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The Politics of Blackness: Atlantic Worlds Circulations and « Black Consciousness » in Africa

African Sub-Saharan societies, particularly their urban spaces, are shot through with transnational cultural dynamics. However, these links to a "world society" – whether they take the form of musical styles, clothing, languages, or poses and postures – are far from being undifferentiated: they are both selective and elective, and can commonly be identified as part of a popular "black" culture.

From here, a question arises: paraphrasing Stuart Hall, *what is this "black" in* African *popular culture* (Hall, 1992)? In other words, what linkages do African women and men, and urban youth in particular, maintain with the socio-historical and political entity that Gilroy has described as the Black Atlantic (Gilroy, 1993)? How can we empirically investigate meanings and issues – moral, aesthetic, political – which are projected in the process of the domestication of black (European and American) diasporic cultural trends in Africa? How can we analyze these reverberations on the continent, in terms of narratives of *Africanness* that represent alternatives both to models promoted within colonial governmentalities, and to those emerging in the wake of the construction of postcolonial states? More generally, how do African societies think and express their ties with such transnational identities – often articulated in terms of a "black condition" or "*blackness*" – that are strongly asserted today, but still shaped by long-term historical processes?

This special issue of *Politique africaine* focuses on the – complex and ambivalent, often polemical – notion of "blackness". In order not to be confined to an essentialist conception of (black) identities, we will favor approaches that rely on strong empirical and/or historical bases. Our overall aim is thus to achieve a "heuristic reversal": while notions of blackness have been extensively studied from the perspective of the diaspora, they have been largely ignored by scholars in the context of African local dynamics. Moreover, considered from the diaspora, Africa, arguably, is primarily a fantasy and ideological referent – the utopian space that many imagine in order to build their blackness. It is the reversibility of this proposal that holds our attention: cultural trends of "transnational blackness" (Marable and Agard-Jones, 2008), mainly located in the West, yield the imaginary referents from which many young Africans reinvent their relationship to world society, whilst claiming their membership in it. Looking specifically at the success of Hip-hop sounds, clothing and attitudes for instance, should such developments be seen only as a local variant of US cultural hegemony? What specific questions can be asked about African youth in particular: can focuses on blackness, in this context, be regarded as positive ways of reclassifying an *Africanness* that remains negatively and/or condescendingly perceived on a global scale?

The shift in focus that we propose implies that we "think globally". Indeed, notions of blackness such as these have emerged in the diaspora are typically associated with countercultures born in response to a so-called "dominant consciousness", or "whiteness". Thus, we may interrogate the effects of this dominant consciousness on a global scale – by focusing on colonial histories and postcolonial legacies, the globalization of capital, prosperity gaps between West and South, etc. – and the counter-dynamics that it prompts locally.

This investigation will serve to shed light on the production of hierarchies and Otherness, but also to highlight ways of representing oneself and to consider the place one occupies within the broader context of world society. It gives a central place to transnational dynamics, while emphasizing their very specific local effects. These configurations are, in sum, indicative of the cosmopolitics that African youth engage in their interface with both the "Here" and the "Elsewhere". In this respect, we insist on the necessity not to consider this blackness as a new illusory place for the re-enchantment of African societies. Indeed, what draws our attention is primarily the *politics* of blackness, including its implications in terms of generational conflicts, boundary-making within African societies, symbolic struggles and so on. We aim to develop a social, political and cultural mapping of blackness, and to explore the ways in which *blackness* distinguishes itself from the much broader notion of *Africanness*. This special issue will expose and interrogate this critical and dynamic field of study in which blackness is perceived both as a space for contestation and as a contested space.

We propose three provisional lines of thought to be explored in this special issue: blackness as (1) lifestyle, (2) transnational "moral region" and (3) strategic resource.

1. We will first explore the new narratives of *Africanness* that are at play through the affirmation of belonging to a global black identity/consciousness. It is assumed that these narratives are reflected in the evolution of lifestyles, which must be accounted for in their verbal, physical, artistic etc. expressions. Such configurations become intelligible in the light of "politics of style" embodying quite tangible physical, social and political effects. This "cultural stylistic" (Ferguson, 1999) approach, at the crossroads of structural social forces and individual performances, should make it possible to identify and to analyze deep popular aspirations and associated the social dynamics. What new spaces of identity emerge through these performative expressions? Beyond an appetite for what comes from elsewhere (particularly the West), what manner of self-narratives are at work? And what is their critical dimension?

2. By placing this topic in the context of global circulations and related symbolic struggles, the aim is to engage black cosmopolitanism as a very specific "form of reflexivity" (Ulrich Beck). The issue of a dominant consciousness or whiteness may be questioned here in terms of its transnational effects and offshoots. In this regard, a historical approach will help to nuance ideas about the 'newness' of such cosmopolitanism, as these ideas are equally rooted in a long history of *links with* and *debates about* the Other and otherness in African societies. It proves interesting to

reflect upon ways in which black cosmopolitanism itself is fragmented and traversed by centrifugal dynamics that are developed over time. In the case of newly independent Senegal in the sixties for instance, if Senghor insisted on his commitments to certain African-American intellectuals (thinkers and practitioners associated with the Harlem Renaissance, notably), he nevertheless denounced the so-called harmful influence of certain artists, such as James Brown, whom he accused of influencing the youth of his country in negative ways by distancing them from their authentic African cultural references... In other words, the construction of a transnational "fictitious ethnicity" was reinserted and reinterpreted within local class and political struggles (elite/popular, seniors/cadets, etc.).

3. Finally, the issue of blackness deserves to be considered in terms of social and geographical mobility. In other words, can blackness be engaged as a resource? And of what nature, against what constraints, to serve what purpose and in what ways? This approach requires analysis in terms of investment, in the most literal sense: what one might term Black-busi-ness. One may test the idea that African modernity is characterized by a move towards new sites for the expansion of wealth and individual value: from production to consumption (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009). Blackness as a "consumer product" supports the building of a highly valued space of identity, as well as the building of a market whose laws of supply and demand remain to be defined. We hope to identify ways in which people access the resource-dimensions of blackness, especially through individual experiences of transnationalism. Raising the question of social and geographical mobility in relation to black-business brings in a wide range of social fields: religion, arts, sports, tourism, sexuality and seduction, development and associations, intellectual/academic work, etc. Empirical studies will allow insights into the hypothesis that subaltern groups or individuals call upon their sense of transnational belonging in attempts to influence local fields of power. For youth on the African continent, the affirmation of their 'global blackness' may allow the challenging of existing social relations. A sociology of actors and internal power relations in African society will bring nuance to the complexity of patterns of blackness in everyday expressions: who claims blackness, from what positions, under what conditions and for what purposes?

Schedule/deadlines

- 22 December 2013: deadline to submit paper proposals (max. 7000 characters including spaces) to the coordinators (thomas.fouquet@free.fr and bazengui@ehess.fr).

- 8 January 2014: notification to the authors of accepted proposals.

- 18 May 2014: deadline for submission of the full papers by the selected authors to the journal (50 000 characters including blank spaces and notes).

- December 2014: publication of the papers accepted by *Politique africaine*'s editorial board.

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