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Performing Whiteness, Troubling Blackness: Afropolitanism and the Visual Politics of Black Bodies in YouTube Videos

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relation between linguistic and nonlinguistic signs in enregisterment processes (Agha 2007) through the analysis of multimodal images of racial otherness in YouTube videos. It aims to show the role of images in indexing social meaning and performing hegemonic Whiteness among metropolitan Cameroonian-French elites living in Paris, through the use of a specific semiotic register indexing an "Afropolitan" persona – an elite, socially mobile and transnational type of Blackness. By focusing on the poiesis of "image-texts" (Nakassis 2019), this article will contribute to understanding the "total semiotic fact" of racial and social differentiation. It will also demonstrate that these images constitute a counter-discourse and are political acts that negotiate agency and contest power relations.

This article explores the relation between linguistic and nonlinguistic signs in enregisterment processes (Agha 2007) through the analysis of multimodal images of racial otherness. It aims to show the role of images in processes of racialization by analyzing the relation between the linguistic and

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the nonlinguistic (visual, bodily, musical) in indexing social meaning and performing Whiteness among metropolitan Cameroonian-French elites, through the use of a specific semiotic register or style (Eckert 2000; Agha 2003, 2007) indexing an "Afropolitan" persona—an elite, socially mobile, and transnational type of Blackness—imbued with critical and emancipatory aims for the global Afrodescendant community. My goal is to approach the "total semiotic fact" (Nakassis 2016), meaning how the totality of unfolding semiosis produces recognizable social types and positionings relative to these types, as they are enacted for multiple social purposes across diverse communicative contexts. Over the last decades, linguistic anthropologists have paid more and more attention to semiotic processes of enregisterment, and their work has demonstrated that the semiotic repertoires of which linguistic features are a part are always part and parcel of larger sets of nonlinguistic signs (Eckert 2000; Agha 2007; Mendoza-Denton 2008; Shankar 2016; Greco 2018)—for instance, in the study of racialization (Bucholtz 2011; Wirtz 2014; Roth-Gordon 2017; Rosa 2019). Yet images have received less explicit attention as semiotic objects from linguistic anthropologists, despite the centrality of what Jakobson ([1935] 1987) called the aesthetic function, and later the poetic function (1960), for the study of "figures of sound" in language. This may be due to disciplinary boundaries that separate language from image, and thus visual studies (and art history, film studies, media studies, etc.) from linguistic studies (see Mitchell 1986 for a discussion; Nakassis 2019; Barker and Nakassis 2020). Therefore, in this article I will show how focusing on the poiesis of "image-texts"[1] (Nakassis 2019) contributes to understanding the "total semiotic fact" of racial and social differentiation. I will also demonstrate that these images constitute a counter-discourse and are political acts that negotiate agency and contest power relations. By analyzing the entextualized images of self-making bodily performances of "Afrodescendant" activists of Cameroonian origins, I will describe the visual politics of the "Afropolitan" style (Mbembe 2014) and its critical and emancipatory aims within the postcolonial symbolic economy. I met these activists in a Pan-African association of twenty-five- to thirty-year-old young executives and business leaders during two years of fieldwork in Paris. This association was led by Matthieu, a computer engineer and consultant in the field of Afropolitan masculine fashion, who wanted that RésAfrique became one of the

1. "An image-text is what the aesthetic/poetic function entextualizes, what it precipitates as a metasemiotic type (a diagrammatic iconic legisign) in and across contexts of embodied, formal occurrence (token-pictures), just as an image-text is a metapragmatic principle for construing the sensuousness of semiosis" (Nakassis 2019).

main showcases of the African diaspora elite in Paris. Relying on the semiotic analysis of YouTube videos of the Gala Exception, the association's major event, I will show how, through the entextualization (Bauman and Briggs 1990) of a set of bodily, spatial, and musical signs, these Cameroonian-French elite "speak like the Whites" (or *whitisent* in French, cf. Telep 2016, 2018, 2019): indeed, they visually perform a collective ethos of cosmopolitan Africans, well-integrated into the globalized and neoliberal "new world society" (Ferguson 2002) and in conformity with the norms of hegemonic Whiteness. Thus, these semiotic activities of partial whitening contribute to the enregisterment of the successful Afropolitan persona as a distinguished form of privileged Blackness. Through these performances, racialized actors tend to erase the social stigma of black skin (Goffman 1963), and they aim to distinguish themselves from less socio-economically privileged French African immigrants. Additionally, this Afropolitan type also indexes the positive image of an empowered Africa, which contrasts with dominant racializing images and discourses about Afrodescendant people, thus enabling Black people to construct a more positive regime of representations about themselves (Hall 1997; Dick and Wirtz 2011; Wirtz 2014). The analysis will also shed light on the "paradox of subjection" (Butler 1997), meaning the tension between subjection and emancipation, by describing the ambivalent effects of political subjectivation resulting from this collective staging. I will show to what extent these Afropolitan performances partially subvert racializing and inferiorizing regimes of representation of Afrodescendant people while also problematically reproducing dominant class and gender norms, which limit their critical and emancipatory aims.

The first section of this article will present the main characteristics of the ideology of Afropolitanism with its cultural and socio-political goals in the postcolonial and globalized economy. In the second section, I will analyze how the setting, the association's logo, and the bodily hexis of racialized actors during their Afropolitan performances in these YouTube videos contribute together to the construction of "legitimate bodies" (Boni-Le Goff 2016), meaning bodies that are integrated into the globalized economy and are associated with elite upper classes and hegemonic Whiteness. Third, I will describe the music, the fashion shows, and the dances of the Gala's videos. I will show how the interrelation between space, music, clothing, bodies, and language during these artistic performances constitute a form of "vernacular cosmopolitanism" (Bhabha 1994, 9), indexing the modernity and the social mobility of the Afropolitan persona, and demonstrate how these entextualized images of elite Blackness index transcendence of mere national identity.

The Semiotic Register of Afropolitanism and Its Sociopolitical and Cultural Stakes in the Postcolonial Era of Globalization

In this section, I will describe the main characteristics of Afropolitanism. I define Afropolitanism as a semiotic register (Agha 2007) or a style (Eckert 2000), which combines different performable (linguistic and nonlinguistic) signs to produce social meaning. According to Agha (2007), a semiotic register is "a repertoire of performable signs linked to stereotypic pragmatic effects by a sociohistorical process of enregisterment" (Agha 2007, 80); that is to say, a process through which "performable signs become recognized (and regrouped) as belonging to distinct, differentially valorized semiotic registers by a population" (Agha 2007, 81). This enregisterment process results in the sedimentation over time of recognizable social figures or types. It links separate moments of semiosis into discourse histories that stabilize those social types and one's contextual expectations of them. Additionally, like any style, a semiotic register always has a differential value among an ideological system of distinction (Irvine 2001), in which it acquires its stereotypic indexical values in contrast to those associated with other semiotic registers (Irvine and Gal 2000; Irvine 2001; Agha 2007).

Now, I will present the main characteristics of the semiotic register of Afropolitanism and show to what extent it has been constructed in contrast with the Afropessimist register, which is still nowadays the dominant representation of Africa in mainstream media and in public discourses in Western countries. Both of these registers produce contrastive representations of Africa, conceived here not as a mere empirical reality but as a scheme of interpretation and action resulting from sociohistorically situated practices, which are inscribed in power relations and struggles between individuals and social groups (cf. Agha 2007, 80–81).

From an empirical point of view, the unity of an object called "Africa" and its status as a unique place seems questionable when one observes the extent of the differences within the continent (in terms of natural environment, historical experiences, religious traditions, forms of government, languages, ways of life, etc.). And yet, as James Ferguson (2006) reminds us:

> the world is (perhaps now more than ever) full of talk, not of specific African nations, societies or localities, but of "Africa" itself. And this "Africa" talk—both on the continent and off—seems to have a certain intensity, full of anguished energy and (often vague) moral concern. When we hear about "Africa" today, it is usually in urgent and troubled tones. It is never just Africa, but always the crisis in Africa, the problems in Africa, the failure in Africa, the moral challenge of Africa to the "international

> community," even (in British Prime Minister Tony Blair's memorable phrase) Africa as "a scar on the conscience of the world." (Ferguson 2006, 2)

Here we have the essential elements of Afropessimist discourses, which tend to construct Africa as "the dark continent," and as "the shadow of the world" (cf. Ferguson 2006). This Afropessimist discourse inherited from slavery and colonization, which built Africa as the radical Other, the reverse of the West, still dominates major Western media today (Nothias 2014). Indeed, the "invention of Africa" in Western philosophical and intellectual discourse during the colonial era was a repulsive force that facilitated the production of an ideal, dominant description of Western civilisation as superior (Mudimbe 1994). The Afropessimist discourse, a product of this colonial ideology, thus constitutes an essentialization of the African continent: a "black continent" or "global shadow," long marginalized in representations of the global and of the world, Africa was constructed as a land outside of history and civilization, as opposed to the West, which was associated with modernity and progress. Through processes of erasure (Irvine and Gal 2000), it has been reduced by Afropessimist discourses to a set of stigmatizing representations of wars, famine, poverty, disease, terrorism, and corruption. These discourses describe an Africa that is dysfunctional in its essence, by hyperfocusing on these "crises," thus erasing the complexity of the sociopolitical and economic processes that underlie them (cf. Nothias 2014).

Because it makes it possible to define a new form of positive Africanness, Afropolitanism deconstructs the Afropessimist discourse that has long locked Africa into the darkness of immobility and archaism. Afropolitanism originally developed in the intellectual circles of Afro-Londonian and South African urban culture, in the landscape of Black diasporas and Anglo-Saxon studies, before being massively reappropriated by elites of the African diaspora. It aims at thinking a positive and mobilizing project for Afrodescendants in the context of globalization, building a new form of Pan-Africanism and a new cosmopolitanism from an African perspective. This ideology of Afropolitanism has become "a cultural instrument of Black political agency in the Metropolis and a metropolitan instrument of self-affirmation for claiming a transnational and hybrid African identity" (Ede 2016, 88). Afropolitanism can be described as a form of cosmopolitanism with African roots (Gehrmann 2015). As a diasporic movement, it claims "mobility between spaces, in the cosmopolitan tradition, as well as digital mobility and visibility through the use of social media" (Gehrmann 2015). In its initial vision of the concept, as it has been theorized by Achille Mbembe (2014), Afropolitanism is relevant for both the diaspora and for Africa. In his definition, Mbembe

highlights fluidity, movement, and itinerancy, associated with Western modernity, as ancient characteristics of the African continent. Therefore, Afropolitanism decentralizes, de-essentializes, and valorizes the continent, eschewing the racializing representations of the continent conveyed by Afropessimist discourses. Moreover, the discourse on Afropolitanism is a continuation of an older debate initiated by Pan-Africanism, which originally aimed to consider ways in which Africans could unite to impose their presence in the world and their own vision of the continent's future. In this sense, Afropolitanism is in line with Césaire's Negritude, but it seeks to go beyond the unique identification with Africa and its racial referent to adapt it to the current context of globalization, which is characterized by the multiplication of flows and the fluidity of identifications. It thus aims to go beyond a differentialist discourse in an attempt to place Africanness within a more universalist project, in ways not unlike the "rooted cosmopolitanism" of Appiah (2006). Thus, Afropolitanism presents itself as a "mobilizing utopia" for Africa (Awondo 2014, 118),[2] building up a positive image of a continent that is well integrated into globalization.

According to Mbembe, Afropolitanism offers Afrodescendants a way out of nationalism through "a postracial conception of citizenship" (Mbembe 2013, 342), which makes it possible to include Africans born outside Africa in this emancipatory project, while still offering them a future in Africa. This is how Mbembe defines Afropolitanism more precisely, distinguishing it from the differentialist philosophy of Negritude and even from Pan-Africanism:

> Afropolitanism is not the same thing as Pan-Africanism or Negritude. Afropolitanism is a stylistics, an aesthetics, and a certain poetics of the world. It is a way of being in the world that refuses, as a matter of principle, any form of victimized identity—which does not mean that it is unaware of the injustices and violence that the law of the world has inflicted on this continent and its people. It is also a political and cultural stance in relation to nation, race, and the question of difference in general. Insofar as our states are pure inventions (and recent ones, moreover), they have, strictly speaking, nothing in their essence that compels us to worship them—which does not mean that we are indifferent to their fate. (Mbembe 2013, 342)

By refusing to confine Afrodescendants to a racial or ethnic category or to construct an identity that would refer only to the nation-state, Afropolitanism

2. Translations of quotations originally in French are my own.

aims at thinking about what it means to be African in a world "where worlds circulate," and about ways to "signal to the world from Africa while avoiding the fetishism of 'race' or what Mbembe calls the 'nativist reflex'" (Mbembe 2014, cited in Awondo 2014, 112), which according to Mbembe characterized the philosophies of Negritude. The question facing Afrodescendants today, according to him, is therefore no longer to return to an African essence or a reified Negro soul, as in the past, but to move on to something else in order to overcome a tragic past of slavery and colonialism that has left its scars in the present. Thus, for Mbembe, the construction of a new African persona can only be achieved through a permanent process of identity remodeling marked by cultural hybridization.

Although it emerged in the field of social sciences, this concept of Afropolitanism—and its derivative *Afropolitan*—has since been subject to multiple reappropriations and resignifications by the Afrodescendant elites of the diaspora, mainly in the fields of urban culture, the arts (painting, literature, music), and fashion. The Afropolitan label has gradually been commodified as a brand for commercial purposes, the political significance of which is not always obvious. This is demonstrated by the existence of many Internet sites, magazines, and fashion products, particularly clothing, bearing this label. Thus, another definition of Afropolitanism as a lifestyle (or a way of life) associated with an Afrodescendant and cosmopolitan elite has gradually emerged in the field of aesthetic and cultural production. It was popularized by the Ghanaian-born writer Taiye Selasi in a chronicle that became famous in the Pan-African diaspora milieu, titled "Bye-Bye Babar: or What Is the Afropolitan?" (Selasi 2005). For this author, Afropolitanism means "a form of African presence in the world" (Awondo 2014, 110):

> They [read: we] are Afropolitans—the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you. You'll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes, e.g. Ghanaian and Canadian, Nigerian and Swiss; others merely cultural mutts: American accent, European affect, African ethos. Most of us are multilingual: in addition to English and a Romantic or two, we understand some indigenous tongue and speak a few urban vernaculars. There is at least one place on The African Continent to which we tie our sense of self: be it a nation-state (Ethiopia), a city (Ibadan), or an auntie's kitchen. Then there's the G8 city or two (or three) that we know like the

> backs of our hands, and the various institutions that know us for our famed focus. We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world. (Taiye Selasi, quoted in Awondo 2014, 110)

Here we have the elements that constitute the semiotic register of Afropolitanism as an elitist and cosmopolitan lifestyle, characterized by hybridity through the mixing of styles, origins, and languages; geographical mobility; membership in the higher social categories of the population; consumption of cultural products associated with the elite; claims of a transational identity ("Africans of the world"). Being multicultural, multilingual, and hybrid, Afropolitans are no longer attached only to Africa, but feel at home everywhere. They willingly adopt the accent commonly used in the Western country where they live, as well as the Western lifestyle of the environment where they reside. This is an important shift in the definition of belonging for these people of African origin, who try to move beyond the reifying issues of race and nationalism, the essentializing dichotomy between self and other, and other conventional categories. While living in the big cities of the Global North, the Afropolitans would thus remain attached to their African roots through a specific place, history, language, and activities, without identifying exclusively with this unique geographical reference.

However, despite the critical potential of Afropolitanism and its aspiration to propose a positive image of Africa, many authors find the commodification of the term as a brand and the elitist tendencies of the Afropolitan lifestyle to be problematic. Indeed, it tends to marginalize the larger population of Black migrants, who do not possess symbolic capital and therefore lack the same social and class mobility as Afropolitans. Many detractors denounce the overrepresentation of the commercial dimension of Afropolitanism in fashion, music, and the arts in general, but also the overvaluation of style and aesthetics, which drown out the original political dimension of the Afropolitan project (Bhabha 1994; Santana 2015; Dabiri 2016; Ede 2016; Gehrmann 2016). In so doing, Afropolitanism masks the persistent postcolonial power relations between the North and the South and excludes millions of Africans from its political project of emancipation. Thus, in one of the most important texts in the critique of Afropolitanism, the sociologist Emma Dabiri (2016) explains that the concept of Afropolitanism "runs the risk of a critique similar to that addressed to the second wave of feminism, which failed to analyse the privileges of middle-class White women while claiming to speak on behalf of all women" (Awondo 2014, 115–16). Dabiri virulently criticizes "rapacious consumerism" and the centrality of capitalism as indicated by the overrepresentation of fashion and

style in Afropolitanism, revealing the participation of this ideology in the "global Blackness trade" (Dabiri 2016, 105). This hyperfocus on the commodification of Africa and style displaces the political discourse on race, modernity, and identity proposed by Mbembe. Dabiri also denounces the affinities that Afropolitanism has with the discourses of international monetary and economic institutions. This new fluid and hybrid African identity, which is opposed to Afropessimist discourse, is associated with consumerism and luxury industries, and thus, according to Dabiri, recalls the celebration of African dynamism and growth promoted by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Furthermore, she argues, the account of "Rising Africa" in the Western media is a form of support for Afropolitanism that would adorn this ideology with the veneer of "liberal innocence" (Dabiri 2016, 105). However, the neoliberal policies advocated by the IMF and the World Bank, with their structural adjustment plans, only produce and strengthen a dual world economy, marked by significant contrasts between the richest and the poorest; and Afropolitanism, far from questioning this status quo, would on the contrary tend to strengthen it (cf. Bhabha 1994). In this regard, Dabiri recalls Frantz Fanon's warning in *The Wretched of the Earth* (2004 [1961]) that the decadent national elites were supported by the bourgeoisies of the North: "In its decadent aspect, the national bourgeoisie gets considerable help from the Western bourgeoisie, which happens to be among the tourists infatuated with exoticism" (Fanon, quoted in Dabiri 2016, 105). Afropolitanism would thus be nothing more than a paradigm of global neoliberalism, which aims to commodify Black culture or Blackness and which would respond to the desires of Westerners wishing to consume a Black culture that is "more authentic, more virgin" (Dabiri 2016, 105). Thus, for many critics, Afropolitanism cannot be the dominant narrative of Africa's achievements, and Afropolitans cannot make the narrative of the achievements of a privileged minority the narrative of the whole Africa when a majority of Africans do not benefit from their material conditions of existence. By draining it of its original political and critical potential, the commodification of the term Afropolitanism has created "a gap between the culture of Afropolitanism and the politics it aims to engender" (Ede 2016, 88).

Thus, as a form of cosmopolitanism with African roots, which claims geographical and digital mobility for Afrodescendant people while deessentializing and valorizing the continent (Gehrmann 2015), the semiotic register of Afropolitanism acquires its social values by contrast with the Afropessimist register in the postcolonial symbolic economy. It indexes a form of mobile and elite Blackness, which contrasts with a marginalized and less socioeconomically privileged Blackness. Therefore, through the enactment of diverse linguistic,

discursive and nonlinguistic signs belonging to this register, Black people can index different social values associated with a cosmopolitan, modern, and elite African persona, which shares some social features ideologically associated with a dominant form of Whiteness.

In the following analysis of YouTube videos of the Gala Exception event, I will show how the entextualization of images of social success of the Afrodescendant community through these Afropolitan performances is a form of symbolic whitening: it contributes to the enregisterment of the Afropolitan persona as a form of socially mobile and elite Blackness. Thus, it enables Black actors to symbolically subvert the racial system by identifying with White upper classes while distinguishing themselves from less privileged African French immigrants.

Whitening by Physical Appearance: The Construction of Legitimate Racialized Bodies through the Performance of International Business Leaders' Bodily Hexis

In the entextualized images of the Gala event, through the public performances of an Afropolitan style, Black bodies are constructed as legitimate bodies associated with the socially dominant world of international business leaders (Boni-Le Goff 2016, 162).[3] I will show how the entextualization in these images of different signs of dominant bodies in relation to space contributes to the symbolic whitening of the actors' racialized bodies and to the enregisterment of the Afropolitan persona as a form of elite Blackness.

At the beginning of the video, the association's logo shows the racialized actors' cosmopolitanism, while pointing out the entrepreneurial ambition of the association. We can see a circle, which evokes both a basketball and the globe. The basketball probably symbolizes the RésAfrique All Star, a basketball tournament. After the Gala Exception, this tournament is the association's second flagship event, and it symbolizes the union of Afrodescendants through the sporting celebration. Inside the globe, there is a tree that represents Africa. The entextualization of these two visual signs indicates the political positioning of the association: it shows the African continent at the center of the world, an agent of its destiny, and that, far from being located on the periphery of the world, this continent is fully inserted into globalization. The metaphor of the circle also suggests the idea of a global network of Afrodescendants. Next to the circle,

3. By "legitimate bodies," Isabel Boni-Le Goff means "bodies that are socially constructed as—implicit or explicit—references and that participate in the differentiation and the hierarchy between social groups" (2016, 159).

in capital letters, we can read the name of the association with an ivory pearl inside the first letter, echoing the tree, and also symbolizing Africanness. Finally, below the name of the association, the slogan is indicated in English: "build your network, build your future." The use of an English slogan again refers to the integration of Black people in a globalized world. It also points out their integration into the world of international business and start-ups, because it relies on a voluntarist logic based on neoliberal ideology.

In addition, the geographical location of the setting, the Vianey Bercy space in the twelfth arrondissement of Paris, signals the identification of the actors with a class of executives and economic leaders: this place is located in the heart of a business district, not far from the French Ministry of Finance. It usually offers top-of-the-line services for various receptions such as seminars, fashion shows, weddings, bourgeois rallies, or business dinners. In the video, the setting of the event is highlighted by a tightened view of the Haussmanian-style building façade. We can also see images of the entrance hall and of the conference room. The luxury of the place is embodied in the golden chandeliers adorned with stones; the marble staircases, surrounded by marble columns; and in the furniture of the conference room, the chairs with golden arms and feet, covered with red velvet.

Besides the place of the Gala, the clothing and body styles of the racialized actors play an important role in the performance of an Afropolitan semiotic register, which is constructed as an upper-class and elite style. Nevertheless, I will show that the differentiation of clothing and body styles according to gender is also an important factor in this collective performance. We know the distinctive role of clothing for members of the dominant classes, where "concern for appearance" (Bourdieu 1979, 664) and control of dress generally distinguish them from members of the working classes. This is shown by the large proportion of their budget upper-class members reserve for clothing and presentation expenses. A sign of

Figure 1. Logo of RésAfrique

Figure 2. Hall of the Gala Exception

respectability and class distinction, and a mark of a desire for social elevation, clothing is often also "one of the central places of the social construction of gender difference" (Barbier et al. 2016, 659).

Indeed, if we look at the bodily hexis of the women in the video, we notice that they appear to be scantily clad and more eroticized than men. First, their outfits borrow from relatively ritualized elements of the female cloakroom (skirts or dresses instead of pants, high heels shoes, jewellery, visible makeup). Most women wear evening clothing that they could not wear at work, and that shows compliance with a upper-class femininity. In addition to the elegance of the outfits, the luxurious jewellery (necklaces and earrings often made of gold or silver, beautiful watches) indicate that these women belong to the upper classes. Besides, there is a great variety of colors not only from one outfit to another, but also within one outfit, wether they are very bright (red, . . .) or more discreet (beige, pastel, . . .). Finally, women are more often dressed in an African style than men, according to the "Made in Africa" hybrid fashion, which consists in mixing fabrics indexing African origins (like wax, batik, or bogolan) with a Western cut. Women wear either a whole outfit, or only a part of it (the top, the skirt), or an accessory, for example wearing a belt made in African fabrics over a dress made in a Western style.

Second, the hair styles of these women also reflect a body discipline associated with upper-class hexis. Indeed, most of them have their hair straightened or relaxed, or they wear synthetic weavings or braids. These hair styles correspond to the most common hair practices among Afrodescendant women, not only in

France but also in most Western countries; they are also very widespread in Africa, especially in large cities. However, these hair practices are all governed by the dominant and western-centric standard of smooth textured hair (see Oyedemi 2016 regarding South Africa, and see Thompson 2009a and b regarding the United States and Canada). They have the effect of erasing the racial stigma of frizzy and curly African hair by replacing "a symbol of stigma (frizzy hair)" with a "symbol of status and social prestige (straight hair)" (Sméralda 2012, 21). Thus styled, these women show bodies that conform to Western beauty standards and to a dominant image of Whiteness.

Finally, the slimness of these women's bodies is another salient indication of the conformity of their bodily hexis to a dominant and upper-class femininity. Thinness is, with few exceptions, the dominant body norm of the group observed in the video. However, this is a gender and class norm: indeed, not only has the ideal of slimming become a very significant norm for women in France since the end of the 19th century (see Carof 2016, 471–72), but slimness also points to a body discipline associated with the upper classes. The slimness of these racialized women's bodies demonstrates that they belong to the upper classes all the more because they deviate from dominant body norms within the group of Afrodescendant women. Indeed, "Black women defend different body norms than White women" (Carof 2016, 472–73). Because curves are more acceptable within their racial group, Black women tend to use weight loss diets less frequently and to have a higher average weight than White women. This corpulence can be a factor of racial discrimination, thus legitimizing their exclusion from the public sphere and qualified professions (Carof 2016, 473). Therefore, the slimness of the bodies of these Afrodescendant women observed during the Gala can be interpreted as a sign of social distinction that differentiates them from other socioeconomically marginalized Black women, while bringing them closer to upper-class White women. Slimness contributes, in conjunction with the other physical signs identified, to making these Black women legitimate in their occupation of high-status social positions.

Just as women display a style in line with dominant, White femininity, bodily whitening for men involves wearing suits that signal their positions as business leaders while indicating the effectiveness and the dynamism of young company managers. They wear a suit with a tie or bow tie, and some also wear a small silk scarf placed in the right chest pocket. Some also wear tie clips, a sign of distinction in the ruling classes and among senior corporate executives. This practice of "distinction" (Bourdieu 1979) allows male subjects to display their social position as racialized economic actors of the dominant social class by showing their

Figure 3. Women at the Gala

proximity to White senior executives and managers. Their clothing style also refers back to a political conception of elegance inherited or inspired by Black postcolonial elites in Africa and in its diaspora, through fashion styles like *la Sape*. Born from the colonial period, *la Sape* is a critical imitation of the elite clothing style of the former White colonizer among poor, working-class, young Congolese men. It consists in "ostentatiously [displaying] very expensive branded garments produced by the world's most prestigious fashion designers" (Ayimpam and Tsambu 2015, 117), in order to challenge race and class hierarchies by performing an elite and Western bodily style (Bazenguissa 1992).

Figure 4. Models at the Gala after a show

Unlike women, who were wearing eroticizing outfits, men still wear, with very few exceptions, a closed and buttoned jacket covering their arms. This behavior is characteristic of male propriety in the business world and of a "business masculinity" (Lagneau-Ymonet 2007), which is itself associated with "privilege masculinity"—that is, "white, civilized, and dominant (in terms of class, but also nationality, color, religion and race)" (Achin and Dorlin 2008, 24). In terms of the colors of their outfits, unlike women, most of the men are dressed in the same shades: black and white or dark blue, light blue, and white (for shirts or pants). In terms of their hairstyles, the men all have very short, shaved hair, which erases the racial marker of frizzy and curly hair. Finally, in terms of weight and corpulence, while the norm for men is still slimming the body as for women, there is more variability here, and many of them may have a slightly larger than average corpulence. This distinction between men and women in terms of weight also indexes a socially constructed gender differentiation: indeed, "if the 'strong' woman reflects an image that is too masculine, the 'strong' man refers to the positively masculine man, weight being used as a marker of physical strength," and the tolerance threshold for being overweight is generally higher for men than for women in Western societies (Carof 2016, 472).

Figure 5. Men and women at the Gala

Figure 6. Men and women at the Gala

Thus, the process of symbolic whitening through bodily style involves, in both men and women, imitating a higher-class and elite bodily hexis that signals their social position as economic leaders. This bodily whitening is part of the performance of an Afropolitan style which symbolically indexes the social success of the whole Afrodescendant community: it aims to deconstruct postcolonial and racializing images of Black bodies which depict them negatively as "abnormal," "sick," "exotic," or "slave bodies" (Hall 1997; Blanchard 2006). In so doing, these racialized subjects attmept to erase the symbolic boundaries of skin color by showing signs of belonging to the upper economic classes and to the world of private companies. This portrayal of the social and material success of Afrodescendant people contrasts with the images of poverty and misery that are often associated with people of Afrodescendant origin (the African "immigrants") in the mainstream media. Nevertheless, despite its critical dimension, this bodily hexis reproduces gender norms, which limits the emancipatory goals of these performances; indeed, through the gender differentiation of body styles among these racialized people, one can find "the sediment of a clothing history that intersects with a history of gender relations, the man's suit being associated with the 'official power' and the fantasy of clothing with subordinate roles" (cf. Hollander 1994, cited by Mesgarzadeh 2017, 448). Women therefore appear more as aestheticized and eroticized objects than men, according to a ritualization of femininity (Goffman 1978) which places them in imbalance with regard

to men's postures and bodies by making them appear more often in assisted or subordinate positions and which reproduces, in contrast, a dominant image of masculinity.

We have just seen how the process of whitening by physical appearance allows Black men and women to show "bodies that are legitimate in terms of gender [class] and race" (Boni-Le Goff 2016, 164). All the observed signs in this collective performance (the association's logo, the location, the bodily hexis of the Black actors) are part of a "symbolic apparatus" (Goffman 1959) which contributes to the enregisterment of the Afropolitan persona as a form of elite and privileged Blackness. Now, I will show to what extent music, dance, and fashion shows also play an essential role in the enregisterment of the Afropolitan persona.

The Art of "Vernacular Cosmopolitanism": Music, Fashion, and Dance Shows as Indexes of a Modern, Transnational, and Hybrid Pan-African Identity

Through the multiple artistic performances of a "vernacular cosmopolitanism" (Bhabha 1994) with African roots, racialized subjects contribute to the enregisterment of a modern and cosmopolitan Africa, fully integrated into the globalized economy of the "new world society" (Ferguson 2002). Therefore, these images implicitly deconstruct negative images of Africa as the "dark continent," marked by archaism or tradition and rejected by the modern world (cf. Ferguson 2006). These images also enregister the Afropolitan figure as an index of a transnational and hybrid Pan-African identity.

Background Music

First, the background music chosen for the Gala Exception video is invested with specific meanings in the context of this performance. Both the mixture of music styles that differentially index Africa and the Western world, and the mixing of African languages with English and French, contribute to the construction of a modern and cosmopolitan Africa. This Pan-African ideology is also part of the semiotic register of Afropolitanism. Indeed, the background music is a song by the Cameroonian singer Reniss, titled "Afrikan Luv." This Cameroonian singer is very famous in French-speaking Africa. Musically speaking, this song is in the Afropop style, a hybrid style that mixes the sounds of electronic music and pop with African rhythms. On the linguistic level, hybridity is marked by the mixing of several languages: English, Pidgin, French, and Negumba. Moreover,

the message of Reniss's song "Afrikan Luv" indexes the Pan-African ideology of the association. Indeed, the song speaks of an African girl's love for her family (her father, brother, sister, and mother). The song is also about maternal love, paternal love, brotherly love, and a husband's love for his wife and vice versa. Indeed, in the song, the speaker says, from the beginning, how exceptional her father and then her mother are, while declaring them her filial love:

Lyrics	Translation
Daddy you of a kind	Dad, you're exceptional
No man no deh like you	there's no one like you
Daddy you give me life	Dad, you gave me life
No man no deh like you	there's no one like you
A waka waka up and down	I go up, I go up and I go down
A no see no man like you	There's no one like you
You are one of a kind ooo	You're exceptional ooo
Mami I miss you chai	Mom, I miss you
Cuz no man no deh like you	because there's no one like you
Mami you make me smile	Mom, you make me smile
I'm happy when I'm with you	I'm happy when I'm with you
A waka waka up and down	I go up, I go up, I go down
A no see no man like you	there's no one like you
You are one of a kind oooh	You are exceptional

In the chorus of the song, the speaker also addresses her love declaration to her brother, sister and even to her lover. She introduces the adjective "African," which implies a generalization and an inclusion of the subject into a broader Pan-African community, beyond her restricted family and relatives:

Lyrics	Translation
No other man no deh like ma brother	There's no one who looks like my brother
My Afrikan brother	My African brother
No man no sweet like my sister	There's no one as sweet as my sister
My Afrikan Lover	My African lover
No other man no deh like ma Papa	There's no one who looks like my daddy
My Afrikan Papa	My African father
No other man no sweet like my Mama	There's no one who looks like my mommy
My Afrikan lover	My African lover

The entextualization of this song, which could be understood in a metaphorical sense as the expression of love for one's family or African community, therefore has a symbolic meaning in this video. It can be used to convey RésAfrique's message, that of building a united Pan-African community. The video would

then also serve to stage this union of a Pan-African diaspora that appears here as "beautiful," "young," and "dynamic," to take up the positive axiologies regularly used by Matthieu, the President of RésAfrique, when he qualifies both the African diaspora and Africa as a symbolic entity in his public speeches.

Moreover, the emphasis on the exceptional nature of the people (the phrase "no see no man like you" is repeated several times) also metaphorically indicates the exceptional nature of the event (the Gala Exception) and of the people who are present and who stand for the elite of the African diaspora, whom Matthieu frequently categorizes as "diaspora talents" (as this event of the Gala Exception must bring together the talents of the Pan-African diaspora).

Finally, the mixing of languages, like the hybridization of musical style, places this song in a form of hybridity between signifiers associated with Africa (the Pidgin language and Negumba, which indicate the Cameroonian locality, and African rhythms and sounds) and Western or more international signifiers (English and French as well as electronic music and pop sounds). This double hybridization (both linguistic and musical) contributes to the enregisterment of an Afropolitan style which symbolically inscribes these racialized actors into the interstitial space of "vernacular cosmopolitanism" (Bhabha 1994). Like the song I have just analyzed, fashion shows and dance performances also contribute to the construction of an Afropolitan semiotic register by indexing a modern, transational, and hybrid Pan-African identity.

Fashions Shows

First, the two shows display the African print which characterizes the international Made in Africa fashion. The entextualization of an African fabric, and especially of wax, represents for Afrodescendant people a major semiotic resource in the enregisterment of a modern, positive, and beautiful Africa. Through this hybrid urban and elite style, racialized actors mobilize a set of signifiers indexing an authentic Africanness in order to promote a collective narrative of continental success and to sell this Africanness to African and (mostly) White middle- and upper-class audiences, not only in Africa but also in Western countries.

During the fashions shows at the Gala event, the models, the vast majority of whom are Afrodescendent women and men with dark or lighter skin, march in outfits that are partially made in an African fabric. The garment is often worn with other garments, made up in the Western style, both in terms of fabric and cut. The fabric and patterns used to index Africanness are not always visible throughout the whole outfit, but they are often mixed up with Western fabrics and clothing with variation from one outfit to another.

For instance, at the beginning of the fashion show for the brand Custom and Co, we see a woman wearing a Western-style white shirt, half-open at the neckline, and denim mini-shorts on which is sewn, in front on the left thigh and behind on the right pocket, a colorful motif printed in wax, contrasting with the two-tone style (white and blue jeans) of Western clothing. In the Make Me Proud fashion show later in the Gala, we find the same hybrid style (fig. 8). This latter brand aims to promote the Made in Africa style and make it accessible through its various creations: ready-to-wear, accessories, paintings, organic cosmetics, and organic tea. The very name of the brand indicates the project to promote African "pride" through artistic creation and to erase the social stigma of black skin, according to the strategy of stigma reversal (Spivak 1988). In addition to the hybridization through clothing style, the choice of English for the two brand names also indexes the cosmopolitanism of the racialized actors and places this Afropolitan politics of style in the international fashion market.

The entextualized images of these two fashion shows, by displaying clothing that mixes Western and African styles, signals a hybrid, Pan-African identity

Figure 7. Custom and Co fashion show

Figure 8. Make Me Proud fashion show

which is nevertheless valued in its singularity, thus contributing to the enregisterment of the Afropolitan persona as indexing a cosmopolitan and transnational African identity. The same hybridization process of "vernacular cosmopolitanism" can also be observed during the dance performance which took place at the end of the Gala.

Dance Performance

The performance of the group of dancers Paradox-Sal, which follows the fashion shows, is also characteristic of an Afropolitan style. This group of dancers regularly returns to the RésAfrique association's flagship events. They notably returned for a new performance at the basketball tournament, the RésAfrique All Star, in May 2014.

Created in 2012, this Afrofeminist hip-hop dance group brings together sixteen young Afrodescendant, Black, or mixed-race dancers, aged twenty to twenty-eight, from different countries including France, England, Russia, the Netherlands, and others. Renowned in the international hip-hop dance world,

the group regularly performs in France and abroad at many prestigious international events, such as the San Francisco International Hip Hop DanceFest. Their dances and music styles are marked by hybridity: they mix different styles of dance performed to the rhythms of Afrohouse, a hybrid music style that mixes signifiers indexing Westernness and Africanness by combining electronic music with traditional and ancestral music from Africa. Afrohouse is a musical movement that emerged in Africa and the Indian Ocean at the end of the first decade of the 2000s among disc jockeys (DJs). It is characterized by an obsessive beat marked by synthesizers, bass, drums, percussion, traditional African instruments, and African rhythms and songs, all elements that characterize popular African music, as well as sound effects. It was born from the meeting of American house music and Afrodance, as well as African dance music (coupé-décalé, ndombolo, kuduro, funana, maloya, azonto, naija music, séga, zouglou, salegy, makossa, kwaito, coladeira, mapantsula, batuque, pantsula, kizomba, pandza music, etc.).[4] Therefore, the entextualization of this transnational hybrid signifier (Afrohouse music) during the dance shows, as well as during the fashion shows, contributes to the performance of an Afropolitan style.

This mixture of styles constitutes the group's trademark and gives it its name: the word *paradox* metaphorically indexes this vernacular cosmopolitanism. Thus, in the press brochure, the description of the group's musical and dance style highlights its hybridity and makes more explicit the indexical meaning of the group's name:

Original text (in French)	Translation
C'est aussi dans les styles de danse représentés par le groupe qu'on retrouve le paradoxe (Locking, Jazz, Popping, Hype, Dancehall, Danse contemporaine, House, Waacking, Hip-Hop . . .).	It is also in the dance styles represented by the group that we find the paradox (Locking, Jazz, Popping, Hype, Dancehall, Contemporary dance, House, Waacking, Hip-Hop . . .)

Besides the hybrid dance and musical styles, the hybrid clothing style of the dancers is also an index of the Afropolitan persona they were performing during the gala. Indeed, the dancers were wearing a pink T-shirt in wax print over a black boxer shirt, with patterns on the wax shirt indexing Africanness in the

4. See http://www.afrisson.com/Afro-house-16219.html and http://proudpeople.fr/l-afro-house-quand-l-afrique-rencontre-l-electro/. Originally categorized as "tribal house," Afrohouse was originally created by European DJs who selected traditional African songs, then included some extracts in their mixes according to the popular sample principle, or built songs inspired by the rhythms of these songs. Today, the Afrohouse scene is being reappropriated by African artists themselves, who design their own songs, then dances, and no longer just samples. Although this style has been spreading in Europe and America for the past ten years, it is mainly South Africa that is at the origin of this phenomenon.

Made in Africa style. This clothing style is a sign of their integration into the globalized space of Afropolitan fashion and an index of their hybrid and Pan-African identity.

As the Afropolitan semiotic register combines different signs indexing a cosmopolitan persona with African roots, the reference to an idealized Africanness, referred to as the "past," the "tradition," the "roots," or the "basics," is repeatedly highlighted in the discursive construction of the group's style. For instance, on the group's website, the following statement can be found in their press kit:

Original text (in French)	Translation
L'objectif était en effet de réunir des danseuses capables de puiser dans leur passé, aussi bien artistique que culturel pour développer et donner une autre dimension à leur danse à travers l'AFRO HOUSE SPIRIT qui représente aujourd'hui la passerelle entre les musiques traditionnelles et ancestrales d'Afrique et l'ELECTRO en pleine émergence et en constante évolution.	The objective was indeed to bring together dancers able to draw on their both artistic and cultural past, in order to develop and to give another dimension to their dance through the AFRO HOUSE SPIRIT, which today represents the bridge between the traditional and ancestral music of Africa and the ELECTRO in full emergence and in constant evolution.

This quotation emphasizes the importance of the idealized African referent in the artistic project of the group ("artistic and cultural past," "afro house spirit," the "traditional and ancestral music of Africa"). Through the metaphor of the bridge, it highlights the link between Westernness, associated with modernity, on the one hand, and Africanness, associated with tradition, on the other hand.

Similarly, in the biography of the choreographer, which presents him as the founding father of Afrohouse, we can also find the valorization of the African referent, which is referred to as the "roots," the "Senegalese-Malian origins" of the choreographer, the "traditions," and the "sources." In this discourse, the African continent is built as a central imaginary resource in the artistic creation of the individual. Additionally, the description of the choreographer's style insists again on the mixing of this African referent with Western signifiers (house and electro music), as in this extract:

Original text (in French)	Translation
Babson se définit surtout par son attachement à ses racines. C'est de ses origines sénégalo-maliennes qu'il puise son inspiration. Lors de ses nombreux voyages en Afrique (notamment en Afrique du Sud avec la création « Transe »), il commence à	Babson is defined above all by his attachment to his roots. It is from his Senegalese-Malian origins that he draws his inspiration. During his many travels in Africa (especially in South Africa with the creation "Transe"), he

mélanger la house aux danses traditionnelles (sabar, pantsula . . .). Il développe alors le concept d'Afro House mélangeant fondations et traditions. Cette volonté d'un retour aux sources se retrouve dès lors dans la plupart de ses créations comme dans « Motherland » (quatuor qu'il développe en 2012 sur le thème de l'Afrique).	began to mix house with traditional dances (sabar, pantsula . . .). He then developed the concept of Afro House, mixing foundations and traditions. This desire to return to his roots is therefore reflected in most of his creations, such as "Motherland" (a quartet he developed in 2012 on the theme of Africa).

Therefore, in the dance performances of the group Paradox-Sal, as well as in the two fashion shows analyzed above, the entextualization of different hybrid signifiers (the Afrohouse music, the Made In Africa clothing style, the dance styles), along with the promotion of Africa as an imaginary referent during these performances of an Afropolitan style, contribute to the symbolic enregisterment of a cosmopolitan and African persona in the globalized economy, while indexing the transcendence over a single national identification in favor of a Pan-African identity.

Conclusion

By approaching these images of the Gala event as a "total semiotic fact" (Nakassis 2016), I have shown how the entextualization of different interrelated semiotic

Figure 9. The Paradox-Sal dance show

pratices and signs (the place, the Afrocentric globe, the international business-class hexis, the deployments of English, the consumption of hybrid Pan-African cultural productions, the display of a strong proximity to the world of haute couture and luxury with the Made In Africa fashion) builds up a coherent semiotic register of the Afropolitan persona, which is enregistered as a form of socially mobile and privileged Blackness. This Afropolitan style is part of a semiotic process of symbolic whitening which enables racialized subjects to showcase the social success of their Afrodescendant community and their integration into the globalized economy through public demonstrations of luxury and material abundance. These semiotic strategies are part and parcel of the "material cultures of success" (Rowland 1996), meaning the modern consumer practices in postcolonial Cameroon and in its diaspora: indeed, the appropriation and display of material attributes of success, and in particular consumer practices indexing personal success, are part of "body politics" or "political body" strategies that allow Cameroonian people to appear as "modern and yet African" (Rowlands 1996, 204). Therefore, the exhibition of this "material culture of success" that is the Afropolitan politics of style enables racialized actors to produce "a [collective] narrative of oneself as *someone who has something*" (Fouquet 2011, 514). This narrative, through the enregisterment of the counterimage of an empowered and successful Africa, aims to erase as much as possible the stigma of backwardness and misery which is largely associated with African people in dominant public discourses. Indeed, these entextualized images of aestheticized and socially dominant Black bodies contrast with neocolonial and reifyied images of otherized, inferiorized, and negatively marked Black bodies ("abnormal body," "sick body," "exotic body or slave body;" cf. Blanchard 2006). This collective narrative of the self, through a repeated "stylisation" of bodily acts (Butler [1990] 1999), aims at denaturalizing dominant ethnoracial norms that regulate the perception of these racialized bodies by Western Others.

Furthermore, this account of the enregisterment of the Afropolitan figure through these entextualized images illustrates the principle of mutually entangled enregisterment processes, where each figuration relies on contrasts established at a prior and higher level of distinction. Indeed, the partial whitening of metropolitan French Afrodescendants relies on the mutually contrastive enregisterment of Blackness and Whiteness on the one hand, and of class distinctions on the other hand: the enregisterment of the Afropolitan *persona* as a privileged Blackness entails the mutual enregisterment of a contrastive and implicit figure, the common African immigrant, as a less privileged form of Blackness, and at the same time the enregisterment of another figure, the transnational

business leader as a form of dominant Whiteness, to which the Afropolitan persona is assimilated. These class and race distinctions prefigure the recursive enregisterment of the successful Afropolitan as a distinguished form of privileged Blackness, while indexing its transcendance of a single national identity through the performance of a vernacular cosmopolitanism with African roots. Thus, the Afropolitan figure troubles racial and social dichotomies between Blackness and Whiteness (cf. Butler [1990] 1999).

However, if the Afropolitan style can be seen as a temporary carnival or parodic reversal of the racial system, through the affirmation of cosmopolitan hybridity and proximity to the dominant White business class, the political subjectivation it allows is not without ambivalence, and we can observe semiotic traces of the "paradox of subjection" (Butler 1997), meaning the tension between subjection and emancipation. Indeed, while erasing the social stigma of black skin through symbolic whitening, racialized subjects also display compliance with dominant class and gender norms, which limits the subversive scope of their Afropolitan performances. Indeed, while mobilizing their socioeconomic resources in order to challenge ethnoracial norms that inferiorize Black subjects, they reproduce in the same movement an elite style which cannot stand for the majority of the Afrodescendant community. In addition, in terms of bodily and clothing practices, the fact that many women wear African, highly-colorful clothing according to the Made in Africa style—unlike men, who are mostly dressed up in black and white business suits—also shows the reproduction of gendered norms and the limited nature of this bodily subversion that only doubly marginalized subjects in terms of gender and race (Black women) are allowed to perform. Therefore, we can see how, despite their desire to subvert racial classifications, the political subjectivation of Afrodescendant bodies during these public performances is semiotically constituted "through the regulatory normative ideal of a 'compulsive Eurocentrism' [and a compulsive Whiteness]" (Hall 1996, 16) which constrains the agencies of these racialized people and their possibilities for emancipation from postcolonial power relations. By claiming their belonging in the international upper classes, by showing their consumption of luxury cultural products, and by reducing the political to the cultural, these privileged Afropolitans cannot really speak for the "subalterns" (Spivak 1988).

However, it is also worth noting that these scenes acquire an additional significance because they are unfolding in France. The Afropolitan persona does not speak for subalterns elsewhere because it is not attempting to do so. By incorporating some of the semiotic resources of non-African elites into its own hybrid self, the persona of the Afropolitan transnational is indexically selective

of the French elites it addresses as interlocutors. It thereby formulates itself as one elite among others, as a new player who belongs to the world of global commerce and seeks incrementally to transform it.

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