‘Afropolitan Encounters: Literature and Activism in London and Berlin’ offers important scholarly insights in a local and global context that continues to confront the violence of ethnonationalism and biological essentialism, despite the efforts of scholars, artists, and activists to exercise creative and political agency. Anna von Rath amplifies thinkers and creators who assert Afropolitanism as a refusal to be located, fixed and contained.’

- Adam Haupt, Professor and Director, Centre for Film & Media Studies, University of Cape Town

Afropolitan Encounters: Literature and Activism in London and Berlin explores what Afropolitanism does. Mobile people of African descent use this term to address their own lived realities creatively, which often includes countering stereotypical notions of being African. Afropolitan practices are enormously heterogeneous and malleable, which constitutes its strengths and, at the same time, creates tensions.

This book traces the theoretical beginnings of Afropolitanism and moves on to explore Afropolitan practices in London and Berlin. Afropolitanism can take different forms, such as that of an identity, a political and ethical stance, a dead-end road, networks, a collective self-care practice or a strategic label. In spite of the harsh criticism, Afropolitanism is attractive for people to deal with the meanings of Africa and Africanness, questions of belonging, equal rights and opportunities.

While not a unitary project, the vast variety of Afropolitan practices provide approaches to contemporary political problems in Europe and beyond. In this book, Afropolitan practices are read against the specific context of German and British colonial histories and structures of racism, the histories of Black Europeans, and contemporary right-wing resurgence in Germany and England, respectively.

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AFROPOLITAN ENCOUNTERS

LITERATURE AND ACTIVISM IN LONDON AND BERLIN

ANNA VON RATH

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In 2018, my colleague Sara Morais dos Santos Bruss and I organized the panel “The body as a site of pleasure and pain” for our Research Training Group’s public conference “Minor Cosmopolitan Weekend” at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, Germany. On that occasion, I invited t-shirt artist and activist Isaiah Lopaz to speak at our panel. Lopaz uses white t-shirts and prints racial slurs or microaggressions on them in black letters to open conversations about race and racism. The derogatory content on the t-shirts documents what some white people in Berlin actually say to him. One t-shirt displays the question, “where are you from?” In his TEDx Talk, Lopaz explains that white people have directed the same question in a myriad of variations at him, like “where are you really from?”, “where did you come from before America?”, “where are your parents from?”, “what are your roots?” (2019). The Afropolitan author Taiye Selasi speaks of similar experiences. In the global North, the white majority society often approaches Black people and People of Color with this question, which in many cases serves as a code for “why are you here?” or “will you go back?” (2014).

Encapsulated in as simple a question as “where are you from?” is the implication of unequal distribution of power, resources and opportunities. Within a predominantly white context, a closer look at the question of origins by white interrogators and Black interrogated reveals various, well-established misconceptions. It wrongly implies that the global North should be homogenously white, and it denies People of Color and Black people the right to call these parts of the world home (or one of their homes). This reductive way of thinking ignores that Black presence in the global North and (post-)colonial migration are directly related to European colonial endeavors – or as Ambalavener Sivanandan puts it, “[w]e are here because...
you were there” (Sivanandan in Younge 2018). Moreover, the question tends to speak of surprise that people who are associated with non-white parts of the world might move around as freely as a vast number of white people. It points to an imaginary divide that cosmopolitans, professional travelers, tourists and expats are white, whereas migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are not. This dichotomy supports a reductive perspective of the global North as a desirable destination for people who seek security, education and economic success. At the same time, the white majority society associates Blackness with being forever foreign to the global North, belonging only really to Africa. Blackness, then, becomes interchangeable with African and a whole host of stereotypes. These stereotypes go hand in hand with white people’s prevailing misconceptions of the African continent that are a legacy of European endeavors to legitimize colonialism.

During colonial times, Europeans constructed Africans as others by ascribing an inherent difference or strangeness to the people of a whole continent, and they made hierarchical distinctions on the basis of that ascription. This act of demarcation has had real consequences, because it happened within existing, unequal power structures: those who did and continue to do the othering, white Europeans, speak and act from positions of power, to mark those they deem unlike themselves other and inferior. To bolster the construction of otherness, Europeans practiced scientific racism (“race research”) and were actually looking for physical differences that would legitimize the superiority and inferiority of certain people (Arndt and Ofuatey-Alazard 2011; Conrad 2012). Nowadays, Africa is inadequately represented as poverty ridden, disease carrying, generally backward and, above all, as a singular place in the public consciousness of Europe and North America. These dualistic and simplistic ways of thinking are a legacy of colonial times and deserve even more outspoken questioning.

It is such dualism that is often at the basis of questions like “where are you from?” and Lopaz’s t-shirts express a desire to question precisely these dominant narratives. When organizing the panel for the “Minor Cosmopolitan Weekend,” I already knew not to ask Lopaz certain questions but our different positions clearly resulted in caution on both sides. I thought it wise to let Lopaz know that he would be speaking at an event organized by mostly white people like myself and probably in front of a
mostly white audience. My co-organizer Sara Morais dos Santos Bruss and I also offered to send the questions for the panel beforehand, which Lopaz gladly accepted. He put it nicely in his email to us that he was a little bit suspicious (he said curious) about what it means to ask people of Black African descent to discuss this topic (the body as a site of pleasure and pain). He stressed that for him as an African American living in Europe to talk about his work in connection to what we suggested was heavily loaded.

I may have been involved in increasing his suspicion because in our email conversation leading up to the event I misread his artwork and the photos he takes of himself wearing the t-shirts in different locations in Berlin as performance. On his artist page on Facebook, called Him Noir, Lopaz states that he finds it tiring to do mostly unpaid educational work for white people, all the time. But in preparation for the event (for which he was paid), he took the time to correct me: he does not perform racism; the images he creates are installations. So, my remark must have indicated that I understood his art as a form of public re-enactment of racism when, in fact, racism is performed by white people, for example, when they ask him and other Black people in Germany “where are you from?” The performance of racism is what is done to Lopaz’s body, which is coded and classified as Black/other. Lopaz’s installations serve as an intervention to criticize performances of racism and to signal to other Black people who may be experiencing the same that he sees them (cf. Mohdin 2018). Using his body and the Berlin environment for the installations implies a productive dissolution of the line between art and real life. His work addresses specific experiences in the Berlin context.

For the panel, I invited a second speaker, Linda Gabriel, a Zimbabwean poetry performer. Her poetry addresses issues like women’s health, sexual harassment and female sexual pleasure. It struck me that being a woman myself, it felt much easier to have conversations with Gabriel about her work. We related easily through our shared position as women and only brushed the question of race in the preparation for the event. This shows how similarities can erase lived differences at the same time that people are able to unite on common ground. How to connect over thin threads of similarities without disregarding differences is one of the main concerns
of Afropolitanism and also of this book. This certainly involves acknowledging one’s own mistakes.

Thus, my recounting of organizing this event serves to illustrate the workings of perceived sameness and difference, and how they affect people’s interaction in the contemporary world with its entangled histories. In this book, I offer further insights into dealing with different aspects of one’s own and other people’s identities via the concept of Afropolitanism. In response to the aforementioned problematic inclinations encapsulated in the question “where are you from?”, which include racial bias and a reductive image of Africa(ns), a growing number of mobile people of African descent who frequently cross national borders and challenge common, narrow and limiting ideas of identity and belonging. The concept of Afropolitanism – a compound of African and cosmopolitan – speaks precisely to these problems.

African Studies scholar Susanne Gehrmann points out that “[w]hat distinguishes the Afropolitan from the ‘common cosmopolitan’ is his/her privileged bonding with Africa” (2016: 63) and I would add, in many cases, an awareness of the inequality experienced because of it. The “major” or unmarked cosmopolitanism, in contrast, seems to only encompass *white*, often male, privileged travelers. This notion of cosmopolitanism originates in the Enlightenment and draws on Kantian thought, that is, a normative understanding of the modern subject and an outspoken advocacy of liberalism. The conceptual boundaries of this limited understanding of a cosmopolitanism for the greater good have been probed in recent years and a spectrum from minor to major cosmopolitanisms developed which continues to diversify. Cosmopolitanisms in the plural are “now seen to be as various as the sociohistorical sites and situations of multiple membership from which they emerged and which [are] therefore the business of social sciences like anthropology, sociology and history rather than a topic reserved to political theory and moral philosophy” (Lemos Horta and Robbins 2017: 1). The plurality of cosmopolitanisms comes with a number of agendas; its discussions center on legal, political, philosophical and cultural implications of an increasingly interconnected world. In the case of Afropolitanism, it offers a particular focus on the experience of
mobile Africans. Valérie Orlando asserts optimistically that “Afropolitanism connotes movement forward and becoming something other than the stereotypes associated with the [African] continent as defined by Western, most particularly Euro-American, sociopolitical and economic standards” (2013: 277).

I understand Afropolitanism as an invitation to a dialog about the categorization of people and the borders between them. Through Afropolitanism an interest in a multiplicity of nuanced perspectives of Africanness in relation to mobility and the world at large can be addressed creatively. Accordingly, Afropolitanism finds expression primarily in creative fields such as literature, art and fashion. I begin this book, which covers each of these fields, by acknowledging the heterogeneity that currently characterizes how people understand and use Afropolitanism. Instead of asking what Afropolitanism is, I intend to explore what Afropolitanism does. In the selected instances of Afropolitanism, on which I follow up in the chapters of this book, I show that Afropolitanism can be created as an identity, as a political and ethical stance, as a dead-end road, as networks of people, as a collective self-care practice or as a strategic label. People of African descent make use of Afropolitanism with specific intentions and adapt it to their contexts and spheres of influence. With my analyses, I aim at laying bare the contemporary Afropolitan strategies that react to the immediate political climate here in Western Europe and thus relate my readings of Afropolitanism to Europe’s general swing to the right, the scapegoating of migration as “the mother of all problems” (Eddy 2018) and the (institutional) legacies of colonial history. In my readings of Afropolitanism, I focus on the cities of London and Berlin, sites of a number of projects and activities that have been linked to Afropolitanism and exemplify the Afropolitan strategy to embrace the local, that is, the micro level, the immediate urban context and to relate these to broader, even global concerns. Afropolitanism engages with the complexities of contemporary identities and intervenes in reductive or dualistic thinking patterns manifested in structural inequalities.
Emerging Afropolitanisms

To illustrate my point of departure, I will provide a brief overview of the emergence of Afropolitanism as a global phenomenon. The novelist Taiye Selasi and the political theorist Achille Mbembe are immediately associated with the coinage of the term and its fundamental theorization. Selasi’s short essay “Bye-bye Babar (Or: What is an Afropolitan?)” was published in 2005 in an online magazine with only a handful of issues. Two years later, Mbembe’s similarly short piece “Afropolitanism” was a contribution to an essay collection entitled *Africa Remix – Contemporary Art of a Continent* (2007) that accompanied a touring exhibition of the same name. In spite of the small number of pages, Selasi and Mbembe’s respective pieces have been widely recognized in Africa, Europe and North America. Carli Coetzee notes that in academia, the term’s visibility increased mostly because of its critics (2016: 101), whereas many writers, artists and musicians willingly identify with Afropolitanism (e.g. Minna Salami, Teju Cole, Blitz the Ambassador). There are Afropolitan Meet-Up groups in the UK and the US and a popular Afropolitan magazine in South Africa. Cultural institutions eagerly embraced Afropolitanism in the form of new catchy event slogans. For example, the Houston Museum of African American Culture hosted a symposium on “The New Beat of Afropolitans” and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London invited the public to a massive “Friday Late Afropolitan” event.

This widely spread application of Afropolitanism, as well as Selasi and Mbembe’s different approaches to it, make clear that since its beginnings, Afropolitanism has served different purposes. But even in its variegated appearances, my analyses in the following chapters show that some of Afropolitanism’s core elements – which Selasi and Mbembe introduce – recur. Afropolitanism is a way of understanding and responding to the complexities of today’s globalized world, people’s increased mobility and their experiences from African perspectives. Core ideas that theorists and cultural practitioners repeatedly reconceptualize and negotiate under

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1 Meet-Up is an online platform to meet new people.
the umbrella of Afropolitanism are: Africa, mobility, identity, culture, European colonialism and inequality. These interconnected ideas provide guideposts for thinking through Afropolitanism, but not all of them are always present nor are they used in the same way. I will briefly introduce these never clearly separable core themes of Afropolitanism via Selasi and Mbembe, and they will reappear throughout the book, albeit in different forms. My short overview will point out that Selasi’s Afropolitanism builds on some aspects of earlier theoretical work such as Paul Gilroy’s Black Atlantic, Stuart Hall’s Diaspora Identity and Brent Hayes Edward’s Black Internationalism. Mbembe, on the other hand, introduces Afropolitanism as an alternative to pan-Africanism and African nationalism. Eventually, these two Afropolitanisms do some crucial work of their own in tracing connections between Africa, mobility, identity, culture, European colonialism and inequality, reconceptualizing and renegotiating them.

Selasi uses Afropolitanism as a means to find an appropriate self-definition. As a “brown person” (2005), living mostly in the global North, she counteracts the structural problem of being introduced wrongly over and over again (“Taiye Selasi is a writer from Ghana,” “Taiye Selasi is an American novelist”) by calling herself an Afropolitan. Afropolitanism became her strategy to react to people who see her as a foreigner when she herself feels like a local (2014). Selasi introduces Afropolitanism as an identity that is finally able to capture her sense of self, best summarized as a permanent state of (re-)mixing, hybridization and newness. When she wrote “Bye-bye Babar (Or: What is an Afropolitan?),” she rightly assumed that many people would be able to connect with her ideas (2005). Her Afropolitanism creates a space for people of African descent to celebrate and discuss their shared experiences of (non-)belonging, restrictions and enrichment, which mobility brings about. Having to negotiate what Africa means to them and how to deal with the inequalities that are rooted in misconceptions of the continent creates the premise for the Afropolitan’s connection. A reflection of the meanings of Africa in their lives always includes questioning notions of race, nation and culture and eventually pushes Afropolitans to develop an Afropolitan everyday politics. Selasi uses the term “Afropolitanism” to describe an elite contemporary African diaspora, people who are mostly well educated and who travel voluntarily.
Their class status enables their mobility and through their way of life – mixing different cultural aspects from wherever they are – Afropolitans gain differentiated perspectives and they quickly adapt to different contexts.

Generally speaking, the study of the meanings and expressions of African mobility is not new and has received increasing attention in the past decades. Selasi’s Afropolitanism contributes to the field of Diaspora Studies. By addressing mobility, culture, identity and inequality from an African diasporic vantage point, Selasi’s Afropolitanism specifically calls to mind the theories of Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall and Brent Hayes Edwards. Paul Gilroy’s Black Atlantic takes the transatlantic slave trade as its theoretical starting point. The contemporary African diasporic dispersal across the globe is the consequence of the brutality that Africans experienced in those early encounters with European cultures. Gilroy uses the ships that transported Africans to the Americas as a metaphor for a microcosm of culture and focuses on the routes, rather than the roots, of African cultures. Gilroy’s Black Atlantic describes a webbed network of a diasporic community with different branches, because African cultures developed and transformed at the different ports reached by the ships of the European enslavers (1993). Selasi does not use the transatlantic slave trade as a starting point. Her concept is extremely contemporary; it acknowledges more recent causes for movement, starting in the 1960s when increasing numbers of people “left Africa in pursuit of higher education and happiness” (2005). According to Selasi, the following generations are becoming Afropolitans. While identifying a more recent point of departure than Gilroy, Selasi’s theory retains a focus on mobility and the cultural mixing that resulted from it.

Stuart Hall, similar to Gilroy, emphasizes that diaspora experiences are not defined by purity, but by heterogeneity and diversity. According to Hall, identities are constantly open to contestation and allow for an element of play, which emphasizes the notion of becoming. Hall asserts that identities are “the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past” (1990: 225). Similar to Hall’s playful diaspora aesthetic for responding to entangled histories of movement and using identity as a resource of hope, the Afropolitan generation establishes a distinct Afropolitan aesthetic in search of recognition and as self-affirmation. The self-making of Afropolitan identities is imbued with an implicit faith in the future.
Brent Hayes Edwards’ Black Internationalism further brings to the debate an interest in the notion of gaps. According to Edwards, there are gaps between different parts of the diaspora and a process of linking or connecting across these gaps calls for a practice of articulation. Articulating the gaps, Edwards argues, serves to express difference within unity; the gaps furthermore enable a much wider range of voices to be included and to describe identities in relation (2003). When it comes to gaps, Selasi is more interested in the individualized notion of them, the gaps in a single person’s family history and not between different nodes of the diaspora. But, according to Selasi, the understanding that every person of African descent living in the diaspora has to struggle with a gappy sense of self creates relationality between them or unity across individual difference. Her Afropolitanism subsumes very broadly young, urban, Black professionals with an interest in renegotiating what it means to be African and mobile in the present time.

Only shortly after the publication of Selasi’s essay, Achille Mbembe’s “Afropolitanism” followed. Like Selasi, Mbembe tries to find a new name for a particular group, for the contemporary African creatives, whose work is meaningful for the world at large. He focuses on the African continent rather than the African diaspora. Engaging with the question of who is African, he reasons that earlier intellectual strategies for finding appropriate definitions do not hold anymore. He names influential movements such as anti-colonial nationalism, African socialism and pan-Africanism as Afropolitanism’s predecessors, but to him, their potential has clearly been exhausted (2007: 26). Mbembe positions himself against these earlier movements which were to a large extent racial or national ideologies (Balakrishnan and Mbembe 2016: 30). Instead, Mbembe argues for thinking beyond the national and the racial: he urges his readers to stop reducing Africanness to Blackness, to refrain from propagating only one way of Blackness that elides all differences and to turn away from Enlightenment ideas of fixed homelands. Trusting Mbembe, Afropolitanism does all of this.

According to him, everybody who participates in producing African art and culture becomes Afropolitan, which includes being African. Though the term is still quite young, to Mbembe Afropolitanism is not an entirely new phenomenon. Afropolitanism describes a mobility that is and has always been essential to everybody living on the African continent; people
have always moved across, to and away from the continent (2007: 27). Unlike Selasi, whose contemporary notion of Afropolitanism only considers the last couple of decades and voluntary movement, Mbembe finds forced movement – of which the transatlantic slave trade is an extreme example – as capable of leading to an Afropolitan way of being as well (28). But he remains clear that the triangular trade was only one episode in African history, and it does not need to dominate the narrative. In any form, movement and encounters with other people make the exchange of ideas and goods a natural part of life; Mbembe asserts that people on the African continent have always mixed elements of different cultures, beliefs and ways of being (28). Movement and encounters naturally lead to Afropolitanism’s essential characteristic: a “broad-mindedness,” which enables creative and critical thinking with relevance for local and global contexts (29). To Mbembe, Afropolitanism signifies an ethical way of being African in the world. Notably, he adds that colonization once tried to freeze earlier versions of Afropolitanism, which did not use the name, “[…] with the modern institution of borders” (27). As part of European colonial endeavors, Africans experienced categorization, separation and assignment to certain territories. Afropolitanism still needs to battle the legacies of colonialism and find creative ways of overcoming all kinds of physical and imagined borders.

Afropolitanism, in short, is a term for a mode of existence that both Selasi and Mbembe find attractive for people to embrace. Creatives and activists, travelers and migrants confirm its appeal in their own Afropolitan practices, some of which I will analyze in this book. All expressions of Afropolitanism bear some similarities, but there are noteworthy differences as well, which can already be seen when looking at Selasi and Mbembe who paved the way for the current popularity of Afropolitanism. While both Selasi and Mbembe have different agendas and epistemological approaches, their arguments assemble around African identity, mobility,²

² With its emphasis on mobility, Afropolitanism distinguishes itself from the notion of Black cosmopolitanism introduced by Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo, which focuses much more on world making (Nwankwo 2005).
Introduction

culture, inequality and colonial entanglements. Both of them examine notions of difference and connection in nuanced ways in order to create a dialog and, eventually, a better future. Neither Selasi nor Mbembe presents Afropolitanism as an all-encompassing term for Black people or Africans. Selasi restricts it to the African diasporic (upper) middle-class and Mbembe to the broad-minded mobile class of the African continent. Underlying both approaches is the idea of creating physical and conceptual spaces to which people want to belong or frameworks within which people wish to express themselves. Afropolitanism represents a critical stance towards the self and the contemporary world and may be a way to introduce a new terminology and visibility of African identities, implying particular aesthetics and ethics.

Afropolitanism adds to a small list of African visionary concepts. Afropolitanism, Afrotopia and Afrofuturism all express a demand for a fresh and utopian drive when dealing with Africa, Africanness and global entanglements. I understand this demand to be a critical response to the fact that Africa has had to serve as a projection screen for centuries. Felwine Sarr positions his Afrotopian manifesto in opposition to the double movement in contemporary African discourses: a promising future on the one hand, especially for the corporate world, and crises and catastrophe on the other hand. According to Sarr, Africa’s very own imaginations and metaphors for the future are missing (2019: 11–12). Sarr suggests that these can be found in contemporary African cultural production. Afropolitanism and its relative, Afrofuturism, imagine the impossible, futures in which Black people are not alienated (Bartels et al. 2019: 175). Both genres serve as invaluable sources for the disentanglement of the projections onto Africa and people of African descent as well as for critical reflections on contemporary power dynamics. Specific to Afropolitanism is its focus on mobility and exchange of ideas. Instead of perceiving globalization as an overpowering source of destruction, which launches identity as that which has to be protected (see Ang 2001; Castells 1997), Afropolitanism confidentlyreacts to the challenges of our time with a focus on better futures. Instead of conserving the established order of things and existing ways of life, Afropolitanism embraces a state of becoming and negotiation.
Afropolitanism as a Contemporary Phenomenon in European Metropoles

After the circulation of Selasi and Mbembe’s essays on Afropolitanism, the term has gained visibility mainly through the literary works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Teju Cole, NoViolet Bulawayo and a few other celebrity authors. To add to the ongoing debates of Afropolitanism, I will limit my analyses to the discussion of only two well-established voices, namely Selasi and Mbembe themselves. I will critically explore their versions of Afropolitanism and the gaps between them. Then, I will introduce several other writers, entrepreneurial creatives and cultural institutions who engage with Afropolitanism in their own way, namely Brian Chikwava, Minna Salami and the Victoria and Albert Museum, C. T., the cultural organization Afropolitan Berlin, Isaiah Lopaz and SchwarzRund. My exemplary list of people and institutions shaping contemporary Afropolitan practices includes lesser-known voices within the Afropolitan discourse, to counter the reduction of the concept to a few highly visible spokespersons.

In relation to the works of the better-known authors, Afropolitanism has been discussed predominantly with reference to Africa, the US and the back and forth between them, which conveys a diminishing picture of the actual variety and complexity of Afropolitan expressions in different contexts. I want to draw attention to a broader geographical scope within the discourse by focusing on Western Europe. Drawing from my material, I address Afropolitanism’s contextual specificity, looking at two European metropoles in particular, London and Berlin. I focus on the urban space to stay true to Mbembe and Selasi’s view of Afropolitanism as an urban concept and take the suffix “–politan” literally in its reference to city dwellers.

Before elaborating on my reasons for focusing on London and Berlin, it is important to briefly differentiate between Afropolitanism and another relative of it, Afropeanism. At first sight, Afropeanism may seem to be the

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3 C. T. is a Zimbabwean migrant who lives in London without legal permission. I do not reveal his name for his own protection.
more obvious choice in discussions about the African diaspora in Europe. The term “Afropean” is a compound of African and European, and Johny Pitts explains that the concept refers to complex forms of Blackness that are deeply rooted in Europe (2019). The Afropean and the Afropolitan partly overlap; both Pitts and Selasi name Claude Grunitzky, who stands for transcultural styles and hybrid artistic expression, as a central figure in their respective genealogies of the concepts. While they are siblings, the focus on mobility, eventually, distinguishes Afropolitanism in Europe from the Afropean. Afropolitanism embraces a global outlook, even in its practices of localness.

Let me return to the Afropolitan sites of this book now. My choice to focus on London and Berlin has practical as well as theoretical justifications. I am familiar with both European capitals because I used to live in London and currently live in Berlin. My first-hand impressions of the two places clearly influence the nuance of my readings of their cultural and political scenes. European metropoles generally appear to be bustling centers of diversity on the surface. But as places where people with an infinite number of socio-political positions and worldviews meet, they represent global inequalities just as much. London and Berlin are centers of power and seem to offer endless opportunities for many, but they are also destinations for poor people or marginalized people who often do not have the choice to go elsewhere. While my German passport allows me to move freely between London and Berlin, all around Europe and to most other parts of the world as well, it is well known that not everybody is equally welcome in Europe – institutionally manifested, for example, by visa regulations, integration policies and racial profiling. But apart from their similarities as European metropoles, London and Berlin serve as relevant sites for investigating Afropolitan practices because of their differences. Both capital cities differ from each other with regard to their entangled histories with the African continent, the way discourses on colonialism and racism have been transpired so far, and the number of Black people and People of Color living there.

While Mbembe’s Afropolitanism focuses on Africa, Selasi deals with the diaspora and even expresses connections to London and Berlin. In “Bye-bye Babar (Or: What is an Afropolitan?),” Selasi mentions London
as a typical meet-up place for Afropolitans like herself (2005). She describes how naturally Afropolitans inhabit spaces in London, mixing and celebrating all kinds of cultural influences. When I lived there, the difference between London and Berlin was directly visible on the streets, on the subway and in the university classroom: London has a much larger Black population than Berlin. Some London neighborhoods are associated with Black communities like Brixton, Tottenham or Lewisham. Compared to Berlin, London has many more institutions, societies and organizations, which support investigations into colonial legacies, urban (racial) inequalities or celebrations of various Black cultural expressions. I only want to mention two of them as examples here: the renowned SOAS University of London (the School of Oriental and African Studies) and the George Padmore Institute, an archive and educational research and information center.

When I started researching Afropolitanism, Selasi was living in Berlin for a while. But in Berlin, Afropolitanism is less of a topic. The reason for its reduced visibility, according to the Black activist and academic Natasha A. Kelly, is that Germany’s Black community is smaller than the British one and afro-urban spaces are still much more under construction (2016b: 23). In spite of the numerous publications by Black and white academics addressing race and racism in Germany (see, e.g., Oguntoye, Ayim, and Schultz 1986; Kilomba 2008; Sow 2009; Nduka-Agwu and Hornscheidt 2013), the discourse has not yet reached the mainstream. The white majority society in Germany still has difficulties acknowledging Black people as part of Germany, even though Black presence in the country dates back at least a couple of centuries. Part of my motivation behind this research is to support the struggle to address and change structural inequalities in Germany including reflections on how to do this from a white position (for the latter, see especially the subchapter Afropolitan Encounters as Convivial Scholarship in this Introduction and Chapter 5 on Afropolitan Berlin). I argue that Afropolitan practices can intervene in discourses of worldliness and locality in the hopes of creating more just encounters between people. Afropolitan practices interrogate desirable forms of internationalism and identity politics beyond the margins of the nation state. Afropolitanism therefore offers fresh takes on earlier strategies of intervention.
So far, identity politics has been the catch-phrase for political positions that represent and fight for the interests of particular socially constructed groups, those, for example, who are made victims of racism and sexism. At first, identity politics gained popularity as a tool to analyze mechanisms of oppression, to counter exclusion and to claim spaces of belonging (cf. Hill Collins and Bilge 2016). In their introduction to Triggerwarnung. Identitätspolitik zwischen Abwehr, Abschottung und Allianzen (2019), Berendsen, Cheema and Mendel argue that the potential of identity politics has to be questioned, especially in a time in which right-wing parties are on the rise all over Europe, appropriating strategies introduced by identity politics in order to justify claims of segregation. According to Berendsen, Cheema and Mendel, identity politics separates societies into smaller groups and discourages or even ends communication across those groups. They would prefer to see the building of alliances between groups who fight for social justice and those who fight against rising nationalism in Europe, rather than their isolating tendencies. Like Berendsen, Cheema and Mendel, I am interested in finding strategies for fostering alliances, and the following chapters prove that Afropolitanism provides productive possibilities.

In addition to social fragmentation, a willful misreading of facts further plays into the hands of right-wing parties: Paul Gilroy observes in his book After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture? (2004) that correlations between increased immigration of Black people or People of Color on the one hand and economic decline, privatization, consumer culture, decay of family values, heightened potential for violence on the streets, etc. on the other, are often wrongly read as causalities by the white European public. He adds that such a misreading has led and still leads to more overt racism and nationalism (Gilroy 2004). Gilroy’s thesis seems confirmed in the rise of fear and hate since the beginning of the so-called refugee crisis in 2015. The refugee crisis, for which border crisis would be a more accurate description, refers to the increased migration to Europe from Middle Eastern war zones and North Africa. The ensuing popular discourse deems the othered newcomers to be a threat to the European nations’ presumed homogenous whiteness, Christian/secular values, prosperous economy and national, social and public security. This fear, which
existed before but intensified in 2015, strengthens right-wing discourses and normalizes them.

With the success of right-wing parties all over Europe, it has almost become socially acceptable to publicly express overt racism and sexism. The *Alternative für Deutschland*, the Brexiteers and other rising right-wing populist parties powerfully condemn identity politics and its accompanying discourse of political correctness as an inhibition on the freedom of speech. However, “at the level of experience and common sense identities are generally expressed, and mobilized politically, precisely because they *feel* natural and essential” (Ang 2001: 151; emphasis in original). Therefore, those right-wing groups who mobilize against identity politics often cleverly disguise the fact that they, at the same time, pursue a *white* identity politics themselves by trying to defend *white* privilege. *White* identity politics repeatedly appears, for example, in the form of scapegoating migrants and minorities and positioning the *white* majority as protecting (*white*) women. A widely discussed instance of this insidious strategy has become synonymous with New Year’s Eve in Cologne (in Germany) in 2015/2016. During that night, several incidents of pickpocketing and sexual harassment occurred which were all assigned to Black and of-Color asylum seekers. The weeks after the event were marked by large-scale demands for deportation in the name of securing *white* women’s safety, which Morais dos Santos Bruss calls a violent appropriation of feminism as a *white* nationalist project (Morais dos Santos Bruss, forthcoming). Gilroy explains that right-wing sympathizers “aspire to the nation’s restoration and repossession and dictate that incomers constitute a security problem which we are obliged to recognize in strongly gendered forms. The male refugee becomes the ‘rape-fugee’ who endangers white womanhood” (2019: 2). Gilroy sees how in contemporary Europe a distinction is made between supposedly authentic, rooted nationalities (imagined to be entirely *white*) and aliens, itinerants and interlopers (imagined to be Black and of Color) (2). Therefore, Ien Ang trenchantly speaks of “fortress identities” that create a strictly localized, exclusionary “us,” warding off everything and everyone that is associated with the invading “outside” (2001: 153).

In contrast, I understand Afropolitanism as an “open door” framework for engaging with contemporary issues. Afropolitanism specifically
addresses the interplay of identity, mobility and culture showing an interest in negotiation. While Afropolitanism does not participate in building fortresses or any other defensive measure, it still seems necessary to acknowledge Ang’s insight that “we cannot do away with cultural identities as real, social and symbolic forces in history and politics” (2001: 151). The apparently conciliatory tendencies within Afropolitanism repeatedly provoke critics to call it apolitical (Dabiri 2016; Gehrmann 2016). Contrary to this, I propose that bringing an informed view of historical colonial entanglements to the discussion as well as an interest in better futures, Afropolitanism provides useful political strategies for dealing with inequality. Nevertheless, it may not be a panacea to counter more and more outspoken right-wing tendencies in Europe or to end discrimination entirely.

Afropolitanism as Response to Structural Inequalities

As mentioned before, the focus on particular voices within Afropolitan discourse leads to a reduction to certain contexts. This holds true not only in a geographical sense but also in a socio-political one. Selasi and Mbembe focus (mostly) on the educated classes and do not offer any thoughts on how sexuality or age, for example, complicate Africanness as well as mobility. Where I see a too narrow focus on a small number of spokespersons, Emma Dabiri criticizes the Afropolitan label as such and in much more drastic terms on her *Diaspora Diva* blog. Dabiri calls Afropolitanism “too polite, corporate, glossy [as] it reeks of sponsorship and big business with all the attendant limitation” (Dabiri 2013 in Knudsen and Rahbek 2016: 2). I agree that many aspects associated with Afropolitanism do not seem to be politically progressive or are neoliberal techniques for concealing inequalities – some examples of this are the commercialization of Afropolitan literature as well as the promotion of particular Afropolitan styles or Afropolitanism as a self-care practice, which I will explore further in this book. The criticism clearly has to be taken into account, but the potentialities of Afropolitanism and its investment in better futures should not be overlooked either. To my mind,
critics dismiss Afropolitanism too easily and Afropolitanism’s supporters have not yet tapped into its full potential.

Eva Rask Knudsen und Ulla Rahbek warn against falling into default positions, “such as automatically predicting that the Afropolitan figure is always-already a privileged member of the diasporic elite who has access to unfettered mobility and a wealth of material and cultural riches” (2016: 268). Minna Salami argues in a conversation with the two researchers that “[o]ften, someone who is struggling with poverty would not be discussing the big ideas of the world” (Knudsen and Rahbek 2016: 158). I would hold against the idea that someone struggling with poverty does not necessarily discuss big ideas on public stages; that someone may very well find ways of life that encompass big ideas of the world. My reading of Salami’s Afropolitan practice alongside C. T.’s in Chapter 4 shows that mostly, Afropolitan networks associated with different classes are simply not aware of each other. Indisputably, prestigious institutions or the media pay less attention to people of lower classes and, therefore, their Afropolitan practices are less visible to the public.

Just as the Afropolitan position is often reductively read as middle-class, cis-heteronormativity would seem to pervade all Afropolitan texts, at least at first sight. However, I argue that LGBTIQ+ positions can also be found within Afropolitanism. In this book, Part III on Afropolitanism in Berlin is strongly informed by queer theory. In Queer Theory: An Introduction (1996), Annamarie Jagose explains that

> queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. Resisting that model of stability – which claims heterosexuality as its origin, when it is more properly its effect – queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire. (Jagose 1996: 1)

Chapter 5 on the cultural organization Afropolitan Berlin exemplifies that queerness almost naturally belongs to Afropolitanism, as practiced in Berlin, because of Audre Lorde’s influence on the Black German community and Black lesbian women’s noteworthy role in creating said community. Lorde embraced all aspects of her identity – being a Black, lesbian, feminist mother and warrior – and set an example for many
Germans, especially Black German women, trans, cis, queer and hetero. SchwarzRund’s novel *Biskaya*, which I discuss in Chapter 6, is narrated from the perspective of a Black queer woman living in Berlin and provides further insights into possible performances of destabilizing heterosexual notions of sex, gender and desire within an Afropolitan framework.

My research demonstrates that the mainstream reception of Afropolitanism simply celebrates less provocative views of it more willingly, which is part of the structural within structural inequalities. Societal inequalities in the form of exclusion, less access to resources or limited opportunities are enabled by structural discrimination, which refers to the interlocking of discrimination on the institutional, individual and cultural level. Leah Carola Czollek and Gudrun Perko explain that “[d]iscrimination exists not only in the unequal treatment of individuals in everyday situations, but also in discourses, in media, and in the sciences, as well as in stigmatizing speech acts and institutional practices of exclusion. The context is thus shifted from the individual to state and society” (Czollek and Perko 2017). In this book, I do not argue that all Afropolitan practices always express an awareness for all kinds of structural inequalities. But I show that the existing variety of Afropolitan cultural texts offers a potpourri of perspectives, which add to each other especially when read alongside. Afropolitanism, therefore, offers the possibility to engage with structural inequalities in meaningful ways.

Afropolitan Encounters as Convivial Scholarship

This book takes the form of a collection of in-depth encounters with Afropolitanism. Symbolically, each chapter should be read as a conversation over a drink, which I had with someone who engages with Afropolitanism. In fact, many chapters owe an enormous debt of gratitude to their protagonists, many of whom I had conversations with. Thanks goes to Minna Salami, C. T., SchwarzRund, Jacqueline Mayen and Isaiah Lopaz. I met Salami at a symposium in London, where she was a speaker. I had emailed her beforehand. When I approached her after her