NARRATIVES OF THE NEW DIASPORA: MIGRATION AND TRANSNATIONALISM IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN LITERATURE

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For my father, the late Dr. Francis Abiola Irele, my lighthouse.

For my mother, Mrs. Bassey Efiom Irele, my solace.

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constituted and re-constituted themselves in the face of impossible odds. Writing in revolutionary times is, as I now know intimately, an unwieldy undertaking. However, I am beneficiary and a carrier of the imaginative rage that fueled the generations of scholars who wrote against colonialism, who led—indeed continue to lead—anticolonial and decolonizing movements, and who champion the voices and experiences of folks on and of the continent.

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parent, someone who guided me in my development as a reader, a scholar, and a human. Words do not sufficiently encapsulate the depths of my gratitude and affection for our dear Uncle BJ. But I still have that Tolkien set. The books are on prominent display in my living room and will continue to travel with me to all the places I eventually call home.

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least continue your tradition of deep love for African and global Black cultural expression. I miss you dearly carry you with me every day, in everything I do. I hope I make you proud.

ABSTRACT

NARRATIVES OF THE NEW DIASPORA: MIGRATION AND TRANSNATIONALISM IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN LITERATURE

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Dr. Rita Barnard

This dissertation examines narratives of the new African diaspora– texts that represent the experiences of a largely visible group of mobile Africans. This project calls for a new theory that pushes us to understand diaspora as an activity, a deliberate and continuous examination of various affiliations. I argue for a more capacious reading of the many ways in which diaspora can function, as an organizing principle, as a theory, and as a practice, to make room for the multiple and different manners that narratives of migration and travel explore the contours of belonging to Africa. New diaspora narratives, by prominently emphasizing transnationalism, belonging, and unbelonging, activate a concept of diaspora as a continuous series of translations and transformations with implications both in the places of migrants' origins and in their new host locales. The complexities of tangible but fraught and fractured allegiances and affinities haunt new diaspora literatures in manners both implicit and explicit. Within the negotiations are re-configurations of notions of home and belonging that require the migrant to invest in or question what being of Africa even means.

This project focuses on the discursive space between the continent of Africa, the old, and the new African diaspora to outline a contemporary global Black subjectivity. African literature has long proven itself to be particularly effective at casting an eye on and subverting or critiquing conventions and boundaries. New diaspora narratives build upon post- and decolonial

methodologies and tropes to craft new articulations of agency and self-fashioning in a contemporary globalized world. Narratives of the new African diaspora, I argue, are crucial to examining contemporary globalization, racialization, and ultimately the ideoscapes of Africa and Africanness that continue to be so central to the global circulation of goods and ideas.

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INTRODUCTION | NARRATIVES OF THE NEW AFRICAN DIASPORA

"I know no national boundary where the Negro is concerned. The whole world is my province until Africa is free."

Marcus Garvey (qtd in Yogita Goyal – *Romance, Diaspora and Black Atlantic Literature*)

What is Africa to us…now?

On December 23, 2013, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution proclaiming the period between January 1 2015 and December 31 2024 as the International Decade for People of African Descent. This resolution called for "the allocation of predictable funding" from a variety of organization sources "for the implementation of the programme of action and activities under the International Decade" (United Nations General Assembly). The decade's programmatic theme was declared to be "People of African descent: recognition, justice and development" and includes initiatives that are a continuation of the same body's "International Year for People of African Descent" in 2011. There are, according to the UN, "around 200 million people identifying themselves as being of African descent [who] live in the Americas. Many millions more live in other parts of the world, outside of the African continent" (The United Nations). Indeed, it is now a well-known and documented fact that the number of African migrants who have travelled to the West voluntarily is larger than the number of people captured, kidnapped, and enslaved from West African shores in the Transatlantic Slave Trade.[1] In the United States, the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration

[1] According to Douglas Massey, "since 1960, the number of black immigrants living in the United States has grown from around 125,000 to some 4.1 million persons. Foreign-born blacks now comprise about 10 percent of the U.S. black population (Hamilton xvii). Regarding more contemporary demographic data,

Reform Act and the subsequent 1980 Refugee and 1990 Immigration Acts have contributed to a large number of Africans migrating to various parts of the country, driven by political dynamics on the continent that have also ordered and defined contemporary creative landscapes.[2] As the migration patterns have evolved, technological developments have amplified the cultural globalization and transnationalism that accompanies these trajectories, as people gain increasing access to forms, styles, and tropes rising from various parts of the world. Transnationalism persists, in personal identity, political affiliations, citizenship, and creative endeavors as the distance between vast spaces narrows increasingly thanks to the Internet and global networks of connectivity and affinity. The pan-Africanism so central to social and political activism in the mid and late twentieth century resurges in new forms as the #BlackLivesMatter movement galvanizes Black people of various ethnic and national origins to fight for racial and social justice. Continued exploitation and extraction of goods from various North American and European capitalist and governmental entities has simultaneously created abysmal conditions from which people feel compelled to escape and, inversely,

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"some scholars have shown that the number of African immigrants who have come to the United States since 1990 as voluntary migrants now exceeds the number of black Africans brought to the United States during the slave trade" (Hamilton 28). See also, Ira Berlin, *The Making of African America* (2010) and Onoso Imoagene *Beyond Expectations: Second Generation Nigerians in the United States and Britain* (2017).

[2] Signed in the United States three years after Great Britain significantly tightened its immigration restrictions, the 1965 Hart-Cellar Act restructured existing regional migration quotas, facilitating a stark increase in the number of Black immigrants from the Africa and the Caribbean. In 1980, President Jimmy Carter signed the Refugee Act, which brought immigration policy into accordance with the United Nations' protocols for refugees and led to a marked increase in Ethiopian, Somalian, and Eritrean migration to the United States. Lastly, the 1990 Immigration Act increased the number of immigrants who could be admitted to the United States on the basis of professional specialized skill and also established a visa system in order to "increase the number of immigrants from countries that were underrepresented in the current immigration population of the United States." These three policy changes led to a shift in immigration patterns such that, figures show, "black immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa were one of the fastest-growing immigrant populations in the United States" in the last six years (Hamilton 24-27).

against which people are inspired to protest. Again, as these political movements take shape, technology helps them gain attention, allowing for the wide circulation of creative works and images of Black lives in disparate parts of the world.

From this global sociopolitical context emerge narratives and scholarship from and about the New African Diaspora. The increasing rates of contemporary voluntary migration from Africa has spurred reinvestigation into notions and practices of diaspora and the implications for sentiments of belonging and global Black affinity. These conversations implicate race and place and often necessitate tense and painful reckoning with the various manners in which wielding attachment to Africa positions migrants vis-à-vis their African American and Black Caribbean counterparts.[3] Certainly,

> since the rules of America differ markedly from those of the diverse countries of the African continent, we cannot presume race to be a constant across place, nor racial identification a given, and hence we have to weigh how *all* African immigrants have to undergo a process of becoming black according to American racial norms (Woubshet 65).

What African immigrants activate is a collision between local and global notions of Blackness that, often, contradict each other or at the very least are misaligned. What is more, the fact that race and racialization are so central to the systemic and social order in the United States requires African immigrants to grapple with their own latent, interrupted, or active associations with their home continent alongside American notions of race and Western ideas about Africa and Africans. This calculus forces Africans to interact with mediascapes and ideoscapes of diverse Black communities around the

[3] A note on terminology: throughout this project I use the terms "Black American" and "African American" interchangeably to denote members of the African diaspora who are more than two generations removed from an African country. Alternatively, by "continental African" or "African," I mean those who were born on the continent, or whose parents were born in an African country. For this later category, and for the purposes of this project, I retain particular focus on authors and characters who express direct and sustained connections to family members who remain in the country of origin.

world. It also engenders and feeds into the fraught nature of intra-racial relations and discourse about race, racism, and Blackness in general. The disparate experiences have fueled an academic move to distinguish between an "old" African diaspora, made up of the descendants of those enslaved in proto- and pre-colonial Africa and carried involuntarily to the West, and the "new" African diaspora comprised of people fleeing instability and difficulties of postcolonial Africa. As Isidore Okpewho explains, "Africans of the precolonial diaspora had been mostly forced out of their societies into bondage so they had no choice in their relocation to the Western world" (Okpewho 5). The new African Diaspora, on the other hand, is generally voluntary and comprised of people whose goal is to escape "the state of disequilibrium in African societies brought about by the intervention of European colonization" and the lingering neocolonial relationships in the postcolony (ibid). Race figures differently in postcolonial African nations and most migrants relocate from predominately Black countries. Within their home countries, ethnic and religious differences sometimes emerge as more salient points of interpersonal contention, causing a particular shock at being racialized upon arrival in the United States. In addition, Western media perpetuates racist stereotypes of Black Americans in Africa and of Africans around the world, leading African migrants to endeavor to distinguish themselves from those who are positioned at the bottom of racial and economic hierarchies in the United States.[4]

[4] In his discussion of the necessity for African migrants to accept Blackness as a moral orientation, Dagmawi Woubshet remarks on the deprogramming that these migrants must undergo to separate their opinions from those perpetuated by the media. He notes that "African immigrants, like others in the world enthralled by Hollywood, have fattened – or is it starved?—their imagination with black stereotypes and anti-black sentiment" in a manner that is similar to how "black Americans have come to see Africa mainly through Hollywood's eyes" (Woubshet 66).

These intra-racial dynamics can define migrant experiences as they acclimate to the prominent manner race functions and orders life in the United States. The tension in relationships to the proximal host affects migrant experiences greatly and is a particularly significant factor that defines experiences of transnationalism.[5] Globalization ensures that transnational African experiences are inherently racialized ones. Indeed, "the complexity of contemporary global processes can never be fully grasped without a deep understanding of the historically specific and dynamic ways race has both constituted and been constituted by global transformations" (Clarke and Thomas 2). This means that although they come from largely Black countries, African migrants are racialized before they relocate to the United States. The distinction in Black African immigrant experiences in the United States rests on the shock of the confrontation with the implications of this racialization. Alongside the expected disorientation that accompanies their efforts to orient themselves in their new homes, African migrants also must reckon with what being Black means in their immediate local as well as a global context. It is this process of being interpellated into the United States' racial system that led Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie to declare, rather infamously, "I wasn't black until I came to America. I became black in America" (Adichie). In much of contemporary African literary representation of migration to the United States, characters demonstrate the same resistance to association with the proximal host as Adichie describes, due largely to the significance of racial classifications in the country. Adichie states plainly, "if blackness

[5] I pull the term "proximal host" from Onoso Imoagene's expansion on David Mittelberg and Mary C. Waters's concept which defines proximal hosts as "the group to which new immigrants are assigned in the receiving country – or put another way, , the group perceived as the new immigrants' coethnics based on criteria such as race and religion" (6). For a large majority of African migrants, the proximal hosts in the United States are African Americans, though for some populations, this racialized association is continuously fraught.

were benign, I would not have been running away from it" (ibid). In reality, melding themselves into American notions of racial stratification requires African migrants to acquiesce to an indelible "Americanness" and necessitates both an ethical orientation (Woubshet 66) and a "political decision" (Adichie). In other words, Africans who migrate to and through the United States encounter and combat varied and complicated conceptualizations of Blackness and the attendant racial anxieties that define all aspects of life in their new home country.

Intertwined into these racial dynamics is the fact that "meanings of 'Africa' and 'Africans' are not static but historically specific and under constant reformulation" (Sawyer 317). In the United States, central in the globalization of racial hierarchies that emerged from the colonial encounter with Indigenous people and the institution of slavery, "Africa has never really been a tangible place, let alone home, for most African Americans. It's a place of make-believe– […] even Edenic. Whatever it is, it's not real" (Phillips 13). Whether cast as the dark land of the ultimate Other, or the mythical magical homeland, Africa looms consistently as a construction in the United States. Africa while a continent with real borders and shores that contains nations with their own boundaries and shores, also functions as an idea against which the West and Western subjects have defined themselves for centuries. Consider Richard Wright's reflections in *Black Power* as he prepares to travel to the decolonizing Gold Coast:

> I am African! I'm one of African descent… Yet I'd never seen Africa; I'd never really known any Africans; I'd hardly ever thought of Africa […] Africa! Being of African descent, would I be able to feel and know something about Africa on the basis of a common 'racial' heritage? Africa was a vast continent full of 'my people.' … Or had three hundred years imposed a psychological distance between me and the 'racial stock' from which I had sprung? (18)

Indeed, Valentin Mudimbe reminds us that in Western scholarship, "the African figure was an empirical fact, yet by definition it was perceived, experienced, and promoted as the sign of the absolute otherness" (Mudimbe 38). In many ways, while the demographic of African diaspora populations evolved and expanded around the world, African Otherness remained a fixed target against it was important to distinguish oneself. In the contemporary landscape, Africa is both revered and reviled while complex performances of Blackness and, by extension, descent from and association with Africa carry political and cultural significance in the American zeitgeist. When they move to the United States, African immigrants find themselves in the lacuna between the parallel utopic and dystopic constructed visions of Africa that rest at the heart of the contemporary racial dynamics.

In this context, this project examines contemporary migrant narratives, a collective of texts that emerge from a phenomenon that has been referred to, with new and increasing frequency, as the "new African diaspora." Recently, we have witnessed what Cajetan Iheka and Jack Taylor call "the migration turn in African cultural production" (1). In turning attention to the "new diaspora" Iheka and Taylor herald a movement that "emphasizes the push and pull factors of migration for a new generation of Africans born in postcolonial Africa and their children born outside the continent" (2). The body of scholarship that has taken to critically observing the new African diaspora spans discipline and location, encapsulating in its breadth and depth the wide range of experiences within the phenomenon of contemporary African migration. This largely visible group of mobile Africans, some with lingering transnational connections to multiple nations and cultures, require new questions and new modes of investigation that

emerge in the cultural products that capture their experience. One question that Iheka and Taylor raise appears particularly pressing: "How does one's racial subjectivity and national identity shift by virtue of occupying a new space?" (ibid). Tensions continue to underlie new diaspora works – calling attention to interethnic, intra-racial, intracontinental, and transnational dynamics that also define the contemporary experiences and accompanying representational works. Permeating contemporary discourse and new diaspora literary production is the question of how to reckon with the various populations that converge to constitute the African diaspora. Interrogations of the relations between Black descendants of the enslaved and those descended from voluntary migrants or who have migrated themselves persist in contemporary dialogue across various media. Indeed, as Yogita Goyal observes, "to say that there is a schism when it comes to the question of slavery and its relation to the present between writers from the continent and in the diaspora is to resort to understatement" (X). Goyal traces a historiography of concepts of diaspora and the temporal residue of slavery, opening up the space for literature to allow us to re-examine notions of racial and transnational belonging and urging for new approaches to interrogating diaspora as a concept. She asks, "how may we think of diaspora not only as a description of people and worlds generated by displacement, but as a concept, method, and reading practice?" (ibid). With this question, Goyal asks for a reading practice and a method of representation that resides in, depends upon, and pulls deliberately from a diasporic *décalage*.[6] I invoke

[6] In *The Practice of Diaspora,* Brent Hayes Edwards's constructs a framework of *décalage*, a French word that, he insists, "resists translation into English." Drawing from Léopold Sédar Senghor, Edwards offers the following explication of décalage in the context of the Black diaspora: "*Décalage* indicates the reestablishment of a prior unevenness or diversity; it alludes to the taking away of something that was

Brent Hayes Edwards precisely to call attention to the multiple translations required in observations of new diaspora literature. Though some of these texts implicate literal linguistic translation, they also activate a transfiguration of form and ideology that depend on structures of contemporary globalization and cross-cultural interaction that begin long before the migrant's actual physical displacement. New diaspora migrants find themselves in contexts that highlight histories into which they are interpellated but have not had the opportunity to reckon with or explore actively.[7] Furthermore, into their migrant experiences, they insert their own specific histories and notions of belonging that sometimes clash with or remain overlooked in their new host homes.

The complexities of tangible but fraught and fractured allegiances and affinities haunt new diaspora literatures in manners both implicit and explicit. Within the negotiations are re-configurations of notions of home and belonging that require the migrant to invest in or question what being of Africa even means. What is more, contemporary migrants, in leaving African nations as either refugees or immigrants, must grapple with the question posed by Isidore Okpewho eleven years ago: "What are the

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added in the first place, something artificial, a stone or piece of wood that served to fill some gap or to rectify some imbalance. The black diasporic *décalage* among African Americans and Africans, then, is not simply geographical distance, nor is it simply difference in evolution or consciousness; instead it is a different kind of interface that might not be susceptible to expression in the oppositional terminology of the 'vanguard' or he 'backward.' In other words, *décalage* is the kernel of precisely that which cannot be transferred or exchanged, the received biases that refuse to pass over when one crosses the water. […] Rather than a model of ultimate debilitation or of predetermine retardation, then *décalage*, in providing a model for what resists or escapes translation through the African diaspora, […] directs our attention to the 'antithetical structure' of the term *diaspora*, its risky intervention" (14-15).

[7] In speaking about her personal experience with immigrant racialization in the United States, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explains that it was not until she began deliberately reading into African American political and cultural history that she decided to identify as black. The historical perspective was important in this process as, Adichie clarifies, "I decided that having understood African-American history, I was a part of it. African-American history doesn't actually start on the slave ship. It starts in Africa. So in a way, we're related. But America will label you black anyway – so the things that black people experience, I experience" (Adichie).

conditions of our affiliation with the new land?" (11) To this question, I add: what are the conditions of our investment in an idea of Africanness? If "in the context of global migration the ideas of diaspora and of diasporan culture have become more, not less, significant, and continue to be grounded in the assertion of a unity based on something conceived of as sufficiently fundamental to override geographical separation" (Smith 255), then we must investigate how expressed belonging to both a point of origin and an adopted destination shape new diaspora experiences. The concept of diaspora depends on an idea of a shared essence, recognizable despite physical separation. However, diaspora must, in contemporary contexts, provide the capacity for ideologies of affinity and belonging that are anti-essentialist and integrate multiple allegiances as well as liminality and unbelonging. In this dissertation, I argue for a more capacious reading of the many ways in which diaspora can function, as an organizing principle, as a theory, and as a practice, to make room for the multiple and different manners that narratives of migration and travel explore the contours of belonging to Africa. This work is situated at the node of tension between discourse about world literature and the persistence of national literatures. I question what contemporary narratives of transnationalism and migration offer to new considerations of diaspora and belonging. Although I do not suggest that we do away with the concept of diaspora completely, this project answers the call from Yogita Goyal and other contemporary scholars to read nuance into our notions of diaspora and to re-think how contemporary African and African American voices contribute to this new effort in the context of the so-called "transnational turn" in African literary production (Orlando).

Interrogating migrant experiences implicates aspects of global relations between the point of origin and the host, with the migrant subject acting as shuttle, weaving parts of each sphere together, and even, I would argue, calling attention to the relations and disparities that exist between both nations. Indeed, as Abdelmalek Sayad reminds us,

> toute l'étude des phénomènes migratoires qui néglige les conditions d'origine des émigrés se condamne à ne donner du phénomène migratoire qu'une vue à la fois partielle et ethnocentrique : d'une part, comme si son existence commençait au moment où il arrive en [Occident], c'est l'immigrant – et lui seul – et non l'émigré qui est pris en considération ; d'autre part, la problématique, explicite et implicite, est toujours celle de l'adaptation à la société d'accueil (*La double absence : des illusions de l'émigré aux souffrances de l'immigré* 56, qtd in Ngnintedem & Sopgui 37).[8]

In considering the utility of performed and ideological "Africanness" this project also hinges on a Mbembean investigation of the centrality or Africa in the modern cultural imaginary landscape. Given the recent global popularity of music, film, fashion, and literature from the continent, this project asks what migrant experiences can lend to discourse about belonging to Africa and the West. In a way, this project is a contemplation of metropoles, a rumination on the ways urban centers simultaneously impose constraints and offer possibilities for affinities and identities. At times, transoceanic, intracontinental, or metropolitan racial solidarities emerge with clear salience. In other instances, the lines of affiliation are far less apparent and ethnicity or regional identities predominate. What I attempt to employ in this dissertation is a flexible approach that takes into account the travelling and multifluous manners in which

[8] "all studies of migratory phenomena that neglect the migrants' original conditions condemn themselves to only giving the phenomenon of migration a simultaneously partial and ethnocentric view: on the one hand, as if his existence commences at the moment of arrival in the West, is the immigrant – and him alone – and not the migrant who is taken into consideration; on the other hand, the problematic, explicit and implicit, is always that of adapting to the host society" (my translation).

migrants, those quite literally on the move, represent their experiences and think through the idea of Africa and their own belonging. As Edward Said reminds us, literature is mimetic (Said 230). As such, the experiences portrayed in the works of fiction I have selected do offer insight into lived experiences of the millions of Africans who migrate within and out of the continent as a result of global political, social, and economic realities. That contemporary popular culture has made a return to Africa demonstrates the persistent need to continue to think about the continent as a central figure in global cultural imaginaries. The reckoning sown into the texts encapsulates “a felt personal experience, which is also representative” of millions of Africans and Afro-descendant people across the diaspora (A. A. Irele 21).

In my first chapter, “Rooted Unrootedness: Melancholic Relation in Dinaw Mengestu’s *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*,” I draw from Édouard Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation* as well as recent work in refugee studies by Viet Thanh Nguyen and Liisa Malkki in my examination of the wandering African migrant character, whose fugues around Washington, D.C. encapsulate an affective melancholic state that brings into relief the tensions between the ideoscapes of Africa and migrant experience. I read migrant malaise as destructive and argue for more nuanced theories of diaspora that take into consideration the multifaceted experiences of its constituents. I have structured the chapter in two parts, starting by regarding how mourning and melancholia render diasporic or racial affinities rather difficult due to the traumatic disassociation that catalyzes refugeeism. In the second part of the chapter, I focus on concepts of contemporary transnational intracontinental affiliation, analyzing how Mengestu’s African-born characters undermine notions of an essential “Africanness.” In so doing, I

argue that Africa, though a functional idea, holds salience most effectively away from the continent. The second chapter, entitled "Diasporic Dissonance: Afropolitan Alienation in Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers"* focuses on Mbue's debut and highly successful novel in an exploration of the utility of Afropolitanism as a concept. In this chapter, I use cosmopolitanism and Taiye Selasi's and Achille Mbembe's Afropolitanism to call attention to the dissonance between migrant expectations and their experiences upon arrival in the United States. I read New York as a landscape of foreclosed and fractured possibilities that undermines historical representations of the United States and the American Dream. Nevertheless, the American metropole demonstrates the manners in which Afropolitanism is useful as an orientation of postcolonial transnationalism that is not, contrary to popular scholarly critique, reserved for privileged and well-to-do apolitical African travellers. My third chapter reads inverted and alternate history as subversive practice in novels by Nisi Shawl and Abdourahman A. Waberi. In that chapter, "Speculating Africa: Postcolonial Speculation and new Ideas of Africa in Nisi Shawl's *Everfair* and Abdourahman A. Waberi's *Aux États-Unis d'Afrique"* I examine the manner in which speculative literature from and about Africa inherits postcolonial methodologies and presents a generative frontier for re-thinking diaspora and transnational belonging. This chapter also ponders, via Moradewun Adejunmobi and Lydie Moudileno, the implications of deploying the genre of alternate history to offer critique on contemporary global Black subjectivities and neocolonial relations. As a whole, the project flees Africa and travels back in its exploration of the multifarious dimensions of new diaspora experiences. I end with a coda that indicates two significant directions for further exploration of new diaspora representational works. Firstly, I urge

for readings of diasporic and transnational religiosity in order to explore the tension between assertions of "tradition" and "modernity" in contemporary African experiences. Religion, I contend, stands as a monumental realm through which migrants fully embody the tension of "cosmopolitan contamination" and muddled transnationalism. (Iheka and Taylor 3; Appiah 101). Finally, I turn to perhaps the most accessible and popular African form – music. I position popular music as a counterpoint to the novel that gleans different experiences of transnationalism on a register unavailable to the literary text. In particular, I argue that Afrobeats music reformulates and offers alternative perspectives into African belonging that circulate more widely than the novel. The figures and authors observed in this study adopt a range of stances that simultaneously intersect with, counteract, refuse, and accept the ethical orientation towards Blackness that Dagmawi Woubshet proposes (66). However, this complex truth underscores the primary urge of this project, namely, an insistence on the need for full concepts account for the wide range of ways internal and external mobilities contribute to contemporary reformulations of the ideoscapes of Africa and its diasporas.

On form, temporality, and the world

There are three organizing structures that are central to my project: the novel, the contemporary, and the world. I am focusing on the novel as a form for three reasons. Primarily, in the history of African literary production, the novel holds a predominant position as a container of anticolonial and postcolonial critique. As Chinua Achebe argues, the African novelist has an obligation to compose didactic art that "teach[es

African] readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them" (Achebe 105). Although debate in recent, mainly Francophone, literary circles contends with Achebe's charge, the spirit of using literature to combat notions of primitivity remain within contemporary and postmodern texts. Although this project stops short of Tanure Ojaide's emphatic declaration that "to be relevant, the [African] writer should use his or her artistic creations to promote justice, compassion, and tolerance and make people happy and fulfilled in their lives on personal and public levels," (Ojaide 42), it does analyze novels with an understanding of the politics that accompany African and global Black literary landscapes. The late Harry Garuba's helpful contextualization of the African novel calls attention to the politics that surround the form:

> The origin of the literary genre we now know as the novel is usually associate with particular historical events that took place in Europe with the invention of the printing press and the rise of capitalism and the cluster of cultural values that developed alongside the changes brought about by these events. Individualism and the cultivation of new forms of subjectivity, predicated on notions of autonomous agency, reason, and a new sense of temporality are values usually identified as characteristic of this age and determinant of the form of the novel. Because these conditions were not replicated in Africa to the same degree and *at the same time*, the emergence of the novel is Africa is thus closely tied to the advent of colonialism and the institutions that colonial rule introduced into Africa (Garuba 244).

It is impossible to remove the African novel, whether in its colonial, postcolonial, or "new diaspora" form from processes of colonialism, decolonization, capitalism, and globalization. It is also now impossible to regard contemporary Africa without acknowledging that the novel retains preeminence as a representative container of African sociopolitical experiences. The novel, being a form commonly understood to

have been reified and codified in Europe also represents in its structure the ways in which contemporary Africans and migrants continue to render themselves quite literally legible to audiences outside of their locales – including other Africans on the continent and in the diaspora. Narratives of the new African diaspora come to prominence because of the visibility of African migrants in the West and the ways their presence troubles categories and systems that have long been constructed and reinforced to denigrate and oppress. Amidst the anguish that racism and capitalist and military exploitation propagate throughout the Black world, novels of the new African diaspora occupy a discursive oscillatory space between various literary traditions. While the form of the novel "opens up a *generalized understanding of political power"* and evolves into a vessel of globalized awareness and expression (Levine 7, original emphasis), there is, undoubtedly, throughout all new Diaspora literature, tangible colonial residue. In considering these texts, we must also ponder both the formal constraints and affordances of the novel as a vehicle for depicting migrant experiences. The novel does not come to us in pristine condition. Rather, the form itself is a palimpsest that reminds us at every step of the painful legacies, "difficult diasporas" (Pinto), and Western economic, political, and ideological domination that permeates Black lives on multiple levels. There is, I believe, no way to fully decolonize the novel. And migrant narratives do not on their own hold full decolonial intent. Instead, as readers and scholars of contemporary migrant narratives, we inherit the responsibility of contextualizing and taking in the full range of political implications as we digest and analyze the experiences depicted therein.

Alongside its colonial residue, the novel persists as a highly adaptive form that catalogues and mark shifts in global discourse and dynamics while also being marked by

these same shifts. Indeed, contemporary globalization and technological interconnectedness calls for us to "rethink the role of the novel in our hypervisual age in terms of the genre's fundamental open-endedness to new influences" (Ganguly 41). What makes the novel such a formidable genre is its very adaptability to various geopolitical, social, and cultural norms and uses. In this observation, I agree with Franco Moretti's assertion that it is "the first truly planetary form: a phoenix always ready to take flight in a new direction" and, often, in multiple directions at once. It is, in this regard the, not simply an external import, but rather a commodity of border crossing, accumulating and retaining the effects of various encounters on multiple intersecting planes. As Eileen Julien declares, "the modern novel is *creole*, a literary 'forma franca' born from the contact of peoples and cultures" (Julien 675, original emphasis). In my exploration of narratives of transnationalism and migration, the novel thus figures as a form quite closely suited in its structure and function to represent the geographic cultural circulation that parallels contemporary African mobilities. Furthermore, in its functionality as a globally recognized form of communication and representation, the novel "has had a disproportionate impact on thinking about Africa both *across* and *outside* the continent" (Julien 690, original emphasis). In other words, the African novel, it its many permutations, has significantly affected both internal and external conceptualizations of "Africa" as idea. This is particularly true in the contemporary era, a period I consider to originate in the decade between 1980 and 1990, due largely to the decade's quite pivotal position in the political and cultural histories of various African nations as a result of social and political movements designed and initiated nearly thirty years earlier.[9] After

[9] See McGowan's two-part study of the political landscape in West Africa from 1955-2004 for indication of

this turning point decade, as African migrated through and from the continent at an unprecedented scale, the novel also developed to a stature from which it "now evinces a capacity […] to imagine the human condition on a scale larger than ever before in history and certainly beyond national and regional configurations, which have traditionally marked both its conditions of possibility and its limits" (Ganguly 2). Naturally, increased physical, ideological, and cultural migration correlates to this new function of the novel – the form transcribes, portrays, and, in a way, fixes the physical mobilities of the peoples it represents.

Finally, what is quite possibly one of the most effective characteristics of the novel, particularly in the postcolonial context, is that it offers freedom from the restraints of the nation-state as primary unit of analysis. If the form circulates so consistently in world history and forces the writers, readers, and scholars to reckon with the "world" as a

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how new OPEC regulations were a significant turning point in African political economy and history. I also draw from Debjani Ganguly's assertion that the contemporary begins "around 1989" as a model for considering the contemporary to have an imprecise period as its launching point (Ganguly 6). The year 1989 is important to Ganguly's theorization of the modern novel, as it marks the shift into a truly digital age. The rapid manner in which information technology and the Internet came to restructure lives around the world offered new opportunities for the novel to circulate as global object. The development of the Internet was highly consequential. As Ganguly observes,

> The revolution proper […] happened after 1989, with the explosion of wireless communication through rapid advances in the distributive capacity of opto-electronics and the convergence of wireless capabilities with the versatile processing and networking capacity of the Internet and the World Wide Web, respectively. On the macro side these developments have revolutionized manufacturing, communication, finance, transport, infrastructure, medical applications, security and military operations, and the very foundations of our knowledge economy. On the micro side, for millions of people around the world the social, cultural, and communicative fabric of their lives is now critically linked to digital networks. The integration of various modes of communication – written, oral, visual, and aural – into an interactive network has revolutionized the very intellectual and social foundations of human existence (15).

The effects are widespread, reaching from capitalist production, geopolitics and war, and culture and created the conditions that led to the widespread global circulation of the modern novel. The Internet also facilitated increased awareness of individual's positions within a *global* order, and catalyzed in very real terms, consideration of world literature as an intellectual plane. Thus, the years that surround 1989 implicated systems of preparation for and adjustment to the paradigm shift brought on by the Internet.

tangible and useful orientation, then it is impossible to read a novel strictly within the context of the nation from which it was produced. Adherence to national literary traditions becomes much more futile when the novel is considered within the continent's long history of intracontinental migration and the relative novelty of the nation-state as an organizing principle on the continent. Achille Mbembe's Afropolitanism, which I take up in the second chapter of this dissertation, calls attention to this history and destabilizes notions of strict, unmoving, locatable autochthony in Africa. This is not to dismiss nations and their significance in the postcolonial realm. Indeed, "the often violent birth of nations following colonialism (think of India and Pakistan, Algeria and Angola) served to install an idea of the epochality of the nation-state, guaranteeing that it provided the preferred horizon for elaborating social, political, and cultural history" (Quayson, Postcolonialism and the Diasporic Imaginary 141). However, contemporary mobilities undermine fixations on nations and national traditions as what Quayson calls the "diasporic imaginary" continues to include evolving relationships to physical spaces. Diasporic identities are not always – are maybe rarely – anchored in one particular place. Rather, new diaspora narratives demonstrate the multiple locations to which migrants affix affinity and obligation. Within one family unit, individuals may hold a wide range of different, sometimes, but not always, overlapping national and cultural identities. Recall the complexities of the Sai family in Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* or the long-inherited lines of affiliation that Yaa Gyasi draws so masterfully in *Homegoing,* or even the complicated unbelonging invoked in Dinaw Mengestu's *All Our Names* before his protagonist even sets foot on American soil. Hence, new African diaspora novels bring the world into relief, emphasizing the manners in which "the idea of a self-contained

national literary tradition seems anomalous, time-bound, and hopelessly nostalgic" in the contemporary context of constant migration, interaction, and global cultural awareness (Smith 245). The texts, in the form in which they are presented to us, occupy an ideological space "not so much *in* a specific place and time as *between* different places at once" (ibid, original emphasis). Ultimately, as these new diaspora narratives push us to think about the function of conceptions of "the world" and, within that world, of "Africa" as both a physical point of origin and a racialized, ideological space that holds a central position in how the world maintains its structures and borders.

CHAPTER 1 | ROOTED IN UNROOTEDNESS: RELATION IN DINAW MENGESTU'S *THE BEAUTIFUL THINGS THAT HEAVEN BEARS*

"The effect of mass migrations has been the creation of radically new types of human being: people who root themselves in ideas rather than places, in memories as much as in material things; people who have been obliged to define themselves - because they are so defined by others - by their otherness; people in whose deepest selves strange fusion occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves. The migrant suspects reality: having experience several ways of being, he understands their illusory nature. To see things plainly, you have to cross a frontier."

Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (1991)

Introduction

According to the International Organization for Migration's first *World Migration Report*, published in 2000, the beginning of the new millennium marked the genesis of a new, remarkable "era of international migration" (3). [10] Accordingly, "more than 150 million international migrants celebrated the turn of the millennium outside of their countries of birth" (ibid).[11] The United States received the highest number of international migrants at the time – the IOM reported that an estimated 25 million residents of the United States were born elsewhere (6). The report notes that "the most rapid growth in the number of international migrants tends to occur as a result of refugee

[10] The International Organization for Migration, based in Switzerland, is the world's top, inter-governmental agency in regards to global migration. The IOM's stated mission is to "help ensure the orderly and humane management of migration, to promote international cooperation on migration issues, to assist in the search for practical solutions to migration problems and to provide humanitarian assistance to migrants in need, including refugees and internally displaced people" (International Organization for Migration). They release several publications, of which the *World Migration Report* is the flagship. Given the increasing urgency of migration and refugeeism around the world, the IOM has moved from releasing reports that coalesce around a theme to publishing generalized accounting of data and trends around the world. The 2018 *World Migration Report*, the first of the more generalized reports, has become the most downloaded of all IOM publications (International Organization for Migration *World Migration Report 2020* xv).

[11] The IOM definition of international migrants as "persons who take up residence in a foreign country," (*World Migration Report 2000* 4) follows "the recommendations of an expert group on international migration statistics convened in 1995" by the United Nations Statistical Division and supervised by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Bela Hovy (54, footnote 1).

crises" (7) but also acknowledges that "distinguishing between voluntary and forced migrants can be difficult" as ever-changing conditions in source countries can affect the migrant's expectations about their time living abroad (8). By 2005, the IOM's report took on a thematic concern – "the costs and benefits of international migration" – and identified global trends in data about international migration. While the very nature of states was in flux in the 1990s innovations in the technology of transportation affected global migration patterns alongside widening economic disparities between countries in the West and the Global South (*World Migration Report 2005* 380). Between 1970 and 2000, the United States' migrant population ballooned, jumping from 10 million foreign-born residents to 35 million (ibid).

In parallel to the rising number of immigrants in the United States, a new subset of literary narratives emerged – immigrant literature. New cohorts of immigrant and migrant authors offered stories of first- and second-generation immigrants troubling categories and raising questions of identity and belonging in contemporary literary discourse. In 2017, Vietnamese-American author Viet Thanh Nguyen published an article in the British *Financial Times* newspaper entitled "On Being a Refugee, an American‒and a Human Being," in which he reflects on his experience as a Vietnam War refugee raised in the United States. Nguyen has been vocal in national discourse about immigrant- and refugee-specific topics, positioning the figure of the refugee as a moral compass for the ill he identifies as accompanying Western capitalist systems. In his short piece, reproduced in his 2017 collection of short stories, *The Refugees,* Nguyen reflects on the distinctions in American thinking between the refugee and the immigrant.

> I came to understand that in the United States, land of the fabled American Dream, it is un-American to be a refugee. The refugee embodies fear, failure, and flight. Americans of all kinds believe that it is impossible for an American to become a refugee, although it is possible for refugees to become Americans and in that way be elevated one step closer to heaven (212).

The refugee, he later elaborates, is the product of large-scale systemic failure at all levels of a nation's structure. "Like the homeless," Nguyen insists, "refugees are living embodiments of a disturbing possibility: that human privileges are quite fragile, that one's home, family, and nation are one catastrophe away from being destroyed" (213). Refugee status in the United States, according to Nguyen, relegates one to a subordinate social position from which one is assumed to seek to escape. Refugees, fleeing acute danger in their countries of origin, can improve their social conditions by inserting themselves into American legal bureaucracy, shedding the pitiful remnants of their failed former homes and embracing the proclaimed possibilities of belonging to the United States. Nguyen cheekily draws a contrast between the refugee, escaping a "country [that] has imploded, taking with it all things that protect our humanity," (212) and the immigrant, who is "that foreigner who has proceeded through the proper channels. The immigrant is one who wants to come, unlike the refugee, who is forced to come" (214-215).[12] Both categories, in Nguyen's construction, carry political and social implications

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[12] In 1951, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees issued the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees that defined a refugee as a person who "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it." (*Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees* 14). In 1969, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) issued a Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa in which the definition of the term refugee is also extended to "every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part of the whole of his country of origin or

and determine the migrant figure's attitude toward and interactions with the United States and access to Americanness. Nguyen centralizes migrant narratives in his academic and creative work, calling attention to the particular vulnerabilities and issues that characterize migrant experiences in the United States. Nguyen's intervention answers Liisa Malkki's call for a more evocative, less functionalist approach to studying refugees within the context of increased global migration and new approaches to internationalism. Though directed toward anthropologists, Malkki's plea for an approach to studying refugees that takes both politics and social imaginary into account is helpful in an examination of contemporary migrations novels in general and new African diaspora narratives in particular (Malkki 505, 507). Indeed, Malkki laments, "[a]gain and again, one finds in ["refugee studies"] literature the assumption that to become uprooted and removed from a national community is automatically to lose one's identity, traditions, and culture" (508). This observation facilitates nuanced approach to studying migrant experiences allowing for readings of contemporary narratives with the aim of highlighting to complex and deterritorialized experiences of belonging, unbelonging, and Diaspora. In particular, Malkki's intervention opens the door for this chapter's examination of melancholic Relation in regards to Dinaw Mengestu's primary African characters in his first novel, *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*.

For Dinaw Mengestu, born in Ethiopia and raised in the United States, inclusion in such a category as "immigrant literature" is a bit fraught. Mengestu has vacillated noticeably in relation to his status as American, Ethiopian, immigrant, or all

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nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality" (3).

three at the same time. In 2017, he participated in a public staged conversation entitled "Reflecting on the Refugee Crisis"[13] with South African novelist Jonny Steinberg moderated by Iranian-American writer Roya Hakakian hosted at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) and co-sponsored by PEN America. When asked about how the contemporary so-called "refugee crisis" and the subsequent xenophobic political responses in Western media affected his relationship to his work's categorization, Mengestu responded that he had experienced a shift in his discomfort with being regarded as an "immigrant writer." Mengestu explained,

> I used to say that I hated this term 'immigrant novel' or 'immigrant novelist.' I would go everywhere I went for years railing against [these terms]. 'There's no such thing as the immigrant writer. All Americans are immigrants et cetera.' […] And now I think very explicitly I'm an immigrant writer. And I want my work to be seen as such and to take it on without any… to take it on more forcefully and more explicitly. Not only within the work but within the way I think about it and I talk about (Hakakian, Mengestu, and Steinberg).

Three years earlier, Mengestu was interviewed by Josephine Reed of the National Endowment for the Arts about his novel *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears.* Reed remarks that she was amused by a recent review of Mengestu's novel that described the book as simultaneously "a great African novel, a great Washington novel and a great American novel." Mengestu responds ambivalently, saying he was fine with his novel being characterized in this manner, since "all of those things were said in commas rather than in hyphens" (Reed and Mengestu). For Mengestu, the form of his work presented an

[13] In 2018, according to UN High Commission for Refugees estimates, there were "70.8 million forcibly displaced people worldwide,' of which 25.9 million were refugees (United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) 2). In January 2017, Donald Trump issued an executive order halting emigration into the United States from several largely Muslim countries in response to what is largely referred to as the global "refugee crisis." This staged conversation was one of many designed to facilitate discourse around global migration and the question of refugees.

opportunity to counter monolithic representations of Americanness and to re-inscribe immigrants into the country's narrative of itself. He elaborates,

> I do see the novel and all my work as products of the distinctly American culture and literary heritage even as they reach out to other parts of the world. Even as they take place in Africa, they're always coming back to America at the same time and they're trying to—or at least I'm trying to—assert the expansiveness of an American literary tradition to say that one of the great things about our culture, our literary output is that we can traverse the globe and we can bring all of these stories, all of these narratives onto our shores and assimilate them to some degree. We can make them a part of our narrative, part of our cultural history because this country is sort of founded on those ideals (Reed and Mengestu).

By the time Mengestu participated in this earlier interview, he had published all three of his novels – each featuring characters who had either emigrated from East Africa or who were children of East African immigrants. Every one of his novels, but most prominently his first one, *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, Mengestu's cast the migrant experience in the United States as one characterized by and encased in a multi-faceted collective opaque melancholy that is activated, precisely, by experiences of cross-cultural interactions. Rather than affirming the assimilative impulse to which he gestures in his conversation with Josephine Reed, Mengestu's characters complicate straightforward migrant narrative tropes and present a complex relationship to American culture and literary history.

The evolution in Mengestu's approach to framing his work coincides with increased contemporary global attention to migrants, immigrants, and refugees. Mengestu and his family fled the totalitarian military Derg regime in Ethiopia in the early 1980s

(Mengestu, "Poorly Mapped").[14] For the author, who was two years-old when he, his sister, and mother migrated to the United States to reunite with his father, Ethiopianness was, at times, completely inaccessible and at other times only partially so. He has written two non-fiction pieces about returning to his place of birth after having grown up in the United States. The first, published in the Spring 2010 special edition of *Callaloo*, conveys Mengestu's reflections upon returning, for the first time in nearly 30 years, to his grandfather's home, preserved immaculately for the very occasion of his family's return by a maternal aunt who remained in Addis Ababa after much of the family fled. Mengestu concludes the piece by informing his reader that "no one in my immediate family except me has returned" to the family's house in Addis Ababa ("Returning to Addis Ababa" 17). By keeping the décor and furniture in the same places they had occupied since 1978 when Mengestu's father left Addis Ababa, Mengestu's aunt maintained a pseudo-shrine to her departed relatives and trapped herself and her family in an Ethiopia that had long ceased to exist. For Mengestu, this idea of Ethiopia, recounted in stories and partially cast in the scant pictures his family carried with them to the United States, serves as a fantastical point of reference for the Ethiopia he encounters in his return. "More than a decade of sustained imagining," Mengestu reflects, "had made even the smallest details […] into objects of curiosity and wonder that had no place in the real world" (16). Mengestu interacts physically with the Ethiopian metropolis but remains incapable of assigning it to a realm of the "real." Addis Ababa and, by extension, Ethiopia, remain imagined spaces that enshroud the writer's existence. Though a

[14] For a comprehensive history of the rise and fall of the Derg, see Bahru Zewde's *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1991* (2001).

locatable place inhabited by real people, Addis Ababa continue to occupy a mythological realm in the author's diasporic imagination.

Nine years later, Mengestu writes about this visit again for an essay series in the *New Yorker* magazine. In this piece, his grandfather's house becomes a sanctuary, the only place where Mengestu "could lay full claim to being an Ethiopian" precisely because of the objects his aunt preserved in the house, covered in the dust they had accumulated in the nearly three decades since his family had left ("Poorly Mapped" 3). Guided by "what looked to be a hand-drawn map of central Addis Ababa, the best one I could find on the Internet," (2) Mengestu disobeys his aunt's insistence that he stay home until she returns from work and can safely guide him around the city. Quickly, the map proves ineffectual and Mengestu is neither able to navigate the streets of the country's capital nor to "recover everything that had been lost in migration if I found my way back to Ethiopia and walked the streets of Addis Ababa, visited the graves of relatives I couldn't remember, and stood in front of the palace where Emperor Haile Selassie had been arrested" (ibid). Of course, Mengestu's improbable mission, dreamed up in his adolescence, fails. His faith in a map downloaded from the Internet exposes his unbelonging from the very beginning of his ill-conceived plan. He finds himself in a confrontation with palace guards and becomes a spectacle on the winding, confusing streets of Addis, where an intervening good Samaritan, confirms that "despite my appearance I was, in the end, a *ferengi,* a foreigner" (2-3, original emphasis). This experience facilitates an epiphany for Mengestu, despite longing to belong to Addis and Ethiopia, "I had lived my life elsewhere and would continue to do so. I had a culture but not the language that held it together, and although I may have been desperate to claim

Ethiopia as my own, the country owed me nothing in return" (3). Mengestu's casting his separation from Ethiopia and his resultant sentiment of unbelonging may explain his ambivalence about how his debut novel is considered and categorized. By casting his fiction as being squarely from the United States but externally-facing, Mengestu noticeably inserts himself into a Black diasporic literary tradition that, holding the Americas as its anchor, attempts to grapple with notions of belonging to Africa and distant and interrupted Africanness.

The protagonists in Mengestu's first novel, *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, reckon with their fractured and competing senses of belonging and unbelonging as migrants who must constantly confront multiple, often competing affiliations. These questions of identity complicate Mengestu's reflections in his conversation with Josephine Reed and potentially elucidate his evolution towards the views he shared at BAM in 2017. The characters undermine the aspirational assimilative gesture to which Mengestu claims to be offering his work. This chapter outlines a theory of migrant melancholic Relation, a concept that can directly address contemporary political discourse about migrants, refugees, and so-called "shithole countries."[15] While in exile, the primary characters in *Beautiful Things* come into contact with and make use of constructed ideas of Africanness that enhance and re-cast their own identifications with their countries of origin and their new host countries. For Mengestu's protagonists,

[15] In January 2018, Donald Trump was reported to have referred to El Salvador, Haiti, and a series of African nations as "shithole countries." Trump made these remarks as he criticized the United States' current immigration policy, calling for new approaches that would favor immigrants from more preferable locations such as Norway (Al Jazeera News). Although Trump eventually denied making these comments, the disparaging attitude towards the Black developing world encased within the dismissive remarks ignited an international debate about the veracity and worth of referring to the Global South in such a derogatory manner. See, for example, Elsie Eyakuze's "'Shithole Nationalism' and Sisonke Msimang's "Trump Rage Ignores the Truth," both opinion pieces published by Al Jazeera in January 2018.

migration and refugeeism activate encounters with the ideoscapes into which the characters are interpellated and against which they strive to cast new senses of their own self-identification. Along the way, melancholic memory amplifies and complicates the incongruity between their lives and the ideas of Africanness and Americanness that remain out of their control and that define their experiences in their new host countries.

Melancholic Relation

The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears is a somber meditation on the tensions unearthed by multi-faceted migrant belonging. Mengestu's three primary African characters reflect on the consequential nature of their physical separation from their African places of origin while also attempting to make sense of the changing landscape of Washington, D.C. in the mid-1990s. My reading of melancholic Relation in Mengestu's narrative combines trauma theory concepts of loss, mourning, and melancholy with Édouard Glissant's theory of the opacity and the poetics of Relation and centralizes a nostalgia for the migrant's former home, a place which one can identify but that remains perpetually out of the errant subject's reach. The melancholy is amplified by the impossibility of the migrant's return to their recognizable home – the object of their attachment, their lost home country, lingers while having also died during the migrant's journey away. Significantly, as Malkki reminds us, in contemporary contexts, "mass displacements occur precisely when one's own, accustomed society has become 'strange and frightening' because of war, massacres, political terror, or other forms of violence and uncertainty" (509). The growing sensation of unbelonging in their place of origin is

the catalyst for migrants to launch themselves into a form of unrootedness that Glissant casts as deterritorialized "errantry." The migrant's place of origin has already ceased to exist; the root, crucial to the "functionalist" approaches to studying migrants that so disappoint Malkki, disappears *before* the subject becomes migrant in the first place. This "death" of the knowable home that precipitates the migrants' exodus propels them into a state of mourning or melancholy.

In Freud's conceptualization, mourning, although a psychological peculiarity, can be described as the unexpected removal of libidinal attachment to an object (198-199).[16] The destruction of the object of affection frees the libido to attach itself to a new love-object whether an external one or a re-internalized attachment to the ego. Mourning, to Freud, is a psychological state one overcomes when they have re-developed the capacity to attach libidinal affection to something else that replaces the lost object. Reassuringly, Freud asserts that "We know that mourning, however painful it may be, comes to an end of its own accord. Once it has renounced everything that is lost, it has also consumed itself, and then our libido becomes free once again" (199-200). Rather than presenting itself as a permanent state, mourning is simply a natural phase, particularly prevalent during periods of instability, of which times of war are notable examples. When a person has finished mourning, they are able to restore their appreciation for the beauty of objects worthy of affection. Freud draws a subtle distinction between mourning and melancholia, both, he asserts, psychological states that should be approached and treated as form of

[16] It is important to keep Freud's particular definition of the human libido in mind: "We believe that we possess a certain capacity to love, called the libido, which is at the earliest stages of our development applied to our own ego. Later, though still from very early on, it turns away from the ego and towards objects which are thus to an extent absorbed into our ego. If those objects are destroyed or if we lose them, our capacity for love (the libido) becomes free once more (198-199).

pathology. Mourning, he defines generally as "the reaction to the loss of a beloved person or an abstraction taking the place of a person, such as fatherland, freedom, an ideal and so on" (203). Melancholia is related, and "is mentally characterized by a profoundly painful depression, a loss of interest in the outside world, the loss of the ability to love, the inhibition of any kind of performance and a reduction in the sense of self" (204). Both states occupy most of the subject's consciousness, but whereas in mourning the grieving subject retains the capacity to attach libidinal affection to their own ego, the melancholic subject does not and displays a striking lack of self-regard. Furthermore, while the mourning subject's lost love-object can be confirmed to be dead, this may not necessarily be true for the melancholic subject whose sentiment of loss permeates their subconscious, inhibiting them from consciously transitioning their affection to a new object (209). Moreover, whereas the mourning subject retains the capacity to transfer libidinal attachment inward back onto the ego, the melancholic subject's strikingly diminished self-esteem prevents them from finding the ego worthy of affection. As a result, the melancholic associates the ego with the lost love-object and remains incapable of assigning libidinal value to any object whatsoever (ibid). In the case of the migrant melancholic subject, this inability to transfer affection creates a psychotemporal disjuncture in which the subject is overwhelmingly preoccupied with the lost home to which they are incapable of returning for myriad reasons.

Compounded onto this mourning and melancholia are the migrant's multiple affiliations. The unplanned abrupt rupture from the locatable physical root of one's self-perception necessitates a multiplicity of belonging that is crafted together precisely because of this sudden physical detachment from the lost home. Crucial to this new

concept of identity is the unrecoverability of the lost home. Although it may not have been physically destroyed, the inevitability of evolution ensures that the migrant will never be able to return to the exact home left behind. Here, Glissant's poetics of Relation proves helpful in conceptualizing the insistent polyvalent nature of the migrant subject's identity and performance of belonging. The traumatic break is the genesis of postcolonial opacity and also of his co-dependent correlative, Relation. At the very foundation of Glissant's poetics of Relation is the wandering subject. Movement from a perceived home, what Glissant calls "errantry," activates Relation and is a core requirement of the productive opacity of identity at its core. Significantly, Glissant establishes that "errantry does not process from renunciation nor from frustration regarding a supposedly deteriorated (deterritorialized) situation of origin; it is not a resolute act of rejection or an uncontrolled impulse of abandonment" (18). Wandering is not an active rejection of a particular home. Rather, it can be a productive action that brings one into a true state of Relation that enables the subject to move out of colonial concepts of what Glissant calls a "totalitarian root." Identity, composed via this errantry, is also discursive and reflective of many interactions against which one's own self comes into relief – "the thing relayed as well as the thing related" (27). Additionally, as errantry rejects attachment to any one pole or polis, it stands in productive opposition to contemporary notions of cosmo- or Afropolitanism, which have largely been considered to assert legibility and belonging in the fashionable metropoles of the Western or Westernized postcolonial world.[17] As a

[17] I offer an alternate theory of Afropolitanism in the context of globalization, diaspora, and the return to Africa in the second chapter of this dissertation.

rhizomatic mode of being, Relation offers an approach to reading oneself and others that opens into an active practice of decolonization.

Following Glissant's theory, how do we conceptualize the contemporary migrant subject who is propelled involuntarily into their errantry? Also, what can we extrapolate from Glissant's very explicitly Caribbean theory of Relation when regarding East African refugees in 1980s Washington, D.C.? The particularities of the French Antilles' fraught relationships to France and to the continent of Africa figure at the heart of Glissant's radical anticolonial theorizing.

Transatlantic slavery and colonization combined to create the conditions from which Glissant theorizes Caribbean identities.[18] Deterritorialization through the dehumanization of enslavement ensured that "Africa" persisted as an ideological concept rather than as a collection of tangible points of origin. Glissant differs from other philosophers of Caribbean culture by insisting that Relation "is not merely an encounter, a shock […], a *métissage*, but a new and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost in the mountains and free beneath the sea, in harmony and in errantry" (34). From the painful history of subjugation through enslavement and colonialization comes a novel form of cultural expression that gives rise to new formulations of identity. The opacity at the center of Relation and its resultant poetics is not simply a dilution or a combination of already-existing cultures. It is "not enclosure within an irreducible singularity" (190). French Antilleans are rendered opaque due to the

[18] As Parham and Drabinski remind us:

> For Glissant, the Middle Passage does not suppress the past; it drowns it. What remains in the New World are fragments – fragments come in from the sea that together generate an unprecedented composite culture that can never be reverted to a single origin. Everything begins conceptually anew at the shoreline, and Glissant's work is dedicated to the intersection of trauma and beauty (3).

deliberate rupture and violent kidnapping from West African shores and subjugation as less than human on Caribbean plantations. Relation is a mode of necessity that recognizes and emerges from the fractured affiliations that persist and grew, against all odds, despite this violent, deliberate dehumanization and forced deterritorialization.

Glissant asks a provocative question while outlining his philosophy of Relation, "comment être soi sans se fermer à l'autre, et comment s'ouvrir à l'autre sans se perdre soi-même ?" (cited in Murdoch 19).[19] Relation requires one to simultaneously excersizing an individual right to opacity while recognizing the opacity of the other. "The duality of self-perception (one is citizen or foreigner) has repercussions on one's idea of the Other (one is visitor or visited; one goes or stays; one conquers or is conquered)" (Glissant 17). In spaces such as the French Antilles, Glissant recognizes the potential for productive Relation. However, in the United States, the self-professed "nation of immigrants," Relation remains unattainable because of persistent Western instincts to "grasp [which] contains the movement of hands that grab their surroundings and bring them back to themselves" in a "gesture of enclosure if not appropriation" (191-192). Within the Western, and specifically American mode of encounter, one runs the risk of either closing oneself off or of losing oneself to the other. It holds transparency as its aim, seeking to cast the other as a completely knowable reflection of the transparent self. For the African-born characters in *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, this American impulse for transparency and assimilation renders their Relation melancholic. While navigating the traumatic residue of the circumstances that caused their migration to the

[19] "How to be oneself without closing oneself off to the Other, and how to open oneself to the Other without losing oneself?" (my translation)

United States in the first place, Sepha, Kenneth, and Joseph must also contend with the various manners in which they are reminded of their unbelonging in Washington, D.C. Their impenetrable melancholic Relation causes an alienation that is only marginally communicable or comprehensible. What is more, their attempts to perform belonging emphasize their difference and widen the chasm between themselves and the communities in which they have lived for over a decade. Mengestu's three African-born characters gesture towards the ephemerality of origin while emphasizing that the traumatic and sudden separation from a locatable point of origin is an experience rife with the potential for reconfiguring notions of diasporic belonging.

Children of the Revolution

Published in the United States in 2007, Mengestu's novel centers Sepha, an Ethiopian man who flees Addis Ababa as a young adult and resettles in Maryland. After his unsuccessful tenure as a student at a local community college, Sepha moves to Washington, D.C. and opens a convenience store in a historically predominately African-American neighborhood that is gentrifying quickly. As he spends more time in Logan Circle, Sepha succumbs to aggressive and overwhelming melancholia that leads him to neglect his shop and that propels him into a state of financial and identity liminality. Because of the political violence that necessitated his departure from Ethiopia, Sepha must re-fashion his sense of self while accepting the impossibility of his return.[20]

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[20] "Mengestu: The main reason why Sepha left Ethiopia was because of the death of his father. In 1974, there was a communist revolution in Ethiopia and Sepha was about 15 years old when that took place, and like a lot of young men at that time in Ethiopia he was semi-politically engaged and that engagement led to

Eventually, Sepha retreats into his own individuality, wandering around Washington, D.C. in an apparent fugue state, enmeshed in his observations of the different random people he trails around the city and away from his store. *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* is Mengestu's first novel, published in the United Kingdom with the title *Children of the Revolution.* The British title invokes a song of the same name, released in 1972 by the English rock band T. Rex. The band recorded the single for the soundtrack of the film *Born to Boogie*, a documentary about them directed by Ringo Starr. The song's lyrics call attention to the supposed obdurate inviolability of the so-called "children of the revolution," a generation of youth coming of age amidst the volatile geopolitical context of the 1960s and '70s. While others can "bump and grind," "twist and shout," and "let it all hang out," the band warns that "you won't fool the children of the revolution" (T. Rex, John and Starr). The chorus, extolling the clairvoyance of the "children of the revolution" repeats eight times throughout the song. Elrich Franke and Kaspar Schiltz characterize the song as belonging to a generation of political popular music that "brings together *diffuse commitments to cohesion, love, and freedom/autonomy,*" despite the fact that it is unclear to which specific revolution and cause the song refers (Franke and Schiltz 49, original emphasis). For Sepha and his fellow immigrant friends, "Ken the Kenyan and… Joe from the Congo" (Mengestu, *Beautiful Things* 1), the song is a comforting ritual that began as an expression of optimism about the "American Dream" and their prospects for success in the United States. Later, as the men settle into the realities and disappointments of their new American lives, the song is an ironic reminder

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the death and arrest of this father. And it's really at that moment that Sepha was forced to sort of break from Ethiopia both physically and emotionally" (Reed and Mengestu).

of the disillusions of their younger days and the impossibilities of the dreams they crafted for themselves. Less a battle cry than a tepid warning or an expression of a frail collective, T. Rex's impassioned song becomes the group's anthem, one they seek in bars and sing together, almost involuntarily, "like children being coaxed into a conversation" (48). "Children of the Revolution," arranged twice by T. Rex, serves as a contextualizing refrain for the readers as the novel slowly pulls together Sepha, Kenneth, and Joseph's disparate histories. The novel draws the contours of the characters' uneasy alliance while also exposing its limits and challenging the reader to consider whether or not they are all, in fact, children of the same revolution.

A significant aspect of the migrant melancholic opacity is the discord between their impressions of themselves, their ideas about their new homes, and the realities they encounter after having migrated. As the years pass in Washington, D.C., Mengestu's characters must consistently re-calculate their various associations to each other, their hometowns, and the American city they now share. Sepha, Joe, and Ken, while drawn together as the children of some or various revolutions, do also have quite disparate personal histories. While they bond over the precarity of their new lives in the United States, each demonstrates different modes of performing Africanness, Americanness, and their immigrant status. Of the three, Kenneth is the most traditionally successful. An engineer, he "believes in the power of a well-tailored suit to command the attention and respect of those who might not otherwise give him a second thought" (2). He believes deeply in his potential to be successful, and even adopts behavior that he believes to mimic affluent American businessmen. He creates routines and attaches himself to symbolic gestures as a coping mechanism. According to Sepha, "[a]s much as Kenneth

has ever needed anything in his life, he has needed order and predictability, small daily reassurances that the world is what it is, regardless of how flawed that may be" (ibid). Physical appearance and gestures are hallmarks of American life for Kenneth, who, also points to his physical transformations as signs of the marvels of the United States (3).

The tension at Kenneth's node of their fragile triumvirate stems from the fact that he pushes himself to personal success because of his shame about his roots. In Kenya, Kenneth's father was "a poor illiterate man who lived in a slum. And you know what that makes him in Africa? Nothing" (185). Kenneth is determined to avoid falling into the same insignificance he attributes to his father. He wants to be able to provide for his family – his sisters and nephews back home in Nairobi. His father's inconsequentiality distinguishes him from his two friends in Washington, D.C. because it prevents him from reminiscing fondly about the life he left behind. "What am I supposed to miss?" he asks angrily while his friends lament the lives they were forced to leave behind, "being sent into the street to beg white tourists for money?" (ibid) There was nothing bucolic or charming about Kenneth's childhood; it was characterized by struggle and insufficiency. Although he does not reveal the exact conditions of his emigration to the United States, Kenneth's motive is clear. He wears suits and works hard, even on holidays, in order to preclude his falling into his father's insignificant shadow. Throughout the novel, Mengestu's protagonist reveals the ways that Kenneth's class paranoia leads him into empty performances of American middle-class status. In one notable scene, early in the novel, Sepha describes a moment when he accompanied Kenneth to buy a second-hand car, a signal of his ability to overcome his childhood poverty. "Buying the car was Kenneth's first entry into a long-awaited form of American commerce that I think he

imagined would lift him above the fray" (10). Kenneth wears a slightly ill-fitted suit for the outing to the used car dealership "on the outskirts of a distant Virginia suburb" where his performance shatters. He urges Sepha to wait outside in the dealership's parking lot, convinced that he strikes an image impressive enough to prompt the car salesmen to approach him and usher him inside to be wooed. Instead, both the dealership's patrons and their staff ignore the two men for half an hour before Kenneth decides that "they don't have what I want" and drives away (12). The absurdity of the scene combines with its tragedy to reveal the weaker points of Kenneth's plan for radical self-refashioning. Regardless of his clothing or the physical gestures and postures he adopts, Kenneth's potential to "belong" and truly shed the residue of his father's nothingness faces many large obstacles, Kenneth himself appearing to be a significant one. Sepha understands his position as accomplice audience to Kenneth's performance, explaining that "we had all suffered enough mockery and humiliation to last us well beyond our lifetimes, and if my role now was to serve as a blind, unflaggingly devoted cheerleader through whatever challenges and victories lay ahead, then I was all the happier for it" (11). Sepha supports Kenneth in carrying the burden of shame at what he left behind, and partially, the shame of forgetting what was once important to him, launching headlong into the empty symbols of success in the United States – fancy suits, bright red cars, and overdone vocabulary – in order to give the impression that he belongs where he is. However, Sepha reveals details that undermine Kenneth's performance – the fractures in the practice of Relation. The car he eventually purchases several days after the episode at the dealership, a Saab, had "webs of rust along the rear tires, a dented front fender, and patches of faded paint along the passenger-side door" (12-13). Regardless, Sepha feigns being impressed

and Kenneth continues to drive the vehicle for years, ferrying himself and Joseph away to their "nearly identical, fully carpeted [suburban] apartments with hardly any furniture besides the oversize televisions that they leave on even when they're not home" (10).

Kenneth's assimilation is precarious. Although his emigration to the United States offers him the opportunity to surpass his father's low station and build a new legacy and inheritance for his relatives in Nairobi, he cannot completely relieve himself of the shame he associates with his African past; his suits are just a bit too small, his car is too ragged, and his apartment too sparsely-furnished. And while he continues to urge Sepha forward, attempting to push him out of his melancholy and into the kind of positivity requisite for successful entrepreneurship, his attempts fall short because Sepha continually notices the places where the sheen of Kenneth's illusion has rubbed off or rusted away. Kenneth appears to reside squarely in a liminal unbelonging. He does not share his friends' nostalgia for Africa, because he sees his association with the continent as an impediment. However, he is keenly aware of the fact that he is not American. He accepts his being-of-elsewhere while convincing himself that he is and can continue to be satisfied by those items that would, ordinarily, be unsatisfactory to a man of his desired station. As long as he appears to be better off than he was and would be at home in Nairobi, Kenneth is satisfied as he continues on his journey to shed the nothingness he inherited from his father.

Kenneth's grasp of American opportunism is the impetus for Sepha opening his store. Mengestu's protagonist heeds Kenneth's advice to "be your own boss, man. That's the only way to get anywhere in this country" (17). Kenneth helps Sepha obtain a "small-business loan from the government" and teaches him the basics of commercial

bookkeeping. When reflecting on how much Kenneth helped him with the shop, Sepha remarks that "I used to think he would have made an exceptional father, patient as he was with me, and who knows, perhaps someday he will" (143). Sepha's employ of past modal or conditional phrasing sorrowfully frames the sacrifices that Kenneth has made, assumedly in service of the potential to achieve success in the United States. Mengestu, resurrects one stereotypical trope of the immigrant to the United States – the worker who sacrifices all non-essential personal or social activity in order to dedicate himself most absolutely to what he perceives to be the key to success and financial gain. In the case of "Logan's Market," the gain is collective, Kenneth forsakes building a family in the U.S. in order to send remuneration back home to his sister and nephews and, out of loyalty to his two close friends, guide Sepha in all the administrative matters of owning and running a small shop. The apparent optimism in the second clause of Sepha's remark – "who knows, perhaps someday he will" – operates in the same impossibly unachievable realm as the financial success the store was supposed to usher in for Sepha and his friends. The store held potential, it "was supposed to signal a departure from frustrating, underpaying jobs and unrealized ambitions" (145). Unfortunately for all the men, Sepha's store became an "unrealized ambition" itself, in parallel with the possibility of Kenneth becoming a father. The store matches Kenneth's unmet potential as his fixation on career and money isolate him into the sad, singularly-focused world he creates for himself in Washington, D.C. and Maryland.

Later in the novel, Sepha reveals the extent to which Kenneth's life in Washington, D.C. reduces him to a figure so tragic even Sepha is uncomfortable sharing intimate space with him. When the heat in Sepha's apartment malfunctions, he spends a

few months living in Kenneth's sparsely-furnished and dimly-lit apartment. Sepha portrays Kenneth as a man whose cool and confident veneer belies an unsettling emptiness, and, Sepha implies, a sort of deterioration into madness.

> I tried not to be around when he came home from work. I couldn't bear the sight of him sitting frozen and lifeless in a plastic lawn chair by the patio windows drinking beer after beer, wiggling his toes in his expensive wool socks. I came home one night and found him laughing hysterically to himself. The only light in the apartment came from the streetlamp that hung just a few feet away from the porch windows. It wasn't enough light to see him by, which was fine because I could hear him laughing and arguing with himself and I wouldn't have wanted to know what his face looked like while he was doing that (145-146).

Kenneth's external performance – the brightly colored, albeit rusted, respectable middle-class car the carefully-selected suits, with arms too short, those pricey socks, along with the impressive engineering job – only tenuously mask the extent of Kenneth's alienation. When the charade is over, he comes home, alone, to an apartment he either cannot afford or does not care to furnish properly and passes time by drinking and debating with himself. That Sepha's discomfort also seems to hinge on Kenneth's socks is notable. The socks reveal the lengths to which Kenneth goes in order to mold himself into the image of the enterprising and successful immigrant deserving respect. Kenneth upholds the sartorial semantics of the corporate world to which he has attached himself in service of financial gain. Kenneth is so committed to becoming a model of immigrant success, he allows himself to prioritize such items as socks over domestic comforts of furniture. In continuing to wear the expensive socks at home, Kenneth blocks himself from developing a full domestic personality to such an extent that when he is at home, he falls into an apparently schizophrenic state, arguing with himself and laughing hysterically.

Sepha's embarrassment at the extent to which immigration to the United States has degraded his friend compels him to avoid Kenneth's home, rather than address his mental state. He experiences similar shame when he sees Joseph working in his capacity as server at an upscale restaurant for the first time. Although the three men originally met while on staff as luggage porters, the men consider their current jobs to be career advancement. Kenneth works as an engineer for a demanding boss and Sepha works for himself running his store. Joseph remains in the service industry, but instead of handling hotel guest baggage, he works at the Colonial Grille, "where senators and lawyers and lobbyists go to dine for lunch and dinner" (168). In Joseph's estimation, the clientele determines the respectability of the job, so "yes, he was still a waiter, but instead of working at a decent restaurant in a nice hotel, he was working at the 'premier eating establishment of the District's elite'" (ibid). Mengestu's narrator explains that Joseph might have "believed that his physical proximity to power meant that great things were in store for him, and thus, working at the Colonial grill augured "a step up in the world, a sign of progress, advancement, and promotion" (ibid). At the same time, his continued employment in the food and service industry in Washington, D.C., elite or not, after nearly two decades living in the United States, also demonstrates Joseph's slow resignation that his dreams to move to the Midwest and attain a doctorate in Philosophy are no longer feasible. These aspirations become "the dreams of a restless young immigrant" (169) whose idealism, ultimately, does him a disservice in the face of the grim realities of his position in the United States. As Joseph ages, he matures into a pragmatism that, although never quite as pessimistic or melancholy as his two friends, persuades him to slowly abandon his lofty dreams of academic success. This realization

finally becomes salient for both Joseph and Sepha when the latter sees him at work for the first time. Although Joseph expresses enthusiasm for his job, he never comes to the Sepha's store in his waiter uniform, "he always takes off his shirt and bow tie in exchange for the Michigan sweatshirt he wears on all but the warmest days" (172). Sepha is struck and embarrassed at the sight of his friend rushing around the establishment, "designed to look like a nineteenth-century English dining room" (ibid). When the two men spot each other through the restaurant's windows, Sepha on the sidewalk and Joseph inside serving Washington, D.C.'s elite, the two men freeze, locked in a shocked and destabilizing gaze. Bénédicte Ledent reads both characters' reactions in this scene as a moment in which Sepha's disparate worlds collide. Ledent argues that throughout the novel, Sepha experiences "the different cultural realms that in a sense partake of who he is – Ethiopian, immigrant African, African American, and white American – […] interact with each other […] in a way that unpredictably reconfigures the notion of diaspora as simultaneously richer and looser than in its traditional acceptation" (116). This observation about new, more amorphous concepts of Diaspora will be addressed later. However, Ledent's reading of this scene minimizes the role that migrant melancholic shame characterizes and frames this silent interaction between the two friends.

Just as Sepha is embarrassed at the sight of Kenneth in his socks laughing and arguing with himself over a beer in his gloomy apartment, he is similarly ashamed at the sight of Joseph in such a degraded position. Despite Joseph's earlier proclamations, the elevated status of his restaurant's patrons puts his subjugation in more stark relief. The tuxedo, usually worn for formal events, takes on new meaning as a signifier of Joseph's debasement in Washington, D.C. The fact that he removes his uniform when he comes to

Sepha's store for the trio's regular weekly rendezvous is indicative of this signification. Joseph prefers a tattered Michigan sweatshirt – a nod to his improbable yet still respectable dream of a Ph.D. – to the tuxedo he wears to bring lunch and dinner to upscale customers. Appearing in Sepha's store in his server's tuxedo would be a concession to the constraints of his current situation. Also, abandoning the Michigan sweatshirt would signify that Joseph surrenders and accepts the impossibility of reclaiming the elite and privileged life he was forced to abandon in the face of political instability in the Congo and his eventual displacement. Stunned when he sees his friend at work, Sepha observes that "Joseph barely looks anything like the man I know. It's not just the tuxedo that changes him, it's the context and the expression on his face" (172). The men had previously accepted the fact that Kenneth and Sepha were not "to set foot inside the restaurant while [Joseph] was working there." However, our protagonist "had never guessed that perhaps it was even too much just to see him" (ibid). Witnessing Joseph rushing around an anachronistic dining room in the middle of the day leads Sepha to an epiphany: "there is no denying anymore who we are and what we've become" (173). Once again, the fantasy of Kenneth, Joseph, and Sepha's friendship has been lifted to reveal the truth – they have all fallen into prescribed tropes of the degraded immigrant. The fancy socks, ill-fitted suits, and the tuxedo cannot obscure their collective subjugation in a place that was supposed to offer new opportunities for success and eternal happiness. This moment is not, as Bénédicte Ledent claims, a moment of "cultural confusion" (116), but one of absolute clarity.[21]

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[21] Ledent also offers a perplexing and ultimately unconvincing analysis of the men's working lives. She acknowledges the colonial residue of Kenneth and Joseph's employment, referring to their jobs as instances

In the face of Kenneth's pragmatism, and Sepha's pessimism and melancholic apathy, Joseph persists throughout the novel with his characteristic unrelenting optimism. He insists on maintaining a perpetual "glass half full" mentality that is anchored in his voracious appetite for literature and philosophy and his desire for the myth of the American Dream to come true. Of his energetic friend, Sepha observes, "you get the sense when watching him that even the grandest gestures he may make aren't grand enough for him. He's constantly trying to outdo himself, to reach new levels of Josephness that will ensure that anyone who has ever met him will carry some lingering trace of Joseph Kahangi long after he has left" (ibid). Compared to the other characters in the text, Joseph stands out for the theatricality of his persona – a trait that he demonstrates most saliently through his tendency to wax philosophical about everything, from matters most mundane to those quite significant. In Joseph's philosophy, the United States and the entire continent of Africa sit at two opposing poles. On one end, in the United States, people can find opportunity and can reach their assumed maximum potential, regardless of their upbringing. On the other end of the dichotomy, in Africa,

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of "quasi servile condition" that could contradict African-American prejudice against continental Africans whose forbears benefitted from selling others into trans-Atlantic slavery. She then remarks that "Sepha's seeming independence in comparison with his two friends' situations might metaphorically allude to the fact that, unlike most African countries, Ethiopia was not an actual colony" (113) and therefore occupies a unique position in Sub-Saharan Africa. This interpretation is puzzling in the face of the fact that Sepha's store, at the time of his narration in the novel, is quite obviously failing, not as a result of the neighborhood's gentrification – as Ledent asserts – but rather because of Sepha's own melancholic neglect of his shopkeeper duties. Kenneth and Joseph demonstrate more enthusiasm for the store than Sepha does, and it is Kenneth upon whom Sepha depends to take care of the store's administrative affairs. What is more, Kenneth, being from Kenya, would be implicated in the historical legacy of the East African slave trade across the Indian Ocean, along with Sepha (as slaves were taken from Ethiopia as well). Ledent's observation of similarities between Joseph and Kenneth's subjugation and the long histories of colonialism and neo-colonialism in Africa are apt though and are helpful to consider in attempts to contextualize and conceptualize these three "children of the revolution."

one learns to appreciate strategy and scheming and to understand the true value of major institutions of the State.

> The words "That is what it's like to be an African" always hovered around the edge of every conversation Joseph had. At times, it was almost miraculous the way he would manage to find a way to insert them. There wasn't a sport played in the world that couldn't better be grasped by the African mind. And as for politics, who understood its weight, capriciousness, and value better than the citizens of a continent devastated by coups and tyrannical old men? (100)

These complementary opinions of the shrewd strategical acumen of African minds and the perspective on the impact of politics informs Joseph's persistent optimism and his pursuit of opportunities in the United States. Having been something of a chess prodigy in his youth, Joseph believes wholeheartedly in the power of dedicated practice and study and invests significant energy in upholding an image of the sophisticated academic, despite his material circumstances in Washington, D.C.[22]

A major component of the tragedy of Joseph's situation involves the lengths to which he goes to attempt to claim his portion of the American Dream. He takes "a handful of adult continuing-education classes [which] scarred him forever" (*Beautiful Things* 99). The subjects are comically earnest and also telling: "American Religious Pluralism, Symbolism in Dante's *Commedia*, and Gender Relations in Twentieth-Century Post-Colonial Africa" (ibid). In the first class, Joseph presumably sought the tools to

[22] Joseph's story is representative of a common experience for members of the new African diaspora. Bereket H. Selassie observes that "new immigrants […] work predominantly in low-wage service jobs, regardless of their educational backgrounds" (271). Furthermore, in the eyes of these

> "recent immigrants, having job security and a regular paycheck may not be enough if their professional aspirations cannot be realized, they are underemployed, or they have experiences downward social mobility from the status they once had in their home countries. For many, the gap between expectations of 'the good life' in America and stark reality adds to the stress of adjustment" (ibid).

understand the essence of the idea of America – its tolerance for religious heterogeneity, often referred to as an indication of the country's inherent appreciation for diversity. In the second course, Joseph would have been able to demonstrate his particular appreciation for Dante's œuvre. He returns regularly to his notes from this class, even after five years, revisiting a particularly striking passage:

> Through a round aperture I saw appear,
> Some of the beautiful things that Heaven bears,
> Where we came forth, and once more saw the stars (ibid).[23]

During a drunken night out, Joseph recalls his first reaction to these lines in his class at Georgetown, saying that "no one can understand that line like an African because that is what we lived through. Hell every day with only glimpses of heaven in between" (100). In a reversal of popular pre- and proto-colonial literature, Joseph identifies intellectual aptitude and the capacity for philosophical interpretation as traits for which Africans are particularly suited. Even while expressing a pessimistic opinion, Joseph makes use of comedy and his enthusiasm for academic legitimacy in a manner that befits his typically larger-than-life nature. The last class, to which neither Joseph nor Sepha refer again, offers an interesting glimpse into the way that Africa enters discourse in the West –via elite college classrooms and often in a theoretical manner at a noticeable remove from lived experience.[24] Joseph "used all his savings to pay for [these] noncredit courses" (99),

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[23] This line, from which the American version of the novel gets its title, was taken from Robert Pinsky's 1994 English translation of the *Inferno*.

[24] It is perhaps this phenomenon that compelled Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in 2018 to make her derisive remark, "Postcolonial theory? I don't know what it means. I think it is something that professors made up because they needed to get jobs." Naturally, Adichie's dismissive remark inspired a furor of responses from her writer contemporaries and postcolonialist scholars. While her MA in African Studies and her fame as an author allow us to understand Adichie's comment as sarcastic neither her claim nor the idea it promotes are new. Adichie, in summarily dismissing an academic discipline, effectively re-ignites the debate about the palpable disconnect between academic Africanism and the daily lives of the

but still finds himself both in a lower socioeconomic station than that of his upbringing and quite far from his academic ambitions. His strategy is flawed; the novel seems to suggest that Joseph will never become a university professor. "When he first came to D.C.," Sepha narrates, "he had worked as a busboy, and then as a bellhop, and now as a waiter. We all have measures by which we gauge the progress of our lives. Joseph has been generous with his" (169). Although Sepha appears critical of his friend's professional life, he credits Joseph for his persistent optimism. "It has been nineteen years since he came to America, and he has tried to see each and every one of those years in the best possible light" (ibid). In many ways, Joseph's story is the most tragic of the three men. Of his family in the Democratic Republic of Congo – which he alternatively refers to as Zaire at four different times in the novel – we learn very little. Joseph himself provides only one hint during a particularly somber moment when he reminds his friends that "all our fathers are dead," which is a fact that brings the group "closest [they] have ever come to a resolution" (10). Shared trauma, grief, and melancholy bring the men together, allowing them to form a fragile bond vulnerable to many factors that threaten their performative and hollow friendship.

Sepha meets Kenneth and Joseph by chance shortly after he arrived in the United States when they "were all new immigrants working as valets" at a hotel. "It was there that Kenneth became Ken the Kenyan and Joseph, Joe from the Congo. I was skinnier then than I am now, and as our manager said, I didn't need a nickname to remind him I was Ethiopian" (*Beautiful Things* 1). At the very genesis of the cohort are stereotypes

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continent's populace and diaspora. See MacFarquar, Musila 2018, and Obi-Young for representation of the responses to Adichie's flippant statement.

about Africanness they cannot escape and that continue to undermine their abilities to engage in full Relation and invest fully in providing each other the kinds of support they actually need. In a sense, the men's enduring commitment to one another depends on the preservation of an illusion, guarded by the individual melancholy they each nurse. Kenneth must always believe that he can be successful as an engineer and Joseph must always believe that by placing himself strategically near the powerholders in the country's capital, he will eventually come into his own authority. Additionally, they must collaborate to support the illusion of the possibilities of the American Dream in order to bolster Sepha as he manages his rundown corner store. The illusion depends on the melancholy each man occupies and attempts to flee.

Mengestu himself acknowledges the somber dynamic, admitting that Sepha, Kenneth, and Joseph are "constantly performing for each other. There's a way in which Sepha, Joseph and Kenneth are at their best with one another and perhaps at the same time constantly deceiving themselves in relationship to one another more so than any other time in their lives" (Reed and Mengestu). This deception is central to their melancholic Relation. Rather than seeing each other as full opaque selves, the three men cling to a constructed sense of shared identity. Moreover, the text provides no evidence that Joseph and Kenneth have any other friends or community. Away from each other, Joseph's and Kenneth's lives appear to be characterized by the same solitude as Sepha's. Though they may regard their friendship to be a "surrogate family," constructed in exile, the stilted friendship between Kenneth, Sepha, and Joseph serves more as a crutch, keeping the men from succumbing completely to the threat of disillusionment and total melancholy. What they have in common is a profound sadness heightened by the traumas

they survived and their estranged solitude as African-born immigrants in Washington, D.C. They share a sentiment of belonging in their unbelonging, occupying a collective being-of-nowhere that attaches them ever so tenuously to one another. So they come together and design a morbid game, going over the details of notable political uprisings across Africa's history. "We are always more comfortable with the world's tragedies than our own," Sepha admits. "Coups, child soldiers, famines were all part of the same package of unending grief that we picked our way through in order to avoid our own frustrations and disappointments with life" (222). Momentarily displacing or redirecting their personal distress for the performance of a constructed belief in a shared regional trauma, the men depend on each other and their superficial, strained melancholic Relation to endure their persistent unbelonging in Washington, D.C.

Culture and Persistent Unbelonging

Mengestu's protagonist offers various clues about the extent of his unbelonging in his reconstituted life in Washington, D.C. On his first occasion of meeting his new white gentrifying roommate, Judith, and her biracial daughter, Naomi, Sepha is "dressed for a wedding" in an "entirely white" outfit (18). Sepha describes his outfit thusly:

> I had on white pants, with a white shirt that had a crucifix embroidered down the middle, over which I wore a finely woven shroud of white cotton. It was an outfit that meant nothing here, stripped as it was of all context. On the rare occasions that I still wore it, I did so expecting the taunts and stares of my neighbors and their children (ibid).

Sepha's dress is a hybrid outfit, not one that is strictly entirely traditional. Perhaps out of necessity, Sepha combines a more casual top over the formal pants effectively

broadcasting his liminality.[25] The less formal embroidered top signals his distance from the cultural point of origin. Even when attending a wedding, an event that in many cultures would call for formal clothing, Sepha contextualizes himself as marginal, recasting his former self into a new re-fashioned model of existence as a subject tethered neither to his home country nor to his host. His clothing "functions as a salient and powerful political language" that "operates at the interface between the individual and the social world… the private and the public" (Joanne Entwistle, cited in Allman 1-2). If we are to follow Jean Allman's argument that "clothing, and dress generally, [are] an alternative archive which provides a window […] into African self-identities [and] self-representation" (4), Sepha's description of his outfit for the wedding offers the us significant signs of his sense of belonging to the America about which he remains ambivalent. Rather than directly describing his outfit as traditional Ethiopian Christian dress, he uses language to normalize or banalize his clothing to a non-Ethiopian reader – "white pants, with a white shirt that had a crucifix embroidered down the middle" (Mengestu *Beautiful Things* 18) – while indicating his membership in a particular community of seldom-practicing Ethiopian émigrés. Despite his efforts to alienate himself from his uncle's gossiping Ethiopian neighbors in a Maryland suburb of Washington, D.C., Sepha still receives and accepts invitations to social gatherings that would for which he feels the necessity to don clothing indicating his Ethiopian Christianity. While Sepha dismisses his outfit as devoid of meaning in Washington, D.C., he goes on to describe the reactions he expects from the people who happen to see him

[25] Thank you to Prof. Dagmawi Woubshet for describing the ways Sepha's outfit differs from traditional style.

dressed for the wedding. He readies himself for inevitable gapes and guffaws as he makes his way to the event. Thus, his white outfit, signals his position as an outsider in his neighborhood of residence. By wearing this white Ethiopian Christian ensemble, Sepha is revealing himself as Other, a person who, while functioning in the community, is not of the community. Regardless of his attempts to disappear into the folds of the goings-on in the Logan Square neighborhood, Sepha sometimes emerges and calls attention to his alterity, thereby indicating the impossibility of his ultimate assimilation. While Sepha bemoans the fact that his outfit is de-contextualized on his doorstep, he is, in fact, *re-contextualizing* his body in the act of wearing these particular pieces of clothing. Sepha understates and ignores the sartorial semiotics of his clothing by describing them as effectively meaningless. At the same time, to an observer with the correct vocabulary and tools of interpretation, Sepha's wedding ensemble indicates a crucial belonging to a context full of meaning.

Sepha's posture regarding his wedding outfit encapsulates the ways in which melancholy and sentiments of individualized liminality preclude the full Glissantian Relation. It appears that a significant component of migrant belonging and territorialization relies on interpretation and understanding as modes of socialization. Indeed, as one the speakers in Shailja Patel's *Migritude* inquires, "if we cannot name it, does it exist?" (53). This naming is both literal – a question of language – and also figurative – a question of recognition and acceptance. If Sepha, adorned in his hybrid semi-formal outfit is not fully legible in his neighborhood, to what extent is he really of the area. Alternatively, though we do not witness Sepha at the wedding itself, the hybrid nature of his outfit raises the question of the extent of his legibility and belonging in the

largely Ethiopian gathering of family members and acquaintances. Translation at several registers underlies the problematic presented by migrant melancholia. Signifying is unsuccessful if the interlocuter does not possess the correct tools for reception and interpretation. Sepha's rather dismissive remarks about his outfit's meaninglessness to his passersby in Washington, D.C. call attention to his bifurcated existence and delineate the contours of his fractured belonging to different contemporaneous spheres. Significantly, Sepha only describes his outfit as indecipherable because his neighbors, observers, and interlocuters do not possess the tools required to decipher them. In his mixed outfit and in his droll, nearly cynical description of himself as a spectacle, Sepha actually obscures his own position as potential intermediary between two realms, residing instead in a melancholic liminality. Sepha's placelessness resides largely in his singular inability to render himself remarkable or legible to those he encounters. At the end of the novel, he reflects on one of his father's adages: "a bird stuck between two branches gets bitten on both wings" (Mengestu *Beautiful Things* 228). To his father's saying, Sepha offers his own addendum: "a man stuck between two worlds lives and dies alone" (ibid). Committing oneself to placelessness, then, emerges as a dangerous individual activity. According to Sepha's deceased father, refusing to draw allegiances makes one vulnerable to violent attack from the two places to which one feels drawn. After all his wanderings around Washington, D.C. and the many identities that Sepha attempted to don in the capital's metro area, Sepha has resigned himself to persistent loneliness. In adapting his father's saying though, Sepha continues his habit of displacing the communal for the individual. Whereas his father presented liminality as a danger in the face of two conflicting social systems, Sepha places emphasis on the individual, who "lives and dies

alone." The subject in both of the adages is "stuck" between two cultures, however where his father sees vulnerability in the face of social structures, Sepha sees persistent isolation, ostensibly driven by the liminal subject itself. Whereas Sepha regards his outfit as untranslateable, the narrative actually undermines this interpretation, attributing this indecipherability to Sepha himself.

In migrant communities, clothing and dress circulate as significant markers of continued cultural affiliation. Indeed, in the social realm, shared expectations and investment in "traditional" notions of respectability and comportment continue to impact individual behavior in the diaspora (Chacko "Identity and Assmilation" 500). Sepha's insistence on isolation and his persistent post-traumatic melancholy sever his affiliations with a salient Ethiopianness in Washington, D.C. As his time in exile increases, Sepha disassociates himself slowly from communities that would anchor him in a diasporic version of Ethiopianness and, at the same time, seems unable to root himself in some kind of adopted notion of Americanness either. Throughout the novel, he demonstrates a proneness to neglectful fugues around Washington, D.C. and its environs – wandering and losing himself in his thoughts and recollections rather than attending to the pressing material decline of his convenience store. In one instance in which he wanders to his distant uncle's apartment complex in a nearby Maryland neighborhood, he describes another outfit he is wearing:

> I look exactly like what I am: a desperate man, on the verge of middle age, with only the money in his pocket to spare. I have dark rings under my eyes, a nose and forehead damp with sweat. My shirt collar has an old coffee stain on it, and the sides of my pant pockets have a streak of dirt running down the side. I take a second to tuck in my shirt, pat down the edges of my hair, and wipe the sweat off my brow with the edges of my sleeve. I pray that I don't run into anyone I know (115).

Whereas in the previous passage, Sepha's clothing indicates partial membership in a socio-ethnic community, his later outfit belies the extent to which his world has deteriorated as well as his externality from the community that appears to be significant for his uncle and his neighbors. Read in parallel, the two passages call attention to the particular sartorial semiotics that Sepha and, ostensibly, the immigrants he represents draw upon as they navigate their belonging and unbelonging in an area of the country heavily populated by other political and social refugees. In accordance with Christophe De Jaeger's assertion that "clothing is a second social skin that people use in society both to conform and rebel," (qtd in Jennings 126), Sepha's two outfits are telling about the development of his melancholic regression over the course of the narrative. Indeed, Helen Jennings reminds us about African societies' long traditions of reading clothing as "advanced signifiers of status, ambitions, beliefs, and life stage" (Jennings 46). Transplanted and interpellated into black African diasporic contexts, Sepha's clothing acquires extended significance as it offers his uncle's attentive or nosy neighbors fodder for speculation and bewilderment – processes that can ultimately also affect Sepha's uncle's sense of belonging in Maryland. Though he fled the community because of its insistent similitude to the Addis Ababa, Sepha is conscious of the ways his appearance is incongruous with the values upheld and preserved by the Ethiopian immigrants in the Silver Rock apartment community. When he arrives at the complex, this consciousness causes him to try to ameliorate his appearance and make himself presentable for the sake of his uncle's and his family's reputation. Along with the efforts to tidy render himself more presentable, Sepha prays that he maintains the same anonymity that he exercises in Washington, D.C. as he crosses the threshold of his uncle's enclave space.

Apparently, Sepha's appearance is incongruous with the values preserved within the Ethiopian immigrants in the Silver Rock apartment community, one that we assume he was once connected to in some meaningful manner. Yet, when he arrives at the apartment building and notices his poor appearance, he makes an effort to make himself somewhat presentable. While adrift, Sepha is not completely lost. He stills calls upon cultural notions of respectability and the importance of appearance to regulate his behavior within enclave spaces. He ends his description of himself by expressing a genuine hope to not see anybody he once knew. In D.C., his unbelonging and itineracy is facilitated by a sense of anonymity. In returning to Silver Rock, Sepha once again becomes an identifiable representative, a part of a whole, subject to externally-defined regulations and social codes. The membership is fractured, however, by his sloppy appearance that contradicts the social norms of the community he re-enters. Clothing and, by extension, physical appearance contribute to Mengestu's characters relationship to space and figure as intermediary or signal of affinities and belonging. Rather than being devoid of meaning as Sepha assumes, the clothing that he selects and dons is ripe with significance that shift in context as he moves from space to space. Space also informs his awareness of himself, as he moves from familiarity to anonymity in the various neighborhoods through which he ambles. These two moments of Sepha's physical awareness also call attention to one particularity of space that permeates Mengestu's novel – namely, Washington, D.C. centrality in the Ethiopian diaspora in the United States. Casually referred to by the moniker "chocolate city," the ethnic and racial landscape of Washington D.C. is also crucially important to consider as a frame for reading Sepha's melancholic Relation.

That Mengestu sets this narrative of individual melancholic Relation in Washington, D.C. and its environs is significant for this particular city's role in the history of Ethiopian e/immigration to the United States. Recent migration data shows that Ethiopian immigrants make up the largest group of Sub-Saharan African immigrants to the Washington metropolitan area.[26] The result, apartment buildings full of Ethiopian immigrants casting judgmental eyes on those who walk the hallways, are endemic of a process of transforming space into what Elizabeth Chacko calls "ethnic places," environments that "are home or representations of home to various immigrant groups, infused with social meaning and cultural and emotional associations" (25). In describing Silver Rock to his audience, Sepha warns that "[t]o call the building insular is to miss the point entirely." Indeed, "[l]iving here is as close to living back home as one can get […] hardly a word of English is spoken inside of these doors […] The older women still travel from apartment to apartment dressed in slippers and white blankets that they keep wrapped around their heads, just as if they were still walking through the crowded streets of Addis" (Mengestu *Beautiful Things*116). The apartment complex functions as an anchor for the displaced Ethiopians who congregate and build new lives there, many who could have fled the Derg regime under similar circumstances to Sepha's. Silver Rock is an attempt at physical translation, the transformation of the American setting into an Ethiopian cultural hub persists as both proof of lingering, but palpable continued attachment to a lost home or point of origin and an effort to adjust to the conditions of a

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[26] Elizabeth Chacko describes the Washington Metro area as encompassing the following localities: "the District of Columbia, the cities of Alexandria, Fairfax, Falls Church, Manassas and Manassas Park, and the counties of Arlington, Fairfax, Loudoun and Prince William in the adjacent state of Virginia; as well as Montgomery, Charles, Frederic, and Prince George's counties in the state of Maryland" ("Ethiopian Ethos and the Making of Ethnic Places in the Washington Metropolitan Area" 21).

new host or adopted hometown. Though the material conditions may have shifted, the cultural order that regulated life in Addis Ababa travels with the migrants, who recreate the norms as best they can in Maryland. In Ethiopia, Sepha's uncle Behane was "a powerful, wealthy man" whose house was "a sprawling ranch […] on the edge of a ridge which hsweeping views of the shallow green valley below" (96). Berhane, an architect, designed the house himself to emulate the style of Frank Lloyd Wright. In the United States, he lives "in one of the poorer suburbs of Maryland" (95) in an apartment building full of other migrant Ethiopian families. Berhane lives alone, in a "corner apartment on the twenty-fourth floor" of a poorly-maintined high rise building (116). Despite the diminished conditions, Berhane is "respected because of the money and power he once had in Ethiopia, because his name was once associated with the cabinet members and princes of the old empire." Paradoxically, "he is also mocked now by some for exactly the same reason" (ibid). Though there is no indication that either Berhane or any of his neighbors plan to return to Addis in the near future, their relationship to one another, mediated through the transformation of Silver Rock into an ethnic place, they are perched differently on the proverbial branch central to Sepha's father's adage. By recreating their Ethiopian lives in the United States, the residents of Silver Rock seem to position themselves for flight back to the locale they consider their true home as soon as conditions make this return feasible.

This insistent similitude to life in Addis is the very reason Sepha flees Maryland for Washington, D.C. (116). The community effectively evokes a lost home that is elsewhere, out of reach. Although he appears to respect and understand the fuction of Silver Rock as "locale of interactions between space and the human spirit" (Chacko

"Ethiopian Ethos" 25), he finds the requisite adherence to persistent moral and social norms untenable. To Sepha, his departure from Silver Rock appears to him sometimes as "an escpae, while at other times it seems more like an abandonment" (Mengestu *Beautiful Things* 117). As he comes back into contact with the nosy neighbors filing into the one functioning elevator and filling it to the brim, he feels pressure under curious glances. His small attempts to fix his appearance allow him to occupy an aura of mystery in his former neighbors' eyes. "Either I left to create a new life of my own, one *free from the restrains and limits of culture*, or I turned my back on everything I was and that had made me" (ibid, emphasis added). This attitude towards culture is notable because of what it reveals. The dichotomy Sepha constructs is jarring; it exposes a dismissive or antagonistic attitude towards nostalgic cultural practice while also acknowledging the centrality of culture in his own upbringing. Sepha has something to prove in the return to Silver Rock – his appearance could signal to his uncle's neighbors that unmooring oneself from an explicit point of origin facilitates a sort of productive freedom. The "category crisis" (Chude-Sokei 54) can in some cases, lead to admirable results. Of course, Sepha's is not one of those cases. He is acutely aware of the fact that "there would be a fair amount of pleasure behind the pity that would greet me if my life were ever laid bare before this crowd" (Mengestu, *Beautiful Things* 117). While Silver Rock stifles him, trapping him, even momentarily, in a crowded elevator under the disproving and probing eyes of gossiping aunties, Sepha also must confront the truth that whether burdened with culture of not, his melancholy prevents him from progressing much farther than he intended to when he set out to sever his connection to the stubbornly-preserved ethnic enclave.

In the elevator, Sepha overhears women discussing the apparent risk that accompanies emigration to the United States: that of losing Ethiopian culture. Evidently, "time, distance, and nostalgia have convinced these women that back in Ethiopia, we were all moral and perfect" (Megestu *Beautiful Things* 118). As Sepha views it, "with our menial jobs and cramped apartments, it's impossible not to want to look back sometimes and pretend there was once a better world, one where […] life was easy and wonderful "(ibid). In fact, the opposite is true. For the entire time he has been living in the United States, Sepha's uncle Berhane has been documenting this reality by writing impassioned letters to American lawmakers and government officials, begging them to intervene in the political unrest in his home country. The letters are a secret passion project, one that Sepha discovers accidentally and monitors privately, opening his uncle's letter box only when he is out of the apartment at work. Through his close reading of his uncle's letters to various American presidents and legislative secretaries, Sepha depicts a dire situation from which he and countless others had to flee in order to survive. Indeed, Sepha's own story counters the illusion upheld by the women in the elevators – his inadvertent collusion with a student political resistance movement instigated the events that led to his father's abduction and murder at the hands of paramilitary officials and his own flight from Addis as a young man (126-130). Sepha's ability to fade into a lightly-constructed version of himself, hiding behind a story with holes and a host of unanswered questions relies, consequentially, on his separation from the insular Silver Rock where his past matters. Though he is never able to fully absolve himself of the regret and melancholy that color his reminiscence of his hometown, he pushes himself into a tenuous individualism that allows him to skirt both a comprehensive renunciation of his home

culture and a full that embodiment of that same culture which accompanies the painful memories of all he has lost. Sepha, “however lonely he seems to remain” (Ledent 116), allows his shame to lead him into loose affinity with Kenneth and Joesph, despite the fact that, admittedly, the three have very little in common besides having originated from the same continent. In the face of his persistent shame, this collective, based on a vague sense of shared pseudo-racial and continental similarity, allows Mengestu to wallow in his unmoored intermediary melancholy.

One of “these people”

The question that looms heavily over this book and other new diaspora fictions is one of racial affinity to other groups coded within the United States’ racial hierarchies as Black. Many scholars have read this as Sepha’s central dilemma. Bénédicte Ledent describes the protagonist as “a character who often indulges in paradoxes and is still in the process of understanding who he is and how he relates to his surroundings” (114). In her view, Sepha’s unease with himself and his environs is reflected in the largely negative portrayal of the Black American characters in the novel. Accordingly, Sepha expresses indifference at the neighborhood’s gentrification because of “a refusal on his part to share their fate” (ibid). Ledent goes on to declare that “Sepha’s compassion for the African American ‘others’ is often triggered by some personal fear and could therefore be read not really as opportunistic, but at least tinged with some measure of selfishness (ibid.). While it is true that Sepha does not consider himself to be truly of the neighborhood where he lives and runs his store, Ledent’s assertions about Sepha’s

relationship to the other residents of Logan Circle and, by extension, to African Americans in Washington, D.C. requires interrogation in the spirit of moving toward what she and Yogita Goyal (2014) both recognize as a necessary re-framing of lingering notions of diaspora. Louis Chude-Sokei agrees, reading Mengestu's novel as a signal of contemporary Black American's "category crisis" in the face of contemporary Black African migration and the literature that emerges from the new diaspora (53). It is certainly clear that Sepha has developed a complex relationship with his neighborhood and its inhabitants and patrons. The gentrification of the country's capital city lingers as a powerful context for the characters' own transformations and complicates their process of developing attachments to their new host city. Regardless of the changing demographics of the city and Logan Circle in particular, Sepha retains the status of outsider. While the neighborhood itself changes, Sepha's relationship to it does not seem to evolve due to his own melancholia as well as the peculiarities of contemporary American racial designations.

For African immigrants in the United States self-perception "may be context driven or situational […as they] choose from a host of possible nomenclatures the ones that best suit their purposes at any given time or place" (Chacko, Identitity and Assimilation Among Young Ethiopian Immigrants in Metropolitan Washington 494). In the particular case of Ethiopian immigrants who are "hailing from a country where the taxonomy of populations is based largely on linguistic, religious, and tribal affiliations, race is not of particular concern until they are confronted with" the extent to which racial categories are significantly functional in Washington, D.C.'s predominately Black metropolitan area (Chacko "Identity and Assimilation" 497). Concepts of all-

encompassing, cross-cultural Blackness become salient for the immigrants once they have left Ethiopia but are further complicated by interactions with other African immigrant populations and the various notions of ethnicity that accompany them from the continent. In many ways, regional and even continental affiliation seem to function more efficiently for immigrant populations than a large diasporic identity.

This is certainly true in Sepha's narrative. Throughout the novel, he positions himself mostly as an observer of the Logan Circle neighborhood, despite the fact that he has lived and worked in the area for over a decade. From the point that he first establishes himself in this neighborhood "has potential" (Mengestu *Beautiful Things* 145), Sepha stands at the margins, watching the goings-on and noting the demographic changes. He describes the neighborhood as "blighted" (146), but also periodically acknowledges his own role as interloper and participant in the area's gentrification. He was originally drawn to Logan Circle because of the anonymity it affords him as a new shop owner and someone who is running from a painful past. When he first arrives, the neighborhood "was still predominately poor, black, cheap, and sunk in a depression that had struck the city twenty years earlier and never left" (34). This history appeals to Sepha, who seeks an environment into which he can be inconspicuous and in which he does not have to answer to anybody's expectations or questions about his past. What is more, he can escape the expectations of grandeur and immigrant success that encircled him when he was sharing an apartment with his uncle Berhane. Rather than attempt to fulfil his uncle's prophecy that he become "an engineer or a doctor," (41) Sepha's own ambitions are different: "all I wanted out of life now was to read quietly, and alone, for as much of the day as possible" (40). This desire leads him to Logan Circle, where

> I didn't have to be anything greater than what I already was. I was poor, black, and wore the anonymity that came with that as a shield against all of the early ambitions of the immigrant, which had long since abandoned me, assuming they had ever really been mine to begin with. As it was, I did not come to America to find a better life. I came here running and screaming with the ghosts of an old one firmly attached to my back. My goal since then has always been a simple one: to persist unnoticed through the days, to do no more harm (41).

Sepha positions himself curiously in relation to his adopted neighborhood. Firstly, the fact that Logan Circle's residents are mostly Black is a benefit, he can enjoy inconspicuousness as a new resident due to his shared racial identity with the area's existing residents. An all-encompassing Blackness provides a refuge for the novel's hero, allowing him the freedom and the solitude to wallow in the "terrible and frightening realization that everything I had cared for and loved was either lost or living on without me seven thousand miles away, and that what I had [in Washington, D.C.] was not a life, but a poorly constructed substitution made up of one uncle, two friends, a grim store, and a cheap apartment" (40). Occupying this palliative racial affinity, Sepha stops short of seeing his fate as linked to that of his neighbors. In the face of increasing redevelopment, Sepha demonstrates remarkable apathy, offering only dry observations of the changing demographics. When his elderly nosy neighbor, Mrs. Davis, laments the manner and speed of their neighborhood's gentrification, Sepha attempts to reckon with his position in the process. While he recognizes that he is "in no position […] to say what was right or wrong," he also acknowledges that Mrs. Davis does not consider him to be "one of 'these people'" who were actively changing the area. Sepha does concede that although he "hadn't forced anyone out," he "had never really been a part of Logan Circle either, at least not in the way Mrs. Davis and most of […] customers were" (189). In fact, Sepha

reflects, "I had snuck into the neighborhood as well" taking advantage of the cheap lease in much the same way as the people towards whom Mrs. Davis aims her ire (ibid).

There is also a physical dimension to Sepha's unbelonging and complex racialization. In this regard, "spatial relationships endemic to and perpetuated by the city space play into logics of identity and commodity or each as both" (Olopade 135). Ledent's reading of Mengestu's novel fixates on her notion that Sepha is contending with "cultural realms that in a sense partake of who he is – Ethiopian, immigrant African, African American, and white American" (116). However, the narrative itself captures a rather different and particularized physical experience. Sepha does not, as Ledent insists, envision his membership in those four cultural categories. Quite the contrary, he finds himself constantly addressing the myriad ways he stands in distinction from each of those realms and remains, ultimately, illegible to their members. Later in the novel, Sepha reveals that in addition to the racial politics that govern the area, he chose Logan Circle in part because of its resemblance to a section of Addis Ababa that holds particular significance in his relationship with his father. The structure D.C.'s Logan Circle is reminiscent of an area in Addis Ababa where he and his father would regularly take constitutionals and discuss philosophy (216). In each park, Sepha confronts his illusions of place, as, despite their predominant Blackness, the two neighborhoods both prove to be less hospitable than he expects. Sepha is forced to flee Addis and the special unnamed park when he unwittingly involves himself in revolutionary student protest activity. The park itself figures in Sepha's trauma – on his last silent walk with his father, they come across seven bodies, executed and put on display by the brutal perpetrators of the Red Terror (216-217). Logan Circle expels him when the changing demographics and his

heightening melancholy overwhelm him to the point that he neglects his store and is eventually evicted. His attachment to his father having been traumatically and suddenly severed, Sepha chooses Logan Circle as a space onto which he can potentially resolve his melancholy. The neighborhood does not fulfil this purpose, its dissimilarity to the beloved park in Addis Ababa couple with the unique racial politics of late twentieth-century Washington, D.C. are too insurmountable. This becomes starkly clear when Judith's house is set on fire by a long-time resident of the neighborhood anguished at having been ousted from the neighborhood due to a sharp increase in rent prices. In reading about the alleged arsonist, Sepha notes the physical resemblance between himself and the man. He considers him, in a sense, a co-conspirator in an unspecified plot, despite the fact that his name, Franklin Henry Thomas, "so quintessentially colonial in its rhythm and grandeur" stands in stark contradistinction to the protagonist's own (225). What is more, his fragile sense of security with the obscurity he finds in Logan Circle is shattered when he becomes part of the population of people ousted from the neighborhood due to the changing demographics. Instead, it proves the extent to which Sepha does not and cannot belong in his new chosen locale.

What Sepha's peculiar relationship to Logan Circle elucidates is a general sense of slipperiness when it comes to his attitudes to wards race and racial categories. Of course, this question is even further complicated by his short-lived romance with Judith, his white professor neighbor and her biracial daughter. As tensions in the neighborhood mount, Sepha must finally declare where his allegiances lie. During a community meeting in response to the rapid gentrification in the neighborhood, Sepha is forced out of his racial ambivalence when Ms. Davis prompts him out of an inconspicuous seat at

the back of the room. Choosing to sit alone in the very first row of the chairs rather than beside Judith who noticeably makes space for him on the seat next to hers, Sepha casts his lot with his Black neighbors and all but ensures the demise of his improbably love affair (197-198). In this moment, Sepha actually deploys his bifurcated attachments, still opting to sit alone and not participate in the meeting while also acknowledging that he operates in "a world where two identities exist and vary in salience depending on social contexts and structural conditions" (Weiner and Richards 102). This is not an instance of assimilation or even cultural hybridity. Sepha is not leaning into a "hyphenated ethnic label to signify movement away from an immigrant ethnic identity" nor is he situating himself in "the beldnign of two cultures as a transitory stage toward Americanization" (110). What Sepha does, in his reflections on Logan Circle, in his interactions with Ms Davis and Judith, and in his continued nostalgia for his life in Addis Ababa with his family, is actualize the ways members of the new African diaspora wield different sometimes clashing identities at different moments, depending on which is more useful or apparent. The melancholy that drive Sepha's errantry in the Washington, D.C. area underscore the discomfort that accompanies African immigrants' navigating the simultaneous pull from these multiple identities. For Sepha, by the end of the novel, his solemnity cements his unbelonging, fixing him in a stubborn placelessness confirmed by him walking away from his store into an open and uncertain future. Sepha remains uncomfortable with the multiple and divergent aspects of himself – his Ethiopianness, his Africanness, and his Blackness – which the narrative presents as functionally incongruent. He is too Ethiopian to be Black, to Black to be gentrifier, and too melancholy to fully settle into either. Sepha presents the problematic of melancholic

Relation: his melancholy remains so persistent that he stands out as a singularity resistant to efforts to include him in various collectives – be they racial, ethnic, national, or regional. Sepha furrows into despondency so resolutely that he precludes himself from the process of self-fashioning that "incorporates, adapts, and amplifies preexisting communal solidarities, cultural attributes, and historical memories […] grounded in real life context and social experience" (Weiner and Richards 106). The prevailing lens through which Sepha sees himself is the tragedy of having lost his father. This grief is Sepha's touchstone and the source of his challenging melancholic Relation.

A significant component of Sepha's predicament rests on the complex manner in which Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants are racialized within the United States' fairly rigid racial categories. In the context of cultures in the horn of Africa, the collective designation "Habesha" carries particular salience in a manner that does not directly correlate to American notions of race or nationality. Indeed, a cursory search on social media or a general search engine would reveal the complex nature of the question of Ethiopian and Eritrean racial identities in particular. It is not uncommon for immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean to "overwhelmingly [emphasize] their ethnic identities and national origins, underplaying more generic identification as Black" (Chacko "Identitity and Assimilation" 494). Many of these ethnic identities transcend national borders, linking individuals to larger communitiees through shared language and custom. This is true for Habesha people from East Africa, who, due also to generalized notions of race in the United States must consistently grapple with exclusion from consideration as both African and Black. Indeed, as Shelly Habecker observes, migrant populations from Ethiopia and Eritrea commonly retain their indentities as "Habasha", an identity that

carries historical and political significance in East African societies.[27] In Habecker's view, identifying as Habasha affords migrants consideration as, alternatively, "special blacks" or "honorary whites" (1205) although cursory searches on social media and search engines would offer ample material to refute this claim. What is useful in Habecker's ethnography of Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants in Washington, D.C. is her observation that the individuals in her study see their Habasha identities as distinct from those of Black or white people in the United States, although they do acknowledge a sensitivity towards their linked fate with Black people of a variety of ethnicities. For them, the racial categories in the United States are too limiting for the expansiveness of Habasha identity. As such, the operate with distinct senses of self, that they can and do see as included within American blackness, when necessary, but that also operates outside of the United States' racial hierarchies. Although neither Mengestu nor his protagonist proclaim Habesha identity or strive to make a distinction between ethnic identification and racial affinity, this issue does allow us to read nuance into the melancholic Relation in *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears.*

Upon arrival into the United States, Mengestu's three African characters find themselves interpellated into the maelstrom of American racial dynamics *alongside* their acute sense of their national and ethnic origins. Recall that Joe still alternates between referring to his home country as the Congo and Zaire – the latter republic would have officially dissolved when Joe had already left and settled in Washington, D.C. What this

[27] Habecker employs unusual orthography in her study of Eritrean and Ethiopian immigrants in Washington, D.C. Though the ethnicity is most commonly spelled "Habesha," Habecker replaces the second -e, opting to include an -a instead. When referring to her study, I mirror her orthographic choice. However, in other instances, I prefer the more widely-employed spelling in other instances.

novel offers is a meditation on the shifting contemporary racial landscape in the United States and invites readers to contemplate how this terrain correlates or clashes to notions of African belonging. Indeed, when Sepha, Kenneth, and Joe gather to play their dictator game, they do so relying on their shared Africanness, a trait that implicates and depends on global notions of Blackness but does not always explicitly name the racial hierarchies it subsumes. New diaspora narratives, by foregrounding unbelonging and cultural alterity augment contemporary calls for new configurations of race and social stratification in the United States. It is clear that "the metaphor of American society today requires deeper and more subtle differentiation, one that allows for and accommodates ethnic complexity" (Moe 7). A project of accounting rather than division, this project of restructuring the dominant narrative about race in the United States carries with it the potention for "social transformation" with far-reaching impact (ibid). To this end, Sepha's melancholic inertia offers a sort of position from which to imagine new possibilites. His contemporary migration and the melancholia that colors his relationships push us to think about the work necessary to develop meaningful associations. In other words, Sepha's despondent narratives highlights the manners in with diaspora and race are embodied practices that require deliberation. Passive racialization persists, yes, but true, unfettered Relation on a racial place requires intentional investment and an orientation towards desired affinity. In the case of Mengestu's protagonist, this possiblity for productive and generative Relation only becomes available at the very conclusion of the novel. After meandering around the city, Sepha comes back to Logan Square and stands at a distance, facing the shop he has abandoned. He revels in "moments like this […] when we are neither coming nor going, and all we have to do is sit and look back on

the life we have made" (228). It is only at this stage of complete dissociation can Sepha finally see his store "exactly as I have always wanted to see it" (228). The strategic examination of the situation as it stands gives Sepha clarity to assess and opens up a range of potentialities for a path forward. Similarly, new African diaspora fictions hold a magnifying glass to the various ordering structures that function in the United States and present the potential for decisive movement in new nuanced directions.

CHAPTER 2 | DIASPORIC DISSONANCE: AFROPOLITAN ALIENATION IN IMBOLO MBUE'S *BEHOLD THE DREAMERS*

"In another's country that is also your own, your personhood divides, and in following the forked path you encounter yourself in a double movement… once as a stranger, and then as a friend."

Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (2004)

"No one lives in transnational space … if one is an African subject. You could say therefore that the well-policed borders of the Western world serve as a means of inscribing the locality of the non-Western subject, and affirming the universality of occidental subjects through their ability to traverse and literally transcend geographical borders."

S. Okwunodu Ogbechie, "Borders and Access (or Lack of Access) to Transnational Spaces" (2007)

Introduction

For some time, African and Africanist scholars and creatives have taken up the question of the Afropolitan in their efforts to theorize cultural and social belonging of increasingly mobile Africans. "They (read: we) are Afropolitans – the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you," declares Taiye Selasi in her somewhat infamous piece, "Bye Bye Babar." These Afropolitans are recognizable because of their "funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes" (Selasi 2005). Because of its overt elitism, Selasi's piece and, accordingly, Afropolitanism as a theory, have been the subjects of pointed, fervent critique. In both the academic and popular realms, writers continue to question the parameters of the nascent school of thought. Contemporary debate calls performative Afropolitanism into question, asking whether one must be economically privileged and globally mobile to have access to Afropolitan ideals. Can one be an Afropolitan having never left the continent? How should we consider those who return, having failed to achieve their Afropolitan dreams in the West? Lastly, and most contentiously debated is the question of whether Afropolitanism is

simply a new way to perform Westernization. Of particular importance for contemporary study of African literature is the question of how Afropolitanism relates to or departs from earlier concepts of Kantian cosmopolitanism the early 2000s work on cosmopolitics, internationalism, and borders.

Contemporary configurations of cosmopolitanism depend on a shared belief in the desirability of acceptance by and into the West. Demonstrated comfort in Western metropoles signifies one's evolved nature, making one worthy of presence and attention within these same metropolitan spaces. That a contemporary African can be Western-educated and still legible and accepted in her African hometown means she is, admirably, a cultural chameleon, at once skilled in many cultural registers. Of course, the desire to blend relatively seamlessly into European and American locales is not new. However, as many scholars have aptly indicated, post-Cold War globalization requires new meditations on identity and global citizenship. How then does one retain particularity while also acknowledging and participating in new modes of interconnected relativity? It is now pro forma to marvel at the myriad ways technology has changed our access to people and cultures from which we find ourselves at a physical remove. It is, indeed, incredible that children of African immigrants, stranded in the United States, can make use of the Internet to stay abreast of cultural trends on the continent. However, as the ending of NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013) warns, technology only functions to host connections that are fractured and tenuous, at best.

Overlooked in the celebrations of successful African immigrants and the proliferation of African migrant narratives are those migrants from the continent for whom the American Dream remains unattainable. While it is true that many of the

African-born migrants to the United States achieve levels of economic stability that may not have been possible in their countries of origin, a significant proportion of these contemporary immigrants remain politically and economically vulnerable for the duration of their residence in their new homes. To them, the dream of success in the West remains a mirage, ever unobtainable and taunting them all the while. More than simply difficult, the United States turns out to be inhospitable and, in some cases, hostile to these contemporary migrants as they strive to realize the aspirations of financial stability that drove them from their home countries in the first place. In their experiences, many contemporary African migrants find themselves managing disillusionment and alienation as they attempt to configure the codes that regulate life in their new homes and adjust accordingly. Often, they discover that the “America” they expect to find does not match what they encounter upon when they settle into their new lives. Indeed, there exists a dissonance between popular imagery of the United States, circulated via various modes of media, and the realities of vulnerable African migrants who travel and settle in the west. This discord is a major theme in Imbolo Mbue’s novel, *Behold the Dreamers*, which stands in stark contrast to both the glamorous ideal of the American Dream and the glossy Afropolitanism that has dominated popular discourse about migrants from the continent. Read alongside popularized images of glamorous social chameleons invoked in peer works, Mbue’s protagonists’ distinctive experiences offer oft-ignored counterpoints to the widely deviled version of the privileged, elitist Afropolitan. Instead, the novel highlights the veracity of the migrant stranded place and the Afropolitan perspective that holds migrant subjects extended between several worldviews. This chapter reads *Behold the Dreamers* to argue for a nuance and complexity in

Afropolitanism. Through an exploration of Imbolo Mbue's novel, I aim to demonstrate that Afropolitanism maintains utility as a theory through which to observe contemporary African migrant transnationalism and liminality in New York, a metropolitan landscape of foreclosed and fractured possibilities.

Afropolitanism and Cosmopolitanism

Afropolitanism has been quite central to discourse about contemporary African cultural production. Much of the debate questions the movement's place in relation to postcolonialism while also attempting to parse out what distinguishes Afropolitanism from cosmopolitanism, a concept that has also been central to observations of globalization and culture. Since Afropolitanism's various iterations have been the subject of much pointed debate in contemporary cultural analysis, it is important to contextualize the theory within the larger genealogy of discourse on cosmopolitanism and the developing and colonized world's relationship to Western metropoles and forms of cultural expression. At the base of contemporary academic debate about Afropolitanism are two seemingly disparate configurations. The first, Taiye Selasi's "Bye Bye Babar," was published in 2005 in the now-defunct LIP Magazine's special edition on Africa. In this piece, the Afropolitan has a direct connection to the continent, having either been born there, decided to live there now, or raised by parents who emigrated from the continent to other metropoles in the West. While some of them are multi-ethnic, Selasi's Afropolitans perform their belonging to Africa: they DJ Afro-fusion nights at dance clubs, they don Kente and Ankara print alongside Western items of clothing, they speak

multiple languages, Romance languages included. What is crucial to Selasi's concept of Afropolitanism is the fact that "there's the G8 city or two (or three) that we know like the backs of our hands, and the various institutions that know us for our famed focus. We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world" ("Bye Bye Babar"). Selasi's Afropolitan is mobile. She uses media and cultural capital to perform belonging when travelling the world while insisting on being of Africa.

Published two years later in a pamphlet compiled to accompany an exhibition in the Johannesburg Art Gallery entitled *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, Achille Mbembe's "Afropolitanism" is decidedly more theoretical. In his view, Afropolitanism emerges at a moment when scholarship has reached the limits of predominant terms and frameworks. He opens his piece explaining that the existing "politico-intellectual paradigms" (26) that regulate scholarship about and from Africa have become so institutionalized that there is no longer room for creativity within them. As a result, he offers Afropolitanism as a new modality through which we can observe the dynamics that shape African lives in contemporary contexts. Now, according to Mbembe, critics of African aesthetic and cultural products neglect to acknowledge the continent's long history of transnationalism and migration. Indeed, Mbembe asserts, Africa has always been a part of a "historical phenomenon of worlds in movement" (27). However, the core of the histories of the continent's various and varied cultures depends on a "paradigm of itinerancy, mobility and displacement" (ibid). African transnationalism is not new, but it now requires a theory through which it can be observed.[28]

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[28] In fact, intracontinental regional migration continues to occur at higher rates than immigration to other continents. According to the 2018 UN Conference on Trade and Development, of the 258 million people

Keeping this history in view, Mbembe proposes a complex definition of Afropolitanism: a "cultural, historical and aesthetic sensitivity" that informs new "awareness of the interweaving of the here and there, the presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa [… and] the way of embracing, with full knowledge of the facts, strangeness, foreignness and remoteness" (28). Mbembe's Afropolitanism develops from his frustration with what he recognizes to be a "gap between the real life of societies, on the one hand, and the intellectual tools by which societies understand their future, on the other," which, he warns, "is not without risk for thought and culture" (26). He reminds us that "African history has always been a story of movement and cross-cultural interactions" that did not begin with the colonial encounters (27). Additionally, Mbembe's theory is helpful reminder that notions of "traditional" Africans practicing pure "culture" are misguided. Indeed, Adeshina Afolayan sums up Mbembe's assertion by pointing out that "the nativist construction of identities on the distinction between the autochthonous 'Africans' and the 'non-Africans,' by virtue of the real history of Africa, is inherently false" (397). Mbembe's Afropolitanism, thus, requires scholars to reckon critically with the truth of Africa's history as a site of sustained movement and intercultural dialogue, leading to ever-developing senses of "culture" and "tradition." With this theory, Mbembe calls attention to the need to centralize Africa in contemporary considerations of globalization.

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considered global migrants, only 35% of them left the Global South for the North and only approximately "38 per cent of migration was South-South" (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development 11). Achille Mbembe's notion of Afropolitanism allows us to observe and conceptualize these "South-South" or intracontinental migrants as well in negotiating the position of borders in contemporary contexts.

Mbembe's reminder about Africa's position in what he calls the "worlds-in-movement phenomenon" (28) is an epistemological intervention into teleological understandings of world history. He declares that "it is not simply that a part of African history lies somewhere else, outside of Africa. It is also that a history of the rest of the world, of which we are inevitably the actors and guardians, is present on the continent" (28). What is at stake, in Mbembe's estimation is not racial or identity politics, but rather our shared conceptual understanding of the history of the world. Given this historical reality, Afropolitanism becomes a modality of sensibility to the other. Announces Mbembe,

> [a]wareness of the interweaving of the here and there, the presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa, the relativization of primary roots and memberships and the way of embracing, with full knowledge of the facts, strangeness, foreignness and remoteness, the ability to recognise one's face in that of a foreigner and make the most of the traces of remoteness in closeness, to domesticate the unfamiliar, to work with what seem to be opposites – it is this cultural, historical and aesthetic sensitivity that underlies the term 'Afropolitanism' (28).

Mbembe builds upon Glissant's rhizomatic mode of being and affixes it to African contexts. Place matters in Mbembe's Afropolitanism; the question has shifted from one about roots to one that requires consideration of influence, circulation, and mobilities. There is, undeniably, a distinction between Afropolitanism and the "global citizenship" of cosmopolitanism. Afropolitanism is both "an aesthetic and a particular poetic of the world" and

> also a political and cultural stance in relation to the nation, to race and to the issue of difference in general. In so far as African states are pure (and, what is more, recent) inventions, there is, strictly speaking, nothing in their essence that can force us to worship them - which does not mean that we are indifferent to their fate (28-29).

Whereas cosmopolitanism seems to hold the nation as a basic unit of organization, Mbembe offers Afropolitanism as a cultural and artistic orientation *despite* the nation, given its artificiality in African history.

There are noticeable differences between Selasi's and Mbembe's concepts of Afropolitanism. The figure portrayed in "Bye-Bye Babar" is more individualistic, while Mbembe's Afropolitan is aware of belonging to a political, historical, and sociocultural collective lineage. Whereas Selasi's Afropolitanism centers on a collective performance of belonging outside the continent, Mbembe's version is intracontinental and relational, drawing attention to world history and long traditions of trade, movement, and exchange. Selasi's Afropolitans are externally-mobile Africans who brandish their belonging to the continent while physically outside it. Mbembe's concept provides a continental correlate. In the ensuing academic debate and ongoing scholarship about Afropolitanism, Selasi's piece has been the subject of heated critique in a manner that overshadows Mbembe's offering.[29] Scholars of African art and cultures continue to investigate how the theory can

[29] The most notable of Selasi's critics is Binyavanga Wainaina, who delivered a plenary lecture at the African Studies Association UK's 2012 conference entitled, "I am a Pan-Africanist, not an Afropolitan." In popular media and international African cultural blogs, S. Okwunodu Ogbechie ("'Afropolitanism': Africa Without Africans"), Stephanie Bosch Santana ("Exorcising Afropolitanism: Binyavanga Wainaina explains why 'I am a Pan-Africanist, not an Afropolitan' at ASAUK 2012), Emma Dabiri ("Why I'm Not an Afropolitan), and Rachel Strohm ("The Hipster Africa Experience Does Not Represent Anything Particularly Progressive") have offered their own critiques. These and other critiques of Selasi's piece take umbrage with her focus on the elite Africans who have, due to education and class, access to the glamorous settings the piece celebrates. Scholars and cultural commentators have united to condemn "Bye-Bye Babar" for its focus on consumerism and its supposed insistence that the upper-class globetrotters represent some kind of African ideal to which the rest of the continent's populations should aspire. Selasi herself redoubled her insistence on her concept of Afropolitanism in a 2013 piece for the *Guardian* about her upbringing and her approach to writing her debut novel, *Ghana Must Go* ("Taiye Selasi on Discovering Her Pride in Her African Roots"). Scholars of contemporary African literature continue to debate about the utility of Selasi's Afropolitanism. Meanwhile, an intellectual and cultural counter movement has emerged, largely on the Internet, to claim and assert Afropolitanism, as Selasi envisioned it, as a contemporary state of Africanness. These movements are closely tied to the many websites that sell "African-inspired" clothing and art and offer reviews of popular novelists and musicians.

be regarded as subsidiary to older schools of thought, namely postcolonialism and cosmopolitanism.[30] However, the widespread resonance of the theory and its expansion outside of the academic realm proves that it deserves consideration as a mode of self-representation that has its own purchase and effect.

Critiques of Afropolitanism fall into two categories, the first made up of those who declare it to be simply an unnecessary re-capitulation of Kantian cosmopolitanism and more contemporary iterations of the cosmopolitan ideal. Largely, these interpretations of Afropolitanism regard cosmopolitanism in a manner resonant of Kwame Anthony Appiah's description – as constitutive of two concepts that work together to create the cosmopolitan ethos: an obligation towards other people beyond immediate familial linkages and acceptance of the value of particular human lives (xv). Faced with the reality that "people are different," the cosmopolitan respects others' ways of life and, most importantly, their right to carry on according to that way of life, unperturbed (ibid). Cosmopolitanism puts into relief the absolute necessity for people "to develop habits of coexistence: conversation in its older meaning, or living together, association" (xix). At the level of cultural practice, consistent, engaged conversation appears, in Appiah's estimation, at the core of what we commonly refer to as "culture." He insists that "[c]ultures are made of continuities *and* changes, and the identity of a society can survive through these changes (107, original emphasis). Accordingly, Appiah offers a praise song for the kinds of "contamination" often associated with contemporary

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[30] Jennifer Wawrzinek and J.K.S. Makhohka's 2011 collection, *Negotiating Afropolitanism* (2011), stands out as an early and important investigation into Afropolitanism as a concrete theory. Although the volume does insist on relegating the Afropolitan figure squarely as a subsidiary to ever-expanding postcolonial thought, it does open pathways into future scholarship on the emerging school of thought.

globalization emphasizing his argument that "[w]e do not need, have never needed, settled community, a homogenous system of values, in order to have a home" (113).

Both Mbembe's and Selasi's Afropolitanism intersect perpendicularly to several of Appiah's central claims. Significantly, Mbembe's insistence that cross-cultural interaction as consistent practice on the African continent connects the lacuna between Appiah's insistence on culture as ever-evolving and his opening claims that globalized interactions are new phenomena and therefore require new frameworks (xii). Mbembe's Afropolitanism accounts for how contemporary scholarship continues to misrepresent the truths of African history/-ies. The Afropolitan, though not a necessarily new personage, still requires new frameworks as academic discourse has found itself too wrapped up in nationalist or ethnic categorizations and distinctions. Mbembe agrees with Appiah in recognizing that, realistically, "authentic" cultural practice is a moving target and not simply victim to globalization's cultural homogenization (Appiah 106). In Appiah's observation, at the core of "much of the grumbling about the cultural effects of globalization is an image of how the world used to be – an image that is both unrealistic and unappealing" (111). In response to the wide variety of misleading opinions about global human history in the face of globalization and increased transnational contact and encounters, Appiah urges for a "tenable cosmopolitanism [that] tempers a respect for difference with a respect for actual human beings" (113). True to the Kantian tradition Appiah's cosmopolitanism represents humans' moral obligations towards one another. This responsibility resides on an acknowledgement of other's rights to live according to different, constantly evolving cultural practices, while also respecting and internalizing a sense of shared humanity. The cosmopolitan accepts that we are all human, and therefore

respect every human's right to choose and practice culture in the manner they choose. Mbembe and Selasi deviate from this cosmopolitan ideal in their Afropolitanisms that center Africa as a geographic point of reference and a springboard for re-investigation of notions of "the world," "home," and "culture." These renegotiations emerge from and acknowledge contemporary modes of self-fashioning and performances of belonging alongside discourses of collision and encounter. In their insistence on calling attention to the particular in relation to the global, Mbembe and Selasi, despite their different approaches, both correspond with what Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins recognize as a shift in who is now considered cosmopolitan to begin with. Older definitions regard cosmopolitanism to be "a fundamental devotion to the interests of humanity as a whole [… that] often seemed to claim universality by virtue of its independence, its detachment from the bonds, commitments, and affiliations that constrain ordinary nation-bound lives" (Robbins 1). In the new age of globalization, Robbins and Cheah urge us to consider the consequential impact of nationalities and global dynamics in considerations of cosmopolitanism and "world citizenship."

Selasi's particular pivot from the cosmopolitan tradition turns on this idea of the world citizen. Of her Afropolitan cohort mates, Selasi reminds her readers that "We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world" ("Bye Bye Babar"). Though seeking to escape the "blighted place" (ibid.) from whence they emerge, the mobile Afropolitan retains multivalent membership in various locales. They recognize their inescapable "Africanness" while also expressing differing levels of comfort in Western settings. However, rather than asserting a global citizenship, that is, their cosmopolitanism, a recognizable sense of integration and assimilation into every

sociocultural enclave in the world, the Afropolitan model recognizes the migrant subject as distinctly African. They belong to a place and an idea, not the world as a whole. Regardless, the cosmopolitan "world citizen" is central to Anna-Leena Toivanen's takedown of Afropolitanism as an empty concept. In her postulation, cosmopolitanism is not simply "a literary category or an authorial identity." Instead, she insists, cosmopolitanism is "a thematic that articulates the idea(l) of world citizenship (which obviously entails some form of mobility), critical self-awareness, openness to otherness and, eventually, the limits that such idea(l)s face in globalised postcoloniality" (191). She takes issue with Selasi's piece in particular, lamenting the fact that it "conceives of Afropolitanism as identity discourse" (192-193). She flattens both Selasi's and Mbembe's points by summarily dismissing identity as a valid node of analysis, insisting that "cosmopolitanism is by no means a mere by-product of mobility. Being on the move or living in a 'multicultural' environment is insufficient for the individual to embrace a cosmopolitan vision and ideals. Cosmopolitanism does not simply 'happen'" (195).

It is important to remember that the cosmopolitanism of which so many scholars and cultural critics insist Afropolitanism to be derivative depends on the investment in the idea of productive and functional nations. Partha Chatterjee points to the Kantian origins of contemporary cosmopolitanism and situates roots of the contemporary turn in discourse on cosmopolitanism to three specific global political phenomena in the 1980s: the devolution of postcolonial states into messy, authoritarian, and dysfunctional regimes, the growth of financial markets to an generally unprecedented global scale, and the fall of the Soviet Union and various other socialist regimes. The combination of these three geopolitical developments created what Chatterjee refers to as the "discursive space" for

re-evaluating Kantian cosmopolitanism ("Nationalism, Internationalism, and Cosmopolitanism" 330). These shifts also introduced new power dynamics, some which map directly onto old imperial and colonial relationships. Alongside these global developments came the urgent task, undertaken by scholars inside and outside the African continent to define what exactly "Africa" means. Indeed, Adeshina Afolayan argues that critical scholarship, or "ideology" in his terminology, "must be matched by a clear-headed understanding of the place of Africa within a global matrix of development (399). Afropolitanism, it appears, resists the impulse to "simply push aside the historical legacy of popular nationalism and the international struggle to fight against the division of the world between oppressor and oppressed nations (Chatterjee 331-32) enfolded within certain strains of cosmopolitan thought.[31] The political subjectivities of the subject in question encircle the distinctions between cosmopolitanism and Afropolitanism. The latter is, broadly, a corrective gesture that resists Eurocentric structures of world political histories. The theory forces consideration of global material discrepancies that are activated in discourse and scholarship about the "world-in-motion." Mbembe's configuration urges consideration of both the outwardly mobile African migrants and those within the continent who "have almost absolute immobility in a contemporary global world that works very hard to keep Africans in their place on the African continent" (Dabiri "Pitfalls" 206). Western ideals that consider Africa only in the context

[31] Consider, for example, Benedict Anderson's assertion that the notion and vocabulary of "politics" developed alongside the fomentation of nationalism and globalized political spheres (119-120). This would mean that, for the continental African context in which Selasi and Mbembe root themselves, cosmopolitanism accompanies world hierarchies. The evolution of the physical world as a concept that replaced the ideological cosmos then cemented power dynamics that dictate access to cosmopolitanism and "global citizenship." Citizens of the global south are precluded from cosmopolitanism without an asterisk.

of exploitation and neglect valorize the glossy Afropolitan who contributes to the commodification and consumption about which the second group of Afropolitanism's critics are wary.

Chielozona Eze reminds us of the defining elements of Achille Mbembe's Afropolitanism when he declares that it "suggests a reading of the African postcolonial identity as necessarily transcultural, transnational, indeed, cosmopolitan" (11). Eze generously reads Mbembe's and Selasi's pieces to draw the contours of what he calls "the Afropolitan model." In his understanding of the genealogical relationship between cosmopolitanism and Afropolitanism, it is important to remember that "[t]he African is contaminated in the sense that she is not culturally or biologically pure. And this is good. The African is a mutt" (9). Eze goes on to insist that "to acknowledge [the African's] muttness is to concede to the presence of the other in her life and to be ready to enter into an I-Thou relationship with this other, to make way for dialogue" (ibid). Occupying the discursive space between a Glissantian and an Mbembean approach, Eze casts postcolonial Africans as constitutive of various, sometimes contradictory elements that combine to condition them for transnational and transcultural engagement. As complex figures who are themselves already the products of long histories of cultural and political contact, contemporary Africans emerge as exemplars of adaptive multicultural subjectivity resulting from their historical experiences of cross-cultural encounters and subjugation. Afropolitanism, then, becomes a means for attempting to grapple the particularities of contemporary Africanness. However, Eze asks the question at the heart of critical dispute about Afropolitanism: "Why can an African not just be a cosmopolitan?" (10). The answer Eze offers himself rests on his understanding of the

histories of cultures in Africa. As African people's "realities are already intermixed with the realities of even their erstwhile oppressors," these "mutts" gesture towards the impossibility of so-called cultural purity (ibid). Eze's intervention thus widens the scope of Afropolitanism, allowing for nuance in our observation of transnational experiences of intracontinental migrants as well as those who do not share the class privilege of the figures most commonly associated with the movement.

Whereas Eze offers an Afropolitanism that "promises some moral re-examination of the world" (14), and in which "the colonized is no longer at the periphery" and no longer "understood exclusively as a victim" (15), Amatoritsero Ede regards the Afropolitan as a mode of performed cultural expression. Afropolitanism "began first as an intense artistic self-perception or self-identity." It then morphed into "a highly stylized cultural production and marketing strategy, and more recently [has become] an infectious cultural phenomenon to be theorized" (33). Significantly, Ede recognizes assertions of Afropolitanism as measures through which migrant or migrant-adjacent creatives attempt to distinguish themselves from earlier and parallel African diasporas:

> The Afropolitan feels a sense of belonging to the metropolitan society only in being seen, in an artistic sense, as 'cultured' and as an ideal citizen. This is why it is mostly cultural-brokers – writers, visual artists, musicians, dancers, and so on, one might say *cultured people* who occupy a venerated social stage because of their *valued* and acquired symbolic capital, – who identify as Afropolitan. Opposed to them are members of larger black migrant populations and diasporas, who feel alienated and lack agency within metropolitan political and social establishments from the USA to the EU or South Africa (which one might consider to be strategically part of the *West* by dint of its long occidental geo-political history and current Westernized socio-economic infrastructure (34).

To Ede, the Afropolitan collective is made up of individuals engaged in a "recuperative project of socio-political and economic agency" (ibid). Accordingly, Afropolitans use

cultural and creative expression to distinguish themselves from the "African writers" of old. In so doing, Ede claims, they shirk the political and economic obligations to the continent. They gain agency precisely by freeing themselves from the restrictive yoke of sole association with the continent.[32] At the same time, while they attempt to distance themselves from impoverished populations, Afropolitans position themselves as spokespeople for the "New Africa," renovating Western impressions of the Dark Continent. Consider, for example, the recent hyper visibility of African entertainers and athletes in Western popular culture, documented and amplified through various forms of media proliferated across the Internet. Alongside these figures, recent years have featured the vast popularity of African musicians, particularly the contingent of musicians producing Afrobeats, a contemporary mélange of African and diasporic sounds, styles, and conventions. Lastly, the wide proliferation across streaming sites of films and television series set in various African locales is also endemic of the Afropolitan problem Ede describes. The consequent "result is a cultural negation of the black group agency that Afropolitanism could have inspired on the political level" (39). In their very assertion of cultural and political agency, that is, by disassociating themselves from other non-elite African and Black diasporic subjects and insisting on a form of capitalistic radical individualism, Afropolitans become the embodiment of wasted political potential. In the

[32] This move by contemporary writers to distance themselves from previous generations of African writers has been the source of noticeably charged polemic in the Francophone literary world. The division rests on the question of responsibility towards Africa. The contingent of authors who seek to define themselves primarily as French or "Afropean" do so with the expressed intent of freeing themselves from a perceived duty to "elevate" the continent or to offer political critique. These authors bemoan the expectation of social or political commentary that accompanies association with Africa. By divorcing themselves from the continent, they believe to be also relinquishing this responsibility, freeing themselves to create art for art's sake. This "alienation and strong rejection of roots" (Ede "How Afropolitanism Unworlds the African World 118) allows declared Afropean writers to "dissociate themselves from the notion of engaged writing" (Cazenave and Célérier 183) and marks a generational border in content and intent.

end, Afropolitanism contributes to a sanitized, ahistorical, irresponsible view of Africa's position within the histories of globalizing or globalized transnational encounters. One should not, according to Ede, assert ones Africanness simply in the spirit of cleansing the continent of its less dazzling attributes.

Ede's critical position opens up insight into the centrality of the Western metropole in contemporary configurations of African subjects. In literature specifically, the self-designated Afropolitan author holds as intended audience cultural communities based in the major cities of the world, who are willing to participate in the shared process of ignoring or diminishing the parts of belonging to Africa that are not glamorous. What Ede overlooks is that Afropolitan ideology depends on the very same negative stereotypes it aims to circumvent. Indeed, in their pursuit to escape the negative imagery popularly associated with the African continent, the roving Afropolitan actually internalizes these connotations and declares herself intent on changing how Africans are regarded in the West. Recall, for example, the sordid dictator game that Mengestu's characters have designed in *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears (222).* The game depends on a shared internalization of the widespread psychological and cultural dynamics of postcolonial African political regimes – the very same "hard to bear" aspects of "Africanness" that Ede believes Afropolitans are attempting to obscure. In its radical insistence on contemporary African sophistication, Afropolitanism both builds upon and distances itself from the concepts of Africa as underdeveloped dystopia from which one must escape. However conspicuous Afropolitan subjects may appear in the Western metropole, they are far less comfortable in their continental places of origin where they are restricted by what they perceive to be the limited resources available to them. Ede's

analysis lends itself as a bridge between the first collective of resistance to Afropolitanism, based in Kantian philosophy, those who object to the political implications of the new ideological and aesthetic movement.

The second critique generally levelled at Afropolitanism – and focused most significantly on Selasi's articulation – decries the easy elitism and commodification of "African" cultures embedded within the declared Afropolitan aesthetic. This focus on aesthetics and consumability obscures the political potential and devolves into mimicry of the Western metropolitan cultures, thus continuing to value the West as desirable (Dabiri, "Pitfalls" 208). The tragedy resides in this lost potential, as Emma Dabiri remarks that,

> the furore generated around Afropolitanism demonstrates how emotive and necessary discourse around black identities continues to be. The reality is that many of Africa's children – dispersed throughout the world by the twin agents of history and economics – continue to grapple with the negotiation of our identities and the search for home ("Pitfalls" 209).

Regardless, Afropolitanism distracts and detracts energy from the potentially helpful work analyzing nuance in various Black identities. Instead, it "has become the marker of crude cultural commodification – a phenomenon increasingly 'product-driven,' design focused and 'potentially funded by the West'" (Santana "Exorcizing Afropolitanism").[33] Critics insist that the problem is not that there exists an Afropolitan aesthetic, instead taking issue with what they perceive to be an attempt to "begin with style, and then infuse it with substantive political consciousness" (ibid). Often, detractors in this camp point to

[33] This piece, published on the Africa in Words website, is the first on Stephanie Bosch Santana's many interrogations into the concept. It is notable for it being the only piece that captures the essence and direct words from the late Binyavanga Wainaina's "I am a Pan-Africanist, not an Afropolitan," an address at the African Studies Association UK's 2012 conference.

the recent global popularity of African-styled consumer items and the proliferation of kente cloth in popular culture to indicate the harmful reverberations of Afropolitanism shallowness.[34] The issue is not *what* Afropolitanism purports to express, but rather how it does so and lends itself to vapid circulation as cultural expression rather than political sensibility.

Selasi herself has taken some opportunities to respond to the critiques of her piece, which, she revealed was written with the intent of reckoning with a "very particular pain" of estrangement ("From That Stranded Place" 158). She refers to herself and other young immigrants or children of immigrants as "de-territorialized brown people" who share an experience of all-encompassing unbelonging. Rather than allowing others to continue to declare what they were not, Selasi wrote her piece "to give us an identity" (160). Additionally, although Toivanen is particularly dismissive of the identity politics sown into Selasi's ideology, it remains significant to acknowledge the manners in which Western-focused approaches to cultural genealogy impact the "de-territorialized brown people" about whom Selasi writes ("From That Stranded Place" 158). Much of the critical engagement with Afropolitanism and the texts commonly referred to as "Afropolitan novels" tends to disregard what seems to be a crucial central component of Afropolitan aesthetic or cultural sensibilities. Afropolitanism is an orientation of *necessity* that, while retaining some of the utopianism of cosmopolitan thinking, also

[34] The 2020 stunt performed by members of U.S. Congress who knelt and recited the names of Black Americans murdered by police officers seems to lend credence to this critique. The congressmen and women, led by Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House of Representatives, donned kente cloth stoles around their necks and knelt for eight minutes and forty-six seconds, mirroring the maneuver Derrick Chauvin employed to murder George Floyd earlier that year. After their demonstration, the legislators announced their proposal for new law regulating police practice.

infuses elements that result from active and consistent lived encounters at the border of multiple lived cultural realities. Indeed, "'Afropolitanism' as a concept acknowledges not only a certain position *in* the world, but expresses a certain position *towards* the world" (Pahl 74). Although Selasi's Afropolitanism appears to be more performative, the population to which she gestures is decidedly not. Despite failing to draw a clear distinction between Afropolitan writers and authors in the so-called "third generation" of African writers, Amatoritsero Ede does offer some historical and genealogical context about the conditions of possibility that converged and led to contemporary Afropolitanism. Specifically, a wide-ranging economic downturn affecting many of the countries in Africa pushed writers to the West in what has been widely called a "brain drain" (Ede "How Afropolitanism Unworlds the African World" 120).[35] While it seems more accurate to point to the Afropolitan writers as the children of those African professionals who relocated to Western metropoles in the 1980s and 1990s, Ede does state, helpfully, that "the social condition of their presence in the metropolis as economic and literary exiles, not as slaves or the colonized, meant that they would naturally have a different relationship to roots compared to a romantic Black Atlantic" (ibid). Having found themselves in the West "in a relatively humane condition and radically different socio-political dispensation" than those enslaved and taken forcibly from the continent, members of the new African diaspora internalize "an existential and historical disconnection which led to the new Afropolitans and Afropeans emphasising routes and discountenancing roots" in their works of literary expression (ibid). The largely economic

[35] See also the references to Debjani Ganguly and the beginning of the contemporary in the introduction of this dissertation.

impetus for their families' migration results in an understandable impulse to consider the African point of origin one from which one must disassociate. At the same time, Afropolitans, whether migrants themselves or the offspring of the displaced, are products of several interacting experiences, simultaneously aware of their alterity from the supposedly "pure," anchored cultural expression in both their countries of actual or familial origin and their host countries or Western places of birth. Thus, Afropolitanism is not, "cosmopolitanism in new clothes" (Toivanen) but instead a theory that emerges from the social, political, and economic specificities of postcolonial Africa in relation to cultural and capitalist globalization.

The central polemic in the debate rests on a question of filiation versus affiliation (Said *The Text, the World, the Critic*). Afropolitanism in both Mbembe's and Selasi's constructs calls attention to the uncomfortable question of ethnicity that undermines Africa's general circulation as an empty signifier. For Selasi's Afropolitans, the attachment to the idea of being "African" activates when travelers or their children find themselves at a physical remove from their countries of ethnic origin on the continent. That is, "Africanness" is a performance of bifurcated affiliation, through which one becomes legible both as insider and outsider. Additionally, Mbembe, in highlighting the various forms of ethnic and cultural interaction that have taken place within the continent for centuries and that will continue within the globalized world order, complicates the racial and cultural implications of the idea of "Africa"[36] while also displacing the Western metropoles as the sole locations of cosmopolitan cultural interaction. Rather than

[36] Dabiri claims that Mbembe's Afropolitanism "is a way of being African that is 'open to difference' and transcending race" ("Pitfalls" 208). She reads Mbembe's insistence on Africa's centrality in world history as a move to sidestep the complications and pathologies that accompany existing racial categorizations.

raising a hand and saying, "we, too, can be cosmopolitan," Mbembe casts intercultural exchange as *inherent* to lived experience on the African continent. We must also remember that he opens his piece by talking about the rigidity of previous academic discourse about African philosophical, literary, and artistic creation. Together, Selasi and Mbembe theorize against the easy universalism embedded within continued ideas of cosmopolitanism. What is more, individuals appear to develop Afropolitan sensibilities when their particular affiliations with African locales persist as factors intractable in their efforts to assimilate into or practice cosmopolitanism. In the face of metropolitan cross-cultural or multicultural encounters, Afropolitans reject assimilationist compulsions to disappear into Western cultural expression. Instead, they insist on their multiplicity, forcing those they encounter to reckon with their sometimes-fractured, but undeniable association with Africa.[37] In so doing, they operationalize "Africa" as both a marker of physical origin and as an ideological container or cultural referent and occupy a fruitful ideological space from which we can consider new diaspora fictions of migration and return.

[37] Toivanen repeatedly takes issue with Afropolitanism's "promoting territorialised and racialised biases of which the concept of cosmopolitanism should be free" (201). This observation seems to highlight the vast discrepancy between the cosmopolitan ideal and lived realities, in which African immigrants and their children continuously face reminders of their unbelonging in Western metropoles. Toivanen astutely observes that "the Mbembean formulation of Afropolitanism seems to highlight the interconnectedness Africa's connection the rest of the world" but that she fails to see the difference between Afropolitanism and "such concepts as hybridity or transculturation" (201-202). Of course, the major intervention that Mbembe and Selasi offer is in their move to centralize Africa in their concepts of how migrant subjects see and experience the world. Mbembe's particular call to re-infuse mobility within the continent into wider understandings of Africa's rightful position in world history directly subverts lingering Western-centric ideas, including world-systems theory and works such as Pascale Casanova's *World Republic of Letters*.

Diasporic Dissonance & Afropolitan Alienation

Four texts have been repeatedly invoked in much of the scholarship about the "Afropolitan novel": Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011), NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), and Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* (2013).[38] Afropolitan novels largely privilege the Western metropole as they illustrate the experiences of African migrants navigating their contemporary Africanness. Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* allows us to make use of Afropolitanism as an effective critical framework for analyzing new diaspora narratives and adding nuance in our investigation into the manners by which migrant African subjects navigate the many borders they must traverse.[39] The novel depicts the Cameroonian Jende family as they migrate and attempt to adjust to New York City in the midst of the 2008 global financial crisis. Throughout the novel, Mbue's narrative offers early indications of the challenges that undergird Afropolitan aspirations, when the patriarch of the family, Jende Jonga, learns that his asylum application has been denied and that he is facing deportation from the United States. This revelation, early in the narrative, foregrounds the family's precarity, as they spend the duration of the novel navigating multiple obstacles, both interpersonal and administrative. Jende has difficulty relaying this precarity to his employer Clark Edwards, a well-to-do executive at Lehman Brothers. During his interview, Jende frets

[38] For her part, Adichie has declared her exasperation with the term, insisting that she is African and weakening her association to the other authors in this collective (Santana 59).
[39] Dustin Crowley reminds us that, rather than occupying what Sylvester Ogbechie calls a "transnational space," migrant Africans must contend with the 'borders [that] are thoroughly regulated, especially in the West" (132). In a sense, Afropolitans often associate themselves with the entire continent of Africa, eliding the borders that distinguish each nation from the next. However, upon their migration to the West, they come into contact with the administrative realities of nations and the bureaucracies that accompany the borders.

over how to adequately represent his immigration status to Clark in such a manner so as not to jeopardize his chances at employment as chauffeur. Jende is unaccustomed to having to vie for work in this way, “he’d never had to worry about whether his experience would be appropriate, whether his English would be perfect, whether he could succeed in coming across as intelligent enough” (Mbue 3). Jende’s contingent immigration status causes him to bend the truth, omit important details, and, in some cases, tell outright lies. From the start of the novel, the American immigration process appears as a corrupting force, rendering earnest, hard-working and well-meaning men like Jende unrecognizable to themselves. Regarding his interview with Clark, Jende asks himself,

> [h]ow would he have explained that his work permit and driver’s license were valid *only* for as long as his asylum application was pending or approved, and that if his application were to be denied, all his documents would become invalid and there would be no green card? How could he have possibly explained his asylum application? Would there be a way to convince Mr. Edwards that he was an honest man, a very honest man, actually, but one who was now telling a thousand tales to Immigration just so he could one day become an American citizen and live in this great nation forever? (8)

Even in pursuit of a respectable job, for which he must wear a suit for the first time in his life, Jende is obliged to take creative license with the facts of his situation. By the time he eventually becomes Clark Edwards’s driver, Jende has been “fighting for papers” by manipulating the truth for over three years, starting before he even left his native Cameroon (18). In fact, he comes to understand that dishonesty is an inescapable necessity on the path to success in the United States. After having been offered the job as chauffeur, Jende learns that his cousin Winston embellished aspects of his story in recommending him for the position. Winston presents his creative license in racial terms,

asking Jende, "you think a black man gets a good job in this country by sitting in front of white people and telling the truth?" (17).[40] Jende's omissions and the requisite ways he must diminish himself to maintain his job and stay in the United States confuse his masculinist perspectives of his role in his family. Far from Taiye Selasi's self-assured Afropolitan, Jende demonstrates his obsequiousness to Clark Edwards from the novel's opening interview scene, immediately invoking the tropes of colonial power dynamics between the subservient, infantilized African man and his white Western employer. The scene is familiar, reminiscent of interactions found in the works of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Ferdinand Oyono. The introductory sentences of the novel reveal the overwhelming novelties of the job interview, from Jende's point of view. Having never had to don a suit for an interview, compose a resume, or demonstrate proficiency in English or general intelligence for a potential employer, Jende is quite evidently out of his element. He reminds the reader of early exaggerated stereotypes of loyal manservants, particularly when Clark Edwards remarks on his clip-on tie and the outmoded style and

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[40] Shailja Patel's "The Making (Migrant Song)" underscores the rhetoric maneuvers migrant workers employ to minimize themselves:

> We absorb information without asking questions.
> Questions cost us jobs, visas, lives. We watch and copy.
> We try to please.
> We hold back in conversations. We don't try to contradict so
> we don't show you up. You mistake this for a lack of
> intellectual confidence (33-34).

Later in the poem, the narrator declares, "It's our job to protect you from the discomfort of seeing/inequality" (34). Dishonesty by omission, dismissal, and diminishment are, according to Patel, a central characteristic of migritude. Where Patel's perspective differs from Jende's is her casting the migrant narrative as productive due to the rage these maneuvers inspire. She offers her poetry to "every smug idiotic face I've ever wanted to smash into the carnage of war/ every encounter that's left my throat choked/ with what I dared not say" (35). The words she pours into her poetry are "words I swallowed down until over the border/ they are still there/ they knew I would come back for them" (ibid). Minimizing herself for American consumption, an infuriating experience for Patel's narrator, eventually fuels her creativity, leading her to compose a series of pointed, biting poems about her experiences as a perpetual migrant.

peculiar color of his dress (9). At the end of the interview, Jende continue to perform the overeager loyal manservant, grasping Clark's outstretched hand with both of his, bowing his head while shaking the banker's hand "with great care" (ibid). This opening interaction is an early indication of the nature of the Jonga family's experience in New York City. They continue to face a series of similarly uneven interactions throughout the novel and constantly confront their own ignorance about the codes and conventions that regulate the spaces they enter in the American metropole. Mbue's novel lends some practical purchase to Afropolitanism, dispelling the notion that material wealth or privilege suffices in successful internalization of the Afropolitan orientation. The Jongas' experiences unfold unevenly throughout the novel. They constantly confront their ignorance about the codes and conventions that regulate the spaces they enter in New York. Much of the narrative relies on the reader's horror at the manners in which power differentials enfolded into various scenes −Jende bowing to Clark Edwards, his wife Neni considering asking one of her community college professors to adopt her son in order to prevent him from having to move back to Cameroon (326-331), or the various instances in which the Clark family demonstrates their disdain for the blighted Global South. These moments allow us to see the ideological and material calculations that members of the new diaspora must make to embody full Afropolitan sensibilities in the United States and, eventually, upon their return to contemporary African cities. The novel also unravels easy associations between the American Dream referenced in the book's title and Afropolitanism as it demonstrates the ways success in the United States remains a foreclosed aspiration for man (Boelhower 11). Furthermore, the novel induces frank

negotiation of the many factors that render immigrant experiences uncomfortable as the illusions about their new homes turn sour.

Behold the Dreamers addresses a problematic gap in existing considerations of Afropolitanism – that of cultural alienation in the Hegelian sense invoked by Abiola Irele in “In Praise of Alienation.” Rather than the simple declaration of alterity or remarkability with which critics take issue, Neni and Jende Jonga demonstrate how the Afropolitan carries the potential for productive alienation. Instead of insisting on an Afropean dissociation from the continent, a feat which appears quite functionally impossible anyway, Afropolitans can embrace a hybrid modernity that, when returned to the continent in the manner the Jongas plan, carries implications for cultural expression “at home.” However, as the novel illustrates, the globalized circulation of media – the ideoscapes of the West and internal portrayals of the continent – complicate the productivity of global alienation. *Behold the Dreamers* shows us that as the United States can and often does foreclose “success” for all but a small minority, of which Jende’s cousin Winston is part, active, full alienation can usher individual success. The question remains how operationalizing global alienation can be figured to craft radical transformation at a larger scale. Furthermore, the problematic postcolonial necessity of engagement and interaction with Western modernities renders this question all the more fraught.[41] Regardless, the Jende family undergoes constant recalibration as they negotiate

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[41] Richard Bjornson raises a similar question in his review of the printed edition of Irele’s inaugural lecture. He asks, “exactly how does Irele propose to introduce the ‘conscientization’ and ‘responsibilization’ implied in his position?” (Bjornson 145) This question is important because in the Hegelian formulation, alienation is the “distancing the self from itself” in a manner that “*enables human beings to attain wisdom*” (Bjornson 143, emphasis added). The move from individual wisdom to innovatively reformulating cultures requires a type of collective organization that remains, unfortunately, beyond the scope of possibility as postcolonial states continue to contend with their overdependence and mimicry of Western institutions.

the dissonance between their expectations, their realities, and the meaning they make of the differences. Thus, the experience of a cultural alienation, "a willed movement out of the self and a purposive quest for new horizons of life, thought and of experience," (A. Irele "Alienation" 31) exposes how the multitudinous ways New York City surprises, frustrates, bewilders, and empowers the novel's heroes infuses their Afropolitanism with substance and opens up the possibilities for Afropolitan lives back in Cameroon.

The 2008 collapse of Lehman Brothers[42] contributes largely to the dissonance between Jende's expectations of his life in New York and the actualities he witnesses or endures. Jende considers the United States' economic state in 2007 and 2008 with disbelief. He considers it "strange and sad and scary" that such terminology as "economic crisis" could be employed to describe the United States as this term was one "Cameroonians heard on the radio and TV virtually every day in the late eighties" (Mbue 183-184). Jende moves to the United States motivated largely by his subscription to a widely-held confidence in the country's infallibility. That Cameroon was a land of financial insecurity and economic instability is already understood due to the country's political and economic troubles in the 1980s. Cameroon's continuously tenuous economic sector makes Jende's achieving the level of financial comfort requisite for him to adequately support his family all but impossible. He relocates to the United States and sends for his family precisely because of the wide range of economic opportunities he believes to be available to him. Thus, he is completely destabilized by the whispers and

[42] Henrik Dosdall and Byron Z. Rom-Jensen describe the Lehman Brothers' bankruptcy as "the largest [failure] in U.S. corporate history." The bank's fall "led to the lay-off of 26,000 employees, triggered 80 insolvency proceedings of its subsidiaries in eighteen countries, and resulted in more than 66,000 claims on its insolvency estate." Lehman Brothers' demise proved to be widely consequential, sparking a global financial crisis and economic recession (196).

eventual shouts of economic downturn in the United States. The chatter befuddles him; he compares the economic collapse to "an unprecedented plague, a calamity like the one that had befallen the Egyptians in the Old Testament" (184). The United States' enduring the types of catastrophes he is accustomed to witnessing in Cameroon is so unbelievable that Jende elevates the recession to the level of myth, an abstraction that affects other people ideologically, historically, and physically far removed from his reality. Regardless, the recession carries material consequences for the Jongas when Jende finds himself suddenly unemployed after having been complicit in Clark Edwards's romantic and, by extension, financial missteps. When a sex worker writes an exposé in a tabloid naming Clark as one of many clients who used government bailout money to pay for sexual favors, Jende becomes collateral damage in the ensuing fallout (212-214, 248-253). Though Jende finds himself in proximity to wealth in his role as a chauffeur, he also received a harsh reminder of his relative insignificance and dependence on beneficial acts from powerful characters like his employers, the Edwards family. In this novel, the Western metropolis complicates Afropolitanism and portrays migrant characters who find both belonging and alterity as they navigate the urban landscape's vicissitudes. Neither the Afropolitan's global belonging nor centrality to Western history are apparent in the ways that Mbue's African characters maneuver their new post-recession realities. Their progression is uneven, and eventually requires a return to a point of origin for the fullness of their Afropolitan transformations to manifest.

Urban spaces undermine and displace collective affinities, a phenomenon exemplified by the history of intracontinental migration and mobility within Africa to which Mbembe draws attention. Metropoles offer Afropolitans opportunities to alternate

between performances of belonging and unbelonging as they choose which markers of Africanness to emphasize or obscure in their social interactions. The balance between inclusion and alterity and the accompanying active alienation from Self rely on a new host setting to act as a sieve ("exutoire" in Ngintedem & Sopgui 35) the migrants use to filter and reformulate themselves. Migration holds as "ressort du voyage […] le désir de se 'refaire,' de produire quelque chose d'autre que soi où l'on puisse se reconnaître, se méconnaître, à travers quoi on puisse fuir l'horreur de soi"[43] and become decisively Other to one's previous Self (Daniel Sibony qtd in Ngnintedem and Sopgui 35). Significant in this process of undoing and reformulating the self is interaction with stereotypes and ideas of the collectives into which the migrant subject is interpellated. Indeed, following Alioune Sow and Catherine Mazauric, migration may very well be a particularly collectivizing experience (14), a phenomenon that is captured in narratives of displacement whether trans-African (a concept they derive from Appadurai) or extracontinental. Mbue's novel contributes to this discourse in portraying the Jonga family's experience in New York as relying on multiple layers of chosen performed affinities. On the one hand, their survival in New York City depends on their ability to render themselves widely legible through the lens of various stereotypes about Africa and Africans in the West. On the other hand, these stereotypes and perceptions inhibit their abilities to advance and take full advantage of the opportunities they migrated to pursue. Furthermore, the tense interplay between the stereotypes and migrant perspectives of themselves accompanies the undeniable transformation that occurs when these very same

[43] "motive of the journey […] the desire to "remake" oneself, to produce something other than oneself in which one can recognize oneself, misunderstand oneself, be ignorant of oneself, across which one can flee the horror of self" (my translation)

migrants interact with other people crafting their own versions of metropolitan lives. While this tension appears to contribute to Jende's ultimate disillusion with the United States and his decision not to contest his deportation, the same is not true for his wife Neni, who, despite facing her own moments of discomfort in the United States, remains convinced of its unique position as a setting for incomparable opportunities and marked transformation. Neni's attitude towards the United States is driven primarily by opportunity; she maintains a clear-eyed perspective on the ways her professional aspirations were impractical in Limbe and pursues them doggedly in New York. However, Neni also exposes the limits of the externally-mobile Afropolitan ideal in a manner that demonstrates how certain migrants adopt a playful stance towards the stereotypes that diasporic Afropolitans work assiduously to refute.

Previously outcast in her hometown after having had a child out of wedlock, Neni's affiliations are persistently tenuous. While her dream of becoming a pharmacist is all but impossible in Limbe, in New York, she finds herself comparing American social norms to Cameroonian ones. Although she marvels at the opportunities now accessible to her in the United States, Neni constructs a narrow social world for herself, noticing that she does not "have a single non-African friend and hadn't even come close to being friends with a white person" (Mbue 90). She is perplexed by the American habit of socializing in loud, crowded bars instead of in the comfort of one's own home. She insists that "people act as if things in America have to be better than things everywhere else. America doesn't have the best of everything," when teased by Winston about her reluctance to attend his birthday party (89). The longer her sojourn in New York City, the less the likelihood of her becoming truly "of the world," and, in this case, "of New

York." Neni, too, becomes an Edwards family employee when she works for the well-to-do family as summer nanny and housekeeper in their vacation home in the Hamptons. During her stint in this role, Neni constantly compares the things she sees in the family's home to her own values and experiences in Cameroon, making it evident that she considers herself to be very much an outsider from the world of the Edwards's cultural collective. She is struck by the younger son Mighty's "forwardness," which she characterizes as "untypical of children from Limbe" (114). She also contributes spiritedly to his images of "African lions and leopards" and the fauna she "had seen roaming around Limbe." To what would undoubtedly be another Afropolitan's horror, Neni invents "tales about monkeys stealing her lunch when she was a schoolgirl, and a classmate who used to come to school riding on an elephant" (ibid). While she delights in being able to entertain her young charge with the stories of people interacting with animals in the wild locales of the African continent, Neni does so by compounding onto American perceptions of primitive Africans consorting with dangerous wildebeest and carrying out lives that are markedly and entertainingly different from those in the United States. As the interpreter and recounter of these experiences, Neni fully situates herself in a liminal position as interloper into high American society, accentuating the illusion that she is only present in the Edwards family's lives by happenstance. She and her husband adopt a deferential stance when interacting with their employers, a position that both adds to and depends a familiar image of poor servile Africans, grateful for white generosity.

This dynamic appears particularly pronounced in two related moments in which Neni confronts and reckons with Cindy Edwards's social anxieties. Cindy reveals herself to have grown up in poverty, distinct from African destitution because, as she explains to

Neni, "most of you are poor over there," and for that reason the shame of poverty is less acute for Africans (123). Cindy's story ostensibly exemplifies the achievability of the American Dream – she toiled through college and taught herself how to behave like she belonged in well-to-do circles. She comprehends her manicured and luxurious life as the reward for enduring the deprivation of her childhood and she works hard to preserve the aura of glamour and leisure while doting on her children and ensuring that they have everything they would ever want. Neni's position as domestic voyeur allows her a glimpse beneath the shiny patina of the Edwards family's life, and, particularly, into Cindy's insecurities and struggles as newcomer to the upper-class lifestyle. Neni observes how her employer devotes herself to the social scene in the Hamptons and obsesses over her belonging and social status. So, Neni is alarmed and uncomfortable when she unwittingly finds Cindy unconscious in a bedroom with alcohol and drug paraphernalia on the nightstand. Cindy, too, realizes the destructive potential of this encounter and pleads with Neni to keep the scene secret, appealing to her as "a wife, a mother, like me…[who] knows how important it is to protect our families" (124). Ironically, it this very maternal impulse that drives Neni to consider a number of extreme gestures in the interests of retaining whatever tenuous control she can over her and her children's futures after Jende decides they will return to Limbe, including divorcing her husband or giving her son up for adoption to one of her community college professors. Ultimately, in frantic desperation, Neni blackmails Cindy into giving her ten thousand dollars, revealing the damning picture she took of her affluent former employer during her earlier drug and alcohol-induced stupor. Neni manipulates Cindy's horror at the possibility of her secret ruining the life she has constructed so carefully for herself and her children (265-269).

Incidentally, it is this very same fragility that leads the characters to this moment as the Jonga family reels from the consequences of Jende having lost his job over his pivotal role in facilitating Clark Edwards's romantic indiscretions.

Neni demonstrates astute awareness of her position in relation to the various actors and factions in New York City and seizes an opportunity to destabilize the pillars upon which the more powerful Edwards family appears to rest comfortably. Indeed, when defending herself against her husband's indignation at her act of blackmail, Neni exclaims that she targeted Cindy precisely because "she thought she could use us, stupid African people who don't know how to stand up for themselves." She later supplements this assertion by insisting that "people with money, they think their money can do anything in this world" (272). In her view, affluence affords people like the Edwards family a confidence in their superiority which propels them to make unempathetic decisions such as hiring and firing people like the Jongas on a whim. There is, in Neni's actions, an incorporation of a Mbembean Afropolitan awareness "of the interweaving of the here and there" and a recognition of the complex subjectivities that surround her relationship with her employer (28). Neni recognizes how class, race, and place of origin combine to define the lacuna between her and the Edwards family. Already married to a deportee, Neni takes action to ensure her family's short-term survival during their final few weeks in New York. This blackmail enables her to purchase a series of commodities that she can use in Limbe as props in her performance of a prosperous returnee from the United States – a performance the narrator describes as maintaining an "American aura" (348). Though her internalization of and engagement with markers of American culture, Neni activates a keen understanding of how to wield Western culture "as the instrument

for the necessary transformation" of her world and prospects (A. Irele 37). It also further demonstrates the nuanced manner in which gender impacts African migrant approaches to both the American and the Afropolitan dream, as cities like New York present them with obstacles that impede their steady progress towards the success embedded into ideoscapes and mediascapes of the West. Mbue's novel exposes the gendered unevenness enfolded into migrant stories and Afropolitan possibilities while unearthing the ambivalence and uncertainty that qualifies Afropolitan potential in the West.

Paradoxically, Neni's surprising perfidious act is a moment in which she takes advantage of the type of opportunity to launch herself into a prosperity that appears foreclosed through more traditional models. In fact, by the end of the novel, much of Neni's frustration stems from her continuous encounters with large challenges that prevent her from catapulting herself and her children into the prosperity that was impossible in Limbe. One of the more decisive blows to her ambitions in New York comes after she receives notice of her eligibility for an academic honor society. After gaining admission to Phi Theta Kappa, Neni approaches her community college's dean to request nominations for several members-only scholarships. The dean refuses, due to her limited service engagement in the school's community and questions her aspirations to pursue a career in pharmacy, counseling her to consider a more "achievable" career goal instead (297). The dean's brusque observation outlines what he perceives to be the improbabilities of Neni's plans:

> You have two children, your husband doesn't make enough money, and, by all accounts, you're having a hard time making ends meet. Pharmacy school is very expensive, Ms. Jonga, and you're an international student. Unless you change your legal status it's going to be hard for you to get loans to get the degree, if you can find a way to get your associate's from

> BMCC [Borough of Manhattan Community College] in the first place (296).

Although she aspires to life as a pharmacist and the various luxuries that the lifestyle will afford her and her children, the dean's perspective facilitates Neni's eventual resignation to her husband's plan to elect for self-deportation. Neni's story lends some credence to Emma Dabiri's and Grace Musila's critiques of the emptiness of Afropolitan aesthetics. Indeed, the realities faced by a noticeably large portion of the new African diaspora prevent them from accessing the "law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge," donning the "London fashion," comfortably deploying en vogue "New York jargon," or wielding the "academic successes" that Selasi celebrates ("Bye-Bye Babar"). Rather Neni has only partial access to an identitarian fluidity that precludes her from "establish[ing] home and belonging in several places as 'universal' subjects and agents of globalization" (Crowley 134). She considers New York a setting that, though bizarre offers a very unique potential for her to transcend her difficult beginnings and become a new version of herself while retaining fervent affiliation with her Cameroonian origin. This interaction with the community college dean as well as the manner in which Mbue weaves Neni and Jende's stories together exposes the gendered earmarks that we must consider in our observations of Afropolitan experiences and aspirations in the United States.

As turbulent as both of their experiences are, Neni also must navigate cultural expectations of her deference to her husband and adherence to his decisions about their family's life in New York. Neni occupies a particularly vulnerable position as a woman which qualifies her ability to access Afropolitan flexibility, both in Limbe and in New York City. In the middle of the narrative, Jende makes a particularly frustrating decision

that Neni must take a year-long leave of absence from her community college in order to stay home with their newborn daughter. Jende rationalizes that "babies need to start their lives in the hands of their mother," while also condescendingly offering that "I want you to enjoy the baby while you're recovering from the pregnancy" (Mbue 172). Jende's decision both interrupts her academic progress but also threatens her immigration status in the United States, plunging the couple and their two young children into further precarity. Eventually, Neni relents, reminding herself that "[h]e had brought her to America. He paid her tuition. He was her protector and advocate. He made decisions for their family" (ibid). Although she finds herself "in a city full of independent women," (173), Neni resigns herself to her husband's decision. She knows that taking a year-long leave of absence from school would invalidate her student visa, which would, in turn, further complicate her already-precarious situation in New York. However, she also recognizes that migrating to New York does not sufficiently free her from her position of subordination to her husband. The social order she sought to escape functions in New York City as well. Migrating to a major metropole, in the West or the Global South, does not necessarily free any individual Afropolitan subject from the various contingencies that define their aspirations and capabilities. Indeed, "women's lives within cultures are shaped not only by their biology but also by the material and social conditions of their societies, by their individual locations within communities and by the forms of power embedded in particular cultural norms" (Wilson-Tagoe 177). In this case, Neni's vulnerabilites are both social and biological as her husband imposes a sabbatical he attributes to her need to recuperate and form a meaningful attachment to her daughter. Her socioeconomic ascension, then, now depends on her amassing signifiers of prosperity

from the United States to distribute to friends and family when she returns to Cameroon. Though the novel ends with the family leaving the airport in Limbe, the reader also understands that, although her time in New York will propel Neni into a different social class in her home town, the progress is bittersweet as she is still unlikely to achieve her long-held dream of being a pharmacist.

Behold the Dreamers reconstitutes notions of the Western metropole as it relates to cosmo- and Afropolitanism in contemporary contexts. It interacts with New York City's predominance in the global imaginary and the cultural capital that the city wields on a global scale. Indeed, affiliation with New York City in particular determines the limitations on the Jongas' success in the United States and their prescribed allure as returnees in Cameroon. What Neni and Jende understand and exemplify is that Afropolitanism depends not only on the migrant's mobility outside of their hometown, whether within or outside of Africa, but also on how they internalize and manipulate the utility of the affiliations this mobility brings. For their Afropolitanism to be activated in a manner that benefits them, they must continue to make use of their affiliation with New York City, regardless of the overwhelming hardship of their sojourn in the United States. In this way, they meld Selasi's and Mbembe's notions of Afropolitanism into one demonstration of global belonging that integrates simultaneous belonging to the continent and contact with the West. In the novel, New York City is a "traveling city" in two regards (Said 226). In returning to Limbe, the Jongas bring New York with them, relying on the global ideoscapes of the city to elevate their social and economic status. New York is also a "traveling city" in the sense that it requires a certain level of acuity in maneuvering the neighborhoods and roadways. The novel portrays the various manners

in which travelling around the city spurs particular sentiments and positions the Jongas as witness to various ways of being. A significant portion of the social and material capital that the Jongas accumulate in New York City is a result of their multiple mobilities as migrants to and in the West and, eventually, as returnees in their native Cameroon.

Liminal Mobilities

The primary consequentially transformative commodity that affects the Jongas' access to Afropolitanism is the automobile. According to Lindsey B. Green-Simms,

> the car is not simply a convenient metaphor or symptom of atomistic capitalist relations. It is also a social object that engenders ways of being, feeling, and acting in the modern world: it is an object that reflects and refracts various surfaces, from its own body to the road on which it drives, to the social image of its driver (*Postcolonial Automobility: Car Culture in West Africa 22*)

Furthermore, the car allows us to examine modernity not as a teleological phenomenon but rather as a relationship frame through which to examine African subjects' positions in global power dynamics. Moving around New York City, the car puts into relief the various factors that contribute to migrant subjects' ambivalent Afropolitanism. Much of the tension that sits at the heart of debates about Afropolitanism, African cosmopolitanism, and resistance to the predominance of migrant narratives in African literary scenes depends on the question of African citizens' access to the agency that is commonly associated with modern mobility. Mobility is an ideal central to the Afropolitan worldview, a mode of thinking that perpetuates postcolonial efforts to build and assert autonomy. Crucially important to this and Mbue's characters' notions of mobility and autonomy are the vehicles that transport them from their small-town

residences to the airport, and the car that offers the Jonga family their primary source of income. However, the car as a figure in the narrative and the histories implicated in the novel are not neutral carriers. Throughout the novel, automobiles figure as complicated markers of the characters peripheral and precarious belonging in their new circles in New York City. Jende is the character most directly linked to automobiles. His employ first as a taxi driver and, eventually, as the Edwards family's chauffeur implicates him in his affluent employers' sordid social habits. Ultimately, the agency that Jende is purportedly to gain from access to the Edwards family's car, continues to trap him in a state of demoralizing subordination, contributing to the frustration that eventually drives the Jonga family back to Cameroon.

According to Green-Simms, "mobility is often seen as a fundamental aspect, a right even, of modern culture" (*Postcolonial Automobility* 12). As a result of this widely held assumption, "cars in Africa have ambivalent pasts and presents, […] they can be technologies of oppression and alienation as well as sources of agency" (5). The manner in which cars and the infrastructure they demand have made their way through African countries has depended quite significantly on the capital and political interests of those spearheading the development projects. As automobiles spread throughout the continent, their value as tools of mobility and agency has evolved. Green-Simms's concept of automobility "hinges on two mutually dependent ideals: mobility and autonomy" (12). Automobility hinges on the ideals of autonomy and mobility that accompany Western configurations of mobility. The parallel infusion of "car culture" in major metropoles around the world implicated these locales in a type of universally evolutionary global modernity. In Green-Simms's estimation,

> the idea of autonomy enabled people to view themselves as self-determining individuals, free from the oppressive institutions of authority, instead of as helpless individuals at the mercy of others. Automobility as an expression of autonomy works in a similar way. Like the social determined human subject, the automobile and its driver exist within a system of dependent relations. These dependencies include, but are by no means limited to, manufacturers, laborers, laws, police officers, roads, signs, advertisements, geographers, oil companies, gas stations, and gas-station clerks (13).

Access to an automobile inserts postcolonial African drivers into a global ecosystem of capital and mobility. Cars also offer a level of self-determination that was previously unattainable and, in some cases, unimaginable. Alternatively, automobiles can often highlight subjective states of stasis. The fact that cars require particular mechanical and infrastructural functionalities also calls attention to the various ways that "car culture" alone cannot propel individuals into the prosperous lives they expect. Indeed, Moradewun Adejunmobi opines that rather than appearing in postcolonial literature as "merely neutral technologies" cars "are more frequently deployed to represent stasis, stalled development, or conspicuous consumption associated with the kind of wealth derived from a deliberate subverting of social capital" (2). As products that are, for the most part, imported into the continent from elsewhere, automobiles compel African state builders to act reactively. Green-Simms frames automobility in West Africa as a "misplaced idea," a type traveling theory that "emerges from specific developments in one country but when transplanted into a new cultural context, it begins to fissure and expose many of its original inconsistencies and forms of dissonance" (*Postcolonial Automobility* 14). In West African contexts, access to an automobile alone is not the determinant of one's mobility or autonomy. Despite this fact, automobility perseveres "as an ideal and as a modern ethos" (13). When automobility is carried into West African

contexts, it raises the question of how its supposedly accompanying autonomy is undermined by the many infrastructural and sociopolitical instabilities that permeate throughout postcolonial West Africa. Consequently, this line of interrogation calls attention to how the concept of modern automobility arrives to the postcolony as an already flawed and largely unachievable illusion, even in its Western area of origin. Indeed, Jende's experience highlights the ways that automobility already sees its limits in the West. The Afropolitan freedom to fashion oneself how one likes and to demonstrate a keen sensibility of the goings-on around the world travels alongside an understanding that it includes an automobility that individuals can enjoy wherever they find themselves. Afropolitan autonomy should offer equivalent mobility in New York, London, Lagos, and Johannesburg. In the end, though, the path to an automobility that Green-Simms reads as endemic to Western modernity reveals itself to be not as easily attained as the American Dream would make it seem. In Mbue's novel, Jende's attachment to the Edwards family car complicates both his autonomy and his mobility as he attempts to construct a new life for his family in New York City.

After Jende receives his official offer of employment from Clark Edwards, his cousin, Winston, teases him by asking, "so, you, this bush boy from New Town, Limbe, you're going to drive a Wall Street exec, huh? You'll now be driving a shiny Lexus, instead of [a rundown] Hyundai?" (Mbue 16). This playful jibe encapsulates the ways that "while the utilitarian functions" are largely the same, the manners in which vehicles are "integrated into social life often depends on their particular cultural and historical context" (Green-Simms *Postcolonial Automobility* 6-7). Put otherwise, the type of car one attaches oneself to matters and determines how one's image circulates as social

capital. Thus, when Jende graduates from driving a wide array of passengers in his livery cab to serving as a personal chauffeur in a luxury sedan, he is now able to enjoy an elevated sense of prestige despite the fact that his primary function is largely unchanged. In many ways, the job as a chauffeur restricts Jende's physical autonomy as he now becomes beholden to the Edwards family's schedules and finds himself implicated in Clark's misdeeds. Indeed, this upgraded automobility is both liberatory and restrictive, "conditioned as much by freedom, liberty, and mobility as it is by inertia, congestion, [and] precarity" (Green-Simms *Postcolonial Automobility* 15). This duality resides in the fact that "it is technically impossible to be both a fully autonomous human subject and one who is dependent on a machine as well as the entire sociotechnical institution that supports it" (ibid). For Jende, who was raised in postcolonial car culture and then transplanted to the United States, the core antagonisms that Green-Simms recognizes within automobility are amplified and qualified by his position of overwhelming precarity as an undocumented immigrant in New York City. If automobility facilitates postcolonial subjects' access to a culture of global modernity,[44] then the fact of their origin continues to determine the extent of their access to this very same global modernity. Afropolitanism, it follows, does not necessarily signify unfettered access to Western modernity. Rather, it requires a certain orientation toward this Western modernity that holds within it both constraints and possibilities, ever dependent on material and social resources.

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[44] On how "global modernity" functions in her work, Green-Simms explains that "*Postcolonial Automobility* sets forth an understanding of global modernity as a paradoxical social experience, formed not only by the speed of the new or the global but also, at the same time, by experiences of what I call 'suspended animation,' moments of pause, interruption, and disruption" (*Postcolonial Automobility: Car Culture in West Africa* 28).

Postcolonial automobility and contemporary Afropolitanism also depend on larger tensions that result from the colonial encounter and subsequent subjugation as well as the prolonged postcolonial and neocolonial residue that marks the relationships between the Global South and the West. Colonialism involved both "modes of domination and practices of self-realization; while it was unmistakably a project of subjugation and domination, it also required a reactionary process of collective subject making (Green-Simms *Postcolonial Automobility* 35). Afropolitanism resides in the friction between colonial subjugation and requisite membership in practices of global modernity that implicate African locales in a larger circulation of labor, capital, and culture. Even when carried by an African or Afropolitan migrant to a Western metropole, automobility remains constricted by pathways determined by the person's point of origin. As such, the passenger vehicle "continues to shed light on the dialects of inclusion and exclusion and mobility and immobility that characterize African subjects' relation to global modernity" (58). This remains true for Jende, as he drives cars outside of his postcolonial home country. For the Jongas, the presumed automobility actualizes the difficult suspended position they occupy. Ostensibly, their integration into American systems via the Edwards family's car should signify active participation, or at least access, to the global modernity to which Green-Simms refers. Instead, their automobility positions them in a liminality that eventually drives their return to a locale from which they originally sought to escape. Though it does not vault them easily into "the good life," the Edwards family's car brings the Jongas to consider New York as setting for both unimaginable possibilities and frustrating impossibilities. Though Jende is the only one of the Jongas who interacts directly with the Edwards family car, his rather fractured automobility enables a reading

of his family's Afropolitanism as the result of a spatiotemporal "liminal hotspot," a transitional state of transnationalism that enables them to don new personas and outlooks upon their return to Limbe. If liminality is a "condition of ontological indeterminacy" (Greco and Stenner 152) or an experience of finding oneself in a process of transition from one state of existence into another yet-to-be identified state, then the liminal hotspot, it follows, is "an occasion characterised by the experience of being trapped in the interstitial dimension between different forms-of-process, and in the situation of ontological indeterminacy that characterises such a dimension" (ibid).[45] On the psychosocial plane, individuals are constantly confronted by various, sometimes conflicting states of existence. Transition are ubiquitous and liminality, though not reserved simply for the subaltern or subjugated, does hinge upon on a series of consequential and overlapping processes that can implicate global networks of access and information. Migrants, whether choosing to assimilate or not, must constantly negotiate the distinctions between the various forms-of-process that inform their daily routines and decisions. Afropolitanism can then be considered as the final "pattern shift," or the potentiality of individuals, driven by the paradox of the liminal hostpot, to design and construct novel, more complex modes of being. The newly adopted form-of-process that the individual crafts from the experience of the liminal hostspot is one that "integrate[s]

[45] Greco and Stenner define a "form-of process" as "a mode of unity/order/organisation/pattern that is exhibited by some composition existing in the actual historical world" (151). Each form-of-process is part of a larger one, contains smaller ones, and is related to others. They each emerge from sequences of events, proving the perpetuity of processes of becoming; they come to be as the result of events and advance the sequences by continuing to exist and inform other events. Greco and Stenner clarify that they approach thinking about liminality and liminal hotspots from process theory, which leads them to consider "the complex, open, self-referential, and self-generative nature of 'systems'" as they "[rethink] systems as processes" (ibid). The implications of this process-theoretical approach result in regarding psychosocial experiences to be the direct result of a number of systems, each with their own conditions, norms, and borders.

the others at a higher level of of complexity" (Greco and Stenner 155). *Behold the Dreamers* allows us to regard Afropolitanism as an emergent form-of-process that offers complexity to experiences of estrangement and unbelonging in various systems around the world and enables the Jende family to enter new psychosocial and socioeconomic spheres.

Afropolitanism, even when wielded within the continent, depends on a series of contingencies and can, for some, cement opinions of the desirability of the West. Neni's anxieties about returning to Limbe underscore the ways in which clean narratives about belonging to Africa can obfuscate the inequalities that Afropolitanism has been accused of ignoring.[46] Neni recognizes that living in New York prompted a transition in her way of life and how she perceives herself. The constraints of her life in Limbe make New York, even with its vicissitudes and string of disappointments appear more desirable than her hometown. Although not true in a material sense, moving back to Cameroon with her family feels to Neni like a regression that will condemn her to the small, limited life she sought to leave behind. She is more ambivalent about the implications of the family's return on her two young children, enumerating both potential benefits and pitfalls of her children growing up in their town of family origin. In her view, "Liomi [her son] and Timba [her daughter] would have many things they would not have in America, but they would also lose far too many things" (Mbue 361). Neni is happy that her children will be

[46] For example, Grace Musila observers that "Afropolitanism seems to be about embracing just enough of Africa to retain a certain flavour that sets one apart from the norm – presumably Euro-American – but not so much as to be *too* 'African' (71). Some of this perspective depends on understandings of "Africanness" as inherently derogatory or something to be cleaned up while also acknowledging how cosmopolitanism lionizes and utopianizes Western locales. Mbue's novel allows for more capacious readings of New York City as not a simple el dorado, but also a place in which immigrants can and do struggle and from which, sometimes, migrants must escape (A. A. Irele 16).

able to "grow up in a spacious house in Limbe, learn to speak French, and master how to dance to *makossa* music." Alongside these experiences, Neni marvels at the fact that Liomi and Timba will grow up with access to multiple generations of their extended families, friends who share their culture, and without having to watch their parents navigate the many economies that life in New York requires (ibid). On the other hand, Neni laments the fact that her children "would lose the opportunity to grow up in a magnificent land of uninhibited dreams. They would lose the chance to be awed and inspired by amazing things happening in the country, incredible inventions and accomplishments by men and women who look like them" (361-362). From Neni's vantage point, Cameroon imposes unnecessary restrictions on children's lives, ones that, in her opinion, do not exist in the United States. Childhood in New York presents an incomparable experience because, Neni believes, "there was a certain kind of pleasure, a certain type of adventurous and audacious childhood, that only New York City could offer a child" (362). That Liomi's and Timba's aspirations may not match her own expectations for their futures is inconsequential to Neni. In one rare instance in which Liomi speaks for himself, he attempts to communicate his own childhood dreams to his mother, surprising her by declaring he would rather become a chauffeur like his father, than a lawyer or doctor. Neni makes light of Liomi's declaration, insisting that "nobody chooses to be a chauffeur" and re-emphasizing that her son must perform well in school in order become, potentially, "a big man on Wall Street" (68). Her insistence on opportunity and wonder as singularly American phenomena color her attitudes towards her family's impending return to Cameroon. Neni, in her concern, takes into account all factors that restrict women and children's autonomy in her home country. These factors

were true when she left, and she expects them to remain when she and her children return.

Neni's anxieties depend largely on her sense of the foreclosed mobilities she faces in Limbe. Throughout the novel, she moves around various parts of New York on her own, creating a world for herself outside of the home and distinct from her children. She holds several jobs, enrolls in school, and creates friend groups that, to her, would have been impossible in Limbe. She undergoes a pattern shift from that brings her an Afropolitan imagination reminiscent of Selasi's conceptualization – a sense of self that transcends the limits of her small town in her underdeveloped country. Neni's movements around New York, even if mostly confined to Harlem when she is not in school, contrast sharply with the structure of her days in Limbe where she would "wake up in the morning with no plans except to clean the house, go to the market, cook for her parents and siblings, take care of Liomi, meet with her friends and listen to them bash their mothers-in-law, go to bed and look forward to more of the same the next day" (14). Instead, in the United States, Neni's days are unpredictable. Even when she does eventually return to Limbe, she leaves behind a landscape of largely unexplored potential in New York City. Back at home, Neni's patterns will again be constricted, limited by the expectations on mothers and wives. By contrast, Jende appears to gain more freedom and potential by returning to his hometown. Although his wife wants to preserve as much of an "American aura" (348) as she can, Jende feels the opposite, pledging adamantly to "never become an American Wonder," the kind of person who insists on speaking with a "laughable American [accent]" and "claiming to understand very little of Cameroonian culture because they were now too American" (355). Living in the United States was a

form of productive stasis for Jende; New York is a liminal hotspot that allows him to boomerang back to his hometown, this time as a more respectable man than he was when he left. What the United States offers, in Jende's estimation, is the ability for people to build comfortable lives for themselves, despite their origins. He refers to then-presidential candidate Barack Obama as example:

> Who is his mother? Who is his father? They are not big people in the government. They are not governors or senators. In fact, sir, I hear they are dead. And look at Obama today. The man is a black man with no father or mother, trying to be president over a country! (40)

In Limbe, no matter how lovely he considers it to be, the kind of somersault to the top of political hierarchies would not happen. Speaking about himself, Jende believes that had he stayed in Cameroon, "I would have become nothing. I would have remained nothing. My son will grow up to be poor like me, just like I was poor like my father" (39).47 Instead, in New York, he finds himself "driving [Clark] in this nice car," and his boss addresses him "as if I am somebody, and I am sitting in this seat, feeling as if I am somebody" (44). Driving an important man around New York and New Jersey allows Jende a sense self that he can carry back with him to Limbe.

Jende's mobility in New York does not parallel his wife's somewhat empowering autonomy, rather it reinforces his liminality and precarity and ultimately confirms his unbelonging in the United States. At the same time, it magnifies his Afropolitan potential and presents multiple opportunities in Cameroon. With money they saved working several jobs in New York along with the thousands of dollars Neni extorted from Cindy Edwards, the Jongas become "millionaires many times over" and Jende returns home as

[47] This declaration is resonant of Kenneth's anxieties in *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, observed in the first chapter of this dissertation.

"one of the richest men in New Town" thanks to the staggering strength of the dollar compared to the CFA franc (353). He now has the leverage to refuse job offers and become acquainted with a lifestyle as an employer rather than an employee (ibid). His vision for the business he intends to establish in Limbe proclaims his Afropolitan worldview in its slogan: "Jonga Enterprises: Bringing the Wisdom of Wall Street to Limbe" (ibid)– despite the fact that Jende was not, in fact, a trader on Wall Street. Jende develops a persona that plays into the illusion that he is a big man in contact with the goings-on of the financial sector in the United States – never mind that his business plan seems to hinge on farming and taxis, industries with skill sets distinct from those required of financial analysts on Wall Street. Entering into the saturated terrain of transportation in Limbe, Jende retains the automobile as "tether to the social" (Garritano 2) ensuring that whatever enterprise he pursues, he reminds his patrons of his global vantage point. The return to Cameroon is not a renunciation of New York in favor of greener pastures in Limbe but rather a collapsing of affinities that allows Jende to live his life as the big man he wants to be while also maintaining an attachment to the United States. Whether or not he drives a luxury car in Limbe, his one-time association with the Edwards family's vehicle allows him to forever carry "simultaneous attachment to and distance from the 'good life'" and facilitates the "feelings of pleasure and emotional security that come from success in the [globalized] capitalist economy" in Limbe (Green-Simms, *Postcolonial Automobility* 128). The Jonga family's options for global mobility have been widened because of their time in New York. As a unit, the Jongas accumulate virtual and material commodities and capital that position them as more flexible than

when they first left. Ultimately, they employ a round Afropolitanism through which they can, ostensibly, maneuver African and Western metropoles with relative ease.

By way of a return

Mbue introduces her novel with an epigraph from the Old Testament:

> For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land – a land with streams and pools of water, with springs flowing in the valleys and hills; a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig-trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills.
>
> Deuteronomy 8:7-9

The book of Deuteronomy "presents itself as an account of the last day of Moses" before the exiled Israelites enter and settle in their Holy homeland. The eighth chapter captures Moses's various addresses and reminders to the people of Israel about the manners in which they are to live and obey God's commandments (Finsterbusch). In various verses, including the one excerpted by Mbue, Moses appears to reiterate the Ten Commandments relayed forty years earlier. This book is significant to scholars of the Bible due to its reinforcement of God's law as well as its apparent evidence of human scribe intervention in the actual production and dissemination of the Bible.[48] In the verses that Mbue selected, Moses reminds the Israelites that, should they adhere to God's laws and maintain obedience to Him, they will receive all the beautiful bounty that Israel has to offer. Israel, to the people who have been following Moses through treacherous geographical terrain for 40 years, is the utopian land promised to them by an omniscient and beneficent God. The epigraph leads readers to draw easy parallels to New York as

[48] See, for example, Weinfeld (1967), Schulman (1991), and Van der Toorn (2007)

the utopia promised to the faithful. The epigraph implores the dreamers to which the novel's title draws attention, that prosperity and abundance are theirs for the taking in New York if they are diligent in their pursuit of the right path. It also links Afropolitan returnees to biblical notions of diaspora that incorporate both a dispersal and a return to a rightful homeland.[49] Whether or not members of particular diasporas eventually make their physical return to a collective point of origin, investment in ideas of home and belonging depends on a sense of keen internalization of the intimacies of place and belonging as well as on salient designations of affinities and Others.

Representations of boomerang migrant trajectories beg consideration of the experiential effects of oscillating between a sense of one's particularity and subscribing to notions of global citizenship and opportunity. Accordingly, they challenge generalized celebrations of moral cosmopolitanism as they activate and examine the consequential and very real discrepancies in experiences, even in the Western metropoles often lauded as multicultural oases. Throughout the Mbue's novel, the adult Jongas must navigate the multiple complexities that accompany their Western cosmo- and Afropolitan aspirations, revealing the less romantic side of African transnational mobilities. New York, far from the promised land with no shortage of food and prosperity pushes the Neni and Jende to contend with their concepts of themselves, sometimes refracted through the perspectives of the Others they encounter in the many spheres through which they move. They fulfil a postcolonial stance of "peculiar insight, blessed with a specific awareness of the relativity

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[49] The return is the aspect of Hebrew ideologies of diaspora that is often overlooked in discourse about dispersals and exiles from other parts of the world. Ato Quayson and Girish Daswani consider "the utopian idealization and the work of political and cultural brokers" as key to lending "the homeland ultimate salience within diasporic consciousness" and potentially inspiring "return to homeland" ideology and mobilization (3-4).

of cultural rules and forms" (Smith 246) by embodying a referential Afropolitanism – a global orientation that opens up possibilities for multiple possible deployments of transnational affiliations. In Behold the Dreamers, the Afropolitan emerges as a mobile subject who, in their ideological and physical travels, merges multiple modes of existence into a new paradigm. In so doing, they highlight the ideological significance of certain places in a manner that makes obvious the sociocultural utilities of association with various places and leaves open the meaning of "home." The Afropolitanism revealed in Mbue's novel presents a rebuttal to critics who bemoan the theory's insistence on the particular at the expense of the universal. The narrative posits identity and reckoning with self alongside and in distinction from the various Others the characters encounter as a significant endeavor that requires plenty of intellectual and emotional energy. The many encounters with institutional, bureaucratic, and social institutions and settings challenge help shape the contours of Afropolitan sensibilities as the migrants and returnees contend with the extent to which they have been transformed by their physical and psychosocial distance from home. The imbue the particular into the global as they continue to reformulate worldviews and personal ideologies in service of the dreams they plan to puruse either in the diaspora or as returnees in their countries of origin.

Implicated in the narrative is the fact that "home" evolves and comes to mean something different for each member of the Jonga family. As they approach their new lives in Limbe, each of the Jongas must adopt different performances of belonging to or having been marked by the United States. The space between alienation and Afropolitanism is wider for some and much more narrow for others. The potential for success in the West remains for the children, while for Neni it appears to be foreclosed

almost entirely by the family's return to Cameroon. New York was markedly demoralizing and difficult for Jende in a way that is not true for his wife or young son. Throughout the novel, the Edwards family lingers as foils for the Jongas experiences, looming large as simultaneously a glimpse into what they could have and also a warning of the traps and dangers that line their path. By the end of the novel, the Edwards family has deteriorated strikingly, and Cindy is dead, having succumbed to a drug and alcohol overdose. Mighty Edwards, the younger of Clark and Cindy's two sons, faces a future marked by "the shame brought on by the nature of his mother's death" and the accompanying embarrassment of the actions of a father whose direction he is purportedly to follow. During her memorial service, Cindy's goddaughter reads a verse from the fourteenth chapter in the book of John in which Jesus assures his followers that "if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me so that wherever I am you will be also" (290). This verse brings the reader back to the sentiment invoked in the book's epigraph – there exists, whether in the material world or the spiritual one, a place of comfort and providence in which those who toil and suffer can eventually rest. That New York City is not this paradise for either the Jonga or the Edwards families refutes the notion of the American Dream referenced in the novel's title.

Afropolitanism then, the book argues, rests not on fixed physical location but

rather on perspective and openness to multiples modes of operation. Indeed, one can be Afropolitan in Africa rejecting romantic notions of glamour in the West while also acknowledging that association with European and American systems opens up certain

avenues generally unavailable to disadvantaged Africans. Afropolitanism is a traveling theory in that it requires a conglomerate ideology that fuses multiple processes and value systems into a fluid existence. To be sure, there remains much to critique about the commodification of empty Afropolitan aesthetics devoid of active engagement with the multitude of political subjectivities that African people face all over the world. Afropolitanism does not and should not excuse the mobile African subjects from affiliation with both the laudable and the deplorable facets of the multiple locations they claim. However, Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* invites interaction with Afropolitanism and Western ideals through acknowledgements of their fullness, flaws, and potentialities. The novel allows us to think about Afropolitanism as a useful mechanism for theorizing migrant experiences beyond the veneer of privilege and luxury most commonly associated with it. *Behold the Dreamers* clears the path for more nuanced discourse about the requisite transnationalism that accompanies contemporary Black migrant experiences in the United States. In extracting a theory of Afropolitanism from the novel, I invite continued investment into the theory as one with wide-ranging and useful intellectual potential and utility to account for contemporary migrant disorientation and re-calibration.

CHAPTER 3 | SPECULATING AFRICA: POSTCOLONIAL SPECULATION AND NEW IDEAS OF AFRICA IN NISI SHAWL'S *EVERFAIR* AND ABDOURAHMAN A. WABERI'S *AUX ÉTATS-UNIS D'AFRIQUE*

"It's struck me more and more over the years that one of the most forceful and distinguishing aspects of science fiction is that it's marginal. It's always at its most honest and most effective when it operates–and claims to be operating–from the margins."

Samuel R. Delany, qtd in Dery, Mark "Black to the Future" (2004)

"History is a legend, an invention of the present. It is both a memory and a reflection of our present."

V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (1988)

Introduction

Scholars of diaspora and transnationalism list four major components of a salient diaspora, of which a crucial one is the narrative of a utopianized homeland. This point of origin, shared and celebrated by members from across the diaspora community, serves as a beacon for those in exile or displaced for whatever reason from it as a place to which one should and could eventually return. In realist migrant narratives, the practice of romanticizing a continental home is a recurring trope. Whether fleeing as exiles or relocating as immigrants, African migrant characters share in the practice of talking about a beautiful "home" where they could be understood and respected as their true, full selves. In many instances, there remains a vast discrepancy between the manner in which migrant characters talk about their lost home and the experiences that spurred their migration in the first place. The call of golden pastures in the West, the promises of opportunity and success, and the obligation to ensure that future generations are well-positioned cast a long shadow over the maneuvers migrant characters' undergo in order to endure much of the alienation and hardship they face in their Western host countries.

Sustaining their persistence as migrants in the West, is their speculation about the Africa they must continue to defend.

This migrant speculation is a crucial continuation of the postcolonial project – a political undertaking that dares to imagine a different future for nations previously colonized and exploited. The African literary tradition has always included an impulse to imagine what is possible while calling attention to the dynamics that inform the present. Postcolonial literature in particular requires the reader to hold the future in consideration while also observing the past and the present. The present emerges as a crucial point of intervention through which contemporary African publics can actively design a future that serves them and some kind of greater good. There is no question that imagining the future within the political frames offered by postcolonialism is a critical and productive endeavor. However, in postcolonial and contemporary literature, there remains a question of genre, with realism persisting as the vehicle through which African writers offer their purportedly serious critiques of present social structures. This is not to say that African speculative fiction does not exist. Indeed, as Joshua Yu Burnett insists, "speculative genres such as magical realism and fantasy have […] always been an essential part of modern African Literature, though such works have not always been labelled or marketed as such" (Burnett "'Isn't Realist Fiction Enough?': On African Speculative Fiction" 120). Often, texts that employ elements of magical realism are considered to be calling upon aspect of indigenous spiritual practice, relegating African speculation to "ancient tradition" or anti-imperial stubborn dedication to precolonial autochthonous beliefs. While indigenous African religious and spiritual practices are and do inform much of the speculative writing that considers Africa, both as setting and idea, observing speculative

works in this manner continues to contribute to Western intellectual traditions that flatten African into an interesting historical past or an idealized, mythical (and, implicitly impossible) future full of potential without making space for considerations of Africa's innovative present. Furthermore, as Lydie Moudileno elucidates, we must also remain acutely aware of the manners in which stubborn insistence on reading African speculation as magical realism only contributes to phenomenon of sensationalizing the "postcolonial exotic," a term she borrows from Graham Huggan (72). Moudileno recognizes that magical realism, in contemporary Francophone African literature, serves as a meaningful avenue through which authors can escape the stringent conventions of French literary practice. Adopting magical realism allows Francophone writers to engage in a tradition that bypasses one-way associations with Europe and engages in what could essentially be observed as a South-South interaction. Holding Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *100 Years of Solitude* as intertext, Francophone writers gain, through magical realism, the power to be innovative by bypassing French literary tradition and conventions (Moudileno 72). While attention to African magical realism can highlight various aspect of literary innovation, Moudileno cautions against "privileging" the genre as the only mode of speculation worth consideration in African literature. Whereas "[d]efinitions of magical realism typically underscore its potential as a syncretic mode of weaving together, to say it quickly, tradition and modernity," African science fiction

> achieves […] a new representation of African historicity which not only reclaims the past, but also projects the continent into the future, a future which, in the case of Africa, has been famously denied by Western philosophy (most notoriously Hegel), impeded by colonization and arrested by successive dictatorial regimes" (74).

Moudileno's anchors her hypothesis in a reading of Sony Labou Tansi's *La vie et demie*, a text she observes to have both magical realist and science fiction elements. In examining this hybrid text, Moudileno argues that these kind of combination texts open up a "wide temporal spectrum" for African lives in which "magic" moves away from the exotic and offers new approaches to reading the "real" (ibid). Speculation, including Afrofuturism, "allows for a representation of an African quotidian which is made livable precisely because it is imagined in a coterminous relationship with a future which opens up spatially to the rest of the world" (ibid).

It is this "rest of the world," I believe, that highlights the pivotal significance of contemporary speculative work by Africans and about Africa. Texts such as Nnedi Okorafor's Africanfuturist corpus have led the charge in African literary study towards sincere interest in African speculative fiction. Additionally, the recent popularity and success of Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi* (2009) and Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018) have contributed to wide interest in speculative representations of the continent. This genre is uniquely positioned to contain insight into how Africans and diasporic creatives conceptualize what "Africa" means in the manners in which they infuse aspects of the mythologies that encapsulate the continent in global political imagination into the ways they re-invent and redesign continental spaces.[50] The turn to the speculative provides an

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[50] In this regard, V.Y. Mudimbe's thoughts on the French word "reprendre" remain quite useful:

> The word *reprendre* –strangely difficult to translate–I intend as an image of the contemporary activity of African art. I mean it first in the sense of taking up an interrupted tradition, not out of desire for purity, which would testify only to the imaginations of dead ancestors, but in a way that reflects the conditions of today. Second, *reprendre*, suggests a methodological assessment, the artist's labor beginning, in effect, with an evaluation of the tools, means, and projects of art within a social context transformed by colonialism and by later currents, influences, and fashions from abroad.

opportunity for the various members of the diaspora to imagine Africa together and to re-configure belonging.[51] The speculative allows for creative identification with the continent as an idea while also allowing for creative imagination of specific locales. Significantly, speculative works allow for the crafting of new spatial and temporal coordinates outside of the confines of a nostalgic glance backwards to an essentialized, primitivized past. While caution remains imperatively necessary in how speculative pieces approach designing their constructed imagined Africas, the genre presents itself as an extremely capacious arena into which the discourse that simmers under the surface of more realist fiction can come into full light. Additionally, much in the same manner that Lydie Moudileno observes in African magical realism's relationship to Latin American literature, speculative approaches to designing an imagined Africa can bridge representational approaches between African creators and their diasporic contemporaries.

> Finally, *reprendre* implies a pause, a mediation, a query on the meaning of the two preceding exercises (*The Idea of Africa* 154, original emphasis)

The Robert & Collins French-English dictionary offers the following English definitions of the verb "reprendre" in its transitive form: to recapture; to take back; to have some more, to regain; to take over; to resume, to carry on with, to continue; to catch again; to alter, and to correct" (2008). It can also, in some instances, mean going back for more servings of something, such as a delectable treat or dessert. The kinds of deliberate consideration and procedural innovation that Mudimbe includes in the act of "reprendre" help make the case for critical investigation of the innovations of contemporary speculative works about and from Africa. In many ways, speculative novels and film engage in contemplations of how to "take up" or "take over" ideas of Africa and Africanness while also re-configuring these ideas onto a new spatiotemporal plane.

[51] It is also important here to consider that, most recently, the move to craft speculative narratives set in various African locales have been taken up by 1.5- and second-generation immigrants. For them, having migrated at a young age, or having been born outside of their parents' home countries informs their understandings of how Africa operates as an idea. While I hesitate to attach the Afropolitan designation to all of these texts, it is crucially important to understand how the Afropolitan imaginary evolves out of a constructed image of an exotic and foreign African "home." The second- and 1.5-generation immigrants often hold only tenuous, or at the most, piecemeal attachments to the countries from whence their families migrated. In this regard, notions of belonging to Africa depend on a speculative nostalgia – a longing for an unfamiliar terrain, utopianized by elders' memories and recollections.

Drawing from the long tradition of postcolonial theory, this chapter examines the subversive speculative strategy of alternate history in *Everfair* by Nishi Shawl and *Aux États-Unis d'Afrique* by Abdourahman A. Waberi to argue for increased attention to global diasporic speculation in contemporary literature. It is my conviction that speculative texts have political utility in offering alternate, generative renderings of postcolonial potentiality. The speculative – and alternate history in particular – figures largely as a genre through which members of the various waves of the African diaspora can imagine the continent and continue to interrogate Africa as an idea. Employing the modality of alternate history, Waberi and Shawl offer works of postcolonial speculation insomuch as they imagine and construct new political orders that have not yet existed. While a many postcolonial texts adopt realist methodologies to critique the power structures in place within continental governments, there remains an opportunity for creative speculation on the possibilities of self-sufficient, innovative life on the continent. Speculation holds power in the very act of rejecting extant structures in favor of ones that upend sociopolitical hierarchies. As we have witnessed over the past decade or so, contemporary speculative works also serve as vectors of fertile dialogue between continental Africans and those living in the diaspora as they think together about the possibilities of transnational or global solidarities and differences in perspective and lived experience.

Afrofuturism, Africanfuturism, Black SF

Black speculative work is largely regarded through the framework of Afrofuturism. Cultural critic Mark Dery coined the term and offered the following initial definition of the concept:

> Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture–and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future–might, for want of a better term, be called 'Afrofuturism' (180)

Deliberating further, Dery asks, "[c]an a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?" (ibid). His question poignantly addresses the political and social effect of Black speculation within diasporic contexts. Afrofuturism's wide expanse invites practitioners to adopt speculative approaches to explore and refute the historic subjugation and dehumanization that permeates throughout United States history. Dery's question depends on the assertion that the very act of imagining a future hinges upon having a tangible concept of a traceable past. For African American authors, the deliberate erasure of a locatable and traceable past adds considerable difficulty to creative imaginations of future agency. African American speculative works make repeated use of "black geek" and extraterrestrial tropes "as a progressive framework to examine how those who are alienated adopt modes of resistance and transformation" (Womack 35). As a group who were consistently and deliberately categorized as sub- or only partly human, African American creatives find Afrofuturism to be a generative field in which to explore the social conditions they have inherited as well as the possible powerful futures they face. In regards to technology and

scientific invention, Afrofuturists are "concerned with both the impact of these technologies on social conditions and with the power of such technologies to end the '-isms' for good and safeguard humanity" (Womack 36). Understandably, African American people have a fraught relationship to scientific and medical technological experimentation having been, historically, the victims of ruthless experimentation in the name of progress. Afrofuturism, then, encapsulates a "liberation edict" that "provides a prism for evolution" and opens space for active reparative reckoning and imagining (38).

Afrofuturism is both a methodology and a framework and adopts a specifically racial purview. In other words, Afrofuturism is a Black project occupied with imagining capacious and inclusive ways of being Black. "Whether through literature, visual arts, music, or grassroots organizing, Afrofuturists redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and for the future" (Womack 9). The genre spans creative and theoretical works in its mission to compose new empowering illustrations of Black pasts and Black futures. The constitutive multi-modal, multi-genre pieces within Afrofuturism are in conversation with one another to make up what Mark Dery calls a "largely unexplored psychogeography" (187) that is constantly evolving and implicates physical spaces both real and imagined. Within its spatial imaginary, Afrofuturism engages with Africa though mythologies of ancient or "lost" precolonial empires. Ytasha Womack observes that "Afrofuturists are intrigued by Africa's ancient wisdom and ancient wisdom from around the world" (80). Afrofuturism inherits much of the tropes and approaches to imagining Africa developed in Ethiopianism and Afrocentrism. In its postmodern approach, the creative movement takes up reverence for the legendary greatness of ancient African societies and wields them in new manners with the distinct aim and effect of

empowerment through pride in a great past. Accordingly, in many Afrofuturist works, African settings are positioned as point of ancient origin. These works rarely engage with contemporary experiences on the continent and, in constructing an African futurity, do so with intentions to restore an ancient glory long-believed to be lost or suppressed.[52] The impulse to engage specifically with ancient traditions from various parts of the continent stems in response to what Womack rightly describes as a large and deliberate colonial effort to dismantle and obscure African cultures' innovations and contributions to world history. The resulting paucity of knowledge about "Africa's contribution to global knowledge in history, science, and beyond is a gaping hole so expansive it almost feels like a missing organ in the planet's cultural anatomy" (80). Thus, Afrofuturist work offers itself as a political response to colonial erasure of African and, principally, Black active futurity.

Afrofuturism's critical speculation about lost African pasts and innovative Black futures inspires deliberate interrogation into how to imagine alternatives in contemporary Africa, too. Speculation created by Africans with contemporary continental locales and themes holds immense potential in a cultural literary landscape that persists in thinking about Africa simply in terms of a lost past, needing recuperation and restoration, rather than a vibrant contemporary space in which multitudes of creatives continue to compose and imagine. Just as Ytasha Womack notices that African Americans must do the crucial

[52] Here, I disagree slightly with Joshua Yu Burnett's observation that "Africa is more typically associated with the past–with folklore, the colonial legacy, and the numerous wars that have plagued the continent in the decades since independence–but rarely with the future" ("Realist Fiction"129). Contemporary speculative fiction does imagine an African future but does so by incorporating elements of a return to a "traditional" or precolonial system of beliefs infused with technological innovations or mystical powers. *Black Panther* and Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* trilogy exemplify this approach.

work of imagining capacious futures, African speculative fiction does and should perform the same function. The possibilities of Africa as a space that has powerful futures and can serve as host to technological and social innovation should be further explored in creative and theoretical work and discourse. Indeed, although "Africa has had a place in the sf [science fiction] imagination as long as the genre has existed" (Bould, "African Sf Introduction" 1), accompanying scholarly discourse about speculative work based or set in African locales remains a fairly new phenomenon. Thusly, the contemporary turn towards reading and theorizing postcolonial science fiction stems from "a recognition of the extent to which the cultural politics of empire helped to incubate the genre of science fiction" (Adejunmobi 266) and speculative works more broadly. Sensitivity to notions of primitivity have greatly impacted investment in creative genres beyond realism. As such, there remains quite a bit of work to be done in investigations of contemporary African literature that does not capitulate or reduce speculative aspects to pre-colonial mythologies alone. It is true that these elements of indigenous beliefs and spiritual practices continue to persist throughout quotidian interactions and emerge in literatures of all genres. However, as Joshua Yu Burnett warns, "if Africa and Africans are left out of our imagined futures, a form a epistemic violence is being carried out by the collective Western imagination against Africa and its peoples" ("Realist Fiction" 121). Speculative works by Africans and set in Africa must be read alongside Black diasporic science fiction and fantasy as the landscape of global Black literature continues to evolve. Furthermore, as Yu also argues, "to […] dismiss speculative fiction, or to relegate it as secondary in importance to realistic fiction within the African context, is to assume the essential superiority of the traditional Western realistic novel over other forms of writing

and storytelling" (120). Attention to the rich capabilities and possibilities of African speculative works also opens up avenues for observing the multiple subgenres communities within the genre.

For her part, Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okorafor has been very vocal about defining her work as *African*futurism, distinct from the Afrofuturist tradition, with the express intention of claiming her own autonomy and control in how readers and critics define her and her work. In a post on her blog, Okorafor offers the following definition of the term she coined:

> Africanfuturism is similar to 'Afrofuturism' in the way that blacks on the continent and in the Black Diaspora are all connected by blood, spirit, history and future. The difference is that Africanfuturism is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West.
> Africanfuturism is concerned with visions of the future, is interested in technology, leaves the earth, skews optimistic, is centered on and predominantly written by people of African descent (black people) and it is rooted first and foremost in Africa. It's less concerned with 'what could have been' and more concerned with 'what is and can/will be'. It acknowledges, grapples with and carries 'what has been' ("Africanfuturism Defined").

Okorafor's Africanfuturism and its correlate in fantasy, Africanjujuism, emerges from a worldview that originates in, is based in, and staunchly centers Africa. It does not concern itself with leaving the continent or looking beyond it, although that option remains available, should it be appropriate. This is distinct from Afrofuturism, which, as Okorafor indicates, derives from the unique African American experience in the United States. Whereas Afrofuturism is positioned as recuperative, Africanfuturism does not function with the same imperative. Africanfuturism rejects the necessity to acknowledge or center the West at all (ibid). For practitioners of Afrofuturism, their being situated in

the West distinguishes their work from that of their Africanfuturist contemporaries and interlocuters. The distinction answers Mohale Mashigo's call for a new theory that better frames speculative work from African writers since, "Afrofuturism is not for Africans living in Africa" (Mashigo).[53] Provocatively, Mashigo opines that, "[o]ur needs, when it comes to imagining futures, or even reimagining a fantasy present, are different from elsewhere on the globe; we actually live on this continent, as opposed to using it as a costume or a stage to play out our ideas" ("Afrofuturismis not for Africans living in Africa"). Mashigo's assessment of the different stakes in Afrofuturist and African-centered practice of speculation rests on the realities of her residing in South Africa, a fact that sets her apart from the widely-critiqued "Afropolitan authors" who generally write from outside the continent. Mashigo, too, recognizes that the particulars of imagining a postcolonial future will naturally "be divergent for each country on the continent because colonialism (and apartheid) affected us in unique (but sometimes similar) ways" (ibid). What Mashigo envisions is a practice of speculation that derives from the current conditions that regulate and define lived experiences within African nations. This kind of speculation refuses to cater to the outsider gaze. It also resists glamorizing African experiences and avoids cleaning up unsavory aspects of life on the continent. Residents of African countries speculating about African futures do so from foundations and with political desires that are, largely, quite distinct from those of outside observers. Mashigo's provocative perspective emerges from a contemporary debate

[53] There has been similar critique of Disney's *Black Panther* film. Though lauded as an exemplar of pan-African collective imagination, the film also relies on stereotypes about Africa. See, for example, Sudip Sen's editorial, "Black Panther and the monkey chant" in African Identities 16:3 (2018). This tension was the topic of Jade Bentil's recent Twitter thread about the "Wakandification" of Africa. Her thoughts spurred such vitriol that she deactivated her account, deleting the thread.

within African literature circles about the prevalence and visibility of migrant African authors. The widespread popularity of writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Teju Cole, NoViolet Bulawayo, and Taiye Selasi is often decried as symptomatic of global literary markets that continue to marginalize active production by African writers based on the continent writing for local audiences. While it could be argued that Nnedi Okorafor belongs to this list of Africans who writes conveniently from a Western locale, her Africanfuturist approach is useful in laying out a model that eschews US- or Eurocentric practices in favor of staunchly centering Africa. Indeed, reading Okorafor's novella *Binti*, Joshua Yu Burnett observes that "in Okorafor's speculative imagination, modern and even futuristic existence does not require surrender to outside hegemonic cultural forces" ("Realist Fiction" 128). Though based in the United States, Okorafor's entire corpus serves as a model of the generative capacity for African and diasporic speculative fiction to re-examine and upend global colonial and neocolonial elements without capitulating to them or resorting to the easy move of simply replacing them. Speculative fiction allows interrogation with nuance, furthering the postcolonial tradition of questioning the power dynamics that shape global Black experiences.[54]

[54] Burnett offers a quite pointed critique of the general marginalization of African speculative texts in Western literary discourse, declaring that,

> The notion that fiction must be 'realistic' is ideologically tied to Enlightenment epistemology – the very same epistemology that actively justified and promoted the colonization and enslavement of the so-called savage, insufficiently 'enlightened' Africans, by the rational, 'realistic' West. The presumption of realistic fiction's superiority to speculative fiction is therefore hegemonic, particularly when applied to non-Western cultures. ("Realist Fiction" 120)

For African authors then, adherence to the strictures of realism contributes to the formulaic, unforgiving manner in which Western audiences regard African creative production. The continued dominance of African realist novels contributes to colonial notions of respectability which restrict the ways in which local and international audiences alike regard the full spectrum of African creative possibilities.

The new direction into which Nnedi Okorafor and Mohale Mashigo profess to forge aligns with what Ato Quayson declares to be the imperatives of contemporary study of world history, which, he argues, must undertake three tasks. First, scholars of world history must "interrogate the assumption of the nation-state as the privileged horizon for literary history." The second goal should be dedicated study of the role that mass migrations have on the realm of the imaginary. Thirdly, scholars should seek to "generate a supple model for interpreting literary texts in full view of their grounding in the recursive mobilities of the past and present time" ("Postcolonialism and the Diasporic Imaginary" 140). The spirit of the second and third pillars of this directive apply directly to our contemporary interests in speculative literature. The contemporary landscape of speculative fiction from Africa mandates intentional investigation into science fiction and fantasy as a corner of the global Black imaginary that transcends nation and implicates identification with and practices of diaspora into representations of Africa. Quayson's helpful explication of how place figures into diasporic identity and what he calls the "diasporic imaginary" facilitates an understanding of the ever-increasing significance of the Black speculation. The dueling relationship between a "home"– whether fictionalized, utopianized, or actual– and "host" sits at the heart of diasporic negotiations of integrity and alienation. Place, nostalgia for a point of origin, and the negotiations of the genealogical association with both the current host and the historical location from whence one came are the three constitutive components of Quayson's concept of the diasporic imaginary. Coupled with the fact that contemporary, post-World War II and postcolonial migrations from the African continent to various parts of the world has

surpassed the number of those enslaved and transported from the continent, the diasporic imaginary depends on a great deal of speculation and re-fashioning an "Africa" that does not, cannot, or has never "really" existed. This collaborative and participatory practice of employing speculation to imagine Africa also calls attention to the many ways that first- or second-generation African migrants must also reckon with their own illusions about their home continent. Take, for example, Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* trilogy, which she wrote after extended research examining Afro-diasporic religious practices in Brazil. The novels, set in a fictional land that is quite clearly based on Nigeria, from which Adeyemi's parents emigrated, take variably convincing creative license with the Yoruba language and mythology to craft the story of a young girl on a mission to restore magic in the kingdom of Orïsha. In the text's author's note, Adeyemi writes an impassioned explanation that her text was largely motivated by police violence towards Black people in the United States and the #BlackLivesMatter movement (*Children of Blood and Bone* 526-527). In this case, it is quite clear that Adeyemi's trilogy is limited both by her own scope as well as by the clear fact that she intended her work for audiences in the United States.

One particularly helpful purchase of speculative literature, however, is in dismantling the easy dichotomy between African readers and Western audiences. The fact that these speculative texts underline is that contemporary associations with and to Africa are not neat. Indeed, if, as Ato Quayson urges us to do, we move postcolonial study away from what he calls "methodological nationalism," ("Postcolonialism and the Diasporic Imaginary" 141) speculative literature can help us envision what a re-constituted imaginary realm could do. Additionally, as Joshua Yu Burnett observes, in

order to "heal the wounds epistemic violence has done through the exclusion of African stories and African bodies [writ large] from its collective visions of our (supposedly) global future, intervention by African and African diasporic writers is sorely needed" ("Realist Fiction" 122). Science fiction and speculative works seem to be phenomenal genres to critique the social structures that continue to regulate the experiences of Africans as they move around the world. These texts that engage in worldmaking, in many cases by erasing and re-drawing the national borders that govern contemporary "real" life, employ a transnationalism that, for members of the new African diaspora, quite aptly mirrors their own conceptions of the world. Furthermore, in their deft "complex paralleling of the speculative with the historical without the need for at least loose adherence to the realities of the historical record," (Burnett, "Realist Fiction"124) speculative works invoke a consideration of spatiotemporal potentialities activated by the persistent continuing waves of migrations to, from, and within Africa. Taking up this speculative genre mirrors contemporary processes of renegotiating our relationships to the shifting notions of place and time on the continent and beyond.[55]

Scholarship on African science fiction has begun to broach the question of how the genre constructs "Africa." In his introduction to a special edition of *Paradoxa* on the subject of African science fiction, Mark Bould contemplates Western readers, asking "[c]an we move beyond European models of fiction, without neglecting the long history of interactions and influences between continents? And what are we to make of the images of Africa, and the African possibilities, they present?" (7). These questions are telling, given how much Western expectations and conventions dictate global literary

[55] See earlier note about "reprendre" in Mudimbe

markets and audiences. However, they also help to conceptualize the manner in which, even in speculative genres, Africa continues to circulate as a venue of experimentation. In many ways, the speculative aspect of some works is accentuated by them being set in Africa, whether in a specific location, as in the case of *Everfair*, or in a completely invented amalgamated locale such as Wakanda in *Black Panther*[56] or Abdourahman Waberi's confederation of African states. It appears that a significant undertaking of Black speculation is to reckon with the "psychogeography" that Mark Dery ascribes to Afrofuturism (187). The African continent carries both physical and psychic import in contemporary speculative texts, particularly in the way it can be wielded to subvert the hegemonic narratives of its inferiority. Significantly, speculative texts lead the charge in maneuvering the intersection between spatiality and temporality. That is, by setting their texts in alternate temporalities, futures included, global Black speculative authors dismantle the easy association between Africa and the distant ancient past and activate a palimpsestic temporal continuum that affords the continent possibility and futurity while still locating it as the anchor of history and legacy. Rather than bemoaning a lost past or extolling a simple Westernized modernity, African speculation offers its own historicity that depends on the interplay – sometimes recuperative – between the past, present, and future. Indeed, "through speculative fiction, we can transform our collection of imagination of what Africa is and what it can be—both in the African continent itself and around the world, for Africans and non-Africans alike" (Burnett, "Realist Fiction" 133).

[56] It should not escape consideration that Wakanda emerged from the mind of two white American artists in the late 1960s before coming to life under Ryan Coogler's direction. The film's diasporic imagination, which has been cast as pan-African in various media reviews, still comes to being through a framework embedded in Western constructions of "Africa."

Two novels that employ alternate history speculative methodologies lead us in this interesting academic direction: Nisi Shawl's *Everfair (2016)* and Abdourahman A. Waberi's *Aux Etats-Unis d'Afrique* (2006, English translation, 2009). By situating their stories in past and future indeterminate temporalities, these texts sharpen the methods of postcolonial speculation and the critique inherently read into works from and about African locales. Furthermore, in their particular attention to global diplomacy, these works demonstrate a continued exploration of Africa as a setting for experimentation and innovation that could eventually serve ongoing postcolonial and decolonizing projects around the world. Even more, these two authors who write at a physical remove from the continent enable us to activate the distinction between Afrofuturism, writ large, and an Africa-centered speculation – perhaps Africanfuturism – that actively undermines global literary tendencies to hold Western practices as ideal and necessary.

Speculative Temporalities

One of the more powerful tropes in speculative fiction is the move to re-imagine the past or construct possible futures. Nisi Shawl's *Everfair* employs alternate history methodology to re-imagine significant turning points in world history.[57] Specifically, the author makes use of steampunk, a subgenre of science fiction that incorporates steam-powered technology, in their re-imagination of anti-colonial resistance in the Congo Free

[57] Ingo Cornils, writing from the perspective of contemporary German literature, defines alternate history as "a subgenre of science fiction that is set in a world in which history diverges or has diverged from the actual history of the world. As a narrative form it is related to fictions of time travel and parallel worlds. It tends to focus on 'turning points' in history, and how they affect individuals, groups and societies" (326).

State.[58] The novel, a finalist for the 2016 Nebula Award for Best Novel, begins with a historical note, in which Shawl explains their intent with their text:

> I like to think that with a nudge or two events might have played out *much* more happily for the inhabitants of Equatorial Africa. They might have enjoyed a prosperous future filled with all the technology that delights current steampunk fans in stories of western Europe and North America. And more. In *Everfair* they do.
> Of course steampunk is a form of fiction, a fantasy, and the events within these pages never happened. But they *could* have (*Everfair* 7).

The affective power of steampunk or alternate history as a narrative genre rests on the subtle distinction that Shawl includes in the final line of their historical note. While the text is fictional, it operates within a realm of speculative verisimilitude that invites readers to ponder the historical conditions of possibility that could have brought them to fruition. If we are to momentarily suspend our recognition of the speculative nature of the steam-powered combat technology the characters spend three decades perfecting, much of the global advocacy and activism within the text rings familiar. Shawl invokes the memories of historical anticolonial and abolitionist activists who travelled the world garnering support for their causes in colonial Europe. Interestingly, the "nudge" to which Shawl refers continues to implicate external intervention from Europeans and residents of the United States. Shawl's constructed intervention takes place during a crucial turning point in King Leopold II of Belgium's colonial advance into territory in what was then referred to as the Congo Free State. In Shawl's revision, an intrepid collective of anti-colonial activists come together and establish an independent nation called Everfair in an attempt to undermine and refute Belgian colonization of the area. The project of creating a new technologically innovative colony on land owned by King Leopold has been devised by the Fabian Society, a multi-cultural, multi-lingual collective of settlers, led by a primarily European governing board. The endeavor attracts adventurous individuals from three parts of the world, the United States, Europe, and Asia, who come together to settle in a portion of Equatorial Africa they purchase from King Leopold. Several factions make up the community of Everfairians, and throughout the novel, their competing interests and philosophies continue to prompt conflict. The narrative spans 30 years, making use of short episodic chapters that jump from several characters' points of view. The novel also features a long cast of characters, each with distinct, and sometimes conflicting, motives for joining the Fabian Society's cause. Additionally, in their global travels, the Fabian Society's spokesmen and advocates, all Western-educated men, call upon the imagery of subjugated African children and women as props to elicit sympathy for their cause. The text offers glimpses into the strategical negotiations and maneuvers Fabian Society members undertake in order to advance their cause

[58] Steampunk is a methodological subcategory of alternate history that proposes new ways of conceptualizing technological innovation. "Steampunk is a sci-fi subgenre that uses steam-powered technology from the eras of the old West and Victorian age as the backdrop for alternative-history sagas" (Womack 15-16). It is particularly useful in Afrofuturist narratives in its subversion of historical constraints.

and hamper King Leopold's brutal colonization. It also calls attention to the various dynamics that exist within a larger anticolonial movement.

Shawl's novel makes use of various revisionist and subversive elements to construct the speculative world of the Everfair colony. *Everfair* notably experiments with power dynamics in sexual relationships, pushing the limits of social proscriptions and stereotypes throughout the novel. From the licentious and seductive assumedly bisexual Black female actress to the tumultuous polyamorous lesbian relationship between a white married woman and her husband's "mulatto" (75) mistress, to the significant age gap between a devoutly Christian African American widow and a her young adult white British second husband, the novel draws on historical sexual taboos and reframes them within the shifting social mores of a reconstituted version of the late 19th to early 20th century. Christianity also remains, carrying with it familiar notions of propriety as well as trenchant condescension towards the "heathen" (72-73) inhabitants of the area that eventually becomes the Everfair colony. Additionally, though the members of the Fabian Society intend for Everfair to be a racial utopia, racial prejudices simmer just under the surface, erupting when romantic relationships test the limits of cross-racial harmony.

Women, when freed from the constraints of evangelical Christian beliefs, experiment more freely in their romantic dalliances in Everfair, unabashedly pursuing romantic attachments that are portrayed to be almost impossible in their home societies. As the Everfair colony slowly comes to its feet, the women take on the labor of bringing the infrastructural dreams to fruition, building on the foundational plans the male members of the Fabian Society's original planning committee have designed. At one point early enough in the novel, one of the more prominently vocal British members of

the Fabian Society, Laurie Albin, leaves Everfair, absconding with one of his lovers and their children, and leaving his wife, Daisy, to sort herself out with her two children. The fact that his abandoned wife openly takes up with the husband's French "mulatto" mistress, who at one point is employed as their children's governess, combines with the insufferable African climate to compel the British man to return to his London home and abandon the Fabian Society's cause. The Albin Family's complex sexual liaisons work in the novel to highlight the manners in which the setting of a new colony on the African continent enables complicated relations. In combining several competing social systems and values, the original residents and citizens of Everfair must attend to paradigms that they previously considered unreconcilable. They also confront the limits of their activist imaginations as they grapple with the norms from their previous lives that prove more difficult than they originally imagined to release in service of a new, more emancipatory, life in their new colony.

Religious practice looms large over *Everfair.* Shawl makes use of the affordances of the alternate history genre to raise questions about competing spiritualities and to highlight the inherent condescension that compels missionary colonialism. The novel resists clean demarcations of "good" and "bad" religious practice. Although it does call attention to the notions of Western superiority that compel missionary colonialism, it does also avoid the easy gesture of uncritically glorifying or essentializing indigenous practices. In the years leading up to the purchase and settling of the land, Europe- and United States-based members of the Fabian Society rely on and manipulate stereotypes about Africans as they travel the world fostering sympathy for their cause. In 1893, the Reverend Lieutenant Thomas Jefferson Wilson, an African American Christian preacher,

frames Everfair to be an alternative to Liberia as a safe haven for Black Americans. There is, though, another potential motive for Thomas Wilson's audiences to move to Everfair: "[h]is people had a chance to save themselves – and simultaneously to *uplift their savage kin*" (45, emphasis added). Though Wilson feels affinity towards the indigenous Africans currently subjugated under King Leopold's brutal rule he distinguishes between "his people" those "comrade[s] in the armies of Christ" and the Africans he anticipates meeting when they all eventually move to Everfair. Although he deplores Leopold's brutality in the Congo Free State, Wilson does consider his own mission to be one of war, albeit with different methods and motives.

Although Reverend Thomas Wilson's Christian preaching drew settlers to Everfair, he ends the novel as a practitioner of an African traditional spirituality in Everfair. The transformation is a difficult one for Thomas, who "wanting to rescue these brands from the burning, […] caught fire himself" (183). This is one of the many respects in which the narrative casts African locales as enticingly corrupting forces. Several of the characters undergo serious transitions in sensibility and behavior, ending the novel drastically affected by their residence in Everfair. Thomas's transformation from Christian preacher into a revered diviner prone to visionary trances appears to be his central conflict, unresolved by the end of the novel. Outside of his membership in the Grand Mote, Everfair's governing council, he is called upon to intervene in local judicial processes as a seer who can read messages from the natural world. He considers these visions antithetical to his Christian beliefs, a tension that triggers exhausting emotional turmoil. His resistance to his trances and to the vision that emerge from them give him the "reputation of a mad man subject to fits" (185), and distorts his perspective on his

political leverage. The novel's episodic structure renders it particularly difficult for the reader to gain complete understanding of Thomas's spiritual journey and the ways in which his religious metamorphosis, a sharp pivot away from the belief system upon which he has built his career, influences his work as one of Everfair's diplomatic representatives and spokespeople. However, Thomas is an important intermediary between the indigenous people already residing in the Congo Free State and the new settlers who arrive because of the Everfair project. In this position, his narrative arc draws the reader's attention to the complicated friction that underlies the new settlement's genesis and development and the pervasive ideoscapes of the African continent as a vast landscape waiting for external settlement and intervention.

Nisi Shawl, an Ifa practitioner ("Ifa: Reverence, Science, and Social Technology"), juxtaposes technological intervention, by way of the weaponry and vehicles developed in Everfair, with concepts of indigenous African mystical beliefs and practices. The science fiction blends into the mythical as Shawl's text jumps from Everfairians' perspectives to those of the indigenous African characters. Although constructed as a multicultural utopia, Everfair does pose a problem to the indigenous inhabitants of the property that was supposedly sold to the Fabian Society by Belgium's tyrannical monarch. While the colony develops as a safe haven for anticolonial inhabitants from all over the world, the young settlement must also contend with how to navigate the relationship with King Mwenda, the rightful ruler of the region. Shawl constructs this character from a series of familiar stereotypes, starting with trope of the "boy king," outwardly adopting the role of the ruthless monarch while privately uncertain of his decisions and moves. Mwenda constantly struggles with his warrior impulse to

"fight and kill the [Belgian] barbarians" (41) and his obligation to and responsibility for the people within his kingdom. A diviner, King Mwenda regularly consults his spirit father who guides him via series of signs in nature that the young king must interpret. His agony over his interpretative faculties spans the length of the novel and culminates in his eventual declaration that all foreigners must return to their home countries and leave his kingdom to continue under his dominion, as it was meant to be.

The role of Mwenda's kingdom remains as a perplexing complication throughout the text. For much of the novel, Mwenda's perspective highlights the ruthless violence performed by King Leopold's agents. He is adept at swift and silent combat and leads retaliatory expeditions against Belgian outposts throughout his land. He oscillates between rightful ire at the atrocities committed by Belgian colonial troops and agony over his own role in perpetuating violence. While he believes wholeheartedly that the people murdered in King Leopold's name must be avenged, Mwenda also expresses confusion about the cumulative effects of more killing in response to European colonial violence. He also sees Everfair as a rival, undermining his resistance efforts and unraveling his reputation as a fierce king who can provide solace and safety to his people. Indeed, early in Everfair's existence, Belgian forces bomb the settlement, forcing the residents to move underground into caves where they remain for most of the duration of the narrative. Everfair poses a threat to Leopold's colonial stronghold in the area, which, in turn, means that Mwenda and his subjects are also in danger, caught in the crosshairs of the battle between Everfair and Belgium, and continually vulnerable to Leopold's

notoriously brutal violence.[59] Eventually, he sends his favorite wife, Josina, initially introduced to readers as a "weapon" to be wielded and deployed (86), on an intelligence-gathering expedition to Everfair. By the end of the novel, Mwenda's patience with Everfair and its ruling Grand Mote thins completely as he reasserts his dominion over the land the colony occupies. He issues a series of dictates that usher in an environment in which Everfair's residents surmise that "non-natives were on the verge of being declared personae non gratae in the nation they'd helped to create" (338). At the end of the novel, King Mwenda dissolves the Grand Mote and expels all foreigners from the land, asserting his right as king that surpasses the claims of the colony he considers troublesome and intrusive. Aspects of Mwenda's characterization diverge from mythologies of fierce African warrior kings, strong and unequivocal in ruling their powerful kingdoms. Compared to the legends of such kings as Askia Mohammed, Sundiata, and Chaka the Zulu, Mwenda falls short, even getting captured in the middle of the novel and having to be rescued by the very Everfairians he resents. He yearns for the freedom of his younger days when he could succumb to his warrior-hunter tendencies, yet also acknowledges the difficulties of ruling equitably. Shawl's monarch retains certain aspects of essentialized native rulers, while also allowing the author to explore the dynamic implications of various colonizing and missionary efforts. Although Mwenda's kingdom retains its "primitivity" in face of Everfair's steam technology, the distinction is not as neat as in previous and common portrayals of civilizations native to the African continent. Shawl appears to call for nuance, imbuing the fierce warrior king with insecurities and failures

[59] Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost* (1999) remains the preeminently-cited account of King Leopold's brutally violent colonization of the Congo and the lingering effects of this chapter in colonial history. In their acknowledgements, Shawl cites this text as the primary inspiration for the novel (383).

that accompany, and in some cases might rival, his brute force. In this respect, Shawl deviates from traditions of speculating about great African kingdoms in an essentialized manner and calls for more robust discourse about women's particular roles in governance and political relations.

Queen Josina's characterization throughout the novel is remarkably nuanced, particularly when read in contrast to her husband. Firstly, she is glossed in the novel's character list as "priest of Oxun,[60] intelligence agent, Mwenda's favorite wife and queen" (10). Josina is the only one of Mwenda's wives who enjoys full characterization and becomes a more central character than her husband while persisting in declaring her intelligence work to be in service of his reign. Her diplomacy skills and spiritual practice combine with her Angolan origin to contribute to her mystical aura. Accustomed to feeling like an outsider or foreigner, Josina is deftly thoughtful in her interactions with others, including her husband. Whereas Mwenda's ambivalence renders him largely ineffective in diplomatic affairs, Josina's tact serves her well as she moves around the continent gathering intelligence and negotiating agreements with various parties. When she is first introduced in the narrative, Josina's discernment is portrayed as inextricable from her intimate knowledge of and connection to nature. She prompts her scouts to use a bird call to alert the other boats in her exploratory expedition, choosing to emulate the

[60] This orthography is a gesture towards the diasporic circulation of Yoruba deities. In Yoruba spelling, the deity's name would be written as Ọṣun or Oshun. Shawl's choice to spell the deity's name with an -x calls attention to the trans-Atlantic connections between ports in Africa and the Americas. In the early 20th century, ships travelled between Brazil and Angola carrying enslaved laborers. It is possible that these routes facilitated the spread of various indigenous spiritual practices, of which Yoruba tradition would be one. Josina's referring to the deity with an -x would then hint towards the fact that she came to her practice through this diasporic cultural exchange, rather than through a connection between her Angolan home and Yoruba people in West Africa. I am indebted to Dr. David Amponsah and Dr. Jacob Olupona for providing this historical context.

call of the “long-tailed mountain cuckoo, which anyone but the whites would know didn’t live around here” (88). Her mastery of the natural world is cast as communal and advantageous – she trusts in the intelligence of those who surround her and those she meets along her journeys. It also renders her perceptive in a manner that distinguishes her from and surprises the European characters. When her party finally comes across Everfair’s settlement, Josina approaches the community, dancing “like a king” and “feeling for the land’s rhythm” since no musicians or drummers accompanied her on the mission (89). Even later, when Josina draws a young girl into her dance, the narration describes her imitating a bird, exiting her trance by “mimick[ing] a final glide downward and end[ing] with a flourish of her figurative wings” (90). Whereas her husband’s connection to nature amplifies his warrior instincts, Josina draws on her environments to form connections. The narrative positions them both as bridges between the natural world and the human realm, however, Josina uses dance, a form of expression that, for her, supersedes language, to connect with the residents of Everfair despite the fact that she is a polyglot and travels with a multilingual aide. One of the more important relationships that Josina initiates via dance is with Lisette, a Frenchwoman, eventually revealed to be of mixed race, who essentially abdicates from polite French society and becomes one of the initial and longest-term settlers of Everfair alongside the British Albin family whose patriarch, Lawrence or Laurie, is one of the founders of the Fabian Society. Lisette initially runs away from her high-class family to live with Laurie as his mistress although after some time, she begins a long romantic affair with his poet wife Daisy instead. By the end of the novel, Josina and Lisette come to refer to each other as sisters and Josina even entrusts Lisette with the care and education of her daughter, Princess Mwadi (344).

The relationship between Josina and Lisette is strikingly intimate from the start due partly to Lisette's curious racial ambiguity. When Josina first spies Lisette in a crowd of spectators watching her dance introduction, she is struck by "wide eyes much like her own" and wonders at Lisette, thinking her to be "[a] white woman–yet a sister? Possible…" (90). It is later revealed that Lisette has a Black grandfather, although her family has gone to great pains to obscure this information. By the end of this short chapter, Josina begins teaching Lisette how to dance, introducing her to a mode of communication that bridges cultural and status divisions and inviting her into her mode of communing with the environment she reveres so profoundly (91).

Josina's connection to Lisette is striking because of the various supposed distinctions they traverse to forge their bond of sisterhood. The narration implies that Josina and Lisette's affection for one another stems from Lisette's having secret Black ancestry – a grandfather her family always referred to as "Le Gorille," or "the gorilla" in French (56). Lisette is protective of this fact about her heritage, refusing to disassociate herself from her Afro-descendant grandfather while also holding secret the true extent of her family's "shadowy connection to the peoples of the so-called Dark Continent" (57). Throughout the development of Lisette's thread in the narration, her partial African ancestry is regarded as a trait to be concealed, ashamed of, and only confessed when absolutely necessary. While Lisette does not overtly deny "Le Gorille," she does not socialize as a Afro-descendant woman and only reveals this family lore to her lover after having been confronted and exposed by a devoutly Christian woman recruited by the Reverend Lieutenant Thomas Jefferson Wilson. At one point during an excursion to scout

land for the colony's expansion and settlement, Lisette segregates herself, declaring to her British former lover, "I belong with the other blacks" (67). The fact of her "Negro blood" remains a pervasive obstacle in her romantic relationship, unresolved at the end of the novel. Several of the characters in the novel wield Lisette's mixed race as a diplomatic tactic as they travel around the world to curry favor for their resistance campaign against Leopold II. Though their means vary, Queen Josina and John Herbert Owen, the founding president of the Fabian Society bring Lisette on voyages back to Europe to negotiate alliances and treaties. Exotified racially and in her queerness, Lisette resists categorization, though she is more comfortable refuting imposed labels than donning new ones. Hesitant to be deployed as a strategic chameleon, Lisette finds herself occasionally allowing herself to be called upon to occupy many concurrent roles in service of Everfair and the purported larger goal of anticolonial resistance.

Shawl's novel is a nuanced observation of colonialism's multiple insidious facets. Many elements of contemporary global ideoscapes persist in their steampunk novel, including the general global condescending belief in African barbarism. To the European and American inhabitants of Everfair, their colony offers an opportunity to save the poor, helpless Africans languishing under King Leopold's brutal rule. However, the novel upends this easy characterization by affording the indigenous African characters dynamic agency and portraying their incorporation in the global diplomatic negotiations about Congolese independence. Shawl's choice to center their novel on King Leopold and the Congo Free State in particular opens avenues for re-engagement with tactics of critical intervention and resistance. The novel refuses easy or neat conclusions, highlighting the many intricacies of historical entanglements between various world powers. However,

although Shawl's work situates itself in a particular historical context, the text's construction of a past conditional world recalls Lisa Lowe's "history of the present," which, she contends, "refuses the simple recovery of the past and troubles the givenness of the present formation" (136). Just as Lowe warns against reading her *Intimacies of Four Continents* as an attempt to offer a "more truthful, more inclusive 'global' account" of history, Shawl's *Everfair* decisively discourages its readers from diluted or simplified conclusions about what should have happened or what could have taken place in the history of Europe's colonization of Africa. Rather, the text's staccato structure combines with the circuitous narrative to urge readers to consider the prolonged residual effects of European colonialism and calls into question the myriad ways in which Africa enters contemporary discourse as a physical host of multifarious lived experiences. Shawl's tactic of revisiting a distant past to afford previously silenced actors with slightly more agency models one of the generative ways in which Black diasporic speculation traverses the ideological fissures in Western engagement with African histories. Shawl's polyphonous narrative also enters into conversation with speculative texts written by authors from the continent, a small but important subgenre of which Abdourahman A. Waberi's *Aux États-Unis d'Afrique* is part.

Inverted History

Abdourahman A Waberi's *Aux Etats-Unis d'Afrique*[61] employs a different approach to alternate history by appearing to simply invert the power structures that function today. In his novel, the continent of Africa is transformed into a confederation of powerful nation-states to which destitute refugees from the North America and Europe risk their lives to emigrate. In international diplomacy, African countries hold much influence and determine the course of negotiations and Westward-flowing aid. Additionally, Waberi makes sure that great figures in African intellectual and political history are memorialized – there is a "Kenyatta School of European and American Studies (15), likely a satirical jab at the School of Oriental and African Studies, a Université Langston Hughes in Harare (16), grand statues and tourist tchotchke figures of Nelson Mandela, Haile Selassi and Julius Nyerere (56), a Maryse Condé bookstore (63), a Ray Charles Avenue (17), a Franz Fanon Institute of Blida (45), and DJs Skip Gates, Abiola Irele, and Afrika Bambaataa (69). AIDS originates in Greece, according to the "Organisation mondiale de la Santé (12) and Asmara is the "federal capital" of the United States of Africa (10). Waberi's text is not so much a cohesive narrative as a series of vignettes that occasionally bring the reader back to a primary character, Malaïka, that the narrator addresses in the second-person singular. The novel moves seamlessly between speculative sections that reverse contemporary global dynamics, casting white refugees from Europe and the United States as the undesirables in a developed and dominant Africa, and inventions of his own, including novel characters inserted into prominent

[61] It should be noted that I mostly cite from David and Nicole Ball's 2006 English translation, published by the University of Nebraska Press. However, I note when I am including my own translation rather than that of the Balls.

families such as the Ngugis and Marleys. Waberi's novel is pan-African in that it glorifies and memorializes figures from the entirety of the Black world, elevating a global Black history to predominant revered eminence in the world he has constructed. The world-building is thorough. Waberi's narrator opens the novel by offering a "succinct account of the origins of our prosperity and the motifs that threw Caucasians on the path of exile" (*Aux États-Unis d'Afrique* 11, my translation). What Percival Everett refers to, in his foreword to the English translation, as Waberi's "intense gaze and a readiness to laugh" (vii) permeates the text. In some instances, the novel offers a direct inversion, In other sections the alternative history is more complex, calling attention, for example, to the global non-profit but neoliberal philanthropic industry, which plays politics with human blight in underdeveloped parts of the world.

Reworking Kowdwo Eshun's conclusion that "Africa is always the zone of the absolute dystopia," (cited in Janis 38) Waberi's text travels to and across a speculative Africa that, more than Shawl's, is stunning precisely becuase of its impossibility. Malaïka, or Maya, as the narrator refers to her, does not function as a traditional protagonist in Waberi's novel. Indeed, the narrator addresses her directly and with striking regularity while describing her peculiar upbringing and her nomadic artistic young adulthood. Maya's perspective is shaped largely by her mother's debilitating and prolonged illness and her father's dedicated and obssessive doting over his dying wife. As a result, Maya is largely left to fend for herself, but must also tend to her father, as he neglects his own wellbeing to occupy himself primarily with his covalescent wife's comfort. Maya grows up to be something of a free spirit, leaving her family home to pusue a degree in art and, eventually, a career as a sculptor and visual artist. Solitude and

nostalgia couch Maya's artistic creations, which garner attention from elite art communities around the continent. The narrator takes great care to describe some of Maya's most critically praised works, offering an interpretation that depends on a narrative perspective on the artist's unique history. Throughout the novel, the narrator appears amused and intrigued by the protagonist, a perspective that emanates from their descriptions of her personality traits. Observing Maya's inability to develop a romantic attachment to a particularly passionate classmate intent on courting her, the narrator remarks that "au fond, tu te vois comme une huître creuse, invisible. Invisible c'est bien le mot. Souvent, tu te vois invisible. Oui, tu n'as pas d'ombre ni d'image de toi-même" (119-120).[62] This observation introduces an aspect of complexity to the central character who, throughout the novel, demonstrates her keen capacity to see others, including those who are invisible or willfully ignored. She transmutes this perception into her craft, sculpting pointed pieces pregnant with meaning and critique. Operating at the periphery of the text's satire, Maya's paradoxical perspective troubles the easy inversion. The protagonist is a figure who disappears from herself, incapable of casting a critical eye on her own cruel behavior but publicly and consistently condemnatory in her views of others. She picks up on the small and large indignities across the continent during her many travels across Africa. However, she retains characteristic impracticality, a trait that sets her apart from her more pragmatic parents. Already distinct as a literary protagonist, Maya's self-negating gaze – literal in some cases as the narrator describes her looking at herself in the mirror and seeing nothing ("tu te regardes dans le miroir, et tu ne vois rien"

[62] "deep down you see yourself as a hollow oyster, invisible. Invisible is truly the right word. Often, you see yourself as invisible. Yes, you have no shadow, no picture of yourself" (*In the United States of Africa* 82)

[120]) – reflects, largely and in an abstract manner, the ways that dominant cultures regard themselves in the face of other, minoritized cultural experiences. Once one considers oneself a functional default, hegemonic or otherwise, one's ability to observe onseelf ciritically all but evaporates.

Of Maya's artwork, the narrator observes that "elles naissent d'un rien, d'une envie. D'un rêve ou d'un murmure" (122).[63] The work, addressing the social ills in the United States of Africa emerge from a desire. There is a futurity to Maya's work even in its sharp critique of the societies she observes in her travels around the continent. In the narrator's view, Maya stands apart from her agemates or contemporaries in her fervent and persistent anticipation of the advent of better times. While the narrator adopts a condescending and, at times, blatantly mocking tone to describe Maya to herself, it is not difficult to draw a direct connection between Maya's artwork and the novel as a whole. Waberi's *United States* also awaits the arrival of a different order. The potentiality the narrator recognized in Maya's work permeates Waberi's text as well. In this novel, described as "tres drôle" by Olivier Barrot, the host of the French television program "Un livre un jour," Waberi's inversion of the current global politial order belies a myopically distorted mode of willfuly limited political self-perception, particularly in the manner in which the continent interacts with refugees and immigrants. The bizarreness or funniness of Waberi's concept relies not simply on the fact of the author's inversion of current political dynamics but also on the absurdity that emerges when the roles are reversed. For

[63] "they are born from a nothing, from a desire. From a dream or from a whisper." (my translation). David and Nicole Ball translate "envie" as "whim," however, given the narrator's extended attention to Maya's passion for righting inequities in her home society and the various communities she visits in her travels, it seems that "desire" or "longing" are more appropriate translations here.

example, in the middle of the text, Waberi inserts a striking epistolary passage, excerpted from a letter found tucked inside the pocket of a man whose dead body was extracted from the waters of Port Sudan by the Coast Guard. The eloquence of the letter refutes the "stéréotype de l'immigrant nu, féroce et sauvage"[64] as it proves that the dead man "devait être un fin lettré, poète ou philosophe" (94).[65] In the letter, the deceased refugee adopts the voice of all the wretched of this speculatively-constructed Earth to decry their shared plight, including experiences of denigration and disenfranchisement.

The extract begins with the writer offering glimpses into the hopes shared by the refugees who risk their lives in search of greener patures in "cette Afrique repue, grasse, rotant d'aise et d'ennui" (93).[66] The risk, though great, remains worthwhile for the refugees, who dream of enjoying Africa's indulgences themselves. The writers describes the collective as

> Nous, agglutinés sur les falaises, les grottes, les crêtes, les dunes, les rocs, les ressacs de l'autre rive. Nous, attachés à ses parois come l'huître à la roche, comme des montgolfières qu'on empêcherait de décoller. Nous, assez de tout, marre de tout, ras le chef, ras le cul, basta et amen de mijoter dans le piment de Cayenne de la faim et de la soif… Nous, voulant et désirant, et quémandant de boire, manger, se sustener, vivre, uriner, déféquer, roter, et même se baigner dans le sang des abbatoirs industriels de la grosse Africa s'adonnant au fitness et au lifting. Nous, voulant franchir espaces, montagnes, océans, mers intérieures, détroits, estuaires, voulant traverser doutes, solitudes, deuils et tristesses (93).[67]

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[64] "the stereotype of the naked immigrant, savage and fierce" (*In the United States of Africa* 62-63)
[65] "must have been a fine writer, a poet or philosopher" (*In the United States of Africa* 62)
[66] "fat, well-fed Africa, belching with comfort and boredom" (*In the United States of Africa* 61)
67 "us, clustered on the cliffs, caves, ridges, dunes, rocks and backwash of the opposite shore. Us, stuck to its walls like an oyster to a rock, like hot air balloons prevented from taking off. Us enough of it all, fed up to *here*, fed up to our asses, basta and amen to stewing in the Cayenne pepper of hunger and thirst… Us, wanting and desiring, and begging to drink, eat, be nourished, live, urinate, defecate, belch, and even bathe in the blood of the industrial slaughterhouse of fat Africa, devoted to fitness and facelifts. Us, wanting to cross open spaces, mountains, oceans,

Using language describing them as subhuman parasites, the speaker addresses the risk and also the potential that lies in successfully landing on Africa's shores. The collective clings to the hope that they can one day integrate into a society that allows them to safely participate in base human functions and frivolous luxuries alike. They embark on their journey having reached the limits of their tolerance for deprivations and neglect in their previous home countries. For them, even subjugation or exploitation at the hands of African corporations is more favorable than the unending suffering they aim to escape. Aside from detailing the reasons for taking flight from their homes, the letter-writer also calls pointed attention to the various stereotypes and derision that refugees endure upon their arrival to the United States of Africa. He addresses the political narrative that casts refugees and immigrants as threats and as undesirable eye sores ruining the image of the prosperous confederation. The "we" for whom the dead writer speaks is a diverse collection of downtrodden people from a wide variety of corners in Europe and Asia. They operate in contradistinction from the the Africans they address to whom they are only sources to be exploited and from which resources, including body parts and organs, are to be extracted. That they stand up and find themselves on the African continent is an affront to this order, designed to keep the consumers and the producers quite separate. The extract ends with the dead writer's acknowledgement of all the stereotypes and malicious narratives Africans employ to refer to the refugees. Phrases like, "les dos mouillés, les têtes fendues, les os sur la peau blanche, les chiens galeux, les tortues venimeuses, les boucs irasibles, les ratons sans maman, les voleurs de sel, les gitans

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inland seas, straits, estuaries, wanting to go through doubts loneliness, mourning, and sadness" (*In the United States of Africa* 61-62)

blêmes, les zombies cendreux, et tout une cylindrée d'insultes encore inouïes…"[68] circulate often in the verbiage Africans employ to describe the "étrange peuple de la nuit dont on n'envie pas le sort," (92). This elegant inversion is a nod towards rhetoric and ideologies towards refugees from the Global South in Europe and the United States. Also invoked in the dead refugee's letter is the long history of intracontinental migration within Africa – a mode of diaspora that is often overlooked in wider discourse about global migration. The letter-writer's casting himself as part of a global collective reminds his audience of the centrality of the world hegemons in affecting lived experiences and conditions around the world.[69]

The situation in Waberi's Europe is quite dire. When Maya embarks on a journey to France to find her birth mother, she has the sense that she finds herself "en pays dominé, conquis historiquement et éconiquement"[70] the populace of which adopt a Lacanian stance of "se regardant dans le miroir d'autrui pour se convaincre de sa propre existance" (146).[71] The parallels between Maya's self-effacing gaze and the desperate self-affirming gaze of the populace she observes in France are obvious. The two reflections how dominant discourse regulates the manner in which subjugated and victimized populations construct transnational senses of self. In other words, as Maya's journey to France and back to Asmara demonstrates, the functional "I" resides somewhere in between the ideological imaginary and self-validation. Maya, finding herself unable to fully identify with her African adoptive parents or with the destitute

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[68] "wetbacks, split-heads, white skin-and-bones, mangy dogs, poisonous turtles, irascible billy goats, motherless little rats, salt thieves, pallid gypsies, ashen zombies, and a whole tankful of curses as yet unheard…" (*In the United States of Africa* 62)

[69] "strange people of the night whose fate is not to be envied" (*In the United States of Africa* 61)

[70] "in a conquered country, historically and economically dominated" (*In the United States of Africa* 102)

[71] "looking into others' mirror to convince themselves of their own existence" (my translation)

mendicants she meets on the street, feels overwhelmingly compelled to unearth her roots in France and adopt a position vis-à-vis her poverty-stricken kin. The compulsion is dangerous, in that it poses the risk of becoming totally destructive. When Maya returns to Asmara and to her bemused adoptive "Docteur Papa," the narrator observes to Maya that "[t]u as défait à temps la maille de fureurs qui a failli te perdre à jamais. Tu as frôlé la mort sans t'en rendre compte. Tu étais à deux doigts d'outrepasser les limitesordinaires" (174).[72] Maya's tendency to dissolve herself into her external gaze and her inability to see herself were potentially destructive. The burden of rendering herself invisible due to the simple fact of her alterity is, according to the narrator, a trait with life-ending potential. As such, her journey to the wretched villages of France and the slums of Paris offers her a mirror against which she can now measure herself. Back in Asmara, Maya can throw herself into her creative work – her sculpting and even some writing – and save herself and her distant relative Titus, who acts as a guide-savant on her French quest and for whom Maya is resolved to start a scholarship fund of sorts to support his enrollment at the University of Zaragosa (167). The French escapade remains, for Maya, a singular journey. Concluding that she has done all she can, Maya returns to Asmara, leaving the reader with the understanding that she entertains no plans to return. The last section of the novel encompasses a journey of self-discovery for the protagonist. However, her return to Asmara and her eventual resolution to immerse herself into her life in the capital city demonstrates the many fissures in the relationship between the developed and the developing (or underdeveloped) world. That Maya can retreat and resolve to base her

[72] "[j]ust in time, you unraveled the mesh of angers that nearly destroyed you. You had a brush with death without realizing it" (*In the United States of Africa* 122)

continued relationship with her relatives on pecuniary exchange absolves her from any real responsibility. Furthermore, she refuses to investigate the reasons why she feels so compelled to maintain physical and emotional distance from her kin in France beyond the fact of their destitution. In the end, Waberi invites us to interrogate the power dynamics that inform regional relations, ones that, he proposes, cannot be undone by cosmopolitan ideals of responsibility towards all humans regardless of creed or color. This approach could also offer a critique of the Afropolitan mentality in that performing success and comfort in a variety of upper-class metropolitan spaces does not solve the problems caused by extended colonial extractive and exploitative relationships between the West and the continent. Ultimately, Waberi's text calls his readers to face a mirror and investigate their own engagement in global systems and cultures of exploitation, subjugation, and willfull ignorance.

Crucially, more than "chart[ing] the failure of western ideologies of modernity from African perspectives" (Janis, The United States of Africa: Afrofuturistic pasts and Afropolitan futures 40), Waberi's text puts into vivid relief the insufficiencies of aspirations for mimicked supremacy. The solution to rampant postcolonial corruption and dysfunction is not, Waberi text warns, to simply invert the system and construct new supremacies. Maya's liminality demonstrates the trap of this mimicry in a manner reminiscent of Fanon and Memmi. Indeed, Janis notes that in Waberi's text,

> The concept of reversibility involves much more than the utopian artist who imagines otherwise, or who imagines another world – reversibility is a question not only of the self and the other, but of art's entry into world from any number of points, of art's engagement with trans- and interculturality, or art's instantiation of Africa and the diaspora, as well as an ironic 'Africa' (41).

Additionally, the question of reversibility raises questions of the relationship between art and politics, particularly in postcolonial African discourse and ideology. Enfolded into the alternate history mechanism of Waberi's text is a critique of the contemporary methods of capitalist and colonialist global domination. In an inverted dominant African utopia – or "dystopic utopia" (Orlando 2) – we still encounter the same traps and pitfalls that accompany capitalism and colonialism in "actual" world history. Undeniably, Waberi's "Africa has also been corrupted by its rampant, excessive capitalism" and "is stuck in the bogs of victimization and the usual cycles of capitalist exploitation that exit in the present as legacies of the colonial, imperial past" (Orlando 6). Orlando's rather pessimistic analysis of postcolonial utopias is useful in its seeming to open pathways for new modes of specifically postcolonial speculation. In her assessment, Waberi's text, along with Abdelaziz Belkhodjha's *Le retour de l'éléphant,* reveals the insufficiency of postcolonial alternate history due to the unshakeable hold of historical postcolonial residue and the impracticality of uniting an entire continent in pursuit of alternative social and economic organization. The picture that emerges from reading Waberi's novel and the smattering of critical engagements and reviews it has inspired is of a strong necessity to imagine Africa differently and for new methodologies to speculate African futures.

The result of Waberi's "dystopic utopia" is threefold: "not only is Africa forced to confront its failings, the West, too, as it looks in the mirror and sees its image reflected back, is compelled to consider the potential that the African continent could offer if the tables were turned" (Orlando 11). Furthermore, the novel serves as a warning of sorts, highlighting the potential pitfalls of newly-emergent alternative structures of power. The dystopia that Orlando reads into Waberi's novel derives from the manners in which the

author's "United States of Africa" exhibits practices and policies that are emulative of exploitative and inequitable dynamics that regulate contemporary lives. The key, Waberi shows us, resides in avoiding the impulse to replicate these dimensions and rather employ a radical imagination to design something different. Maya, rather than "evok[ing] an Afropolitan being-in-the-world that represents shared citizenship with the world of others," (Orlando 10) presents a possibility for transnationalism that is responsible and responsive to divergent experiences and access to resources. That she was adopted by a prosperous and successful doctor-academic and a loving mother fixes her in an alterity that fuels her transnational creativity. It is precisely because she is Other but not necessarily subjugated to the same kinds of discrimination as other Europeans in the text that Maya can serve as a potential bridge across the definitive discrepancies in European and African experiences in the novel and in the world that is reflected in a refracted manner throughout the text.[73] The novel's satirical elements depend on Maya's alterity, which is amplified by the narrator's droll tone. The inverted history of the text is bizarre from the reader's and author's perspectives, however Maya, in her sensitivity to the power dynamics embedded in the United States of Africa's global dominance, stands as the perfect interlocuter because of her insider-outsider status.

The vantage point of the marginal observer drives many new diaspora narratives; the narrator's foreignness equips them to notice and comment, as their comparative eye reflects back on their known home system while they decipher the new host system.

[73] Here, I disagree with Valérie Orlando's assertion that "Maya in her difference will always be marginalized in Africa" (10). The narrative seems to insist that Maya's privileged and loving upbringing distinguish her from the downtrodden Europeans she sees and interacts with on the streets in Asmara. Her travels across the continent and, eventually, to France on her journey to find her birth mother, are only possible *because* she is not a marginalized European adoptee, but rather one who was raised by well-to-do parents who could afford her education and lifestyle as an erratic creative.

Though not quite an interloper, Maya is semi-peripheral, a position she cements herself by indulging in her nomadic artistic bohemian propensities. The novel ends with an open-ended question, as Maya approaches "la première station de la paix intérieure" (175).[74] The only avenue for Maya to begin the process of self-realization and acceptance is for her to engage with her difficult past and reconcile it with her vision for a productive, creative future. In much the same way, the text implies that the path to a sustainable, if not dominant, "Africa" rests on a similar process of cleansing reconciliation. There is, Waberi's narrator assures the reader, a means to extracting a collective from the painful loop of postcolonial trauma. Whether or not the reader holds African supremacy or global dominance as the ultimate goal, Waberi's novel offers a vision into an empowered speculative future that functions as a momentary reprieve from his and his readers' contemporary contexts.

Speculative Worldbuilding

Significantly, the effectiveness of Shawl's and Waberi's texts depends on their dedicated deployment of what Darko Suvin terms the "novum." "Logically necessary" and "hegemonic in narration," the novum is a defining characteristic in science fiction literature that distinguishes it from other literary or artistic genres. Suvin defines the novum as "a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's and implied reader's norm or reality" (80). The novum is all-encompassing construction that completely differs from the author's and reader's context in such a manner as to refer

[74] "the first stage of inner piece" (my translation)

back to this "lived reality" and offer a tangible commentary through the tension the reader experiences in evaluating the discrepancies. The novum is remarkable because it integrates a variety of definining realms and can implicate or describe novelty in terms of a "new invention," a temporal or locative transition, the presence of a central character with a striking trait, or in novel or invented power dynamics (ibid.). The function, then, is twofold. Firstly, the novum must develop in a manner that is immersive, convincing, and allows the reeader to follow the narrative logically. The immersion should activate the reader's sensation of difference from lived reality. In other words, as Suvin insists, "one should say that the necessary correlate of the novum is an *alternate reality*, one that possesses a *different historical time* corresponding to different human relationships and sociocultural norms actualized by the narration" (88). The novelty depends on the noticeable and oftentime stark distinction between the author's and the reader's reality, which remain consistent points of reference for the reader. Secondly, the novum also inspires the readers to engage in critical observation of the text's structure in relation to lived experience. The novum maintains an allegoric relationship to the author's and reader's "reality" such that the commentary – be it social, economic, political, or a combination of the three – is embedded in its very existence. The aspect of the "real world" that is upended to craft the novum is the very thing that the text purports to critique. While the SF text's world has to be autonomous and withstand close examination on its own merit, it also functions to refer the reader back to their own world and spur critical interrogation. Suvin describes this relationship as a "feedback oscillation" that directs the reader in a circular manner between the constructed world of the text, the author's historical context, the reader's actual reality, and back to the world

of the text (88). This is a crucial aspect of African science fiction that employs aspects of the inherent political critique embedded in postcolonial literature (Quayson *Postcolonialism*).[75]

In both the novels explored in this chapter, the constructed "Africa" is the novum. Both texts portray a reconstituted political landscape and engage with the ideological circulation of "Africa" as space and idea. Each novel challenges the extant ideoscape of Africa, while pushing the reader to reflect on their own complicity and acceptance of persistant denigration and exploitation. In the case of Shawl's *Everfair*, the colonizing impulse, the desire to venture into social and political experimentation with the intent of "saving" those languishing under viciously violent and exploitative conditions, finds new hosts in the Everfairians and their mission to liberate via alternative colonization. Waberi's novel's move to displace commonly-held stereotypes and racist tropes onto Europe invites the reader into a boomerang investigation of how these ideologies persist and continue to circulate in various spheres. As a novum, the reconstructed "Africas" function in a self-contained but also highly-referential manner; they "change the whole universe of the tale" and require the reader to reckon with the "totalizing" nature of the new worlds embodied in the texts (Suvin 80). Furthermore, in their engagement with

[75] This classic text's third chapter, "Literature as a Politically Symbolic Act" draws from Biodun Jeyifo's writing on Chinua Achebe and Salman Rushdie to insist, that postcolonial African literature differs from postmodern Western literature in the inextricability of aesthetics and politics. He references the fact that African authors themselves describe their works as political in interviews (85). But he also points to the fact that, Jeyifo's model of a "dialectical continuum" between a postcoloniality of normativity and an interstitial or liminal postcoloniality creates a discursive space within African texts that moves them into a fourth estate position similar to that previously occupied by the press. I would argue that contemporary literature and now popular music sustain this ideological space, serving as sharp reflections of life throughout the African continent. In some instances, this manner in which creative production places human experience in stark relief remains *more* accessible on the global cultural landscape than the press and raises questions of access to content and the circulation of targeted imagery.

innovation in the material and social sciences, and new technologies of warfare and diplomacy, the worlds that Shawl and Waberi construct lead to reflections on the implications for future imaginary renderings of African spaces and their relations to those in other parts of the world. They argue for radically creative political imagination as a means of forging new paths for the continent's future. While Suvin reminds us that the SF text's world has to be total and autonomous, functioning as its own complete system that hinges on the novum to distinguish it from the reader's and the authors' world(s), he also emphasizes that SF stands in an analogous relationship to "reality." In other words, while the reader should be able to immerse herself into the world of the text, the work should also compel her to examine and reflect on her own. The novum's proximity to verisimilitude, in some cases its plausibility, is the fulcrum of the work's analogy.

Everfair and *Aux États-Unis d'Afrique* disrupt a temporal landscape in which the African continent finds itself molded and sometimes, distorted, in service of often harmful or destructive Eurocentric ideology. However, the question remains whether corrective postcolonial political practice should emulate historical colonial and exploitative capitalist structures to upend white supremacist realities.[76] Waberi and Shawl, along with their science fiction contemporaries, engage in a practice of "recontextualizing the past in a way that changes the present and the future" (Womack 158). As such, whether the alternate history methodology inserts a condition of possibility for technological advancement into proto-colonial resistance on the continent,

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[76] Malorie Blackman raises this question in her popular dystopian young adult series called *Noughts & Crosses.*The series currently comprises 5 books that portray a romantic relationship between two young people from different echelons of a highly-stratified society. The novels depict a structure in which Black people wield political and social power, which they abuse to subjugate white people. The book series has enjoyed popularity in the United Kingdom since its debut in 2001 and was adapted into a television series by the BBC in 2020.

or rewrites history in order to imagine a future in which a unified African federation holds a position of political and ideological dominance on the world stage, speculating Africa allows for critical intervention of what "Africanness" signifies today and opens possibilities for what it can and could mean in the future. Indeed, "[e]ngaging the politics of imagining means not only operating within the limiting mode of the political reactionary but also imagining and, more significantly, occupying alternative African futures" (Sunstrum 114). Furthermore, this type of worldbuilding through alternative history carries transnational implications. Shawl and Waberi are both diasporic figures, writing from outside the continent. Assumedly, there is a separation of nearly 200 years between the setting of Shawl's novel in the Belgian Congo and Waberi's future United States of Africa. That the two texts set in vastly different temporalities continue to address similar thematic reverberations demonstrates the extent to which the harmful ideologies are deeply entrenched in contemporary imaginaries. Even in restructured "totalized" worlds, European supremacist ideologies prevail and demonstrate the truly transnational nature of decolonization and postcolonial imagination. Although Valérie K. Orlando holds Waberi's text as an example of one that eschews observing the postcolonial nation-state on its own terms, an argument she builds off her reading of the "insular" postcolonial angst she notices throughout the text (2), Waberi's and Shawl's texts actually highlight how much African histories and futures implicate those of many spaces around the world. In particular, the world of creative speculation has become a hotbed for re-imagining Africa, particularly for immigrants, their children, and Afro-diasporic people.

Recent discourse about speculative renderings of Africa, Africans, and Africanness have been re-invigorated by the widespread popularity of Disney's 2018 film, *Black Panther*. Post-apocalyptic and dystopian works have gained new popularity to Western audiences in parallel to the resurgence of fascism and white supremacist administrations in various Western states. Accompanying this trend and due in large part to the rise of social media that collapses cultural and physical distances, African artists and "Africa" as a whole have also gained resurgent visibility in the West, particularly marked by the increased consumption of contemporary African music and the Afrobeats genre. Disney inserted *Black Panther* into this cultural context, tapping a transnational cast that many have lauded as a model of pan-Africanism. Although crafted by a corporate entity based in the United States, *Black Panther* allows the space for an African utopia within the context of a persistently complicated global landspace. Undoubtedly, *Black Panther* is an American film based on an American comic book series and built upon an American worldview, that includes a question of diasporic and continental subjects' and regimes' obligations to one another. The film's release and popularity incited a flurry of journalistic and academic responses that persist today as junior scholars address a phenomenon they term "the Wakandification of Africa" (Bentil 2020; Mulkey 2020). Indeed, contemporary engagements with the African continent as a utopian setting invoke the discussion about the problematic of insistent Western habits of essentializing or distorting realities of African political, economic and social lives. The film's many complex elements lend themselves to a range of analytical vantage points and, it seems, signal a new direction in contemporary Africanist scholarship as the concept of "Africa" and belonging to the continent continues to evolve.

Many elements of Disney's film are resonant with Waberi's and Shawl's novels: the dominance of an African state, the engagement with global diplomatic dynamics, the figure of a confident woman diplomat, fraught dynamics resulting from colonial encounters, and intracontinental international relations, and the seemingly incessant modernity-tradition polemic run through all three works. Where *Black Panther* differs slightly from these texts and potentially signals a pivot in creative representations of speculative Africa is

> its unapologetic assertions of difference that do not predicate the independence aspirations of a people of African descent on the grudging magnanimity of others. In this film, where one African thing stands freely, other entities, African or not, stand by it unless provoked into opposition (Adéẹ̀ḳọ́ 138).

Further scholarship on contemporary speculative works from and about Africa can employ methodologies similar to those that Adélékè Adéẹ̀ḳọ́ recognizes as characteristically postcolonial[77] to engage in a global project of radical re-imagination that makes room for voices and ideas from the continent and the diaspora. A significant portion of speculative fiction's affordances is the space or freedom for experimental conceptions of the subjecthood and relation within built worlds. Consider Samuel Delany's remarks about identity in his interview 1994 interview with Mark Dery:

> "Now part of what, from my marginal position, I see as the problem is the idea of anybody's having to fight the fragmentation and multicultural diversity of the world, not to mention outright oppression, by constructing

[77] Adéẹ̀ḳọ́ "deploys *postcoloniality* as a broad term that captures a tendency of organizing and interpreting relations among peoples and nations" (137, original emphasis). What is strikingly effective about *Black Panther* in Adéẹ̀ḳọ́'s view is the manner in which the film draws viewer attention to global power dynamics and asserts an African place in the global scale of self-sufficient and potentially beneficent governance. The technological innovations are laudable and do, of course, assist Wakanda's singularity. However, Adéẹ̀ḳọ́ places particular significance on Wakanda's assiduous protection of "the freedom to be left alone to be different. Interactions preferred in the narrative indicate that wanting to be (or being persuaded to want to be) like others brings no worthy benefit" (138).

> something so rigid as an identity, an identity in which there has to be a fixed and immobile core, a core that is structured to hold inviolate such a complete biological fantasy as race whether white or black." (Dery 190)

Delany is pushing us to consider how imagining the unknown, speculating with form, structure, and system, allows us to think beyond the strictures that dictate contemporary lived experience. Some of the constraints on political postcolonial projects – global power dynamics and economic structures – disappear or come into new relief within the realm of the speculative and allow readers and creators alike to consider what is possible. Moving into the capacious realm of the possible, then, widens the scope of what conversations and interactions can and should occur in the realm of the real. Speculation allows us to recognize the various ways that the systems within which we operate are constructions of their own, the results of earlier speculation.[78] Imagining ourselves in the future is important, but *how* we see ourselves in that future is also crucial. Indeed, in postcolonial and contemporary spaces, "imagination is a tool of resistance" (Womack 24). Crucially, that African science fiction appears to be a fecund landscape leading the charge in contemporary trends in African literature "resituates Africa as a place capable (like its novelists) of thinking the conditions of its political, human, environmental, technological, and literary relevance at the local and planetary level" (Moudileno 75).

Ivor W. Hartmann's emphatic introduction to the first of his *AfroSF* anthologies, proclaims science fiction to be

> the only genre that enables African writers to envision a future from *our* African perspective […] The value of this envisioning for any third-world

[78] See for example, Delany's thoughts on James Baldwin's realization that "there *were* no white people – that is to say, 'whiteness,' as it indicated a race, was purely an anxiety fantasy to which certain people had been trained immediately to leap […] whenever they encountered certain other people whom they coded as black or nonwhite" (Dery 190). Consider also Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's previously-cited observation that she "became Black" upon emigrating to the United States from Nigeria, a majority-Black country.

> country, or in our case continent, cannot be overstated nor negated. If you can't see and relay an understandable vision of the future, your future will be co-opted by someone else's vision" (7).

He goes on to declare that "[f]iction by African writers is of paramount importance to the development and future of our continent" (ibid).[79] The contemporary global political moment might be a particularly ripe moment to revisit and reinvest in speculative imagination about Black spaces as organizing and other forms of protest appear to be ushering in new political realities. The fact that the Movement for Black Lives has become a global one, galvanized by several rallying cries, of which variations on "Black Lives Matter" and "I Can't Breathe" are consistent refrains, adapted to various local contexts, appears to demonstrate the critical necessity of collective capacious imaginations.[80] It is true that continental new diasporic authors can and should engage one another as they activate their "capacity to think, to imagine, and to project oneself intellectually into different worlds" (Moudileno 76). What remains to be sorted, as recent events in political and cultural history have also indicated, are the terms upon which these artists do so.

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[79] Hartmann compiled and published two compilations of African Science Fiction literature having facing difficulty finding an avenue to publish his own speculative work.

[80] Currently, the organizing hashtag #ZimbabweanLivesMatter has come to be employed heavily on social media by scholars, students, and activists protesting political corruption and demagoguery in Zimbabwe. Protests in the southern country reached an apex following the government's shoddy approach to distributing resources in response to COVID-19. The current administration has detained several of its detractors, including novelist Tsitsi Dangarembga, following their public criticism of President Emmerson Mnangagwa's regime.

CODA: TOWARD NEW DIASPORAS?

"If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go."

James Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation," *The Fire Next Time* (1963)

"the condition of the diaspora is to miss the taste of something you never exactly knew"

Tao Leigh Goffe, November 11, 2020

As the bass and drum line of Nigerian singer Tiwa Savage's most popular song "All Over"[81] begin, the music video's camera pans over a picturesque boat club. The viewer sees a variety of boats, docked at seven walkways in the shadow of a multitude of high-rise buildings. On the shore, the viewer can just barely make out a swimming pool, the striking blue of the water no match for the deep aqua of the ocean in which the boats are floating serenely. As the video cuts to the next scene, a caption line in the bottom right corner of the screen informs the viewer that the aerial view is from Miami, Florida. The viewer's attention is focused on a vibrantly painted lifeguard station, dwarfed by a high-rise building, and overshadowed by the large red and black logo of E2E Productions, the company that produced Savage's video. Tiwa Savage appears herself for the first time in the video's third frame, standing on the beach facing away from water that now reflects three remarkable shades of blue, distinct from the clear sky. With her left hand on her head, she gazes intently into the distance at a spot ostensibly behind and to the left of her viewer. Savage is wearing a long-sleeve white swimsuit, designed to

[81] Savage's "All Over" is her second most popular video on YouTube with over 15 million views. Her most popular video is one in which she collaborates with the prominent Nigerian rapper, WizKid, who gained visibility by writing for and collaborating with Canadian rapper, Drake.

resemble a deconstructed dashiki – the recognizable design is emblazoned on the front and at the elbows of her suit. The cut-outs along her midriff signal to her viewer that she is not traditional. The dashiki, a widely-recognized West African design, reminds the reader that she is, indeed, Nigerian, whether on the beaches of Miami or Lagos. Her hair in long brown and blond braids, a light breeze agitating the strands of her yellow fringe earrings signals a new mode of being-African-in-the-world.

American singer Omarion takes a different approach in demonstrating his transnational perspective. The music video for his 2017 song "Distance" starts with a shot of a bird of prey – an eagle or a hawk – circling in a mostly clear blue sky. The eagle is slightly off center, tracing circles in the sky on the left side of the frame. As the first notes of Omarion's song begin to play, the frame shifts suddenly to give the audience an aerial view of a mountain, covered with vibrant green mossy grass and extending far off into the horizon. Just at the horizon line, we see evidence of some buildings – perhaps a small town. Quickly, the scene changes again. We now spy the singer himself. Arms slightly akimbo, eyes closed, head tilted to the sky. His name appears in the top left side of the frame, hanging above two baobab trees, one much fuller than the other. Wearing non-descript jeans and a neon orange sweatshirt, Omarion is standing in a grassy plain absorbing the elements before he begins to dance. During his introductory declarations (his name among other phrases), the video cuts away from the singer. We now see another angle of the plain, over which the name of the song is superimposed. At the bottom of the screen, we see the timestamp – "PM 3:07 Oct. 03 2016" and the location "South Africa." Before the singer, once known as the lead singer of the boy band B2K, launches into his energetic dance, still in a grassy plain, the camera cuts quickly to a shot

an elephant unfurling its trunk to grasp some tree leaves. The transition is incredibly rapid; the viewer barely registers the animal and does not witness it either retrieving the leaves or placing them in its mouth. Another shot of Omarion, still in the meadow, but this time ambling to his dancing spot with his hands in the front pocket of the bright sweatshirt. Then, quickly, the camera turns to a gathering of giraffes, a calf and two developed ones, who have stopped in the middle of a mud path to gaze at the camera. Again, we are reminded of the location as "South Africa" floats in the middle of the screen in the same font used to announce the singer's name just second before. Finally, as the percussion begins, our view returns to Omarion who is now dancing energetically in front of the baobab trees. The video continues, interspersing shots of wildlife running in the meadows with scenes of Omarion dancing to the song's Afrobeats rhythm. After about a minute and 50 seconds, the narrative shifts. Sitting atop a safari vehicle, Omarion spots a carful of women, decked with a camera and a long telephoto lens who begin taking his picture. The gaze shifts, though he is in South Africa on safari to look at wildebeest, Omarion becomes the spectacle, eventually entering a village, donning traditional garb, and dancing alongside women dressed in beads and preparing to perform a routine that ressembles the Zulu maiden dance. The message is quite clear. Through music, Omarion participates in an active collision between the diaspora and the continent. Singing in phrases that resemble Caribbean patois, over an Afrobeats beat and ending the journey having been initiated into a village, Omarion adopts a type of pan-African stance that highlights the affinities between Black communities in different parts of the world.

The rise and global proliferation of Afrobeats music presents an interesting case study in the argument for new and expansive notions of diaspora and global intraracial affinity. The genre blends various African, American Hip Hop, and Afro-Caribbean musical styles and conventions as performers sing or rap lyrics in creoles as well as in European and African indigenous languages. Unlike the speculative texts I explore in the third chapter, Afrobeats songs often move away from the myths of ancient "lost" African civilizations. Rather, they privilege lifestyles of glamour and prosperity in a manner congruent with music cultures all around the world. Often, Afrobeats songs make use of familiar Hip Hop braggadocio and invoke the same themes of money, sex, love, and fame as other popular musicians around the world. Steady migration throughout and from Africa couple with contemporary proliferation of social media and digital music platforms work together to ensure the global circulation of Afrobeats artists leading to high-profile collaborations with Western and continental African stars – Fuse ODG and Ed Sheeran, Diamond Platnumz and Ne-Yo, Wizkid and Drake, Burna Boy and Beyoncé. Music has proven to be a productive landscape for encounters between African artists and their contemporaries around the world. Furthermore, African-based artists such as Tiwa Savage use their music to perform a transnationalism that no longer requires moving out of the continent to engage. So, what are we to do with this truth in light of Yogita Goyal's call for new diasporas? Much as Goyal recognizes that "new diaspora fictions exact new and transformed frames, insofar as they unhook diaspora from slavery and take us beyond assimilation" (*Runaway Genres: The Global Afterlives of Slavery* 208), contemporary popular music moves us beyond the trope of the griot or the protest artist (Fela Kuti emerging as the primary example) to consider a shared musical field in which global

Blackness can be performed in multiple dimensions. Music truly requires a practice of new diasporas that allows space for modes of belonging that completely transcend the nation. Language and style become the important factors in contemporary self-mapping and belonging to Africa becomes democratized in a manner much more flexible than national borders and administrations can afford. Additionally, in the face of changing global publishing networks, music circulates at a register that is much more accessible than the novel and comes into contact with collectives who do not necessarily overlap with target audiences for new diaspora narratives.

Any future examination of contemporary popular music must take into account the various manners that these artists perform Africa. There appears to be incongruity between the widllife and headdress that Omarion uses to demarcate his relationship to South Africa and Tiwa Savage's deconstructed dashiki swimsuit.[82] There also remains an important question about the contemporary purchase of pan-Africanism as a political orientation. As Tsitsi Jaji observes, "certainly a compelling narrative about pan-Africanism holds that it was most effective in the simultaneous struggles against colonialism, apartheid, and legally sanctioned racist discrimination in the twentieth century" (8). The political Pan-African movement coalesced around very real experiences of global oppression and exploitation under the racist colonialist regimes around the continent and their peer governments in Europe and the United States. Awareness of the goings-on in contemporary political arenas would indicate that the conditions against which Pan-African activists fought in the early to mid-twentieth century persist today,

[82] Unfortunately, many scenes in Omarion's music video are reminiscent of the tropes the late Binyavanga Wainaina satirizes in his now-famous 2005 piece, "How to Write About Africa," originally published in *Granta 92.*

having morphed and taken on new insidious forms. Indeed, Jaji insists that “it is precisely because the challenges of new forms of exploitation are so acute and pervasive that renewed perspectives on liberation movements and solidairty are so urgently needed” (ibid). As political unrest around the world in response to rampant police brutality and government corruption indicate, Jaji’s observation is evergreen. In contemporary contexts, Pan-Africanist ideology and investment in the idea of a transnational Black collective has shifted, giving rise to a shared global cultural platform that only periodically maps onto radical political capacity-building in Europe, the United States, and Africa. However, notions of a shared racial identity linger, connecting artists with audiences around the world who express a sentiment of shared belonging. This couples with the recent surge of companies that offer DNA testing to determine regional African ancestry for diasporic subjects whose forebears were violently separated from family lineage due to the atrocities of colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. Alongside the new diasporas comes a new sense of global Black affinity, bolstered by social media and music. Contemporary mediascapes emphasize this artistic landscape. Omarion can bemoan the “distance between our bodies” in his lyrics while demonstrating through his music video that there is in fact, very little distance at all.

This collapsed distance became apparent in 2019, the declared “Year of Return” to Ghana for people of African descent. The Ghana Tourism Authority (GTA) described “The Year of Return, Ghana 2019” as “a major landmark marketing campaign targeting the African-American and Diaspora Market to mark 400 years of the first enslaved African arriving in Jamestown Virginia” (Ghana Tourism Authority). The year-long undertaking was a collaboration between the GTA, Ghana’s Ministry of Tourism, Arts,

and Culture and the Office of Diaspora Affairs, The Office of President Nana Akufo-Addo, the PANAFEST Foundation, and the US-based Adinkra Group. Throughout the year, events commemorated the sites and legacies of the transatlantic slave trade while celebrating the enduring relationships between the diaspora and the first independent African nation. Following the success of this marketing and tourism campaign, and invoking Ghana's preeminance in pan-Africanism, President Akudo-Addo has declared the next ten years to be dedicated to "Beyond the Return" events that would continue to emphasize and celebrate trans-diaspora connections. Although the Year of Return and Beyond the Return initiatives are designed to bolster diasporic tourism and economic engagement in Ghana, the projects also emerge from a striking resurgence of diasporic fascination with African locales and cultural products. The 2019 series of events culminated with a music festival that featured performances from several globally popular Afrobeats stars, many of whom currently reside outside the continent. Indeed, these musicians continue to gain popularity as symbols of contemporary Africanness, a distinct way of being that emphasizes tangible connections between Africa and the diaspora, one that persists regardless of individuals' places of physical residence.

In the Black world, diaspora necessarily requires transcending the nation because it evolves from the violent tradition of ripping individuals from their home communities and commodifying and essentializing their bodies for the purpose of capitalist production. The elision of national boundaries was requisite for the formation of diasporic identities as Blackness became a signifier for the specific deterritorialization that resulted from the transatlantic slave trade. In contemporary times, neocolonial and neoliberal interventions create the conditions from which migrants flee, causing them to be interjected into the

amorphous extra-African Blackness that continues to order Western racial and capitalist hierarchies. Thinking about new diasporas cannot escape these transnational origins. The new African diaspora and the narratives it produces situate themselves in the liminal interplay between nation and larger, nebulous affinities. After all, postcolonial and contemporary migration is a phenomenon of crossing frontiers and mobility across borders. African migrants do retain functional, cultural, and political attachments to their nations of physical origin and their "movement itself provides a panacea for the problems of unbelonging" (Crowley 130) that inspire the calls for new names and new diasporas.

There is, undoubtedly, deep tension in scholarship about contemporary narratives of African migration. On the one hand, there remains the practical reality that "one cannot generally occupy a truly 'transnational space'" because "borders […] are thoroughly regulated, especially in the West, so any access to a postnational state marked by free, untroubled movement between nations must in fact be granted by the nation-state itself as the regulator of that movement" (Crowley 132-133). On the other hand, postcolonial contexts undermine the dependence on "methodological nationalism," which "implies that the nation is the natural container for understanding politics and society" (Quayson, Postcolonialism and the Diasporic Imaginary 140).[83] Ato Quayson's reminder that "the nation state as we know it today is a fairly recent product of human history," (141) and particularly so in the postcolony where borders continue to be negotiated and contested indicates the sheer necessity of thinking transnationally when regarding migration and mobilities. In the case of the migrant narratives addressed in this study,

[83] See chapter 3 for more engagement with Ato Quayson's argument about how place figures into the "diasporic imaginary."

"the figure of the stranger or that of the one who arrives from a point outside of demarcated social or communal boundaries serves to unsettle the easy parameters of the nation-state form" in the methodological nationalist approach to literary analysis (ibid). Furthermore, media interaction with trends in migrants and refugees often "draws upon the rhetoric of naturalization to represent them as threats to the nations and regions in which they arrive" (Daiya 23). This discourse often overlooks the intracontinental migration that also affects the way nation-states function within the continent of Africa. My argument throughout this project is that all three of these observations are true and that the combination of the three defines the ideological space that new diaspora narratives occupy – the realm of simultaneous belonging and unbelonging that characterizes contemporary narratives of Black mobility within Africa and beyond to the West.

The persistent truth that African literature remains radically pluralistic in a manner that both mirrors the many networks of influence, exchange, and interaction that have always defined the African continent's place in the world," (Krishnan IX) corresponds to the ways the diaspora figures in continental political and economic maneuvers, too. For it's part, the African Union (AU)considers the diaspora to be a member constitutent. From the AU's vantage point, "the African Diaspora consists of people of African origin living outside the continent, irrespective of their citizenship and nationality who are willing to *contribute to the development of the continent and the building of the African Union*" (AU, emphasis added). While generally capacious and wide-ranging, the last portion of the definition calls attention to a question that is central to this project: to what utility is Africanness? I follow this line of inquiry not to dismiss

the varying degrees to which contemporary diasporic subjects retain and wield their attachment to the continent, but rather to investigate the manners in which they operationalize and negotiate this affiliation while branching out to Western frontiers. In some cases, the physical and ideological distance is involuntary, as in the case of the political refugees in Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*. In others, migrant subjects such as those in Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers,* retain a semblance of agency in their boomerang sojourns from and back to the continent. Still, in others, engagement and ideological returns to African locales involve radical speculative imagination that interrogate the future potential for productive futures, such is the case in Nisi Shawl's *Everfair* and Abdourahman A. Waberi's *Aux États-Unis d'* Afrique, both alternate history novels.

Throughout this project, I focus on the discursive space between the continent, the old, and the new African diaspora to trace the contours of a contemporary global Black subjectivity. As the field of new diaspora studies expands, there remain many directions into which this work can evolve. Music circulates widely and operates in a different register than the novel. Since the turn of the century, contemporary African popular musicians have developed and refined the Afrobeats genre, molding it into a landscape that is perfectly suited to offer a theory of the new diaspora and contemporary transnationalism. However, hierarchies continue to loom largely in the entertainment sector as well. Anglophone West Africans are quite visible in the Afrobeats arena; Nigerians and Ghanaians hold predominant positions of celebrity, acclaim, and popularity and led the charge into more mainstream acceptance in Western popular music markets. Afrobeats presents an interesting case study of constructed affiliations to Africa because

of its origins in sub-Saharan African migrant communities in England and the United States. Though artists residing across the continent certainly do contribute actively to the African popular music scene, the most visible and celebrated artists are still those who can rap in Twi from London. Alternatively, further study of new diaspora narratives must also consider religion and religiosity as another vector for transnational affiliation. Religion, having been a significant tool for colonial domination persists as an organizing principle for Africans on the continent and in the diaspora. Often, forms of indigenous religious practice are presented as the antithesis to other forms of organized religion, particularly the many forms of Christianity. This tension appears in many new diaspora texts including Okey Ndibe's 2014 *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, a novel about a Nigerian immigrant who travels back to his familial village in Nigeria with the intent of stealing the statue of the town's traditional deity to sell to a high-end gallery in New York City. The protagonist, himself not a believer of any discernible religion must circumvent his immediate family's devout evangelical Christianity and his extended family's prominent role as keepers of the shrine to the traditional god. The novel uses the figure of the returnee to interrogate notions of modernity, progress, and tradition. In this text the new diaspora subject by having acclimated to struggle in New York City puts Nigerian religious practice into relief and forces re-examination of persistent notions of primitivity that underlie the fervent spread of Christianity in the country.

If we are to continue to regard African literature – "a label that is in itself problematic given the continent's vast size and internal diversity" (Krishnan VIII) – as a tool for simultaneous artistic expression and political commentary, then we must also pay close analytical attention to the various manners in which global dynamics affect the

circuits and themes that pervade the literary landscape. For nearly a century, literature has been a real through which continental Africans endeavored to represent themselves as members of a global populace. African literature has long proven itself to be particularly effective at casting an eye on and subverting or critiquing conventions and boundaries. Long before the contemporary waves of migration, and even before the so-called "brain drain" of the late twentieth century, African ideas and locales have travelled outside of the continent and have come into full contact with external concepts through which various communities and cultures around the world imagine Africa. Despite the current anxieties about authors writing and catering to non-African audiences and markets, new diaspora narratives craft new articulations of agency and self-fashioning that build upon the explicitly post- and decolonial canon of the mid twentieth century. Now, as a result of migration trends and technological innovations that allow these mobile Africans to retain cultural attachment to their home locales, members of the new African diaspora are theorizing and what Africa means alongside many different voices on the continent. Racialization and postnationalist sensibilities add new implications to the questions these works raise. By engaging "tropes of scattering and return that are at the heart of notions of diaspora" (Goyal, Romance 6), new diaspora narratives push us to think about the oscillatory relationship between a macro-level identification with Africa as an idea(l) and the microexpressions of affinity, collectivity, alienation, and unbelonging that also figure largely in migrant experiences in Europe and North America.

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