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Futuring Africa: An Introduction

Steven Van Wolputte, Clemens Greiner and Michael Bollig

> Africa is to be pitied, worshipped or dominated. Whichever angle
> you take, be sure to leave the strong impression that without your
> intervention and your important book, Africa is doomed.
> WAINAINA 2005

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Africa is doomed. Africa is rising. Africa is bleeding, Africa is thriving. Africa holds the key to the future. The world's future. No future.

There is indeed no future for Africa. Or better, there is no single future. There are many roads to take, many paths to follow, each of which comes with its own crossroads and junctions, uncertainties, expectations, anxieties, imaginings, anticipations and speculations, determined and undetermined by pasts and presents, by possibilities and constraints, by past futures and by future pasts. One continuing concern, especially in the light of growing inequalities, is whose future is one talking about? Africans, like all peoples of the world, are "future-makers" (Appadurai 2013: 285) whether as inventors, engineers, scientists, planners, writers, artists, activists, or as children, mothers and fathers – albeit, paraphrasing Marx, not always in circumstances of their own choosing (Mavhunga 2017; Mbembe 2017; Sarr 2016). It is at these interstices and intersections that Africa is *futuring* – planning, imagining, making, building, expecting, avoiding, policing, preventing, writing, speculating, anticipating whatever is becoming.

Ideas, philosophies, anticipations, aspirations and expectations of the future will, obviously, also have their impact on how the past is experienced and remembered. Grand narratives such as colonialism were (and are) pretty much oriented towards the future (yet, a future made 'white' – read 'modern', 'efficient' and 'rational'), as were the various forms of resistance, such as the dream of pan-Africanism or the ongoing process of decolonization. More recently, governments throughout the continent have drafted their visions, for example 2020 (Malawi, Nigeria), 2025 (Tanzania, South Africa), 2030 (Kenya, Namibia), whereas the African Union has outlined its Agenda 2063. The high ambitions and ideas expressed in these, however, often starkly

contrast with the gloomy projections by the UN and other agencies: by 2050, and even if urbanization as such is not necessarily 'bad', half of Africa's rapidly growing population will be living in cities that already are expanding at such a rate that the much-needed infrastructure cannot keep up. For the other half, conflicts over land, water and other resources continue to fester or are announcing themselves. Overall, inequality is on the rise; and to top it off, recent climate projections predict rising temperatures and decreasing rainfall in significant parts of the continent (except, ironically perhaps, portions of the Sahel), while in other parts the frequency of extreme events, such as flash floods and landslides, will increase (World Meteorological Organization 2020). Biodiversity loss, degradation and declining agricultural yields seem inevitable.

No future, indeed. Or is there one? Population pressure remains a driver of change, but in what direction? According to the UN's World Population Prospects (United Nations 2017: 3) "more than half of the anticipated growth in global population between now and 2050 is expected to occur in Africa." This means that Africa will be hosting more than 25 per cent of the world's population by 2050. This growth is tremendous, given that since the slave trade and colonialism the African continent has been characterized by – and also suffered from – low population densities. At the same time, the data from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) project devastating effects of global warming on food production (World Meteorological Organization 2020). Does this suggest a looming Malthusian nightmare, or can this turn out to be an incentive for local innovation? Will Africa be unable to benefit from its large youth bulge? Such projections do indeed start from a *ceteris paribus* assumption, though not one that takes into account the local dynamics of creativity and ingenuity. Also missing from these models are the hopes and fears, the aspirations and frustrations of the people themselves. How do *they* understand, imagine, feel and make *their* futures? What are *their* horizons against which *they* aspire, hope, create, innovate?

This, indeed, is what this volume aspires to be: nothing more or less than a scholarship of the possible (or, as Appadurai (2013: 295) phrased it, an ethics of possibility) to complement the emphasis on suffering as the common ground of a shared humanity – the dark sciences indeed (see Downey 2003; Goldstone and Obarrio 2017; Mawere 2014; Ortner 2016; Robbins 2013). Of course, such an undertaking must inevitably remain unfinished. We therefore set out to collect splinters and snippets, work in progress and food for thought, and aimed for polyphony rather than streamline, breadth rather than depth. We instructed our contributors to write short, crisp and provocative essays that challenge rather than analyse, and encouraged perhaps less conventional contributions.

This way we wanted to do justice to the often ambivalent and sometimes contradictory associations the word 'futures' evokes.

This volume is the next one in a tradition of inspiring volumes that accompanied the biannual European Conference on African Studies (ECAS), from Leiden 2007 (de Haan et al. 2007), Leipzig (Engel and Nugent 2009), Uppsala 2011 (Dietz et al. 2011). Lisbon 2013 (Engel and Ramos 2013) and Paris 2015 (Tall et al. 2015). It was supposed to appear alongside the ninth ECAS conference, to be held in early June 2021 in Cologne, and co-hosted by the Institute for Anthropological Research in Africa (IARA), Leuven. Alas, the COVID-19 pandemic forced us to break the cycle, and postpone the conference to June 2023. Despite this setback, however, we decided to continue preparing the present volume, scheduling its launch for June 2021. And even though its publication offers only meagre consolation, we can but hope that it inspires new, exciting work and that it serves as a firm starting point for the conference in 2023.

And then there is us, the editors. Among the reasons to opt for a kaleidoscope rather than a single snapshot was that we, the editors – three ageing, middle-class white men, privileged to work in two of the finest European institutions with many of the amenities of contemporary academic life – are convinced that the field of African studies is in need of a thorough overhaul. Few in this field would dispute that decolonization of the academy is adamant, but by expressly looking for young talent from the continent we hope that we may have made a modest contribution towards reinvigorating African studies with new blood.

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Few words are as much abused as 'future' and 'Africa'. To be clear, this volume is *not* about 'the future', not even when written in the plural. Admittedly, using the plural ('futures') implies downscaling, honing in on the lived experiences of social actors, doing justice to the variety and heterogeneity of life on the African continent. Yet, this still does not suffice, for it presupposes foreseeable paths and trajectories –and then, one might ask, whose trajectories? As the contributions to this volume testify, what is at stake here is that people are making their futures today. Hence, our emphasis on the gerund, on 'futuring'.

Two remarks are in place here: first, this does not mean a return to what Achille Mbembe (2006) has referred to as presentism (to present the past in an eternal unchanging present, as in 'traditional' – fixed – kinship structures, prototypical rituals and archetypical figures such as witches and chiefs). Second, we want to leave behind the idea that 'acting about' the future is the privilege of the privileged. Even if the 'bare life' (Agamben 1998) is a reality for many in

today's context of neoliberalism and the raging pandemic, this does not mean they have stopped thinking about tomorrow, whether that tomorrow features redemption in a distant paradise, or whether, as Jane Guyer (2007) so convincingly argued, we should orient our attention towards what lies immediately ahead.

Futuring then refers to subjectivation, and to the subjunctive (or optative) mood, with the latter clearly distinguished from the indicative and the imperative mood. It is an infinitive verb form (but one that acts as a noun) that always implies an actor. This also determined how we grouped the individual contributions into sections. Not taking into account the introduction and conclusion, re/thinking, living, confronting, imagining and relating all refer to a common thread we distinguished. 'Re/thinking' refers to the necessity to evaluate critically received categories (such as pastoralism, the ethnographic museum or 'the' future of Africa); under 'Living', we grouped those contributions that focus on the complexities of life under ecological constraints and economic adversity. The next section, 'Confronting', brings together contributions on the daily struggle for security, resources or meaning-making, whereas 'Imagining' concentrates on the continent's creative industries and its innovative potential. 'Relating' then refers to those contributions that elucidate intimate relationships people build and maintain with their bodies, their partners, their ancestors, or with society at large. To end, Andreas Mehler and Francis Nyamnjoh, draw conclusions on the future of academic collaboration. One finds a more elaborate one at the beginning of each section.

Having said this, it is important to note that 'Africa' is a category of practice rather than a category of analysis (Moore 2008), let alone an "axiom of unity" (Tsing 2005: 89) and that we do not subscribe to an alleged African exceptionalism. It borders – or should border – on the cliché that the inhabitants of the continent have always been pretty much part of the world, for better or for worse.

What then could such an ethics of the possible mean for the future of African studies, or, for that matter, for North American, European, or Asian studies? For scholars on the continent and their European, American and Asian allies, this first of all means to decolonize their thinking. A meme circulating on Facebook during the #RhodesMustFall campaign asked the rhetorical question of why white privilege is "your history being part of the core curriculum and mine … being taught as an elective". While in the past such critical questions (see Crossman 2002; Hountondji 1994) were largely ignored, recent events in Africa and elsewhere have placed them firmly centre stage (Nyamnjoh 2016) of intellectual and political discourse. But decolonization of the mind (and heart) goes further than curriculum reform and clenched

fists (however important): likewise, a decolonization of knowledge (see Bristow 2017: 282) does not suffice. What is needed is a decolonial knowing that requires different modes of thinking (rethink thinking) and writing/representing (*with* and *from* instead of *about*) and most importantly, that requires an 'epistemic freedom' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018) to decentre the deeply entrenched narratives (be they historical, political, social, economic, cultural or – even – ecological) with which we are all too familiar. Against a sclerotizing yet still dominant Western thinking and against the "Western grammar of alterity" (Mbembe 2002: 635), one can claim that "there is no better terrain than Africa for a scholarship keen to describe novelty, originality, and complexity" (Mbembe, in Shipley et al. 2010: 654).

Like other volumes on this topic (Etieyibo 2018; Goldstone and Obarrio 2017; Heidenreich and O'Toole 2016), we do indeed share a deeply rooted distrust towards depictions of the continent and its inhabitants as 'in crisis', and that these crises are particular to Africa. Yet, we are also aware of the challenges humankind is facing and of the way these challenges play out locally. Think in this regard of land grabbing, global warming, rising inequality, speculation, ethnic tensions, ID-ology (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 48), and so forth. In studying these dynamics, however, it is important to move from a study of essentialized states of being to an understanding of transitoriness (Larkin 2017: 49) and becoming. Such becoming is first of all relational in that it involves not only other human beings, but also other living creatures great and small, infrastructures and other features of the urban-scape and land-scape. The ambition here should be to creep into the cracks and folds of the dominant master narratives of our time (that are remarkably similar to those of yesteryear) – the holes so eloquently evoked by De Boeck and Baloji (2016: 107). Besides relational, such a study of becoming should also tune in to the ambivalences and contradictions, ambiguities and paradoxes of lived experience, not as a 'state' of human nature but as an empirical question (Berliner et al. 2016). An important issue here would be what is regarded as constituting the conditions and ethics of 'the good life'. In this, African studies needs to be concerned about both the 'up' and 'down', but should also move sideways, exploring the meshwork of the "social nervous system" (Taussig 1992) as its synapses bud and necrotize, and the meshwork changes – mutates – through experiencing and interacting with its immediate and not-so-immediate surroundings. This not only implies attention to order of magnitude – who or what are the units of analysis? – but also to the dimensionality and directionality of research, to guarantee that attention is paid to contrasts, differences and disparities within congregates once glossed over as homogenous (as in 'South Africa', 'Yoruba society', or 'the city') (see Bird-David 2017: 210).

Such a focus on becoming and emergence should also help tilt African studies so that its centre of gravity shifts away from its past and current institutional, political, epistemic, and methodological preoccupations. It could also help do away with the grand narratives on the continent's 'future', whether the latter are phrased in gloomy terms such as the "new scramble for Africa" (Carmody 2011; see also Shipway 2017), or in overtly optimistic ones such as 'Africa rising' (see Addo 2015; Edozie 2017). Increasingly, the continent is perceived as an experimental field for global tomorrows, as it was in the continent's pasts (see Bloom et al. 2014; Byerley 2012; Gewald et al. 2009; Hunt 1999; Ramutsindela 2007; Tilley 2011). And yes, many of the present realities and challenges were birthed by past futures, past understandings of what lay ahead, to past desires and past utopias (Bloch 1985). Conversely, one could also wonder what future pasts will look like once African histories are no longer optional courses of study. How will historians and artists reimagine their future heritage and history? How will philosophers think about their ancestry-to-come?

Despite this play of oxymorons, the many understandings and speculations about Africa's tomorrows are based on past, present and future materialities and, at least partly, depend on economic, social, infrastructural and political contingencies. One such contingency certainly concerns the continent's economic prospects. Whereas for decades Africa trailed behind the expectations of global planners and politicians, recent scenarios of future economic development bear a more positive outlook. It is true that after independence much of the formal economy remained dependent on the export of resources. The past decade, however, has seen enormous capital inflows into African agriculture. Land has gained in value, essentially because Africa is increasingly being seen as the only continent in which the agricultural expansion needed to feed a growing world population is still possible.

In a similar vein, Africa has also taken centre stage in the competition over emission rights, which has resulted in international speculation in rural land (Fairhead et al. 2012). These investments – often inaptly and imprecisely described as 'land grab' or 'green grabbing' – may further boost economic activity, but they also have an impact on local small-scale farming (Hall et al. 2015b; Peters 2013), and on the continent's rapidly expanding cities where property has become the object of international speculation. While local elites and medium-scale African investors play a role here (Jayne et al. 2014), it is also vital to recognize the strength of the impact of the global political economy and of the structural local and global inequalities it creates (see Ayelazuno 2014; Hall et al. 2015a). In a parallel move, the increase in the global price of raw materials has spurred a new run on prospecting and mining rights and a quest to improve the infrastructure that transports these precious minerals and

natural resources. While Africa was and continues to be torn by international competition for its resources, which range from human labour (nowadays reflected in the brain drain from the continent) to copper, ivory and gold, new rivalries and potential threats to stability and security are appearing on the horizon. As the Global North seeks alternatives with which to fuel its economy, the quest for and exploitation of 'new' minerals such as cobalt, coltan or lithium, poses an additional (potential) risk to peace and human security on the continent (Berman et al. 2017). Water, too, has become a scarce resource, due partly to global warming and often partly also to mismanagement and over-exploitation (Naik 2017).

Furthermore, it seems that the coronavirus pandemic has tempered the widespread Afro-optimistic perspectives of the past decade. However, what seems sudden, appears to have deeper structural roots. Many have warned that the spectacular economic growth rates are due more to oil and gas exploitation, and to the infrastructure surrounding it, than to the sustainable growth of a middle class, and have thus called for "Afro-realism" (Wadongo 2014). The pandemic thus seems to have acted as a catalyst for processes that were already underway in the 2010s. Africa's foreign debt "as a percentage of GDP almost doubled from 25 per cent in 2008 to 48.5 per cent in 2017", whereby 20 per cent of this debt burden is controlled by China, which now attaches more ties to loans (Munyi 2020: 481). Zambia defaulted on its repayment obligations in 2020, and may not be the only country running into severe budgetary problems in the coming years (Williams 2020). In 2019, Mo Ibrahim's governance index for Africa turned negative for the first time in the 2010s, showing a particular decline in the 'security and rule of law', and 'participation, rights and inclusion' categories (All Africa 2020; see also MIF 2020). Democratic elections, for example, in Tanzania, Zambia and Malawi were disputed. Soldiers and/or militias rebelled against elected governments in a number of states across the continent, and civil war plagues Ethiopia as we write. As a recent newspaper article claimed, "Africa Rising may fast become Africa Uprising" (Anthony 2021).

Another such contingency concerns Africa's infrastructures. Current developments in this field are key to understanding future making in Africa (*The Economist* 2015) and may act, in their turn, as catalysts of ongoing transformations. New development corridors, such as LAPSSET in Kenya and vast agricultural intensification projects such as the Southern Agricultural Growth Corridor of Tanzania carry infrastructural promises of roads, airports and resort cities (Chome 2020; Kochore 2016; Mkutu 2017). When or even if these mega projects, which are often cornerstones of national development plans, will eventually be realized, however, remains in question (De Boeck 2011; Müller-Mahn 2019). Recent developments in the gas and oil industry in Africa,

but also the massive investments into solar, geothermal, wind and hydro-based energies appear to be more tangible, as they also bring massive infrastructural investments into previously marginalized areas, such as roads, water pipelines, boreholes, or telecommunication boosters (Klagge et al. 2020).

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have arguably taken the key role in debates on development in Africa (Ponelis and Holmner 2015). The rapid uptake of mobile phones has particularly driven hopes for ICT-enabled leap-frogging. While the percentage of Internet users on the African continent is still low (but rapidly growing) the number of mobile phone users is impressive and has led to new markets, such as mobile payment systems. Increasingly, Africa is seen as a future digital trendsetter, which also has its repercussions in the arts (African Digital Art 2019). If indeed, paraphrasing AbdouMaliq Simone's (2004) words, people should be regarded as infrastructure, Africa's futuring by and large will depend on the creative minds and hands devising new digital and analogue applications cut to fit local needs, whether in the maker spaces in Cape Town, Lomé or Nairobi, or on the Agbogbloshie waste belt near Accra. Indeed, whereas in the past studies concentrated one-sidedly on how imported technologies were 'adapted', attention finally goes to innovation from within Africa itself (for a critique, see Gewald et al. 2012; Hart 2016; Pype 2017). As Emeka Okafor (the founder of Maker Faire Africa) remarked, "making is central to leading Africa where it needs to be: a developing, problem solving region. ... It's imperative that communities from Cairo to the Cape unfetter their populations with tools from within" (King et al. 2014).

Even if it is valid to question whether these techno-visions alone will provide the answer, there is no doubt that such locally bred solutions will be necessary. A third major contingency threatening an already vulnerable continent is certainly global warming, and in the past decade the future of African environments has become the topic of much scientific debate. What will African environments look like thirty years from now, and what will they look like at the end of the century? Nobody seems to doubt that environments will rapidly change due to the effects of global climate change, conservation and agricultural intensification. Scenarios of climatic change predict a transformation of environments: substantial parts of the continent will receive less precipitation and rains will be concentrated in fewer precipitation events (UNEP 2013, 2016). This will lead to profound changes in Africa's hydrology, and overall to a more arid environment. Conservation (Hannah et al. 2002, but also see websites of diverse conservationist NGOs, for example, AWF 2021; BirdLife 2021) and agricultural intensification (Folberth et al. 2014) are thought to be apt adaptation strategies. Indeed, Africa contributes significantly to the world's conservation

goals. While at the moment slightly more than 15 per cent of the terrestrial landscape is under conservation worldwide, a good number of African states contribute significantly higher percentages to conservation. If global targets for an increase in terrestrial ecosystems under conservation are to be met, Africa will certainly contribute majorly to this effort (Dinerstein et al. 2019). Not doom and dust but Edenic landscapes are the future, so the story goes. This future scenario rhymes well with a transformation of agriculture towards greater sustainability and higher outputs. In landscapes equipped with sufficient environmental infrastructure, large-scale irrigation, mechanization and smart agriculture may provide a future in which significantly more food and products for the global market are produced. These future visions of the landscape are likely to lead to new patterns of inclusion and exclusion, and will necessitate the renegotiation of governance and of issues relating to environmental justice (Büscher et al. 2017).

Enmeshed in these environmental changes is the dissolution of traditional livelihood patterns in many of the continent's rural areas. The search for opportunities in urban areas and abroad conjures up an image of the continent being thoroughly mobile, constantly on the move (de Bruijn et al. 2001; Steinbrink and Niedenführ 2020). The growing outflow of a predominantly young population from the continent is resulting in transnational networks and diaspora formations, and many more young Africans continue to dream of a life abroad (Piot 2010). Many – if not most – international migrants from Africa send remittances home. The financial volume has outnumbered foreign direct investments and development aid and their patterning might well be termed 'carescapes'. Based on these impressive monetary flows – often from migrants in insecure and low-paid positions – economist Felwine Sarr (2016) argues for the need for a 'homo africanus' model driven not by self-interested but by other values.

Uncertainty also governs Africa's political landscapes. Whereas in the 1970s ethnicity was thought to be on its way out (Southall 1970), nationalism and ethnic frictions (whether or not in tandem with religious movements) only gained prominence over the past few years (also see Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Geschiere 2009; Meiu 2019). But politicians and prophets, planners and performers are of course not the only ones futuring. Also, in art, philosophy and in popular culture, in poetry and novels futures are being made, written, drawn, imagined. Nnedi Okorafor, for one, in her Binti trilogy portrays a vivid Afropolitanism that also reverberates in the 2017 release of the Black Panther epic. Speculative fiction in the form of graphic novels depicts futuristic cities populated, among others, by African superheroes, thus providing an exciting counternarrative to mainstream Western discourse. Future-making, however,

goes beyond literary or academic circles: it also implies the day-to-day inventiveness encountered in cities and villages, in designated maker spaces and in everyday households, in digital art, electronic games and mobile applications, or in novel approaches to the rural and urban built environment (Pieterse and Edjabe 2009; Heidenreich and O'Toole 2016).

These dynamics and ongoing economic, social and political changes have a huge impact on how relationships between women and women, women and men, and men and men are conceived and lived (Pauli and van Dijk 2016). To the extent that an African middle class is indeed emerging, it embraces forms of relatedness inspired by the globalizing ideal of romantic love and companionate partnerships, a process that informs how women and men conceive, experience and practice love, friendship or care, which in turn weighs in on how they think and experience family relationships (Scharrer et al. 2018). Ultimately, all these relationships involve one form or another of future feeling and future thinking –think, for instance, of the rising demand for IVF treatments; of the expectations inherent in child-raising; or of the plans that friends make to start a business venture. Needless to say, although these futures are highly gendered, and although the Western media and NGOs like to portray women in Africa as univocally powerless and poor, this may remind us that quite a few African nations have taken the lead in guaranteeing women's rights and political participation, often leaving their northern counterparts far behind. Although important questions and issues remain, a scholarship and ethics of the possible pertains with regard to these gendered futures, even if only because of the huge discrepancies between and within countries, regions, and cities. The same goes for the changing attitudes (for better or for worse) towards same-sex relationships and queer sexuality (Meiu 2017).

That said, we can only hope that the present volume will contribute to a fruitful discussion on futuring in and from Africa, and to a truly decolonial academic field. As we write this introduction, the COVID-19 pandemic is still raging, and currently has affected – and these are conservative estimates – more than 114 million individuals and claimed more than 2.5 million lives worldwide. It also casts doubt, in some circles at least, on the role of science. Regarding the future of African studies, then, a crucial question is how science-led approaches can contribute. Part of our answer is that such approaches need to be collaborative. One thing that has become clear during the pandemic is that digitalization offers many new, efficient venues in which to work towards more cooperative science practices and towards a radical rupture with past, outlived epistemologies.

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