Introduction: Narratives of achievement in African and Afroeuropean contexts

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Introduction

Between the 1940s and the 1970s, the 'achievement principle' was intensely researched and theorised within a frame of Western rationalisation and of Western-driven notions of global progress especially in economics and the social sciences. In the first decades of this century, achievement orientation and meritocratic thinking have begun to attract research once more, this time across a wider disciplinary spectrum, but again, with an implicit focus on the global north-west.[3] Achievement-orientation, however, and its manifestation in meritocratic principles is a powerful aspect in cultural narratives across the globe that impacts on social and individual lives in multiple ways. It is present in African societies and in communities across the African diaspora. This collection of short essays seeks to initiate a conversation that can help generate a better understanding of the ways in which achievement and merit are defined, negotiated, represented and embedded, and of the connotations they carry in African contexts, among African social groups and strata, and in communities across the African diaspora, especially in Europe. The collection thus aims to draw attention to the existence of a diversity of concepts of achievement prevalent in these contexts and to embark on explorations into the question of their relations.

That Africa and Europe are not only neighbouring and geographically connected continents, but have a long history of exchange, entanglements and transculturation deserves to be remembered in times in which colonial legacies of 'othering,' postcolonial divisions and new dichotomic projections are re-shifting the focus on essential differences. These relatively recent developments have affected European views of Africa, and African views of Europe sustainably with the result of not only blurring a history of connectedness – a literal continental connectedness when considered in terms of deep time – but also of

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2 Some of the papers in the ensuing chapters have been presented at a workshop conference that took place in Fall 2018 in Stellenbosch and Cape Town as well as a conference panel in Tampere. The workshop conference was generously funded by the German Research Council (DFG) via the programme Point Sud. For his support in setting up and carrying out the workshop we would like to thank Marko Scholze. The editorial process has been supported by Thorsten Lemanski and Agnes Lucas at Heinrich Heine Universität Düsseldorf. For her invaluable help in reading and correcting all contributions from manuscript to proof stage, we are indebted to Miriam Hinz.

3 Studies on educational contexts abound (cf., for instance Lampert 2012, Hadjar and Becker 2016, and Markowits's 2019 polemic take) cultural studies (e.g. the contributions in Dench 2006, and most recently Littler 2017).

impeding serious comparative discussions of values and the questions of what it means to lead a good life, to succeed, to 'make it' – to move forward, to move on or to move up in life, individually, communally or as an organisation. The lack of explorations – of the kind that would require a longstanding dialogue and commitment to cross-cultural exchange and collaboration – is especially striking when the (omni)present force of neoliberalist narratives of achievement is considered: These narratives come with universal claims (Littler), but have been formed in specific contexts and situations, they affect, but are also affected by, both Western/European and African individuals, communities and concepts.

The aim of the debate that this essay collection hopes to spur and participate in is to contribute – through initial (re)considerations of philosophical and theoretical approaches on the one hand and case studies of narratives of achievement in African and Afroeuropean contexts on the other – to a reframing of global notions of achievement and thus to a corrective to the prevailing Western/Eurocentric framework. Ultimately, it will also help us reconsider and interrogate Western ideas. Our leading question will be: How is achievement envisioned, narrated and scripted in African and Afroeuropean cultural representations, in institutional and organisational contexts? While the essays are the result of an exchange and collaboration on achievement concepts across disciplines, including scholars from Africa, Europe and beyond, each of them nevertheless opens a new door, probing into a special field. Together, they open up a wide panorama of 'meritocratic' narratives and scripts and show that narratives from what (at least in a Western perspective) is still wrongly seen as the 'global periphery' have a greatly underestimated bearing on transcultural social realities and ultimately challenge the notion of 'global' ideas.

We have grouped the essays in three sections. The papers in Section I: "Universal agendas – particular practices" engage centrally with core values and notions of success, achievement and performance in organisational bodies, but also in concrete local contexts and practices. Section II: "Science, politics and the public: Metrics of success" explores the metrics of achievement in a selection of national scientific, educational and political entities with a particular focus on South Africa and some Western European nations with different political and educational cultures respectively. Section III: "Narratives of formation" investigates literary and artistic negotiations of concepts of value and success from both African and Afroeuropean contexts.

I Universal agendas – particular practices

The debates leading to the essays in this section tackle two interrelated ideas: firstly, that narratives of achievement are not and were not solely western discourses, but have emerged independently in different global regions; and secondly, that at the same time, narratives of achievement are, especially when considered in the academic community, in world politics and economics, dominated by hegemonic Western discourses.

In 1961, Harvard psychology professor David McClelland published his book *The Achieving Society*. Although, it was heavily criticised for its invalid methodology and circular argumentation (e.g. Weisskopf 1962), it was generally celebrated in the Western scientific community, including even those who voiced criticism (e.g. Davis 1962, Rubin 1963). One major argument of the book is that economic wealth could be attributed to an intrinsic motivation for achievement, implanted in boys by their mothers (McClelland 1976, especially chapter 9). Thus, in his assessment of the varied economic performance of nations, he effectively replaced the biological racism – widespread since the 19th century – with a psychological explanation, without questioning the contingency of his concept of achievement.[4] In the heat of decolonizing movements and women's movements, he implicitly and in many passages explicitly put both, colonised regions and women in what he, along with conservative politics and dominant social theories of that era, considered to be their place: motherhood for the latter and a perpetual state of having to learn from the West for the former.

The argument, and impact, of McClelland's book is only one prominent example – among many others – of how achievement and ambition were Westernised and thereby used to obliquely legitimise notions of Western supremacy, imperialism and the diverse 'civilizing missions' both in hindsight and for the postwar present. To put it more precisely: If these Westernised notions of achievement did not directly *legitimise* relations between the so-called global North and global South, they have certainly contributed to the construction of social realities by informing specific models, standards and development programmes, e.g. by advocating support for some political systems rather than others etc. Ultimately, these Westernised notions of achievement have helped cement the prevailing (Western) narrative of an achieving global North and an underachieving global South, and this narrative has fed back into staging Western notions of success as universal norms.

To understand how this hegemonic narrative of a Western 'origin' of achievement operates, and to challenge it, is one aspect this section of papers addresses. In this process, it is inevitable to return to the question: What does "universal" and "particular" imply? What does it mean in and for each contingent context? Secondly, these papers explore the relation between agenda and practice. Narratives and discourses are not identical with practice. Rather, they are interpreted for, and translated into, practice, and practice can shape, and indeed change, a narrative in turn. Hence, addressing the relation between agenda and practice also allows us to understand how narratives of achievement are challenged by the very practice that is guided by the narratives. This reciprocal process occurs continuously on different scales ranging from an individual's agenda to the

4 The way in which McClelland juxtaposes the data he references and draws on has been recognised as problematic. Even more problematically, his understanding of achievement remains under-defined and is by implication informed by Western thought. Most problematically, this implicit understanding has fed into a widespread, yet unfounded, distinction between achieving and under-achieving nations.

global. An awareness of how situated practices inform situated narratives necessitates a reformulation of our initial thought: Not only do different social contexts and situations *frame* narratives of achievement, they form such narratives in specific ways. The papers in this section pay tribute to the wide-ranging scale of these contexts, their historical and geographical locations by considering narratives of achievement in municipal environments, in regional and in global agenda settings.

These three interrelated aspects – how situated practice creates narratives, how narratives are translated into practice, and how to understand universality and particularity and their relation – recur not only in this section but throughout the collection.

Mpho Tshivhase sets out by challenging the perception of Western accounts as global representations. Western accounts focus on the individual aspects of achievement only, whereas Tshivhase, drawing on the works of Dismas Masolo and Ifeanyi Menkiti, shows how individual drive and communal acknowledgement fashion achievement collaboratively. She argues that the African idea of communally formed personhood thereby advances a different concept of achievement. **Jo Littler**, by contrast, presents and critically interrogates the (Western) ideology of meritocracy and the metaphor of the ladder. She argues that this ideology functions as a hegemonic discourse which suggests fairness while it perpetuates and simultaneously covers inequality. Unlike the meritocratic model of social stratification, where economic wealth brings social recognition in itself, **Steve Tonah** shows that in Mamprusi society the idea of chieftaincy and traditional titles is at the core of narratives of achievement and the key to social recognition. Towards this end, such achievements as economic wealth and power are only means, while titles associate success closer with both the identity of the person and their social embeddedness.

Joseph Oduro-Frimpong's contribution investigates how achievement is framed and narrated in Ghanaian obituary posters. Obituary posters are analysed as a popular cultural practice across Ghanaian cultures, which remediate narratives about achievement situated within traditional frameworks of what it means to lead a 'good life.' So do other cultural practices, e.g. folktales. **Tasun Tidorchibe**'s contribution zooms into the folktales of the Konkomba in Northern Ghana to tease out elementary concepts of value and normative orders which have shaped the attitudes and lifeworlds of the community for generations and have a direct economic aspect: Among Konkomba, social recognition revolves not only around procreation, but also around achievements in farming. Farming, selling produce and the practical challenges imposing themselves in this process are addressed by **Issa Fofana**, who elaborates on the basis of an empirical study how changed practices lead to measurable achievements by exploring the impact of mobile telephony on the cereal trade market in Mali. Thereby he shows how particular practices mobilise (both in a litteral and a figurative sense) achievements for the upward mobility of a previously rather dependent social group. **Katja Hericks** discusses the idea of productivity as a famous narrative of achievement within the International Labour Organisation. She illustrates how the ILO's interpretation of productivity has changed in the context of its African activities.

Manuela Boatcă's contribution, which closes this section of papers, takes the debate back to the level of African-European relations. Focusing on the historically evolved European supremacy discourse that has been foundational for the European exploitation of the African continent, she reminds us that racist and colonialist ideas of achievement impact contemporary (supranational) European politics to this day.

II Science, politics and the public: Metrics of success

A second over-arching thread in our debates relates to the measurement and understandings of achievement in (higher) education, scientific and political institutions within different national contexts. Within societal organisations, nationally and internationally, academic institutions enjoy a high degree of prestige. Key notions of value and success propagated and perpetuated in these environments tend to be an example of, and influence for, other societal organisations and sites of discourse and learning. Typically, it is within these contexts that "scientisation" occurs. Science is self-constructed by scientists as producing a universal set of falsifiable, objectively verifiable facts about the natural and social world. Science can, in this sense, be understood as having a universal agenda. It is of particular relevance to our theme to note that science also involves social hierarchies, with some scientists/academics having more authority than others. Furthermore, science is created in tandem with narratives of formation as people become scientists. Given our focus on achievement in *African and Afroeuropean* contexts, we are particularly concerned with the analysis of regional and culturally-specific aspects of the production of science and scientists in these domains.

Some readers may wonder why we have adopted such a seemingly loose understanding of the scientific enterprise: why have we brought together papers dealing with students in university residences, academics, medical doctors and biomedical scientists? We want to provocatively draw on, and read, the broad German concept of *wissenschaft* (i.e. systematic research and scholarly inquiry in any discipline) in African and Afroeuropean contexts. When we understand science and scientists as produced by, and taught in, societies, we can further map the tensions between, and enmeshments of, individual and communal African and Afroeuropean models of achievement. At crucial moments, African notions of achievement have also partly been reactions to international organisations' technocratic notions of African societies as underdeveloped and to apartheid stereotyping of Africans as inherently unsuccessful. Here, the papers grouped under this theme also emphasise African agency in asserting models of success founded on fostering greater social justice. The case studies draw our attention to the agency of Africans and Afroeuropeans in disrupting both dominant models of African failure and offering up their own, diverse approaches to accomplishing individual, and social, progress.

Three of the contributions in this section point to the fact that Black and African people have complex – and at times divergent – notions of achievement both in

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and occupations. These papers address achievement in various country-contexts and among different 'racial' groups.[5] Hence, while **Charlotte Williams** discusses Black academics' or "blacademics'" ideas of achievement, **Abdoulaye Gueye** describes those of Black French people in relation to their entry into occupations and **Florian Elliker** sketches out dominant models of success in historically White South African universities' student residences. **Charlotte Williams** contends that Black British people have their own scripts of success and achievement in institutions in which they are racially marginalised. Here we can see that Black academics (or scientists/researchers) are not merely acted upon by oppressive institutions, but that they have formed their own framings/narratives of meritocracy and success. Similarly, **Abdoulaye Gueye** discusses the specific characteristics of Black French citizens' understandings of success. He highlights the fact that Black French people have a specific notion of upward mobility as related to occupational prestige and notions of Whiteness as a "*master criterion* [his emphasis] of qualification." African narratives of achievement are far from homogenous or static: racial, ethnic and class inequalities are still reproduced at South African universities. In particular, **Florian Elliker**'s article discusses the ways in which residences at Historically White Afrikaans Universities (HAUs) confront students with a problematic model of "universal" achievement on campus, but outside the classroom.

If Black and African notions, and experiences, of achievement are not always – adequately – represented in conventional institutions of learning, this does not mean that they automatically fare better in alternative models of education, e.g. Democratic Education (DE): While introducing Democratic Schools' conceptualisations of achievement that challenge conventional meritocratic approaches, **Lena Kraus** comments on of these schools as often lacking in diversity criticism. Individual achievement must be understood in relation to ideas of society-wide economic advancement, which must be historically contextualised. As **Mina Godarzani-Bakhtiari** shows, universalised, Western/Euro-centric economic narratives of achievement have constructed Africa, and the global South in general, as "undeveloped" after the Second World War, when newly decolonised countries came to be seen as "closed autonomous national economies."

One field in which dominant (Western) narratives of African performance have had particularly detrimental effects and which deserves additional reappraisal is the context of medicine and health. In Western contexts, the valorisation of medicine as a healing art, and the promotion of public health can be framed as akin to a universal morality

5 Capitalizing the terms "Blackness" or "Whiteness" signals that they are concepts – albeit concepts that impact the social realities and lived experiences of individuals and groups across the globe in various ways – that have emerged in the context of a racist history of thought. We are aware that terms denoting affiliation with a specific 'racially' categorised group differ, and that there are significant discrepancies in the historically contingent contexts of South Africa, Britain and other European nations as regards terminological traditions. We have therefore chosen to refrain from a standardisation of terminology when editing the individual contributions.

(Metzl and Kirkland 2010). It must be recognised that while individual African doctors and health activists have received acclaim for their own achievements, they have also, at times, highlighted the structural causes of ill-health and its converse, the need for collective societal health solutions. These issues are explored in two of the papers which deal with South Africa. **Vanessa Noble** shows that in an apartheid context, individual Black medical students' and doctors' achievements acted as a riposte to dominant racist notions of their inherent propensity towards "under-achievement." However, some of them came to develop a more collective sense of achievement in challenging apartheid. Similarly, **Mandisa Mbali** questions dominant framings of individual Africans' scientific and activist achievements in ending AIDS by calling for a greater focus on structural drivers of new infections.

III Narratives of form/ation

The boundaries between art and culture are blurry. The papers grouped in this section engage with literary texts and artworks that 'perform' as such and that are not immediately bound up (at least in the first degree) with a social, communal or generally cultural function, as for instance the Konkomba folktales discussed in **Tasun Tidorchibe**'s contribution or the mediatised narratives of achievement discussed in **Joseph Oduro-Frimpong**'s exploration of Ghanaian obituary posters. The discourse about art's alterity has so far been understood as highly situated, i.e. as a legacy of Western (modernist) culture (Casanova 2004, 46). However, this understanding is beginning to be challenged, and new insights into the ways in which the Western paradigm has travelled are manifold: Indeed, the notion of art as 'other' to society has been claimed by artists and writers in the former colonial spheres who have assumed it, written back to it or used it as a site of performance that is translatable to the global (and yet Western dominated) literary marketplace and the art sphere. But then, art and literature are also social practices, embedded in cultural narratives and enmeshed with these, and thus not free from hegemonic structures. In fact, the fields of art and literature are social fields that produce hegemonic structures of their own.

The complexities of achievement narratives in the art scene are illuminated by the recent openings of two major art museums on the African continent: the *Musée des Civilisations Noirs* (MCN) in Dakar and the *Zeitz Museum of Contemporary African Art* (MOCAA) in Cape Town. Both embrace a Pan-Africanist mission in their collections of cultural artefacts and contemporary art that is inclusive of the diaspora and of what may be termed Afropolitan perspectives (Mbembe 2005). Both institutions which collect, display and celebrate African art (the MCN with a culturalist perspective, the MOCAA with a fine arts approach) have been criticised for their dependence on non-African funding. While the MOCAA responds to accusations that it may be subject to what Littler terms the "hegemonic whiteness of the cultural industries" (Littler 2017, 161), copying Western mu-

seums and promoting a "white concept" of Africa, among other things (Blackman 2015), by emphasising institutional awareness of the problem,[6] the MCN's Chinese funding was openly celebrated as a symbol of solidarity between China and Africa pitted against Western hegemonic expectations.[7] What the criticism directed at both institutions highlights, however, is that African institutions that attempt to make an impact on a global scale are observed with particular scrutiny and expectations regarding their performance.

Racialised expectations of performance (or non-performance/failure) also continue to impact on the range of possibilities at the disposal of individual African and Afrodescendant artists, curators and other practitioners in the global/Western creative industries, as the experience of the late Okwui Enwezor in his position as director of Munich Haus der Kunst suggests (cf. Enwezor in Knöfel 2018). The trope of Black exceptionalism outlined in **Charlotte Williams**'s contribution to the present collection fares prominently in the narratives surrounding Enwezor's rise as curator of important and thought-provoking international art shows (among them the documenta and the Venice Biennial). However, a counter narrative ("you construct a picture, a picture of failure, of my failure" [*ibid*.]) followed promptly as soon as the museum's long-standing financial and structural problems surfaced. That organisational problems are individualised for the benefit of the organisation but to the detriment of the individual who is made to bear the full weight of responsibility can be observed in many contexts: A school failing one of its students will much rather personalise the matter as that individual student's shortcomings; an enterprise that does not perform will get rather rid of a CEO; a failing football club will rather exchange its manager than look into possibilities of organisational improvement that will enable a diversity of individuals to move forward and onward. This way, myths of achieving, functional, performing organisations or environments are maintained – in Enwezor's case the myth of Haus der Kunst as high-profile art institution – whereas perceptible narratives of failure are almost always sketched as the failure of individuals. In a racist or strongly class-ridden climate, they quickly become the collective failure of particular, essentialised groups: Thus Enwezor, to stay with the example, became 'the African,' or 'the Black curator,' who has always carried a burden of representation on top of the challenges of the managerial-curatorial work.

Socialist and Panafricanist visions of the early and mid-twentieth century had challenged such essentialising structures of domination (McEachrane 2020). Like the

6 Our visit to MOCAA in November 2018 was framed by correspondence and introductory statements that reflected the MOCAA's awareness of its institutional responsibility vis-à-vis its positioning.
7 The funding through China has been a recurring subject in reports surrounding the construction and the opening of the MCN in 2016. Writing in *Le Monde*, for instance, Azimi (2016) cites an "informed Senegalese observer" who expressed fears that the Chinese might 'vampirize' the museum and treat it as an 'antechamber'" (e.g. Azimi 2016). The opening press release of 6 December 2018 frames the museum's construction as part of the "cultural cooperation" between the People's Republic of China and Senegal under Macky Sall's presidency (MCN 2018).

visions of a socialist and social-democratic type of meritocracy described by Littler (2017, 32-35), these visions were swallowed by the rise and eventual domination of a neoliberal approach to the world in which the invocation of merit functions as a mask of desire. Pitted against, and amidst, these concepts are individual and collective attempts at making sense of, or even projecting alternatives to, the conflicts arising from these seemingly fair, and yet violently competitive contemporary environments. Art and literature offer particularly sharp foci of insight in this respect. **Ruby Magosvongwe**'s paper, for instance, investigates alternative concepts to the norms imposed on African post-independence societies by highlighting the stigmatizing and simultaneously productive multitude of notions of madness across African contexts by drawing on diverse Anglophone African texts, but with a particular focus on the Zimbabwean writer Mashingaidze Gomo's long narrative poem *A Fine Madness* (2010). Gomo's work offers a transcultural engagement with concepts of valorisation emerging as legacies of colonial violence and vested interests in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Whereas Gomo's text is an individual writer's attempt at creating a vociferous and multivocal debate, the Ghanaian writer and poet Nana Awere Damoah engaged in a virtual 'community enterprise' when putting together *My Book of #GHCoats* (2013). The result is an extended piece of conceptual poetry derived from Damoah's (and his Facebook community's) fabricated quotations of wisdoms attributed to a variety of celebrities. In his contribution on *My Book of #CHCoats*, **Kwabena Opoku-Agyemang** explores a mesh of proliferations of Ghanaian and globally translatable narratives of achievement and the ironic treatment they receive in Damoah's work.

Eva Ulrike Pirker explores Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's engagement with narratives of achievement in oppressive normative frameworks that formulate universal claims in her reading of *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), which as a novel of formation/*Bildungsroman* also situates itself in a metafictional discourse about achieving literary genres. Like Adichie, the British novelist Zadie Smith is a writer whose work has been imbued with valorisation on the world literary scale. Whereas the very concept of 'world literature' is a contested one, its definition through the attribution of global economic or cultural capital works very well in the case of these two authors (Casanova 2004, 178-79). **Suzanne Scafe**'s reading of Smith's novels *NW* (2012) and *Swing Time* (2016) traces Smith's explorations of individual progress, especially the progress of her Black British protagonists, over the millennial and post-millennial years, which were marked not only by a new 'muscular' neoliberalism, but also by the accompanying social divide. Like Scafe's, **Joseph McLaren**'s contribution on Diran Adebayo's novel *Some Kind of Black* (1996) presents an Afroeuropean context by centring on the ambivalent progress of a young, Yoruba-descended man in the UK, where he is always 'some kind of black.' The progress of women across academic environments is scrutinised by the Moroccan writer Fatima Mernissi in her autobiographical works *Dreams of Trespass* (1994) and *Scheherazade Goes West* (2001). **Tina Steiner** explores two aspects of these works, their tracing of female agency in both North African and Western academic contexts, and their tracing – across cultures – of this agency in the

(subversive) act of Scheherazade's storytelling in *The Thousand and One Nights*. The sense that orality can challenge the realm of written culture, that women's particular practices can challenge a realm of 'universalised' male domination is also embraced in Kenyan artist Wangechi Mutu's works that, like Mernissi's texts, transgress medial and generic boundaries. **Cezara Nicola**'s discussion of a selection of Wangechi Mutu's artworks (e.g. "The Forbidden Fruitpicker" and "You Are My Sunshine," both 2015) shows how Mutu projects, through her use of Afrofuturist tropes, an imaginary that allows for a critical discussion of gendered and culturally charged notions of achievement as well as a critical discussion of achieving forms in a neoliberal-meritocratic artworld.

To be continued

The most basic, and yet the most crucial, aspect linking the individual papers in this collection is that the narratives of achievement they engage with are contingent. Although the situations and contexts from which they emerge are often subjected to and entangled in cross-culturally operating hegemonic frameworks, these narratives and the forms they take are nevertheless situated within and informed by local and regional conditions. This leads to the insight that the assumption of a universal narrative of achievement is not only incomplete or erratic, but in fact presents a violent epistemic imposition of a normative order to the detriment of the recognition of complex situations that require a serious cross-disciplinary and transculturally informed research ethics – an ethics that commands the inclusion and accommodation of local knowledge wherever possible and the recognition of an incompleteness of records wherever necessary. Furthermore, the contingency of the narratives investigated in the different contributions leads to the insight that the debate they engage in has to be widened and continued across contexts and disciplines. The papers in this collection open doors to a variety of fields for exploration, but also – necessarily – draw attention to the limits of their respective scope of investigation. There are, indeed, countless other doors to connected areas of relevance. We invite readers to see this collection as a prompt to open some of them and contribute to what we have come to believe is a crucial debate in a world shaped by ever new formations of contingent narratives, by moving bodies and travelling concepts.

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