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Temporalities of waiting in Africa: introduction to special issue

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Ethnographic accounts of Africa in the late 20th century described a continent in which people were seemingly waiting endlessly for a future that would not come (Ferguson 1999; Piot 2010). Driven by normative temporal narratives of modernity and development, citizens and states imagined linear incremental movements through time. From individuals who envision better lives through work, education or migration, to larger community's agendas for collective empowerment, to government's long-term visions of national renewal, Africa has been rife with expectations for the future. For both states and citizens, the realization of these multiple futures is routinely delayed and often indefinitely postponed, creating a stark divide between expectation and reality. Across the continent a sense that the future is an elusive good and the present is a chronic state of waiting emerged in the aftermath of neoliberal structural adjustment policies that accelerated inequality, poverty, unequal resource access and marginalization (Ferguson 2006).

Perhaps more than any other area, it is in the lives of youth that scholars have examined the gap between expectations of progress and a reality of stagnation (e.g. Archambault 2012; Cole 2004; Hansen 2005; Mains 2012; Masquelier 2005, 2019; Weiss 2009). Youth not only wait for economic development, they wait for maturation and growth in their own lives, as they struggle to attain normative expectations for the life course and become adults. In the face of persistently unmet expectations, many young people have experienced frustration, disillusion, despair or apathy. Scholars have attempted to conceptualize this experience of youth with the notion of 'waithood' (Honwana 2012). Attributed to a combination of persisting structures of gerontocratic and patrimonial rule and of economic pressures under neoliberal capitalism, the effects of structural adjustment, in particular, waithood describes the involuntarily prolonged adolescence of (mainly male and urban) youth grappling with issues of poverty, underemployment, access to education and, more generally, social and political marginalization. Deprived of access to the resources needed for attaining markers of social adulthood (i.e. stable income, marriage, family and household formation), youth are effectively put in a state of prolonged waiting that generates feelings of boredom, frustration and shame (Mains 2007, 2017; Masquelier 2013; Schielke 2008).

Studies of expectations of development and youth waithood in Africa follow similar logics. Through engagement with modernizing discourses, like formal education, Africans have

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developed desires for progress that cannot be met in the current political and economic climate.¹ In the face of economic decline, political exclusion and unmet expectations, Africans wait. As insightful and evocative as these narratives of waitthood and unmet expectations are, they are also problematic because they run the risk of masking the fact that waiting is productive. Youth throughout the continent have used similar language to describe their lives in terms of sitting, waiting, doing nothing and having too much time (Hansen 2005; Mains 2012; Masquelier 2005; Ralph 2008; Weiss 2009). Despite youth claims to be doing nothing but ‘the sitting that kills pants’ (Masquelier 2019), close ethnographic explorations reveal lives that are anything but static (Di Nunzio 2019; Gilbert 2018; Honwana 2012; Johnson 2018; Masquelier 2019; Stasik 2016; Turner 2015; Ungruhe and Esson 2017). It is true that youth wait, but as they wait they talk, play, plan, scheme, hustle and work. In the process of waiting, African youth build relationships that provide a foundation for transforming their lives.

The same is true of African nations. Leaders of African nations certainly wait for economic development, but they simultaneously engage in projects aimed at state building, construction of infrastructure, resource extraction and attracting foreign investment. Any sense that African nations are static should be quickly dispelled by the number of the world’s fastest growing economies currently found on the African continent. Economic growth does not mean an end to waiting, but it certainly reveals that waiting is not an absence of activity.

Building from the argument that waiting can be productive, the articles in this special issue support a conception of a temporality of waiting that combines hopes for a distant future with activity and growth in the present. A temporality of waiting is based on the reciprocal relationship between imaginations of the future and the experience of waiting in the present. It is an experience of time in which engagement with the present is shaped by visions of the future. The present is characterized by feelings of stuckedness, boredom and doing nothing as one’s energy is focused on possible futures. These feelings do not, however, imply that one literally does nothing. As one waits, incremental and unstable day-to-day practices are simultaneous with the maintenance of a broader vision for the future. Waiting becomes inextricably linked with, and filled by, what Ernst Bloch (1986) has described as the *principle of hope*: the power to reorient action through the potentiality of the not-yet. Fed by the moral capacity to persevere in spite of current predicaments, the time of waiting for the future provides opportunities for building relationships, for crafting alternative pathways and for actively tempting fate through social and political action. While the outcomes of these actions might not necessarily match the previously imagined futures, they bear the possibility to bring about change.

For example, in this special issue, Serawit Debele describes Oromo refugees waiting for asylum to be granted in Germany. Their imagined future of legal residence in Germany structures the way they wait – participation in Protestant religious activities is an important element of their waiting. Prayers and spiritual activities may not contribute to the realization of desires for legal residence, but they do produce a particular process of subject formation. Jan Beek describes waiting for income from a speculative ponzi scheme in Ghana. The process of waiting connects those who have participated in the ponzi scheme in ways that do not necessarily generate desired wealth but do create valued social relationships. Hope for the future structure practices of waiting in the present that have unexpected but highly important implications.

The unstable side effects that emerge from a temporality of waiting are particularly useful for conceptualizing contemporary Africa in ways that move beyond a sense of abjection, crisis, uncertainty or temporariness and explore the dynamic relationship between the present and the distant future. To borrow from Jane Guyer’s (2007) discussion of punctuated time, the temporality of waiting is based on the gap between the distant future and the present. Punctuated time involves waiting for a specific future event, like the granting of legal residence explored by Debele or the pay out from a ponzi scheme examined by Beek. As one waits for a distant event, the near future

appears to be evacuated. Guyer (2007, 410) asks ‘what becomes “near” when “near” fades from collective consciousness’. The studies in this special issue indicate that it is largely the side effects of practices of waiting that fill in the near future.

Waiting often includes a sense of uncertainty (Cooper and Pratten 2015), but it necessarily involves clear goals or desires, even if one is quite uncertain about their attainment. For some, uncertainty may be far more desirable than the relative certainty that one’s goals will not be reached. Regardless of uncertainty about the future, expectations and desires structure actions in the present. Imagined futures evolving from past and present experiences generate movement that is highly unstable and certainly not linear (Cole 2010; Goldstone and Obarrio 2017b). A temporality of waiting continually forces a dialogue between the distant future and the seemingly mundane activities of the present. As people wait for imagined futures and dramatic events on the distant horizon, they act in ways that have unexpected consequences. These divergent properties and potentials of waiting – which fold together doubt, disillusion and hope, temporariness and long-term plans, enforced stasis and emergent change – serve as the principal frame for this special issue’s exploration of how different actors and communities across Africa wait while simultaneously negotiating social, economic, political, as well as existential struggles.

While the articles in this special issue stem from different disciplinary orientations including anthropology, history, religious studies and sociology, they are united in using primarily ethnographic methods to understand the experience of waiting. Ethnography allows the authors to explore the relationship between what people say and do. As noted above, although people often describe their lives in terms of waiting, in fact they engage in a great deal of activity that can only be identified through extensive observation and participation. The particular nature of these activities is also important – the work of waiting is not passive but rather entails particular forms of ‘labour in/of time’ (Bear 2014, 20), which, although quite different from manual labour, nevertheless entail strenuous mediations and exert both mental and physical effort. Covering a range of waiting situations and activities in Africa and African diasporas, the analyses here assembled draw on long-term field research to tease out the changing experiences in people’s temporal engagements and future-oriented practices as they evolve over (waiting) time. This ethnographic approach enables the authors to identify the nuances of the lived experience of the temporality of waiting. In this sense, the articles’ conceptual contribution of identifying the side effects of waiting is based on a particular methodological approach.

Attending to the multifaceted interrelationship between present and future that shapes dynamics of waiting, the contributions to this special issue tie into broader discussions on time, futurity and uncertainty in Africa (Cooper and Pratten 2015; Gaibazzi and Gardini 2015; Goldstone and Obarrio 2017a; Guyer 2007; Hänsch, Kroeker, and Oldenburg 2017; Schielke 2015; Weiss 2004), while adding an explicit Africanist perspective to the scattered yet growing body of ethnographic writings on waiting (see in particular the contributions in Hage 2009a and Janeja and Bandak 2018). The conceptual question of what, anthropologically speaking, waiting is and how it relates to different gradations of passivity and action is addressed in the theoretical contribution by Gregor Dobler who situates waiting as evaluation and specific action within economic and political structures. Attending to the social conditions and consequences of waiting, he frames waiting as a medium of resource allocation and social cooperation and, in a further step of the analysis, shows how the unequal distribution of waiting in Africa is linked to inequalities in global economic structures. The following eight articles continue in this line of analysis by linking up the empirical study of particular waiting situations with broader issues of politics and the political economy in contemporary Africa and beyond. In exploring the varied ways in which people individually and collectively position themselves at the juncture of past experiences, lived present and awaited futures, they seek to explicate how different

constellations of time, power and positionality affect the ways in which people navigate conditions of both possibility and constraint.

The themes that cut across the different articles emerge from the peculiar political and economic context of 21st century Africa in which narratives of abjection and decline no longer apply, but dreams of stability and formal employment are as distant as ever. The increase of foreign direct investment in the last two decades – particularly visible in the resurgence of energy infrastructures, large-scale commercial agriculture and massive resource extraction – has mainly filled the pockets of political elites and transnational companies, while the majority has been excluded from the social, material and economic benefits (Ferguson 2006). Despite rates of economic growth estimated by the African Development Bank (2019) to reach 4% in 2019, most employment is available in the informal sector, and in particular, in its growing service sector.² Regular employment is limited, which makes it a difficult and frustrating endeavour for young educated people and skilled workers to find good jobs in order to follow imagined futures and to claim recognition in the shaping of the political economy. In addition to exclusion from participation in economic growth, many people in rural and urban Africa face displacement, expropriation and limited access to land due to ongoing or escalating political conflicts, growing transnational resource extraction and the boom of new infrastructural projects (Hammar 2014; Hänsch 2012; Kesselring 2018). The resulting unequal distribution of profits, services, material and economic resources shape people's relationship between the day-to-day experiences of waiting in an uncertain and precarious present and the longing for imagined distant futures. The social inequality produced and its unbalanced distribution of opportunities and resources reflect existing regional and global power structures.

Following Barry Schwartz (1975) assertion that the distribution of waiting time is inversely related to the distribution of power, one main theme raised in the contributions to this special issue is the political dimension of waiting. As earlier studies highlight, waiting relations provide a crucial proxy for understanding how power is exercised through the control over other people's time (Bourdieu 2000; Göttlich 2015) and how prerogatives of access and resource allocation are differentiated according to socially ascribed categories of race, class, gender and age, among others (Conlon 2011; Crapanzano 1986). This governance-centred approach to waiting figures prominently in studies concerned with waiting in institutional settings, revealing the effects of subjection, dependency and subordination that being kept waiting generates among unprivileged groups (Auyero 2012; Bayart 2007; Jeffrey 2010).

In the African context, these institutionally and structurally imposed forms of waiting become especially manifest in the sanctioning mechanisms state authorities deploy for controlling the movement of irregular migrants (Andersson 2014; Bredeloup 2012; Gaibazzi 2012; Sutton, Vigneswaran, and Wels 2011) or in the privations endured by urban slum dwellers through governmental neglect (Dawson 2014; Simone 2008; Wafer 2017). While acknowledging the sense of uncertainty, vulnerability and powerlessness, such imposed waiting tends to induce on its subjects (Khosravi 2014), several articles in this special issue challenge analyses of 'stuckedness' (Hage 2009b; Sommers 2012) by attending to the shifting mobilizations and contestations of seemingly powerless groups. For instance, writing about the waiting for employment of residents in an informal mining settlement in South Africa, Joseph Mujere's article describes how people draw on informal patronage networks to access work. Entering into patron-client relationships does not simply relieve people from waiting, however, but creates new dependencies, which in turn give rise to new forms of uncertainty and waiting. These ambiguities of waiting are captured from a different angle in Silke Oldenburg's ethnography of young people's waiting in the unstable political context of Goma, Eastern Congo. Faced with entrenched structures of patrimonial and gerontocratic rule that restrict conventional paths for accessing work, young men and women

use their prolonged waiting to capitalize on unforeseen opportunities by building up informal relationships with potential new patrons, international aid workers in particular.

As Mujere's and Oldenburg's articles demonstrate, informality structures the temporality of waiting. Informal work arrangements and patrimonial networks reproduce inequalities of distribution and access. As people circumvent imposed restrictions, existent structures of power are transformed. These 'everyday micropolitics of waiting' (Oldfield and Greyling 2015, 1101) often go unnoticed as quiet 'weapons of the weak' (Scott 1985). When turned into collectively organized forms of collaboration and exchange, they can lead to unexpected effects by opening up chances for accessing resources, by refashioning local political orders and, ultimately, by reshaping futures.

In contexts of oppression, the act of waiting itself can also become a form of resistance to power; for example, by waiting until domination fades or disappears. Such strategies of tenacity were enacted by various communities for resisting colonial rule (von Trotha 1994). They are also relevant in today's neoliberal economies and in response to the exercise of state violence under authoritarian and military rule. In her article, Valerie Hänsch describes how peasant communities in the Sudan collectively persevere to resist imposed waiting caused by dam-induced displacement and state coercion. Faced with the seemingly hopeless situation of losing their homes and livelihood to the rising water, men and women evinced remarkable levels of staying power by rebuilding lives at the shores of the reservoir, and undermining and openly confronting governmental politics of displacement.

Practicing patience and perseverance is one way by which people in Africa engage with politically imposed forms of waiting. As a kind of tacit response to the effects of politics, the affective resonances triggered by long-term waiting for political change create a space for evaluation and critique of the situation at large. The experience of being forced into prolonged periods of waiting, whether by way of structural marginalization, political oppression or forced displacement, may ultimately also lead to protests and other forms of direct political action. This was demonstrated by the recent ousting of long-term political leaders in the Gambia, Zimbabwe and the Sudan, where decades of waiting for political change, as well as for expected and/or promised services, rights and justice created the social ferment of revolution. As is evident from the developments following regime changes in the three countries; however, political transition does not necessarily bring an end to waiting. The question of what happens when long-anticipated political change finally materializes is addressed in the contribution by Niklas Hultin with regard to the aftermath of Yahya Jammeh's rule in the Gambia. Although the political and economic situation improved for many Gambians, the transition to democratic rule marked no end to waiting. Fuelled by newly instilled yet quickly quenched hopes, waiting expanded beyond its initially projected temporal horizon. In this, waiting evoked different evaluations of the divide between expectation and reality, which, as Hultin shows, people expressed through emotionally charged idioms of resignation and resentment.

The productive nature of waiting is another key theme for this special issue. Several articles demonstrate the power of waiting to produce different gradations of sociality (Honwana 2019; Masquelier 2019; Prothmann 2019). While struggling to realize imagined futures, or simply to overcome the ennui and temporal anxiety of enforced waiting, people solidify old and forge new social relationships. The fostering of exchange and mutuality in waiting provides a sense of belonging, boosts individual chances for progress and creates venues for shared political and economic practice (Dawson 2014; Ibrahim and Bize 2018). While these shared practices and the affinity they engender might not relieve people from waiting, they nevertheless change the ways in which people wait in important ways.

The production of collectivity in waiting takes on special significance with regard to the waiting temporalities of migrant mobility (Bendixsen and Eriksen 2018; Cwerner 2001; Pettit

and Ruijtenberg 2019). Migration commonly entails a simultaneous separation of social ties and their maintenance across distance, a tension that creates waiting of different qualities and orientations. Those who migrate wait for passage, arrival, settlement, work, legal status, etc. Those left behind wait for news, remittances and, in case of the migrant's spouse and relatives, reunification, which might take years or even never occur (Elliot 2016; Gaibazzi 2019). As has been argued for Korean Chinese transnational migrants, these distinct yet interrelated acts of waiting – fuelled by hope, expectation and, ultimately, love – generate an affective binding force between people divided by geographical distance (Kwon 2015).

Martha Kumsa's contribution on the perennial plight of the Oromo in Ethiopia and the North American diaspora shows that the commitment to a common future not only binds separated kin but creates lasting relationships of solidarity that connect successive generations across continents. Her article also brings to the fore the significant role that evocations of the past have in shaping the social value of waiting in the present, revealing the concurrent work of different temporal dimensions that waiting entails. Grounded in a personal narrative of waiting in the diaspora, she discusses the complex intersection of individual and collective experiences of uncertainty, hope and despair as they unfold in the Oromo liberation struggle. Even if the imagined future of justice and meaningful political change remains perpetually deferred, the connectedness produced through shared experiences of waiting, and through a shared history of violence and oppression, provides grounds for sustained mutuality and support that affect lives at present.

The generative and transformative potentials of waiting in migration also become manifest in the shaping of self and personhood. The interlinkage between waiting, migration and personhood is explored in Katarzyna Grabska's article on young female Eritrean migrants 'stuck in transit' in Sudan's capital Khartoum. Bringing a gendered perspective to the notion of waitthood, she expands on the parallel between the girls' imagined yet deferred transition to 'better places' elsewhere and their protracted transition into adulthood. Although unable to realize the aspired onward movement, their waiting for an imagined future elsewhere becomes a constitutive element in the remaking of traditional models of womanhood. In the process, they not only negotiate normative expectations of their families and society at large but carve out alternative paths to becoming adult women.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue invite us to consider waiting as a heuristic for understanding the relationship between imaginings of the future, on the one hand, and different forms of quotidian temporal work that characterize waiting in the present, on the other. This relationship, the articles show, is contingent, contested and highly unstable. Its manifestations in Africa provide valuable insights into broader issues of politics and political economy, both within specific contexts in Africa and in the world at large. The articles demonstrate that imagined futures shape the practices, experiences and affects of waiting in the present, and that waiting, far from being static, can be fertile time. Desired futures provide people with a sense of direction that generates action. While these actions might ultimately lead to outcomes that are different from the previously imagined and hoped-for future, the movement they create has important implications for strengthening social relationships, challenging imposed restrictions and inequalities and reconfiguring relations of power.

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Notes

1. These desires for progress share a linear incremental structure but they differ in terms of how future goals are imagined (Mains 2012; Masquelier 2019).
2. The African Economic Outlook 2019 estimates that ‘Africa has the highest rate of informality in the world, estimated at 72 percent of nonagricultural employment [...] and as high as 90 percent in some countries. Furthermore, there is no evidence that informality is declining in Africa’ (ADB 2019, 46).

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