

“The Modern Girl Wants to Have it All”?: Shifting Megarhetorics of Empowerment in *An African City*.

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Abstract: In 2014, Ghanaian-American filmmaker Nicole Amarteifio debuted on YouTube *An African City*, a web series that has been dubbed “Africa’s Sex and the City”. The show—which centers on the lives of five African women who have recently returned to the continent from their long stay in Europe and America—seeks to provide alternative representations of African women as modern subjects and for this reason, the show has been acclaimed as a counter rhetoric. Analyzing the show and receptions of it using perspectives from feminist theories of the cinematic gaze, transnational feminist rhetorics and Africana Critical Theory suggest a complex deployment of megarhetorics of empowerment and consequently, reflects on the limits and possibilities of neoliberal cinema as a transformative rhetorical tool for visualizing women of African descent. This paper presents shifting—a present continuous word of action variously defined as transformation, liminality, circulation, code-shifting, embodied-affective response—as a trope/motif in African women’s cinema. Shifting, in this paper, becomes a viable feminist approach for reading the rhetorical nuances and ambiguities of what can be designated as “difficult texts” not only in terms of content but also in form and audience reception. By attending to the complex entanglement of various shiftings in *An African City*, this paper highlights the rhetorical conundrum of Amarteifio’s cinematic choices and how their underlying tropes or visions of empowerment—simultaneously interpellated, transformed and disrupted—present interpretive difficulties for feminist viewer-analysts. Ultimately, the paper presents *An African City* not only as a sample African-authored feminist visual text but also as a source of a rhetorical theory of transnational black women’s cinematic politics.

Keywords: [shifting](#), [empowerment](#), [transnational rhetorics](#), [postfeminism](#), [Afropolitanism](#)

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Introduction

The camera pans over the city, capturing an expanse of multi-story buildings, moving vehicles and greenery. Two Black men walk briskly by the street, but they are not the subject of the cinematic narrative, so we hardly see their faces. The camera eventually settles on the exterior of an apartment painted in mild yellow and then enters the building, where we find five Black African women—all recent returnees from the West—animatedly discussing how a woman’s financial independence can impede her sexual prospects in Ghana. The atmosphere is convivial as these close friends comfortably share intimate details of their lives. Their talk about their various romantic disappointments is peppered with wits and laughter as they (prepare to) wine together. They are in a newly-rented apartment owned by Nana Yaa, the narrative’s protagonist who, having initially tried finding a man to fund the apartment, opted for a loan instead. Overlaying the opening visuals is a voiceover that proclaims, in a typical American accent, the following “postfeminist shibboleths” (Negra, 2009, p. 4): “the modern girl wants to have it all. She wants a job that she loves waking up to everyday. She wants financial stability. She wants great friends. She wants equally great boyfriends. She wants great sex. She wants a great love.” This is the opening scene of an episode of *An African City* (hereafter AAC), a globally acclaimed web series that debuted on YouTube in 2014 and is set in Accra, Ghana. Created by Ghanaian-American filmmaker Nicole “Amerley” Amarteifio, the show seeks to present an alternative cinematic portrait of modern African femininities, characterized by expressiveness (in speech and fashion), sexual agency and cosmopolitan consciousness. Consequently, it provides

crucial material for reflecting on the rhetorical implications (in both theory and practice) of African women's cinematic contributions in contemporary neoliberal contexts.

This essay focuses on the deployment of a multilayered megarhetorics of empowerment in AAC to reflect on the potentialities and challenges of neoliberal cinema as a transformative rhetorical tool for visualizing the lives of minoritized women. Megarhetorics of empowerment are neoliberal hegemonic narratives of progress that mediate self-improvement through capital. They emphasize choice, agency and consumption as indices of empowered subjectification. The taken-for-granted assumptions of empowerment discourses possess a “mega’ power” that enable them to “shape practices across the globe” (Scott & Dingo, 2012, p. 5). Informed by feminist theories of the cinematic gaze (Mulvey, 1975; hooks, 1992), transnational feminist rhetorics—especially Rebecca Dingo’s (2012) work on empowerment discourses, and Africana Critical Theory (Fanon, 1986; Mama, 2002; Oyěwùmí, 1997), my discussion introduces *shifting* not only as a trope in African women’s cinematic representations but also as a feminist rhetorical approach for reading the nuances of complex texts and subjectivities. I define *shifting* in five senses: viz. aesthetic and social transformation—including “gaze shifts”—which refers to visual strategies that center and (re)vision *other* subjectivities; circulation of all kinds (including of people, ideas, sensibilities such as megarhetorics); codeshifting (shifts between variously-linked rhetorical forms in line with the palimpsestic character of megarhetorics); identitarian liminality (the in-between consciousness of postcolonial/diasporic subjects as transcultural people); and finally, the politics of somatic-affective resonances—e.g., laughter, joy, discomfort—experienced by consumers and producers of the series.

I use the present continuous tense to highlight the continued shifts that happen as audiences engage and circulate AAC and texts around it. This is especially crucial because, at least, the first season of the show is still freely available on YouTube and is constantly watched and commented on by audiences across the globe. Furthermore, *shifting* allows me to acknowledge the analytical possibilities presented by my positionality as a Ghanaian woman—born and bred in Accra—who has watched the show at different times in the U.S and Ghana. Each contextualized viewing allowed me to (re)read the series from a different angle. My constantly shifting reflections from these (re)readings underscored the complex textuality of AAC and the usefulness of critical ambivalence as a method. By attending to the various *shiftings* in AAC, I highlight the rhetorical conundrum of Amarteifio’s cinematic choices and how their underlying tropes of empowerment—simultaneously transformed and disrupted in the show—present interpretive difficulties for feminist viewer-analysts. The conclusion critically reflects on how a visual rhetorical analysis that centers shifting as a critical lens unravels the layered aporetic meanings of texts like AAC.

The Cinematic Gaze and Neoliberal Megarhetorics of Empowerment

Discussions of the gaze in AAC are complicated by two crucial factors: one, the neoliberal (gendered) context of the series and two, the text’s centering of African women as racialized subjects in transnational media. As shown subsequently, this essay assumes that neoliberal visibility structures AAC’s representations because of the series’ complex suffusion of postfeminist and Afropolitan (African-inflected cosmopolitan) sensibilities. Both sensibilities are influenced by neoliberal politics, though one is linked with a mainly gen-

dered intersectional script and the other, a mainly racial intersectional script. This is further complicated by the series' postcolonial African urban setting with its complex histories, relationalities, cultures and representational codes. Thus, to account for AAC's many *shiftings*, discussions must move beyond a unified view towards a more intersectional view of the cinematic gaze "as a dynamic site" for the convergence of multiple viewpoints (Lutz & Collins, 1991, p. 134). Such a view would enable readers to negotiate complex analytical positionalities as they unpack the multidimensionality of visual texts (p. 137).

One lens takes for granted the phallogocentric and racialized representational politics of the cinematic gaze. Laura Mulvey's (1975) psychoanalytical reading of classic Hollywood narrative cinema has argued that women are "coded for strong visual and erotic impact" in ways that associate women with "to-be-looked-at-ness" (p. 11). In this sexual politics, where men possess an active gaze and control the narrative, the woman is objectified to satisfy male desire and fantasy. While the context of Mulvey's work is vastly different from AAC's production context in terms of space and temporality, Mulvey's observations about the patriarchal psyche in Hollywood cinema foreground the gendered history of cinema as a representational technology—a history that is crucial even for texts like AAC, which are produced outside of, but remain in conversation with, mainstream cinema. AAC's attempts to center the female gaze does not completely disrupt the male gaze because of the series' emphasis on women's sexual lives. Furthermore, Black scholarship (see Fanon, 1986; hooks, 2002; Oyěwùmí, 1997) can extend analysis of African-authored texts beyond the male gaze, highlighting the need to consider cinema's engagements with other sites of differentiation. Writing about the Black condition, Fanon (1986) observed that the white gaze—described as "the only real eyes"—objectifies the black body resulting in silencing, invisibility and self-contempt (p. 116). Oyěwùmí's (1997) contextual theorization can expand Fanonian explanations beyond race through the argument that sight structures the "exaggerated presence" of the body in Western cultures, a phenomenon she designated as "bio-logic" (p. 2-30). Because "the body is always in view and on view," "it invites... a gaze of differentiation," with gendered othering being just one of such effects (p. 2). Crucially, Oyěwùmí argued that this Western "worldview" has become global. AAC attempts to disrupt colonialist misrepresentation of Blackness by centering the experiences of diasporic Africans whose links with the West complicates the gendered gaze with a racial and bourgeois gaze. However, the series' dependence on postfeminist and Afropolitan codes—both of which are shaped by global dynamics and engage the body as a site of empowerment, recirculates Western bio-logic.

The circulatory power of Western bio-logics is demonstrated in cinema that centers the "modern girl" and/or the Afropolitan. In these texts, the gaze is imbricated in the argumentative modes of "megarhetorics" of neoliberal development which circulate commonsense ideas about empowerment whose persuasive functions and effects shift in response to specific translocalities (Scott & Dingo, 2012, p. 2). Postfeminist "girly" films with their emphasis on consumption, choice and entrepreneurialism (see Radner, 2010), share with Afropolitanism the disciplinary power of neoliberalism and its constitution of specific modern subjectivities—that is, "normative global citizens" (Dingo, 2007, p. 105). Underlying representations of a highly stylized "empowered" woman, often situated in the city, who takes charge of her sexuality is a postfeminist gaze that engages ironically with the legacies of feminism. Afropolitans—cosmopolitans with African roots—are highly mobile, highly educated Africans with access to neoliberal capitalist resources of the Western world

especially; they wish to define themselves beyond the rigid confines of the nation-state, engaging ironically with PanAfrican ideologies. As Ede (2016) has argued, Afropolitanism “pander[s] to the white metropolitan gaze in targeting that public as its first literary audience” (p. 94). I read the intersections of the gazes linked with these perspectives as rhetorical effects of neoliberal biopolitics.

Because black experiences with coloniality are not monolithic, there are diverse ways to account for black relations with the gaze. hooks’ (1992) argument that Black people are engaged in “a broad range of looking relations” besides resistance (p. 128) is especially significant. However, this point was made in the context of hooks’ theorization of the “oppositional gaze”: the capacity of Black people, as oppressed subjects, to cultivate a kind of visual agency that interrogates dominant and oppressive representational politics and imagines more transformative visions of reality. If “[t]he ‘gaze’ has been and is a site for resistance for colonized black people globally” (p. 116), how does one engage AAC’s neoliberal (re)framing in its representations of new diasporic African femininities? As subsequently argued, AAC reflects an apparent ambiguity or paradox, for it attempts to be critical of dominant discourses only to fall back into these scripts in its revisioning of African femininity. Consequently, even the megarethorics that shape the series are continuously shifting and the producers cannot be said to be unaware of these representational effects.

Are you a Ghanaian?: Shiftings in *An African City*

The series is framed as an “oppositional black gaze” (hooks, 1992, p. 117) in response to mediated racism against Africa and African women in Western media. Amarteifio (2016) indicates that she created the show to shift a dominant politics of visibility in Western media—one in which African women become “nameless victims in the front cover of poverty reports,” receive little coverage and speak less on screen (Amarteifio, 2016; Christensen, 2021). While Amarteifio targets a Western audience, she also disrupts dominant masculinist representations of women as passive or dangerous (see Garritano, 2013, p. 17) in popular African cinema while triggering debates about who qualifies to tell African stories. Thus, from Amarteifio’s perspective, her show was a rhetorical solution to a rhetorical problem. This context is crucial for reading the opening of the series, with its layered visual politics.

Titled “The Return,” the opening episode begins at the airport in Accra, Ghana. Nana Yaa, the protagonist, has just returned to her home country after her studies in the US. The camera tilts upward gradually moving from her feet to her face, giving us a view of her appearance—one that some spectators say reminds them of Lauren Hill: she is in a black jacket on a white tank top, dangling earrings and a necklace. Her natural hair is styled in finger coils, and her lips are painted in bright red lipstick. From the tarmac, she walks confidently, to the upbeat rhythm of the background Afrobeat music, towards immigration only to be misrecognized by a Black male immigration officer who explains: “Madam, the line for the non-Ghanaians is at the other side.” Nana Yaa responds saying “Yeah, I know. I am Ghanaian” in standard American accent. The officer responds “Huh? You’re a Ghanaian. You don’t look and sound like a Ghanaian [with rising intonation].” When she finally gives him her passport, she says “See, mi yɛ Ghanaian” in an American-accented English-Akan codeswitching. The official mimics this accent when he jokingly responds “wu yɛ Ghanaian” [You are Ghanaian]. Displeased, Nana Yaa gazes at him as if to register her discontent and persistence then

sarcastically says “Medaase [Thank you]” (with an American accent) before walking towards the exit even as the official, obviously perplexed, continues to stare. The airport, as a chronotope of mobility, indexes Nana Yaa as a liminal subject whose situatedness within this contact zone and performative sartoriality imply that her identity is always already in question. The scene intervisually engages with, and disrupts already existing discourses of the return of the African Diaspora, implying that not all who look African American (visually symbolized by echoes of Lauren Hill’s iconic style) hold a foreign passport. As the first episode shows subsequently, Nana Yaa is not alone for there are four other women—her girlfriends (all returnees)—who also share this liminal identity.

A visual syntax of neoliberal worldliness frames the series’ alternative visions of African femininity, ironically shaped by the very structures of domination that the series seeks to dismantle. The camera’s constant lingering on high-rise or luxury buildings, billboards, historical monuments and vehicular mobility constructs Accra as a space of business, development and leisure. The camera lingers on the billboards and exteriors of businesses and recreational spaces long enough to have the names of these brands registered in a viewer’s memories. The interior mise en scene of various episodes show expensive furniture and high-end art, complementing the luxurious looks of the women which are characterized by a diverse and modern high-end wardrobe often blending African vibrant fabrics and aesthetics with global fashion trends. The timing and angle of the camerawork connote to-be-looked-at-ness, inviting viewers to visually savor the cityscape and the signified bodies of the women. This is exemplified by a joyful comment on episode two: “The Hair! THE HAIR!!!! I don’t care if the acting and the script could use some significant work... **look at them. I can’t take my eyes off the screen.** They are all goddesses in their own right” (@darkinetix, 2014, emphasis added). Through their diverse African hairstyles (e.g., natural, weave, permed and braided) and chic clothes and accessories, the women perform “spectacular femininity” (see Dosekun, 2020) as a dimension of a gendered Afrocopolitan ‘cool’. They are young, beautiful, successful, healthy and sensual African women living a life of glamour and consumption.

In presenting the narrative from these women’s perspectives and making men the object of their sexual desires—evidenced for instance by Sade’s sensual gaze at the “dark and chocolaty and young” male passersby in episode one, Amarteifio shifts the male gaze but not entirely. The emphasis on the spectacular fashion and sexual lives of the women highlights the political potential of the personal but they also reinforce the scopophilic (“pleasure in looking”; see Sturken and Cartwright, 2018, p. 451) lens of mainstream gendered mediation. Crucially, the constant technological (camera) shift between the women and the urban space (see images 1.0 and 2.0) constructs both the feminine body and urban landscape as objects on which the signs of modernity are inscribed and both attract our scopophilic attention. One reading could frame the visual narrative of the series as a kind of love letter to Accra. However, such readings would have to contend with the fact that the series is visually presented as a kind of tourist guide and/or advertisement for the many businesses (e.g., hotels, salons, gyms, pharmaceuticals) showcased and linguistically referenced. In so doing, the series visualizes both the city and the women as signs of Africa’s rise through a recirculation of postfeminist and Afropolitan megarethorics. Underlying these rhetorics are complex instances of simultaneous objectification and subjectification, raising questions about the limits of resolving neoliberal poverty porn narratives

of Africa and its women with neoliberal narratives of empowerment.



Image 1.0: A Scene from Episode Six, Season One.



Image 2.0: A Scene from Episode Ten, Season One.

The interpellation of Global Northern white audiences constructs a looking relationship with biopolitical implications—that is, the idea that the ideal female body in Africa’s rising narrative is that regulated by neoliberal logics. On AAC’s Twitter (now X) page, the show is described as “‘Sex and the City’ meets AFRI-CA!” (see @AnAfricanCity, 2012). NPR, like many other transnational media outlets (such as The New York Times, BBC, Indie Wire, Yahoo, ForbesAfrica), have also made this comparison, describing AAC as a “remix” of “*Sex and the City*” (Meraji, 2016). These framings call for a comparative analysis that emphasizes the transnational linkages between AAC and other extant texts but not without pointing to an underlying rhetorical hierarchization. This comparison—and the fact that the show prioritizes young women’s lives in the context of modernity, sexuality and cultures of consumption—construct the series as chick flick, a quintessential postfeminist genre implicated in the global circulation of megarethorics of empowerment. However, reading AAC merely as an African version of *Sex and the City* presents interpretive challenges because of the “other” histories and subjective positionings that composing in an African metropolis necessarily engages.

By comparing AAC to *Sex and the City*, the series takes on a Western capitalist/colonialist gaze of desire and reproduces the registers of Hollywood postfeminist cinema because ultimately the representation must be recognizable. The women are visually black, but they possess white sensibilities, exemplified when one of the characters indicates that “I have an obroni [white person’s] mouth.” To follow Fanon (1986), one could describe this as a case of “BLACK SKIN, WHITE TASTE.” White taste is a synecdochic representation of the

characters' range of white middle-class sensibilities and consciousness, made possible through a racial reconfiguration that has expanded whiteness to include non-whites who can perform neoliberal success through accent, consumption pattern, sartorial stylization and a liberal ethos, for example (summed up in the following title of an NPR review: "Sex, Style and Success In 'An African City'"). The women love Starbucks coffee, they buy drugs from the U.S., and they are vegetarian. Though the polyphonic representation of the women allows audiences to hear multiple perspectives on postcolonial gendered relations and subjectivities—and thus, at least in this sense, the series challenges monolithic representations of modern African womanhood—a single narrative is presented of non-diasporic Ghanaians even if there are moments of tension and complexities. The men are sexually "psychotic," the maids steal bras, nieces ask for shoes, "aunties" use "fat" as a compliment, the politicians are corrupt and irresponsible, service providers cannot follow simple instructions. The argument is that local Ghanaians lack global ethical sensibilities. It is not clear whether Amarteifio is only making visible these women's views of local people, or her own views are filtering through the representation. Knowing that Amarteifio has degrees in African Studies and corporate communications, as well as work experience at the World Bank requires a reading of her show as intentional—rather than incidental—rhetoric. I suggest that the ironic tensions in *AAC* are partly linked to Amarteifio's liminal positionality as someone who is both within and outside Western modernity and its ideas of progress. She is not only literate in, but has also actively participated in the circulation of, the megaheterotics of empowerment shaping the policies of transnational development agencies. If, as Fanon (1986) argues, "to speak means...to support the weight of a civilization" (p. 17-18), then her appropriation of Western cinematic forms further reinforces Western ideas about Africa.

The women are so privileged, but they do not reflect on their complicity in the very system that subjugates their continent; and Afropolitan perspectives are projected as the modern voices of reason for the continent. Like all empowerment rhetorics, Afropolitanism and postfeminism are limited and ambiguous. In *AAC*, they construct an image of black men as unworldly and unable or unwilling to perform a kind of white respectability politics. In episode 3, Nana Yaa splits from Kofi, her "perfect on paper guy" who has a degree from Harvard and works as a junior partner in a top law firm, because he liked to take "an African dump" in her new apartment. In that breakup frame, Nana Yaa responded strongly to Kofi's announcement that he was going to use the toilet. She throws his clothes at him whilst holding her palm towards her nose, to symbolize foul smell. When Kofi uses the word "toilet" in their heated exchange, Nana Yaa responds that "the non-crass way of saying toilet is to say bathroom or restroom or lavatory." From Nana Yaa's view then Kofi lacked the self-restraint and refinement associated with being respectable. This and other examples suggest the rhetorical risks of appropriating an already existing generic template as a counterheterorical mode. Because of the histories of racialization, even a text such as this that seeks to privilege women's perspectives must be critical in its construction not just of women but their relations with black men, even if for comedic purposes. However, the show also seems to turn the rhetorics of empowerment on their heads. While the girls are poshly dressed and look empowered visually, the series' focus on their everyday struggles (e.g., the high cost of renting; water and power rationing) presents tensions that interrogate this dominant narrative that the modern girl can have it all even in a postcolonial context. Similarly, Afropolitan narratives of *Africa Rising*

are evoked (e.g., through the focus on brands and the girls' empowered looks) only to be dismantled by their everyday struggles. For one must confront (post)colonial histories and Africa's unequal geopolitical positioning to understand the not-so-pleasant conditions in Accra. In this sense, *AAC* is a countercritique of the very discourses in which it is implicated. Crucially, Amarteifio—in a feminist fashion—re-vision her representation in season one, by introducing in season two a voice that interrogates the white middle class consciousness of the five friends (evident for instance in “Another Return,” an episode which calls forth a comparative reading of “The Return” episode in season one).

Conclusion

This essay engages visual rhetorical analysis from transnational and postcolonial angles, explaining how such contexts complicate interpretations of what is seen in *An African City* (*AAC*). The analysis suggests that global cultural flows complicate visual semioscapes through processes of (re)circulation and (re)appropriation in specific translocal contexts. This highlights intravisuality—the dynamic constitution of various visual codes (each comprising a language and an ethos)—as a critical framework for examining transnational Black cinema. The discussion of *AAC* also foregrounds the critical power of ambivalence/irony as a visual methodology for composing and reading. For one, *AAC*'s affirmative and expansive praxis are obvious in its centering of hair rhetorics, female friendships, codeswitching, sartorial authorship, and Black diasporic intimacies. However, Amarteifio's positionality as a transnational African subject with access to neoliberal megarethorics of empowerment impacts what one sees and can therefore revise. For instance, because of Amarteifio's experience as a Black subject in the West and as a fan of *Sex and the City*, she is critical of some Western imaginations of Africa but not the postfeminist templates she transposes onto *AAC*. Amarteifio's (re)visioning of African subjectivity through a Western lens, raises critical questions about the political (“oppositional”) potential of ambiguous cinematic representations. These contradictions present some interpretive challenges, but they are fruitful in understanding how the liminality of transnational black women necessitates a different reading of politics in ways that complicate and extend feminist praxis. Because things are not always black and white in *AAC*, viewer-analysts must deploy multiple lenses (visual metaphor intended) if we are to avoid myopic interpretations. *Shifting* then becomes a kind of critical and close rhetorical reading strategy for unpacking the implications of layered visual meanings and reflecting on the potentialities and challenges of neoliberal cinema as a transformative rhetorical tool for reenvisioning Black female subjects. Ultimately, shifting foregrounds the rhetorical/analytical capaciousness of constantly reframing late modern visualities.

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Biography

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