Iterability and Newsweek's Paradigm of Nigeria as 'Black China'

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ADAGBO ONOJA, JUL 20 2020

Metaphorical (and even hyperbolic) representations or analogies of Africa are not new. Hardly are they surprising either as media outlets are always seeking readers and market share, somehow relying on hyperbolic or surprising narratives to accomplish that. However, the January 15th, 2020 Davos edition of US based *Newsweek* would seem to be an exception, coming from *Newsweek* which is commonly viewed across Africa as a representative of the metropolitan discursive space. Among other things, platforms in that discursive space are widely believed to be complicit in reproducing what Saunders has aptly described as 'the West's imperially inflected geopolitical codes towards the actual physical and human geographies that constitute the world's second largest and most populous continent', (2019: 177). Contrary to that heritage of negativism, *Newsweek* ran a cover story depicting Nigeria as 'Black China' under the title 'The World's Next Superpower'. The rider to the cover story continued the theme by proclaiming that 'Nigeria will be Africa's first true global player – sooner than you think'. On the face of it, a storyline proclaiming social transformation of Nigeria on the scale of contemporary China projects a positive trajectory for Nigeria.

The cover story and the metaphor of 'Black China' could not have, therefore, come but as a surprise, even for critics accustomed to mediated representation of Africa. However, in the light of the closer scrutiny interventions from outlets such as *Newsweek* bear, a critical geopolitics perspective would reject any notion that the cover story in itself demonstrates repudiation of imperial geopolitical codes**.** Instead, the positive outlook of the story also raises the question of what the metaphor might all mean: *Newsweek*'s metaphorical hint of the impossibility of project Nigeria or *Newsweek*'s radical visualisation of Nigeria that can be performative of that reality and, by implication, the African moment through Nigeria's transformation on the scale of China?

What the metaphor might all mean is the challenge taken up in this article. It draws on the concept of iterability to argue that the meaning of *Newsweek*'s 'Black China' metaphor for Nigeria lies beyond whatever intentions fired *Newsweek* editors to write the cover story/coin the phrase. Rather, the meaning and the possible actions such meaning could provoke depends on the interpretation of the metaphor by applicable spaces of readership; spaces that are certain to 'read' it as a call to action and cohere around it in a manner that can be productive of that reality.

What is thus at stake in this article is demonstrating iterability in relation to making sense of this metaphor and, by implication, privileging it in approaching meaning making. This is considered important to on-going exploration of the emancipatory potentials and limits of popular geopolitics in resolving the 'African condition', (Onoja, 2020; 2019). The impoverished and conflict-ridden conditions are the bases of Tony Blair's memorable but problematic metaphor of Africa as a scar on the conscience of the world. It is a phrase the world is increasingly acknowledging. We have just seen that in United Nations Secretary General, the World Health Organisation, (WHO) and International Governmental Individuals, (IGIs) such as Bill Gates echoing each other about how unusually devastating COVID-19 would unfold in Africa.

The Cover Story as Mediated Text

At issue in this section is how the concept of iterability provides the method by which we can determine what the

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cover story/metaphor might mean for Nigeria. The entry point in that respect is taking the cover story, along with the metaphor, as a discourse or a frame game implying a standpoint in space and time. Treating the cover story as thus a mediated text transforms the metaphor from an innocent expression to one which is pregnant with meanings. Hence, the primacy of interrogating the metaphor towards uncovering its plausible layers of meaning. A major claim is that doing so is a challenge for theory.

That is, theory in the sense associated with Rey Chow when she calls poststructuralism 'the paradigm shift whereby the study of language, literature, and the cultural forms becomes irrevocably obliged to attend to the semiotic operations involved in the production of meaning…', (Chow, 2002:172). Chow identifies the accomplishment of theory in that sense as 'systematic unsettling of the stability of meaning, an interruption of referentiality', a powerful echoing of the basis upon which Jacques Derrida and scholars who follow his analytical pathway challenged hermeneutic analysis and contextualism when it comes to making sense of a discourse or a text or similar cultural productions. That basis is the iterative practices by which potential and multivalent meaning unfolds to the consequences of discourse or language game.

From the iterative processes comes iterability as the defining element of writing itself in the Derridean philosophical universe, irrespective of the form of writing involved. Iterability conveys the idea that a text is a derivative of readability – the condition of being read by others beyond the author. 'A writing that was not structurally legible – iterable – beyond the death of the addressee would not be writing', declares Derrida, (1988: 7) in a move that makes readability and repeatability the defining semiotic processes. Readability as a condition of possibility of writing or of the text comes along with a remaking of the text through what Thomassen, for example, calls 'the mutual implication of repetition and alteration', (2010: 47), none of which is escapable with readability and repeatability. The 'repeating, revising, decontextualising, recontextualising and so on' that define reading as to turn it into a re-writing of the text on the scale of an 'event', (Phillips, 2013: 124) proves the point about meaning being a derivative of iterability.

There is thus no way a text, particularly of the type under consideration here, would undergo the practice of readability and still be understandable in terms of the intention of the author or the context in which it was produced. Context as a factor in the interpretation of a text suffers from citationality and the differing and deferring implications of that. Thus, although context is generally accepted as a crucial variable in understanding a text, it not that decisive as to contest the conclusion that 'no intention, and no consciousness can arrest production of meaning through iterability', (Thomassen, 2010: 50). Readability and citationality are then the constitutive features by which the text becomes a wandering entity whose meaning cannot be stable because the readership it will encounter and the interpretation that awaits it at each of such points cannot be anticipated. As such, readability and citationality are also the means by which Derrida operationalises his contestation of binary oppositions in Western philosophy. Ludemann has listed such binaries as 'the privileging of interiority over exteriority, of ideality above materiality, of the intelligible above the sensible, of time above space, of presence above absence, and so on', (2014: 32).

In other words, the text becomes solely a product of contingent interpretation in terms of meaning rather than the writing ideology of the author or the social context of its production. The implication is the case that iterability transforms meaning making itself into a site of struggle in the context of Deconstruction's sense of the social as a discursive space. This invests iterability with a decentering implication for hegemonic orders and hegemons against which the reading of a particular text can be articulated into a universal consensus on any particular issue. In iterability, therefore, lurks the means by which a successful politicization of an unequal power relation becomes possible or achievable. All this connects iterability to a politicised resolution of the unequal historical power relations between those experiencing the 'African condition' and their dominant others.

Two questions that arise at this point are precisely how iterability unpacks 'Black China' and in which specific spaces of readership as to follow interruption of referentiality and the African moment rather than otherwise.

Iterability, 'Black China' and the African Moment

If we rely on iterability, then we can speak of most likely interpretation and re-articulation of *Newsweek*'s paradigm of Nigeria as 'Black China' into a call to action, considering the spaces of repeatability of the paradigm in the current

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configuration of global politics. All such spaces would find a message in a metaphor that idealises recent transformation in China as the imperative for Nigeria. The status of a binding narrative or a 'common will' awaits the metaphor from each of the diverse ideological, cultural, business and geopolitical interests involved. That would happen because each confronts a problem solving challenge in the Nigeria that now exists but which China scale transformation is a unifying solution. Investing Nigeria with the capacity to replicate China on the African continent as *Newsweek* has done is thus bound to appeal across such spaces as far as how Africa might leap into industrial civilisation is concerned. Africa's leap is something the Africans will see as the end of their own 'centuries of humiliation'; which capitalists would see as good for capitalist globalisation and which global civil society would see from the lens of global ethics and justice.

This analysis does not assume a tension free connection between each of these interests and the 'Black China' metaphor. Rather, the analysis suspects that the neoliberal minded drivers of the World Economic Forum, for instance, would have preferred a metaphor that proclaims the values of liberalism, liberal democracy and capitalism they are inclined to instead of China image for the transformation of Nigeria invoked in the metaphor. What is assumed is the irresistible completeness of 'Black China' for the degree of transformation in Nigeria that would satisfy their stake in the country. It has to be of the depth and size of the transformation in China which has left linguists, economists and development scholars stranded in naming it or left the voices that have attempted doing so to speak in superlatives.

For Stephen Roach, a Senior Fellow at the Jackson Institute for Global Studies at Yale University, 'no large developing economy has ever done what China has done over this period, transforming itself into the world's most powerful export machine', (Moody, 2018, p.6). Sir Mark Moody Stuart, a former chairman of Royal Dutch Shell and Chairman of United Nations Foundation for the Global Compact also points at how China's accomplishment at reform has been an "astonishing achievement" and a role model for other developing countries, particularly in Africa'. *Newsweek* must have thus found 'Black China' the inescapable metaphor for its cover story, the same manner that the multiplicity of interests involved would find in the metaphor a unifying narrative for each of their different stakes in Nigeria. It is these specific interests and their likely reading of the metaphor that we try to sketch below. The list below does not capture every conceivable interests but those considered contextually most significant.

If we take the Davos circuit, for example, this is the audience to which the cover story is formally targeted. It is instructive that the story opens with the reporter referring to the then Emir of Nigeria's ancient city of Kano as one of the very few persons he had been told may know the answer to the question of what the future holds for Nigeria. The voice behind that nomination cannot but be a Davos voice in a story written with the Davos audience in mind, considering that the Emir (as he then was) is an economist, a former Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria with connection to international finance that comes with the job. The same goes for the many voices heard in the story, most of them Western educated elite in the same league as the then Emir. They include Ms Oge Onubogu whom the cover story introduced as the leader of the Africa programs at the US Institute of Peace, Yemi Koyejo of the Nigerian-American Multicultural Council in Houston, Fareedah Yahuza Yashe of the Community Engagement and Social Development Initiative, (CESDI), a nongovernmental organization in Maiduguri, the capital of the Northeast state of Borno where Boko Haram holds sway, Uche Orji, the incumbent CEO of the Nigeria Sovereign Investment Authority with Wall Street investment background and Folasope Aiyesimoju, CEO of the conglomerate UAC as well as a former staff of Kohlberg Kravis Roberts in London to whom is attributed the description of Nigeria as one with 'demographics to die for'.

Common to the above listing is a sustained animus against the clumsy and dysfunctional management of modernization by the power elite in Nigeria. In other words, they symbolise all three values Bates identified as drivers of recent shifts in Western narrative of Africa, these being liberalism, democracy and capitalism as opposed to traditionalism/tribalism; authoritarianism and poor macroeconomic policy, (Bates, 2012). A Davos view of where Nigeria should be can be inferred and, by implication, a Davos constituency of the forces for the materialization of Nigeria as 'Black China'.

While the Davos circuit might have remotely instigated the story in tandem with writing Nigeria from the point of view of expanded global market, its counterpart – the global civil society – is sure to decode the metaphor and intervene

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from the point of view of emancipatory politics in global justice. The global civil society refers to theequally diffuse fronts already testing its strength against diverse manifestations of neoliberal globalisation underpinning realities such as the 'African condition'. We have in mind powerful amplifiers, stretching from thinkers, writers, philosophers, models, First Ladies, musicians, vocal international personalities, the anti-globalisation actors, the anti-war movement, the Occupy Movement, the Boycott campaigners, the anti-debt coalitions and sundry activists already on the barricades. These groups may not have arisen in response to the 'African condition' and has not drawn a link between the transformation of Nigeria into a 'Black China' and the African moment. There is, however, no evident reason it would not embrace a campaign that could lead to a rupturing of 'African condition' through the emergence of what Huntington would call a core state for the African Civilisation.

The third most identifiable interest expected to buy-in to the realisation of 'Black China' is China. China's narrative of Nigeria as a 'strategic partner', the geopolitical advantages and the identity allure in its involvement in a rapid transformation of Nigeria are such that China is guaranteed to be guided by the metaphor. This does not dismiss scepticism about China's intentions in Africa. What it privileges is how a rising power such as China will not miss the geopolitical advantage of its image as reference point in this case. We identify the Nigerian domestic space as another interest to watch in this analysis and to simply argue that current deep division in Nigeria along class, gender, ethnic, regional and religious lines will not interrupt the emergence of a critical mass in response to the promise of the remaking of the country on the scale of China.

Also certain to be a factor is popular geopolitics, the source of new narratives of Africa in the form of 'Africa Rising', 'the lion on the move' 'Africa Aspiring' and similar others. Scholars such as Bates who argue that these narratives are driven by the West's need for Africa's mineral resources in the context of threats of social upheaval in the West and the rise of China may have hit the nail on the head. The point, however, is that iterability denies the meaning of these narratives to the intention of those behind them. To that extent, it does not matter what drives the narratives but how the readers recast them to achieve political objectives. Seen from that perspective, the new narratives of Africa and the discursive sites behind them constitute a flank with a potentially emancipatory contribution to the project of turning the 'Black China' metaphor of Nigeria into that reality. Without underestimating the neoliberal character of these narratives of Africa and Africa's own nation branding campaigns that Browning, (2016) has convincingly pointed out, there can still be no losing sight of the discursive power of mediated texts in the re-making of Africa through Nigeria's achievement of transformation. The spectacle of Western dominated platforms of popular culture that promoted the image of Africa as a 'Dark Continent' turning into bearers of potentially emancipatory metaphors is the beautiful paradox the world might already be experiencing.

The last but crucial space to consider is the African counterpart of metropolitan platforms of popular culture which has already been on the literary barricades against the cultural misrepresentation of Africa. From that space has come memorable texts such as Binyavanga Wainaina; Nanjala Nyabola; Chimamanda Adiche, James Michira among many others. These protest texts have, however, been mainly about mocking hegemony rather than situate the information warfare against the continent beyond the perceived intention of hegemonic script managers. In that lies their paradoxical helpfulness to the mission of cultural misrepresentation by confirming to the interests behind such scripts how successfully hurtful they have been in that. As such, these African scripts have failed to hurt the hegemonic Other through the Butlerian idea of performativity that Aradau captures as entailing 'the possibility of certain things, subjects, and discourses to be both ordering and disordering, be misappropriated, and counter-act a given rational in iterative practice' (2017: 72). With 'Black China', they would be shifting from attacking to politicising the metaphor.

The preceding discussion indicates how the reading process would provoke into being the coalition of the willing that can politicise the 'Black China' metaphor by posing it as the resolution of the 'African condition'. As much as reading the metaphor could go either way and as much as attempt to politicise one interpretation could be overwhelmed by contending interpretations, the decisive factor that can be seen at work in favour of the line of argument here is the near impossibility of selling any meaning of the 'Black China' imagination of Nigeria that rejects that reality as invoked by the metaphor in the current context. Hence the potential power of the 'Black China' paradigm to produce the implied reality once a 'historic block' arises to read it as a call to action. It is in that context that the metaphor can lead to Nigeria's leap in the scale of China based on the iterability of texts beyond authors. This is not to suggest that

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everyone would accept that Nigeria's transformation would automatically translate to the African moment. The assumption is that the articulatory process would respond to such likely areas of tension.

Conclusion

Iterability resolves the question of what *Newsweek*'s cover story and its paradigm of Nigeria as 'Black China' refers to. The key features in the reading process that define iterability also invests it with a political value favourable to the translation of the metaphor into a call to action on the subject matter. Iterability is not about guarantee of success of a call to action. Rather, the guarantee lies in the difficulty of attracting positive reception for contending readings of the metaphor among the key, applicable interests and forces involved. That is what will pave way for a productive outcome for a campaign that will present Nigeria achieving China scale social transformation as an idea whose time has come.

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