as a sonic and material emblem of African heritage on the global stage of the 2010 soccer World Cup. Africanness resonates evocatively in post-

apartheid South Africa. In a context in which the country is repositioning itself vis-à-vis the continent and the world, and is self-consciously reinventing and redefining itself as African, the use of the terms 'South African' and 'African' to describe cultures, heritages, and identities, is subject to profound changes. Jethro analyses how mega sports events have served as platforms for fashioning versions of Africanness that legitimize the state and contribute to the reconfiguration of a South African national identity. At the same time, stakeholders at local, national, continental and international levels contested the *vuvuzela*, arguing against its definition as generically African. Jethro's contribution demonstrates compellingly the fluid and controversial nature of notions of Africanness as they are appropriated and commercially exploited in a globalized, capitalist world order.

Debates about Africanness tend to be politically charged, as outlined above, because of the struggles that were fought against the oppression of a whole continent that continues up to today, albeit in various forms. At the same time debates about Africanness also cause frictions within countries and communities because they are invariably linked to matters of cultural heritage. Claims to Africanness often arise in reaction to tensions and conflicts and therefore point to the importance of the political economy of truth claims; social change affects the cultural organization of society and this often invokes a moral response. In other words, what is or is not tradition, or what is or is not African, is often contested and groups may effectively accuse each other of being 'un-African'. For instance, the young urban professionals in Nairobi that Rachel Spronk follows in her contribution are criticized for being un-African, whereas they perceive themselves as frontrunners of cosmopolitan lifestyles inspired by global Africa and hence as Africans par excellence. Spronk describes the generational conflicts between these urban professionals and the larger public and shows how claims to cultural heritage, gerontocratic relations, and shifts in gender and sexuality reflect a field of tension. Whereas today's young urban professionals are the visible results of social transformations that began with their grandparents, a hegemonic discourse of cultural loss glorifies the past and hence maintains a static image of the cultural, African organization of life.

Our aim therefore is to describe and analyze in detail how experiences of being (and/or becoming) African emerge out of specific (ethnographic) settings and how identity claims and the various identity categories involved get fleshed out and put into practice with a wide variety of resources, including race, geography, cultural heritage or language. Approaching Afro-Jamaican identity politics from a spatial perspective, Wayne Modest and Rivke Jaffe show how the importance of 'being African' has decreased over the past decades, with the geographical focus of Jamaican blackness shifting from the African

continent (Marcus Garvey, pan-Africanism, Rastafari, roots reggae) to the ghetto. Analyzing the decreasing focus on Africa as a site of political subjectivity, their contribution shows how ideas and practices of Africanness have varied and fluctuated historically. Interestingly, the shift that Modest and Jaffe identify in Jamaica stands in striking contrast to the current revival of Pan-Africanism, including its Jamaican icons, as a resource for young Afro-activists in Amsterdam, as De Witte describes in her contribution.

Popular culture and (Internet) media are important sites where notions of African heritage are given shape and meaning, and crucial means through which these notions and designs travel. They constitute the public spheres in which new subjectivities and collective identities are worked out, and sometimes hotly debated. The new category of 'Afro-Dutch' youth in Amsterdam described by De Witte reveals an emergent sense of and search for a shared African heritage, and a growing desire for public exposure and recognition of this Africanness. Manifesting in, for example, media initiatives, performing arts, cultural festivals, and bodily fashions, this trend is characterized by an aesthetic emphasis on African styles and political struggles about the inclusion of African heritage in Dutch imaginations of nationhood and citizenship. Mobilized and recognized as the stuff of being African, African culture gets put to use as a self-evident category of practice in different locations across the globe. But such notions are also critically interrogated or even rejected as irrelevant to the experience of being African. In its multiple renderings we hope to discern how the African continent, its people and cultures become objectified and detached from lived realities in African countries as well as 'liquified' (see: Fabian (1978: 329) or Bauman (2000)) and poured into new life-worlds. Imaginations of Africa are interesting not because they tell us about the continent as a geographical space but because they tell us about the lives and stories, struggles, and aspirations of the people that make up Africa as a truly global sphere of interaction.

As all cases highlight, it is pivotal to disentangle different actors on different levels, from state institutions, different generations, social movements, community leaders and individuals in their daily lives. All contributions examine how claims to and practices of Africanness are embedded in personal experiences and in larger – global, local, national – structures, taking account of the resonances and dissonances between these different spatial levels. Public discourses on Africanness form a crucial context in which people situate themselves, and take up and naturalize certain statements. Yet at the same time – as is generally the case with social life – people blow up the very same categories they use when it comes to their daily-life practices. In other words, African-ness is an important reference point, yet a moving target. Analyses of media discourses, ethnographic methods and contextual/situational analyses provide

insight into the contradictions and perhaps unexpected outcomes of people's search for Africanness.

Our aim is not simply to unmask Africanness as an imagination that scholars can deconstruct. Rather, we wonder how imaginations of Africa and African-ness take root, materialize, circulate, and persuade – or fail to do so. This issue thus examines how Africa features in the making and living of identities on the ground and in the development of new, globalizing forms of Africanness. It seeks to differentiate between cultural entrepreneurs and the groups they claim to represent and explore the ambiguities between them, and to account for the multiple interpretations and conjunctions of African and other identifications in specific economic, social, and political contexts. Taken together, the articles presented here advance an empirical approach to Africanness that focuses on what people actually do in situated practice, thus revealing how frameworks that appear monolithic or monochromatic, even if they may indeed inform people's politicized identity discourses, often collapse in everyday practice. We believe that this critical approach is important and forms a solid basis for analyzing the attraction of particular discursive frameworks and the circumstances under which they are mobilized, but also undermined. It involves a disentangling of the various geographical meanings, cultural mobilizations, racial implications and political inflections of the term 'African' in different settings. Calling attention to the multiple, even contradictory, usages of the notion of 'African', this approach furthermore comprises a critical analysis of the debates that ensue about what or who is really African, as well as the stakes in these debates. With ethnographic accounts, historical analyses, and critical reflections, this issue investigates fundamental questions of identity and identification in global Africa.

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