

Narratives of Migration and Diaspora in Contemporary African Fiction

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.

Signature

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Felix', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Date 05/09/2018

Felix Mutunga Ndaka

Johannesburg, 2018

Dedication

To Joy, Baraka and Noma –

May you dream beyond the vastness of the universe.

May your willfulness never be contained.

And may your dream-worlds always come true.

And to mum and dad,

This too is for you.

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Abstract

This study is concerned with contemporary African literature's representation of African migrations and diasporas in the West. The study seeks to grapple with how contemporary African mobilities transform and configure gendered, racial, familial and national relations. Through the use of the novel genre, the study holds that contemporary African writer's representation of experiences of migration and diaspora give us fresh lenses with which to revisit and complicate debates on cultural and intellectual productions in the context of North/South encounters, nation, home and belonging, gendered experiences of mobility and inter- and intraracial relations. The novels under study – NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013); Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013); Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011); Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007), and *How To Read The Air* (2010); Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (2005); and Alain Mabanckou's *Blue White Red: A Novel* (1998) – portray mobile African characters within local and global contexts and grapple with what it means to be African in a world defined by migration and globalisation, and how being African shapes one's experience of these worlds. The study situates itself critically against triumphant discourses of migration and globalisation by examining postcolonial African subjects whose experiences of migration and global contacts are often framed through the lens of race, gender, class and national dystopias. Through an examination of characters – women, children, marginal African masculinities, ethnic and classed mobilities – who navigate their contacts with the world in varying degrees of vulnerability, the study complicates celebratory and homogenising discourses of global modernity. This study argues that the focalisation on African experiences and perspectives of modernity provide a radical counter-gaze that challenges western discursive control as well as causing epistemic incoherence and disarticulation through diversifying ways of being and knowing. Ultimately, the study's critique of the author's engagement with hegemonic forms enables ideological projects that not only disrupt socio-political and economic hierarchies but also imagine new ethical horizons of human relations.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION	II
DEDICATION	III
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	IV
ABSTRACT	V
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
AFRICAN NARRATIVES OF MIGRATION AND DIASPORA	1
1.1 African Migrations and Diasporas	1
1.2 Contemporary African Fictions of Migration and Diaspora: Locating the Study	6
1.3 A Profile of the Novels.....	29
1.4 Chapter Breakdown.....	33
CHAPTER TWO	38
THE VOYAGE IN: “INVADING” THE WEST IN AFRICAN DIASPORIC WRITING	38
2.1 Introduction	38
2.2 Rupturing the Genre: Un-Writing Silence in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s <i>Americanah</i>	40
2.3 The Salon: Pushing the Boundaries of Racialised Femininity and Migrancy...	51
2.4 Disembodied Spaces: Loud Femininities and Blogging	64

2.5 Unmapping the City: Contestating and Contaminating the City in Teju Cole’s <i>Open City</i>	70
2.6 Conclusion.....	85
CHAPTER THREE	88
TROPING THE HOSTLAND: IMAGINING ELSEWHERE IN THE AFRICAN POSTCOLONY	88
3.1 Introduction	88
3.2 Children’s Games and Photography in Bulawayo’s <i>We Need New Names</i>	92
3.3 Costuming, Passing and the Itineraries of Sapeur Masculinities in Mabanckou’s <i>Blue White Red</i>	114
3.4 Conclusion.....	143
CHAPTER FOUR	147
DIASPORIC CONTACT ZONES: AFRICAN IMMIGRANT MASCULINITIES AND THE AMERICAN SPACE	147
4.1 Introduction	147
4.2 Bodies Out of Place: American Spatialities and the Reconstitution of African Immigrant Masculinities.....	151
4.3 Subversive Marginality in the Neoliberal Academia	182
4.4 Mis-Fathering Sons?: Fictions of Migration, Masculinity and Nation in <i>How to Read the Air</i>	191
4.5 Conclusion.....	208

CHAPTER FIVE	211
UNDUTIFUL DAUGHTER(S): DISRUPTING GEOGRAPHIES OF THE GENDERED NATION AND BELONGING IN ADICHIE’S <i>AMERICANAH</i> AND ATTA’S <i>EVERYTHING GOOD WILL COME</i>	211
5.1 Introduction	211
5.2 Mapping Daughterhood within the Masculinist Nation	214
5.3 Patricidal Epistemologies and Desires: Being Undutiful and Belonging Differently	227
5.4 Conclusion	250
CHAPTER SIX	252
CONCLUSION	252
REFERENCES	265

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

AFRICAN NARRATIVES OF MIGRATION AND DIASPORA

1.1 African Migrations and Diasporas

In this study, my use of diaspora and migration is both cognisant of the confluences and differences these terms conjure (Hickman, 2005). While noting the disciplinary origins of diaspora and migration in religious and sociological discourse respectively, Susan Arndt (2009) pinpoints their “conceptual overlaps” found in the fact that both terms refer to “transnational crossing of borders by *people*” and as such “refer to experiences of displacement and alienation, loss and new beginnings, pain and longing, memory and (dis)identification” (104). In addition, Arndt observes the confluence of the terms in their sharing of notions “of both leaving and arriving (often implying a permanent or at least long-term stay in the land of residence)” (Ibid.). But the two terms also differ in some subtle ways. On the one hand, scholars insist that diaspora encapsulates collective histories of dispersal/scattering to various destinations. Colin A. Palmer for instance emphasises that “a diasporic stream is the movement of a people to several destinations at once or over time” (2000: 57). Borrowing a leaf from Gabriel Sheffer (1986), William Safran (1991) and James Clifford (1994), Judith T. Shuval adds that diasporas encompass “a history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host country, desire for eventual return (which can be ambivalent, eschatological or utopian), ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity defined by the above relationship” (2000: 43). As such, even though it was originally used to refer to Jewish, Armenian and Greek dispersals to various parts of the world, these limits have been exploded to include the movement of other people – African, Palestinian, Sikh, Indian, Irish – to various parts of the world (Tölölyan, 1991; Shuval, 2000; Arndt, 2009; Ndaka, 2013). As a result, diaspora has come to be “applied to all kinds of mass migrations of the second half of the twentieth century which have resulted in the formation of new sub- and supranational cultural structures” and this semantic “extension ... inscribed in it makes it possible to assume a coexistence of a multiplicity of diasporas and to locate these on different levels” (Arndt, 2009: 106).

Because of this proliferation of the term diaspora to refer to various movements, it has come to be increasingly mobilised in the academia and beyond to capture and theorise the equally increasing scattering and settlement of peoples across the globe. Despite its valence, and perhaps because of it, the term “diaspora” remains highly contested (Zezeza, 2009 & 2005; Cohen, 2008). While Braziel and Mannur (2003) caution against its use as a catch-all-phrase to speak of and for all manner of movements and for all dislocations, even symbolic ones, Clifford (1994: 304) argues against the imposition of “strict meanings and authenticity tests” when discoursing diasporas. He shows that the creation of typologies – based on an ideal Jewish type – to define diasporas is not only reductive but that it also obscures certain differences even within one diasporic community. Clifford calls for the recognition of diaspora as a “complex discursive and historical field” and he suggests that the classic diasporic communities should be used as “nonnormative starting points for a discourse that is travelling or hybridizing in new global conditions” (Ibid.: 306).

Migration on the other hand is “etymologically, semantically, and historically inhabited by notions of wandering, the latter focuses prominently on the connotation of ‘emigration’ or moving somewhere else” (Arndt, 2009: 104). Arndt adds that “although migration is a term of movement (of groups as well as of individuals), it may also refer to the resultant state of living somewhere else” temporarily or permanently (Ibid.: 104-5). Evidently therefore, “the relationship between migration and diaspora is causal, migration causing diaspora,” and while some migrations lead to diaspora, not all migrations form diasporas (Ibid.). Palmers (2000) underscores this tension when he opines that “the boundaries between the two – a migration and a diasporic stream – are very elastic since a diaspora is usually the product of several migratory

streams” (57). Thus while diasporic journeys do not “refer to temporary sojourns” but to journeys that “are essentially about settling down, about putting roots ‘elsewhere’” attended by expectations/myths of return, migrations can either be temporary or can in the long run become permanent sojourns (Brah, 1996: 179).

In using the terms African migration and diaspora, this study is attentive to the overlaps and differences that they summon. My usage of the terms in the title hopes to capture the mobilities and displacements that they conjure, and also to refer to the ways the narratives analysed here help us to be attentive to both the home – as the place of departure – and to ways of living and thinking “without home,” to borrow Sara Ahmed’s phraseology (2000: 80). In addition, this study’s use of the two terms recognises the analytical and theoretical purchase that they enable us to engage with the relationships between old African diasporas and contemporary migrants/diasporas. In considering the points of departure alongside points of arrival, this study hopes to establish a productive tension that will illuminate the complex imbrication of memories, cultures, political and economic histories. Even though I use the homogenising and often ahistoricising referent of African migrations and diasporas, the analysis is cognisant of the specificities of migration and diasporization that are informed by the particularities of the nation-state, gender, ethnicities and the times and conditions of migration. However, significance is given to the nation-state not only as a point of departure and as home, but also as a point of return and its mobilisation for a politics of resistance in the face of globalisation, the ravages of imperialism, late capitalism and ethnic nationalisms experienced in host countries.

While this study deals with fictions of contemporary African migrations and diasporas – a reference that has temporal and spatial connotations – this is done against the backdrop of

studies of earlier African mobilities. Studies of African diasporas came to occupy the pride of place in academia in the 1950s and 60s as scholars attempted to make sense of the “traumatising dispersal of Africans through the transatlantic slave trade and the subsequent expectation of return” (Arndt, 2009: 106). As such, the initial scholarly engagements with African diasporas betray a predisposition towards the study of the Black Atlantic which looks at African dispersals from the perspective of “the slave trade and the processes of diasporisation to racialisation” (Zezeza, 2008: 5). Paul Tiyambe Zezeza (2005) decries this “analytical tendency to privilege the Atlantic, or rather the Anglophone, indeed the American branch of the African diaspora” and calls for the expansion of African diaspora discourse to also include “intra-Africa, Indian Ocean [and] Mediterranean” diasporas (35). He therefore gestures to the vast histories of African migrations and diasporas that demand scholarly attention. Writing about these histories, Colin A. Palmer identifies “six diasporic streams associated with African peoples over time,” with the first three classified into pre-modern and the latter three as modern diasporic streams (2000: 57-58). The pre-modern stream includes firstly, movements that “began about 100,000 years ago and has often been described as the great exodus”; the second dispersals “began about 3,000 B.C.E. with the movement of Bantu-speaking peoples from what are now the contemporary nations of Cameroon and Nigeria to other parts of the African continent and to the Indian Ocean”; and the “third prolonged diasporic stream began around the 5th Century B.C.E and involved the movement of traders, soldiers, merchants and slaves to parts of Asia, Europe, and the Middle East” (Ibid.). The other three streams that form the modern African diaspora include: the first movement is associated “with the Atlantic slave trade”; the second dispersal is “associated with the East African slave trade to Asia, which roughly concluded with the era of the Atlantic slave trade”; and the “third stream is the contemporary movement of Africans and peoples of African

descent to various societies of the globe” (Palmer, 2000: 58). According to Palmer, the pre-modern streams were “for the most part ... voluntary ... but there were forced movements as well” while the “modern streams have been almost always the product of racial oppression and attendant systemic evils, and of resistance to them” (Ibid.).

This study deals with narratives of African migrations and diasporas in the West (Euro-America), specifically in France, Britain and America. It zeroes in on migrations and diasporas that Zeleza (2005), cognisant of the challenges of periodisation, refers to as “‘contemporary’ African diasporas,” in a bid to separate them from “‘historic diasporas,” that is, those “‘diasporas formed before the construction of colonial states [and] which have profoundly altered the territorial identifications of Africans ... since the late nineteenth century” (54-5). The scholar goes further to classify the contemporary African diasporas into three waves: the diasporas of colonization, the diasporas of decolonization that happened “during the struggles for independence and immediately afterwards”, and the diasporas of “structural adjustment which were formed since the 1980s out of the migrations engendered by economic, political, and social crises and the destabilizations of SAPs” (55). These contemporary movements have variously come to be referred to as the “postcolonial diaspora”, the “New African Diaspora”, or “the diaspora of imperialism” (Okpewho, 2009: 5).

The present study borrows the rubric of Zeleza’s diasporic categorisation to analyse texts that represent narratives of migration and diasporas that broadly fall under Zeleza’s diasporas of decolonization and movements engendered by “destabilizations of SAPs” (2005: 55). While some of these movements are deemed voluntary and self-elected, they are also “induced by economic and political factors ... in particular ... the failure or delays of

postcolonial African states to realise the hopes of independence” (Davies, 2011: 208). Therefore, and as Zeleza reminds us, the contemporary African migrations and diasporas have “to contend with the added imperative of the modern nation-state, which often frames the political and cultural itineraries of their travel and transnational networks” (2005: 55). In addition, modern advancements in communication and travel technology affords opportunities “to be transnational and transcultural, to be people of multiple worlds and focalities, perpetually translocated, physically and culturally, between several countries or several continents” which further intensifies the investments and connections with “home” in ways that were unavailable to the old diasporas (2005: 56). This then gives us the chance to rigorously engage with modernity and mobility in a seemingly bounded world and to expand the range of studying global power and cultural formations.

1.2 Contemporary African Fictions of Migration and Diaspora: Locating the Study

Within the African continent, intra- and inter-continental migrations of people have been at the centre of the creative and imaginative energies of fictional writers. Mobility as a human phenomenon occupies a pride of place within oral and written African literary traditions. A cursory survey of literary scholarship shows an over emphasis on inter- over intra-continental movements. My interest with literature on inter-continental migrations is informed by the fact that this corpus – written mostly by African authors living in the West – increasingly calls attention to present day realities of African encounters and inscription into a globalised modernity, African intellectual and cultural productions in the face of these encounters and

migrations, expanded questions of race, gender and gendered relations and how they intersect with migration and settlement in hostlands, how the gendered national home shapes migration and informs questions of belonging in addition to how the histories of colonisation and imperialism inform destinations of travel. Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) calls attention to our particular historical moment and the need to revisit African histories within global history in a way that is instructive for the present study. About this historical moment, he writes:

The history is dominated by a climate of interventionist global neoliberal imperialism which increasingly manifests its violent character through ... military invasion[s] ... often justified as humanitarian interventions to introduce democracy and human rights, dethrone dictators, eradicate terrorism and restore order ... These new developments in global history have provoked animated debates with some scholars ... raising issues of the spectre of 'new imperialism' that is involving new players from East and South-East Asia. Some left-leaning scholars have concluded that we are living in a new world of 'universal capitalism in which capitalist imperatives are universal instruments of capitalist domination'. They see this development as a very recent phenomenon. (vii)

To study African literary production that engages migrations to the West is therefore not to detract from the equally salient writings of intra-continental migrations but an attempt to grapple with the close interpretation and explanation of African socio-cultural and political realities in a world where configurations of global power permeate and shape the everyday. Although there are a number of poetry, drama and even short fiction texts that deal with migration and diaspora, this study is mainly concerned with the novel as a genre whose proliferation in Euro-American migrant and diasporic spaces is undisputable. The main texts that

are examined in this study include: Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (2005); Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* (2007) and *How to Read the Air* (2010); Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011); Alain Mabanckou's *Blue White Red: A Novel* (2013); NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need new Names* (2013); and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013). These texts are also read alongside other texts that are helpful in enabling a productive discussion.

While the selected novels cannot be said to be representative of the diverse cultures and peoples of Africa, their narrativisation of migration within the backdrop of the "postcolony" and the intensifying forces of globalisation affords an opportunity to interrogate issues that preoccupy present day social and imaginative domains. The interest in the novel is informed by the fact that, as a literary form, it presents a distinctively eclectic and expansive space which is accessible for readers' journeying into the complexities of human experience and dilemmas that the characters confront. The reflective and self-analytical mode in which the novels under study are narrated mark a growing/cumulative self-awareness that, to adapt Bakhtin (1984: 63) is indicative of "unfinalisability" and "indeterminacy" that prods the reader to imagine further horizons of engagement and sociality. In addition, the novel's "semantic openedness," scope, and magnitude present a site for the dialogic interaction of multiple meanings, voices, and discourses (Ibid.: 6).

These novels bear witness to the intensification of mobility and journeying which has subsequently become a topical subject of exploration by what Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton refer to as the third generation of African writers in an era of globalisation marked by inequalities of power, national disillusionment and crises (2005: 14-5). Tanure Ojaide (2008)

echoes this when he observes the “overwhelming impact” that “migration and globalisation” have had “on [recent] African literature,” something that gives us a glimpse into the “evolving nature of African literature and the depiction of the contemporary African condition” (46). While early African literature’s treatment of migration and return journeys – largely written by male authors of the first generation of African writers – is almost always ideologically tied to the politics of decolonisation, nationalism and nation building, contemporary African writers display some marked continuities and ruptures with this tradition. For these early writers, sojourn in the west is rarely contemplated, perhaps an indication of the hopes of the writers in the nation after independence. This can be found in texts such as Chinua Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease* (1960), Wole Soyinka’s *The Interpreters* (1965), Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Fragments* (1970), Peter Abrahams’ *A Wreath for Udomo* (1956), J. P. Clark’s *America, Their America* (1964) etc.

Compared to this older generation of African writers, a sizeable number of contemporary writers who explore migrant and diasporic themes live and are published in Western metropolises – including the ones dealt with in the present study. Their personal experiences of migration and diaspora become the fodder which feeds their literary imagination. If as Tanure Ojaide opines “staying in the homeland and migrating have political implications ... in the production of literary works,” then it is important to consider how the placement of African authors in Western metropolises shapes their literary texts (2015: 22). For one, Ojaide takes note of how Nigerian writers living in the “liberal cultures” of the West appear to be “more radical especially concerning issues of sex and sexuality than those within Nigeria” (Ibid.: 201). While I am hesitant to accept this assertion, literary scholarship would benefit from a comparative exploration of the thematic, narratorial and ideological divergence or convergence

of writers from within and without the continent. Ojaide also observes that, in the contemporary era, “migration, globalization, and the related phenomena of exile, transnationality, multilocality, and place polygamy have their bearing on the cultural identity, aesthetics, content, and form of the literary production of Africans abroad” (2015: 31). To the scholar, as a result of African writers’ locatedness in the West, there are identifiable changes in their literary engagement (2008: 46). However, this is not to say that one needs to have personally experienced migration in order to be able to write about it. For instance, Ike Oguine, the writer of *A Squatter’s Tale* “offers an exquisite analysis of acute, painfully felt dislocation ... in an alien dispensation” despite never having lived in America (Ikheloa, 2006). This not only attests to heightened global relations and links that make “distant localities” proximal (Giddens, 1990: 64), it also gestures at the way in which stories of travel have made the west imaginatively accessible to African localities – even to those who have not been mobile.

This study engages with this expanded range of thematic, stylistic and formal concerns explored in contemporary African fiction in the face of migration and diasporisation. As a rapidly growing body of literature, it has been met with increasing critical interest. These critical peregrinations seem interested in problematising the nation and the attendant quest/questions of home and belonging, identity, transnational linkages and or afropolitanism, integration/assimilation, globalisation, race, sexuality and gender. However, as I intend to show in the following discussion, there are recognisable paucities and caesuras in how the issues are handled. To begin with, because of the placement of the authors and histories of African literary canon in western spaces, scholars have been legitimately wary of the possibility of the deployment and appropriation of this literature in the service of hegemonic cultures and

institutions. For instance, Wandia Mwendu Njoya (2007) distrusts the stranglehold French publishers have over contemporary Francophone African literature. On the one hand, Njoya reads some residues of colonial policies/nostalgia through the appropriation of African cultural products to “know,” and hence claim mastery, for as Achebe reminds us, knowing/understanding the “native” goes hand in hand with control (1975: 5). On the other hand she decries the designation of these texts as so banal and exotic as to only offer amusement. Njoya notes that “in Africa, French colonial writers and educators encouraged publications from African students that would not only entertain the French metropolitan public, but would also provide colonial administrators with information about African societies” (36-7). Njoya further quotes Midiohouan (2002) to argue that “this dynamic set the foundation of France’s control of African publishing in French that persists to this day” (Ibid.).

Picking up on this, Graham Huggan reminds us that under the conditions in which African literature is produced – where writers desire recognition “and the financial rewards that come with it,” – there is a high possibility that the “unmistakably politicised kind of writing” will be “blunted by a coterie of publishers and other marketing agents anxious to exploit it for its ‘exotic’ appeal” (2001: 35). Njoya and Huggan point at the possibility of compromising literary production and engagement because of political, cultural and economic reasons. For instance, the Caine prize for African literature has been criticised for favouring works that simplify and pathologise Africa through its awards that have been said to pander and perpetuate an aesthetic of violence and poverty porn (Habila, 2013). These sentiments highlight a fundamental truism of the reception and consumption of African cultural items and the representation of African subjects in global matrixes of power.

I find Gugu Hlongwane's (2002) reading of writing in South Africa after apartheid instructive in its explication of how the political and historical baggage between Africa and the west shapes literary production – especially in spaces that offer increased racial contact. She maintains that “the Western gaze influences not only how some South Africans write, but also who is elevated as the modern interpreter who will be palatable for Westerners” (117). This statement raises two interrelated issues that are pertinent for the writers of the texts I examine in this study. On the one hand, there is a possibility that the ubiquity of the Western archive and other technologies of control/surveillance and subject codification might influence the African writer's fictional output. Echoes of this in the fictional realm can be found in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) where the protagonist, Mustafa Sa'eed, exploits and tries to live up to Western fantasies of Oriental sexualities in a manner that at once deploys subversive mimicry but also fixes him in static representational regimes. On the other hand, the judgements that accord merit to these African writers might be done using hegemonic Euro-American literary paradigms and tools that ultimately establish hierarchies of value. In addition, these judgements of value and “palatability” might in the end be perpetuating injurious tropes of Africa(ns) that are often found in Western archives. Further, this palatability can also easily translate into a demand and expectation of self-affirming narratives of Euro-American humanity and hospitality critiqued in Adichie's *Americanah*, Mengestu's *How to Read the Air* and Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*.

Evidently, the potential minefields found in the locatedness, publication and celebration of some of these writers in the West have elicited heated debates about African literary production, its audiences, thematic concerns and reception. In addition, scholars are increasingly

pointing out the complex and uneasy connection between literary production and unequal social and cultural contacts in the global market place (Huggan, 2001; Vermuelen, 2015; Kiguru, 2016). Huggan eloquently examines “the material conditions of production and consumption of postcolonial writings, and the influence of publishing houses and academic institutions on the selection, distribution and evaluation of these works” in a bid to show how cultural difference has been commodified in the “global late-capitalist system” (2001: vii). While cognisant of the potency of these readings, I attempt to offer an alternative that approaches the texts as self-reflexive, conscious of their own processes/conditions of creation as the characters are also conscious of their placement and figuration within various representational regimes. In taking this position, I follow Doseline Wanjiru Kiguru’s (2016: iv) cue in contending “that in the absence of economic autonomy, African literature will have to work within the limitations of external influence and patronage.” As such, the study is interested in the ways in which this literature both appropriates the logic of capitalistic production and consumption and at the same time fashions subversive narratives within the context of epistemic violence, socio-cultural marginality and economic dependency.

In this regard, this study attempts an examination of this corpus of literature – through an analysis of Cole’s *Open City* and Adichie’s *Americanah* as representative texts – not only as a zeitgeist of the times but also in a bid to understand the political purchase it affords us in revisiting and rethinking epistemological dialogues and archival productions between Africa and the West. It is the position of this study that although there have been gestures towards this direction, they remain tentative and ultimately directed at other concerns. Arndt (2009) and Ojaide (2008, 2012, 2015) are examples of these gestures but their studies do not offer a

sustained exegesis on this. In her article titled “Euro-African Trans-Spaces: Migration, Transcultural Narration and Literary Studies,” Arndt considers Europe as a “historical and political construct that seeks to attain its form through demarcations to the outside” (2009: 103). By drawing attention to the constructedness of Europe and the idea of borders, she makes a useful point for this study that enables us to begin to imagine how migrant/diasporic literature “provincialises” Europe (Ibid.: 103-104).

Brenda Cooper’s (2013) study is instructive in the way it approximates to the concerns of the present study. Cooper examines how five African migrant writers, that is, Biyi Bandele, Jamal Mahjoub, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Leila Aboulela and Moses Isegawa subversively deploy language to contest “imperialist and patriarchal tropes and symbols” inherent in the English language (1). Cooper contends that Western writing uses metaphors and symbols embedded in the English language in a manner that denigrates and caricatures other cultures. Her intervention hinges on an examination of how these African writers make use of material culture, “foreign” words, “jingles and rhymes, rhythms and references to oral traditions, transformed words, made-up words, nonsense and stuttering” to counter these imperial and racist distortions and represent multiple ways of being that are not limited by hegemonizing Western discourses (11). Cooper is therefore largely interested in language and representation, and the strategies employed by migrant African writers to challenge Euro-American representations of Africa. While Cooper deals with the materiality and language of these representations and contestations, this study is concerned with the discursive and ideological geographies of these historical representations. The confluence found in both studies – from the examination of contemporary/new African writers to the interest in African representations in the west – and the

differences in analytical orientation provide a productive point of departure for the current study. Adichie and Cole's text enable an exploration of these epistemic and archival (re)productions.

Focusing on Adichie and Cole's texts, I attempt to show how the narratives that they present open up a discourse on Africa and the West that troubles the West's epistemic borders and discursive control, something flagged by V.Y. Mudimbe (1988) and that continues in the present as recent protests geared towards decolonising the academia in South Africa attest (Heleta, 2016). As such, emphasis is placed on the manner in which the texts provide "literary invasions" of the West that challenge Eurocentric discursive closures through debunking and opening up its boundaries for scrutiny and questioning. Contextualising Adichie and Cole as modern day griots, the study examines how their texts contest knowledge systems and their production while opening and expanding discursive contours in ways that challenge hegemonic formations. In treating these texts as performing the ideological work of transgressing and disturbing borders (physically and metaphorically), Brah's (2002) ideas are instructive. She notes that borders are:

Arbitrary dividing lines that are simultaneously social, cultural and psychic; territories to be patrolled against those who they construct as outsiders, aliens, the Others; forms of demarcation where the very act of prohibition inscribes transgression; zones where the fear of the Other is the fear of the Self; places where claims to ownership ... are staked out, contested, defended, fought over. (198)

Evidently, and as Anna Ball (2005: 2) reiterates, Brah thinks of the "border" not simply as a "geographical structure" but also as a "power structure" that continues to inscribe "colonial

power” even after colonial power is officially over. Brah’s ideas are therefore useful in exposing the artificiality of borders, their imbrication with power, showing the anxieties that go into their making and maintenance, and the necessity that borders create for their disruption and contestation. Consequently, Adichie’s novel is examined in the way it vivifies and animates public discourse on race in the age of Obama and post-race through the use of politicised spaces of the salon and the blog that stretches the novelistic form. In addition, the novel is analysed on how it challenges literary cultures of production and consumption, engages with African diasporas, and narrativises “the twentieth century ... rise in the ‘feminisation of migration’ in Africa” (Bonifacio, 2012: 1). Examining *Americanah* as a text that feminises migration is highly political especially because migration has often been “depicted as quintessentially masculine, an activity ascribed to male bodies and a process imbued with masculine attributes including risk, adventure and courage” (Datta, et al., 2008: 2). The interrogation of Cole’s novel is done on the basis of how it questions unisonant histories, epistemological policing of spaces and conventional reader-text expectations in a bid to complicate modes of representation and knowability. The premise is that Adichie and Cole perform an ideological fusing of the aesthetic and the political in order to provide the lens through which we can engage hegemonic epistemes but also pose radical ways of inhabiting modernities and spaces that are charged and dominated by the forces of race, patriarchy and capitalism.

More often than not, migratory and diasporic journeys to the West have often been discoursed in ways that downplay the complexly layered and entangled histories and contacts between the places left behind and Western destinations. For instance, Adichie captures this in an incident in *Americanah* when Obinze contemplates Britain’s mass media’s purveyance of

apocalyptic messages concerning asylum seekers. Seeing a woman reading an article that was urging immigrants to speak English at home, he thinks to himself:

There were so many of them now published in the newspapers, and they echoed the radio and television, even the chatter of some of the men in the warehouse. The wind blowing across the British Isles was odorous with fear of asylum seekers, infecting everybody with the panic of impending doom, and so articles were written and read, simply and stridently, as though the writers lived in a world in which the present was unconnected to the past, and they had never considered this to be the normal course of history: the influx into Britain of black and brown people from countries created by Britain. Yet he understood. It had to be comforting, this denial of history (258-9)

Adichie's novel hints at the uncritical ways in which public discourse, and often, academic discourse frames conversations on migrations and diasporas from former colonised nations living in metropolitan centres of the west. The anxieties between Britain and the formerly colonised subjects attest to desires to reify borders and a flattening of histories of territorial violation. As such, there appears to be a deliberate de-emphasising of the ways colonial contacts and post-independence relations of extraction (of human and material resources), political interventions, imperialism and neo-liberal policies enforced by the Bretton Woods institutions contribute to the crises in African countries (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Indeed, within the hearth of postcolonial theories – which produces the framework where most of colonial and post-colonial migrations/diasporas between colonised and formerly colonised territories and the west are studied – the division of time, locations and phenomena into pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial effaces inherent fluidities and complexities that need keen attention (McClintock, 1992:

86-88). Recognising this disconnect scholars are becoming more attuned to what Walter D. Mignolo (2011) refers to as “the colonial matrix of power” which he opines is comprised of “the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality” (xviii). According to Mignolo, the rhetoric of modernity is “constantly named and celebrated” through the deployment of a coterie of buzzwords such as “progress, development, growth,” while the “darker side of modernity” is “silenced or named as problems to be solved by the former (poverty, misery, inequities, injustices, corruption, commodification, and dispensability of human life)” (Ibid.).

These acts of subterfuge and masking within discourses of modernity are aptly captured within the paradigms of globalisation where universal notions of humanity, multiculturalism, hybrid subjectivities and beneficial inhabiting of trans-national spaces have become uncritically celebrated. This triumphant and celebratory approach to globalisation runs counter to the lived realities of people exempted from its privileges and benefits. Martha Donkor (2005) notes the tension globalisation elicits within various groups. Firstly, she writes that it is idealized by “politicians and business people” who believe “that it holds the key to worldwide progress and prosperity” (27). Secondly, she advances that “scholars take a middle ground,” presenting “both its promise and its adverse effects,” and lastly the scholar holds that “activists are essentially pessimistic about the consequences of globalisation” (27-8). In fact, Donkor links colonization to globalisation and highlights how they have worked in tandem to establish “an unequal global political economy” that ultimately creates the “impetus for formerly colonized people to turn to migration as an option to living difficult lives” (Ibid. 27).

From the foregoing, the present study is wary of the rather premature celebration of global modernities on the premise that subjects and cultures meet on an equal footing. Read this

way, literary criticism and scholarship that privileges hybrid and creole identities and multiculturalism do so by sidestepping materialist histories of imperialism/colonialism and racialisation that continue to define contacts between Africa and Euro-America. As such, this study attempts to be attentive to the lived realities of individual characters who bring together narratives that force us to reckon with how the particularities of race, gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity and nation shape contemporary mobilities. The study therefore recognises the purchase of considering the quotidian in migratory journeys in an attempt to better understand African modernities in a globalising world. In doing this, I echo Avtar Brah's sentiment when she cautions that it is not enough to ask questions about who travels but that we should go further to ask "when, how, and under what circumstances" (1996: 179). In examining the disenfranchising encounters between Africa and the West, I consider narratives that portray these contacts within the continent – as national and local borders become porous and permeable to globalising formations – and offer a foci shift from examining public/macro relations to personalised experiences. In this regard, Mabanckou's and Bulawayo's texts are considered for they not only enable us to examine the mythologies of the promises of the west before migration, they also insert their protagonists within Paris and Detroit in ways that debunk triumphalist narratives of arrival.

In reading Bulawayo's *We Need Names*, I keep in mind Ulrich Beck's (2000: 37) instructive definition of globalization as those "processes through which sovereign national states are criss-crossed and undermined by transnational actors with varying prospects of power, orientations, identities and networks." Beck's definition is useful in analysing Bulawayo's representation of children, their games and encounters with the western world and China – from

tourist's photography, NGO representatives, foreign media houses, Chinese contractors and narratives of travelled relatives within Paradise and Budapest, the novel's setting. In addition, this study welcomes Robert Muponde's (2005) challenge to consider the ways in which childhood is "a contested terrain, one in which the larger tensions and conflicts of society manifest themselves" rather than "seeing childhood in romantic or idyllic terms" (ii). The focalisation on the constantly mobile, observing and "interpreting" (through games) child narrator and characters in the text forms the perfect metaphor for the narrativisation of the fracturing of the protective spaces of family and nation and their insertion into violent and disenfranchising national spaces and global formations. Bulawayo appears to be aware of these for at one time when talking about "Hitting Budapest" – her short story which won the 2011 Caine Prize for African writing and which forms the first chapter of the book – she reiterated her interest in unequal global encounters. Bulawayo avers that 'the story came from this need to engage with the world,' and an interest "in what happens when two different worlds meet in a problematic way ..." (Flood, 2011).

The focus on the vulnerable and branded bodies of children who carry the memories of past violations and movements while at the same time chronicling western humanistic interventions, western media, and foreign presences in Paradise and Budapest therefore serves to highlight the disenfranchising encounters with global modernity and ultimately overturns globalisation's assumptions of interdependency and reciprocity. As such, the study follows Muponde's injunction to move beyond the figuration of children by adult writers through "insidious and dystopian motifs of vulnerability" (2006: 80) and attend to the ways in which childhood can "bear questions of history, politics and resistance" (2005: ii). This study also pays

attention to private interpersonal relations and affective experiences that get lost in examining macro/global relations. Even though some scholars have read the text as advancing a poverty, violence and exoticising aesthetic (Helon, 2013; Ndlovu, 2016), I advance that Bulawayo consciously deploys a form of “cultivated exhibitionism” and or “strategic exoticism” in a way that enables her to work “from and within exoticist codes of representation” in order to subvert them, and I also argue that she succeeds “in redeploying them for the purposes of uncovering differential relations of power” (Huggan, 2001: 32).

More often than not, African literary criticism related to gender studies has for long tended to concentrate on the representation of women and the socio-cultural construction of femininities while the study of men as gendered beings hasn’t always enjoyed the same interest. In addition, Kopano Ratele notes the paucity of “studies of men in Africa” as compared to other parts of the world (2008a: 19-20). However, there is burgeoning research and interest in African masculinities that is committed in exploring the range of gendered experiences of maleness throughout Africa (Dlamini, 2015; Ratele, 2014; Gqola, 2009, 2007; Shefer, 2007; Mhlahlo, 2009; Muchemwa & Muponde, 2007; Ouzgane & Morrell, 2005; Mngadi, 2005; Lindsay & Miescher, 2003; Morrell, 2001). This study’s entry into critical men’s studies is through an examination of mobile African men in Euro-American spaces. Chad Montuori’s (2011) work on the literary representation of gendered migrations from Africa to Spain forms an instructive starting point for this study. Montuori sets out on the task of demonstrating “how gender and migration intersect to shatter any fixed notion of the African migrant experience” (Ibid.: iv). While his study only considers African migrations to Spain, the current study expands the range of African elsewhere to include the United States of America, France and Britain, while at the

same time recognising other destinations of travel that Bulawayo's text narrativises. The premise of the current study is that migration is often highly transformative of the performativity of African masculinities for it inserts them into regimes of representation that are underwritten by institutionalised racism, prejudice and exclusion. Despite the understanding of migration as a male culture complete with the subtexts of masculine bravado and courage highlighted earlier, the texts examined in this study present the embodied experience of migration as enunciating new forms of enervating vulnerabilities and anxieties within African men. The onus in examining literary texts that deal with migration is to interrogate the different negotiations African migrant masculinities make in a bid to cope in debilitating racist and capitalist conditions, but also to understand how these conditions provide an environment where productive relationalities/socialities are made. In addition, the study will also examine the ways in which these men challenge and expand hegemonic categories of manhood.

Attending to the experiences of men and migration (and their figuration within globalising forces) to the west in literature is an attempt to strike a gender-balanced approach to African encounters with global modernity. It is also a "rejection of the idea that all men are the same" in that "not all men have the same amount or type of power, the same opportunities, and, consequently, the same life trajectories" (Ouzgane & Morrell, 2005: 4). Accordingly therefore, the study not only acknowledges the gendered ways in which power is wielded, but also the ways in which race, sexual orientation, religion, age, social class etc. accord power and privilege. My reading of the experiences of women and men alongside each other is an attempt to recognise the similar ways "they face the challenges of daily life together and their unity is their strength" (Ibid.: 6) but also a way in which we can pay close attention to the differences of

gendered experience, privileges and inequalities. In addition, it is the position of this study that offering a sustained examination of African men within given socio-cultural, political and historical contexts performs the political work of recuperating these masculinities from injurious representations found in Eurocentric archives that figure the black man as not only “morally bankrupt, inept, barbaric” but also as lazy and unreliable (Uchendu, 2008: 1-3). Although Egodi Uchendu references representations of African men by European travellers and colonialists in Africa, images of pathologised black men still obtain today as it can be seen by the often dehumanised, depoliticised and ahistorical coverage of African conflicts (DeVargas & Donzelli, 2014: 250-1). However, as I have hinted above, studying these masculinities’ vulnerability within global capitalism should not divert us into an examination of violent and harmful performances of masculinity, the “patriarchal dividend” that they wield, nor of strategies of subversion against limiting horizons and identities (Morrell & Ouzgane, 2005: 7). Ultimately, and as Ratele opines “the project of studying men [is] related to and supportive of radical gender transformation” (2008a: 18).

Three novels are examined on how they afford us an engagement with mobile masculinities – Mabanckou’s *Blue White Red* and Mengestu’s *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* and *How to Read the Air*. Their works are read in a bid to show how they give us a lens to examine men’s relationship with western spaces, other men, women, with family members and spaces of work – the academy, the service industry, the commercial and corporate world – in the context of migration. In analysing Mabanckou’s *Blue White Red* the study exercises vigilance by reading marginal, non-hegemonic Congolese masculinities figuration within the arenas of national and global power in a bid to grapple with power and domination within masculinist

categories. By paying attention to the way migration is gendered, and in this case, loaded with masculinist cultures of Congolese *sapeurs*, this study is cognisant of how globalisation is often experienced “as poverty” by black men who are disadvantaged by race and social class (Ouzgane & Morrell, 2005: 7-8). To avoid setting up an exclusivist paradigm that solely interrogates Mabanckou’s representation of *sapeur* masculinities, I consider the positionality of other masculinities and women in this male culture.

In continuing focalisation on men, the study considers Mengestu’s novels – *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* and *How to Read the Air* – and their placement of African men within the American national space as an invitation to engage celebratory narratives of migration in the face of racist and capitalistic formations. Mengestu’s novels provide the basis for interrogating the complexly layered scripts of masculinity, capitalism and racism within American foundational narratives of progressivism – embedded in the mythos of the American dream – and shows how migrant African men are positioned in the hierarchies the narratives summon, and how the narratives shape their performance of gender. This study holds that the examination of African migrant men’s relationship to the American space, with white masculinities and black and white femininities offers a fertile ground for interrogating how power permeates through the matrixes of gender, race and national spaces. As such, this study eschews progressivist tropes of migration that place the burden of success on individual effort while disregarding exclusionary institutional and structural systems. In addressing these disenfranchising encounters, the study follows Ian Smith’s (2004) instructive intervention against the automatic “radical associations given to migrancy in postcolonial theory” which

ultimately serves as an “alibi, erected in place of a genuine confrontation with the lives of those at the receiving end of global capitalism’s polarising action” (258).

Tied to this examination of migrant masculinities’ experiences of African elsewhere is the interrogation of the constitution, engagement and performance of spaces. The novels in this study present spaces (homeland and hostland) that are invested and loaded with various polarised meanings that the novelists subtly question and undercut. The analysis of the representation and experiencing of space will be done with the understanding that space is both a “physical location” and an “abstract conceptual space” (Upstone, 2009: 3). As such, I am interested in actual physical spaces but also in the constructed nature of spaces and the meanings attached to it. The ideas of Mary Louise Pratt (2007) concerning “contact zones” are instructive in the way they help us to engage with African migrants’ encounter with the charged spaces of the hostland and how it is imagined. Pratt uses this term to refer to “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (7). The hostland spaces are examined on the basis of how they model colonial enterprises of racial separation and seclusion and how migrants engage and contest these.

One of the major themes that has preoccupied contemporary fiction writers involves the writers’ engagement with the national “home.” Paradoxically, this fictional preoccupation with the nation is not only evident in texts of authors whose personal experience epitomises and narrativises “uprootedness and deterritorialization” (Coly, 2010: xi), it also comes at a time marked by the diminution of “the nation as an object of postcolonially correct interest” (Boehmer, 2005: 10). These writers “return” to themes of home/nation signify the continued

currency and investments in the nation, especially, as Elleke Boehmer (2005: 4) points out, in “relation to liberation politics” that extend to engagement with post-independence non-egalitarianism and imperial formations/cultures. Indeed, some of these writers not only provide narratives that offer discursive “returns” to the national home, but also represent return movements of their protagonists as a viable option of narrative dénouement. Adichie narrativises this in *Americanah* through Ifemelu’s return, while Sefi Atta does this through Enitan in *Everything Good Will Come* and strongly hints at the possibility of a future return by Deola, the protagonist of Atta’s *A Bit of a Difference* (2012). In the same vein, some of these writers living abroad also make “frequent visits, practice place polygamy and have a multilocal sense of belonging” (Ojaide, 2015: 35). The national home in these narratives of migration and diaspora is therefore recognised as indispensable for those subjects who are not privileged enough to claim that the world as it is constituted is his/her home (Ahmed, 2000:83). Ayo Coly forcefully reiterates this when she argues against “the rejection of roots as regressive” and asserts that this “is an ideological, emotional, and political response that history and contemporary geopolitics, including the racial fixing of bodies and access to space, have made unavailable to postcolonial African migrants” (Coly, 2010: xxv).

In these contemporary writings, authors demonstrate complex and imaginative ways of handling the discursive topos of the nation/home. While in earlier African writing the legitimacy of the nation was taken as a given, writers dealing with themes of mobility and displacement increasingly question and challenge the nation as a political, social and even as an economic entity in the face of global capital. Perhaps the Somalian born Nuruddin Farah, more than any other writer aptly captures this imaginatively complex “revisiting” of the national home. Exiled

for several decades, Farah's entire literary oeuvre of eleven novels uses Somalia as the ground for his fictional production in an attempt to "keep my country alive by writing about it" (Jaggi, 2012). Simon Gikandi however highlights the dexterity of Farah's writing by noting that even though the subject of Farah's "novels has consistently been the process by which nationalist euphoria became transformed into a discourse of loss and mourning," he has "never been imprisoned either by the foundational moments of African literature ... or by that fateful historic moment" of Somali's descent into totalitarianism in 1969 (1998: 753). This expanded critical re-imagining of the nation found in Farah's works is replete across the African continent. For instance, Obi Nwakanma's (2008) examination of Nigerian Igbo nationalism draws attention to the challenges of postcolonial nationality which is forced to compete with other ethnic affiliations. Reading Nwakanma, Hamish Dalley (2013) opines that the former "sees recent Igbo writing as reflective of that group's ambivalence toward the Nigerian federation – a structure of feeling that goes back to the nation's establishment amid ethno-political conflicts inherited from colonialism" (17). This topic is taken up by Adéèkó Adélékè who examines contemporary Nigerian novelist's engagement with the nation and surmises that their "stories are filled with characters whose psychic firmaments are not inexplicably unsettled by the singular and unified nation state" (Adélékè, 2008: 11). These changes in the way writers narrativise the nation appear to be matched by an intensified questioning of an unconditional fidelity to the nation in the social and political landscape of several African countries. At the time of writing this, political events in Cameroon and nascent and inchoate separatist sentiments in Kenya highlight the tenuousness of national affinities in the face of injustices and inequalities. As such, there appears to be a rejection of a nationalist topoi that demands self-abnegation and submissiveness in exchange for belonging and acceptance in both the imaginative and social realms.

The present study's interest in these narratives that capture an enduring, albeit troubled, romance with the nation in an age where scholarship on the nation/nationalism has been supplanted by various "trans-s" recognises, as does Susan Andrade (2011), the various ways that nationalism still haunts "the imagination of writers from Africa" (27). While noting the expanded sociality that these novels represent as a result of movement from the national home, the launches into an interrogation of the nation not only as a point of departure, but also as a point of "return." The direction this examination takes is informed by the apparent privileging of points of arrival and the migrant/diasporic person's engagement with these spaces. As such, by foregrounding the "home" as a repository of psychic, political and emotional investments in the matrix of migratory journeys, this study hopes to complicate the way points of "departure" and "arrival" are often discoursed as if they present unproblematic and neat movements and settlements of subjects. This is done alongside an acknowledging of the complex imbrications of the spaces and histories of homelands and hostlands in a way that helps us to grapple and understand charged African modernities complete with their political and historical baggage. I use the term "home" not only to refer to what Dan Ojwang (2012) cites as "an array of related ideas: as a dwelling-house, a site for family making, a geographical site of origin, a native land and an imagined place of national, ethnic, religious and personal belonging," but also to the way "'home' suggests ... a sense of 'patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture and protection'" and how it is used to mask "elaborate patterns of inclusion and exclusion" (5).

In reading the national home, I focus on Adichie's *Americanah* and *Atta's Everything Good Will Come*. *Americanah* is a novel that represents a gendered experiencing of the nation

through the deployment of a romantic plot that tracks a love that migrates and returns. Utilising this framework of romance, the study will examine Ifemelu's eventual return to Nigeria as a return to nation, to home and love, albeit as a return that refuses domesticating ideologies inherent in matrimonial couplings and nationalist patriarchies. Atta's text is also examined alongside *Americanah* to show how Enitan's migration and return enunciates new and radical relationalities within the home and the nation. In building a case for the novels' upstaging of the nationalist rhetoric, I read both Adichie and the protagonist, and Enitan in Atta's text as being "undutiful." On the one hand, Atta's and particularly Adichie's thematic choices that centre on feminine experiences are read as challenging a literary canon and criticism that has often viewed these issues as lacking scholarly legitimacy. On the other hand, reading Ifemelu and Enitan's story as a coming-of-age narratives enables this study to trace their growth – both in their private love life and in their relationship with the nation – as possessing disruptive capabilities for patriarchal constructions of femininity and limiting nationalist cultures.

1.3 A Profile of the Novels

Mabanckou's *Blue White Red* (1998) is a novel that vividly captures the complex relationship between France and post-colonial Francophone African, specifically Congo-Brazzaville. Affecting French mannerisms and clad in designer clothes, Charles Moki, a character in the text who stays in Paris returns to his home village in Congo accompanied by the trappings of the "been to." The parody of Moki that Mabanckou presents becomes a symbol of a certain image of France that the narrator, Massala-Massala, aspires to travel to. Beginning at a

point when Massala-Massala has been arrested and is about to be deported, the novel employs a jerky and erratic plot – despite the narrator’s insistence that he has to “start from the beginning” – that betrays his desperate attempts to make sense of his present predicament through narrative. With searing satire and pathos, the novel strings together a narrative of a society caught in a tragic web of colonial contact and its legacies in the post-colonial period through its portrayal of the mythologisation and iconisation of the colonial master’s space and culture.

Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come* (2005) represents the coming-of-age narrative of Enitan who grew up in Nigeria, moved to England for her law studies and eventually returned to Nigeria. While in Nigeria, she strikes a friendship with Sheri which survives her parents’ attempt to separate them and her long years of study in the UK. The novel revolves around the lives of these two women and their relationships with men which in turn affects their relationship with the nation. Enitan’s relationship with her father and Niyi Franco, her husband whom she later divorces, and Sheri’s relationship with Brigadier Hassan shapes the way they experience the domestic space of the home and the nation. Ultimately, they manage to free themselves from these domesticating patriarchies and forge new relationalities with both the people around them and the nation.

Mengestu’s novels provide narratives of violent deracination from the homeland that elicit feelings of alienation and detachment in the hostland. His works reflect the complex interplay of the burden of memory, the nostalgia for a home that is hardly recoverable, the tensions of living in racialized spaces, and the dilemmas of identity the experience elicits. His first novel, *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007) portrays a haunting narrative of three characters who are involved in quotidian attempts to recreate and reconstruct home in the midst

of overwhelming isolation and nostalgia. The novelist's deft handling of symbols and metaphors – Stephanos' shop, the games that Stephanos plays with Joseph and Ken, the relationship with Judith and Naomi, Logan Circle, Ken's car, and Joseph's poetry – magnifies the complexity of the migrant experience in racialised spaces. Sepha Stephanos, the Ethiopian protagonist in the novel, has been living in Washington for seventeen years. He strikes up a curious relationship with Joseph and Kenneth who come from Congo and Kenya respectively. They often play semantically loaded games in which they attempt to name the many coups that have happened in Africa. These games become complex ways in which they re-connect and perform the homes they left behind. The narrative plot that keeps on oscillating from the past to the present makes their engagement with home, memory, and history much more poignant. Yet, the melancholic nature of the narrative changes when the story takes a romantic turn as Judith enters the scene. To a larger extent, the desire for family and belonging is plotted against the developing, though unconsummated, romance between Stephanos and Judith.

Mengestu's second novel, *How to Read the Air* (2010), is narrated by Jonas Woldemariam who is born in America by Ethiopian parents. The narrator reconstructs the disassembling of his parents' marriage in a space that reaffirms their undesirability, unbelonging, and difference. Jonas' melancholic nature which is heightened by the interiority of the narrative, his complicated engagement with America, and the brooding loss and detachment that looms over his narrative signals the ways in which trauma can be passed down and inherited from parents to children. The novel presents the impossibility of the migrant to find meaningful and tangible narratives that locate and ground him. The stories within the overall story and the intricate lies the narrator weaves concerning his parents and their histories are presented as a

symbolic garb that he wears in order to claim a history he is hardly aware of. Cole's *Open City* (2011) utilises an interior monologue to portray, with a keen eye for detail, Julius' experience of New York, while still managing to capture his unerring detachment. Born in Nigeria and educated in New York, Julius comes from a diverse background. He is born of a Nigerian father and a German mother. The historical baggage he carries as a result of his diverse background and interests amplifies his relationship with the spaces and people he interacts with. The highly cultured narrator connects narratives of places, histories, and people in ways that blur borders and gives him an opportunity to reclaim and reflect upon his past and his present.

Bulawayo's seminal novel, *We Need New Names* (2013), takes the form of a bildungsroman chronicling Darling's experiences in Zimbabwe and her eventual migration to America. As such, the narrative plot begins in Paradise and Budapest – fictional shanty towns in Zimbabwe – and ends up in America. With a deep understanding of the human psyche and global contacts, Bulawayo's novel unerringly enacts highly disenfranchising encounters with the western world through the uncanny games Darling and her friends play. The Western countries Darling and her friends script in their games form a counterpoint to the violence and squalor that define their day to day reality. In addition, the novel represents the uneasiness that accompanies the migrant person's arrival in America and the convoluted attempts to reinvent the self and reconfigure foreign spaces into a space one can belong within the backdrop of a past and a home that never fades from memory.

Adichie's third novel, *Americanah* (2013) assumes epic dimensions by taking the form of a coming-of-age novel, a romance narrative, and a novel of social manners. The novel's eclectic nature combines trenchant social, cultural, and racial critiques and commentaries that lay

bare the migrant experience in America and London. It deals with the migration of Ifemelu and Obinze to America and London respectively, their love, Ifem's engagement with race and migrant life, her tenuous relationship with her Nigerian "home," and her eventual return.

1.4 Chapter Breakdown

This study is sub-divided into six chapters. Chapter one contextualises the study first by giving a historical account of African migrations and diasporas. It also discusses the utility of studying the two forms of mobility together by making a case for their similarities and differences. The chapter also offers a discussion of contemporary African literature that deals with migration and diasporas and the theoretical debates surrounding this literature. Through outlining and laying groundwork for the issues to be investigated and the approach of the study, the chapter gives a justification for the entire research.

Chapter two examines how African stories of travel offer an avenue through which we can examine epistemes and archival productions between Africa and the west in a manner that challenges and subverts western discursive control. This is done through an analysis of Adichie's *Americanah*, and Teju Cole's *Open City* against the backdrop of the discursive self-infatuation and anxieties of the West, especially its tendency to see itself as the cultural, discursive and political centre, as the norm upon which all other peripheries surround. The premise is that the authors' insertion of the characters – African Others often seen as existing outside western discourse and history – into policed western spaces in an historical moment that has seen an upsurge of aggressive and exclusivist Euro-American nationalism affords an opportunity to

probe discursive closures by prising open histories, cultures and knowledges and at the same time punctuating them with those of the Other. The pairing of Adichie and Cole's texts is based on their particular formal choices that enable a productive discussion on epistemic and archival silences and historical erasures. While Adichie's novel's investment in the salon and the blog as spatialities whose deployment necessitates an examination of public discourses on normative Americanness and their elision of black, female and immigrant bodies, *Open City's* essayistic detailing of spaces, histories and contacts as the narrator moves across America and Europe exposes the erasures that construct fictions of purity and order.

The third chapter analyses Mabanckou's *Blue Whie Red: A Novel* and Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* representation of the imagining, performance and experiencing of African elsewheres in postcolonial African states. In examining these texts together, I pay attention to their play on the plot to represent would-be immigrant experiences of their elsewheres before and after migration. Both the novels are therefore heavily invested in how narratives of either America, South Africa or Paris filter into the protagonists' lives and shape their everyday with various degrees of vulnerability. In so doing, Bulawayo and Mabanckou present global encounters as highly disenfranchising and disempowering. The novels choice on focalising on children and marginal African masculinities in Bulawayo and Mabanckou's texts respectively provides this study with a platform for examining non-hegemonic characters' experiencing of the violence and inequalities of national and global configurations of power. In this chapter, I argue that these texts narrativise an enduring and growing discursive "infatuation" with the West in African fiction. The novels under study in chapter three provide narratives of characters/communities whose quotidian experiences are interspersed with imaginaries and

visions of diasporic spaces and the possibility of escape/movement to these spaces. The authors present complex ways in which Western spaces are experienced and practiced in postcolonial Africa even before characters migrate. The chapter contextualises these seductions within histories of colonialism, imperialism and global capitalism in an attempt to provide a well considered interrogation of African encounters with modernity. As such, this chapter is interested in not only the narratives and mythologies that valorise Euro-American spaces but also in the disenfranchising contacts that African nations/peoples have with these spaces.

Chapter four analyses Dinaw Mengestu's two novels, *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* and *How To Read The Air*, with an aim of interrogating how migrants engage with racialised and exclusionary spaces. Set in the US – Washington and New York – the novels invite an examination of migrants' use and access of the American space, a space defined by a progressivist ideology of the "American dream" that favours hegemonic white masculinities. This chapter therefore not only questions American founding mythologies, it also subversively posits alternative ways of being masculine and the radical and transformative reconfiguration of African migrant masculinities, while also challenging triumphant narratives of migration. The choice of analysing two novels by Dinaw Mengestu is informed by his sustained exploration of marginal African masculinities and their engagement with the American space and its founding mythologies. As a chapter that is interested in reading the positionality of the African migrant male in the masculinely gendered, racialised and capitalist American space, Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* and *How to Read the Air* provide narratives whose setting, characterisation and thematic concerns variously address these issues. While Adichie's *Americanah* deals with a feminine experience of migration to America, more than any other

African author, Mengestu literary oeuvre centres on a largely masculine experience. As such, Mengestu affords us an opportunity to engage with the precarious and diverse experiences of African men within a hostile America

Chapter five rereads Adichie's *Americanah* alongside Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* in an attempt to attend to migrant fiction's preoccupation with the home through gendered lens. This chapter decision to go back to *Americanah* is based on the author's choice to craft a narrative that ideologically invests in "return" and "romance" with the national home, something that wasn't within the purview of chapter two of this study. Atta's text also represents the migration and return of the protagonist in ways that are instructive for this study. Of significance to this study is both Adichie and Atta's interest in feminine experiences of migration and return to the national home in the face of nationalist patriarchies and domesticating ideologies. Adichie and Atta's mapping of Ifemelu and Enitan's migration and return, their relationship to the nation and national patriarchies enables an analysis of the gender hierarchies, exclusions and violence within the nation that ultimately make it unhomely, and the protagonists' subversive undutifulness to the categories of nation, femininity and domestic life. In chapter five, I am concerned with how African migrants re-think and re-imagine belonging especially when the ties to the homeland are strained by complex feelings of attachment and detachment. Borrowing Rosi Braidotti's (2012) concept of the "undutiful daughter" as a conceptual framework, this chapter attempts a gendered analysis of belonging by examining *Americanah* and *Everything Good Will Come*'s representation of a daughter's experiencing of the home/nation and belonging. The premise in this section is that the home/nation is a gendered space, and that the hopes and aspirations of the woman are not necessarily aligned to those of the patriarchal nation. Ifemelu's

migration and eventual return, as is Enitan's, is seen as enunciating a questioning of the nation and its domesticating tendencies while at the same time opening up new ways of inhabiting the nation and of conceiving of belonging. In this regard, the chapter zeroes in on Adichie's deployment of a romance plot as an analytical framework to examine the complex relationship between a "daughter" and the national home. In addition, I read Enitan and Sheri's relationships with dominating, exploitative and violent masculinities within the nation – both in the domestic or public arena – make the national space inhospitable. Reading *Americanah* alongside Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*, the chapter is ultimately interested in how the vexed questions of home and belonging are closely connected to the power dynamics that undergird social relationships.

In view of the preceding chapters, this chapter concludes the study by positing that contemporary African literatures on migration and diaspora represent a significant discourse that we can use to examine African encounters with modernity. It also summarises the arguments advanced in the preceding chapters.

CHAPTER TWO

THE VOYAGE IN: “INVADING” THE WEST IN AFRICAN DIASPORIC WRITING

For recent apertures in critical thought instigated by certain internal displacements in the hearth of the West (feminism, deconstructionism, psychoanalysis, post-metaphysical thought) have been increasingly augmented by the persistent question of a presence that no longer lies elsewhere: the return of the repressed, the subordinate and the forgotten in “Third World” musics, literatures, poverties and populations as they come to occupy the economies, cities, institutions, media and leisure time of the First World.

Iain Chambers

2.1 Introduction

This chapter positions itself against and alongside the epistemic productions as well as silences of Africa(ns) in Western archives. It examines Adichie’s *Americanah* and Cole’s *Open City* as texts that undercut discursive constructions and closures through their presencing of Other bodies, knowledges and histories in Euro-American spaces. Adichie and Cole’s imaginative “invasion” of Euro-America and their portrayal of their protagonists’ traversing of Euro-American spaces enunciate North/South conversations that undermine hegemonic representational regimes. This chapter’s reading of the novel’s entry into North/South dialogues is therefore conceptualised as “a project intent on ‘penetrating’ the real ... to extend, disrupt and rework it,” to adapt Chambers’ formulation (1994: 10). In reading *Americanah* and *Open City* in a manner that suggests the political utility of narrative, I rely on Fredric Jameson’s (1981) theorisation of the text as a “socially symbolic act involved in ... polemic strategic ideological confrontations” (19). As such, I consider Adichie and Cole’s texts as performing the ideological

work of contesting “established knowledge/authoritarian bases” and addressing the “condition of ‘unheardness’ to which dominant discourses relegate a range of voices” (Boyce-Davies, 1994: 108-12).

The chapter discusses *Americanah* and *Open City* separately. As such the chapter is subdivided into two major parts with the analysis of *Americanah* subdivided into three sections. In discussing *Americanah*, the chapter is concerned with the text’s portrayal of the deployment of silence against gendered, racialised and immigrant Others. Through the examination of Adichie’s placement of her protagonist within the embodied and disembodied spaces of the salon/hairdressers and the blog, the chapter grapples with how Adichie disrupts patriarchal, racist and national ideologies and structures. In reading the salon, I am interested in its representation as a space that the author uses to challenge hegemonic desires to confer invisibility, enforce homogeneity and undermine black migrant and feminine experiences and bodies. The chapter’s analysis of the blog highlights its disruptive potential when compared with the conventions of narrative fiction. In this chapter, I make use of the framework of interactivity and audience to advance the argument that it represents a freeing space that creates possibilities for productive conversations on interracial and intraracial relations.

In analysing Cole’s text, this section centres on the representation of movement as a meaning making process that allows the reader access into silences and erasures that go into the construction of space and its boundaries. The chapter uses the notion of a palimpsest to engage the narrator’s attentiveness to the multitudinous and sometimes violent histories and narratives subsumed under mainstream discourses in the attempts at order making. In addition, the chapter launches into a discussion of the narrator’s portrayal as a character who refuses interpretation

and knowability as a way in which the author destabilises knowledge and regimes of order and meaning making, and by implication hint at the fallibility of memory and all monological narratives.

2.2 Rupturing the Genre: Un-Writing Silence in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

Americanah (2013) is Adichie's third novel after *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). It is a novel that spans three continents (Africa, North America and Europe) and revolves around the love, migration, return and reunion of the two main characters, Ifemelunamma (hereafter referred to as Ifemelu) and Obinze. Literary scholars have studied the novel's engagement with "migration theories" (Idowu-Faith, 2014: 2), its destabilisation of the geopolitical centres of power and as a novel that addresses itself to the "functions and failures of representation" (Hallemeier, 2015: 231), its narrativisation of racial homogenisation and gendered invisibility/visibility (Braga & Gonçalves, 2014), the portrayal of the black hair industry (Iromuanya, 2017), the novel's representation of gendered experiences of migration (Koskei, 2014) and its Afropolitan orientation (Fan, 2017).

While these studies present illuminating interpretations of *Americanah*, this study is concerned with how the novel's thematic and stylistic choices are adeptly deployed to disrupt discursive control and closure within the context of the discursive self-infatuation of the West. The novel's overtly politicised content, the hybridisation of form, the positionality and the mordant/provocative tone that the protagonist assumes provides the author with an adept narrative that disturbs epistemic closures and the policing of interactions. The "literary

invasions” that the novel makes abrogate the centre/periphery dichotomies and prises open the lid, á la Smith, which polices and limits North-South/inter-racial interactions. This study argues that Adichie’s generic hybridisation – it is at once a romance novel, a novel of social manners, a coming-of-age narrative and its incorporation of the virtual site of the blog – functions to open up and extend conversations on the nature of silencing and policing, especially as it relates to the black female migrant’s interaction with white America.

Indeed, Adichie’s fascination with elected, and often, calculated silences and the “unspoken” runs through most of her fictional oeuvre. Both *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of Yellow Sun*, to a certain extent, grapple with certain elected and imposed silences within the national and private/family spheres. On the one hand, the narrative structure of *Purple Hibiscus* is imbued with oppressive silences and abuse within the family space. The narrator, Kambili, and Jaja, her brother, develop a “secret language” that they use to deal with the exacting violence of their father, Eugene Achike. As Heather Hewett (2005) observes, the narrative brings us into confrontation with the family’s “troubled lives,” for instance, “their mother’s multiple miscarriages” and “Jaja’s deformed little finger” which “remain unspoken secrets” (81). She maintains that “these ‘unspeakable things unspoken’ are shared between Kambili and her brother through stolen glances” (Ibid.). It is through Kambili – a fifteen-year-old girl – that the narrator examines “how unbridled power can cause both physical and psychological destruction” (Ibid.: 80). *Half of Yellow Sun* on the other hand excavates the ghosts of the Biafran war from a national psyche that seeks to elide such histories. Adichie’s representation of war, memory and national/communal/personal traumas enables her to deal with divisive, contested and unresolved

histories within a nation's collective consciousness and the overarching incomplete nation building project.

In reading *Americanah's* engagement with silence, I take recourse to a number of scholars' theorisation on silence. The understanding of silence as suffusing every aspect of human life (Picard: 1989), its encapsulation of something more than the mere "absence of audible sound" (Dauenhauer, 1980: 4), and Robin Patric Clair's (1998: 23) interjection that "expressive activities can be silencing" and "silence can be expressive" provides a useful framework within which we can understand the silence imposed upon Ifemelu both as a racial migrant and a gendered subject. While silence has been recognised as an important component in any interaction, and even as possessing some transformative and liberatory possibilities (Rowe & Malhotra, 2013; Clair, 1998; Irigaray, 2008), it is portrayed in *Americanah* as an insidious, even disingenuous avoidance of necessary conversations.

In *Americanah*, there appears to be pervasive and often consensual silences that govern human interactions. While this form of silence and/or silencing allows for dialogue/conversation, the interaction is ultimately highly coded and circumscribed. Adichie's portrayal of how language/speech are imbricated with silence and/or silencing enables her to escape the false and reductive binarisation of voice and silence and their equation to agency and oppression that Sheena Malhotra and Aimee Carillo Rowe (2013: 1) draw attention to. Within the silences that the novel encodes and decodes, we gain insight into the structural silences that permeate gendered and raced social interactions. This study's reading of actual silences (absence of speech/voice, but not of thought), and silences as omissions embedded within conversations is an act of excavating the meanings of the silence, the elided and the innuendos that speech evokes.

Adichie's foregrounding of language over silence and her questioning of the disingenuous ways "expressive acts" encode silence therefore places premium on the transformative capacity of voice to inscribe and render the other visible.

Unpacking Ifemelu's portrayal is significant if we are to understand the text's disturbance of silences and the unspoken. Compared to the other characters, Ifemelu demonstrates a heightened capacity for independent action and thought, and escapes the vulnerability, passivity/voicelessness and invisibility that is conventionally ascribed to women in masculinist cultures, and by extension, a black migrant. In the blog and in various other interactions, she betrays a verbal dexterity and articulateness that is often misinterpreted as rudeness or aggression. However, her ability to voice what is socially awkward gives us the lens through which we can engage with the varying ways in which race and feminine silencing operate. She eschews circumscribed conversations that ignore offence and mask frictions/schisms that racism and patriarchy elicits. In this sense, Ifemelu's character calls to mind Sarah Ahmed's (2010) figuration of the feminist killjoy. Ahmed's draws attention to how hard the participants at the family dinner table work to preserve the appearance of "happiness" – "domestic bliss" (Ibid.: 65). At the same time, she envisions a presence – the "killjoy" – within the superficial serenity of the dinner table that causes a disarticulation and rupture of the "happiness" of the dinner table by refusing to stick to polite conversations that efface conflict (Ibid.). Following Ahmed, Ifemelu can be read as a killjoy, a willful subject whose presence in the American socio-cultural space occasions moments of discomfort and awkwardness in an environment where nationalist, racist and patriarchal regimes insist on the enforcing of silence

and acquiescence to hegemonizing narratives of America that exist in contradistinction to the lived realities of race, class and different gendered experiences.

I read Ifemelu as a subjectivity/body whose place in this table – to continue with Ahmed’s (2010) image – is not only one of estrangement but also a site of dissidence. As a person of colour, Ifemelu repeatedly refuses to be courted and “tamed” by the hegemonising narratives of America and as such she is seen as impolite in relation to the “hospitality” supposedly extended by the American space. In choosing to focalise on Ifemelu, an “undisciplined” and willful “feminist killjoy” who disrupts American national, racist and patriarchal silences, Adichie enables the narrative to front a certain gendered and racialised revolutionary rage against American structural and societal limitations with resonant immediacy and urgency. However, the novel’s extensive focalisation on Ifemelu also has its disadvantages. Ifemelu represents forms of privileged mobilities complete with the attendant capital, fluencies, confidences and versatilities that her education and exposure has granted. Her engagement with race and patriarchy is fortified by this social capital that she has acquired. While it could be argued that Adichie focus on Ifemelu is conscious as it is ideological because of the possibilities she creates for transgression and questioning, her experiences and dominant voice, with its versatilities and confidences, seems to obscure and drown out other less-privileged mobilities, voices and experiences. To avoid an analysis that only dwells on Ifemelu, I pay attention to the women in the salon in order to provide a class-sensitive reading of the text.

Ifemelu’s irreverence and ability to say the “inappropriate” and the “uncomfortable,” coupled with her refusal to skirt around vexatious topics/issues is evident even when she is still in Nigeria. For instance, Sister Abinabo, an influential church member in her mother’s church

who is often given charge over adolescent girls ejects Ifemelu from a group of other girls preparing garlands to be presented to Chief Omenka, a 419 man and his family in a special Thanksgiving Service. Ifemelu's crime is that she questions why she should make decorations for a thief in church (50-51). After this incidence, her father upbraids her for her penchant to speak in haste and out of turn:

You have to refrain from your natural proclivity towards provocation, Ifemelu. You have singled yourself out at school where you are known for insubordination and I have told you that it has already sullied your singular academic record. There is no need to create a similar pattern in church (52)

This injunction is followed by similar statements from her mother and Aunty Uju that seek to stifle and silence her: "Why must this girl be a trouble maker? ... it would be better if she was a boy, behaving like this"; "... she doesn't always know when to keep her mouth shut"; "You don't have to *say* everything" (52-53). These sentiments not only expose her mother's panic and anxiety elicited by Ifemelu's refusal to fit into gender constructs of femininity where silence and "nuance" is normalised and even venerated as a feminine virtue, they also demonstrate her complicity in female silencing. This gendered form of silencing therefore goes hand in hand with the conflation of the female voice with aggression (she is called a trouble maker) which, in the logic of patriarchal gender roles policing, is a threshold to chaos because of the threat it presents to acceptable feminine and masculine behaviour.

In addition to gendered silencing, the text also represents racialised nature of silence. This comes up in her relationship with her white American boyfriend, Curt. Through the novel's

portrayal of this relationship, the reader deduces that it is mainly strained because of Curt's seeming "sunniness" and naivety that comes from his class and racial privilege, and for this reason, she often feels the urge to burst the bubble he dwells in (197: 287). She admits that racial conversations with him were "slippery ... admitted nothing and engaged nothing and ended with the word 'crazy,' like a curious nugget to be examined and then put aside" (291). The racial slights and aggressions directed towards blacks are thus a cause for curiosity to Curt, and his engagement with them – sometimes with uncharacteristic complicity from Ifemelu – lacks the depth that she would later find in Blaine, a Black-American university professor. While this text presents the possibility of building private/intimate racial bridges and understanding through romantic love, Ifemelu and Curt's separation ultimately records a failure to do so in the context of polarised racial divides in the public arena. In fact, the novel presents the fragility and vulnerability of American publics in holding conversations on race. One incident that stands out is when Ifemelu notes that Kimberly, her one time employer, would always refer to every black woman as beautiful even when they would "turn out to be quite ordinary-looking" (146). Most poignantly, when Ifemelu and Ginika, her high school friend who migrated to America before her go into a store to buy a dress, the girl at the checkout counter cannot bring herself to ask them whether they were assisted by a black or a white attendant. The moment of awkward silence they endure makes Ifemelu wonder why she couldn't just ask whether it was the black or the white attendant and Ginika replies that "because this is America. You're supposed to pretend that you don't notice certain things" (126-7). Ifemelu finds this avoidance of the pervasive racial dynamics that govern American social interactions disingenuous.

Irigaray's (2008) illuminating study on the nature of human interactions gestures at the complementarity of speaking and listening/silence in transcending and understanding difference. She posits that "entering into communication requires the limits, always effective of a unique discourse, access to a silence thanks to which another world can manifest itself and take place" (5). In *Americanah's* case, however, the narrative represents a self-willed refusal to concede to the "ethics" of interactions – and even sometimes participate in them. On several occasions, the novel presents instances where white America prefers a monological interaction. Often, these unisonant "monologues" are represented as eliding and reductive schemas of knowing and representing the racial Other. Laura, Kimberly's sister exhibits this through her persistent digging up of the most shocking and pathological stories from Africa whose denominator is hunger, poverty and war (162; 167-8). Her insistence on maintaining the stereotypical narrative of Africa as a foil to the West is on the one hand, deployed to silence Ifemelu by reminding her of where she comes from and therefore demand her gratitude for the hospitality offered by America. On the other hand, it is also a refusal to accept the possibility of variant narratives and to collapse Africa into the undifferentiated meta-text of what Graham Huggan (2009: 315) terms as the catastrophic and the savage. Laura's fixation with the discursive representation of the West and its others translates into, in Irigaray's contention, the losing of the "most important function" of discourse: "communicating and not merely transmitting information" (2008: 5).

This glossing over of race in American public discourse is most amplified when Ifemelu encounters a dismissal of the significance of conversations on race from a "dreadlocked white man who sat next to her on the train," and whose entire outfit and mien fit the archetype of a "social warrior" (4). When she tells him that she has a blog called *Raceteenth or Various*

Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black, he evenly charges that: “Race is totally overhyped these days, black people need to get over themselves, it’s all about class now, the haves and the have-nots” (4). This response – which reductively divorces race from class – trivialises and invalidates Ifemelu’s lived experiences of racial exclusions, hierarchies and privileges in its claim of a post-racial society. Indeed, it is fitting that Adichie writes a novel about the centrality of race in America at a time when Obama was elected and the period touted as the post-racial era. In fact, the Obama moment is central in the narrative. However, this claim of a post-racial American society has been variously contested as ignoring the persistence of racism and how it continues to define socioeconomic inequality (Lentin, 2014: 1265), and as a myth that is grounded on a privileged perception of racial relations (Dawkins, 2010: 10).

Adichie’s positioning of her novel within this historical moment that renders engagement on racial inequalities peripheral and insignificant is a telling intervention into private and public discourses that serves to re-open and continue these conversations. In fact, the novel appears to be conscious of the conditions of its own production through the way it brings up politics of fictional publication in America and cultures of reading. On the one hand, this happens when Ifemelu narrativises how Shan, Blaine’s sister has difficulty publishing books on race. Shan talks about her experiences with her editor after writing her own memoir about “growing up in an all-white neighbourhood” and “being the only black kid in my prep school” (334). The editor’s response after reading it is: “I understand that race is important here but we have to make sure the book transcends race, so that it’s not just about race” (Ibid.). After this experience, Shan remonstrates that:

You can't write an honest novel about race in this country. If you write about how people are really affected by race, it'll be too *obvious* ... so if you are going to write about race, you have to make sure it's so lyrical and subtle that the reader who doesn't read between the lines won't know it's about race. You know, a Proustian meditation, all watery and fuzzy, that at the end just leaves you feeling watery and fuzzy (335-6)

Shan highlights how this desire to transcend race not only undergirds insidious race denialism that dismisses lived experiences of the victims of racism but also defines publication cultures that serve to safeguard racial privilege. In choosing to write her book that does not seek to transcend, offer a paradigm shift or “nuance” race therefore becomes a way in which Adichie, recognising the interactional and discursal subterfuge of mainstream America constructs a character who occasionally drops the pretensions of propriety and civility that such engagements presuppose. While Shan's editor on the surface appears to be concerned about marketability of her memoir, what lies beneath this are issues related to book reception and the sensibilities of the mainstream readers. On the other hand, Adichie eloquently captures book reception and interpretative cultures within America when Ifemelu has a discussion on V.S Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* with a woman called Kelsey who feels that it made her “truly understand how modern Africa works” and that it is “the most honest book” she has ever “read about Africa” (189-190). When Ifemelu challenges her reading of the novel by asserting that the book is not about Africa at all, Kelsey gets defensive and tells Ifemelu that she sees why she “would read the novel like that” to which Ifemelu replies that she too sees why Kelsey “would read it like you did” (190). In this way, Ifemelu subverts the assumption of a scientific disembodied rationality and impartiality that the white subject ascribes to herself. In addition, when placed alongside

Shan's experience with the editor, Adichie unearths what is considered palatable and unpalatable to mainstream audiences. While Naipaul's text transacts in acceptably ahistoricised representations of Congo after independence, Shan's memoir which portrays her contextualised experiences of race within America elicit denial and dismissal. Robin DiAngelo's theorisation on white fragility is useful in understanding the pushback that Shan and Ifemelu encounter when issues of race crop up. DiAngelo (2011: 54) argues:

White people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress. This insulated environment of racial protection builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress, leading to what I refer to as White Fragility. White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviours such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviours, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium.

Kelsey's response and Shan's editor's behaviour therefore serve to underline white fragility for they are defensive actions deployed to protect certain representations that do not strain mainstream sensibilities. On their part, Ifemelu and Shan's inability to skirt around American race relations is by extension a refusal to "go along" with formations that elide their embodied racial and female (and immigrant for Ifemelu) experiences for as Ahmed (2010: 59) reiterates, "going along ... is how we get along" (59). As a result, Ifemelu is often seen as "trouble" because of her pointing out and "reading situations of conflict and struggle" for the

“troublemaker is the one who violates the fragile conditions of peace” (60-1). Adichie’s novel is however not merely interested in narrativising the difficulties of holding conversations on racial and gender inequalities. The argument of this study is that Adichie creates spaces that transcend and challenge all manner of self-infatuation. In her attempts to limn the racial and gendered silences in America, Adichie creates interactive social spaces/occasions whose very nature and constitution fosters robust engagement, ruptures hegemonic discursive closures and allows space for difference and multiplicities of meaning. The spaces include the salon/hairdressers, the blog, the classroom and dinner parties. Although the dinner parties/gatherings are instructive in the way they play upon difference to elicit multi-voiced social interactions that make Blaine believe in the possibility of world that provides “a safe and equal space for everyone” (336), and the classroom as an ideal space enunciating rigorous debate on race, this study will only focus on the salon and the blog. This is because the salon and the blog stand out predominantly in *Americanah* as reconfigured spaces the author uses to explore the weighty issues of racism and its pathologies, privilege and class, migration, female interactions and aesthetics.

2.3 The Salon: Pushing the Boundaries of Racialised Femininity and Migrancy

The most significant space that repeatedly recurs in the text is the salon/hairdressers. By setting her novel in the salon, Adichie taps into a long tradition of literary and cinematic representation of hair care spaces in America as important sites “for Black political discourse” (Norwood, 2017: 76). For instance, Earl Wright II and Thomas C. Calhoun (2001) draw attention to the barbershop, a largely masculine space, as a complex setting where various socio-

economic activities take place (268). Like the salon, the barbershop emerged as a space where racialised and gendered counter-cultures were deployed against mainstream institutions and traditions. As a black subculture in a society where interactions between slaves were policed and criminalised, the barbershop acted as one of several political sanctuaries where black people could escape White supervision and surveillance (Nunley, 2005). However, more than being a mere site of escape, the barbershop was also a transgressive space of affirmation, community and acted as spatial and rhetorical reservoirs of “history, culture, and knowledge” (Ibid.: 22). bell hooks (2001) also draws attention to the significance of the beauty shop for black women in America by pointing out how it served as a setting for “Black women bonding through ritualised, shared experience” and also acted as “a space of consciousness raising, a space where black women shared life stories – hardships, trials, gossip; a place where one could be comforted and one’s spirit renewed” (112). In this sense therefore, Adichie’s use of the salon is a creative nod to these African American hair care spaces while at the same time populating it with recent African diasporas. The changed demographics affords Adichie an opportunity to revisit racial and gendered issues alongside immigrant experiences in ways that challenge mainstream constructions of black femininity and Americanness.

Adichie’s construction of the embodied site of the salon is such that the issues that arise from this space – women’s aesthetics, their bodies, desires and pleasure and social interactions – rub against and bleed into the larger society. What then appears to be an entirely feminine subculture is thus represented as deeply imbricated in hegemonic (patriarchal and racial) constructions and representations of femininity. Through the choice of the salon, Adichie mines the most ordinary practices and experiences in order to transcend attempts to limit

migrant/racial/feminine self-expression, explore the complexity of racial slights and aggressions, migrant longings and desires. As one of the smallest and most intimate of female universes, the salon is often misconstrued/stereotyped as simplistic and mundane, and the interactions petty and trifling. However, in *Americanah*, the salon provides an extremely politicised narrative space used by the author to launch into “larger” debates on class, aesthetics, migration, loss and national longing, heterosexual relations, racial/feminine visibility/invisibility and silencing, race, etc. It is a marker of Adichie’s authorial dexterity that she portrays the salon as a space where the characters not only engage and sometimes transcend given categories and essentialisms, but also as a space where they retreat to forge bonds of commonality as women and as migrants.

The salon conversations, what Wabende’s (2014: 33) calls the “register related to the salon,” provide a unique frame of reference through which we can examine interactions within the context of foreignness and class differences. The interactions, what might often pass as “gossip” when viewed through a certain prescriptive lens, becomes a way in which the characters negotiate their seeming marginality/powerlessness and inscribe themselves into discourse/visibility. Indeed, the pejorative association of gossip to “feminine culture” fails to take cognisance of the fact that this labelling underwrites “a powerful ... discourse deployed by males to perpetuate the subordination of women” (Greenfield & Williams, 1991). As a pervasive and as an integral form of human interactions, gossip performs various social functions. Erik K. Foster (2014: 83), quoting Stirling (1956) posits that gossip is “socially beneficial in that it facilitates information flow, provides recreation ... strengthens control sanctions, thereby creating group solidarity” and “it also can be ‘an outlet for hostile aggression.’” In the novel, therefore, “gossip,” mostly dismissed as a frivolous feminine speech act is transformed into a

semantically loaded interactive moment, one that empowers and escapes the policing and boundaries placed upon female/migrant interactions.

Ifemelu takes note of these overtly political speech acts when Halima and Mariama, both hairdressers, start talking about a client who had just left the salon. The client, who “looked about seventeen,” had disclosed that she had two children. After she left, Mariama notes that she is too young to have children and Halima quips that “Oh oh oh, these people ... when a girl is thirteen already she knows all the positions. Never in Afrique!” When, they turn to Ifemelu for her agreement and approval, she says nothing and mentally notes that they would probably talk about her as “that Nigerian girl” who “feels very important because of Princeton” and who “does not eat real food anymore,” and they would laugh, but with “mild derision, because she was still their African sister” (102-3).

Halima and Mariama’s interaction not only infantilizes their client but it also carries totalising connotations of white America’s sexual permissiveness and promiscuity by inferring that children as young as thirteen are sexually active. Read against Halima’s assertion that such behaviour can never be found in “Afrique,” this speculative conversation carries racial inflections that read closely invert the racist and foundational discourses of the “colonial enterprise” that hyper-sexualized and eroticized black women (Bernard, 2016: 1; Holmes, 2016: 1). Their gossip is here deployed as a discourse that explodes this binary of black/white sexualities while at the same time constituting and securing relations amongst themselves by attempting to rope in Ifemelu into a supposed shared bond of familiarity that is their “Africanness.” It is also worth noting that Ifemelu also shows awareness of class differences between herself and the salon women as a possible source of gossip when she leaves the salon.

While the women's mobility and job is defined by economic vulnerabilities, Ifemelu's incorporation into American academic and economic institutions – her Princeton attachments and a successful career as a racial blogger – grant her the social capital to navigate her world (Nigeria and America) with relative ease. However, Adichie's representation of these class tensions is handled in such a way that they do not overwhelm their intra-racial and gendered solidarities in a racial and patriarchal society. In fact, one feels the suspension of their class differences and tensions as their interactions progress into the sharing of relational/gendered and racial narratives and experiences. It is therefore not by coincidence that Ifemelu imagines that they will still laugh at her but with “mild derision, because she was still their African sister” (102-3). The term “African sister” is loaded for it carries with it their racial and “sisterhood” entanglements. These class differences therefore become temporarily dissolved when they convene at their points of vulnerability and disenfranchisement – racial and patriarchal hierarchies – which also happen to be their points of resistance, solidarity, strength and understanding. Significantly therefore, through the deployment of “gossip” the author assembles the “gossiper” while disassembling the “gossiped.” This seemingly trivial encounter thus demonstrates the ways in which the women claim and negotiate their agency through their creation of narratives that re-write their daily encounters in a seemingly marginal profession and hegemonic regimes of representation.

Halima and Mariama's assembling of the self is reinforced by various interactions with their clients that continue to expose the complex interplay of class and power relations in the salon subculture. On a number of occasions, and in a manner that claims knowledge and expertise over the client, the hairdressers ignore their customers' instructions on how they want

their hair handled. Even when they show obsequiousness to the clients' demands, the servility is not only feigned but also defined by the context; and both the performer and the audience recognize this. By amplifying the class and affluence of their clients, and the client's acceptance of the affected deference, the hairdressers create an environment that enables both to play out their different claims to class and power. For instance, Ifemelu notes the quiet deferential manner in which Mariama talks to an offending client all the while wearing "a smile full of things restrained" (186). Halima on the other hand stretches "for a little too long, as though to register her reluctance," when she is about to begin braiding a new client (187). All these actions underwrite subtle class and power negotiations that define salon interactions.

Significantly, Adichie uses the salon space to enunciate conversations about transgressive feminine sexualities and relationships. Portrayed as a site where social and class hierarchies are temporarily suspended as the characters are united by their femininity and experience, the salon can be read as a liberating space where speech flows freely to articulate what is normally regulated in everyday life. In this regard, Aisha confides to Ifemelu that she has "two Igbo men" and, in a tone laden with sexual innuendo, adds that "Igbo men take care of women real good" (15). In disregarding social conventions and strictures, and in having and talking about her dual sexual liaisons, Aisha removes her sexuality from the realm of the unspoken to the level of normalized – albeit temporarily – salon conversation. In doing this, Aisha appears to be aware of the reduced risk of slut-shaming by Halima, Mariama or Ifemelu because of having two sexual partners. Aisha enables the reader to envision the exploding of what Foucault (1990) terms as the "modern Puritanism ... edict of taboo, nonexistence and

silence” as she interrogates convention and propriety in talking about her sexual experiences (4-5).

Aisha’s sentiments should be read in the context of the larger narrative’s portrayal of the patriarchal control and surveillance of the female body and sexuality, often with female complicity. On numerous occasions, Adichie’s protagonist makes us aware of this policing of female bodies and the repression of their sexualities. At one point, Ifemelu recounts her mother’s reference to her genitalia when she told her to “scrub between your legs very well, very well” (128). The casting of Ifemelu’s genitalia as the “unsayable” by her mother forms an instructive point of departure on how the girl child is socialized into shame and silence with regard to her body. Her mother’s approach to the female body and sexuality is contrasted to Obinze’s mother who, when she caught them making out, called Ifemelu to her bedroom and talked to her about love, sex and abstinence (72). The normalizing and removal of “shame” when discussing sex is presented as a counterpoint to her mother’s conspicuous silences. In her mother’s world, “between your legs” is “unmentionable” and therefore possessing overtones of the shameful. This socialization into shame is poignantly echoed in Odiemo-Munara’s (2012) study of Mary Okurut’s *Invisible Weevil* (1998) where he flags women’s socialization to their body parts, processes and functions. While examining Nkwazi’s – the protagonist’s – coming to terms with her body parts and processes, Odiemo-Munara notes how in *Invisible Weevil* female genitalia morphs from “the shameful whose real name they should never say” to “koko” which “actually meant animal” (102). Odiemo-Munara argues that this “socialisation into shame” marks Nkwazi’s relationship with her genitalia such that when she is sexually abused she cannot report

the abuse “because it carries that which is deemed ‘shameful’ and thus to open up about what is being done to the ‘shameful’ is in itself a shame” (102).

Like Nkwazi who overcomes this negative induction into womanhood, Ifemelu rejects the shame and silence that would see her repress her sexuality. In Adichie’s text, Ifemelu’s unreserved embracing of her sexual desire not only legitimizes but also normalizes female sexual pleasure. In addition, Ifemelu shifts the supposed power dynamics in heterosexual relationships by originating and owning the sexual negotiations with both Rob and Obinze. As such, to quote Foucault, Ifemelu performs “nothing less than a transgression of laws, a lifting of prohibitions, an irruption of speech, a reinstating of pleasure within reality ...” (1990: 5). By spurning the regulation and control of her sexuality, she by extension refuses to be subordinated in order to ensure the survival of what Tamale refers to as patriarchal and capitalist structures (2005: 11).

The space of the salon is also used to challenge and examine the insidiousness of singular and homogenized definitions of beauty. Arguably, the text explores the pervasiveness of what Idowu-Faith (2014: 1) calls “hair politics” within and beyond the space of the salon. Indeed, the larger narrative unfolds within the space of the hairdresser’s where Ifemelu has gone to braid her hair in preparation for her return to Nigeria. While Ifemelu sits in the salon, the narrative moves to Nigeria and back to the present through a series of flashbacks. In this movement, Adichie invites us to contemplate the braiding of hair alongside the weaving of narrative. As the braiding goes on, so does the telling, tangling and untangling of the life experiences of the female characters. In the process Adichie portrays a rich tapestry of personal narratives of immigration, womanhood, love, longings for home, race and aesthetics. This braiding of hair and weaving of narrative reads into Aribisala’s (2013) contention that the author

“insinuates the organic connection between the braiding of black hair, the telling of stories and the transferring of ideas from the braider to one whose hair is being braided; her stories and ideas are being braided into our black hair.” It is in this double act of braiding and “telling” that the novel represents black hair as a site of struggle, and how hair “shapes black women’s ideas about race, gender, class, sexuality, images of beauty, and power” (Banks, 2000: 3).

While the narrator flags the connection between “race, gender and body size” in determining what/who is considered beautiful, it is the politics of the stylization of black women’s hair that she dwells on at length (6). This comes up early on in the text when Aisha, her braider, wonders why Ifemelu doesn’t relax her hair, a statement that momentarily turns Ifemelu into a proselytizer of the merits of wearing natural hair (12). While this conversation seems to be hastily handled and abandoned, it becomes eloquent when read alongside the larger narrative of Ifemelu’s progression from relaxed hair to natural hair. Through flashbacks, Ifemelu narrates how Ruth, her career counselor had advised her to lose her braids and straighten her hair when going for an interview, for, as she says, “nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters” (202). On the day Ifemelu relaxes her hair in preparation for her interview, the hairdresser in West Philadelphia remarks that she will have “just a little burn ... But look how pretty it is. Wow, girl, you’ve got the white-girl swing” (202-3). This conflation of “pretty” as having a “white-girl swing” reinforces a Eurocentric notion of beauty, for it subtly ties beauty to certain bodies, while presenting natural (black) hair as the antithesis of what is beautiful. Like Aisha, this hairdresser demonstrates the internalization of a hierarchized notion of hair aesthetics that places kinky/Afro hair at the polar opposite of straight hair. This desire to distance oneself from “natural ‘kinky’ hair” (Barnett, 2016: 70) and the embracing of a white straight-hair aesthetic is also expressed by

Aunty Uju who at one point tells Ifemelu that “there is something scruffy and untidy about natural hair” (216). This assumption of straight hair as the norm and as the marker of beauty thus goes hand in hand with the inferiorization and devaluation of blackness, not only by the mainstream society, but also by black people themselves (Mercer, 1987: 35-6). The reader acutely feels these black pathologies when Ifemelu finally cuts her straightened hair. After cutting it, she becomes highly self-conscious of how she looks, refuses to go to work for three days and buys:

Oils and pomades, applying one and then the other, on wet hair and then on dry hair, willing an unknown miracle to happen. Something, anything, that would make her like her hair. She thought of buying a wig, but wigs brought anxiety, the always-present possibility of flying off your head. She thought of a texturizer to loosen her hair’s springy coils, stretch out the kinkiness a little, but a texturizer was really a relaxer, only milder, and she would still have to avoid the rain. (208-9)

Her attitude towards her natural hair seems to configure it as a repository of shame, for in her statement we read the implication that her straight hair makes her like herself while kinky hair does not. The gradations of value she attaches to her hair therefore assume a hierarchy that places straight hair on top of black/curly hair. But the anxieties and insecurities that she suffers ought to be seen within the context of the racist environment that cultivates them. This devaluation of black hair gets more interesting when Ifemelu narrates her mother’s transformation by the pseudo religious-patriarchal discourse that seeks to regulate and control female bodies. Having grown in the shadow of her mother’s long beautiful hair, she describes how her mother one day came home “her face ... flushed, her eyes unfocused” and proceeded to

cut her hair (41). Significantly, Ifemelu watches her burn the hair “at the same spot she burned her used sanitary pads” and then after that she came back to the house to declare to Ifemelu that she was saved (Ibid.). The act of burning the hair, and the fact that she does it at the exact spot she burned her sanitary towels, dirty and soiled reverberate with meaning. The burning, read in the Judeo-Christian tradition, is a symbolic act of annihilating what she now considers impure, dirty and soiled – her hair. It is noteworthy that her husband previously calls the hair a “crown of glory” and Ifemelu described it as “free and full, flowing down her back as a celebration” (Ibid). Ifemelu describes the transformation thus:

After that afternoon, her God changed. He became exacting. Relaxed hair offended Him. Dancing offended Him. She bartered with Him, offering starvation in exchange for prosperity, for a job promotion, for good health. She fasted herself bone-thin: dry fasts on weekends, and on weekdays, only water until evening (42)

While these incidences hint at her mother’s psychological and emotional vulnerability occasioned by the family’s changing fortunes, the cutting of her hair and her subsequent refusal to wear “necklaces and earrings because jewellery ... was ungodly, unbecoming a woman of virtue” point towards a certain self-immolation that curiously downplays her femininity (43). These attempts to diminish her femininity gestures at both its suppression and the denial of its expression. Its relegation to the realm of the impure and un-expressible is an attempt to silence it, only to allow its expression within spaces where it can be controlled.

While Ruth and Aunt Uju’s statements on hair straightening point towards a negation of black bodies and a valorization of whiteness in mainstream America, they also illuminate the

persuasive and coercive strategies deployed towards black bodies as a precondition for their inclusion, access and employability. There is therefore an attempt to limn what Michael Barnett germanely refers to as black women relaxing/straightening of their hair in order to aid their “economic security and assimilation” (2016: 73). On the one hand, Ifemelu and Aunty Uju’s straightening of hair is an attempt to assimilate to the mainstream in the belief that straightened hair conveys “a non-threatening image to white and mainstream society” and allows “one to more easily blend in with the rest of society” (Barnett, 2016: 73-4). On the other hand, their straightened hair becomes a means of making themselves “as marketable as possible on the job market” (Ibid.: 74). Borrowing from Donaldson (2012), Barnett makes the point that “the decision to conform to a dominant style of beauty or to go natural may just come down to a choice between economic security and destitution” (2016: 74). Both Ruth and Aunty Uju seem to be aware of this, for they relate the ability to get a job with one’s hair style. Instructively, Aunty Uju tells Ifemelu that, “You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed” (119). Admittedly, although straightened hair affords both Ifemelu and Aunty Uju access and “involvement in particular flows of capital and desire,” this agency is seriously undercut by the fact that their straightened hair articulates a certain form of a coerced “embrace of whiteness ... and it marks some black women as more acceptably desirable” (The Unknown, 2016). As such, this “social capital” that they have acquired to “join the American professional class is purchased at a considerable mental, emotional, and personal price” (Ibid.). These coercions to conform to “acceptable” and less threatening forms of black femininity women’s highlights the histories of systemic regulation of their bodies that post-racial discourses seek to erase.

The counterpoint to this uniformity that is enforced on non-normative bodies and values is represented by Ifemelu's earlier mentioned transition from straightened hair to natural hair. I read her decision to go natural as a form of deviance that enunciates difference which is often interpreted by the mainstream society as threatening to their structures of privilege and power. Though it takes some time for Ifemelu to get used to her natural hair, when she finally falls "in love with her hair," she evokes some anxieties and hostilities from the "mainstream" society because of the implied challenge her action poses to an assumed "infallible" standard (213). This is exemplified by the tentative and hesitant questions and comments she receives from her co-workers and even strangers concerning her changed hair (211). Of significance, however, is the way Ifemelu begins the journey of re-valORIZING her natural hair. She does this within a group of fellow black women who recognize the political implications of straightened hair in the context of the ideologies of race and racism. When she tells Wambui, her Kenyan college classmate, that she hates her shaved hair, Wambui refers her to a website called *HappilyKinkyNappy.com*, a virtual community of black women who share ideas and personal narratives of their experiences with natural hair (209). The content of the website proves to be therapeutic for, in it, she finds:

Message boards full of posts, thumbnail photos of black women blinking at the top. They had long trailing dreadlocks, small Afros, big Afros, twists, braids, massive raucous curls and coils. They called relaxers "creamy crack." They were done with pretending that their hair was what it was not, done with running from the rain and flinching from sweat ... They traded recipes. They sculpted for themselves a virtual world where their coily, kinky, nappy, woolly hair was normal. And Ifemelu fell into this world with a tumbling gratitude (212)

In this online forum, the ideas of weaving and telling continue to find expression as the women share their natural hair-styling ideas and experiences in ways that re-value and re-center black hair. By the same token, this virtual community uses natural hair – a signifier of black femininity – to re-assemble black female bodies as desirable and attractive through its untangling and challenging of racial histories that find expression in the valuation of hair. In this group, Ifemelu transforms her hair from what she had considered as a “stigmata of shame into emblematics of pride,” to borrow Mercer’s expression (1987: 9). The website provides a counter-space which offsets the constant and reductive bombardment by mainstream media, as it tries to force what Ifemelu refers to as “images of small-boned, small-breasted white women on the rest of the multi-boned, multi-ethnic world of women to emulate” (178). As such, the website becomes a space where black hair represents alternative modes of being and aesthetics that contrasts with the mainstream norms. In their subversive pursuit of difference, they bring into existence multiplicities of being that challenge the securities and the privileges of a unisonant narrative and the mainstream’s assumed uncontaminatedness (Leitner, 2012).

2.4 Disembodied Spaces: Loud Femininities and Blogging

As I argued in the introduction of this section, Ifemelu’s character is often offensive and even threatening to patriarchal and racist regimes because of her refusal to fit into conventional and limiting gendered and racial categories. Through her refusal to gloss over race in one-on-one interactions, in her habitation and positioning of her black body in spaces that seek to confer invisibility to the historical experiences of those bodies and in the blog, I argue that Ifemelu’s

voice and body registers as excessively “loud” – especially in environments that demand her gratitude, docility and obsequiousness. My use of the term “loud femininity” is inspired by Anne Helen Petersen (2017) theorisation of what she refers to as the unruly woman, “women who, in some way, step outside the boundaries of good womanhood, who end being labelled too fat, too loud, too slutty, too whatever characteristic women are supposed to keep under control” (2017: x-xi). My argument is that the blog amplifies Ifemelu’s loudness more than any other space and through it we envision a character who forces her way into American publics to disrupt the superficial order established over discourses on race and difference. Through the blog, Ifemelu becomes the iconoclast who explodes the superficiality and silence of racial engagements, and the myths of post-race. In addition, the blog also throws into sharp light the differences and tensions between the older diaspora and the recent diasporas.

Ifemelu’s blog, *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non- American Black*, provides another interactive space where she engages what she calls “American tribalisms.” Adichie’s use of the blog to address racial questions demonstrates the self-reflexive ways the novel genre has adapted and reacted to 21st-century platforms and publics. The blog necessitates a reconsideration of the different ways in which digital media can shape the form and content of fiction. In *Americanah*, the anonymity and the non-fictive nature of the blog allows Ifemelu to have a sharper say on issues in a way that pushes the limits of conventional narrative. When asked why she made her character a blogger, Adichie’s response was that: “I wanted this novel to also be social commentary, but I wanted to say it in ways that are different from what one is supposed to say in literary fiction” (Guarracino, 2014: 2). Guarracino goes on to contend that “blog writing, or blogging, features

prominently in the novel as such a space, both embedded in but also outside creative writing, and as a place where social realities of race can be discussed without the trappings of character and action” (2).

Indeed, while face-to-face interactions among the characters, especially when it comes to race and privilege, appears stilted, the blog frees the interagents in a way that actual dialogue and narrative doesn't. The blog posts act as narrative breaks, punctuating the overall narration with pithy and incisive commentary on racism and its pathologies. But these breaks are used to build the text's concerns. Cognizant of this, Guarracino contends that the novel's "social commentary moves back and forth, from the blog to the novel and vice versa, contaminating fiction with the drive for elaboration expressed by blogging but also infusing blog entries with the emotional entanglements of creative writing" (3). Reading the blog entries alongside the larger narrative therefore creates movements where the subtleties and conventions of narrative give way to pointed commentaries that engage race, privilege, interracial relationships and the coercive strategies of inclusion and exclusion from hegemonic forms. The incident between Shan and her editor discussed earlier aptly articulates the explicit coercions deployed to downplay the exploration of racial experiences in narrative fiction in a space that seeks to silence racial schisms and grievances in its claim of a post-racial society. In contrast to these limitations that Shan observes, the blog presents a freeing space where Ifemelu's irreverence and ability to say the "inappropriate" and the "uncomfortable" collapse the circumscribed conversations that mask the frictions elicited by racism and patriarchy. In the anonymity and the immediacy that the blog affords her, she becomes a transgressor and initiator who vivifies and animates public discourse

with her astuteness, honesty and courage while at the same time demanding collective probity and self-reflexivity.

Ifemelu's blog also captures the traumas and pervasiveness of racial slights and aggressions, musings ranging from "immigrant life in the diaspora to affirmative action and interracial relationships," and black pathologies induced by racial hierarchies (Sefa-Boakye, 2014). In the blog titled "Why Dark-Skinned Black Women – Both American and Non-American – Love Barack Obama" Ifemelu blogs on how "many American blacks proudly say they have some 'Indian.' Which means Thank God We Are Not Full-Blooded Negroes. Which means they are not too dark." She goes on to blog about the value attached to light skin and summarily declares that American black men "like their women light" (213-4). In another blog – "To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You are Black, Baby" – she describes how non-American blacks insist that they are Jamaican or Ghanaian, etc., to escape the "black" label. She quips: "And admit it – you say 'I'm not black' only because you know black is at the bottom of America's race ladder" (220). Through these blogs, Adichie explores racially inflicted inferiority complexes that lead to, as Fanon (1967: 9) explains while examining black and white pathologies, the devaluation and negation of self through an identification with the other as the "norm." As such, the blogs reveal the complex ways in which power – as all hierarchical structures – and its performance sometimes necessitates and even demands the complicity of the powerless. This shift in representing immigrant/racial relations and desires presents an opportunity for nuancing the discourse on the workings of race. However, her unflinching representation of painful race relationships, her satirical tone and the semantically loaded

laughter she invites the reader to participate in through her portrayal of certain archetypal characters undercut the hierarchical positions that colourism discourses seems to buttress.

Adichie's choice of the space of the blog, an unpoliced and highly contradictory one, is as curious as it is instructive. Gunitsky (2015) pinpoints how the social media can be used both for political mobilization and dissent as well as for counter-mobilization, discourse framing, preference divulgence and elite coordination by "autocratic and hybrid regimes" (42). Dean's (2010) theorization on blogging illuminates another inimical way in which the social media can hinder productive public discourse, self-knowledge and reflexivity. She advances that the deluge and constant bombardment of images, information, ideas on social media might "displace critical thought, replacing it with the sense that there isn't time for thinking, that there are only emergencies to which one must react, that one can't keep up and might as well not try" (2). However, Dean also notes that the seeming chaos and frenzy in such interactions might have a solution in audience feedback. By borrowing Johnson's notion of the integral nature of feedback in virtual sites, Dean contends that with more feedback from an audience "online conversations would approach equilibrium" (14-15). Guarracino (2014) reiterates the capacity of blogs to elicit conversations by noting that they are a "shared platform" which "need both individual and collective engagement to be effective" (5).

Reading Ifemelu's blog from this perspective of interactivity, feedback and equilibrium enables us to examine this space as dramatizing the dilemmas that characterize interracial relations that are often defined by varying degrees of silences. The blog provides an alternative space for collective conversations/deliberations in the face of the failure of the insulated nature of the "diversity workshops" and "multicultural talks" she is invited to as a guest speaker (305).

Indeed, in the opening pages of *Americanah*, where Ifemelu makes her last post in preparation for her return to Nigeria, frequent poster SapphicDerrida makes an instructive observation: “I’m a bit surprised by how personally I am taking this. Good luck as you pursue the unnamed ‘life change’ but please come back to the blogosphere soon. You’ve used your irreverent, hectoring, funny and thought-provoking voice to create a space for real conversations about an important subject” (5).

Although SapphicDerrida arguably represents an ideal online interagent, her views point towards the capacity of the blog to make “people become invested in, energized by the exchange” (Dean, 2010: 5). The blunt, personal, sometimes bitter, ironic and sarcastic blog posts offer moments of reflection on a range of topics, bringing the reader to an awareness of the pervasive and insidious nature of racism, class and privilege, and the necessity to engage them. The responses Ifemelu receives vary from hostility to reductive dismissal as “an angry black woman,” and a desire for genuine engagement. While, on the one hand, her dismissal distorts and reduces her humanity to a sexist and racial stereotype (Vanzant, 2016), there is, on the other hand a deployment of the blog to counter the ignorance, superficiality, extremism and toxicity of public discourse on race in all its manifestations by presenting penetrating and honest arguments and conversations on its workings. These impassioned and emotive blogs and interactions offer valuable insights into how knowledge, racial privilege and power are produced, negotiated and subverted through affective relations and encounters. By the same token, the blog expands the spaces and platforms of public interaction from face-to-face engagements which exhibit certain degrees of regulation to a space which allows for both disassembling and enabling openness. The different responses expressed by her respondents guards against the cultivation of an echo

chamber that merely reflects certain views but rather gives room for self-examination, reflexivity and knowledge.

2.5 Unmapping the City: Contestating and Contaminating the City in Teju Cole's *Open City*

Teju Cole is a Nigerian-American writer, photographer and an art historian who lives in Brooklyn, New York (Vermeulen, 2013: 40). Cole is the author of *Every Day is for the Thief* (2007), *Open City* (2011) and two non-fictional texts *Known and Strange Things: Essays* (2016) and *Blind Spot* (2017). *Open City*, the novel under study, won the 2012 PEN/Hemingway Award, the New York City Book Award, and the Rosenthal Award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. The novel represents the experiences and thoughts of Julius Olatubosun, a Nigerian-German psychiatrist, who is on the verge of completing his residency in New York. Before moving to America, Julius had attended school in Nigeria and after his father's death he moves to America to continue with his studies. Beginning in medias res, the narrative sparingly releases details of Julius's life, his recent break up with his girlfriend, military service in Nigeria, his estrangement from his German mother and his seeming incapacity to sustain social relations. This withholding of details of Julius's life and only very gradually sifting them into the narrative gives the reader the feeling "that the book began before we started" (Wood, 2011). Much of the novel consists of Julius's wanderings, both physical and mental, and it is through such wanderings that the reader experiences a panoramic view of the spaces, objects, people and histories that he encounters. By the end of the narrative, the narrator's thoughts and recollections have taken us back to Nigeria, Europe and America where he now lives.

Cole develops the character of Julius as a refined and obsessive intellectual, a psychiatrist whose profession allows him entry into the most intimate details and trivia of the psychology of the city and the people he meets – although he lacks the same critical edge when it comes to his own life and experiences. While he often appears to seek out human interactions, Julius is however presented as highly introverted. Nevertheless, the author manipulates this distance such that the reader gets the impression that it allows him some access into knowledges and engagement with people, spaces and their histories that only such removal affords. From such a distance, the highly ruminative and contemplative voice of the narrator presents a catalogue of manifest and not so overt historical crimes and atrocities, a web of layered experiences and uncontainable voices and narratives that cannot be subsumed under hegemonic histories and cultures. Taken to what sometimes reads as hallucinatory meanderings, the narrator serendipitously connects a wide array of histories and spaces to reveal labyrinthine connections and entanglements. His diverse knowledge of music, literature, drawings/paintings, film and history – which are often used in the narrative as points of departure into other places, times, narratives and experiences – often portrays him as a poseur. As a result of this, Cole punctures his credibility because of his seemingly detached elitism and lack of empathy, and majorly, the scene towards the end of the novel when we learn of his sexual assault of Moji in his teenage years back in Nigeria.

Much of the critical analysis on the novel focuses on how the novel fosters/undermines the cosmopolitan tradition. For instance, Madhu Krishnan gives an insightful reading of the novel that destabilises “neoliberal visions of cosmopolitanism” which posit the “postcolonial space as inherently liberatory” (2015: 675). She proposes that a reading of the narrative in

tandem with the title gives a “notion of space in which the illusion of freedom of movement serves as a mask for the continuation of violence.” To Krishnan, Julius’s visit to Brussels is significant in the text because of its history in the Second World War. She notes the fact that since Brussels chose surrender over attack, the city emerges as a “space of submission and violation, against which the myth of liberty through flux cannot maintain its illusions” (2015: 676). This insightful interpretation however tends to see movement in the text solely as an expression of liberty/freedom that masks ongoing abuses and atrocities. However, to look at it exclusively from this perspective downplays the ways in which Julius’s movements transforms space into a loci of knowledge and its transmission, and as such, they act as mediums that trigger conversations on histories, cultures and people. In his engagement with spaces, Julius exposes liminal spaces of contestation seemingly subsumed in the univocal logic of the host. Julius’s wanderings, more than just being an expression of freedom through movement, unravel/unearth these hidden layers of histories and cultures that transgress what appears on the surface as exclusive histories and experiences to reveal moments of intricate entanglements and continuities. While indeed the text limns these cities as spaces “of submission and violence,” it is equally important to take note of what happens in the margins of these mainstream attempts to control its migrant and racial others. It is these liminal spaces of contestation, flux and entanglements with/to the “fortress” city that Julius is interested in. To consider both the hegemonic constructions of the city spaces alongside those spaces where contestations reveal cracks to its unified narrative reads into Fran Tonkiss’ (2005: 99) germane assertion that “urban spaces provide a stage for an official geography of authority as well as for the mobilization of alternative politics.” To view the novel’s portrayal of both New York and Brussels from this

perspective avoids the reification of the binaries of violator/violated and ultimately gives space to the complex mélange that emerges from these connections.

Krishnan's interpretation of the city of Brussels is however apt for the current study. She argues that Brussels, read against its "historical backdrop suggests that ... like the catachresis of the open city, the production of postcolonial space performed by the novel deliberately conceals as much as it reveals in order to engage in a meta-commentary on the very production of a cosmopolitanism rooted in neoliberal conquest" (2015: 677). The current study's concern is with the notion of "openness" that Cole deploys not only as a space opened up by movement, a space that is under "invasion" by its Others, but also as an openness that denotes the opening up of a discourse that takes cognisance of the inclusion of subterranean histories and voices. The opposition created by what the city space conceals and reveals, in the words of Krishnan, will be useful in examining how Julius's narration articulates the silenced/erased and thereby throws it into sharp relief. As such, and to quote Sarah Upstone (2009: 8-9), the urban spaces represent instabilities of meaning, a certain productive incompleteness and productive chaos that circumnavigates attempts to codify and order.

Katherine Hallemeier's (2013: 239) reading of both Cole's fictional texts, *Every Day is for the Thief* and *Open City*, explores how the "protagonists ... maintain cosmopolitan identities largely by embracing international literary culture." She however quickly adds that a deeper engagement with the texts exposes the "parochialism of the protagonist's cosmopolitan sensibilities by introducing characters who possess creative resilience and language skills that the protagonists lack" (Ibid.). These sentiments are followed up by Pieter Vermeulen (2013) who contends that *Open City's* "engagement with memories of suffering and its evocations of

aesthetic experience shows that it interrogates rather than affirms an aesthetic cosmopolitan program” (40). Vermeulen goes on to give a compelling interpretation of the text that both acknowledges the novel’s affiliation to cosmopolitan traditions and at the same time notes that the text “ends up as a catalogue of failed attempts to forge intercultural connections through artistic means” (2013: 42).

Vermeulen expresses some disquiet with the narrator who strings together “numerous accounts of human rights abuses and testimonies of culturally diverse experiences” but does not allow these to register in his “dissociated mind” in “even a minimally transformative way” (Ibid.). He identifies Julius not as a flaneur, “an aesthete who uniquely manages to engage with the realities of the modern city without fully surrendering to them” and who has been “condemned as a fatally bourgeois figure attempting to reprivatize public space” (Ibid.: 41). Rather, Vermeulen argues that Julius evokes more the “fugueurs ... ‘mad travellers’ who unaccountably walked away from their lives and, when found, were unable to remember what had happened on these trips, let alone what had motivated them to set out in the first place” (Ibid.: 42). Vermeulen dismisses Julius as a character who has “difficulty managing his distances from and attractions to the lives of others, and that the aesthetic experiences that are explicitly invoked to aid this management of affective and cognitive distance turn out to be of no help” (2013: 50). However, while Vermeulen’s dismissal of Julius’s character is apt, I posit an examination of Julius’s seemingly detached wanderings and engagements as more semantically loaded and indeed calculated to achieve what James Wood (2011) calls a “steady, accidental inquiry” of the world and experience.

The above-mentioned sustained and illuminating readings concentrate on the interpretation of the otherwise ambitious novel's questioning of literary cosmopolitanism through its failure to "generate ... intercultural associations" (Vermuelen, 2013: 50). Vermuelen, however, offers a very illuminating observation central to the concerns of this study through his interpretation of Julius's declaration that he is "one of the still legible crowd" (Cole, 2011: 59). Vermuelen notes that this:

underlines the responsibility of the novelist to testify to a history of suffering that he, unlike the victims of history, can still read and render legible and visible for future readers. By emphasizing legibility ... these figures shift attention to the readers who may yet receive the traces that the novel has rendered legible, even if it refrains from any more ambitious or more determinate designs on the reader (2013: 51)

Through this statement, Vermuelen gestures at the withdrawal of the narrator from a much more deterministic influence over the narrative, and welcomes the reader into the act of decrypting and decoding, with the narrator, the visible traces.

Rather than disregarding the insightful analyses of Cole's novel, the current reading seeks to augment the critical discourse surrounding it. While recognising the novel's undercutting of the cosmopolitan aesthetic that Krishnan, Hallemeier and Vermeulen underscore, the current analysis of *Open City* sets out to analyse the ways in which the novel succeeds in evoking/generating conversations that subvert spatial binaries, epistemological closures and historical silences. While the above mentioned critics read Julius as unengaged and unresponsive to the suffering that he relays, and as Vermeulen (2015: 281) contends elsewhere, "unavailable

as a site for empathetic identification,” I hold that this lack of involvement is intentional, that it is through it that Cole manages the mediation of Julius’s observations and interactions. Examined keenly, this “distantiation yields an epistemological advantage; it produces ... a productive alienation” (Vermeulen, 2013: 41). This productive alienation enables the novel to represent “multifarious realities, stories, and memories in a way that allows multiple resonances and interconnections to emerge” (Ibid.). Undoing the narrator as a site for identification permits the reader to escape from the control – emotional and ideological – of a first person narrator. Through this, Cole allows the reader precedence in the interaction with the narrative: a narrative whose indeterminacy, inconclusivity and imbrications, however, repudiate simplification. Significantly, this also enables analysis of the text to move beyond the narrator/narrative dyad that Krishnan, Hallemeier and Vermeulen prioritise, to the narrative/narrator/reader triad that Cole’s novel seems to give primacy to. A reading along this line attends to the complexity of Julius as a character whose attentiveness, isolation, contamination and fallibility is adroitly deployed to effect constructive reader-narrative identifications/engagements.

I find Cole’s novel similar to Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* in a number of ways. On the one hand, both texts record a metaphoric transgression, a reversal of journeys to the South and thus a travesty of the familiar topos of travel and exchanges as originating from the North to the South in fiction. On the other hand, they both give the impression that the reader comes into the story somewhere in the middle of the narrative: that there was action and narrative that preceded the reader’s entry. Cole’s novel opens thus: “And so when I began to go on evening walks last fall, I found Morningside Heights an easy place from which to set out into the city” (3). This opening carries the connotations of connection and continuity. The notion of

connection with a past and its explanation ties in with the ideas of continuity, of actions, conversations/dialogues and even monologues (as is Julius's) that have been going on before.

Cole's opening that gives the impression of the narrative starting in the middle creates the necessity of flashbacks/flash-forwards in order to revisit the past. The overall effect of this is that *Open City* becomes a nonlinear narrative. While the disjointed and disruptive narrative that Cole presents not only imitates the disorderly and random workings of the human memory, it significantly prefigures the symbolic disruption of the linearity and order of Euro-American discourses and spaces. This disturbance is embodied in the narrator's motif of movement to spaces/places which lend themselves open to interpretation, where traces of history and experience that are thinly obscured are prised open. Indeed, the novel's opening with movement/motion foregrounds it as a metaphor of flux and entanglements that the narrative prioritises. It is through these movements, for instance, that he encounters Professor V's book which details the mass murders of Native American's and the erasure of that past (26-7). Later when he visits Brussels, he sees an inscription under the first five Belgian kings that mentions Congo (100). The link to Congo is amplified in the novel by the strong anti-immigrant sentiments that precede and attend his visit. Ultimately, the narrator's bringing together of seemingly disparate/dissonant histories/memories and stories into dialogue with each other ultimately expose their frictions and intricate connections. As such, walking in *Open City* is used to create spatial linkages of either New York or Brussels to other spaces.

This nonlinear narrative too manipulates time, memory and space in order to underscore the intertwining of the past with the present and to disrupt spatial binaries. The novel, as all other nonlinear texts, is designed to challenge the idea of linearity – through its rejection of narratives

that develop chronologically/sequentially – and by extension, it explodes the idea of singular voices/discourses. The nonlinear plot presents the reader with multiple tales that build up to the climax. Cole utilises these multiple paths to create a cacophony of histories and voices, to question, read and interpret spaces and their histories. It is through the lens of eclectic narrative paths that the author wants the reader to view New York and any other city and places he visits.

In addition to the continuity and connection that Cole's opening creates, it also significantly anticipates a listener/audience. This idea of a conversation is reinforced, in what appears to be an authorial intrusion, by Julius himself when he contends that “a book suggests a conversation: one person is speaking to another ... so I read aloud with myself as my audience, and gave voice to another's words” (5-6). Tucked at the bottom of the page as a trivial anecdote and considering the subsequent actions and statements that Julius makes, this sentiment turns out to be the hinge upon which the narrative rests. By invoking a conversation that significantly ties in the reader with narrative, the novel suggests the primacy Cole places upon the reader's reception of the text. Alluding to the relationships between texts and readers, Miguel Syjuco (2011) infers that “with every anecdote, with each overlap, Cole lucidly builds a compassionate and masterly work engaged more with questions than with answers regarding some of the biggest issues of our time: migration, moral accountability and our tenuous tolerance of one another's differences.” Syjuco consequently signals at the text's attempts to embrace complexity and evoke debate beyond the remit of the fictional world.

Cole's anticipation of a novel that sparks a conversation with the reader through the undoing of the narrator's reliability and overt attempts to court the reader's engagement necessitates an interpretation of the denouement of the text, an act that by implication takes us

beyond the fictional world of the narrative itself. The text rejects the idea of a closed/neat narrative in which, upon denouement, all conflicts are resolved and loose ends tied. Suggestive of an ending beyond the narrative/text, it ropes in the reader in a manner that seeks to involve him/her in its creation. Analysing Cole's text within this perspective conjures up Racheal DuPlexissis's idea of writing "beyond the ending" (1985: 5). DuPlessis posits that "writing beyond the ending means the transgressive invention of narrative strategies, strategies that express critical dissent from dominant narrative" (Ibid.). In her work, which deals with texts by European female writers and how they challenge strategies of writing about women, she notes how these fictions counter conventional endings of the novel which present choice as over "and that the growth of character or the capacity for defining action has ceased" (Ibid.: 178). While DuPlessis's concern is with the choices, growth and actions of the characters within the fictional world of the text, my appropriation of the term takes cognisance of the way narrative finds relevance beyond the confines of the fictional world. This is because Cole's unbenign portrayal of the limited and elitist cosmopolitan aestheticism of Julius gestures at the ways in which the text actively anticipates an engagement with an audience.

As I had earlier hinted, it is worth noting that the novel rejects any form of simplification and conclusivity. The narrator, for instance, experiences a moment of dissociation from his own life and narrative when he comes to the tragic realisation of his own lack of self-knowledge. After he recalls his sexual assault of Moji, he declares that:

Each person must, on some level, take himself as the calibration point of normalcy, must assume that the room of his own mind is not, cannot be, entirely opaque to him.

Perhaps this is what we mean by sanity: that, whatever our self-admitted eccentricities might be, we are not the villains of our own stories (243)

To the reader, this episode is jarring because of the overarching lack that accompanies its presentation. The revelation is followed by a certain lack of explanation, plausibility, remembrance on his part or even an apology from an otherwise highly contemplative narrator. The reader therefore senses Cole's reluctance to secure Julius in a coherent container of meaning and we are instead invited to witness this discordancy as we contemplate its meaning. This undoing of the reliability of the narrator reads into the larger task of destabilising all securities, certainties and presumed knowledge of the self or the other, and fundamentally, it casts a shadow over the feasibility/viability of all hegemonic narratives. This in turn opens up space for revisiting, re-writing and re-elaboration of histories and experience. As a matter of fact, the novel does not front any univocal or reductively panoptic narrative, rather, the otherwise fallible narrator who appears to be highly attuned to the stories and voices surrounding him give the novel a polyphonic and multivocal quality. More often than not, the protagonist's narrative is subsumed and sometimes almost disappears under the weight of the various encounters and interactions he has. His own narrative seems secondary and incidental in the face of these encounters, a fact that explains the restraint – or even avoidance – he shows when it comes to his personal life. Overall, there is a degree of the unknowability of the narrator which is not helped by his concern with other voices and narratives and the gradual and studied/measured anecdotes he gives of himself.

Despite the fact that Julius is largely presented as possessing a criminal detachment, he often invites and seeks conversations and interactions with other characters in the text (Martin,

2011). His portrayal highlights Cole's preoccupation with ambiguity and the unfinalizability of meanings. One such poignant instance is when he travels to Brussels and makes the acquaintance of Farouq (117-129). While their interaction exposes Julius's apolitical liberalism that makes his concern with human suffering ring hollow, it at the same time frees him to serve, more or less, as an impartial conduit/medium through which we gain entry into the multifarious stories that he presents. Cole's deft handling of the character of Julius makes Luke Kennard (2011) note an apparent "openness" and "honesty" of Farouq's and Julius's interaction, a dialogue that is "at times impassioned but essentially respectful," and the "inconclusivity" of that dialogue as "a virtue." Kennard quotes the instance when Julius wants to tell Farouq of the perception of the Jews in America and abandons the idea because, as he says "what I would impose on him would not be an argument, it would be a request to adopt my reflexes, or the pieties of a society different from the one in which he grew up" (Cole, 124). It is precisely because of Julius's refusal to proselytise and to give space for Farouq's voice, impassioned and deliberated, that acquaints the reader so well with Farouq. In addition, this refusal, read alongside his portrayal as an unreliable narrator, represents Cole's fascination with the fallible, contaminated, complex and the articulation of alternative politics.

The novel's title, *Open City*, acquires significant purchase when we read Julius – a character who elicits dialogue with most of the characters that populate the text – as an agent of this openness, and the city itself and the characters he meets as metaphors of this openness. While describing the title of the book to Jeffrey Brown (2011), Cole had this to say:

Well, there were two things I thought about when I gave the book that title. One is this idea that this city is accessible to him. It's open. The way we talk about open

hearted, open minded. So it has a positive connotation that way. It's about a sensitive narrator who has taken in a lot of the signals that the city has given him as he walks around. But the other idea was the meaning of the term "open city" itself, which is not such a positive meaning. It's a city that has been invaded, but a city that is trying to deal with the enemy to prevent physical destruction of its infrastructure. So when that deal is signed, the invading army marches in and is there without breaking the city apart. So that's an open city, too. New York is, of course, not actually an open city. But I wanted to capture a little bit of that siege mentality and that sense of invasion happening on several levels, historically, psychologically. Those were the two ideas that made me give the book its title.

The openness that the novel presents is thus two tiered. On the one hand, it denotes the literal opening up of national borders and the attendant feelings of invasion by immigrants. On the other hand, it captures Cole's attempt to portray the cities as both accessible and open. I however extend this positive idea of accessibility and openness to connote Julius's ability to access histories and narratives that appear to be subsumed in the insular and exclusivist stance of his host cities. This accessibility translates to the opening up of discursal closures/hegemonies through Julius's fascination with marginal and peripheral histories and memories. Scholars have long since recognised the threat that the migrant poses in the former "medieval fortress town" which was constructed as a "place of safe retreat against the external enemy," and now has to grapple with "an enemy [who is] ... within [its] gates" (Westwood & Williams, 1997: 8). Westwood and Williams argue that this stranger often elicits various forms of surveillance from the hosts (Ibid.). However, Iain Chambers perceives a productive disturbance that the alien

presence brings about by positing that the “labyrinthine and contaminated quality of metropolitan life” the migrant occasions, “not only leads to new cultural connections, it also undermines the presumed purity of life” (1994: 95).

Cole’s novel represents this disturbance as also affecting the epistemic and discursive self-infatuation of the host. The author does this through his deployment of the catachrestic term “open city” which undercuts the spatial, and by extension, epistemological policing of spaces. Julius’s relationship with the city of New York personifies the openness that Cole mentions. His narration of space appears to be radically engrossed with the slippages of the peripheral against the backdrop of the “mainstream.” Julius’s peculiar sensibilities enable him access to the city which in turn becomes a text, open for his contemplation and articulation. At the beginning of his walks, Julius describes the shock encounter with the “incessant loudness” of the streets, and how after the walks through the city, he would lie in bed rehearsing and futilely “sorting each encounter” (6-7). However, as the narrative progresses, Julius becomes versatile as a reader of New York. He becomes, as noted earlier, “one of the legible crowd,” agile in recognising the cacophony/multiplicity of voices and histories that define the city (59). The openness that the reader encounters in the text – of either New York or Brussels – becomes closely tied to the idea of being invaded as peripheral and suppressed/elided histories erupt within the mainstream. These histories, as Chambers contends elsewhere, dislocate the Western intellectual cogito and his/her supposed “masterly of the word/world” (1994: 95).

Julius approaches the city with an undivided attentiveness that is akin to other artistic works he describes, be it listening to music or observing portraits. To him, New York becomes a text whose stories need a witness to be articulated. This idea of the city/space as a text is echoed

by Tonkiss (2005) who observes how Walter Benjamin's (1985) experiences the cities of Naples, Moscow and Marseilles. Tonkiss notes that Benjamin deploys "different metaphors... to describe the ways one unlocks the strange city – the city appears as a maze, a stage, a book, a ruin" (Ibid.:123). In *Open City*, New York presents itself as both a stage and text to the narrator: a space where plurality is dramatized and difference brought into sharp relief; and as a text, possessing a "system of signs," a la Tonkiss, whose signifiers defer meaning (Ibid.: 131-2). David Frisby (1997) reinforces the notion of the city as a text by contending that our understanding of cities begins with the presupposition that the city "possesses features of textuality – minimally a constellation of signs and symbols," a language, and that a city as a text "presupposes a reader or readers" (6). He further argues that "if the city is a text, then it should be read – amongst others – by those who seek to create, shape, and transform it. Their *reading* of the city crucially conditions their *writing* of the city as a text, its buildings, its streets, its street furniture ... readings generate meaning out of a plethora of signifiers" (Ibid.). This conceptualisation of the city as a text therefore opens it up to multiple interpretations and meanings.

The proliferation of meanings that defines *Open City* is best exemplified when Julius, during his walking sprees, comes across the ruins of the World Trade Centre. He observes that:

This was not the first erasure on the site ... the site was a palimpsest, as was all the city, written, erased, rewritten. There had been communities here before Columbus ever set sail ... human beings had lived here, built homes, and quarrelled with their neighbours long before the Dutch ever saw a business opportunity in the rich furs and the timber of the island and its clam bay. (58-59)

The deployment of the term palimpsest to describe the 9/11 site becomes a framework within which the narrator views New York. As a metaphor, a palimpsest connotes the ideas of erasure, layering/overlying and plurality. It necessitates a rethinking of the concepts of centre/periphery, hierarchies, fixity and linearity along the lines of connections, plurality and multiple nodes. To Julius, the site as a palimpsest produces a plethora of traces that are rendered visible and articulable by the ruptures in its silences. As a palimpsest therefore, it questions the legitimacy of the discourses of fixity and boundedness ascribed to spaces. The site thus becomes open, legible, a space where, to quote Upstone (2009) in a different context “erasure always leaves its mark ... a new reality is layered over the old, which nevertheless continues to exist as a trace” (6). New York City is layered with these traces from its colonial history to modern day illegal/legal migrations. Through this, Cole shows that what spatial order conceals is always present, never completely obscured. Significantly, we can also read Julius’s narrative as a palimpsest because of the way he embeds other stories within his own. The amalgamation of voices, digressions and stories he presents as a backdrop of his life’s journeys undermines his narratorial “I” by providing divergent points of view and voices. The palimpsest his narrative creates, the conversation/dialogue his narrative enacts with other stories and lives betrays both the connections and the disjunctures that his life has with others.

2.6 Conclusion

Through an analysis of Adichie’s *Americanah* and Cole’s *Open City* this chapter has sought to explore the various ways the authors deploy the novel genre to enter, disturb and to extend North-South discourses. Adichie’s novel, intent on disturbing the enforced and consensual silences, portrays silence in the context of migration as gendered and racialised. She

represents the spaces of the salon, the blog and to a lesser extent parties/social gatherings and the classroom as spaces whose constitution radically challenges discursive closures by presenting a complex play of difference and meanings. Adichie's protagonist, Ifemelu, is constructed as an iconoclastic character, a "killjoy" whose refusal to fit into gendered and racialised containers stretches the limits of silence and expands the horizons of being beyond static representational regimes. Adichie's text therefore manages to address the subject of race and by extension show its embeddedness with a number of other issues.

Cole's approach is geared towards examining spaces, especially the spaces of the metropolitan centres of the West, in a bid to show their contamination, the instabilities of meanings that they embody and the slippages of the peripheral that lies beneath mainstream cultures and histories. While the reader of *Americanah* comes to establish somewhat intimate identifications with the narrator, *Open City* presents the narrator as unknowable and further alienates the reader's sympathies when we come to learn of his raping of Moji. This unknowability reads into the larger novel's attempt to project an indeterminacy and fallibility of any narrative/discourse. This unfinalizability is reflected in not only the novel's opening but also in the interactions that the protagonist has with other characters, and in the narrator's wandering thought processes, finding apertures in the most mundane objects, spaces or topics. While Ifemelu's likeability and honesty is deliberate, the distantiating of Julius from the possibility of empathy by the reader, I argue, is a calculated for it is from such a distance, aloof yet clinically observant that Cole's polymath ably transmits his experiences, observations and interactions to the reader. To put it differently, the distance enables the writer to create reader-narrative identifications that escape the controlling voice of the first person narrator. Cole's use of the term

“open city” becomes significant in, on the one hand, confronting the siege mentality of Euro-America in the face of its immigrant community and the deployment of racism as a disciplinary and surveillance mechanism, and on the other hand, opening and penetration of spaces to reveal their complex imbrications and entanglements and hence challenging the discourses of purity.

CHAPTER THREE

TROPING THE HOSTLAND: IMAGINING ELSEWHERE IN THE AFRICAN POSTCOLONY

I would like to call ‘imagined worlds’ ... the multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imagination of persons and groups spread around the globe. An important fact of the world we live in today is that many persons on the globe live in such imagined worlds (and not just in imagined communities).

Arjun Appadurai

3.1 Introduction

Since mobility is a definitive condition of the world we live in, it is almost inevitable that the imaginations of the spaces beyond the home/nation are not only central in the narratives and discourses of home, but also inform how we inhabit the home. Bulawayo and Mabankou’s novels present narratives that are stylistically and thematically conscious of the spaces beyond the nation. These novels portray migration as a process and the destinations of travel as part of the day-to-day repertoire of the characters before they travel. This study is an attempt to grapple with the meanings and significance of African “elsewheres” in the African imagination through the examination of the contacts and experiencing of these spaces (before and after migration) as represented in Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* and Mabanckou’s *Blue White Red*. I use the term “elsewhere” as has been used by Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall (2004) and Jonathan Echeverri Zuluaga (2015). Zuluaga understands an “elsewhere as linking the actual lived space (here) with other spaces (there), mirroring each other but also transforming or subverting the relations that define that lived space” (Ibid.: 596). He further clarifies that they “describe

imagined, distant, malleable destinations” and that “they not only relate to the there and then of dreams and aspirations but structure relations to the here and now” (607). In this sense therefore, the African continent “exists only as a function of circulation and of circuits. It is fundamentally in contact with an elsewhere” (Mbembe & Nuttall, 2004: 351). Building on the previous chapter’s examination of the creation of intercultural dialogues and disruption of discursal/epistemic closures in African migrant/diasporic fiction, chapter three seeks to engage with Africa’s contacts and relations with its elsewheres, and how these elsewheres define and inform the lived realities of Bulawayo and Mabanckou’s texts. As such, the study recognises how Africa and its elsewheres are represented as alternative nodes in a constantly slipping and asymmetrical nexus of connections and relations.

This chapter’s interrogation of the contacts and experiencing of other spaces in the African continent hypothesises that *We Need New Names* and *Blue White Red* present narratives that are significantly invested in the African continent as they are in African elsewheres. To rephrase Mbembe and Nuttall (2004: 348), these novels perform a polemical exercise that imagines the world from Africa and/or imagines Africa into the world. Bulawayo and Mabanckou’s novels call for an engagement with on the one hand, the fantasies and narratives of foreign spaces as they diffuse and circulate into the national space and, on the other hand, the actual lived experiences of Africa’s contacts with Euro-America. In this chapter, I use the term performance to refer to a series of symbolic acts that the characters make recourse to in order to enact claims of familiarity to spaces outside the national boundaries. I appropriate and retool Judith Butler’s concept of “performativity” to make sense of the character’s imitative and repetitious actions that serve to showcase certain fluencies and familiarities with these spaces

(1993). The character's "repeated stylisations of the body," the spaces within which they enact these fluencies and their audience congeal to create an element of performance that is central to how African elsewheres are experienced in these texts (Butler, 1990, 43). To examine these fluencies and familiarities, this study will zero in on the mythos and narratives of Euro-American spaces that the two novels exhibit, the returnees as texts that mediate and perform these foreign spaces to the home audiences, and the un-travelled as the recipients of these narratives and performances.

This chapter is divided into two parts as per the novels under study. The first section reads Bulawayo's text in an attempt to show how Bulawayo's text conjures up a narrative of African mobilities and global relations that are acutely disenfranchising and disempowering. This will be done by focusing on the child narrator, children's play/games (specifically the country-game) and their personalised and intimate narratives of relatives in foreign spaces. In addition, the chapter examines photography as an archive whose function is the production of Otherness. Through this, I show that the use of non-hegemonic and subordinate characters' symbolic performances and experiencing of global relations serves to dramatise North-South and South-South relations that are defined by the fracturing of intimate relationships, economic coercion, inequality and violence. In reading *We Need New Names*, I take cognisance of Bulawayo's narratorial vigilance that locates African elsewheres not solely in Euro-American spaces but multiplies/diversifies these elsewheres by placing them in a complex network that includes both the South and the North. This study's analysis of *We Need New Names* ultimately attempts to offer an alternative reading to both Helon Habila (2013) and Isaac Ndlovu's (2016)

examination of the novel that dismisses the text as employing an aesthetic of poverty porn that performs Africa to the world.

The second section of the study examines Mabanckou's *Blue White Red* and how its representation of mobility as a way of building up masculinity for young males in Congo-Brazzaville forces us to rethink the value attached to mobility and immobility as it relates to the reconfiguring of non-dominant masculine subjectivities in the global arena. Using the concepts of passing and excess as analytical frameworks, I interrogate how the *La sape* culture uses migration, performative and sartorial repertoires for the rebranding and refashioning of *sapeur* masculinities in ways that create possibilities of transgressive self-articulation. Through the examination of their multiple self-stylisations, the study examines how *sapeur* masculinities imbue the body with a transgressive grammar that blurs class/social boundaries and also transforms Paris into a signifier in flux that is bereft and deprived of its specific and constitutive referents. In addition, the study also pays attention to the ways in which the subversiveness of the *sapeur* subculture is often undercut by their induction into global consumerist cultures and hegemonic regimes of representation. As such, the study is interested in how *Blue White Red* welcomes the reader to contemplate how marginal masculinities subvert and cohabit with hegemonic forms. Further, the section interrogates Mabanckou's portrayal of the *sapeur* culture with its masculine cadences as inimical to other masculinities as well as to female voices and bodies for it results in their elision, accessorisation and commodification which in turn serve to amplify *sapeur* agency and desirability. However, and contrary to these masculinities' attempts to stage themselves as in control of their "female accessories," I show how their masculine capital is in fact dependant on the women's legitimising attentions.

3.2 Children's Games and Photography in Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*

If I'm lucky, like today, I get to be the U.S.A, which is a country-country; who doesn't know that the U.S.A is the big baboon of the world? I feel like it's my country now because my aunt Fostalina lives there, in Destroyedmichygen

Bulawayo, 2013: 49

NoViolet Bulawayo – the pen name of Elizabeth Zandile Tshele – was born in Tsholotsho, Zimbabwe in 1981. She adopted the name Noviolet – which means “with Violet” – after the death of her mother who died when Bulawayo was eighteen months old. NoViolet Bulawayo grew up in Bulawayo, the second largest city in Zimbabwe, until she was eighteen years then she moved to Kalamazoo, Michigan. Her pen name therefore aptly captures the “loss and nostalgia” stemming from “on the one hand, the literal loss of her mother, and on the other hand, the writer's homesickness for the city of Bulawayo which she had been away from for thirteen years when she published *We Need New Names*” (Ndlovu, 2016: 133).

We Need New Names was published in 2013 and has won numerous literary awards: it was shortlisted for the “Man Booker Prize, the Guardian First Book Award and the Barnes & Noble Discover Award, on top of which it was awarded the inaugural Etisalat Prize for Literature (2013), the Los Angeles Times Book Prize Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction (2013) the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award for Debut Fiction and a Betty Trask Award 2014”. In addition, the first chapter of *We Need New Names*, “Hitting Budapest,” was originally published as a separate short story which won the 2011 Caine prize for African Literature.

We Need New Names has had a chequered critical reception. While some scholars have acclaimed its thematic scope and depth of content (Arnett, 2016; Chitando, 2016; Moji, 2015), Helon Habila (2013) and Isaac Ndlovu (2016) see the text as pandering to a literary aesthetic that performs Africa to the world. I however argue that this reading of Bulawayo's text as perpetuating a stereotypical and reductive aesthetic – best expounded by Binyavanga Wainaina (2005) – that influences the production and consumption of literary texts from Africa in the West falls short of acknowledging the subversive ways in which she engages with the valuation of African/West relations. To put it differently, Bulawayo's use of the tropes of lack/poverty, disasters, disorder and intractability is accompanied by a sustained critique/questioning of their reductiveness and the trade in these images of suffering. Far from reinforcing a certain image of Africa in Western discourses, Bulawayo uses her characters to flag unequal global relations and the dehumanising and exploitative nature of the “branding” and consumption of African bodies and spaces in the Western world. Darling is relentless in exposing the disenfranchising nature of Africa/West contacts. The porousness of national borders – movements of cultural signifiers and people beyond national boundaries – that Bulawayo cultivates in the text is an attempt to position her character within global matrixes that heightens our perception of these skewed relations. Ultimately, and in a marked departure from Ndlovu's (2016) and Habila's (2013) analyses of the novel, I argue that the narrative's cultivated exhibitionism of “poverty porn” is an authorial ploy that Bulawayo uses to redirect, implicitly and explicitly, these images back to the voyeuristic Northern subject.

Bulawayo sets her novel in a shanty town called Paradise and its affluent neighbour, Budapest, in what appears to be post-independence Zimbabwe. The setting later shifts to

Michigan as the main character, Darling Nonkululeko Nkala, moves there to live with her aunt, Fostalina. The novel is subdivided into eighteen chapters – each with its own title. The first nine are set in Paradise and Budapest while the last eight are set in America. Chapter ten, “How They left,” is a median, transitional chapter that positions Darling within a collective journey of relocation and changes the setting of the story to Detroit, Michigan. This variance in the setting of the novel – what Ashleigh Harris (2014: 5-6) chooses to call “an awkwardness” of the novel due to Bulawayo’s positioning as an African migrant writer – fittingly portrays the narrator’s dislocation and immersion into an American social-cultural space, a space which demands new fluencies in order to navigate. It is worth noting that Chapter ten, together with chapter five and sixteen, are not narrated by Darling and they form what Anna-Leena Toivanen (2015: 3) calls “interlude-like chapters, narrated by an extradiegetic narrator in a distinctly lyrical voice.” Taken together, these three chapters “provide a wider social perspective to the chapters narrated by Darling” (Ibid.). However, even within the variance in the novel’s setting, the novel presents a porous world. This permeability is not only evident in Darling’s migration and her narratorial voice which traverses and tangles these spaces, it is also illustrated by the diffusion and circulation of diverse global cultural items into Paradise through various mediums.

The novel revolves around Darling and her friends: Bastard, Chipso, Godknows, Sbhoo, Stina and Forgiveness. It is written with no quotation marks that separate the dialogue from the prose. What comes out is a flowing almost breathless anecdotal narration – as if the protagonist is afraid to pause and lose the thread of the narrative – that matches its exuberant and enthusiastic young narrator. In the process, the protagonist appears to be reporting her encounters and experiences, seemingly without processing them. Bulawayo skillfully uses the child

narrator's lack of experiential resources to process what they observe in order to force the reader to access a certain way of seeing and experiencing Darling's world. Because the child character's capacity for transformative action is limited, the narrative appears to revolve around the character's deceptively disempowering act of movement and observing. By forcing the reader to see the world through Darling, Bulawayo ingeniously presents a narrative that delicately balances naivety, innocence, a child-like questioning/curiosity and vulnerability to radically shift our lens to the adult world, national politics, nostalgia, loss, absence and adult ineptitude/apathy, and global dynamics of power. The children's peripatetic wandering and observing eyes – especially in the first part of the book – provide the counter gaze presented by the unnamed British-Zimbabwean woman, NGO representatives, BBC and CNN and adults that populates their world. Put differently, they provide a counter gaze that not only destabilizes and unsettles the adult gaze but also the framing and homogenizing gaze of various foreign individuals and groups that appear in the text.

Darling's voice sells no illusions; it is unadorned, forthright and unflinching as she reveals shocking details of abuse, political neglect, violence and skewed and exploitative global relations of power. Michiko Kakutani (2013) observes the distinctiveness of Darling's voice which he concludes is "unsparing and lyrical, unsentimental and poetic, spiky and meditative. It is the voice, early on, of a child – observant, skeptical and hardhearted in the way children can be." Through the depiction of children as having the capacity for "good, misguided ... and even evil impulses," (Kearney, 2013: 46) Bulawayo performs the task of undoing what Muponde (2004) refers to as the "sacralisation of childhood" (3). The implied naivety and innocence of a child narrator becomes deceptive in *We Need New Names* for in her narration, the reader

discovers a sustained questioning and critique of her world. In this way, Bulawayo allows the children to enter the narrative “as actors whose politics is to open up discourse on the nature of society in its broadest and most specific terms” (Maxted, 2003: 69). Bulawayo’s cultivation of the poetics of obliquity through the restraint she exercises in appearing not to allow the narrator to process what she observes imbues the narrative with subtle yet powerful renditions of loss, pain, longing, lack, abandonment and loneliness, indeed, a complex negotiation of emotions. But this is counterbalanced by a certain transcendental impudence, passion, joy/laughter and the humorous inventiveness that pervades the novel as the children look for a language with which to articulate, inhabit and name their world. Bulawayo acknowledges the transcendental nature of her narrator when she notes that the children’s “playfulness in the face of danger creates a space to address devastating, complicated issues with clarity but also with hope” (Torres, N.d.). She would also reiterate this in another interview with Belinda Otas (2013):

Knowing I was working with a charged book, I had to find a character who could look at horror and still stay intact, still try to go on with the business of life, and that is how Darling was born. The innocence of children and their unacknowledged strength is what allows her to play and be funny and tell us of things falling apart all in one breath.

In an attempt to examine how the West is experienced and performed in Bulawayo’s text, this study reads it alongside *Blue White Red*. While the characters in both texts cultivate certain fluencies, albeit limited, that enable them to navigate power laden global spaces/relations, there is a pronounced vulnerability in *We Need New Names*. This is partly because of the use of susceptible and disenfranchised child characters and also because the text limns what Toivanen (2015) calls “uneasy and less privileged forms of mobility ... mobilities that fall far from the

category of class-privileged cosmopolitanism” (1-2). Unlike the male characters in the text who still have access to the “patriarchal dividend,” Bulawayo’s children enter “social settings in which traditionally they, together with women, have been denied a political voice and have limited bargaining power” (Maxted, 2003: 69). In addition, the permeability of national borders to global influences/forces are presented as enunciating irredeemably harmful and exploitative relations whether it is through the press, NGO representatives, foreign contractors, runaway relatives and sickly returnees like Darling’s father.

By focusing on the various ways that the child characters come into contact with the outside world, experience and perform that world, this study problematises the trade/transaction of certain images and narratives of Africa. Indeed, Bulawayo presents Paradise as a space that familiarises and exposes the characters to an outside world, a world that elicits complex reactions/emotions. The knowledge and presence of these other spaces permeate the narrative and are mediated to the local through multiple avenues. Pier Paolo Frassinelli (2015) makes the germane observation that although the first section of the book is “situated in a supposedly marginal, poverty-stricken corner of the planet, the landscape of the first section of the novel is in fact traversed by global cultural flows and geopolitical signifiers with which the children are uncannily familiar” (716). My interest in this study is not only with the children’s contact with these cultural flows and geopolitical signifiers, it is with all forms of contact that the children have with African elsewhere – from tourists, to narratives of travelled relatives, NGO representatives, foreign media houses and Chinese contractors.

My first concern is with Bulawayo’s representation of the character’s knowledge of other spaces through the intimate narratives of relatives’ migration. While *Blue White Red*

portrays the circulating knowledges of foreign destinations and so creates an alluring mythos of Paris which is nevertheless ultimately exploded, Bulawayo offers a measured and studied narrativisation of these spaces even before migration. In the novel, these elsewhere evoke intricate emotions of loss, abandonment and debilitation upon the familial unit. Bulawayo utilises the motif of movement to capture a series of devastating estrangements and fracturing of family ties. Polo Belina Moji (2015) pertinently observes that the novel “depicts a cycle of displacements and ruptured kinships, starting with the forced removal” of Darling to Paradise “which leads to the migration of her father to Johannesburg and her own eventual illegal immigration to America” (182). Within the context of the disabling conditions in *We Need New Names*, the characters’ movements – within and beyond the national space – can be read as attempts to seek spaces of retreat, spaces that offer sustenance and nurture kinship ties. However, these movements create further incapacitating conditions that impair that which they sought to mend and sustain. For instance, Godknows knowledge of London comes from his story of his uncle, Vusa. When they meet a British-Zimbabwean woman at Budapest, Godknows says: “I know London. I ate some sweets from there once. They were sweet at first, and then they just changed to sour in my mouth. Uncle Vusa sent them when he first got there but that was a long time ago. Now he never sends anything” (8). These feelings of the loss of kinship ties and the desertion of kinship responsibilities felt by Godknows are acutely rendered by Darling’s memories of her runaway father who abandoned familial responsibilities and went to South Africa. His graduation picture hanging on Mother of Bones house reminds her of his desertion: “he never writes, never sends us money, never nothing. It makes me angry thinking about him so most of the time I just pretend he doesn’t exist; its better this way (22-3). Later, Darling gives us her mother’s – Felistus – take on her father’s leaving:

Mother had not wanted Father to leave for South Africa to begin with, but it was that time when everybody was going to South Africa and other countries, some near, some far, some very, very far. They were leaving, just leaving in droves, and Father wanted to leave with everybody and he was going to leave and nothing would stop him.” (91)

These memories of their relatives in foreign spaces elicit associations and emotions that are tinged with deprivation, dispossession and disintegration – a lack of wholeness in family relations. Paradoxically, these movements that are supposed to place the individuals within spaces that remobilize the family and provide a “freeing” and ‘secure” space deprives them of both emotional and material sustenance. Instructively therefore, the movement to Paradise after Darling’s initial home is demolished – a movement that prefigures the other movements outside the country – marks the commencement of a pronounced political and parental neglect where women increasingly demonstrate resilience and take leadership of their families as the men become more and more vulnerable when they fail to meet normative patriarchal expectations. Uncle Vusa in London and Darling’s father in South Africa become estranged from the family and forsake the responsibilities and expectations placed upon them. Like the sweet and sour sweets that Godknows remembers, the allure and promise that London and South Africa offer as destinations of travel eventually turns out sour as they grapple with abandonment and family disintegration.

The associations that attend these elsewheres acquire new associations when Darling and Bastard are talking about America – the narrator’s horizon of migration – where Fostalina, Darling’s aunt lives. As Darling gloats about her impending journey to America, Bastard dismisses her in a huff: “Well, go, go to that America and work in nursing homes. That’s what

your aunt Fostalina is doing as we speak. Right now she is busy cleaning kaka off some wrinkled old man who can't do anything for himself, you think we've never heard the stories?" (15). Bastard's statement deflates any social capital that might be claimed through mobility – that the sapeurs in *Blue White Red* are accorded – by highlighting the peripheral profession and space that Fostalina occupies. His recourse to scatological aesthetics that is highlighted by Toivanen (2016: 3) while discussing African abject mobilities – those mobilities that take “into account less privileged forms of mobility that challenge elitist formulations of being at home in the globalized postcolonial world” – is thus semantically loaded as he underlines the relegation of migrant/women's labour in the “international economy” to “carework and the domestic service industry” where they are absorbed “under conditions of vulnerability and exploitation” (Bonifacio, 2012: 2). This is the same fate that awaits Darling when she eventually migrates to America.

In the final analysis, Bulawayo's focus on these intimate and personal narratives of migration shifts from national and corporate entities to less examined individualized/intimate relations with global spaces in diaspora/migrant discourses. This presents a welcome shift from the global to the private and in this positioning, it gives the reader access into global encounters from specific, idiosyncratic and affective perspectives. A reading of the novel from this level of the private/domestic interpersonal relations in the context of global movements leads to a recognition of affective and interpersonal experiences that are lost when we solely focus on the overarching public/macro relations of global contact. In addition, the tangling of globalized and intimate relations enables Bulawayo to interrogate the seamless narrative of globalization by focusing on quotidian, unequal and disenfranchising global encounters. Consequently, Bulawayo

shows how both national and global forces affect the intimate spaces through her representation of the estrangement of the family unit which leaves the characters vulnerable.

Despite the debunking of these African elsewhere as offering elusive promises, Bulawayo's narrative vigilance does not, however, allow for the presentation of the local and foreign as existing in contradistinction. The children's mobility between the spaces of Paradise and Budapest gestures at the blurring and troubling of these spatial divides and their meanings. The way Darling admits that "getting out of Paradise is not so hard" (2013) is the same way characters in the text traverse various national/international borders, albeit with limited ease because of border and immigration regulations. Significantly, it is also the same way global cultural items and signifiers flow into Paradise. As such, the text presents the national and foreign spaces as deeply implicated. These spaces are shown to be a site for the enactment of complex relational affects. For instance, while on the one hand Budapest is represented as the space of desire, it also reminds them of their non-belonging and lack. This becomes more salient when we consider the potency of the name given to the connecting street: "Hope Street" (2). On the other hand, Paradise is not only paradoxically represented as the space of flight, it is also presented as the familiar/knowable space of "home." Bulawayo uses this miniature socio-economic divide between Paradise and Budapest to prefigure relations between local and global spaces. The valuation of these elsewheres in the novel does not, therefore, diminish them in the minds of the characters. Indeed, just as the characters traverse the boundaries between Paradise to Budapest and claim it, so do they place claims on other global spaces. Hence after picking guavas, Darling records that "we just walk nicely like Budapest is now our country too, like we built it even ..." (11). In addition, she refers to America fondly as "my America" (15) and as

“my country” (49). Indeed, her thoughts of the future are always conflated with her expected journey/migration to America. Darling’s here and now appears to be suspended, waiting for that moment of travel to America.

What appears in the book therefore is an intricate portrayal of both longing for an elsewhere and vulnerability as the characters narrate their disenfranchisement in this web of global relations and contacts. One of the ways that the children poignantly perform their experiencing and relation to their world is through games/play. Through their play, Bulawayo bequeaths her characters with imaginative possibilities that helps them negotiate their vulnerability and powerlessness. In addition, their play/games are meaning making processes, schemas that they use to interpret and translate the adult world in relatable ways. The country-game is one of the most significant moments of play that Bulawayo uses to comment on global relations/politics. The country-game dramatizes the children’s economic, cultural, political subordination in the context of global mobilities of capital and culture. The game is a complex enactment of the relative influences and jostling for power by different global players. Far from presenting global politics as being removed from their day-to-day life and seemingly marginal world, their play interpolates Darling and her friends, as non-hegemonic players, within that world. Country-game aptly captures global political and economic inequalities, the polarization and frictions of global players as the children fight to either be the U.S.A, Britain, Canada, Australia, Switzerland, France, Italy, Sweden, Germany, Russia, Greece because they are “the country-countries” or even the second best options consisting of Dubai, South Africa, Botswana and Tanzania (49). In this hierarchy, the children dismiss what they call “rags of countries like Congo, like Somalia, like Iraq, like Sudan, like Haiti, like Sri Lanka, and even this one we live

in” as “terrible place of hunger and things falling apart” (49). Frassinelli (2015) succinctly sums it up by contending that in the country-game, the children visualize the world “as a striated space, cut across by the borders that correspond to the extreme inequalities that not only make some countries more desirable than others, but that also turn some of countries into no countries at all, subspecies of countries” (716).

The alignments, shifts and realignments of global power that the game enacts is embodied in the elimination process that the game entails – complete with the accompanying hostilities/frictions. The metaphoric edging out of the “weaker runner” when he/she is tapped out of the game becomes representative of the actual jostling for space by different global players in their world. Darling says that playing the game of elimination is “like being in war; in war you don’t just start to fight somebody stronger than you because you will get proper clobbered” (50). Through this game, played immediately after they had come from Shanghai and seen how China is “a big dog,” (43) the writer invites us to contemplate historical Sino-African relations that have in the past supplemented and even threatened to supplant Euro-American alliances. Chapter three, therefore, is not an “inexplicable chapter on how the Chinese are taking over Africa,” as Habila (2013) contends. Bulawayo deploys this section to represent shifting global alliances caused by the emergence of new players in global politics. The presence of the Chinese contractors in Shanghai is Bulawayo’s attempt at narrativising what Thamsanqa Moyo and Theresia Mdlongwa (2015) call the “look East Policy” which marked the “break down in relations between Zimbabwe and most of the Western countries” (76). The scholars argue that Bulawayo’s juxtaposing of Chinese and Western relations with Zimbabwe in the text stigmatises China as “ogres” while portraying the West as patronising but “at least ... philanthropic” (Ibid.:

80). This conclusion however downplays Bulawayo's pointed criticism of the asymmetrical and insidious nature of both East and West encounters. Just as the text represents the treatment of African workers vis a vis Chinese workers as exploitative and dehumanising, it also depicts Western humanitarian interventions by NGO representatives as transactional events that trade in stereotypical discourses of Africa/ans. The descriptive epithets that the children give to the dominant global players whose presence is felt in their world – China and America – eloquently illustrate the associations that they have come to acquire in a manner that evokes “global scenarios that align with the modern structures of power in the world” (Adami, 2014: 17). While China is referred to as “a big dog” and as a “red devil looking for people to eat so it can grow fat and strong,” the U.S.A is referred to as the “big baboon of the world” (43-49). Taken together, these appellations typify the exploitative, predatory and hierarchical relations within the global arena as they filter down to Paradise and its environs in ways that challenge the implied reciprocity and interdependency in globalisation discourses.

Beyond the polarity presented by Euro-America and China, the text also multiplies African elsewhere by introducing other destinations like South Africa, Dubai, Tanzania, and Botswana (49). Even Paradise's rich neighbourhood, on the surface inexplicably named “Budapest” resonates with meaning if we consider Bulawayo's attempts to evoke transnational linkages that exist in Darling's world. Budapest, a space that elicits both desire and hostility (as the title of the first chapter “hitting Budapest” suggests) from the children, could also be a way in which Bulawayo hints at the complex and often tense Zimbabwe and the former USSR alliances that date back to Zimbabwe's struggle for independence (Guzura, 2016). While writing about the fascination with eastern Europe in the South African literary landscape, Monica Popescu (2010)

notes how “for some, communist regimes have served as potent symbols of equality and social justice and stirring examples for political mobilization and revolution” (2-3). Read this way, Budapest becomes an aspirational space, offering the promise of economic and political security, while at the same time having the possibility of fermenting dissent because of the violence that goes into the making of such spaces amidst the surrounding squalor.

Bulawayo’s narratorial scope goes further to place tourist, Western humanitarian interests and media in Paradise under scrutiny as they frame Darling’s world into archival images of consumption and memorialization: photographs. The novel presents an unsettling fixation with photography as ways through which Western characters in the text apprehend, consume and experience Paradise. It flags the moments of contact and photography sessions as performative and transactional events through which the children experience their disenfranchising contact with the Western world. Bulawayo’s deployment of photography in the recording of personal and humanitarian interventions in the beleaguering conditions of Paradise leads to the creation of narratives and images that disempower and elide the observed. Tourist interests exhibited by the British-Zimbabwean woman, Western media coverage and the seemingly humanitarian acts force the child characters to an experiencing and performance of their subordination and non-hegemonic status as they get caught up in what James Arnett (2016) calls the Western worlds’ “affective consumption of the postcolony” (151). This study builds on Arnett’s magisterial reading of the novel that flags “the emotional trade in photographs to examine how the neoliberal privatization of aid and charity has created a brisk trade in and expectations about African subjects’ performance of suffering” (149). Arnett goes on to argue that this performance of suffering “fosters an affect of superiority ... that reinforces the capricious nature of private

interest and investment in the Global South” (2016: 149). While Arnett is interested in how “postcolonial suffering is commodified and traded by Northerners in a materialist affective economy that is grounded in the production and dissemination of telegenic images of suffering,” I am more interested in the photographs as an archive that transacts in power-laden narratives and contacts that inform the experiencing of African elsewhere.

Indeed, Bulawayo’s novel is a photocentric text right from conception to the numerous instances photography weaves itself into the narrative. The novel’s use of visual imagery forces the reader to engage with the subtle ways in which the lens of the camera obscure/mask as much as they reveal. The text invites the reader, in Susan Sontang’s (1973) astute theorisation, to make deductions and speculate with regard to the content of the photographs and the intentions of the photographer (17). Visual imagery and their capacity to elicit deductions and speculations, á la Sontang, gain significant purchase when we consider the fact that the novel was itself inspired by a picture Bulawayo saw of a child sitting next to the rubble of his bulldozed home after Operation Murambatsvina (*The Guardian*, Nov. 15: 2013). After seeing the pictures of the operation, Bulawayo avers that she “became obsessed with where the people would go, what their stories were, and how these stories would develop – and more importantly what would happen to the kid in the first picture I saw. The writing project essentially became about finding out” (Ibid.). The writing of the novel is therefore a representational and curative intervention that eschews cheap sentimentality and the consumptive impulse of the images of suffering. In her wish to know “what their stories were” and “how these stories would develop,” Bulawayo expresses a desire to “know” that is diametrically opposed to an assumption of knowledge, and demonstrates an understanding of that “knowing” as a process rather than as a given. She also

demonstrates an awareness of the photograph as an archive and repository of narratives awaiting consumption. In addition, Bulawayo's choice of presenting the narrative using the child characters undercuts the humanitarian interventions in the novel that annihilate the receiver (through the NGO representatives exhibition of a saviour complex) in order to shore up the humanism of the giver.

Through the use of visual imagery/pictures, Bulawayo's novel challenges the conflation of seeing with knowing for it repeatedly prods the reader to focus on the disconnect between the reductive and choreographed picture taking sessions and the socio-economic and political context in which they are taken. The choices that the photographers make, the moments they choose to take the photographs, the setting and what they predominantly focus on draws the reader's attention to the experiencing and performance of disenfranchising North-South contacts by the child characters. This gets played early on in the text when they have an encounter with an unnamed British-Zimbabwean woman at Budapest while scavenging for food (6-10). When the woman is taking pictures of the children, it is not lost on Darling that she is affecting a certain intimacy that they do not share. Darling aptly observes that "she is smiling like she knows me really well, like she even knows my mother" (9). The unnamed lady assumes a certain level of invasive, even aggressive, familiarity with the children that is however ironically glaring given that she is photographing behind a locked gate which "she didn't bring the keys to open" (6). The closed gate becomes symbolic of the detachment and distance between the observer and the observed subjects. The familiarity that she assumes enables her, in Sontag's phraseology to "appropriate the thing photographed" and place herself "into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power" (1973: 2). In the exercise of this appropriation

and assumption of knowledge, her asking for permission from the children to take the photographs is evidently a disguise for the underlying power relations and an unnecessary and expendable courtesy which she quickly dispenses with. The children too do not feel that it is relevant, used as they are to numerous violations from the adult world. Darling therefore says “we don’t answer because we’re not used to adults asking us anything” (8). In addition to this assumption of knowledge and familiarity of the photographed, Arnett observes that the woman’s attempts to direct the photographing session by telling the children where to stand and look “is a form of virtual violence that calls attention to the woman’s undeniable privilege and aesthetically arranges the vicarious horror that she assumes she is capturing, implicating disfigurement as the condition of the Southern subject” (2016: 161). He borrows Sontag’s concept of “uglifying” to explain the unnamed woman’s fascination with “photos of the children, specifically in their pregnancy and dental decay” (Ibid.: 162). This “uglifying,” Bulawayo’s text suggests, provides the rationale for the creation and perpetuation of otherness, and her violent invasiveness legitimises the dehumanising and self-empowering humanitarian intervention that Bulawayo tackles.

These humanitarian interventions provide the other photo-taking instance scenario that the novel engages. In the instance when NGO representatives come to Paradise to deliver aid, Bulawayo pokes holes into the dubious assumption of the affects of care and empathy by the NGO representatives in their relations with the inhabitants of paradise. The distance that Darling had sensed with the unnamed British-Zimbabwean woman is now keenly felt when she comes into contact with Western philanthropists. Darling narrates that when the children are pushing and shoving, they “are careful not to touch the NGO people ... because we can see that even

though they are giving us things, they do not want to touch us or for us to touch them” (54). When she later receives her gift from a donor lady, she thanks her but the lady “doesn’t say anything back, like maybe I just barked” (55). Bulawayo’s text therefore presents encounters that do not make attempts for genuine and intimate connections/relations which might affect the knowledge of the other. In Toivanen’s (2015) words, this distancing of the volunteers from the recipients of charity “suggests that the children’s racially othered bodies are associated with dirt and danger which poses a risk to their good-willing superiority” (4). The threat that the aid volunteers feel the children pose if they come into contact with them reflects Western anxieties that originate from epistemic and discursive practices whose creation of taxonomies seek to isolate and alienate the “foreign.” Theirs, to borrow Colin Perrin’s (1999: 28) elegant construction rather loosely, is “an anxious response not of an other which strays too far, but to an other which comes too close.” In addition, the pictures are reduced to evidence and a reinforcement of the photographers’ philanthropy and humanity while totally oblivious of the violence and dehumanisation occasioned on the characters. The moments of contact with the outside world – be it with a tourist or with aid workers – are thus presented as inherently violent encounters which expose the children’s vulnerability to global relations of power. Indeed, as Sontag declares, the picture taking sessions are “an event in itself, and one with ever more peremptory rights – to interfere with, to invade, or to ignore whatever is going on” (1973: 8).

In the search for what Arnett refers to as “relatable” objects/images, the camera lens enforces a uniformity, muteness and stasis on the photographed (2016: 151). Significantly, however, Bulawayo’s text manages to return that collapsing gaze. The children’s “eyes” and presence in the backdrop of these invasive and muting encounters offer a counter-narrative that

troubles the dichotomies of the observer and observed and the unisonant interpretations disseminated by their photographs. Bastard, who appears to be the de facto leader of the group, seems to be aware of the subtle erasures and alienations that the camera lens imposes upon them. When they are being photographed by the NGO representatives, he “takes off his hat and smiles like he is something handsome. Then he makes all sorts of poses; flexes his muscles, puts his hands on the waist, does the V sign, kneels with one knee on the ground” (53). Godknows rebukes Bastard and reminds him that “you are not supposed to laugh or smile. Or any of that stuff you are doing” (Ibid.). In response, Bastard remarks that “when they look at my picture over there, I want them to see me. Not my buttocks, not my dirty clothes, but me” (Ibid.). Bastard’s response constitutes both a refusal to take part in a representational economy that denies him voice and limits him within a prescribed schema, it is also an attempt to participate in the meaning making process of both the photographs and the photo session. His antics exhibit self-knowledge and possession that spurn the objectifying gaze of the camera by seeking to influence how his image will be interpreted and viewed. In this context, Godknows’s rebuke is an acknowledgment of the fact that the observed subjects are denied control of their presentation, and that they are only allowed to project themselves within a circumscribed framework. As an act of subterfuge, Bastard’s antics explode the singular schema that seeks to frame him without a smile or laughter by projecting a multiplicity of selves that refuse to perform abjection and immiseration. This transgressiveness is also exhibited by MotherLove who refuses to be drawn into the enactments and performances of suffering before the benevolent gaze of the NGO representatives (55). Her refusal to be drawn into the enactments and performances of charity and patronage unsettles the aid givers who expect self-abasement and celebratory recognition. When MotherLove “stands there like a baobab tree ... a sadness on her face,” she poses a

challenge to the NGO representatives collapsing knowledge of the Paradian's and their performance of power subtly tied to benevolence (55-56).

Ultimately, Bulawayo's text invites the reader to consider the taken photographs as archival material, items that are implicated in observing, documenting/storage and dissemination of knowledge. Her portrayal of visual representation seems to read into what Saskia Sassen, in a different study, terms as photography's capacity to produce "knowledge beyond the actual visual content," and as such possessing "heuristic" qualities (2011: 439). She goes on to posit that photography "produces knowledge about more than what the photograph's content itself captures visually, but it does so through the photograph itself" (Ibid.). Sassen's thesis becomes salient in the context of South-North ontologies that Bulawayo's text engages. Okwui Enwezor (1996) is acutely aware of the inimical dimensions of photography when he avers that "no medium has been more instrumental in creating a great deal of the visual fictions of the African continent than photography" (20). Erin Haney (2010: 10) reiterates that the "study of photography in Africa remains a political question." These injunctions enable us to tease out the connections between race, knowledge and photography that cohere in Bulawayo's narrative. Instructively, the visual culture that the unnamed British-Zimbabwean woman, the NGO representatives and BBC and CNN news groups appear to be chasing package the characters within a representational framework that assumes knowledge and power over them. Darling becomes markedly aware of this when she finally goes to America. While attending Dumi's wedding, Aunt Fostalina's childhood friend, she meets a woman who describes pictures her niece had taken of children in a South African orphanage with paternalistic enthusiasm (176). In her self-congratulatory demeanor, what Arnett (2016: 157) refers to as the "affect of superiority," that is "a

consolidation of proliferating minor affects that permit the Northern subject to feel better *than*, feel better *about themselves*, and appear noble and generous,” Darling recognises herself as she must have appeared in the eyes of the NGO representatives back in Paradise. Through the woman’s interaction with photographs that her niece took, Bulawayo gestures at the ability of photographs to travel and transact in familiarities and knowledges that are restricted to an Afropessimistic discourse of lack and disaster; a discourse that necessitates humanitarian “saving.” Bulawayo’s searing indictment is however preserved for the woman’s celebration and beautification of poverty and the performance of abjection by the receivers of aid. While she is telling Darling about the orphaned children pictures’, she gushes at how “awesome” and “lovely” they were (176-7). This assumed knowledge and familiarity with Africa also degenerates into what Arnett (2016: 175) terms as a collation of disparate knowledges for she appears to read country-specific occurrences of war and human suffering into the larger continent. Chapter sixteen – one of Toivanen’s (2015: 3) “interlude-like chapters” – of the novel records questions directed to African migrants that reinforce this representational economy transacted by the pictures:

And when they asked us where we were from ... Africa? We nodded yes. What part of Africa? We smiled. Is it that part where vultures wait for famished children to die ... where the life expectancy is thirty-five years ... where dissidents shove AK-47s between women’s legs ... where people run about naked ... where they massacred each other ... where the old president stole the election and people were tortured and killed and a whole bunch of them put in prison and all ... where they are dying of cholera – oh my God, yes, we’ve seen your country; it’s been on the news” (237-8)

We Need New Names thus draws attention to the capacity of photography and videography to perpetuate and participate in the apprehension and production of otherness. The fecundity of Darling's world – as framed within the lens of the Unnamed British-American woman, NGO workers and BBC and CNN media houses – in producing images and narratives of distress and suffering that always allows space for benevolent/charitable Western subjects to step in to “save” and mend the damage/horror is portrayed as a form of epistemic violence that infantilises the inhabitants of Paradise. The erasures, distortions and deformations that the lens of the camera seems to enforce on the characters in the text demands that we attend to “the photograph as ... a medium of mystification” (Thomas & Green 2014: 4). Instructively, and as John Pultz (1995) argues in a different study, if we are to accept “Foucault's relationship of knowledge to power,” then we must acknowledge that “the knowledge produced by photography cannot be disinterested, rational, and neutral” (Ibid.: 9). By zeroing in on the purpose and circumstances under which the photographs are taken, the political and relational dynamics between the photographer and the photographed and the dissemination and consumption of the photographic images, Bulawayo demonstrates that the collection of photographic surrogates of humanitarian intervention and the photography sessions are implicated in power relations resulting from North-South interactions. Indeed, Darling's voice repeatedly shows how the inimical knowledges produced by the disseminated photographs and the photography sessions are performative events that constitute subtle coercions and displays of power. The silences, abject and subservient postures forced upon the inhabitants of Paradise as they ready themselves to receive aid underlines this power play. Darling poignantly underscores this when she astutely observes the children's disregard of their parents' authority in the presence of the NGO workers. As the children jostle in a queue to receive gifts, the parents are rendered powerless and impotent

because “the NGO people are here and while they are, our parents do not count” (54). The bodies of the children paraded in their various states of want and neglect serves to unmask/demonstrate their vulnerability and powerlessness in the ambit of disenfranchising national conditions and dehumanising (affective) consumption by the Western world. Significantly therefore, through her representation of the nation-state as implicated in the creation of the dystopian space in Paradise, Bulawayo’s photography also subtly makes a statement about the failure and the disillusionment of decolonisation as evidenced through the neglect and violence of the postcolonial state.

3.3 Costuming, Passing and the Itineraries of *Sapeur* Masculinities in Mabanckou’s *Blue*

White Red

It is true, I had been secretly working in my field of dreams on the wish to cross the Rubicon, to go there some day. It was a common wish; there was nothing special about that wish. You could hear that wish expressed from every mouth. Who in my generation had not visited France *by mouth*, as we say back home ... I’ll be going to France soon. I’m going to live in the centre of Paris. We were allowed to dream. It didn’t cost anything. No exit visa was necessary, no passport, no airline ticket. Think about it. Close your eyes. Sleep. Snore. And there we were, every night ...

Mabanckou, 2013: 20

Alain Mabanckou was born in the Republic of Congo – also known as Congo-Brazzaville – in 1966 and grew up in the coastal town of Pointe-Noire. In 1989, when he was 22 years-old, he obtained a scholarship to study law in France. After graduating with a postgraduate diploma, he practiced law for ten years. In 2002 he moved to America and took up teaching duties at the University of Michigan and later moved to the University of California, Los

Angeles in 2006. One of the most prolific African writers in French, Mabanckou is mostly known for his two highly acclaimed novels *Broken Glass* (2005) – which won several Franco-French literary prizes and was a Finalist for the Man Booker International Prize 2015 – and *Memoirs of a Porcupine* (2006) – which won the Prix Renaudot award. Mabanckou is a versatile writer and academician who has dabbled in poetry, prose and journalism.

Mabanckou's first novel, *Blue White Red: A Novel*, was originally published in French in 1998 and later translated into English in 2013 by Alison Dundy. The novel won the *Grand Prix Littéraire de l'Afrique noire* in 1999, an important award in African Francophone literature. The translation of Mabanckou's book into English – a task whose enormity Alison Dundy, the translator, confesses as she tried to “convey the complex nesting of languages,” – is a welcome move that enables conversations and exchanges across Francophone and Anglophone literary and creative arenas that seldom interact (Mabanckou, 2013: ix). Mabanckou has also published *African Psycho* (2003), *Black Baazar* (2009), *Letter to Jimmy* (2009), a literary memoir on James Baldwin, *Tomorrow I Will be Twenty* (2010), a fictional rendering of his formative years in Congo, and *The Lights of Ponte-Noire* (2013), a memoir. Most of these texts were all published in French and later translated into English.

Blue White Red is presented in a confessional mode by a first person narrator, Massala-Massala, who changes his name to Marcel Bonaventure when he migrates to France. The manner in which Massala-Massala presents his infatuation and (mis)adventures in Paris coupled with the use of the first person narration lends his narrative the quality of the poetics of disclosure and revelation. The hesitancy and caution he exercises in the prologue before he ventures into an expose of his woes in Paris is indicative of his knowledge of the centrality of the

fiction(s) of Paris in the minds of his countrymen. Accordingly, he feels compelled to provide his audience with the reasons why he has to tell his story, that is, to retrace his footsteps and confront the spectre of his past (5). The prologue and the subsequent chapter – The Country – thus serve to prepare the reader for the biggest disclosure: that his Paris was “one of night. The night of thoughts. The night of vagabondage. The night of walls” and not the Paris conceived as “the city of light” (137). His disclosure therefore serves as a testament that debunks the myth of “the city of light” that is circulated by returnees – who are referred to in this text as Parisians – from Paris and perpetuated as second-hand narratives by those who are proximal to the Parisians. The novel’s cultivation of the elements of disclosure and revelation comes full circle towards the end of his narrative when, thinking of his father on his flight back to Congo-Brazzaville, he concedes that he will be honest with him regarding his misfortunes in Paris: “From him, I will hide nothing. I’ll invite him to come behind our house. We’ll speak man to man. I’ll tell him everything, from beginning to end” (143). From this perspective then, Masala-Massala’s incarceration and deportation from Paris is far from being a moment of loss; it is a moment of illumination. It is a moment that forces him into reflection, clarity and narration. The affectations and excesses of Moki – the consummate Parisian in the text –, viewed from Massala-Massala’s retrospective lens, become apparent for what they are: a performance and an illusion.

The novel is divided into four sections: The first section is the prologue, titled “Opening.” This “Opening” affords the reader a glimpse into the narrator’s moments of intense psychological and emotional anguish as he contemplates the failure of his (mis)adventure in Paris, the city of light. In this prologue, we learn of Massala-Massala’s detention in Paris as he awaits deportation to Congo-Brazzaville for buying metro-tickets with stolen cheque books.

From the vantage point of the prologue, the narrator then takes the reader on an excavationary expedition that is aimed at exhuming “all those moments that catapulted me from near and far, all the way to this place, more than six thousand kilometres from the land where I was born” (14). As the story unfolds, the reader realises that Massala-Massala’s narrative significantly arises from the need to put everything into perspective (for himself) now that his time in Paris is over. It appears that – as I put it elsewhere while reading Benjamin Kwakye’s *The Other Crucifix*, Brian Chikwava’s *Harare North* and Ike Oguine’s *A Squatter’s Tale* – “it is important that the narrator tell his story, not necessarily to an audience, but most importantly to himself so as to claim that order, meaning, and clarity that he strives for” (Ndaka, 2013: 54). Accordingly, he avers that:

I would like for everything to be in chronological order. At times, memory seems like a mountain of garbage that has to be patiently sifted through just to retrieve a miniscule object, the trigger that sends everything adrift ... What is important at this point is to understand. To look at everything without truncating or falsifying facts. I don’t want to relive the illusion that started me down this road (14)

The “Opening” is followed by Part one, enigmatically titled “The Country.” This section records the infatuation with the symbolic space that is Paris and the buttressing of the pedestal Paris is elevated to in the imaginations of the locals by the periodic descending of the Parisians on the narrator’s village. Mabanckou begins this section with an epigraph from Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Times*. The epigraph – “it is better to dream one’s life than to live it, though even living it is to dream it” – reinforces the dislocation/transplantation of the characters realities into the realm of the imaginary (16). Indeed, the characters’ tyrannisation by the allure

of Paris as the only space capable of providing closure to their present dilemmas results into a certain form of zombification. Part two of the novel, “Paris,” documents Massala-Massala’s arrival and (mis)adventures in Paris. This moment of arrival also captures the disintegration of the illusion of Paris and the hold it had on him prior to his arrival. Like the first section of the novel, the second section begins with an epigraph from Abdellatif Laabi’s *Le Spleen de Casablanca*:

It seems that the gates of hell

border those of heaven.

The great joiner designed them

in the same coarse wood (80).

This epigraph builds on the themes of the section as it draws parallels between Congo and Paris. The final section, “Closing,” tracks his eventual deportation to Congo-Brazzaville and his increasing trepidation at the prospect of return as a failed “Parisian.” The potency of the debunking of the myth of Paris that is embedded in the narrator’s disclosure of his (mis)adventures in Paris is however undercut when, having come to the end of the narrative arc, Massala-Massala expresses a desire to seek another journey to France.

In *Blue White Red* therefore, Mabanckou taps with ease into the fractured and illusory dreams/desires of a range of male characters whose aspirations are collapsed into the “city of light,” Paris. These desires are framed within an economy of lack that appears to pervade the homeland and the myth of Paris as the space that offers the hope of success and self-regeneration

for the characters. The text's juxtaposing of the Parisian, the un-travelled, and the Peasant – those who have travelled to France but only live in the provinces – coupled with the stories that govern their interactions and engagements enables us to reconsider the value attached to mobility and immobility as it relates to the reconfiguring of marginal masculine subjectivities in Congo-Brazzaville through various self-stylisations. The text presents us with characters who, by virtue of their having been to France, exhibit certain fluencies and knowledges of Paris. These fluencies and knowledges are reinforced by an entire repertoire of performative acts that set apart characters who have travelled to Paris (Parisians) from both the un-travelled (villagers) and those who have travelled to France but do not stay in Paris (Peasants). Didier Gondola (1999: 23) and Dominic Thomas (2003: 949) refer to those who showcase these fluencies and perform their Parisian-ness as belonging to the movement of *La Sape*. *La Sape* refers to the “Society for Ambieners and Persons of Elegance ... whose membership was/is essentially constituted by young men from Brazzaville and Kinshasa” (Ibid.). *Blue White Red* refers to the individual members as *sapeurs* or the Parisians (51).

Two substantive critical studies of Mabackou's novel stand out for the present study: Wandia Mwendé Njoya's (2007 & 2008) and Dominic Thomas (2003 & 2007). Njoya's (2007) illuminating and incisive study appropriates tragedy both as a “genre and as a philosophical framework” to analyse African migrations to France within a history of volatile political, cultural and economic encounters (iii). By flagging the danger of diminishing the effects of French imperialism in reading African migrations to Europe, Njoya draws a link between the present day veneration of Western spaces in Africa to complex colonial and historical forces that shape this fascination. Musing on the reader's obligations when confronted with “narratives exposing

injustice,” Njoya posits that it would be prudent to “consider African migration to France as a theatre of economic, cultural and political relations enacted on a global stage” (2008: 34). Njoya reads *Blue White Red* as a novel that presents a narrative of the alluring image of France which entices young men into France only for them to become victims of this dream/allure (2007: 121).

Njoya refuses to concede that there is any degree of agency in the practice of *La sape* and argues that “*La sape* appears to reinforce hegemony by encouraging young men to aspire for standards that are not only degrading but also out of their reach” (2007: 130). She goes on posit that “if *La sape* is to be considered counter-hegemonic, the hegemonic structure must incorporate France and not be limited to African dictators” (Ibid.). While she presents a compelling reading that frames the logic of African migrations to the West, her reading seems to underplay the loaded performances of Paris and self-stylisations which, paradoxically, assemble and disassemble the characters. This study – while acknowledging that, at some level, the characters’ actions might be read as acts that perpetuate hegemonies – is interested in the subversive possibilities contained in *sapeur* masculinities’ performances and sartorial choices. I argue that the public spectacles that the characters create inscribe/script their bodies with a transgressive grammar that blurs class/social boundaries and also provincialises Paris by dispersing and resiting it within real and imaginative spaces in the Congo. I therefore seek to show how the expressive acts of the body the characters deploy both constitute and negate the hegemony of France.

Dominic Thomas’s (2007) reading of *Blue White Red* sets out to examine “the symbiotic relationship between Paris as a narrative construct in the minds of its former colonial subjects and the complex manner in which urban spaces and narrative productions are

simultaneously reconfigured according to the cultural, political, and sociological agendas of cultural practitioners” (155). He reiterates the argument made by Janet MacGaffey and Remy Bazenguissa-Ganga (2000) who posit that the practice of *La sape* provides “a little known and altogether different facet of relations between the local and the global, one focused on individuals and their counter-hegemonic activities rather than on nation states and large companies.” Thomas brings to our attention the ways in which Paris is constituted by its “peripheries.” He notes a symbiotic relationship between Massala-Massala’s Congo and France that goes to the extent that “Paris, essentially does not exist outside of these spaces” (2007: 155). Indeed, in its self-constituting narratives, Paris needs its former colonial territories to not only act as its foil but also to legitimise its power. Like Njoya, Thomas cautions us against downplaying the “role that Paris played in the minds of colonised African subjects, and has continued to play since decolonisation” (Ibid.: 158). Thomas, however, diverges from Njoya’s study by emphasising the contestatory nature inherent in the practice of *La sape*. He recourse to the argument advanced by Gayatri Spivak that the decolonisation project does not only “require a change of mind,” it “also involves a re-fashioning of the structures we inherit from colonial days” (Spivak, 1999). Thinking of the *Sapeurs* as enacting a process of re-appropriation and refashioning therefore, in Thomas’s words, yields us “the potentiality for rethinking and demystification of the origins of the metropolitan fascination” (2007: 159).

Thomas’s study is therefore significant for the present one in the way that it flags the transgressive nature of the *sapeur*’s movements and highlights the divergent “Parisian” and “Peasant” narratives that challenge and question the legitimacy of each other (2007: 184). The present study expands upon Thomas’s study by focusing on the complex ways in which Paris is

performed/experienced by both the Parisian and the un-travelled. In this way, I examine how the *La sape* culture that the *sapeurs* practice entails a refashioning of masculinities in the face of their exclusion from national/global arenas of power as evidenced by their lack of symbols of power – capital/economic, cultural, political, racial etc. Further, I argue that Mabanckou’s portrayal of the *sapeur* culture and its masculine cadences performs the elision and commodification of female voices and bodies while at the same time downplaying the constitutive nature of feminine and masculine identities. This study however takes exception to Thomas’s assertion that “the protagonist ... finds himself located somewhere between Africa and France, between the postcolony and the former colonial centre” (Ibid.: 184).

In contrast, I argue that, according to the psychology of the text, this formulation of the narrator’s location as lying “between Africa and France” is untenable precisely because of the failure of the tripartite matrix of, to borrow Thomas’s phraseology, “departure-descent-return” (Ibid.: 180). His return as a “failed Parisian” places him firmly within the bracket of those who lack fluencies and knowledges of Paris (to be perpetuated and disseminated to the untravelled). It is not enough to have travelled there, it appears that to be considered a Parisian, one has to have gone through a certain normative engagement with Paris – as the “city of light” – and to be able to narrativise and perform the “Parisian.” Like the Peasant, Massala-Massala does not have the performative repertoire and symbols to narrate and perform the Parisian. In the psychology of the text therefore, only the successful Parisian can claim that placement. Significantly, to “lie between France and the Congo” in the text appears to be a socially constructed location, not a placement he can presume as his. It is conferred by other Parisians and the villagers defer to their judgement. As it is, he doesn’t have the currency/capital to claim or to be accorded that

positioning. This is made apparent by Moki when he is asked how one can become a Parisian in an assembly of his admirers. He responds that one has “to convince the country here” that they have what it takes to become a Parisian before even going to Paris (48-9). In addition, when it comes to the literal reading of this placement, the lived realities of these *sapeurs* resist this in-between positionality. Indeed, with the constant surveillance and harassment that they face while in Paris and the deportation of Massala-Massala, the narrative presents them as bodies out of place in Paris than they are in Congo-Brazzaville.

Mabanckou’s text, like Bulawayo’s, invites the reader to engage with marginal and subordinate characters’ experiencing and performance of foreign spaces. The text’s presentation of *sapeur* masculinities calls to mind Ouzgane and Morrell’s (2005) assertion that “while some African men may have been able to enter the global economy on something like equal terms ... most men have felt the weight of globalization as poverty” (7-8). The male characters presented in Mabanckou’s text are significantly excluded from both the national and global capitalist economies in ways that undermines the conventional narrative of manhood as a provider/producer. The *sapeur* masculinities’ performance and fashioning of their masculinity in the midst of this marginalisation and exclusion leads to a cultivation of certain fluencies that challenge their vulnerability in contradictory and conflicting ways. Mabanckou’s representation of these marginalised masculinities, their mobility and their complex imbrication in seemingly self-indulgent global cultures of consumption enforces a certain vulnerability (emanating from their lack and exclusion from national/global power) and enables a refashioning of their masculine subjectivities. Their mobility is therefore represented as an exclusively male rite of passage that aptly depicts the continuities and discontinuities in the remaking of male

subjectivities in the context of global flows of capital and culture. In this sense, their manifest excesses in the assumption and deployment of the multiple repertoires of *sapeurs*/Parisians, what Thomas terms as their “survival skills, resourcefulness and tricks,” and their circulation “at the margins of the law” is an attempt to perform their masculinities in ways that challenge their marginality and invisibility (2013: xiv). The mobilisation of these diverse repertoires and self-stylisations that are bereft of economic, political and discursive capital demands that we recognise the various ways in which non-dominant masculinities reconstruct and fashion themselves in relation to their marginalisation, lack and disempowerment.

Fatima Viera’s (2013) concept of “utopias of immanence,” a term she uses to refer to, as she aptly puts it, “utopias as acts of resistance ... insofar as they show new ways of being, living and sensing the world under the form of virtual becomings ... utopias based on the rejection of the idea of blueprint” is essential in understanding the *sapeurs* infatuations and self-stylisations (x). Indeed, the *sapeurs* exhibit a form of self-projection into an imagined space that frees their bodies from limiting and prescriptive social, economic and racial conditions. In the epigraph to this section, Massala-Massala refers to Paris as a space that existed in the field of his dreams and that all they had to do was to think about Paris, close their eyes, sleep, snore “and there we were, every night” (20). The first part of the title of this section, a statement he makes while he is being repatriated to Congo-Brazzaville, also reiterates this (147). These statements demonstrate the *sapeur* treatment of the imagination as a sort of stagecraft to access the desired and to transport the self into an uncontrolled, limitless and uncensored realm. In this sense therefore, their “dreams” and or illusions of Paris, acts that temporarily suspend reality to re-imagine new alternatives, can be read as disruptive, a site of critical consciousness and as a space of discovery

of unbounded possibilities. However, their attempt to transform fantasy into an authentic experience often falls short when their day-to-day reality interferes and prevails over the illusion/dream. While discussing these utopias that the *sapeurs* project themselves to, Thomas (2007) identifies a “dream component/fascination” in the narrative and further posits that “given the sociopolitical circumstances in the postcolony, dreaming and the imagination emerge as necessary mechanisms for the confrontation of reality” (171-2). The “dream” is thus a recuperative exercise that transforms and transports these male characters from lack and disempowerment to sophistication and privilege, which are considered to be the capital that defines manhood in Massala-Massala’s village. Read keenly therefore, their dreams and self-stylisations become utopias within which they appropriate and trouble power in ways that are in tandem with their marginality and precarity. Seeing their dreams, fantasies and self-stylisations as capable of creating utopias reads into Bill Ashcroft’s (2012) assertion that “the dynamic function of the utopian impulse is a dual one: to engage power and to imagine change” (12).

The self-projection to the realm of the imaginary also alerts the reader to take note of the precariousness of these *sapeur* masculinities whose proximity and contestation of hegemonic forms is reduced to symbolic acts. Recognising these contradictions in their actions enables us to account for the messy realities of the *La Sape* practitioners whose renegade actions cannot be separated from their cohabitation with cultural and economic hegemonic forms. It is in these niches, and in recognition of Michael Mann’s (1986: 4) aphorism that “societies are much messier than our theories of them,” that I position the analysis of Mabanckou’s text: in spaces where characters’ transformative action at the macro-level is fragile but in their quotidian and

routine realities, transgressive articulations of the self are manifest. In this way, revolutionary and conformist action coexists alongside each other in ways that defy prescriptive templates.

The character's performance and experiencing of Paris – the symbol of global power and capital in the text – in Congo-Brazzaville happens through narrative/stories that are passed down from the *sapeur* to the villagers. Through movements to and from Paris – whether real physical journeys or imaginary – Mabanckou represents *sapeur* masculinities' complex encounters with global hegemonies. The movements to France that are framed within an indissociable logic of return, what Thomas refers to as the “departure-descent-return components,” enable the narrativisation and circulation of knowledges about Paris in ways that make it familiar and provincial (2007: 180). It is through the production of these localised textualities of Paris and in the triadic cycle of departure-descent-return that we encounter Moki, the consummate *sapeur*, his eminent return and the palpable suspense and anticipation felt by the entire village. Massala-Massala's narration and introduction imposes upon Moki's name some ecclesiastical connotations by presenting it as the genesis of his narrative and Paris (mis)adventures: “IN THE BEGINNING, there was a name ... a two-syllable name: Moki ...” (19). For Massala-Massala and the entire village, Moki is the text that mediates their experiencing of Paris and he is therefore, the repository of masculine symbols and social capital. It is thus fitting that Moki's return to the village should be of communal interest for it appears that to make the journey to Paris is more of a collective than an individual experience. On the one hand, the community gets to claim that journey/experience for itself through the demands and expectations (for gifts and monetary favours) placed upon the traveller. On the other hand, the community gets to vicariously experience Paris through the returned Parisians and their

narratives – to visit “France by mouth” as the narrator says (20). Understanding the corporate meanings of France – for the villagers – therefore accounts for the energies that appear to be invested in the return of the successful Parisian and the larger myth/narrative of Paris.

Moki’s choreographing of his descent on the village is conscious of this corporate owning of Paris. He must therefore fashion himself in a manner that fits a “Parisian.” The narrator notes Moki’s transformation from the “frail young man” to a man who is “robust, radiant, and in full bloom ... France had transformed him” (22-23). To complete the appearance, Moki had “applied hydroquinone products on his entire body” to lighten his skin (38). Njoya’s (2008) reading of Moki’s skin bleaching solely highlights his alienation as a victim of “racist discourses” that condemned African cultures and bodies (31). Admittedly, Moki’s act speaks to a larger and complex process of the global pathologisation of darker skins and the homogenisation of beauty/aesthetics that is also tied to global capitalism (Lindsey, 2011: 97-98; Hunter, 2002: 176). In this context, the application of chemicals on the body to attain a light skin speaks to the black body as a site of discursive and physical violence that is tied histories of racism that figure blackness as profane, a negation and requiring transcendence. However, we can also recognise the subtle and eloquent ways in which Moki encodes his body’s appearance in a manner that frees it from “the social straight-jacket” and with this “illusion the sapeur’s body no longer reflects ... the ‘mal ville’ ... it becomes a body that shines in the artificial universe of the *sape*” (Gondola, 1999: 31). As such Moki’s lighter skin enables him to escape simplistic racial and social categories, an escape that destabilises skin-colour hierarchies and inscribes his body with the capital conferred to lighter skins. This reads into Yaba Amgborale Blay’s (2011: 5) contention that skin bleaching is an “attempt to circumnavigate the parameters of the white/non-

white binary racial hierarchy by instead assigning and assuming colour privilege based upon proximity to whiteness.” This conflicting contestation of racial categories brings to the fore a radical “clandestine discourse of subordinate groups” and “fugitive political” actions that appropriates and retools skin colouration (Scott: 1990: x-xii). It is therefore in this messy mix of both paradoxically empowering and disempowering actions that the *sapeur* masculinity articulates itself and confronts racial categories.

The transformed Moki’s return, complete with the trappings and capital of mobile masculinities, is described as an event that the community participates in (30). In line with the collective owning of Moki, the first day of his return is preserved for family members who flock to see him fearing that “they would miss out on the hypothetical manna Moki brought back if they weren’t there” (34). These visits not only reiterate the affluence of the Parisian that Paris has supposedly conferred upon the traveller, it both becomes a moment of celebration and of performance, a social spectacle that enables the villagers/non-travelled to experience France through the returned Parisian who is transformed to a text of consumption. In the course of these performances/spectacle, Moki distributes seemingly inconsequential gifts from France such that “in the end, everyone left with *a little something from France*” (37). Mabanckou’s portrayal of the semantically loaded gift-giving event and the value attached to the seeming trinkets and trifles needs to be unpacked. The “cheap trinkets,” far from being valued for their utilitarian purposes are significant because they come from France, and as such, they are the conduit through which the villagers make their imaginative journeys to France – they act as mementoes, reminders of their individual/collective imaginative journeys to Paris, the imagined utopia. This symbolic function of the gifts is brought into sharp focus by the anecdote the narrator tells us of

Moki giving his childhood friends “things from Paris. And not just any odd thing! Moki thanked them with little Paris Metro maps. They were jubilant” (39). This “owning” of the map of Paris in Congo is an act that appropriates an imaginative space in a manner that is reminiscent of the geographies of adventure that the imperial library invested in the outposts of the empire. Their appropriation echoes Gondola’s (1999: 28) claim that for the *sapeurs*

European cities are endowed with a magical quality, an aura that is reinforced by the stories related by those who return home. They envision Europe as an immaculate, immense city of light, where magical, mechanical passageways carry people along, where fortunes are easily made, and the climate healthy. In short, a place where living is easy.

In Mabanckou’s novel however, Paris is not only represented as a place where “fortunes are easily made,” it is also represented as a space to be conquered and possessed, and the narrative is made to carry the romantic and seductive exoticism and violence prevalent in European imperialism, complete with its masculine inflections. Njoya (2007) alludes to this when she compares Moki, and other Parisians, with epic heroes. She asserts that “like the actions of epic heroes, illegal immigration inspires narratives that make survivors appear more heroic, the stories more impressive and the language more entertaining” (Ibid.: 139). Moki is therefore an epic hero returned from his adventures.

Much like “Africa became an indispensable term,” Europe’s imperial foil, and “provided a rhetorical ground on which a new sense of heroic history could be acted out” to paraphrase Jean and John Comaroff (2010: 31), Moki and his fellow Parisians view Paris as that

space where their heroic actions/exploits detonate. His presentation of the Parisians' journeys and exploits in Paris in grand and heroic, albeit criminal, terms invests the narrative with a logic of invading an imaginative space, conquering and possession. Pertinently, and in a manner that echoes Marie Louise Pratt's (2007: 198) "monarch-of-all-I-survey" narratives, Moki avers that "Paris is in my pocket. I know that city, and nobody knows it better than me" (48). In addition, and significantly so, having Paris in one's pocket is a symbolic act that both maps and unmaps the colonial metropole and translates it in ways that are both dispersed and intelligible to the characters in the text. To put it differently, the characters' mapping and unmapping of Paris challenges the binary world it represents: centre and periphery, belonging and unbelonging, black and white. This unmapping and mapping not only reconstitutes these *sapeur* identities but also reconstitutes the world in ways that subvert the conventional structuring of identity and geography enunciated by the epistemic violence inherent in the logic of binary oppositions.

The seemingly mundane acts of gift-giving and receiving, and the stories and interactions that accompany this are therefore laden with symbolic meanings that force the reader to rethink these interactive moments that mediate complex negotiations of space by marginal masculinities. They are indicative of the intricate ways in which foreign spaces are translated, made intelligible/unintelligible to the villagers and they consequently become part of their everyday grammar. In addition, they also gesture at the villager's ceding of authority to the Parisian by ascribing premium on mobility, and giving legitimacy to the Parisian's claims of sophistication and fluencies as he showcases his seemingly unbounded transnational masculine identity. The gift-giving event is also a space within which the *sapeur* enacts largesse and benevolence in his performance and flaunting of its maleness. In Moki's gift-giving and sartorial

extravagance, we can therefore read an assertion of a “consumerist model of masculinity from global black popular culture” that contests its exclusion from global capital “by asserting agency as capitalist subjects” (Matlon, 2016: 2-3). Drawing from Matlon, I argue that the lack of salaried employment by the young male character’s in the text diminishes and denies them an opportunity to be producers, providers and heads of households, “itself a condition of ‘adult masculinity,’” which in turn necessitates their insistence to participate in the global economic arena (Ibid.: 1-2). Moki’s extravagant spending in transforming the lifestyle of his family and the obviously limited largesse he extends to friends and relatives is thus suggestive of the way in which *sapeur* masculinities append their self-worth to their spending/consumerism, what Jordanna Malton (2016: 3), borrowing from Newell (2012), refers to as bluffing “their way up the social hierarchy through excessive spending”. Apart from the various ways in which this complex performative and interactive moment is variously employed by both the performer and the audience, it is worth noting that it marks their induction/incorporation into fetishistic consumerism and consumption. While owning and claiming their experiential access and possession of mementoes of Paris ascribes upon them some empowering form of self-articulation that supersedes their bounded, territorialised and provincial village space, this visibility is also counterbalanced by a disempowering consumerism that creates needs and desires that are way beyond their means (Njoya, 2007: 130). In these acts of transgressive self-articulation, the narrative restrains a one-to-one conflation of consumption with empowerment.

Moki’s fetishistic consumerism and performativity – a public spectacle that articulates him within a consumerist model of masculinity as it also welcomes the villagers to experience and recognise his fluencies of Paris – finds its full expression in his choice of dressing/attire. The

text's careful detailing of Moki takes note of the excesses and superfluity of clothing and adornment that he exhibits. The extravagant display that Moki enacts produces a visually striking image, which placed upon the public space/stage, becomes an object of admiration, and in the process, an avenue through which the villagers experience and gain their own fluencies of Paris. Reiterating the importance of clothing choices to the Parisians, Moki asserts to his audience gathered at a local *buvette* that "clothing is our passport. Our religion" (51). This statement not only reasserts the centrality of dressing for the *sapeurs*, it also conjures up the idea of mobility and passing. I use the framework of "passing," as Pamela L. Caughie (1999: 13) uses it: divesting it with the negative associations of "disguise, impersonation, appropriation, and fraudulence" and recognising it as a "'potentially ethical practice' that implies movement, action and change" (Keating, 2001: 471). Rid of these negative connotations, passing enables us to grapple with the *sapeurs*' refashionings as laden with transformative potential and questioning the fixed subjectivities that their self-styling challenges. As such, the Parisians use clothing as a masculine ethos to move beyond the orbit of the identities, social status conferred upon them, and the spaces that shape their interactions. The costuming is a way of negotiating the invisibility imposed upon the economically and politically disenfranchised male subjects in ways that mobilise and engender group solidarities and blur class boundaries and social stratifications. This attiring therefore signals class, privilege and sophistication despite the squalor and exclusion from the national/global political and economic arenas. Thomas puts this more succinctly when he argues that through their dress choices, the *sapeurs* aim "to circulate outside of those matrices" of the rural and the urban, and their attendant meanings, and that "this distantiation is intended to avoid stereotypes and projections traditionally attributed to colonised subjects and that survive today in France in characterisations of African immigrants" (2007: 161). Ultimately,

we can read their costuming as a form of masking – both as an act of concealment and as an act of creating another persona of the self.

Sartorial choices and the attendant subtexts that accompany them are therefore imbued with political significations. Indeed, this connection between dress and power politics forms the polemical crux of Jean Allman’s (2004) *Fashioning Africa: The Power and the Politics of Dress*. Allman notes that the concern of the collection is to tease out “the ways in which power is represented, constituted, articulated, and contested through dress. It seeks to understand bodily praxis as political praxis, fashion as political language” (1). To Allman, fashion is a “political language capable of unifying, differentiating, challenging, contesting, and dominating” (Ibid.). Viewed this way therefore, the *sapeurs*’ clothed bodies iterate radical reversals that challenge hegemony, invisibility and conformity, and also mark their subordination in global cultural flows. Enrica Picarelli (2015) draws our attention to the centrality of clothing to these *sapeur* masculinities by asserting that they are “entirely reliant on it” for their “economic value and the ability to choose and acquire the right garment determine the worth of men” (212).

When all things are considered, the *sapeurs* visibility/hypervisibility, or “excessiveness” (in dress, stories of Paris, use of the French language, cuisines and body language) is a performative strategy that recognises the currency of the myth of Paris and its centrality in the villager’s imaginaries. Nicole R. Fleetwood’s (2011) framework of “excess flesh” that theorises “the strategic uses of the body by black female artists and cultural figures” (109) provides an appropriate point of entry in examining Moki’s excesses. Fleetwood’s thesis hinges on the “continued currency and relevance of the black female figure as one that registers as excessive in public culture” (Ibid). She argues that excess flesh is a “conceptual framework for understanding

the black body as a figuration of hypervisibility” and that it “is an enactment of visibility that seizes upon scopic desires to discipline the black female body” (112). By deploying this framework, Fleetwood aims to “articulate the visual and discursive breaches that these enactments make in dominant visual culture, an important site of engagement with the public sphere” (109). Seen through these lens, Moki’s hypervisibility, achieved through his self-stylisation excesses, does not necessarily exhibit a “totalising negation” of the self, rather, it is a visibility that “understands the function of this figuration” for the *sapeur* masculinities (Fleetwood, 2011: 111). Moki’s transgressiveness and seeming cohabitation with hegemonic forms foregrounds – as Fleetwood (Ibid.: 112-113) argues regarding excess flesh – the impossibility of essentialistic binarised/hierarchical relations, and the limitations of all totalising and universalising metanarratives through a diversification of the categories of masculinity.

Over and above the *sapeur* masculinity self-stylisation through dress choice, Mabanckou records an overt, yet easily dismissible, discourse that serves as a subtext to the sartorial performance – what I refer to, borrowing and departing from Fleetwood, the *sapeur* sartorial eccentricities/fastidiousness and performative excesses. The text portrays another repertoire of gestures, mannerisms/bearing, and the idiosyncratic ways of speaking/language use that goes in tandem with Moki’s costuming. It is this performativity and theatricality that both Njoya (2007: 137) and Thomas (2007: 180) allude to when the former compares Moki to a griot and the latter contends that Moki performs a “symbolic reversal ... of the Colonial Exposition held in Paris in 1931,” that of being an “exhibit so that his fellow Africans may observe his Frenchness.” This chapter argues that for a better understanding of *sapeur* masculinities in their attempts at self-articulation, it is productive to look at Moki’s performative excesses – be it

dress, language and accent, skin colouration, culinary choices, gestures and comportment – as intertexts that reinforces each other as part of his *sapeur* masculinity repertoire that enables him to transcend the limitations of his marginal status in the global economy. Gondola (1999) succinctly sums up for us the multiple texts that Moki’s performance stages. Arguing that clothing represents a search for identity in the practice of *La sape*, he identifies three levels of clothing:

First, real clothing, which presents the *sapeur* as an individual who suppresses a real identity to acquire a borrowed one. Second, the griffe (expensive designer labels), which authenticates this oneiric migration, adds the finishing touches to the usurpation. Third, the spoken (and even sung or danced) clothing makes the *sapeur* the actor and conjurer of this identity. If the value of the real clothing is contested, and if the authenticity of the griffe is threatened, the spoken clothing reaffirms the illusion of an ego-screaming by presenting an enactment of words, gestures, and attitudes.” (25-6)

Gondola’s interjection serves to highlight the multiplicities of performative actions that reinforce each other. Taken together, the clothing and what transpires after and beyond the clothing, what Gondola calls a certain “wearing, a speaking, and even dancing and singing of and about clothes” (Ibid.: 37) are a communicative act that serves to mediate foreign experiences, sophistications which position the performer beyond his present realities. Moki, aware of the fact that he is a subject of observation and curiosity interweaves his clothing, speaking, gestures, and comportment in a manner that shows this intertextuality. The narrator, with a keen eye for details notes Moki’s attire when he was invited at the local *buvette*:

Moki was dressed in a tailor-made suit by Francesco Smalto. A very see-through shirt allowed you to make out his white skin as soon as he took off his jacket in public. His silk tie was covered in a pattern of miniscule Eiffel Towers. He wore only Weston shoes, and he was the only one in the country to have a pair made of crocodile; one pair cost the equivalent of a minister's salary in our country. (44-45)

Having observed Moki showcase his ornamentation, styling and elegance, it is not lost on the narrator how Moki overlays this with a complex interplay of diverse repertoires;

As soon as he was out of the car and aware that all eyes were upon him, he put on what could have been a walk down a fashion runway, to the great delight of the fanatics sitting in the *buvette*. He unbuttoned his jacket, handed it to one of his brothers behind him. Under the see-through shirt, his skin looked brighter, almost pale, without any irritation or the severe allergies borne by local imitators. This Metamorphosis stupefied the crowd. The Parisian hitched his pants up all the way to the belly button. The gesture was stiff, contrived, and rehearsed, in order to show off his socks, which matched his tie. One of his brothers handed him Emmanuelle Khanh sunglasses, not to wear them but to pose them lightly on his forehead. A hail of bravos ensued. The girls forgot their long hours of waiting patiently and gushed frenetically. (45)

In these performances, Moki not only consciously solicits a public gaze, in the duo acts of spectatorship and observing that he invites the audience to take part in, he ultimately evinces a complex process of coveting, emulation and appropriation of the fluencies that he exhibits. Moki therefore calls attention to his self-creation and self-styling that comes from his experiential

contact with the France of fashion by carefully balancing what Picarelli (2015: 210) calls “sartorial wit” with an assemblage of body movements and gestures that lends credence and authenticity to his claims. This display of elegance is not only an attempt to project the self out of his limiting environment, it is also aimed at an audience that has been made privy to the seductions of the repertoires that Moki typifies. As such, it becomes a social spectacle whose collective consumption goes hand in hand with the foregrounding of a certain type of mobile transnational masculinity that transcends the limits of its frontiers in a global capitalist economy. The elements of theatricality and exaggeration that Moki cultivates as a consummate dandy alludes to the performativity that Elle Reynolds Weatherup (2011) recognises in the live performances of Beau Brummel George Walker and Zoot suiters. Weatherup observes “three aspects of the dandy’s performance that are the most salient and translatable” (Ibid.: vii). According to Weatherup

The dandy shocks his community with a performance of superiority, delimiting his otherwise marginal status in that community; he alienates that society by putting himself on a pedestal of self; and he entertains, maintaining a seamless mask of truth and fiction that pleases his alienated society while he, always the stoic, appears not to notice. (Ibid.)

In the novel therefore, Moki is invested with these performative aspects which, as I had discussed earlier, simultaneously delimit his marginal status, alienate him and play upon the truth and fictions of Paris. But as other scholars of dandyism have observed, this dandy performance is not just for theatrics, it is often “the ultimate symbol par excellence of glamorous rebellion against status quo” (Gligorovska, 2011: 22), and it also expresses “an awareness of the politics of representation responsible for reproducing racial inequalities” (Picarelli, 2015: 211). Mabanckou

thus presents the “myth of Paris” in the text as a functional masculine narrative that is created out of the desire to imagine and articulate the self into utopias of belonging, affluence/agency, sophistication and certain codes of performative masculinity. Perhaps it’s because of this that Moki feels obligated to sustain and perpetuate the myth of Paris and perform the Parisian for it affords him alternative means of visibility in an established “community of taste, where a shared passion for beauty encourages forms of mentoring and mutual assistance” (Ibid.: 212-213).

While Moki’s self-styling is highly expressive, the hypervisibility that he attains as the quintessential Parisian also forces some form of unintelligibility on both Paris and on himself. In the text, the villagers see and view Moki within the limited lens of a “Parisian,” a perspective that both makes him visible and at the same time effaces him as an individual. As a result, the villagers relate with him only as an object of fantasy and scrutiny in his mediation of the Parisian world. In addition, Moki and the other sapeurs self-stylisations play into the Fanonian gaze, a concept that recognises the racialised constructions of black male bodies in white supremacist discourses which emphasises their sexual prowess and genital size, virility and strength, aggression, violence and criminality and pathological consumerism (Saint-Aubin, 2005; hooks, 2004; Mukherjee, 2006). For instance, in the scene of Moki’s return and subsequent visit to the *buvette*, the narrator dwells at length on the physicality and sensuality of Moki’s body. This is narrated alongside the ecstatic reception Moki is given by the group of girls who “gushed frenetically” upon his arrival (45). Although the novel does little in terms of exploring the signification of these sexualised black male bodies in France, the reader is inevitably left to contemplate the consumption and meanings attached to these masculinities as they circulate in the global stage, especially within the context of historical representations of blackness. In this

ambit, the image that Moki cuts falls into stereotypical representations of black men as hypersexual and as sexual predators. Indeed, these myths of African hypersexuality has led to the objectification and commodification of both black men and women within the patriarchal and capitalistic Euro-American spaces. Within this fetishizing, pathologizing and consumptive cultures of the West, we can envision a not so different reality for Moki and the other *sapeurs*. This commodification and consumption of difference in capitalistic economies, as hooks (1992) points out, lacks transformative potential but rather, it is used to reinforce the superiority of whiteness. In this regard therefore, their self-stylisations highlight their engagement with representational economies, cultures and traditions that both exclude them and insist on their perceived grotesqueness because of their blackness. Furthermore, through the *sapeurs* attempts to circumnavigate immigration laws and their involvement in illegal activities, something that is seen favourably and considered as necessary skills by these masculinities, they fall into criminal constructions of African masculinities within Western spaces. The text hints at this pathologisation of black male bodies and the anxieties and fears that they evoke through its narration of the policing technologies and regimes that these immigrants from Congo-Brazzaville face at the hands of the French police. Massala-Massala's deportation at the beginning of the narrative speaks to regulatory and control mechanisms that are increasingly being deployed against racial "Others" by Euro-American states who feel marooned/overrun by the immigrants. On the one hand therefore, these masculinities present their bodies as a canvass upon which transgressive ideas/actions are articulated, on the other hand, they also act as site where racial mythologies are reified and reinforced.

Additionally, the performance of a *sapeur* masculinity is also presented as violent and exclusive of other forms of masculinities, and exploitative of female characters. Morrell and Ouzgane (2005) seem to have this in mind when they point out that “all men have access to the patriarchal dividend, the power that being a man gives them to choose to exercise power over women. And this can be extended to the power to control the lives of other men as well” (7). The novel’s representation of Congo-Brazzaville masculinities’ refashioning and contestation of their disempowerment and marginalisation also engages with the subtle ways in which hierarchies are constructed within their marginal spaces. In the novel, mobility is presented as a way of building up masculinity (a rite of passage for young males). However, in these movements, destinations of travel and the acquisition of certain repertoires that perform sophistications and fluencies of being in the world by the young men matter. The juxtaposition of the Peasant and the *sapeurs* invites an engagement with the contradictory ways in which the dominance of the latter is both reinforced and subverted. The text presents the Peasant as lacking the performative fluencies and sophistications of the *sapeur*. The Peasant’s lack is largely read as an absence that negates and downplays their place within the hierarchies of transnational masculine sophistications/linkages. Massala-Massala’s village mates are therefore not “infatuated with that lot” who “melt easily into the crowd” and “the girls don’t run after him. They ignore him. They make fun of him in the street when he passes by” (58-9). Evidently therefore, the Peasant lacks the social/masculinity capital existing within the matrix of travel and “successful” return from Paris which celebrates the Parisian and enables him to participate in the commodified relations with women – a commodification that Moki excels in. Equally important is the way in which the peasant serves to challenge the hegemony of the *sapeur*. Through their cultivated dissociation with the affectations that the *sapeur* deploys and their debunking of the myth of Paris, they threaten the

social capital and privilege that Moki and other *sapeur* masculinities have accumulated. However, the power differentials between the Peasants and *sapeurs* is presented in such a way that troubles the rigid “binarism” between hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities by showing how both function in the same structure of hierarchised privilege as they also enter into exploitative relations with female characters (Coles, 2008; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Further, immobile masculinities are subsumed under the posturings of *sapeur* and peasant masculinities.

In the *sapeur* and, to a lesser degree, the Peasants’ confrontation with their peripherality and disempowerment, Mabanckou’s text brings into being the accessorisation of female bodies and the elision of their voices/experiences. The narrator admits that “boys my age seduced their girls, warming them with the serenade: I’ll be going to France soon. I’m going to live in the centre of Paris” (20). Later, he describes the neighbourhood’s girls’ infatuation with Moki as “they flocked together on the main street to watch him go by, offering him a timid and reverent hello. They spied on him, followed his comings and goings, guessing what he did with his time” (38). As such, female bodies and voices appear to, on the surface serve to spectate male agency and act as symbols of conquest and ownership for the Parisian . Read this way, Moki’s penchant of surrounding himself with “fawning” female characters translates into turning their bodies/presence into his accessories and parading them in public serves to reinforce his desirability as a *sapeur* masculinity. This denial of any form of agency to the women is reinforced by the text’s presentation of female characters’ docility and stasis. The female characters that we meet in the text largely appear to find relevance in their serving as accessories that augment the masculinity of the would-be *sapeur* or the accomplished *sapeur*. This is further

amplified by the text's portrayal of the *sapeur* journeys to Paris as conferring agency to the men against the inertia of female characters who sit to await the heroic return and listen to the exploits of the successful *sapeur*. The women's rivalries, hostility and antagonisms as they compete for the attention of Moki serve to portray them as petty and trivial, while also magnifying his desirability as the dominant masculinity.

However, a close examination of the relationship between the *sapeurs* and the women in the text reveals the dependency of these masculinities on the latter's attentions. If we consider that feminine and masculine identities are relational, mutually constitutive and interdependent, it becomes apparent that far from being mere cheering aspirants to the *sapeurs* consuming attentions, the women are integral in the self-making journeys and narratives that they construct about themselves. In this sense, the journey to Paris is closely tied to the man as the provider ideal in the family. This then ropes in the woman not just as a beneficiary of this male enterprise, but as central in how this masculine identity in the domestic arena is defined. As such, the rite of passage that migration offers to these masculinities is closely tied to ideas of the nuclear family and gender-role expectations. And while the ability to provide confers upon these males a sense of power and control, this falls apart when we consider masculine reliance on the sanctioning and legitimizing powers, albeit limiting, of women within the domestic space. In the same vein, while the female characters that the *sapeurs* surround themselves with appear to be largely playing accessorising roles in the self-making strategies of these men, upon closer examination their importance lies in their ability to confer upon them legibility through the attentions they accord them. This is brought into sharp focus when we consider the withdrawal of the legitimizing attentions from the Peasant who "melt easily into the crowd" and their subsequent

dismissal as the girls refuse to “run after him” and instead “make fun of him in the street when he passes by” (58-9). Evidently therefore, women function in this circuit of migration and return as a rite of passage for *sapeur* masculinities to not only legitimise but also to render them legible. At the same time, they are subject to the domineering self-stagings of these masculinities.

3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that *We Need New Names* and *Blue White Red* represent narratives that collapse national boundaries through their portrayal of the accessibility of outside spaces in the characters imaginations. In the novels, African elsewhere, mainly focalised in Euro-America but multiplied in Bulawayo’s text, are presented as part of the characters day-to-day imaginative grammar. Africa and its elsewheres are therefore presented “not as discrete and essentialised spaces but rather as spaces increasingly defined, perhaps even constituted, relationally and/or rhizomatically, through global networks” (Janet et. al, 2010: 2).” In the context of this relationality, the texts present the inhabiting of the home as informed by the imaginaries of these elsewheres. Bulawayo and Mabanckou depict complex ways in which these spaces are lived, experienced and performed as the characters exhibit diverse fluencies/knowledges – through an assortment of repertoires and self-styled choices – of outside spaces that are mediated through various avenues even without travelling. The political purchase of this is that it invites a rethinking of migrations/mobilities as constitutive processes that speak to complex and varied connections and translations of spaces beyond the seemingly bounded borders of the nation. Wart Canzler et al. (2008: 1-2) speak of multiple mobilities, a concept that

aptly captures this. Arguing that “mobilities are inscribed into very different spheres of modern life,” they add that “mobility does not consist exclusively of movement, but also a system of potentials characterised by intentions, strategies and choices” (Ibid.).

By implicating Africa and its elsewhere, these texts undermine the idea that they can be understood self-referentially. Their narrative trajectories (plots that both narrate the homeland and the outside world), coupled with their portrayal of a national psyche dotted with the narratives and images of an “elsewhere” suggest that the national form, with its attendant struggles and aspirations, cannot be exclusively understood without recourse to its elsewhere. Thus, whether it is Bulawayo’s narrative that locates itself between an unnamed country resembling Zimbabwe and America or whether it is Congo Brazzaville and France for *Blue White Red*, the authors underscore the contaminatedness and interactions of cultures, histories and subjectivities. The texts’ cultivation of heterogeneity and multi-referentiality lends credence to the claim that “the incessantly fortified line dividing here from there may turn out in the end to be an ‘optical illusion,’” as “cracks and fissures” make visible the disavowed connections (Minh-Ha, 2010: 7). In addition, and most significantly, these texts underscore a subtle critiquing of the spaces that the characters intimately inhabit. On the one hand, the novels engage the hegemonies, dominations and exclusions bred within the national space. The inequalities arising from these are presented as partly responsible for the multiple migrations that the texts depict. Indeed, elsewhere in the texts emerge as a refusal to be contained within the limiting boundaries of the nation. As such, these narratives of the elsewhere circulating in the home, and the ultimate migrations of some of the characters, subtly signal at the delegitimation of post-colonial nationalisms and represent alternative ways of engaging with the troubles and the prospects of

the nation. It is with this in mind that Toivanen (2015) points out Bulawayo's engagement with "the failures of the postcolonial nation-state to claim the promises invested in it at independence" (3). Mabanckou's text also deals with the various ways that the national space is limiting as the characters project themselves into what they conceive as more hospitable spaces. On the other hand, the texts also debunk the myths and narratives of Euro-America (and by extension other African elsewhere). Firstly, this is done through the resiting of these spaces within the spaces of the Global South in ways that signal a challenge to an assumed hegemony and plenipotence. Secondly, this is done through the production of knowledges and narratives that expose the long held fantasies, fictions and illusions of the imperial metropolitan centres as the sites of intelligibility, order, knowledge, refinement development/progress and plenitude, together with their epistemological securities and anxieties towards its others.

Instructively therefore, Bulawayo and Mabanckou's tangling of African and elsewhere necessitates a rethinking of their discursive and experiential significance/meanings within the African imaginary. For instance, Mabanckou presents the "myth of Paris" in the text as a functional narrative that is created out of the desire to imagine and articulate the marginal *sapeur* masculinities into utopias of belonging, affluence and sophistication in a manner that challenges national forms of control, marginalisation and their boundedness and peripherality within global flows of capital and culture. *Blue White Red* thus represents a largely male-centred migration, and more often than not, the narratives of migration are solely portrayed as a masculine rite of passage. The "heroic" cadences of the exploits of Parisians – coded as masculinist – eclipses the women under the *sapeur* figuration and at the same time confer power upon them in the way in which their attentions serve to legitimise the Parisian as a dominant/desirable masculinity.

In Bulawayo's text, these elsewheres are imbued with hope and promise which is nevertheless exploded by the disenfranchising contacts and experiences that the children have of these spaces. *We Need New Names* troubles this exclusivist narrative through not only including gendered experiences in the story of migration but also children's experiences of African elsewheres and migration. Both texts represent narratives of the less privileged that enforce vulnerabilities occasioned by migration and disenfranchising global contacts while at the same time underscoring transgressive strategies of negotiating debilitating conditions. On the one hand, Mabanckou's investment in the corporeality of the body directs us to the subversively creative deployment of the clothed body as a canvas of political expression. In this way, the narrative invites an analysis that pays attention to the ways in which the body speaks and or articulates. Through the body, *Blue White Red* unmask dominant configurations of whiteness/colourism, class and spatial mythos. Bulawayo's child characters destabilise their subordination and disempowerment in global flows of capital, culture, human bodies, discourse and power through their wandering, narration and games that exposes the dynamics of unequal global encounters.

CHAPTER FOUR

DIASPORIC CONTACT ZONES: AFRICAN IMMIGRANT MASCULINITIES AND THE AMERICAN SPACE

Babamukuru was not the person I had thought he was. He was wealthier than I had thought possible. He was educated beyond books. And he had done it alone. He had pushed up from under the weight of the white man with no strong relative to help him. How had he done it? Having done it, what had he become?

Tsitsi Dangarembga

4.1 Introduction

Dinaw Mengestu was born in 1978 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. When he was two years old, he migrated to Illinois together with his mother and sister where they rejoined his father who had earlier fled the Derg Revolution which saw the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie. He is the author of three novels: *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007), *How to Read the Air* (2010) and *All Our Names* (2014). Mengestu is also a nonfiction writer who contributes to magazines like *Rolling Stone*, *Harper's* and *Granta*, reporting on conflicts from Eastern Congo, Uganda and Darfur in Sudan. He is the winner of various awards: 2012 MacArthur Foundation Genius Award, the 2008 Lannan Literary Fellowship, *The New Yorker's* "20 under 40" award and the National Book Foundation's "5 Under 35" among others. Mengestu's literary oeuvre grapples with a wide range of issues: war, violence, dislocation and loss and their attendant traumas, African Diasporas in America, African migrant masculinities, identity, nation, family, globalism and capitalism etc.

This chapter focuses on Mengestu's two novels, *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* and *How to Read the Air*. It interrogates African migrant masculinities' engagement with the American space, father/son relations and national mythos. In reading African migrant masculinities in America, I suggest the importance of paying attention to the gender inflections of not only migration itself but also of American histories, myths and political/economic cultures. My contention is that there is an ideological and value-laden discourse that underwrites how space is constructed, perceived and experienced. In this regard, the examination of marginal masculinities' access and use of the American space will be done against the backdrop of American metanarratives and foundational mythologies as repertoires that inform their imagination and embodied experience of the American space. Mengestu's works specifically wrestle with the fictions and truths of the American dream as a success mythology, and African migrant masculinities' confrontation with this figuration. William Blazek and Michael K. Glenday refer to this myth as the ideation of America "as a space of limitless promise evolving into material abundance," a myth whose reinforcement through the mass media culture has ensured its endurance albeit in different forms (2005: 3-4). Heather Wyatt-Nichol contends that "the American Dream functions as a myth ... providing hope to citizens and reinforcing beliefs in the protestant work ethic and meritocracy" (2011: 258). Wyatt-Nichol's argument alludes to the implication of this myth with Neoliberal capitalism, a fact that is reiterated by Kozo Yamamura (2018) and Jennifer L. Hochschild (1995).

Instructively, Blazek and Glenday hold that the myth of the American dream, in the context of American "ethnic diversity," was "grossly irrelevant to anything other than the reductive, white, Eurocentric and male-gendered experience" (2005: 4). A useful point of

departure that bolsters our argument about masculinity and place/space is provided by Andrew Gorman-Murray and Peter Hopkins (2014). Borrowing from the work of Van Hoven and Hörschelmann (2005), they argue that “rather than only being attached to men’s bodies, ‘masculinity can attach to bodies, objects, places and spaces well beyond the confines of biology and sex,’” and they pertinently conclude that “masculinity can therefore be associated with a variety of types of bodies, places and contexts” (5). These scholars bring into perspective the gender and race coding – specifically masculine, white, heterosexual, Christian etc. – and capitalist orientation of space which will form the basis of analysing Mengestu’s characters and their inscription into Washington and New York, the setting of the two novels.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section examines Sepha and Kenneth’s traversing of the American commercial and corporate world. Sepha’s placement within a grocery store in Washington, DC and his neglect of the ethos of commercialism will be analysed to show how it suggests a possibility of rethinking commercial capitalistic engagements. However, the study will also show the unresolved ambivalence of Sepha’s renegade actions through an examination of his participation in the commodification of feminine bodies within capitalistic formations. This study aims to provide a considered understanding of the American society that is attentive to both the interactions the characters have with white and black America, the materiality, corporeality as well as the governmentality of space. The study’s investment in making a distinction between “white” and “black” America follows Louis Chude-Sokei (2014), Benedicte Ledent (2015) and Patrick Brenus Oray’s (2013) injunction that we attend to the anachronistic, monolithic and nebulous ways the “black diaspora” is used and defined, and the tenuous solidarities that it is expected to conjure. My analysis of space in this

way is informed by Doreen Massey's (1994) interjection that we should think of space "not as some absolute independent dimension, but as constructed out of social relations: that what is at issue is not social phenomena in space but both social phenomena and space as constituted out of social relations, that the spatial is social relations 'stretched out'" (2). And that to think of space from the perspective of social relations inevitably leads us to think of spatiality and power and the "spatiality of power itself" (4). Kenneth's character will be useful in undercutting hegemonic masculinity's image of the corporate self-made man through an elaboration of the latter's reliance on disempowered and coerced bodies to produce. The second section will interrogate Joe's (Joseph Kahangi's) character in relation to how he troubles and questions the archival and epistemological productions, inclusions and exclusions of the neoliberal academia and his placement within the service industry.

The third and final section will examine *How to Read the Air* and its portrayal of the father/son relationship in the immigrant family and the lies and fictions of the narrator as a point of departure to examine the "failure" and dissolution of African immigrant masculinities and American national mythologies. In this section, Mengestu's text is understood to be presenting two narratives, complete with their fabrications, distortions and reductiveness: the African immigrant narrative and American sociocultural and spatial narratives. In this section, I aim to show that Mengestu compels us to critically re-examine how spatial fictions/myths – of lack and chaos, on the one hand, and plenitude, opportunity and freedom on the other – are ultimately about power. My reading of Jonas's lies stems from the understanding that the novel is about much more than the narrator's morality or ethics, it is also about politics and history. To use Tindral Kareem's elegant expression, I approach the novel not merely as an invitation to

contemplate Jonas's "pathological delusion" but significantly as a strategic and political "aesthetic illusion" (2012: 486).

4.2 Bodies Out of Place: American Spatialities and the Reconstitution of African Immigrant Masculinities

Mengestu's first novel was published in Britain under the title *Children of the Revolution* and later in America as *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* because of what the publishers cited as an overtly political title. The narrative, set over a period of eight months, traces the life of Sepha Stephanos who left Ethiopia for America to escape the Red Terror of 1976-78 that happened after the deposition of Emperor Haile Selassie (Tareke, 2008). Once in America, he attends college and later works as a bellhop before quitting to own and run an ailing grocery store in Logan Circle, a predominantly black neighbourhood that is undergoing re-gentrification.

The novel's representation of space invites a reading that is attentive to spatial politics. Some scholars have noted Mengestu's fascination with spatiality. Sarah K. Harrison (2016) uses the framework of "urban waste ... a concept that designates not only discarded things and degraded places, but also the devalued people that feature as both symptoms and symbols of postcolonial inequity" to delve into an analysis of the novel's portrayal of "urban margins" and how it "affords an original critique of urban transformation in Washington, D.C" (3-4). Harrison makes a compelling case for the contextualisation of the redevelopment of Logan Circle as an act of state violence [and] emphasises that gentrification needs to be seen not only as "a strategic

manoeuvre with decided local effects, but also a symptom of a globally widespread mode of order-building that rests on the violent elimination of wasted urban populations” (15).

Nicole Cesare (2015) uses the “principle of relation” in Mengestu’s novel “to suggest that the novel brings narrative and mapping practices closer together” (113). Cesare further contends that reading the novel “through the framework of relation shows how the text deploys maps and other cartographic ephemera to negotiate and mediate geographical upheavals such as diaspora and gentrification” (113). Ultimately, Cesare argues that “in embodying the relationship between story and space, *Beautiful Things* shows how space is constructed from the experiences, memories, and relationships of those who move through it” (134). These two scholars’ incisive interventions bring to the fore the transnational cartographies that the novel narrativises through bodies inhabiting urban margins. My reading of the novel builds on and extends these analyses by considering the way in which marginal, racialized immigrant masculinities engage with and inhabit Washington, D.C.

When Sepha’s narrative begins, the narrator has lived in America for seventeen years. He owns and runs a neglected and failing grocery store at Logan Circle – a blighted and predominantly African-American neighbourhood in Washington, D.C., which, as the narrative unfolds, goes through the process of re-gentrification. It is from the intimate space of the store and the ambiguous and conflicted relationship he has towards it that we are ushered into a narrative of migrant ambitions, loneliness, memory, loss, trauma, guilt, gentrification, friendship, love, and interracial relationships. Mengestu’s representation of the store is highly polysemic. For Sepha, it evokes complex emotions of ownership pride and at the same time, it serves as a reminder of his isolation, ennui and stasis. As a social space, the store forms a homosocial

meeting place for Kenneth, Joseph and Stephanos – a space they create for reminiscing and immigrant masculine bonding. When Judith McMasterson and Naomi – a white professor of American political history and her interracial daughter – move into the neighbourhood during the initial stages of gentrification, the store partly becomes the space where the unconsummated romantic involvement between Sepha and Judith gets played out. It is also the space where Sepha performs the role of surrogate fatherhood to Naomi. In addition, the store is also represented as a commercial and a central social space for the larger Logan Circle community where they come to shop, socialise/hang out and exchange gossip, and as gentrification intensifies, a space where the community meets to mobilise and articulate their resentments and grievances. Thus, Mengestu evocatively represents the store as a relational space, a space for sociality, leisure and commerce.

The significance of the store attains further meanings when we consider its symbolic meaning for the three male characters in the text – Sepha Stephanos, Kenneth/Ken from Kenya and Joseph/Joe Kahangi from the Congo. For the three characters, the store is a reminder of American/immigrant possibilities, of what can be achieved in America. Brown (2011) echoes this when she asserts that “when Sepha first opens his store in Logan Circle, he and his friends see it as ‘a departure from frustrating, underpaying jobs and unrealized ambitions.’ Sepha recollects their conversations that first night in his new store, growing ‘increasingly grand, our ambitions for the world limited only by imagination’” (26). Fittingly then, Joseph declares the moment of opening the store as “the beginning” and the store as the space where they “begin new lives” and as a result, they “were all guilty of hyperinflated optimism and irrational hope at that point” (144-5). Sepha reveals that opening the store was Kenneth’s idea for he advised him

to be his “own boss ... that’s the only way to get anywhere in this country” (143). Evidently therefore, the store is a space that marks Sepha’s buying into the credo of the American dream, of the self-made man and infinite possibilities – the ethos of success with hard work – America’s “dominant narrative of striving, success and ‘liberty and justice for all’” (Brown, 2011: 2). The store comes to represent the coalescing of immigrant hopes and ambitions for success in America. However, as we shall see later, it is significant that this future comes to be embodied by an ailing commercial space in Washington, arguably the world’s capital for progressivism/success, neoliberalism and capitalism.

Read this way, it is no coincidence that the narrative begins in a store, a commercial and transactional space in the capitalist and neoliberal capital of the world. Neither is it fortuitous that the first book Sepha reads and displays in the store is V. S Naipaul’s novel, *A Bend in the River* (1979) – a gift from Joe who incidentally comes from the Congo, the setting of Naipaul’s novel (39-40). It is conspicuous that this is the second time that Naipaul’s text gets mentioned in two novels examined in this study – The first being Adichie’s *Americanah*. This fact deserves contemplation. *A Bend in the River* is a novel that is, on the surface, interested in the “catastrophic” transition from colonialism to independence, and the precarious positionality of a commercially oriented East African Asian community. However, a closer examination of the text reveals its pathologisation of Africa(ans) through its representation of a narrative of African atavism and a chaotic post-independence period without paying due attention to the legacies and influences of the coloniser. In addition, the “chaos” that appear to define the post-independence period in the text must also be seen within a context that recognises the anxieties of presence and belonging in an historical moment when the community has been stripped of its privileges that

accrued within the colonial racialised matrix of power. Indeed, the mobility that the characters in the text enjoy is enabled by their accumulation within the racially hierarchised and violently exploitative and extractive capitalist colonial economies.

Within this context, it is fitting that both Adichie and Mengestu extend an authorial nod to Naipaul's text. Adichie's intervention comes when Kelsey, "a young white woman" says to Ifemelu that reading *A Bend in the River* has helped her "truly understand how modern Africa works" (141). Through Ifemelu's response that the novel is not about Africa at all, Adichie attends to the representational power of narratives in shaping how we experience the real world. This interface is what Adichie gives full voice to in her 2009 TEDxEuston talk "The Danger of a Single Story" when she flags how limited schemas of representation evoked by "single stories" flatten complexity and shape how we view the world. In seeing how Kelsey would read the novel the way she did, Ifemelu calls attention to subject positionality in interpreting literature and experiencing the world and by extension, questions Naipaul's authorial erasures and liberties.

In Mengestu's rejection of capitalist accumulation through Sepha's neglect of his store in *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, the author offers a rereading of commercial spaces within capitalistic formations. Through his representation of Sepha as a character who is at odds with Salim's desires of commerce and aggrandizement, Mengestu offers a critique of how capitalistic forms of domination and exploitation are portrayed in Naipaul's text as aspirational. In his nod to Naipaul, Mengestu invites us to consider capitalist formations enunciated and advanced by colonialism and imperialism and at the same time to imagine ways of subversion and or existence outside their remit.

The intertextualities between Sepha's narrative and the protagonist of V. S. Naipaul's novel are therefore too glaring to miss. Both Sepha and Salim are immigrant owners of run-down stores, and both buy and run the stores hoping for what Joe aptly refers to as "new beginnings" (39). Dayo Olopade (2008) notes the thematic congruence of both texts that is articulated in what she refers to as a "rhythmic alliance between transaction and travel" and a continuation of the "geographies of retailing and acquisition" within capitalistic formations (135). Like Salim, Sepha's fortunes in the store seem to affect the way he feels about the host space. So when business is good, he "walks home at the end of the night feeling better, not only about my store, but about this country. I think to myself, America is beautiful after all" (5). However, when business is bad, he hates America (Ibid.).

These feelings Sepha has towards America and the store form the lens through which we can look at his immigrant aspirations for upward mobility. Though Sepha didn't come to America with the same expectations that Kenneth or Joe had, after staying with his uncle for two years, we sense a change in his attitude. In fact when his uncle, who seems to harbour typical immigrant ambitions of meritocracy and success through hard work even though this ethic has not worked for him, expresses his hopes for a better future for Sepha, the narrator reveals that he "didn't want anything from America" for he believed that he would soon return to Ethiopia (139). Sepha does not therefore seem to be initially invested in the American dream. However, the moment he makes a decision to leave his uncle's apartment at Silver Springs appears to be decisive. When he revisits the apartment, he observes that within it there was "an entire world made up of old lives and relationships transported perfectly intact from Ethiopia ... living here is as close to living back home as one can get, which is precisely why I moved out after two years"

(115-6). His leaving then is a conscious distancing and desertion of the collective Ethiopian immigrant life and community to claim and immerse himself into the American public. He therefore describes his leaving as an “escape while at other times it seems more like an abandonment” (117).

The use of “escape” and “abandonment” is particularly eloquent when we consider the novel’s re-writing of conventional migrant and diasporic narratives and experiences. The collective Ethiopian immigrant space – with their fierce solidarities that seek to transpose an Ethiopian sense of belonging/home to America, complete with the accompanying nostalgia – is experienced by Sepha as disabling and constraining. Sepha’s desertion represents a sort of escape from intra-immigrant collectivities and national solidarities by an immigrant male to chase a more profitable trade than the job he was doing as a bellhop. It appears as if the novel suggests that for this immigrant’s inscription into the American capitalist ethos and the dogmas of upward mobility, a certain violence has to be done that results into the diminution or even severance of the affinities to the collective. In fact, the text is replete with instances where “conventional” immigrant relational paradigms are frustrated and “abandoned” as Mengestu troubles the exigencies of national genealogies and diasporic kinships in the American space through the character of Sepha.

This is not only evident when he leaves Silver Springs but also more poignantly felt through his relationship with Naomi. Being Naomi’s surrogate father – herself a symbol of interracial possibilities – speaks to attempts to challenge racial polarities and undo patriarchal kinships, especially because Naomi appears to value their relationship more than her relationship with her father Ayad, an economics professor from Mauritania. It is also telling that living in

Washington, D.C. – a city whose largest African immigrant group is from Ethiopia – Sepha does not strike any meaningful relationship with a character from Ethiopia. The only relationship he has with an Ethiopian character – is with Uncle Berhane Selassie who is actually a family friend – is strained and distant.

A key question Mengestu's novel demands that we attend to is what it is about the American space that necessitates a disturbance of these affinities to the collective – be it national or immigrant. Reading Sepha's "desertion" alongside Naipaul's opening lines in *A Bend in the River* offers useful insights into this escape. Salim's peremptory opening statement declares that "the world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it" (1). For Salim, this "nothingness" is felt not only by the abysmal state of his shop in a world of capitalistic accumulation but also by his placement within the East African Coast and in central Africa where his shop is located. "Nothingness" is an enduring figuration of the African space in Western and in this case Asian authoring and archives. In addition, as a member of the Asian community which had defined its place in colonial East Africa through the hierarchies of race, independence upsets the privileges and protections of the empire in ways that imagine the Asian as outside the new nation-state. The diminished status in the political and social dispensation brought about by independence is compounded by Indar's – Salim's friend – reiteration of the community's histories of subjugation and displacement as he rages against their "community and ... civilization, which gave us energy but in every other way left us at the mercy of others" (86). For Indar, to escape this "nothingness" demands a repudiation of any claim/hold the community might make upon him. He thus tells Salim that "for me that dream of home and security was nothing more than a dream of isolation, anachronistic and stupid and very

feeble. I belonged to myself alone. I was going to surrender my manhood to nobody. For someone like me there was only one civilization and one place – London, or a place like it” (92). Indar therefore constructs a hierarchy of civilizations in which the dominance of Britain as an imperial power both dwarfs and is annihilative of the Indian civilization. In addition, he embraces a form of individualism predominant in capitalist cultures and together with Sepha, they experience the communal space as one of “nothingness” – marginalisation and, by extension, domination. For a masculinity seeking articulation in London and by extension a civilization built through the violence of colonialism and capitalism, the dominated histories of the past of his community are both enervating and emasculating. And so Sepha confesses that his “escape” and “abandonment” leads him to ponder whether he “left to create a new life” of his own, “one free from the restraints and limits of culture,” or he “turned his back on everything” he “was and that had made me” (117). He keenly senses the vulnerability and anxieties of the immigrant community at Silver Springs as they chronicle with horror and powerlessness the supposedly vanishing Ethiopian culture and morality. Sepha’s uncle epitomises a servile and marginal masculinity whose insistence on keeping intact affinities to a place they had left curtails the possibility of “meaningful” engagements with America. Sepha describes how Selassie turned “himself off every morning” as he went to be a cab driver and only turned himself on again in the evening, and that “‘Nothing’ was the right word for the way he lived, and so was the vacancy with which he had said it” (141-2). Selassie’s “nothingness,” the narrative hints, refers to the emptying of Berhane’s vitality by the monotonous and repetitious work he does.

Sepha’s “escape/abandonment” of the Ethiopian community at Silver Springs therefore appears to be a rejection of a marginalisation, servility and docility that the immigrant

community and his uncle display in engaging with the American space. It is a refusal to “turn himself off” and a rejection of the descent into Naipaulian “nothingness.” So when Sepha quits his job as a bellhop at Capitol Hotel, he says that he realized he “couldn’t continue living like this any longer” as he feels the numbness in his “arms and legs” brought about by “thirteen hours of lifting luggage and bending at every moment to someone else’s needs” (142). His sentiments are reflective of a refusal of the obsequiousness of the service industry. In a manner than is reminiscent of American national/spatial mythologies, he strikes out on his own, pitting himself against the world. What becomes apparent in Mengestu’s novel is that the pursuit of the credo of the self-made, striving capitalist masculinity demands the troubling of immigrant solidarities to the collective in so far as they represent binary opposites of hierarchisation.

This troubling of national genealogies and diasporic/immigrant solidarities as a way of inhabiting the American space is also further accentuated by Sepha’s diminution of black intra-racial solidarities. Sepha’s narrative is tellingly silent and sketchy about the African American inhabitants of Logan Circle who frequent his store. After living in Logan Circle for fifteen years, Sepha forms no meaningful relationship with the dominant African American community except a suspect relationship with Mrs. Davis. This relationship is coloured by tensions largely because he views her as being invasive and he feels under constant scrutiny and surveillance from her. In one instance, he describes her thus:

Mrs. Davis was standing outside as she normally did, leaning against the front fence, surveying every person and car that passed before her with what she believed was a keen and watchful eye for all things suspicious. For twenty three years she had lived in this neighbourhood ... and in the winter you could sometimes spot her wrapped in a

blanket sitting on the couch nearest the front windows simply staring out vacantly onto the empty sidewalk and street, as if something only she remembered had occurred there, and now was the hour designated for remembering it. (22)

When Judith – who enters the narrative as a harbinger of the gentrification of Logan Circle – moves into the neighbourhood, Sepha says he had caught Mrs. Davis “on several occasions watching us talk from her living-room window” (22; 80). Mrs. Davis therefore serves as the Logan Circle “gaze” that watches guardedly and protectively at strangers/new comers to the community, perhaps in anticipation of the African-American displacements as gentrification intensifies. Her vigilance performs a sort of symbolic violence which later degenerates into actual violence when Judith’s house gets burned. Her surveillance is contrasted to Sepha’s who, as an outsider in the neighbourhood, watches dispassionately and with a sense of inevitability as gentrification happens. Apart from this policing and surveillance, Sepha also experiences a moment with Mrs. Davis which evokes common discourses of the pathologisation of Africa. When Mrs. Davis asks Sepha why a woman like Judith would move into the neighbourhood and he replies that “it’s a free country ... people can live where they like,” Mrs. Davis retort, though Sepha later tries to diffuse it as a failed attempt at a joke, is loaded with the conventional narratives of Africa – tropes of savagery, chaos, the ungovernable and the backward:

What do you know about free countries? You didn’t even know what that was till you came here last week, and now you’re telling me people can live where they like. This isn’t like living in a hut, you know. People around here can’t just put their houses on their backs and move on. (23)

In addition, the statement performs the act of exclusion and distancing. The flippant way in which Mrs. Davis dismisses and reduces the seventeen years Sepha has been in America to one week serves to underline a possibility of his not ever belonging despite the number of years he lives there.

Evidently therefore, Mengestu uses the gentrification of Logan Circle to bring into sharp focus black intra-racial, racial and immigrant politics in America. This gentrification introduces a race/class/immigrant polarization which gains complexity when Judith moves next door to Sepha. He quickly strikes up a romantic relationship with Judith who is treated with suspicion that borders on hostility by Mrs. Davis (23). This hostility towards Judith is re-enacted by what appears to be a normalised masculine micro-culture of female harassment, intimidation and humiliation in public spaces. In one instance, a young man approaches her and asks her if “she liked to suck black dick” and he “pulled out his penis and then broke out in laughter and went running back to his friends” (32). Sepha narrates another occasion when Judith and Naomi walk out of the “store hand in hand, past a few snickers and ‘psssst’ and ‘Heys’” (33). Taken together, these instances are attempts to reinforce and “retake control” of spatial boundaries through the cultivation of fear as a means of social control over Judith’s use and access of Logan Circle – especially in the face of Judith’s presence which is associated with racial and class capital that is transforming Logan Circle (Day, 2006: 569). Because of her race and class, Judith is also misrecognised by the Logan Circle community as responsible for the capital flows that lead to the evictions. While Sepha lacks a similar history of racial relations as the black Logan Circle community and serves as the Other in Mrs. Davis’ construction of postcolonial

“peripheralities”, Judith’s experience of Logan Circle is shaped by a heightened vulnerability because of her race, class and gender.

The affinity between Sepha and Judith develops and eventually gets undone in this context of charged class and racial politics. The hostility by the violently disenfranchised black Logan Circle community towards Judith stands in contrast with the relative ease with which Sepha relates to her and Naomi. Indeed, the novel emphasises Sepha’s “cultural and intellectual affinity with them, the white woman, the mixed race daughter; their shared interest in modernist art, Russian existentialism, Alexis de Tocqueville ...” (Chude-Sokei: 2014: 57). By extension, the immigrant community, represented by Sepha, Ken and Joe, seem to welcome the gentrification as carrying good fortunes for Sepha’s grocery store. Consequently, Ken advises Sepha to include a deli in the store in readiness for the change of fortunes that are about to overtake the neighbourhood. At the peak of the gentrification, Sepha is represented as a detached observer. When Mrs. Davis would talk to him about recent evictions, he would “instantly turn a deaf ear,” and when she opined that “it’s not right. These people coming in like that and forcing us out,” Sepha would think to himself that he “was in no position ... to say what was right or wrong” (189). Later, as one family was being evicted, he goes to see what was happening and says “but I knew my place. It was behind the counter, not in the middle of a dispute in which I had no part to play” (192).

Sepha’s observed detachment comes in the face of Mrs. Davis’ expectation that he shares the same sentiments with the African American community at Logan Circle. These attempts to recruit Sepha are met by his unwillingness and outright dismissal as when he throws away the flyers of a meeting organised to strategize the community’s response by Mrs. Davis.

When he attends the meeting, the reader keenly feels his observer/outsider status. He sits at the back and when Mrs. Davis invites him to move closer, Judith, who is also in attendance, expects him to sit next to her. Mrs. Davis keenly follows him with her eyes to see where he was going to sit and Sepha observes that “it had become that type of meeting. I saw that now. Poor Judith. She didn’t know what she had walked in on ... there were definite sides, and the people in that room were all waiting to see which one I was going to choose” (197-8). Sepha passes Judith by and moves on to sit all by himself.

Sepha’s refusal to choose sides is indicative of a resentment that Chude-Sokei (2014: 64) theorises originates from being “impelled to submit” to the priorities of racial solidarities. More than that, Sepha keenly feels his immigrant status and the seeming fragility and ineffectiveness of racial solidarities and protests in the face of the differentials of social, racial and financial capital in one of the world’s major neoliberal cities. As a new comer in the neighbourhood, he feels his lack of authority to dictate who should or should not belong. On one level therefore, Sepha carries a sense of what Olivia Laing (2007) refers to as the “fragility of homes” having come from a country whose political upheavals forced him into exile after watching his father violently attacked in their living room. On another level, Sepha also feels a sort of inevitability and the futility of protest in the context of the violence of capital formations and flows across space. This is felt throughout his narration as he captures the class (re)formations in his neighbourhood, the changing architectural, commercial and racial landscape as capital-led spatial restructuring of Logan Circle – what Chude-Sokei (2014: 53) refers to as the “shifting architecture of America’s capital” – that enforces impermanence and temporality upon the neighbourhood. In fact, the novel highlights what Sepha calls the “passive and helpless

observations of people stuck living on the sidelines” (23). Joe later echoes this when he sees the inevitable march of the forces of capital and opines that “there is nothing these people can do ... all of the marches in the world won’t change anything anymore” (220). The feelings of helplessness crosses borders as Mrs. Davis’ failure to mobilise any structurally disruptive racial protest runs alongside the tragic end of Sepha’s dalliance with protest back in Ethiopia. In this coalescing of global violence and dislocation, Sepha spends his walks mapping Ethiopia into Washington, D.C, forcing the reader to reckon with the subtexts of a past that is never far from the present. Ultimately, this mapping amplifies the structural/spatial violence that leads to the evictions in Logan Circle and the violence can be read alongside the Derg regime’s violence that led to Sepha’s and his uncle’s flight to America. This underscores what Cesare (2015) says about the instability of Washington:

The novel’s juxtaposition of scenes of Logan Circle in the midst of upheaval with Sepha’s memories of Addis in upheaval implies that, despite its ostensibly timeless monuments, Washington, DC is just as unstable as Sepha’s hometown. The two cities emerge entangled in Sepha’s consciousness, both equally subject to the pressures of dynamic cartography. (122)

Because the novel represents gentrification as cyclical, then the evictions of people, and the attendant violence, are presented as inevitable. However, Sepha’s overtly subversive acts that challenge neoliberal capitalism – discussed later – contradict his calculated isolation and seeming apathy from the anti-gentrification mobilisation and capitalistic forces. These actions seem to suggest alternative ways of engaging capitalistic forms of human organisation and the American commodity and accumulation culture. What is apparent is that Sepha appears to be disinclined to

mobilise under the rubrics of a monolithic racial identity and experience. This reading of Sepha's refusal to mobilise and his transgressive acts relates to Jeffrey Gonzalez's contention that *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* aims "at the personal," and that it depicts "individual struggles to locate dignity, recover autonomy, and live ethically," and that "in so doing ... find ways to imagine that individual striving for something better can point to ends worthy of collective struggle" (2011: xiii). His recognition of the inevitability of the gentrification of Logan Circle doesn't become an apolitical retreat into inaction; it is channelled into an articulation of discontent against neoliberal capitalism even though the circumstances seem to be "utterly overdetermined" (Gonzalez, 2011: 185).

Ultimately, Mengestu calls for a studied approach and response to what Chude-Sokei terms a "tense, silent, incomparable, and awkward" relationship between African immigrants and African Americans which he says is "more a question than a foregone conclusion" (2014: 68). He notes that "*intra-racial* difference is all the more complex due to the expectation of intimacy generated by race politics and the legacy of discourses and movements ranging from Ethiopianism, to Pan-Africanism, 'Black Power,' Afrocentrism, and, of course, 'Black Atlantic' thought" (2014: 68). The text therefore gestures that the expectation that the "black diaspora" should share and exhibit the same responses towards gentrification, and by extension white America, is a ghettoization of divergent experiences and people.

However, to fully understand these intra-racial, racial and immigrant relationships, it is important that we be attentive to the space they inhabit, and thus the space that produces and informs these relationships. The premise here is that as characters produce space, physical space also informs people's interactions and perceptions. Not only is the African American Logan

Circle community's interaction with the larger America and with new-comers framed within their experience and habitation of Logan Circle, Sepha's interaction with America is also framed within Logan Circle. When Sepha moved into Logan Circle, it was in a state of neglect and disrepair. However, when the novel opens the narrator's voice moves from a description of Logan Circle in both its state of decay and transformation as gentrification finds its way into the neighbourhood. When Sepha opened the store ten years ago, he says that:

Logan Circle was still predominantly poor, black, cheap, and sunk in a depression that had struck the city twenty years earlier and never left. Most of the streetlights that surrounded the circle were burned out, leaving the neighborhood perpetually pitched into a strange half-darkness more frightening than pure black. Before the newly formed General Logan Circle Statue Association restored the statute last month it was chipped, defaced, and smeared with human, dog, and bird shit. Drunk old men, their foreheads wrinkled, their pants barely buckled around their waists, rambled around the statue's benches in the afternoon and evening muttering to themselves and one another. The benches smelled of urine, and even the pigeons that strolled around the grass in search of throw-away chicken bones and bread had a sad, desolate look to them, as if they knew by instinct that this was where their breed belonged. (35-6)

In this state of disrepair and recent rehabilitation, Sepha also captures the demographic that inhabits this space in an overwhelmingly recurring description of black bodies involved in illegal commerce, prostitution, alcoholism, shoplifting, and as gentrification peaks, helplessness and anger, then resigned movement out of the neighbourhood (189). The constant hum of illicit trade – alternative means of making a living occasioned by exclusion from the mainstream socio-

economic sector – and the abject bodies that populate Logan Circle disrupts the larger myths of America by underscoring the slippages within its capital, Washington. Brown (2011) makes this point when she notes the discordant nature of America’s monuments as embodiments of national ideals and the reality of people’s lived experience. She writes that “the ideals of universal inclusion and prosperity are unobtainable myths for many” and that “the national monuments and federal institutions that signify this narrative are peculiar mirrors, that do not ‘so much reflect as they imagine, mythologize, distort... and (re)construct identity, history and citizenship by reinforcing the nation’s symbolic unity’” (9). Borrowing from Farrar (2008), Brown reiterates that what this imagining of the nation ultimately manages to do is to make “visible a ‘hegemonic landscape where the dominant culture is legitimated, transmitted and preserved’” (Brown, 2011: 8). Brown’s reading then makes apparent the relations of power that accrue between Logan Circle, its inhabitants and mainstream America – other spaces and institutions of power. In line with this, Sepha describes the neighbourhood as visible to decision makers and various regimes of legibility only through the lens of control and management. He says that the first time he saw Judith, he:

Assumed that she was an agent of some city bureaucracy, assigned to the neighbourhood to report on the condition of its aging buildings, to determine whether they were in need of repair or demolition. Before Judith, these were the only reasons white people had ever come into the neighbourhood: to deliver official notices, investigate crimes, and check up on the children of negligent parents. (17-18)

This conflation of “white people” with various regimes of power and control – and their absence and presence in the neighbourhood – gives insight into the racial and spatial divide, as

well as how “whiteness,” represented by city regulatory regimes, polices, manages and controls black inhabited spaces and bodies. Sepha’s observation that Logan circle interacts with institutions of power through the lens of regulation and surveillance is indicative of how policy and spatial practices participate in the production of space and subjectivities. This incident, coming early on in the novel, creates a “here” and “there” marked by differential relations of power. As such, the physical and human landscape of Logan Circle emerges as constructed through a complex process of regulation, racialisation and economic marginalisation. Further, Sepha also notes the consumption of Logan Circle by other neighbourhoods through the commodification and sexualisation of black female bodies. He describes how incursions into the neighbourhood are premised on the practice and performance of “consumption” of women. Fittingly, the women have names of commodities that can be consumed or aesthetically felt (38). Sepha observes:

Most women who worked on the circle also came to my store at one point or another. Those who came regularly flirted and shoplifted a bag of chips or a can of soda, knowing all along that I could see them but didn’t care. They had names like Chocolate and Velvet, always things that you could touch or taste because the imagination is nothing if not tactile. On summer nights, traffic backed up for blocks leading into and out of the circle as a uniquely democratic blend of cars – Mercedes, Volvos, rusted Plymouths, and boxcar Chevys – lined up to choose from the women who ringed the circle in their bright neon outfits like a cheap, tawdry crown. (38)

This relationship of surveillance, inequality, exclusion and consumption puts into perspective Logan Circle community’s hostility towards Judith and suspicion of strangers. In

addition, the experiential difference and Sepha's immigrant expectations explain the failure of Sepha's mobilisation into monolithic "black" solidarities and the gentrification protests.

If we read Logan Circle as a space constituted by histories of regulation and neglect, and populated by a disenfranchised demographic with fragmented solidarities, the failure and neglect of Sepha's store becomes understandable. In the store's state of neglect that escalates towards the end, we can also read Sepha's changing relationship to accumulation, commerce and, by and large, America's Credo. Logan Circle proves to be a site where the black male immigrant's dreams of upward mobility (and aligning itself along the dominant American masculinity) fail. It is also a space where Sepha's recalibrates his engagement with America and seeks alternative ways of habitation and use of the American space. His actions and attitude towards the store – opening late, closing himself inside the store so that he can socialise with Naomi and Judith, being inattentive to customers, allowing customers to take away goods without payment, using his money impulsively, and ultimately, leaving the store open and walking away – invert the philosophy of individual progressivism (socio-economic mobility) through hard work/striving that defines the American space and masculinities. Cognisant of this, Tim Foster (2012: 272) opines that Sepha "explicitly seeks to devalue both the power of capital and labour," while Olopade reads Sepha's actions as being transgressive of the logic of capitalistic accumulation and ownership – what she refers to Sepha's "urge to do violence to accumulative strategies" (2008: 148). Olopade further argues:

Sepha's urge to do violence to accumulative strategies accelerates throughout the novel; he purchases Christmas presents for his family and new friends, knowing their cost "meant skipping out on that month's gas and electric bills and crossing my fingers for a

steady flow of business through the rest of the winter.” His justification: “It was a beautiful book.” The offering, a volume of Emily Dickinson's poetry, rehabilitates the value of aesthetics in the marketplace; the expendability of his mother’s gift – surrendered to a prostitute, in one of the most heartbreaking scenes in the novel – suggests Sepha has jettisoned all other conceptions of value, use, or commodity in the effort to regain authority over his own fate. (Olopade, 2008: 148-9)

Indeed, Sepha’s actions seem to privilege a relational paradigm that in the face of it collapses the terms of capitalistic commercial engagements. At some point, he tells Naomi that it is not enough to hold on to the store if it doesn’t have value for one other person other than for himself (227). Sepha’s cultivation of neglect and non-acquisition is a calculated rejection of hegemonic forms of masculinity which are based on a class ascendancy, progressivist and goal-oriented ideology. He therefore emerges as a masculinity that rejects the currencies of power and affluence gained from capitalistic accumulation. While Sepha’s actions are indeed disruptive of certain notions of masculinity and capitalism, the aggressive flows of capital transforming Logan Circle exposes the vulnerability and tenuousness of this defiance. His actions gain political purchase however when we consider them as an attempt to chart a possible beginning for an alternative path beyond the remit of commercial capitalism. Therefore, the ultimate challenge Sepha’s approach achieves is in the gesture of dislodging the legitimacy of neoliberal capitalism as the only logical economic horizon for human organisation. In this regard, Mengestu seems to be prodding his readers to think about alternative horizons for human economic and social relations.

Although Mengestu attempts to fashion in Sepha a sensitive and progressive character, his sexual escapades with prostitutes/sex workers denote an involvement in the objectification, commodification and commercialisation of female bodies within capitalistic and patriarchal modes of exchange. There are several instances in the text that Mengestu projects Sepha as a masculinity that values emotional intimacy and eschews male bonding rituals that are predicated on the conquest of female bodies. For instance, when Sepha mentions Judith to Joe and Ken, he does so “infrequently, and with no passion than I discussed anything else that might have happened on that given day” (61). This is in contrast to Joe who tells Sepha that “it’s about time you dated a white woman” and Sepha replies that he “hadn’t thought of it that way” (61). Joe’s mentioning of Judith’s race is important because it indicates a possession of women’s body, in this case, a white woman as some sort of achievement. The sexual domination and conquering of a white woman is politicised. For a non-hegemonic masculinity (racialized, immigrant and lacking in social/economic capital), it is a means of exercising masculine control. It is thus instructive that Sepha appears to be inattentive to these homosocial moments that seek to loop him into a masculine and racial “conspiracy” against Judith.

However, the sexual transactions and liaisons that Sepha has with prostitutes around Logan Circle restrain us from reading him as a radically transgressive character who does violence to certain notions of manhood and economic organisation. While Mengestu is at pains to set Sepha’s sexual life apart from other characters in the text – especially Joe – there are cracks in this narrative. While we often encounter in Joe a masculine bravado that emanates from the sexual “conquering” and possession of women, Sepha’s experiences with the prostitutes around Logan Circle are narrated without any show of the desire to control, conquer or exercise

masculine power and aggressiveness over feminine bodies. Sepha's recounting of the one sexual encounter that features in the text seems innocuous enough. Indeed, we sense a certain tenderness and intimacy in the experience (163-4). Read keenly however, this encounter privileges Sepha's feelings and desires and denies the woman agency and thus betrays the power dynamics of the sexual exchange:

We lay down on the couch first, and then later the bed. I wanted to be more than just half-present, which is to say I wanted to see myself fully and honestly, naked and in my bed with a woman whose real name I would never know. I took pleasure in feeling another body under me and on top of me. I buried my head in her chest and treated her as if she was someone I loved. It was purely the context of the evening that mattered. It gave a certain weight and substance to what we were doing, so that when we were done and lying on my bed with the orange glow of the streetlamp as the only light in the room, neither one of us moved or rushed to get up. (163)

The many times the narrative narcissistically focalises on the "I" completely eliminates the woman as a sexual subject for it represents her as a passive and receptive object and medium for Sepha's sexual pleasures and fantasy. For him, she remains a woman whose real name he will never know (163). Mengestu's attempt to capture some intimacy and upstage masculinity's poetics of conquering of feminine bodies through sexual encounters is undercut by the reiteration of Sepha's feelings, pleasure and experience which loom large as the only ones that matter. Put differently, the emotional distance he tries to breach with the affected intimacy is undermined by the privileging of his desire and pleasure, and the objectification of the woman as a conduit for this affective resuscitation. The phrasing and tonality of the excerpt implies that her pleasure and

sexuality is subsumed under his. In effect, this encounter plays out a classic patriarchal tale where female pleasure is placed under the subjection of an aggressive macho masculinity (Ratele, 2008b). In the final analysis, Mengestu's portrayal of Sepha as exhibiting a different form of masculinity from Joe in his sexual encounters falls flat. This is because ultimately, their sexual experiences and encounters with women result in the use of feminine bodies and sexualities to recuperate Joe's masculinity (for to him conquest of feminine bodies and his assumed adeptness at the wooing/mating dance is writ large) and for Sepha to recuperate his feelings and to fill an emotional void. It is instructive that he says "it was purely the context of the evening that mattered" (163). This context was an evening he had hoped to spend with Judith and Naomi but he couldn't for they had left to visit relatives in Connecticut. In addition, the nature of the sexual encounter and transaction is not lost on the reader. The reader is aware of the racial, social and economic vulnerability enforced on the women at Logan Circle that drives them to prostitution. Logan Circle thus forces us to be attentive to the intersectionalities of race, gender and class that come into play as far as prostitution is concerned. Evidently therefore, the issue of economic coercion cannot be wished away. This then complicates Mengestu's character who, although he appears to challenge commercial capitalism, he participates in the transactional exchange of female bodies. Indeed, his shop is partly dependent on the sex trade that thrives in Logan Circle. And when the sex workers around Logan Circle come to the store and shop lift, he allows them to and he would at times ask one to come back to provide him with sexual services:

I had never cared too much which of the women on the circle I went home with. I don't know how many women there had been over the years. I imagine it was somewhere between six or seven a year ... I had slept with almost every prostitute who had come

into my store. I did so by refusing to take their money when they came to the register to pay for their candy bar or can of soda. I would tell them that if they were free, they should come back alone just before I closed. When they did, I turned off all the lights, locked the door, and for a half an hour tried to forget everything about myself. It was easy enough (137-8)

The novel is unerringly silent about whether the shoplifted goods were the payment, or the questions of choice and safety undergirding this bartering. This ambiguity therefore leaves room for us to interpret his sexual encounters as exploitative. The black female bodies in *Logan Circle* are, as Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz argues elsewhere, a “locus of commodification and fetishisation” and this is connected to their “sexuality and their role in the marketplace as objects and agents of desire” (2012: 5). While Ruiz recognises that prostitutes “can be seen both as sexual victims and sexual agents,” the subjection of the women in *Logan Circle* to patriarchal and capitalistic objectification, commodification and consumption is undeniable (8). Ninotchka Rosca (2014) draws a link between “sex work” and capitalism. She argues that “those with power, those with a larger share of the surplus, those with greater strength or with whatever little bit of social exceptionalism – these have the tacit right to access sexually those who do not.” To Rosca, the notion of choice and willingness, that the “accessed agree to being accessed” is an “enduring deception ... a myth which capital now uses in its incursion into the few non-capitalist spaces extant in a globalised economy.” She further argues:

The nature of the business turns the human body into both an instrument of production and commodity for the generation of profits, trapped as a person is in the cash nexus and subject to assault by Capital. It is this “striking asymmetry of power” that renders

the question of agency moot and pointless, empowerment but an illusion for the most powerless gear in the profit-generating machine ... Furthermore, agency ignores the subtle difference between decision and choice – the decision to enter prostitution may not be, is more than likely not, a choice.

Rosca's sentiments are also reiterated by Nancy Holmstrom (2014) who does a pertinent reading of the sale of sexual services as a transactional moment that involves domination and coercion:

What is the prostitute selling? Certain sexual services. But just as rape is not primarily about sex, prostitution is about more than that ... sexual services cannot be separated from the sale (or rent) of the body that supplies those services. The client is buying the right to use a woman's body as he wishes, without any desire on her part. Once she has contracted to provide a particular service – assuming she has this power to set limits – she has to allow him to *enter into* her body ... she must do whatever she has contracted to do to his body with her hands and mouth. This is domination at a most intimate level, whether or not he plays the dominating role in the interaction.

From the foregoing therefore, Sepha's exit from capitalistic commerce that is enunciated by his relationship to his store is undercut by his involvement and perpetuation of the trade in female bodies in ways that entrench capitalism and patriarchy. His paradoxical action that at once challenge capitalism and patriarchy/sexism while still reinforcing them point toward an irresolvable ambivalence that is inherent in Sepha. Regardless, Sepha's character significantly

creates possibilities of imagining the occupation of the American space differently through his disturbance of the order and neatness of patriarchal and neoliberal capitalism.

In this regard, Kenneth acts as an instructional counterpoint to Sepha's character. For instance, Kenneth appears to have been sold into the American spatial myths and masculine credo of progressivism on the basis of capitalistic accumulation. Like Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, Kenneth's masculine identity, aspirations and desires are consciously structured in opposition to his father who, together with Africa, he describes as "nothing." In a moment of anger, he tells Joseph and Sepha that his father was "a poor illiterate man who lived in a slum. And you know what that makes him in Africa? Nothing. That's what Africa is right now" (185). Kenneth's attempts to gain currency within a capitalist and consumerist setting is therefore an attempt to transcend this "nothingness." His father, denuded from the masculine markers of social mobility, disappears into insignificance when placed alongside American masculinities, and his location in Kibera (a Nairobi slum) is indicative of his "nothingness" (185-6). As mentioned earlier, this "nothingness" finds echoes in Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*. Kenneth's statement, as does Salim's, expresses contempt and disdain for the masculinity his father represents – a masculinity with no material possessions and existing in a space that is shorn of any power and affluence. Selwyn Reginald Cudjoe (1988) notes the way Naipaul's works often frame Western metropolises – specifically London – as spaces in which one's masculinity/manhood can be realised: "Naipaul considers London the 'real world,' that is, 'the bigger, harder world'" and that for Salim and his friend Indar in *A Bend in the River*, "a sense of identity – that is, one's manhood – can be achieved only in London or a similar city" (187). Kenneth's father, located as he is in the margins of global power and capital, conjures up the

images of lack, weakness and inadequacy in the syntax and grammar of global masculine power. It is therefore fitting that he is disembodied and absent from the text for “nothingness” must be locked out of the cartography of “thingliness.” The number of times “nothing” comes up in the text is not coincidental. It is indicative of the annihilative figuration of the poor black masculinity within the American space: it speaks to black masculinity as being unmappable within the nexus of class, capital and whiteness. Because of this, his masculinity is a negation of an assumed standard.

It is because of his anxious relationship with his father that Kenneth fashions himself after a masculinity whose performance of its power and affluence he misidentifies as revolving around a repetitious spectacle of importance and affluence backed up by rituals of consumption. Kenneth seems to believe that powerful masculinities become “successful” because of the way they occupy and present their bodies in the American public domain – through exaggerations and the performance of the prosaic and assertiveness that borders on aggression. He cites his boss who always says the same thing to him over and over again (2). Accordingly, he tries to mimic this in his interactions with Sepha and Joe. These performances are reinforced by sartorial choices that seek to involve him in particular flows of capital and script his body into spaces of visibility. Sepha observes that Kenneth “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). Kenneth’s engineering degree is also part of the social capital that he has accumulated and deploys in order to gain currency within the American space. However, Kenneth’s misidentification of American masculine power and affluence as a combination of a visual and performative grammar – divorced from the dynamics of race and class – leads to a lack of

legibility within the American space. This invisibility is aptly captured when Kenneth and Sepha perform a “consumerist spectacle at a car dealership” (Olopade, 2008: 146). The day of buying the car, Kenneth picks Sepha up, dressed in a suit, with a rented sedan complete with “an unadorned confidence” for the day (10-11). For Kenneth, this day marked his “entry into a long-awaited form of American commerce” that “he imagined would lift him above the fray” (Ibid.). This kind of consumerism exhibits a masculinity produced within neoliberal capitalism “that emphasise[s] consumption and gratification as their own rewards” (Watson, 2011: 9). Sepha describes the moment thus:

We pulled into the dealership cautiously, as if every minor gesture of ours was being judged. We got out of the car, and rather than walk around the lot or enter the main office, Kenneth grabbed me by the wrist and said, “Wait, Stephanos. Let them come to us” ... as we stood outside and waited against the hood of the car, middle-aged American men ... walked leisurely through the aisles of cars ... and never once passed anything more than a brief, one-eyed glance in our direction. We waited ten and then twenty minutes before we finally realised that no one was coming to us, regardless of what we wore or how long we stood there. (11-12)

This incident records a homosocial acting out of a successful masculinity (within capitalistic and consumerist domains) by Kenneth. Although Sepha gives him the approval he needs, the dealership employees, the main focus of his performance, punitively shun and withhold the validation and approval that he seeks. His performance of hyper-masculine confidence, suavity and sophistication, and assumption of consumer/purchasing power is after all a facade that cannot give him adequate currency within white, neoliberal capitalist formations. If

anything, the novel represents these as necessary fetters that sustain and perpetuate exploitation and facilitate his being caged into rituals of consumption. While Kenneth seems to understand masculinities as defined by certain “strategic accomplishments” and as “performances which are undertaken in particular contexts, drawing on particular resources and capacities,” he lacks the right ensemble of hegemonic “resources and capacities” that will render him legible within raced consumerist cultures of the U.S (Gorman-Murray & Hopkins, 2014: 8-9). Gorman-Murray and Hopkins emphasise this when they point out that the “ideals of race, class, sexuality, age and bodily ability, inter alia” are basic for the performance of hegemonic masculinity (Ibid.: 7). These regimes of (in)visibility active within the U.S demonstrate how space, race, class gender and the “choreographies of the everyday” function to confer legibility and illegibility within its visual economies – and by extension, fulfil the need for validation on the one hand, and surveillance and control on the other.

In addition, Mengestu’s novel allows us insight into the place of migrant masculinities within Washington’s political economy. Through the character of Kenneth, the novel enables us to contemplate the centrality of a non-hegemonic migrant masculinity in global capitalist formations. Kenneth provides a perfect example of how the racialized migrant body is intimately involved in the performance and production of power and material inequalities that capitalism brings into being. Through Kenneth, we read a process, coerced even, “of managing people’s potentialities in order to maximise the value to be extracted from them” (Vermeulen, 2015: 282). His engineering degree, coupled with his accumulation of other American performative and social capital, becomes the channel through which his body becomes marked for capitalist production, maximization and consumption. The masculine tenacity coupled with a rigorous

work ethic that Kenneth exhibits serve to absorb his “labour power more fully” (Vermeulen, 2015: 282). Indeed, Ledent recognises Kenneth and Joe’s “quasi servile conditions” in capitalist modernity (2015: 11-2). This portrayal of Kenneth and Joe (black immigrants) as slavish in the service of capital, signal the transmutations and continuation of black bodies’ relationship to capital/capitalism. Frank B. Wilderson (2003) makes a compelling case of how “capital was kick-started by the rape of the African continent” through slavery and by “approaching a particular body (a black body) with direct relations of force” (22). While Wilderson examines America’s late capitalism’s desire to reinstitute slavery through “the reconfiguration of the prison-industrial complex,” Mengestu considers the exploitation and “violence” meted out to black immigrant labourers in capitalist and neoliberal formations (22).

Through this representation of capitalism’s reliance on migrant bodies, Kenneth’s masculinity significantly debunks the masculine and spatial myths of America: the myth of the self-made American masculinity and America as a space that allows personal growth. He shows how his boss benefits from the labour of his employees even when it is Kenneth who has “to take one for the team” and work during Christmas holidays (2:180). Kenneth’s frustration and stasis within the capitalist/materialist and accumulative hierarchies also undercuts the progressivist myth of the American space. The performances that Kenneth puts forward and Mengestu lampoons – his boss’s stylised employer/employee rituals; his assumption of the currency of a consumer masculinity – demonstrates the constituted fictionality of racial/masculinist hierarchies within capitalist formations. Most importantly, it unmaskes the myth of the American self-made man which is premised on a go-getter and striving individualism and implies that the rewards of the American dream are accessible to all irrespective of race, nationality, gender, religion or

sexuality (Kimmel, 1995). It shows this masculinity as reliant on others for its success and only cognisant of others as long as they mirror back to itself what it wants to see.

4.3 Subversive Marginality in the Neoliberal Academia

Among the three male migrant characters, Joseph Kahangi represents himself as the intellectual in the group. His attempts to pass as an academic and his perpetual play at being a student at Georgetown University is not only a way of imagining oneself on the verge of entering into a career in the academia it is also, the novel suggests, a desire to be a producer and disseminator of knowledge (99). However, his lack of the finances to continue paying for his studies ensures that he is kept out of the space of the university, and by extension, he cannot participate in the discursive practices of Western neoliberal institutions. Through Joseph's experiences with the university, Mengestu affords us a glimpse of how neoliberal capitalism has come to shape and define the academia. Craig Groat (2015) makes a useful observation about the academy:

Today it exists just as much as a neoliberal endeavour as modern business enterprises. Because of a shifting economy that increasingly privileges wealth in fields of technocratic expertise and by valuing the neoliberal ideology of individualism, especially within economies of capitalism, more people are now involved in higher education and degrees are now more expensive than ever before.

Seen through this lens, going through the academia becomes a process of acquiring skills that make the individual economically valuable in the job market. However, unlike Kenneth who has a degree in engineering, the courses that Joseph takes – American Religious Pluralism, Symbolism in Dante’s *Commedia*, and Gender Relations in Twentieth-Century Post-Colonial Africa – are unmappable within the utility and value system of the ideologies and practice of neoliberal capitalism (99). This valuation of academic disciplines also finds expression in Fiston Mwanza Mujila’s debut *Tram 83* (2015) in the character of Lucien, an historian, writer and budding intellectual. When Lucien informs Ferdinand Malingeau, the Swiss tourist/publisher, he meets in Tram 83, bar cum restaurant, that he has a bachelor’s degree in history, the man points him out to other revellers as a source of amusement and disdain (44). He admonishes Lucien thus: “This country’s been knocked flat, it’s all got to be rebuilt: roads, schools, hospitals, the station, even men. We need doctors, mechanics, carpenters, and garbage collectors, but certainly not dreamers!” (45). Malingeau’s statement betrays a bias for fields of expertise which are meant to have some economic practicality and value rather than disciplines for “dreamers.” In Bronwyn Davies and Peter Bansel’s (2007) apt interjection, Malingeau visualises that the rebuilding of City-State, the setting of Mujila’s novel, requires the installation of “apparatuses and knowledges through which people are reconfigured as productive economic entrepreneurs of their own lives” (248). While asserting that “the context of education is ... a highly relevant site for such structuring to take place,” Davies and Bansel point out that “schools and universities have arguably been reconfigured to produce the highly individualized, responsabilised subjects who have become ‘entrepreneurial actors across all dimensions of their lives’” (Ibid.). Mujila’s novel intimates that in an environment of obscene/vulgar resource extraction and consumption where everything is literally turned into a commodity of exchange,

individuals with the skills and training to prop up the system are essential and indispensable. In this economic environment, Mujila's novel depicts the "responsibilised entrepreneurial actor" as possessing a highly compromised degree of agency operating as he is in a pernicious system whose sole focus is the exploitation of human and environmental resources for profit.

In Joseph's case, someone who seems to be partly invested in the spatial narrative of American class ascendancy, his exhausting of his savings to pursue non-technocratic and non-innovative courses that wouldn't facilitate his absorption in the job market seems borderline suicidal. Significantly, this hints at his possession of a variant measurement of academic value that is not accommodated within neoliberal capitalist formations (99). Ultimately, his inability to continue schooling because of financial constraints represents Joseph as a victim of the "corporatisation ... of the university" which is "manifested in structural transformations of higher education, including the instrumentalisation, commodification and marketization of education" (Berg, L. D. et al, 2014: 63-4). These neoliberal practices in academic institutions cannot be divorced from the normalisation of hegemonic masculinity's traditions of knowledge production (Ibid.: 63). Joseph's exclusion troubles the marketing iconography of the neo-liberal academy that presents it as multicultural and therefore inclusive (97-8). Indeed, this illusion of the inclusion of minorities that Sepha notes about American universities and colleges is a façade that is meant to aid the university in the competitiveness and jostling that defines capitalistic forms (Groat, 2005).

In addition, Richard G. Jones Jr. and Bernadette Marie Calafell (2012) argue that although universities "desire other bodies," they "do little to change the academic cultures, as others are instead expected to assimilate" (969). The scholars posit that these Others are only

included and tolerated on the precondition that “they remain docile, unthreatening, and invested in self-commodification,” and that “those who defy expectations of middle-class Whiteness civility and heteronormativity are often disciplined for their failure or desire to perform within the hegemonic order” (2012: 969). Groat, Jones and Calafell’s studies are germane in the way they unsettle the self-serving optics of diversity and multicultural policies in neoliberal academic institutions. Sepha’s statement that “after sixteen years here, I am certain of at least one thing: the *liberal idea of America* is at its best in advertising” (after seeing an ad for the Virginia community college) becomes eloquent in this regard (97-8).

Mengestu’s text represents Joseph’s exclusion from neoliberal academic institutions as significant in the face of the pervasive and ahistorical discursive constructions of Congo within Western and Asian publics. This relates to Kevin C. Dunn’s (2003) assertion that the Congo is “overly textualised; it has been a discursive space onto which numerous actors ... have projected characteristics, images, and meanings in their attempt to define and delineate the identity of the Congo” (8). Dunn draws attention to the “established trope of the ‘Heart of Darkness’” which configures the Congo through the lens of the “inherently chaotic and anarchic,” representations which, as he shows, are West-centric and perform the political work of validating the exploitative North/South relations (Ibid.: 4). Jones and Calafell reiterate this when they point out that in “neoliberal discourses, certain bodies become privileged while others become pathologized, and the hierarchy of identities that is created is validated, as neoliberalism facilitates some people’s movement through spaces and hinders those who are marked as Other” (2012: 969). In this regard, it is eloquent that Joseph gives Sepha *A Bend in the River*, a book which is replete with these pathologising constructions. Joseph appears to be aware and wary of

these discursive constructions and he attempts to craft a counter-discourse. Sepha informs the reader that Joseph is working on a “cycle of poems, ones that would trace the history of the Congo from King Leopold to the death of Patrice Lumumba and the rise of Mobutu SeseSeko” (169). However, the narrative discloses Joseph’s frustration and struggle to find the correct words, syntax and tone that would adequately represent the history of the Congo in all its complexity. He tells Sepha that “the problem” was that “he wanted to tell the entire history of the Congo, from the rubber plantations to the first coup. ‘Nothing can be left out ... the poem must be able to contain it all. Anything short of that is a failure” (170-1).

Joseph’s lack of a language to capture the complex nature of this history stands in contrast to the reductive textualisation of the Congo that Dunn draws our attention to. Significantly, this unsuccessful attempt to ultimately write/complete the poem, read alongside his truncated access of Georgetown University highlights his failure to enter legitimated neoliberal domains of knowledge production and circulation as a voice that interrupts and defines how the Congo is understood. Joseph’s exclusion is particularly eloquent given Naipaul’s narrativisation of the Congo in *A Bend in the River* (his gift to Sepha) which invites a further comparison to Joseph Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness*. While Conrad’s text is set in colonial Belgian Congo, Naipaul’s novel is set in an unnamed post-independent African state which resembles the Congo. The colonial and post-colonial representations of domination, exploitation and postcolonial crisis that these texts portray are what Joe seems to be interested in. Like the colonial District Commissioner in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* – who finds no complexity in the character of Okonkwo and therefore decides he is going to write about him in “a whole chapter ... perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate” (1959: 68) – both Salim and Marlow

represent Congo as chaotic, mysterious and ruinous to the non-African, and the Africans as rudimentary and primitive (Achebe, 1977; Dunn, 2003; Walunywa, 2009). Just as Achebe is at pains to capture the complex locus of African masculinities in the colonial world, the reader also gets the feeling that Joseph's incapacity to complete his poem is because he is struggling with complexity that would go into the portrayal of the Congo nation.

There is a lot going on here. The intertextualities gestured by these texts indicate the skewed nature of knowledge production which, by way of Foucault (1972), translates to extant power differentials. In Mengestu's novel, academia as well as epistemic production is gendered, racialised and politicised. Salim and Marlow, the male narrators of *A Bend in the River* and *Heart of Darkness* respectively, are engaged in representations that have political and racial ramifications. The production of the Congo in these texts is as a result of a European-Asian co-authorship. Joseph's dilemma hinges on finding a language to articulate colonial and post-independence experiences of his country alongside a reductive and racist archive represented by both Naipaul and Conrad. The fact that financial constraints ensure his exclusion from university, the space that gives authority, validity and legitimacy to the processes of knowledge production, seems to indicate that the imbalances might continue. Joe's relationship to this archive and liberal academic institutions illustrates the silencing (but not absence) and marginalisation of counter-narratives and histories within academia. His anxieties are best articulated by bell hooks who, while writing about the margin as a space of radical openness avers: "Silenced. We fear those who speak about us who do not speak to us and with us. We know what it is like to be silenced." (1989: 23). Indeed, the "over-textualisation" of the Congo by external actors not only reinforces a certain way of "knowing" the Congo, it also marginalises

alternative narratives and discourses. It is because of these discourses that Berg et al (2014) describe “the neoliberal academy as a space characterised by ‘slow violence,’ a form of violence that is neither ‘spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive’” (68). This is because discourses have political and material implications for “it is through discursive narratives that we make sense of the world around us and our place(s) within it” (Dunn, 2003: 10).

Nevertheless, the fact that Joseph is still in the process of writing a poem that captures the complexities of Congolese history suggests that the epistemological certitudes of *A Bend in the River* and *Heart of Darkness* will not forever hold. If we think of the university space as representing a discursive landscape whose constitution does not envision Joseph’s presence, and imagines him as a subject who is articulated but never articulate, then his poem represents a disarticulation of the logic of hegemonic epistemes. His tortured poem represents that voice that occupies and uses the margins of the academia, not just as a site of “pain and deprivation,” but also as a position and space of resistance, a la hooks (1989: 21). The presence of this poem – outside the hegemonic articulations of the Congo – enunciates a crisis of incoherence in the vocabulary of West-centric narratives of Congo. Ultimately, the reader envisions the possibility of the creation and existence of alternative narratives and archives, though unsanctioned by domains of knowledge production and circulation, which counters its certainties.

Instructively therefore, we can read Joseph’s desire to enter the university not as a desire for assimilation and uneasy cooptation, but as an attempt to enter and disrupt the academic “centre.” This is important because *Tram 83* encourages the reader to be suspicious of acceptance and inclusion in the knowledge production, publishing and reception cultures of the

West. When Lucien informs Malingeau that he is writing a “stage-tale that considers this country from a historical perspective” titled *The Africa of Possibility: Lumumba, the Fall of an Angel, or the Pestle-Mortar Years*, the latter retorts that he won’t buy it, and that “instead of Lumumba its best to depict our own heroes ... instead of getting bogged down in the history of Congo-Zaire” (47). He goes on to advise Lucien to “leave these great men to their dignified repose” and to turn his “mind to texts that talk of railroads, mines, or I don’t know what” (47). When Lucien gives him another text to be considered for publication, Malingeau is impressed but he insists that Lucien reduces the characters otherwise he would not publish it (101-2). Malingeau’s approach to Lucien’s work is not only reductive but it is also reflective of the ways in which recognition (read publication) is implicated in the politics of valuation, legitimacy and hierarchization (Bourdieu, 2007). Put differently, Lucien’s recognition through publication is predicated on truncations and ahistorizations which serve publication economies and their attendant ideologies. We thus envision Joseph’s autonomy and lack of recognition as uninhibitive and productive unlike Lucien whose economic desperations lead him to capitulate to Malingeau’s demands.

Mengestu’s novel shows that playing the “role of an aspiring academic” is a useful strategy for a marginal masculinity haunted by varied feelings of lack of control. Admittedly, this sense of lack of control begins in Mobutu’s Congo where the regime leads Joseph and his fellow young men to turn to chess as a form of homosocial bonding and re-asserting control and choice. The narrator says that they had developed “a religious devotion to the game, a respect for its handful of rules and almost infinite variations born, as Joseph said, out of a shared sense of gratitude for having at least one space where their decisions mattered” (63). In America, these feelings are exacerbated by the jobs that he does – from a teacher in the Congo to a busboy, then

a bellhop and later a waiter (169). This transition is significant and is reflected in his amplification of his relationship with a white woman (a social worker) who he had dated for two years in Congo, and who, when he comes to America and begins working as a waiter in the Colonial Grill, doesn't recognise him (63-4). The implications are telling for a character who revels in performances of a hypersexualised masculine bravado. While in Congo he was "visible and dateable" to a white woman, he becomes "invisible" to her in the Colonial Grill she frequents. Put differently, Joseph's home country appears to afford him paradoxical forms of visibility and invisibility, while in Washington he works in the service industry (a domain largely considered feminine) which denudes and "emasculates" him.

The moment of recognition between Sepha and Joe becomes very poignant. When Sepha sees Joseph "fully dressed for work" as he is rushing "back to the kitchen with another order waiting on his lips," he cannot "make sense of the image staring back ... Joseph barely looks anything like the man I know. It's not just the tuxedo that changes him, it is the context and the expression on his face" (172). The apparel and Joe's expression connote an embodied performance of docility, deference, camaraderie required in the service industry where he is under constant surveillance and supervision. This image runs counter to the irreverent and in control masculinity that Joseph embodies when they go clubbing or when he is playing chess. Joseph's maintenance of hypermasculinity is a "buffer against challenges that other men (and women) pose against" his identity as a "real man" (Bishop et. Al, 2009: 8). He thus distances himself from the work he considers feminine and demeaning and at the same time "reconstructs a new type of masculinity" of the academic and a masculinity which excels in wooing and revels in sexual conquests (Ibid.). Accordingly, he is always ready to advise Sepha on his relationship

with Judith and at one point, he refers to Kenneth as “the perfect house nigger” while inside the Colonial Grill he performs and embodies the same role (182). Tellingly, through the similarity of Joe and Ken’s jobs that demand their subservience and deference, the novel enacts the vulnerability of migrant gendered (masculine) identities and the fungibility of black bodies within the American public space despite the difference in the socio-cultural capital they have acquired.

4.4 Mis-Fathering Sons?: Fictions of Migration, Masculinity and Nation in *How to Read the Air*

Mengestu’s narrativisation of masculinely gendered America as a space that safeguards and secures certain type(s) of identities in *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* is continued in *How to Read the Air*. Jonas Woldemariam is the 33 years old narrator of the novel. He is born of Ethiopian immigrant parents, Yosef Woldemariam and Mariam in Peoria, Illinois. His father, Yosef, had migrated to America via Sudan and Europe immediately after his marriage to Mariam Woldemariam. This was to run away from the 1970s Red Terror revolution that he was mixed up in: he had even served a brief stint in prison for this involvement. Mariam joins him three years later and the narrative reveals that this period of separation had “made them strangers” (1). Their separation and reunification reveals deep flaws and vulnerabilities in their relationship which are exacerbated by their immigrant status and unmet expectations. Their relationship becomes hostile, emotionally and physically abusive and this environment creates and bequeaths various complexes and traumas to Jonas who says that as a child he “learned quickly that a fight was

never far off or long in the making,” and that he “imagined it sometimes as a real physical presence lurking in the shadows of whatever space my parents happened to occupy” (9).

Grace Musila (2015) contends that Mengestu’s *How to Read the Air* and Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go* exhibit a continuation of thematic concerns enunciated by Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. She posits that Achebe’s two novels are “interested in the question of human failure,” a concern that also “recurs in much contemporary writing by first generation African diaspora writers including Taiye Selasi and Dinaw Mengestu” (92). While reading Okonkwo, Yosef Woldemariam and Kweku Sai, Musila advances that:

These are men who find themselves at the cross-roads of major generational, historical and familial changes that are framed by racist, capitalist scripts and intertwined with prescripts of hegemonic masculinity, which exact a high price on the souls of men ill-equipped to negotiate them. Both Dinaw Menegestu’s *How to Read the Air* and Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go* have, at their centre, first-generation African immigrants who are confronted with the pressures of life in America and the pressures of family expectations, both those back in Ethiopia and Ghana, respectively, and their own families in the US (93)

Musila’s reading goes on to posit that Yosef and Mariam’s family disintegrates as a result of corrosion “by the pressure of capitalist America and its racism” (94). She contends that “Yosef’s attempts to navigate the transition into being a success story in America, and assimilating successfully is undermined by the false promise of the globality of the American experience, which in reality, remains burdened by the baggage of economic migrancy” (99). I

quote Musila at length because she makes a useful point of departure which I am going to use to discuss Mengestu's portrayal of migrant masculinities in families, their relationship with their sons, and national histories/mythologies.

Musila's depiction of Kweku Sai and Yosef Woldemariam as Unoka's, Okonkwo's and Ezeulu's grandsons articulates a concern with masculine genealogies and families. I extend this argument to posit that *How to Read the Air* is concerned with the father son dyad as a lens through which we can explore the textures of migrant masculinities experiences as it is with national mythopoeics. I will therefore read Yosef's relationship with his son within the intimate space of the family, and how the "failed" masculinities that they conjure relate to the American national space. In line with the framing argument I used to read *The Beautiful Things*, I advance that *How to Read the Air* frames both the family and the nation as patriarchal spaces of orientation and socialization. In this regard, my analysis follows several scholars who have noted the utility of reading the family alongside the nation (Andrade, 2011; Musila, 2013; McClintock, 1993) as well as the masculinised nature of the nation (Enloe, 2014; Boehmer, 2015). Consequently, what we encounter in the novel as a result of the "failure" of the father and the nation to seduce and solicit enough loyalties for both institutions (the family and the state) from the characters is a mis-fathering of sons and a questioning of American national mythos in ways that challenge phallogentrism in domestic and public spaces.

Mariam's expectation that her husband "deliver[s]' the American dream," a la Musila, follows a familiar socio-cultural script of the man as the provider which in turn legitimises men's de jure occupation and supposed control and monopoly of the public space. His failure to do so is partly the cause of the marital tension narrativised by their son. In fact, Musila opines that "the

pressures of migrancy in the US, Yosef's failure to deliver the American dream, and America's inability to be a homely space for the young couple, converts the few embers of love that survive their three years apart into toxic mutual resentment" (97). The intersection of what Musila calls "racist, capitalist scripts ... intertwined with prescripts of hegemonic masculinity" make it impossible for Yosef to fulfil the familial expectations (93). Yosef's lack of productivity and seeming impotence within a capitalist orientation of producing masculinities connote an emasculation which throws into crisis constructed notions of manhood/fatherhood. The sense of failure takes a toll on him and the narrator reports that "he was always crouching, curling, trying to reduce himself into a package smaller than the one he was made of" (43). While this diminishing of himself is partly because of his traumatic stowaway migratory journey, the narrative hints that it noticeably increases over the years as his engagement with America continues. Yosef's behaviour is markedly different from any other white masculinity in public spaces we encounter in Mengestu's texts, and notably so when placed alongside Kenneth's employer's occupation of public space. Kenneth's boss exhibits a hypermasculine confidence that announces and shouts its presence in public spaces. This is also evident in Curt, Ifemelu's white successful corporate masculinity in *Americanah*. Curt's ease in pulling strings for Ifemelu to get a job and his nonchalance in flying her to Paris for dinner is felt by Ifemelu to be reflective of his class, race and gender privilege. Yosef, the slumped patriarch who seeks to diminish himself, decouples the conventional associations of the figurations of the male body from notions of power and authority. The defeated and disillusioned figure he cuts is thus instructively delinked from "key attributes associated with masculinism" such as "control, competition ... physical strength" etc. (Day, K. et al., 2003: 313). Yosef's body, coming unstuck from these attributes exposes the vulnerability of immigrant masculinities within capitalist and hegemonic

masculinity domains – domains that require assertiveness and aggression and competitiveness as a precondition for inclusion.

This figure of a “failed” masculinity affects domestic relations between himself, Mariam and the son. Yosef becomes violent and emotionally distant. His violent behaviour towards his wife and son is a familiar male script of reasserting control and power within the familial space. This violent behaviour and emotional unavailability alienates him from his wife and enforces timidity and emotional withdrawal from his son. Evidently therefore, Yosef fails both as a father and a husband not just as a “provider,” and the narrative suggests that this failure is caused by false promises of migrancy and an adherence to a limited and inflexible masculine script. If we understand the family as a space for nurturing and gender socialisation, then Yosef’s “failure” enunciates a crisis in fatherhood and manhood for both himself and his son. Like a family heirloom, the conflicts that characterise the parents’ relationship are inherited by Jonas and Angela – albeit at varying degrees and intensities – and the narrative intimates that it is because of the toxic home environment he grows up in. He comes out of childhood emotionally crippled, disinvested and inhibited and he is therefore unable to forge productive bonds of trust and intimacy with Angela, his wife. The emotionally and materially impoverished home therefore instils a distrust of emotional intimacy in Jonas. As his father before him, Jonas reacts to hostile domestic and public spaces by learning to fade away, be silent and not to be noticed. Accordingly, he says that “I had always suspected that at some point in my life, while still living with my parents and their daily battles, I had gone numb as a tactical strategy, perhaps at exactly that moment when we’re supposed to be waking up to the world and stepping into our own” (62). This act of fading oneself in a space where the dominant strain of masculinity demands

insistence, aggression and competitiveness “unmans” and “cripples” both the father and the son. Similar to his father, Jonas becomes unmappable in a space defined by “racist, capitalist scripts ... intertwined with prescripts of hegemonic masculinity” (Musila, 2015: 93).

When Jonas marries Angela, the latter is aware of their stasis within the hierarchies of class ascendancy. She is worried that they “had yet to form a life as commonly prescribed by others. In life, one made steady but consistent progress. Capital was raised, furnishings and homes were purchased and then later resold for a double-digit profit” (106). She therefore resents Jonas for delaying to commence his Ph.D. for “it was part of her faith that this was one of the only ways we could secure a bright and happy future” (106). Seeing that Jonas does not share the same urgency of getting out of their stasis and seeking inscription into an accumulative, progressivist and supposedly meritocratic culture, she accuses him of having no identity: “You don’t have any idea who you are, do you, Jonas?” (107). It appears that Angela’s frustration lies in the fact that Jonas does not exhibit competitiveness and aggression that are not only considered to be masculine attributes but are also necessary in the making of the capitalist self-made man (Malhotra, 2014; Kimmel, 1997; Mutua, 2006; Wilson & Daly, 1985). Granted, we can interpret Angela’s accusation as referring to two things. On the one hand, it could be directed to the fact that Jonas lacks familial and national histories and memories which would situate and anchor him as a migrant. On the other hand, the narrative also strongly hints that his not knowing who he is, and therefore defining himself accordingly is as a result of a disorientation caused by the lack of the socio-cultural capital of being a man in the American space and the violence of both the family patriarch and of the capitalist masculinely gendered American space. Jonas’s rumination in lieu of a response to Angela’s accusation is telling:

I may not have had a solid definition of who I was, but that was only because for so long I had concentrated my efforts on trying to appear to be almost nothing at all – neither nameless nor invisible, just obscure enough to blend into the background and be quickly forgotten. It had begun with my father, who I had always hoped would never notice me. It was in his company that I first learned how to occupy a room without disturbing it. Whenever my father came home from work, I'd sit in different parts of the living room – in the centre of the couch, on the floor, or next to the coffee table in order to see how he acknowledged me. On several occasions I came too close and was told to get out of his way, on others I was either grunted at or quizzed about my progress in school that day. Eventually one evening he came home from work and didn't notice me at all. I was sitting near the end of the couch, with my knees lifted to my chest and the lamp next to me deliberately turned off, and I realized that all I had to do to avoid him was blend into the background. That knowledge followed me from there so that eventually I thought of my obscurity as being essential to my survival. Whoever can't see you can't hurt you. That was the reigning philosophy of my days (107-8)

This rumination to Angela's accusation is important in two ways. Firstly, it notes how his occupation and use of space is diametrically opposed to hegemonic masculinity's use and occupation of the same: like his father before him, he seeks "to blend into the background and to be quickly forgotten." As noted earlier, excesses of self-display, Kenneth in *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* hints, is a preserve of white, heterosexual, wealthy and successful masculinities. In addition, Jonas does not embody the socially constructed in control, insistent, aggressively competitive and strong-willed masculinity of the self-made man who is crucial in

American cultural/national mythologies (Kimmel, 1997). On the contrary, the narrative presents Jonas as a procrastinator who, though he knows his marriage is on the rocks, does nothing about it even when he knows Angela is cheating on him, and although he keeps on saying he will go back to college, he never does. Even when he loses his job at the law firm, it is Angela who finds him another job through her boss. More often than not, it appears as if an “agential” Jonas – with a job and pursuing a Ph.D. – is merely an accessory to the perfect life Angela envisions.

Secondly, the rumination shows that his response to the familial and the American space is something he developed to deal with his father’s violence. As such, his desire to fade into the background is not only enforced by the father, it could also arguably be inherited. Instructively, both father and son’s acts of fading themselves are shown to be ways of avoiding violence, both in the domestic and in the national arena. For the father, it is a defence mechanism against mockery and micro-aggressions deployed against a black man with an Ethiopian accent – his foreignness (93). Both the father and the son use it as a dissociative strategy from capitalist and masculinist American topologies within which they are unable to self-identify as “men.” Jonas’s statement that he came to think of his “obscurity as being essential to my survival” is also illuminating if we are to read it in relation to the coercive white phobias of black males – mostly young – in the American space (108).

Both father and son’s calculated obscuring of the self can be equally read as an attempt to appear to be potentially less threatening and therefore, less competitive in the occupation of public space. These phobias, as Kristen Day observes are a “key mechanism for justifying and maintaining race privilege and exclusion” (2006: 569). Jonas and Yosef’s desire to obliterate themselves are therefore a reaction to the coercive pathologisation of black male bodies in public

which strategically serves to legitimise and restrict their access of the same, and ultimately eliminate economic competition. To borrow Nirmal Puwar's apt theorisation of what she terms as "space invaders," the entry of "women and racialized minorities" into spaces they have been excluded from illustrates "how spaces have been formed through what has been constructed out" (2004: 1). She further contends that this "entry causes disorientation and terror. The threat they are seen to pose amplifies their presence. As 'space invaders' they represent a potential organisational terror. They are thus highly visible bodies that by their mere presence invite suspicion and surveillance" (Ibid.: 54). In this regard, we can read Jonas and his father as subject to policing regimes and practices that seek to safeguard white male privileges and spaces. Through the father/son embodied response, Mengestu brings into focus the precarity of black masculinities' occupation of white spaces and their vulnerability to patriarchal, racial and capitalistic forms of violence and exclusion.

The narrative of *How to Read the Air* therefore seems to be very attentive to the fragility of the patriarch/male and the family in its pursuit of an all-encompassing American dream. In Mariam/Yosef's and Jonas/Angela's marriages, the failure and fragility of the men is writ large. Yosef does not play any meaningful paternal role, and it is telling that Jonas remembers their interaction in terms of being beaten and quizzed (107). Jonas is also emotionally distant and avoids engagement for the fear of conflict, a configuration that leads to the breakdown of their relationship. These failures of masculinity are found within the interlocking specificities of migrancy, race, hegemonic masculinity and capitalism. In this context, Mengestu shows the impossibility of developing a healthy masculinity which allows for psychological resilience as well as emotional intelligence and connectedness. In addition, through his representation of

troubled family relationships, Mengestu seems to put to test the fiction of familial and migrancy happy-ever-afters. In the same vein, the novel explodes the conventional idealised notion of a family as composed of a dominant patriarch with women and children subservient, obedient and dependant on him. If anything, both the father and the son's failure to cultivate and nurture intimacy and trust in their relationships provides an opportunity for both Mariam and Angela to redefine, imagine and produce new realities outside the ambit of matrimony and motherhood. However, the novel's ending with Jonas telling Angela that despite their pending divorce they are "going to remain part of each other's lives for much longer than we think" not only signals the possibility of imagining care and intimacy beyond matrimony, it also alerts us to his wilful acknowledgement of connectedness that is opposed to his earlier desires to fade way from emotional entanglements. He amplifies this later when he thinks to himself:

We do persist, whether we care to or not, with all our flaws and glory. If Angela, my mother, or even my father were here I would gather them close so I could tell them that despite what we've gone through, and despite our attempts to escape one another, I'm certain of beyond the slightest doubt that if there is one thing that has to be true, it's this
(325)

In this instance, Jonas reiterates the value of emotional expression and involvement. But there is also something else going on here; although Mengestu dwells on the dysfunctionality of the family when it is hinged on masculine stoicism, unexpressiveness, materialist and capitalist ideals, Jonas' desire to "gather" and remind his immediate family that they do "persist" in each other's lives re-affirms the familial bond under a new ethic of commitment, sensitivity/emotional responsiveness and uninhibited communicativeness. In this sense therefore, we can interpret the

undoing and denuding of the black masculinity by the American space as enunciating a process of renegotiating and remaking of the self by shedding prescriptive traditional and conservative values of masculinity/family and embracing more ethical and positive ways of being a man. In the end, the uncertainty to self-identify as a “man” within hegemonic templates that we encounter in Jonas enunciates a crisis precipitated by the limited categories of manhood. This is because Mengestu represents this instability and lack of consistency as an ethical stand since not being able to authoritatively define oneself (as opposed to an assumed coherent definition) leads to ethical (re)negotiations of identity that are more enabling and productive. In this sense therefore, migrant masculinities do not produce one coherent/hegemonic narrative of the self, what emerges is a fragmented and incomplete narrative, one that can be refuted and challenged, even appropriated and reworked differently by any male/man. By positioning oneself this way – as fragmented and incomplete – this masculinity is ultimately implying that it cannot be able to speak authoritatively in a way that subsumes and encompasses all other masculinities. It is a subjective self-awareness that radically entertains complexity, plurality and redefines masculine identities away from the standard, habituated and dominant.

As mentioned before, Mengestu’s *How to Read the Air* is also concerned with national and self-making American mythos. Mengestu writes immigrant marital/familial tensions and father/son relationships alongside the hegemonic narratives of America, and in so doing suggests we consider the undoing of one as reflective and informed by the other. What I am interested in here is Jonas’s weaving into the narrative seductive fabrications/lies that lie comfortably side by side with “truths/facts” and how the novelist deploys them to unmask the façade in which national narratives/histories and hegemonic masculinity masquerade. Jonas’s narrative calls

attention to itself because of the many fabrications he creates to cover up the details of his family's history that he doesn't have access to. Mengestu himself points at the different motivations for the lies Jonas tells: "Jonas lies as a way of protecting himself. He lies to avoid the difficult things in his life: his own issues, his own complicated history, his own failings" (La Force, 2010). Emma Bond's (2016) study of the novel illuminatingly dwells on family histories and memories and surmises that the fabrications Jonas comes up with are an attempt to create a coherent narrative of the self. She writes:

Indeed, Jonas's childhood is characterised by this inability to access or share in the construction of a set of familial memories, which were lost through the displacement his parents suffered and then silenced by the resultant scars of separation and strife. But, crucially, this lack is itself the impetus for the *creation* of the narrative, and explains the way the narrator has to construct a new, coherent version of the self, as well as his own familial history (often through false and devious means), as a coping strategy to make up for this missing genuinely 'real' and collectively reminisced psycho-narrative. (5)

While Mengestu and Bond's argument flag the lies as a strategy of avoidance and self-(re)construction, I am more concerned with what the lies mean and how they inform our interpretation of the text. While both Mengestu and Bond enable us to place our interest on Jonas and the uses of his lies, I posit that the lies also enable us to shift our attention from the individual to society.

To begin with, the narrative hints that America is imagined and experienced through a series of circulating fictions. Early on in the narrative, we are allowed into Mariam's

constructions of America when she is still in Ethiopia: “Say America enough times, try to picture it enough times, and you end up with a few skyscrapers stuck in the middle of a cornfield with thousands of cars driving around” (6). When Yosef sends her a picture of himself “sitting in the driver’s seat of a large car, the door open, his body half in the car, half out” she showed the picture to “her mother, sisters, and girlfriends” and wrote “on the back, in English: Yosef Car” (6-7). She does this despite knowing that it was not his car and that he had seen the car and wanted to have a picture taken of himself in it to show off (6). In fact, Mariam expects many more pictures of Yosef “standing in front of a large house with a yard; pictures of him in a suit with a briefcase in hand” (7). Mariam’s expectations – fictive and fabricated – are laden with overtones of the abundance of the American space as well as its capacity to secure success and affluence for her husband. Mariam exhibits a level of optimism in the possibility of the re-making of the self that pervades most African migration narratives to the West. Most significantly, in her aspirations, we sense neoliberal capitalistic undertones carried by the notions of accumulation/acquisition, work and productivity – Yosef pictured next to a car, “large house with a yard” and “pictures of him in a suit with a briefcase.” Evidently therefore, the text suggests that Mariam’s imaginations about Yosef’s life in America are inextricably linked to the inclusive access to the promises – albeit false – of global capitalism. This figuration of America as a land imbued with infinite possibilities and promising futures is a powerful myth that reifies fabricated values of capitalism – progress and the moral importance of work – while perniciously concealing the related discourse of profit and exploitation. This fiction of America is what seems to inundate Yosef/Mariam and Angela/Jonas’s marriages – though we feel this more strongly in the latter – with the American capitalist ethos of progressivism. Embedded in their embrace of these promising futures in America is a perfidious form of denialism of the exclusions and

contradictions of their lived realities. For instance, even when Yosef doesn't send any more pictures and does not send money for her to join him in America for three years, her expectations do not waver.

The most significant lies/fabrications that I am interested in are the ones that Jonas uses to fill the gaps in his parents' lives, the migrant experience and journey. Through the interweaving of factual details of his parents "honeymoon/vacation" trip from Peoria to Nashville and embellishment of his father's migratory journey, Jonas seduces the reader with various fictions that are even more compelling than what might have happened. For instance, when he sets out to "retrace his parent's steps," he invites the reader to consider probabilities of what might have happened, flirting with one proposition and discarding it at whim in pursuit of another (15). At one point when he is recreating a stop along his parents' trip, he toys with the idea of letting his mother run away from his father:

There are two directions the story can go in at this point. I can either see my mother ... preparing to take flight into the forest ... or I can let her stand her ground and remain exactly as she is. The temptation to set her loose makes for a stronger narrative. I can let her dash past bushes and branches. I can give her scrapes on her arms, let a little blood trickle down her legs over her knee, where it dries and hardens into a firm dark blotch (150-1)

As a teacher, Jonas also appears to be aware of the reductive and inventive ways in which migrants, and by extension Africa, are/is imagined and constructed by his students and the American society at large. Notably, he responds to fictions about migrancy with a fiction that

confirms the original one. So at one point, to satisfy the curiosity of his students about his origins he divulges to them that his “family ... had to leave their home abruptly. That’s why we ended up here” (104). While the statement has a degree of truth, it is generic and totalising. Jonas muses:

They fell hard for anything that sounded like that, and were quick to imagine the missing details on their own. They assumed war first, hunger and poverty second; despite their best intentions, and how many times they had recently heard someone say that Africa was more than just the sum of that, I knew these were the only images they had. Africa was everywhere in the news and the pity for it and its inhabitants had spiked a thousandfold as a result. There were rallies in Central Park for the dead of Sudan, and protests outside of the UN and several different African consulates against more general crimes ranging from corruption to blanket oppression (104)

Evidently, one of the significant features of the novel is the seductiveness of these fictions even when the text oversees their self-destruction. In exploring the various investments in these fictions, Mengestu slyly demonstrates the character’s desire – and by extension the reader’s complicity – for certain predetermined narrative arcs while at the same time launching into an expose of the imbrications of narrative with power and domination. The students’ preference for the atavistic versions betrays a willing dismissal of the complexity of Africa(ns) – the target of their latent activism. That these misunderstandings and/or fictions are located in an academic space – a key stakeholder of the knowledge economy and a space we expect critical engagement with society – is indicting. The movement of these fictions from the media into the academic space does not translate into the creation of a deepened understanding that might shape

possible action, instead, they become muddled and entangled with hegemonic epistemological regimes of representation. Conspicuously, the images that emerge from “knowing” Africa in terms of chaos, lack and savagery serve to construct it as a foil to the American space. In contrast, America emerges as hospitable, orderly, a space of plenitude, benevolent and the students as empathetic, civically engaged as well as articulate.

Jonas is aware of the seductiveness of these value-laden fictive constructions of Africa/America which serve as mirror images that refract into the American public what they want to see. In one notable incident, he notes the “desire to make every part of America seemingly accessible to anyone who wants it,” as if America is calling people to witness the “proof of [its] largesse and [its] generosity, freely given, with nothing expected in return” (127). This anecdote resonates with a scene in Adichie’s *Americanah* that aptly captures the ways that the white American subject performs paternalism and benevolence towards the African migrant while imagining the infinite opportunities and inclusivity within America. After Kelsey, a young white woman, asks Mariama – the salon owner – how business was and the latter replies that “business is up and down but we try,” Kelsey summarily opines: “But you couldn’t even have this business back in your country, right? Isn’t it wonderful that you get to come to the U.S. and now your kids can have a better life? ... Are women allowed to vote in your country?” (189). Mariama looks surprised by the first question but answers in the affirmative and after a “longer pause,” answers yes for the second one (Ibid.). Beneath the humanitarian intervention and “saving” that Kelsey assumes the American space offers to the migrant is a self-empowering discourse that proffers superiority, empathy and indispensability of the white subject. Both Mengestu and Adichie therefore skewer these constructions of America that are oblivious of the

lived realities of migrants whose positioning at the intersections of migrancy, race, gender and class places them beyond the remit of celebratory and an all-encompassing American dream.

Ultimately, Jonas seems to toy with and trouble these self-affirming fictions of America vis a vis its others. His embellishment of his father's journey to his class in the private school he teaches is a sly/wry commentary about the expectations placed upon the migrant tale. The reader is aware of the nestling of truth and fiction in Jonas's narration and of the invitation to ponder about these migrant narratives and their use and abuses in the American publics. This way, Mengestu calls us to re-examine our histories, what we have come to know as our certainties, and our investment in the narratives/fictions that we create. The narrator's lack of honesty and unreliability encourages the reader to cultivate a healthy distrust of the fictions people and societies create. In presenting these seductive and seemingly irresistible fictions of Africa, the migrant and America, Mengestu cautions that it is possible, even for the most vigilant, to fall into the trap of their seductiveness. Through the author's movement from individual to societal histories, *How to Read the Air* implores us to reconsider the seemingly neat national narratives and histories as they relate to the entrapment of immigrants who come to America in pursuit of the credo of the American dream. The novel shows that the nation, defined as it is by patriarchal ideals, is inherently monologic in so far as it seeks to represent a unisonant American experience. Consequently then, Jonas narrates how this monologism is achieved through coercion, violence, erasure of any unsanctioned and variant voice/experience and exclusivist hierarchies that only privilege the white, corporate/working, heterosexual male. For instance, at the Manhattan refugee centre where Jonas works and he is expected to edit the refugee stories to make them more horrific such that they can be granted asylum, Mengestu hints that just like the fiction of

“assimilation,” acceptance is predicated upon lies and violent truncations (26-7). However, Mengestu’s insertion of variant experiences and voices within the family and even the American nation creates fissures and cracks that undercut the hegemonic assumptions and narratives of both masculinism and the nation.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter sought to examine Mengestu’s *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* and *How to Read the Air* with the aim of threading out the textures of African migrant masculinities experiences in America – a space defined by a masculinist and capitalist ideology and credo. Through the examination of Sepha’s shop and the Logan Circle community as it relates to Sepha’s, Ken’s and Joe’s experiences of it, I sought to interrogate the inextricability of the progressivist promises of migrancy from notions of labour, accumulation and consumption – values of neoliberal capitalism. In addition, the chapter questions the assumptions and expectations of black diaspora affinities and political mobilisation. This chapter also makes a case for Sepha’s rejection of commercial practices through privileging of relationality and connectedness as subversive in the way it seeks alternatives beyond the remit of commercial capitalism. However, Sepha’s renegade action is undercut by his involvement with the prostitutes around Logan Circle in a manner that objectifies and commercialises female bodies within patriarchal and capitalistic forms of use and exchange.

Kenneth is interrogated on the basis of how his father forms a counterpoint for his embracing of the credo of the American space and masculine ethos. His accumulation of social

and cultural capital that would articulate him within capitalistic and hegemonic masculinity domains serves to show how models of domination are often presented as ethical and aspirational. Lastly, the character of Joe affords us an opportunity to examine black migrant masculinities within the discursive practices of the academia and the service industry. Mengestu deploys Joseph's character to critique the western academia and how it is shaped by neoliberal capitalism. Reading Joe's poem that seeks to capture the intricate history of the Congo alongside the discursive productions of the Congo, I posit that Mengestu legitimises the margins as a subversively productive site of epistemological production.

Finally, through the examination of *How to Read the Air's* portrayal of the father/son relationship and American national mythos, this chapter advances a reading of familial and national spaces as patriarchal in orientation. The nation in the text emerges as a larger arena and landscape where hegemonic masculinity's power, values and ideologies are articulated and extended. However, the patriarchal order and hegemony it seeks to establish in these spaces is not only rendered unstable by the vulnerability of the male characters but also by the fissures and instabilities of national mythos. I advance the argument that the failure of the males in the text, placed within "racist, capitalist scripts and intertwined with prescripts of hegemonic masculinity," signals a crisis in the constructions of black migrant masculinities (Musila, 2015: 93). The study shows that both father and son come unstuck from the social cultural capital that defines American masculinities and this creates a possibility for the emergence of a more ethical and emotionally aware masculinity. In addition, the chapter posits a reading of Jonas's lies and fabrications as a way in which the writer calls attention to not only migrant expectations but also to national histories. Because of the way fictions coexist alongside "facts," Mengestu makes a

case for the critical appraisal of our personal and collective historical archives and memories. Through this nestling of “truths” and lies, I advance that Mengestu toys with and unmask a particular ideologically inflected and enduring American national myth through his portrayal of migrant masculinities and families that spiral to dissolution in a way that shows how presumptive the idea of the American dream and migrant expectations are.

Ultimately, both *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* and *How to Read the Air* represent African migrant masculinities as fugitive masculinities within the ideologically inflected and masculinist American space. This fugitivity emanates from their failed attempts of legibility in a space where masculine signifiers of visibility are regulated and predetermined, as well as the hegemonic need to maintain spatial boundaries and hierarchies. As such, Mengestu’s novels suggest the necessity of transcendence, “escape” or exploding of the boundaries of the representational regiments the migrant is corralled into. Despite the instances of unresolved ambivalence towards hegemony that are found, for instance in Sepha, a close examination of the male characters in the text, reveals subversive, ethically creative and even productive ways with which they engage with the American space in ways that not only challenge hegemonic masculinity but also in the way they pose a more diverse/inclusive understanding of masculinity. While Sepha de-emphasizes the dehumanising logics of capitalistic commercial engagement; Joseph calls for a re-engagement with dominant epistemologies/archives and alternate gender roles; Kenneth unmask the success of the corporate white masculinity and; Jonas, like Sepha, embraces emotional connectedness through the acquiring of a grammar of care which in turn suggests possibilities of the resuscitation of the relational and intimacy in their lives as both novels draw to an end.

CHAPTER FIVE

UNDUTIFUL DAUGHTER(S): DISRUPTING GEOGRAPHIES OF THE GENDERED NATION AND BELONGING IN ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH* and Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*

If nationalism is not transformed by an analysis of gender power, the nation-state will remain a repository of male hopes, male aspirations and male privilege

Anne McClintock

5.1 Introduction

While having a conversation with Zadie Smith after the publication of her third novel *Americanah*, Adichie told Smith that she likes to think of the text as her “fuck you book.” She adds that “in some ways fuck you to another version of myself ... with *Half of a Yellow Sun* I was very dutiful. I think for so long I’ve been a dutiful daughter of literature. I’ve followed the rules ... with *Americanah* I thought ... ‘I’m going to write the book I want to write’” (Zadie & Adichie, 2014). I use this conversation because of its disruptive discursive potentialities. On the one hand, Adichie’s comment captures movement away/towards a mode of writing that she actualises in writing “the book I want to write.” On the other hand, the comments embody irreverence to a writing tradition that was epitomised in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, a tradition that by implication casts her as dutiful and deferential.

In using the concept of the “undutiful daughter” I rely on Rosi Braidotti’s theorisation about the betrayal and disloyalty to “the rule of One – the universalistic standard of the dominant vision of the subject as coinciding with rationality, consciousness, and self-regulating moral

agency” which figures others as “a lack or necessary absence: non-ones” (2012: ix). In line with this, Fanny Söderbäck (2012) begins the introduction to the *Undutiful daughters: New directions in feminist thought and practice* volume with an instructive epigraph by Braidotti: “One of the defining features of the undutiful daughters’ mind-set is a productive form of conceptual disobedience” (3). In my mind, the implication here is that the creation of tensions within extant traditions, histories, knowledges, genres, etc. is aimed at carving out niches of transformation and foregrounding avenues of inquiry that commit epistemological patricide. As such, when Adichie “claims the privilege of just writing the book she wanted to write, she opens the door a little wider for that entity formerly known as postcolonial literature, inviting us to map new itineraries of identity, migration, and resistance” (Goyal, 2014: xvii-xviii). Building on Braidotti (2002), Brigita Miloš (2014) uses “the concept of ‘disobedient daughter’ ... as one possible nomadic line of escape from or through a variety of molar structures, identifiable by different names: the literary canon, national literature, literary theory and history, academic authority or epistemological distinctness” (146).

Following this line of thought, I propose a reading of *Americanah* as a bildungsroman that represents a moment of a daughter’s undutifulness – for both the author and the protagonist. To think of *Americanah* as a bildungsroman that captures the “womaning” of Ifem, a la Ogaga Okuyade (2011: 153), is to recognise, as does Braidotti (2012) that “one is not born, one becomes an undutiful daughter” (ix). In her growth, I explore Adichie/Ifem’s process of becoming undutiful to phallogocentric (and Eurocentric) roles, cultures, textual, national, historical and epistemic genealogies, their production and constitution. In this regard, I zero in on the text’s representation of belonging and the experiencing of the gendered home/nation, issues that the

text recasts within the context of migration. I hope to pool these ideas together with *Americanah*'s portrayal of heterosexual love/romance in an attempt to illuminate the individual's relationship with the nation. As a novel that presents a female narrator's migration and eventual return journey, *Americanah* provides a coming-of-age narrative that invites a reconsideration of the woman's place and relationship with/within the nation.

To supplement this discussion, I read *Americanah* against and alongside Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*. Like *Americanah*, Atta's text presents a narrative of a female character's growth, migration and return as processes that enunciate a renegotiation of belonging and gendered relations. However, unlike Adichie's text which explodes the nation as the only horizon of belonging, *Everything Good Will Come* affirms the national home but radically reconfigures the character of that belonging. While both novels can be read as coming-of-age narratives of their respective protagonists, what is particularly striking for this study is how both novels provide an opportunity for considering the narrative of the nation from perspectives of gender, ethnicity and class – and each perspective invites us to attend to the differences and intricacies of national affiliations and belonging. To do this, this chapter will be divided into two sections. The first part will attempt to examine Adichie and Atta's mapping of the daughter within the masculinely imagined national space. The second section interrogates the two novelists' rewriting of daughterhood within the nation in a bid to show how the protagonists', as Boehmer elsewhere argues, place “their own subjectivities, sexualities, maternal duties, private stories and intimate pleasures in tension with conventional roles transmitted by national and other traditional narratives” (2005: 6).

5.2 Mapping Daughterhood within the Masculinist Nation

Feminist scholars of the nation, as Elleke Boehmer (2005) reminds us, decry “the manipulation of gender politics in the exercise of national rule” and “the nation’s ‘sanctioned institutionalisation of gender difference’” (23). Boehmer continues that these scholars “contend that this gender weighting has historically tended to delimit nationalist identifications by women, although not universally so, and recently to a lesser extent ...” (2005: 23). Susan Andrade (2002) traces this weighting to early nationalist and decolonisation projects. She contends that “at a moment when the cultural production and political agitation of African men were easily assimilated to a nationalist paradigm, women’s culture and politics were often understood as unrelated to nationalism, and, therefore, as not engaged in the larger political process” (Ibid.: 45). On cue, Boehmer (2005) does an astute reading of the “national son” alongside the daughter. She observes that:

In relation to the national son, the self-defining inheritor of the post-independence era and the protagonist of the nation-shaping narrative, the female child is a – if not *the* – non-subject within the national family romance ... the daughter figure within the framework of the postcolonial narrative that inscribes the new nation is, if not subordinate, peripheral and quiet, then virtually invisible. (2005: 106)

According to Boehmer, the portrayal of the “daughter of the new nation in male-authored texts is predominantly pictured ... as homebound and tradition bound. She inhabits either private spaces or the peripheries of public, national space” (Ibid.). This position is reiterated by Joanne Nagel (1998) who persuasively argues that the “scripts in which these roles

[in the making and unmaking of nation states] are embedded are written primarily by men, for men, and about men, and that women are, by design, supporting actors whose roles reflect masculinist notions of femininity and of women's proper 'place'" (243). As such, feminist scholars of the nation are quite clear about the relegation of the woman/daughter into the domestic sphere by patriarchal nationalism. In addition, other scholars have also flagged the seemingly innocuous representation of women as icons of the nation/nationhood. Florence Stratton (1994) calls for vigilance in female characters' portrayal in romanticised and idealised terms, for to her, this is a patriarchal strategy of containment (172). Writing about the "mother Africa trope," Stratton calls attention to the idealization and canonization of the woman which serves to give the woman metaphorical importance while:

Practically she is nothing. She has no autonomy, no status as a character, for her person and her story are shaped to meet the requirements of his vision. One of these requirements is that she provide attractive packaging. She is thus constructed as beauty, eroticism, fecundity, the qualities the male Self values most in the female Other. She is the emblem of male desire. (52)

Americanah and *Everything Good Will Come* offer interesting perspectives of the roles and spaces within which the woman/daughter is relegated in both imaginative and social realms of the nation. To begin with, the authors of the two novels are at pains to show national patriarchy's investment in the domestication and subservience of women. This consigning of the woman to the domestic arena has injurious implications for it curtails her access to public economies and resources and also restricts her participation in the political arena (Tamale, 2004: 52-3). Atta for instance poignantly captures the place of the woman in the national social

imaginary when Enitan and Sheri are playing at what they want to be when they grow up. When Enitan says that she wants “to be something like ... like president,” Sheri informs her that “women are not presidents” because “our men won’t stand for it. Who will cook for your husband” (30). Their internalisation of the “historically and culturally constructed” patriarchal ideology of domesticity at such a young age significantly loops in the idea that a woman’s “wholesome existence” is dependant “on getting married, producing children and caring for their family” (Tamale, 2004: 51-2). Atta expands this further through her representation of the role of the woman in patriarchal imaginaries of the nation as limited to procreation. Regarding Sheri’s barrenness, Enitan observes that:

Better to be ugly, to be crippled, to be a thief even, than to be barren. We had both been raised to believe that our greatest days would be: the birth of our first child, our wedding and graduation days in that order ... Marriage could immediately wipe out a sluttish past, but an angel or not, a woman had to have a child (102).

Enitan herself comes to experience the pressures of procreation when she fails to have a child and her husband’s relations would look at her “stomach before looking at my face” (188). Faced with various forms of coercions from even her relatives including her mother and father, Enitan asks them “why they harassed women this way. We were greater than our wombs, greater than the sum of our body parts” (188). This resonates with Florence Orabueze’s (2004) assertion that the “woman’s primary role is that of procreation” (108). Enitan’s narrative makes it clear that the place of the woman is in the domestic arena and in matrimony where her primary role is procreation, silence and submissiveness to the family patriarch. In fact, for Enitan to become politically engaged, her marriage to Niyi Franco has to be dissolved. The texts also show that

feminine bodies and sexualities that deviate from the acceptable forms of matrimony, domestication and procreation are met with various forms of discipline and control. For instance, Sheri and Uju receive subtle and overt forms of stigma and shaming because of their unions with the military officers.

In light of these efforts to “domesticate” the female characters both within the matrimonial and the national home, Adichie and Atta’s novels represent narratives that disrupt this androcentric figuration by moving women out of the home. While Ifemelu subverts domesticating matrimonial couplings and expands the possibilities of belonging beyond the nation, Enitan challenges matrimonial domestication by separating from her husband. In moving these characters out of the “home,” the authors challenge the constitution of the home and initiate the process of its unravelling. While examining transnational women’s representation of home against patriarchal domesticating strategies, Strehle (2008) offers that the act of moving “women’s bodies out of homes” involves a critical interrogation of “a foundational equation, one in which much else has been built” (27). In her mind, this movement marks a moment when “they begin to unsettle the house ... explore the possibilities for change, dramatize new, more creative and resistant ways in which human subjects may think further afield, and encourage more radical departures than we have yet undertaken from the places we call ‘home’” (Ibid.). As such, moving the protagonists out of the “home” is useful in how it shapes the relationship with both the nation and male gender.

The characters of Aunty Uju and Sheri are instructive in the way the authors use them to explore daughters’ experiencing of the nation as represented in their interpersonal relationships with powerful national masculinities and masculinely weighted national spaces and institutions.

My conflation of interpersonal intimacy/public and home/nation rests on the premise that it is much more productive to read them not as separate spheres but rather, as spheres that feed and bleed into each other. In this regard, Susan Strehle (2008) is instructive when she argues that:

From a perspective conjoining feminist and postcolonial theory, home reveals its deeper affiliation with the public realm, as a patriarchal space where power relations vital to the nation and culture are negotiated. Home reflects and resembles nation: not a retreat from the public and political, home expresses the same ideological pressures that contend within the nation ... indeed, home does the business of nation and carries its agendas forward in time, producing the subjects of nation and empire. (1)

In examining the home as a reflection of the nation, I zero in on the representation of Aunt Uju in *Americanah* and Sheri in *Everything Good will Come*. Aunt Uju and Sheri stand for a pervasive representational trope of the “kept woman” and or the “other woman” that pits powerful/hegemonic masculinities and vulnerable female characters together within the nation. Uju and Sheri have relations with married military men referred to as The General and Brigadier Hassan respectively. The fact that they are both highly ranked military officers serves as a pointer to the political historical context of the novels setting in Nigeria, and the authors’ attempts to draw a connection between national masculinities, power and violence. In addition, through the exploitative coupling of hegemonic national masculinities with individual women, both Adichie and Atta show the interrelationship of the public and the personal. These characters enable us to untangle the gender-constructed roles within both the domestic and the public/national space. While Uju and Sheri are tethered to the domestic spaces the men create and provide for, The General and Brigadier Hassan are allowed to go out to the public sphere

and occasionally descend upon the home for various forms of ministrations. Aunt Uju, Ifemelu's cousin, is a trained medical doctor who fails to get a job after completing college. She meets and starts dating The General, a powerful and wealthy military officer who becomes her financial benefactor. After he is murdered, Aunt Uju migrates to America after being threatened by The General's relatives. Sherifat Bakare, also known as Sheri is Enitan's friend since childhood. Precocious and strong-willed, Sheri is born of a black Nigerian father and a white English woman. After Sheri is raped by three of their friends, the two friends get separated when Enitan is sent to study in London. Sheri aborts with a clothes hanger and becomes barren in the process, something that earns her societal opprobrium. When they eventually meet after Enitan relocates to Nigeria, Sheri is dating and financially dependent on a Brigadier Hassan, a man who "collected polo ponies and women as young as his daughters" (100). The narrator reveals that "Sheri was the Nigerian man's ideal: pretty, shapely, yellow to boot, with some regard for a woman's station," a fact that underlines the predatory and conformist nature of their relationship (105).

Sheri and Uju's relationships capture a relational paradigm that is defined by its transactionality and materialism. As such, they are represented within the nation and in their relationship with national masculinities as objects of desire, consumption, amusement, control and also as accessories that mark the status of the military officers. Unlike Ifemelu and Obinze's coupling that is founded on romantic love, Sheri and Uju's heterosexual coupling with Brigadier Hassan and The General are based on economic dependence and patronage. This is established early on when Uju meets The General at a wedding and he tells her that he likes her and that he wants to take care of her (46). Later, Uju comments after Ifemelu observes a hairdresser fawning

over her demonstrates how dependence and patronage in social relations are ubiquitous in the larger society. Auntie Uju opines that:

You know, we live in an ass-licking economy. The biggest problem in this country is not corruption. The problem is that there are many qualified people who are not where they are supposed to be because they won't lick anybody's ass, or they don't know which ass to lick or they don't even know how to lick an ass. I'm lucky to be licking the right ass (77)

While reading Uju's relationship with The General, Yemisi Ogbe (2013: 9) asks an important question which she nevertheless feels Adichie handles hastily and therefore trivialises: "Why are the wheels of romantic Nigerian tales different, made of unromantic textiles like money, necessity and the need to bear children?". Instead of viewing the depiction of this relationship as trivialised, I propose that Adichie's placement of the relationship within the context of gendered economic inequalities allows for an extended discussion on heterosexual relationships and a daughter's experiencing of the nation. If we are to read Auntie Uju/The General and Sheri/Hassan's relationships against Ifem/Obinze and Enitan's relationships, the economic vulnerabilities of the former makes it apparent how social class informs heterosexual coupling. Ifemelu is raised in a relatively well-off family (until her father loses his job) while Enitan's father, Sunny Taiwo, is by comparison rich. However, saying this does not take away the lack of warmth and conviviality in their homes, something that is powerfully captured in Atta's text through the parents' constant fights and arguments. It is also telling that both Auntie Uju and Enitan's parents are absent in the texts. Auntie Uju is Ifemelu's father's cousin who

comes to Lagos to live under his care (53). Sheri's father dies when she is young and she doesn't know her mother because her father took her away from her when she was very young.

Evidently therefore, viewing these relationships in a class differential paradigm enables a productive conversation on female susceptibility to commodification and accessorisation in a patriarchal and capitalist setup. These military "big men" keep Sheri and Uju – both young and beautiful – in expensive houses, provide for them and use them not only for sex but also as status symbols and for emotional/domestic labour while at the same time denying or foreclosing their chances of economic autonomy. Through these characters, Adichie and Atta paint a picture of the difficulty, but not the impossibility, of women to self-actualise in the absence of parental care/support, and the function of exploitative male support, largesse and patronage in such contexts. It is no coincidence therefore that Ifemelu gets a job through Curt's (her white American boyfriend) connections, as Ranyinudo once reminds her when she feels that Ifemelu is becoming judgemental and sanctimonious (422-3). Enitan's financial security is also heavily dependent on her father's wealth even though she is a qualified lawyer. The importance of hegemonic male patronage and the difference of how national sons and daughters experience the national home is demonstrated by Obinze's relationship to Chief, a wealthy and highly connected businessman. On the one hand, The General and the Brigadier fear and therefore constrain the economic independence of their young mistresses. Aunty Uju has to keep asking for money for even the most mundane things while Brigadier Hassan forbids Sheri from starting her own catering business. On the other hand, Obinze becomes a successful protégé of the Chief for hanging around him and performing occasional acts of obsequiousness (25). Through Obinze, Adichie's novel highlights the relative ease with which homosocial bonding and male-to-male

patronage and mentoring is beneficial as compared to the exploitative and wholly domineering relationships that Aunty Uju and Sheri have with The General and the Brigadier. In addition, the relationship between Obinze and Chief – what Ogbe refers to as “a novel idea of friendship. Chief offers Obinze his friendship ... It is friendship but it is not” (2013: 11) – is informative in the way it involves an unstated exchange/usage of women’s bodies. Although the relationship is complex and Obinze does not know why “Chief had decided to help him, to use him while overlooking, even encouraging, the astonishing collateral benefits,” it is not lost on the reader that they were introduced to each other by Nneoma, Obinze’s cousin who is the target of Chief’s unwelcome libidinal interests (27). When telling Obinze about Chief, Nneoma has this to say:

I know this very rich man, Chief. The man chased and chased me, eh, but I refused. He has a serious problem with women, and he can give somebody AIDS. But you know these men, the one woman that says no to them is the one that they don’t forget. So from time to time, he will call me and sometimes I go and greet him. He even helped me with capital to start over my business after those children of Satan stole my money last year. He still thinks that one day I will agree for him. Ha, *o di egwu*, for where? (23-4)

Adichie thus leaves us to speculate about the possibility that Chief helps Obinze because he anticipates that Nneoma will one day capitulate to his sexual advances. This form of “bartering” is not the only one in the text. Obinze remembers an incident when another man had “brought his girlfriend to visit, and when she left the room to go to the toilet, Obinze heard Chief tell the man to give him the girl in exchange for a piece of land” (24). These relationships give us a glimpse into an aspect of male friendship that is premised on women’s bodies as items of exchange, transaction and homosocial bonding. They also reiterate Anne McClintock assertion

that nations do not give “women and men the same access to the rights and resources of the nation-state” (1993: 61).

Adichie’s depiction of everyday realities of materially produced heterosexual intimacies is a refusal to sentimentalise and dehistoricise love/romance by unearthing the underlying material and political realities and experiences of psychic exploitation, dispossession and disenfranchisement. In this way, she shows how intimate couplings are often born out of economic necessity and want. Even though Adichie shows that these unions do not foreclose the growth of love and care – as is the case of Auntie Uju who develops fond feelings towards The General – the texts’ portrayal of gendered socio-economic and political inequalities underline the coercive and exploitative nature of the unions. Placed in patriarchal regimes and economies of desire and attention, these characters are seduced with material comforts and protections that the military regime affords. In desperate attempts to keep the attention of the officers, both Uju and Sheri are forced into extensive and near-obsessive self-grooming schedules. It is however worth noting that Adichie and Atta variously subvert the negative stereotypes of the “kept-woman” or the “other woman” through their portrayal of female characters who are able to “transfer successfully the principles of investment and return from the economic to the emotional realm,” (Von Ankum, 1994: 161) and their pursuance of self-development and dependence beyond the ambit of male sponsorship and patronage. This happens when Uju leaves for the US and after studying for entry exams starts practicing medicine and Sheri starts a successful catering business and breaks up with the Brigadier Hassan. Again, the novels inscribe movement out of the sphere of the “home” – out of the nation for Uju while Sheri moves out of the realm of the kept woman – and its overarching ideologies as freeing for both characters.

Through the depiction of Uju and Sheri's interpersonal relationships, both Adichie and Atta's texts ultimately represent national patriarchies/masculinities as inimical to senses of home as they violate the intimacies of home. The violence and disenfranchisement these masculinities occasion in both the domestic and national spheres produce hostility, estrangement and often flight – and what I would call unhomeliness/unbelonging for not only the female subjects, but also for other non-hegemonic masculinities. The abject female bodies that populate both texts – from Sheri, Uju, Ifem and Enitan's mothers to the women Enitan bands with to protest against the military regime – defamiliarise the home as that safe and familiar space and reveals it is “an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance” (Martin & Mohanty, 1986: 196). The disturbance of at-homeness comes to its peak when military masculinist violence leads to the murder of The General and his relatives threaten to kick Uju out of her house (86-7). This forces her to flee the country for America. Sheri also gives an account of her family's suffering when her father died and her uncle “took all his money” (102-3).

Adichie and Atta's texts demonstrate that the interests of the nation and patriarchal forms of belonging and being in the nation are not necessarily aligned to the interests of women. Chielozona Eze has this in mind when he identifies Adichie and Atta as part of “the third generation of African women writers [who] are less occupied with the nation as a construct or a space that has to be defended. They are more interested in the woman's body as a violated space that needs healing” (2015: 317). This point is forcefully put across by Tony Simoes da Silva (2012) who subtly reminds us that there is a way that Adichie's earlier work narrativises the abjection of female bodies within the post-colonial nation. Through an examination of *Purple*

Hibiscus and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Simoes da Silva identifies pervasive “images of the ‘body in pain’ ... the battered, bruised and scarred body” which according to him “emerges as a key image, a corporeal evocation of the individual self that is traced in both novels to a legacy of colonial and post-colonial relations, and specific gendered configurations” (455). The marginal position that women occupy within home and national body politic and the violence they face – economic, political, social and even physical – ultimately leads to their divestment from the largely elite-male production of the nation and its interests. Strehle amplifies this masculinist orientation of the nation by calling attention to how “both home and nation draw on and perpetuate a fundamentally patriarchal authority, hardly unique to these two institutions” (2008: 5). Ultimately, the authors show that inclusions and existence at home/nation are often coerced and defined by oppressions and silencing that cuts across gender, class and ethnicity.

These coercive inclusion and exclusions in the home/nation are brought into a sharper focus by Atta’s eloquent portrayal of the violent ethnicisation of the nation during the Biafran war, something that Adichie deals with in her earlier novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Enitan recalls her childhood memories of how “the Biafrans were trying to split our country in two” and Uncle Fatai, one of her father’s friends saying that he hopes “our boys finish them off” (9). She also narrates that in her school one got teased “for being Igbo, because it meant that you were Biafran or knew people who were” (18). Implicit in Uncle Fatai’s statement is a nationalism that not only sanctions violent inclusion but also accords legitimacy to “us” and “our boys” while at the same time representing the Biafrans as what Amy Kaplan (2002: 50) refers to as the “spectres of the foreign that lurk inside” which require mechanisms of discipline and containment in order to perform and demonstrate allegiance and in the process enforce belonging. Even though

Americanah does not directly address this ethnicisation of the nation, there is a way in which we can read Ifemelu's conditional and qualified fidelity to the nation (a quality that is absent in Atta's text) as a sustained way of addressing her distrust of the nation. Looking at Adichie's entire literary oeuvre, it becomes apparent that there is a way in which it has led us to *Americanah*'s explosion of the limiting and constraining category of the nation through a daughter's migration. On the one hand, *Purple Hibiscus* maps the tyranny of a family patriarch alongside the tyranny of the state which both leads to the break-up of Kambili's family and the migration of Auntie Ifeoma. On the other hand, *Half of a Yellow Sun* dramatizes the traumas of the Biafran civil war and reflects what Obi Nwakanma terms as the "the indeterminacy of the Igbo writers in the postwar years, about their relationship or the slipperiness of their affiliation with postwar Nigeria" (2008: 7). Continuing on this precarity of the Igbo nation within the larger Nigerian nation, Nwakanma notes that "Biafra's secession ... signalled the ambivalence, dislocation, and marginality that Igbo writers began to associate with their sense of nation and national belonging in the aftermath of the war" (2008: 7). Read along this line, *Americanah* comprises an instructive break in Adichie's literary journey.

Atta and Adichie's texts therefore represent a nation that is produced through gendered, ethnic and class privilege on the one hand, and violence, exploitation and oppression of women, the poor and ethnic others on the other hand. Ultimately, what Atta and Adichie's texts demand is that the reader rethinks his/her investments in the political and cultural project of the nation in the face of its coercions, inclusions and exclusions. In light of this, the next section of this chapter examines how Adichie and Atta unwrite these masculinist imaginings of the nation and re-imagine the woman within the nation.

5.3 Patricidal Epistemologies and Desires: Being Undutiful and Belonging Differently

In this section, I aim to show how Adichie and Atta recast the home/nation in ways that disturb and destabilise its masculinist figuration. The premise here is that the narratives of the nation that these writers advance, far from reinforcing the masculine inscriptions of the nation, undermine and thwart cultural and political productions of the nation in a manner that makes them undutiful. The writers under examination here are representative of what Annie Gagiano (2013) refers to as women's writing in Africa that "clearly and skilfully evinces [their] ... interest in recording politically and morally evaluative accounts of their nations" (47). Gagiano continues that these female writers "seem to want to write women into their nations' histories, present and future, rather than write off their nations. They inscribe women into the nation in complex ways that contrast with the tendency in nationalist rhetoric to invoke women primarily in simplistically symbolic roles" (ibid.: 48).

As I indicated in the introduction, Adichie intimates that her being undutiful is tied to a movement away from and towards a certain mode of writing that she actualises in *Americanah*. Conspicuously, Adichie mentions *Half of a Yellow Sun* as a counterpoint to *Americanah*. On the one hand *Half of a Yellow Sun* explores a range of themes from war and violence, colonial legacies, ethnicity and nationalism with love, human relationships and betrayal often forming the backdrop of these themes. As such, the Biafra secession, 1967-70, looms large as an historical reality that threads these themes together. The vastness of the legacy of Biafra that Adichie writes alongside is acknowledged in an author's note at the end of *Half of a Yellow Sun* where Adichie mentions thirty-one books that "helped [her] research" (542-4). Hugh Hodges (2009) notes Adichie's "juxtaposition of this list with the note about Adichie's parents," a note that

records her indebtedness to her parents, and “acknowledges both the novel’s debt to a literary tradition heavily invested in accounting for what happened in Biafra, and a desire to redirect that investment” (1). In Hodges’ words, *Half of a Yellow Sun*:

Invites a re-reading of the novels Adichie lists, both to find out what *Half of a Yellow Sun* owes to them and what it adds to them. It is also an invitation to reflect on the fact that although Biafran War literature has, as an oeuvre, been deeply concerned with the problem of closure – a full and final accounting – the oeuvre itself continues to grow and evolve (2009: 1)

Hodges painstakingly shows Adichie’s writing of *Half of a Yellow Sun* within a tradition and legacy that has therefore refused closure, a tradition that the novel intimates, must be reckoned with in constructing national futures. Even in her earlier work, *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie’s investment in national themes and her alignment with her literary predecessors is palpable. The political unease in the country, brought to the dinner table through Eugene Achike’s ownership of a newspaper publishing firm, forms the backdrop of the Achike’s family drama. Arguably, nowhere is Adichie’s salutary bow to her literary forebears’ more evident than in *Purple Hibiscus*, a novel that has intertextual references to Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. In placing herself within a lineage and writing about the issues that preoccupy her predecessors, Adichie squarely positions herself within literary and national histories as well as discursive traditions that have largely been dominated by masculinist perspectives and interventions.

On the other hand, I argue that *Americanah*, represents a mode of writing that, in a more heightened manner than Adichie's earlier works, upstages patriarchal epistemologies and genealogies. In *Americanah*, Adichie explores themes and topics that were never considered as academic and therefore were not approached with the same analytical vigour and seriousness by a discursive system that sought to privilege a form of commitment to the ideologies of nationalism. Adichie is mindful of this when she says that the novel is about love, race and hair, (Kellaway, 2013) an equivalence that sandwiches race – a highly charged political topic – in between what patriarchal nationalist figurations considers as apolitical. My argument here centres on one of the three: love. It is my contention that Adichie's novel utilises the romance genre, often dismissed as apolitical and catering to “escapist aesthetic choices ... that focus on gender and sexuality, topics that are themselves seen as distractions from more pressing issues of collective agency and progressive social change,” (Davis, 2013: 2) to pose questions about the complex coupling between the individual and the nation. In an interview with Emma Brockes (2014), Adichie flags the seeming trivialisation of love:

Don't we all in the end write about love? ... When men do it, it's a political comment on human relations. When women do it, it's just a love story. So, although I wanted to do much more than a love story, a part of me wants to push back against the idea that love stories are not important. I wanted to use a love story to talk about other things. But really in the end, it's just a love story (2014)

As such, Adichie foregrounds the love story as inherently political, and that indeed, it is its dismissal when it is written by women writers that is political. In doing this, Adichie refuses to see the love story and the “political” novel as “mutually exclusive and thus irreconcilable

traditions,” a la Davis (2013: 1). In working with and against the romance genre, Adichie explores a range of other “distracting” issues such as hair, braiding, the salon, sex, sexuality and desire, emotions and relationships, beauty and aesthetics, themes that often fizzle out in most critical and imaginative work within masculinist national histories and literary genealogies. Valentina Scarsini (2017) underlines the novel’s disruptive qualities within literary traditions when she mentions what she sees as a “lack of academic interest in *Americanah*” which to her lies “in the very nature of the novel, the plot being quite linear and ‘pop’ and based on a romantic love story” (11). Evidently, *Americanah* is definitive in the way that it marks a moment of Adichie’s undutifulness as it relates to her earlier works and those of her literary predecessors.

Just as the act of becoming undutiful for the author is a process, it is apt that Adichie represents her protagonist, Ifemelu as also going through a process of becoming undutiful, hence my analysis of the novel as a bildungsroman. As a bildungsroman, *Americanah*’s principal narrative centres on Ifemelu’s process of womaning, and this quest is inextricably linked to her love life and her relationship to the Nigerian national space. As such, her growing up is intimately tied to her appreciation of her romantic relationship(s) as it is tied to her relationship with Nigeria. In reading the novel this way, I take Okuyade’s (2011) cue who while reading Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come* sees the Bildungsroman as “intimately connected to nation-building” and advances that Atta uses the Bildungsroman as a strategy of developing national identity and promoting social cohesion, by endorsing and perpetuating specific ideologies (167-8). The scholar continues that the domestication of the “traditional western Bildungsroman ... within a postcolonial context to appraise narratives of growth” is capable of offering “a model of resistance to women’s oppression” (2011: 152). Okuyade offers that these Nigerian variants of

the Bildungsroman portray “the struggle for individuation and the negotiation of feminine subjectivity, while concurrently depicting the plight of women in a society plagued by the debilitating forces of patriarchy, and alternatives to that plight” (ibid.). Okuyade is not alone in seeing the bildungsroman as initiating some productive dislocations within post-colonial and patriarchal contexts. Stratton (1994) notes African women writers’ redefinition of the bildungsroman by their thematization of “not only race but also gender as a developmental issue” whereas the earlier texts authored by men concentrated only on race (1994: 107). She eloquently argues:

In certain important respects, the female bildungsroman stands in opposition to the entire African male literary tradition – a tradition to which the very notion of female development is alien. For it is a form which, by its very definition, characterizes women as active and dynamic – as developing. Women are, in other words, conceptualized not as the Other but as self-defining. Furthermore, their status as historical subjects is given due recognition. This ... form ... seeks to subvert the Manichean allegory of gender by putting female subjectivity in process. (ibid)

Although Stratton’s statement is peremptory in its refusal to admit representational subtleties that are found in works by male authors, her statement is useful in pointing towards the limited portrayal of female characters. A close reading of Adichie’s text demonstrates its alignment to a post-colonial bildungsroman that is attentive to the questions of gender in national formations. Ifemelu’s character represents a femininity that occupies and inhabits the national space in a manner that is disruptive of the social constructions of femininity. Right from a young age as a school-going teenager, Ifemelu stands out as having a non-normative femininity which

challenges national masculinities' attempts to enforce silence, docility and subservience. Two occasions stand out in the novel. The first one is when Obinze, the new boy in her high school, tells her what Kayode, a schoolmate, says about her. To Kayode, "Ifemelu is a fine babe but she is too much trouble. She can argue. She can talk. She never agrees" (60). The other one is when Ifemelu's mother felt that she had insulted sister Ibinabo and laments: "Why must this girl be a troublemaker? I have been saying it since, that it would be better if she was a boy, behaving like this" (52). Both incidents exemplify instances where Ifemelu is viewed as having a femininity that does not fit into a socially constructed identity mold of what being a girl entails. Tellingly, implicit in her mother's desire to impose silence is also a discourse of honour and dishonour, propriety and impropriety that is only ascribed to women and excused in boys. I read Ifemelu as a speaking subject, and in this regard take cognisance of Samuelson (2005) who while writing elsewhere about authors' attempts to control and contain their women characters, observes that "women as speaking subjects, with tongues, are presented as dangerously unstable leaky vessels" (4). She goes on to argue that more often than not, "such women are subject to textual acts of sexual power that seek to manage and restrain them" (ibid.). However, Adichie refuses to contain/regulate Ifemelu's character by giving her free rein throughout the narrative, so much so that Scarsini (2017: 77) while comparing Ifemelu's "provocative nature ... to misleading representations of a girl as silent, obedient and malleable" refers to her as a "loud femininity."

Ifemelu is therefore represented as argumentative, opinionated, passionate and flawed – not only flawed in her lack of patriarchally assigned feminine "virtues," but also in the way she often comes off as judgemental and dismissive. I however argue that this figuration is productive in the way it runs counter to prevalent social and imaginative stereotyping and containment of

women. By representing her as what acceptable femininity is not, Adichie offers an irruption of the feminine norm and creates possibilities of challenging and destabilising hegemonic representations of women that often idealise womanhood and hold onto the “naturalness” of the roles and attributes ascribed to her. It is of no small significance therefore that Ifemelu becomes a risky invitee into genteel and urbane gatherings and parties that she often attends with Blaine, her African American boyfriend, where she repeatedly tests the limits of feminine silence and propriety. In my opinion, attempts to silence and “domesticate” Ifemelu and make her fit into a pre-cast identity amount to a form of policing, surveillance and containment of not only her emotions which are borne out of particular experiences, but also of a runaway femininity that refuses prescriptive female identities. In addition, what is at stake when we obsess about her propriety is not only the fact that we fall into a presumption that emotions are a hindrance to conversation or debate, but also because we fail to address the overarching patriarchal and racial “superstructures” that Ifemelu positions herself against. It is in effect, a case of being mindful of the comfortability of patriarchy (whether practiced by men or protected by women) and whiteness and failing to address the privilege that undergirds both.

Americanah and *Everything Good Will Come* provide narratives of a steady coming-of-age of the protagonists that affects the way they engage in heterosexual relationships and with the national space. Notably, the maturation and womaning of both Ifemelu and Enitan come with a change in their understanding of their bodies, intimacy and love. As Scarsini (2017) eloquently shows, Ifemelu’s sexuality and love relationships are key in moulding her subjectivity and agency. She argues that the novel offers insights into the fruitfulness of sex as a “literary subject

and how literature can contribute in defining the agency and performance of black femininity” (Ibid. 37). In addition, she posits that:

The novel may be defined as a compendium of female sexuality which does not simply describe one sexual instance of the protagonist, but rather traces its development in link with various factors such as age, economy, culture and society. As a matter of fact, the narrating voice follows Ifemelu in particular in her sexual life both as an adolescent and as an adult, stressing how she is initially curious about sex and yet does not enjoy it, whereas as an adult she develops a remarkable sexual imagination and desire with different partners (38-9)

Keeping this in mind, and taking a slightly different turn, I argue that the novel’s exploration of female bodies, pleasure and agency and love runs counter to national patriarchies for they are placed in “tension with conventional roles transmitted by national and other traditional narratives” (Boehmer, 2005: 6). While writing about “the mother Africa trope,” Stratton (1994) draws a link between gendered sexualities and national discourses that I find instructive. She argues that the “national subject is [often] designated as male,” and that in constructing Africa/the nation in feminine terms, it “becomes the object of the male gaze” (51). Stratton sees this relationship as one of “possession,” one that casts the man as “the active subject-citizen,” and the woman as “the passive object-nation,” one who symbolises “his honour and glory or his degradation as a citizen. Sometimes he is a questing hero, Africa a woman in distress” (Ibid.). One instance in *Americanah* potently exemplifies how woman’s bodies and sexualities are intricately tied to national masculinities’ gaze, desire and control. This incident happens in the US when Bartholomew, Auntu Uju’s suitor, comes to visit them. While they are

watching a television drama featuring “a young girl in a short dress,” Bartholomew quips that “a girl in Nigeria will never wear that kind of dress” (116). Ifemelu, unable to stomach his “overheated moralities” reminds him that “girls in Nigeria wear dresses much shorter than that o” (Ibid.). Later, Ifemelu reads his online posts where he comments that “Nigerian women came to America and became wild,” and he says that this is the reason for the “high divorce rates among Nigerians in America and the low rates among Nigerians in Nigeria” (117). There are several things going on here. In the first place, Bartholomew exhibits some form of supervisory role over women’s bodies and sexualities through his implicit desire to police their sartorial choices. Secondly, he demonstrates some form of male moral panic regarding the “wildness” of women who refuse to stay in matrimonial unions (the social institution where sex is sanctioned) that, the narrator hints, might be abusive. Tied to these two is, on the one hand, a proprietorial pride of having girls who “will never wear that kind of dress,” and, on the other hand, a sense of collective ownership of women that can decide and judge what is acceptable and what passes as not acceptable hence “wild.” This positioning of the woman in a space where she symbolises “his honour and glory or his degradation as a citizen,” as Stratton opines enables him to invoke national kinship ties that allow him to apportion patriarchal nationalist commendation and opprobrium accordingly. However, Ifemelu’s retort to Bartholomew intimates the slippages of power and the failure of regulatory and prohibitory regimes within national patriarchies in ways that create possibilities for re-imagining the social horizons and roles of women.

In growing up against these social prescriptions that regulate their bodies, sexualities and sociality, it is telling that the protagonists of both novels end up re-evaluating (for Ifemelu) and severing (for Enitan) their intimacies not only as it relates to their love/sexual lives, but also

as it relates to the nation. Ifemelu for one leaves a relationship with Curt, an interracial romance that signals a “location of resistance to the norms, proprieties and taxonomies of the cultural order” (Belsey, 1994: 6), but one in which she is treated as an exotic adventure (Scarsini, 2017: 48). The racial connotations of their union that Scarsini underlines by pointing out Curt’s confession to Ifemelu that he had never been with a black woman before resonates with bell hooks’s (1990: 57) observations on the historical constructions of “black women’s bodies [as a] discursive terrain, the playing field where racism and sexuality converged.” Curt, to borrow and extend hooks’ astute theorisation, represents sex with a black woman as a form of “rite” in ways that rope in fetishisation, desire, consumption and domination. Ifemelu also leaves Blaine who exhibits constraining forms of frigidity (Ibid.: 50-1). She eventually ends up with Obinze who represents a sensitive, supportive, vulnerable and caring masculinity that refuses to exercise patriarchal authority and is not tied to societal constructs of stereotypical manhood. In Enitan’s case, she severs her relationship with Niyi and opts to live outside matrimony once she discovers his limited(ing) grammar of love and civic engagement. This happens after her father is arrested and Niyi, claiming to love her, forbids her to participate in any civil action to secure her father’s release claiming that his only concern is his family (326). In fact Niyi’s declaration of love to Enitan right after they have had an argument about her political activism of which he disapproves reveals that his expression and grammar of love is closely tied to control and regulation as it is tied to a selfish individuality that disregards collective well-being, struggles and injustices as long as he is safe. She therefore rejects this stifling coupling/love and the reductive civic engagement it enforces.

Adichie and Atta's development of the changing individual romances alongside national affiliations needs examination. Ifemelu's various relationships allows for her growth as an emotional and sexual subject in a way that unwrites the fairy tale of a single love, and that eventually leads to her return to Obinze. In narrating this return to Obinze, the narrator does a curious thing by showing an equivalence between a return to Nigeria with a return to Obinze. On the verge of leaving America to Nigeria, Ifemelu evaluates and what led her to that decision despite the success of her blog and her relationship with Blaine. She attributes this to "cement in her soul ... an early morning disease of fatigue, a bleakness and borderlessness" that "melded into a piercing homesickness." She concludes:

Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil. And, of course, there was also Obinze. Her first love ... they had not been in touch in years, yet she could not pretend that he was not a part of her homesickness, or that she did not often think of him, sifting through their past, looking for portents of what she could not name (6-7)

Just like her return to Obinze must be viewed in relation to the other romantic journeys that she took, Ifemelu's return to Nigeria also needs to be looked at in light of her leaving – her migration from Nigeria. She had left Nigeria after a series of university strikes that paralysed learning such that "everyone was talking about leaving" (98). Although Ifemelu does not talk about the national condition that leads to these migrations, Ginika's father and Obinze's mother, both university professors, give us a glimpse of why the home/nation becomes a space of flight. Concerning the strikes, Ginika's father, who together with his family migrates to America, laments that the "regime is treating us like sheep and we are starting to behave as if we are

sheep” (64). He complains about his inability to conduct research because he is busy “organising strikes and talking about unpaid salary and there is no chalk in the classrooms” (Ibid.). When Ifemelu goes to bid farewell to Obinze’s mother before she moves to America, the former remarks that “Nigeria is chasing away its best resources” (100). These characters provide the politically conscious and evaluative voice that Ifemelu is as yet lacking, and therefore make the connection between the university strikes and governance/national politics. Ifemelu’s migration from the national home is significant in the way she spurns its domesticating tendencies and calls attention to its failures to capture or monopolise the intimacies and loyalties of its citizens. Her migration, and that of other characters in the text, reads into what Adélékè Adèkó (2008) calls an abandonment of the “‘dying for the nation’ sentiment that dominated earlier nationalist narratives” for it is a refusal of a certain self-abnegation demanded by the nationalist project and rhetoric. In light of the coerced but not self-elected affiliations to the nation discussed earlier, this migration becomes an exercise of freedom, a “refusal to be contained and accounted for by the frameworks of home and nation” (Coly, 2010: xi).

In light of the nation’s failure to secure the loyalties of its citizens and Ifemelu’s relative success in America, her decision to return becomes semantically loaded. On the one hand, it unwrites the African nation as a space of flight, a space where the subject seeks to flee. But at the same time, her decision to return and stay, perhaps inadvertently, underlines her privilege as it is contrasted to the people who also want to migrate. On the other hand, and significantly so, the return signals the legitimation and reinforcement of the nation as an originary point of belonging, a space that provides the promise and possibilities for solidarity, community and sociality in the face of the racial aggressions and chauvinistic nationalisms which often serve to buttress

economic and political privilege in America (Coly, 2010: xviii). However, whether this is achievable remains debatable bearing in mind the class and ethnic polarities that both Atta and Adichie limn. It nevertheless remains a possible horizon that Atta's text overtly works to achieve and which Adichie points towards. Certainly for Obinze, return to the home offers a refuge from racism, "failure," the vicissitudes of foreignness, exclusion and non-belonging. In a space where race does not have the same hold on social mobility as it is in England, the reader feels the ease of Obinze's socio-economic ascendancy which mainly comes from co-beneficial and privileged forms of homosociality. *Americanah*'s representation of return is therefore highly political for it acknowledges a nationalist agenda that proffers the nation as a bastion within which the post-colonial subject can offer resistance against what Ayo Coly (2010) refers to as "neo-colonial globalization" (xxiv).

In addition, the novel presents Ifemelu's return as also a return to love since Obinze forms part of her "homesickness." Placing the return to Obinze and love as part of the equation, the novel expands the nation as a space that provides forms of intimacy and romance that sharply contrast to the ones she had experienced in the diasporic space. As discussed earlier, her relationship with Curt and Blaine are highly charged because of racial, economic/class and historical differences. Apart from the almost irreconcilable class and economic differences and racial undertones of their sexual encounters, it is instructive that Ifemelu feels frustrated by Curt who, even though he is sometimes perceptive to racial aggressions directed at her, is completely oblivious about others and so she is put in a position where she constantly has to explain (457). Repeatedly, the reader feels the strain exerted on their private romance when in it placed in the public space. The same thing happens with Blaine who on top of his sexual frigidity mentioned

earlier, harbours expectations and assumptions of intraracial solidarities and proclivities that reductively brackets out their historical backgrounds, gender and racial experiences. This comes up when Ifemelu chooses not to attend a protest organised by Blaine against the racial profiling of Mr. White. Mr. White is a black security guard at Yale who Ifemelu disliked because he always made inappropriate remarks regarding Ifemelu, squeezed her fingers whenever they shook hands and basically leered at her even in Blaine's presence (342). Blaine just assumes that Ifemelu would attend the protest but she "merely preferred" to attend a going-away lunch with Boubacar, a Senegalese professor who taught contemporary African issues at Yale and whose classes she would often attend (Ibid.). In the fight that ensues after her failure to attend, Ifemelu recognises in Blaine's tone "a subtle accusation ... about her laziness, her lack of zeal and conviction, but also about her Africanness; she was not sufficiently furious because she was African, not African American" (345). Blaine therefore demonstrates an underlying and unexamined expectation of a black diaspora solidarity and even ghettoization that disregards Ifemelu's history, gendered and racial experience. In addition, there is a glaring disconnect in his being enraged by the racial profiling while at the same time he does not recognise the sexual harassment that constantly happens in his presence.

In effect, the failure of the romances between Ifem, Blaine and Curt appears to be a way in which Adichie uses to hint at the difficulty of extending individual love/intimacy into the public domain. Put differently, their private/domestic love remains fragile and limited in the face of historically charged schisms and hostilities that dominate the public national spaces and institutions. As such the reader cannot but feel how fluidly national cultures and histories move into and affect these domestic intimacies. However, as mentioned before, the fact that these

couplings are considered in the novel deals an ideological blow to the interracial and intraracial polarities envisioned between the two – however limited this might be. Ultimately, by narrating the national home as a space that offers collective solidarity against the forces of racism, late imperialism and as a space that nurtures Ifemelu’s romantic love to “the only person with whom she had never felt the need to explain herself,” Adichie presents return as multifaceted – as a return to nation, to home, to love (6). In this way, the novel affirms “the continuing political, ideological, and emotional appeal of postcolonial nationhood” (Coly, 2010: 125).

However, Adichie, through Ifemelu, falls short of wholly endorsing the nation as a space that the individual can invest all her hopes of equity and self-fulfilment bearing in mind the gendered and ethnicised nature of the nation that her literary oeuvre limns. As hinted earlier, migration in *Americanah* is more often than not an indicator of the troubled intimacies between the individual and the nation. In this way, we sense the truism in Iain Chambers’s (1994: 2) assertion that “migrancy and exile ... involves ... a form of picking a quarrel with where you come from” as Adichie presents characters “whose psychic firmaments are not inexplicably unsettled by the singular and unified nation state” as Adéèkó argues elsewhere (2008: 11). This reluctance by the individual to wholly invest in the nation is for instance narrativised when Ifemelu contemplates the infrastructural failure that leads to the lack of electricity and the reliance on a generator for air conditioning at Ranyinudo’s flat. Feeling the “warm, humid air” that “gagged the room ... she felt suddenly, guiltily grateful that she had a blue American passport in her bag. It shielded her from choicelessness. She could always leave; she did not have to stay” (390). Evidently therefore, her return does not mean that America, as a possible site of dwelling, completely disappears from her horizons. In fact, return to America remains a

contingent possibility. Her American passport offers her a form of reassurance and security that she can always summon. It offers a compensatory space of dwelling when the nation fails to secure for her the protections of citizenship and is therefore unable to mobilise and monopolise her allegiance.

One thing however stands out that needs to be attended to when dealing with her relationship with America. I will take recourse to a statement Adichie often makes about America. She compares “America to ‘a very rich uncle who doesn’t really know who you are, but all the same you can’t help being fond of him’” (Calkin, 2013). If we are to transpose Adichie/America relational model to Ifemelu’s predicament, what becomes apparent, though subtly layered, are unequal global relations of economic and even political power that most often occasion migration. So in Ifemelu’s thinking of America at a moment of infrastructural failure, we can read the material/capital investments in that “very rich uncle” called America. In this regard, Ifemelu views her American passport as insurance against the uncertainties of national futures, and therein lies a paradox: the desire to insure herself when her return journey is an investment in these national futures. But this paradox is not hard to untangle if we understand Ifemelu’s relationship to both America and Nigeria as part of an ongoing practice of critique and embrace that performs the ideological work of unsettling the mythologies of home/nation and the discursive constructions of America as well. Kwadwo Osei-Nyame’s (2007) reading of Oguine, the protagonist *A Squatter’s Tale* and his relationship with America/Nigeria is instructive in the way it aids our understanding of Ifemelu’s relationship as well. He says about the text; “while Nigeria is negated, it is also being affirmed as a possibility. For the alternative (if Nigeria could provide fulfilment for Obi, he would stay there) is evoked as a non-existent but possible reality”

(88). The corollary is also true: because America is an “uncle who doesn’t really know who you are,” it cannot fully offer the privileges and protections of citizenship and belonging.

In essence, what *Americanah* evinces is a refusal to perform an uncritical patriotism anticipated by the nation state, as well as a refusal of domestication. Indeed, return should not be simply read as a moment of re-domestication within the patriarchal national space, or as a formulaic reunification found in romance/love stories. On the contrary, Ifemelu’s return limns a radical inhabiting of the national space that is enhanced when read alongside Atta’s Enitan. In fact, the nurturing and re-evaluation of their interpersonal intimacies and romances go hand in hand with an increased and studied involvement with the national space and communities in ways that mark a subtle movement from the personal/private in domestic unions, to an expanded public space. In my opinion, this records a politically radical moment which inscribes women’s labours of love, care and intellect into the public domain in a manner that challenges its masculinist orientation and configuration. Ifemelu’s blog in Nigeria, *The Small Redemptions of Lagos*, should therefore be read as part of the intellectual and emotional labour she invests in the nation. Her blog tackles a range of issues: fashion, weddings, relationships, sex, sexuality and the body, the Nigerpolitan Club, the kept woman, health, government harassment of hawkers and the destruction of their shacks, waterlogged neighbourhoods, the mass media and fake accents etc. In this way, Adichie captures the coming-of-age of Ifemelu – the girl who did not have the language and political savvy to narrate the connections between strikes and migrations to national politics and management – to a public intellectual capable of initiating, participating and contributing in national conversations. In reading the blog this way, I follow the lead set by Louisa Uchum Egbunike who, while reading Ifeoma’s letters to Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus*

opines that “the ability of many Nigerian citizens, both at ‘home’ and in the diaspora, to participate in a national debate while in the midst of adversity indicates that the populace remains engaged with the prospect of a better nation” (2014: 231).

Enitan in *Everything Good Will Come* aptly exemplifies women doing the intellectual, emotional and physical labour of imagining new national realities. After Enitan’s father gets arrested by the military regime, Grace Ameh, a journalist assembles a group of women related to arrested journalists and dissidents to agitate for their release in ways that amplify the productivity of female solidarity, male silence and absence (329). Significantly, this group of women abrogates and toys with gender constructs and stereotypes to engage with public figures and institutions. When Grace Ameh is recruiting Enitan to join in the protest against these arbitrary arrests, she tells Enitan that she wants to constitute “a group of wives, coming together once a month, in someone’s house, doing what women do best. Gossiping,” a statement she follows with a wink, and to which Enitan replies by saying that she had “never passed up the opportunity to gossip” (297). There could be two interpretations to this. On the one hand, Grace performs a politicisation of gossip, with all the reductive negative connotations attached to it as a feminine subculture, which names it as a subversive culture. On the other hand, it underlines the endurance and continuity of “gossip” amongst women – that it is not something they will be doing for neither the first time nor the last – for mobilisation, bonding and subversion while at the same time hoodwinking the patriarchal establishment. In addition, the novel uses this to reinforce “gossip” and or “talking” as a legitimate way of bringing about change not only in its orientation of sharing and informing, but also in the possibility this creates for destabilising action. In this regard, Grace gives an injunction to Enitan: “use your voice to bring about

change” (259). In voicing their dissent, Grace, Enitan and the other women provide the answer to Sunny’s question directed to his daughter when he wonders where the voices of women, who form more than half of the population, are in standing up against the regime (196). Enitan informs him of the multifaceted nature of women’s struggles and points out the deficiencies of a national struggle that sidelines the particularities of women’s issues:

No husband, bad husband, husband’s girlfriend, husband’s mother. Human rights were never an issue till the rights of men were threatened. There’s nothing in our constitution for kindness at home. And even if the army goes, we will have our men to answer to. So what is it you want women to say? (Ibid.)

From the above discussion, we deduce that women’s voices have always been there but have however escaped the male radar because they have been trivialised and hence dismissed as “gossip.” In addition, Enitan’s response to her father indicates that women’s liberational undertakings cannot be divorced from the sphere of the intimate and the relational, and that here they are considered as “distractions” to the more “legitimate” male centred anxieties and preoccupations. This statement, directed at her father is loaded because of his contradictory behaviour that recognises governmental injustices and aspires to raise Enitan beyond societal limitations of womanhood but refuses to see the violence and injustices he commits against his wife. In rejecting her father’s goading, Enitan refuses to buy into a populist rhetoric of nationalism that compromises women as it privileges men. This reads into Cynthia Enloe’s observation about nationalisms and their orientation towards “masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope” (2014: 45). On the contrary, Enitan envisions Nigeria as a space of collective ownership and habitation.

In the bond that Grace, Enitan and the other women establish, we sense a formulation of a model of resistance whereby the defence and preservation of the self is not for the self alone, but also for the preservation and defence of the larger society. Their active and participatory performance of citizenship is contrasted to the militarised masculine violence and apathy that pervades the text. Insulated by male and middle class privileges, Niyi's disengagement from any act of political dissent exemplifies this apathy. As mentioned earlier, Niyi demonstrates a sense of citizenship and belonging to the nation that only acknowledges responsibility to himself and his immediate family. His failure to see the world beyond the home, to envision relationalities that transcend matrimonial and familial intimacies – intimacies that are nevertheless born of the desire to control and contain on his part – positions him within national patriarchies represented in both texts as responsible for various forms of violence either through commission or omission. However, Enitan desires a more expanded vision of her citizenship that recognises her responsibility to other individuals within the nation. Unlike her husband, Enitan refuses to see the violation of the collective as separate from the violation of the family/private. Although her desire for collective equity and justice remains latent and unacted upon for some part of the narrative, it takes an assault of the personal – the arrest of her father and the death of the mother – to galvanise her into action towards the end of the novel. As such, she tells Niyi that “nothing is safe around here ... whether or not you are looking for trouble, they give it to you,” and that she initially “wasn't worried about my mother. Who are we fooling? The state our country is in affects everyone” (325-6). The most poignant moment of Enitan's acts of imagi-Nation in the novel comes when she explodes the boundaries of the nation that constrain her political and civic engagement. She pithily asks: “What was the country I loved? The country I would fight for? Should it have borders?” (299). Coming right after she acknowledges transnational solidarities

by black women through her desire to wave a happy flag “for women in my country; African women. Black women,” Enitan demonstrates alertness to victorious celebrations of black femininity, its bonds and vulnerabilities that transcends the limited ethical commitments delineated by the horizons of national boundaries.

Through Adichie and Atta’s representation of eclectic social, cultural and political competencies of their protagonists, they proffer characters who reject the male injunction for female silence, pliability, compliance and acceptance. Ifemelu and Enitan’s politics, which do not mesh well with mainstream national and patriarchal undertakings, locate them outside androcentric discursive terrains and agendas in a way that suggests their destabilisation through pinpointing their inadequacies and inefficacies. In interrogating these two characters, I suggest an analysis of their womaning narratives that rereads Okuyade’s (2011) examination of the Bildungsroman tradition within the interpretive framework of the undutiful daughter. While Okuyade (2011) asserts that “the history of the Bildungsroman tradition is connected to nation-building and the socialization of ‘good’ citizens,” I suggest that a closer examination of Ifemelu and Enitan does not summon the image of the “ideal female citizen” – docile, submissive, domestic, supportive (168). In fact, both characters do not become “good” citizens. Their engagement and habitation of the national space in a way that engenders the growth of democratic space and institutions, equity, justice, accountability and collective responsibility positions them at a point of conflict with national patriarchies and its proxies. It is no wonder then that Ifemelu has to be contained when she eschews feminine roles and virtues, and Enitan’s act of divorcing Niyi is inconceivable because he did not cheat on her, and her open joy, dancing and defiance when her father is released can only be interpreted by onlookers as “madness.” In

addition, these characters' active participation and representation of women in national discourse arrogates the normalised and self-imposed masculine prerogative of representing women in the public sphere (Boehmer, 2005: 26-7). Their voices and presence offer disjunctures and discontinuities from male-centred historiographies and genealogies of the nation and envision more inclusive and less violent presents and futures.

However, a fine disambiguation is necessary here, that is, the variations in the two novels' representation of a framework for collective action. While Atta's text constructs a collective and therefore, the reader feels, more productive engagement with the nation, Ifemelu's political action seems isolated and therefore precarious. Indeed, Ifemelu is a returnee in the literary tradition of the "been-to" established earlier in Achebe's *No Longer At Ease*, Armah's *Fragments* or even Soyinka's *The Interpreters* where we feel the protagonists' alienation and isolation, albeit that this differs in *Americanah* as Ifemelu works towards fitting in the defamiliarised national space. Ifemelu's isolation is mitigated by the fact that she does not exhibit the high ideals of national reconstruction nursed by either Obi in Achebe or the interpreters – Sekoni, Kola, Sagoe, Bandele and Egbo – in Soyinka's text. Adichie therefore captures the change of thematic preoccupations from the first to third generation writers. Her representation of Ifemelu as a "been-to" who lacks the grand national ideals held by Soyinka, Armah and Achebe's protagonists, and her indicting and unflattering portrayal of the members of the Nigeropolitan Club (a group of Nigerian Euro-America returnees) with their affectations and elitist tendencies can be read as her way of decisively removing the hope of national futures from returnees and placing it as a collective endeavour. In this way Adichie privileges inclusive interactivity and engagement as a way of conceptualising and charting out national futures.

Ultimately, in its mapping of disembellished national affiliations alongside a heterosexual romantic love that travels and returns, Adichie's novel refuses a grand narrative of romance. While the quintessential romance narrative casts the woman as passive, waiting for the agency of the man to activate her intimate desires, so does the male-centric national romance which literally writes and or silences the woman within its political, cultural and institutional formations. It is no coincidence that Adichie's protagonist, Ifemelu, finds the "Mills and Boon romances ... silly" in the way they enact male mastery and agency against female vulnerability, acquiescence and passivity, waiting for her sexuality to be awakened by the man who holds and guides the destiny of the relationship (58). In a way that contrasts to the image of Mills and Boon romances which Ifemelu defines as "the man would grab the woman, the woman would fight weakly, then collapse against him with shrill moans," she initiates her sexual encounters with Obinze in a manner that explodes the normative trajectories of sexual desire (Ibid.). As such, Adichie enables us to visualise desire, untethered as it is from patriarchal edicts, as a "possible mode of resistance" a la Boehmer (2005: 172). In addition, Ifemelu also refuses to see Obinze for seven months when he appears not to know the decision to make concerning his wife and daughter, on the one hand, and Ifemelu on the other (477). This rejection of female helplessness and dependence is continued by the novel's upstaging of the scripts of chivalry whose basis is usually female rescue and provision. Ifemelu returns as an independent and self-accomplished woman whose destiny and future is not predetermined and dependant on Obinze. As such, their reunification contains layers of subversion to normative heterosexual intimacies and coupling.

In the same vein, as I have attempted to show, her return to Nigeria as part of an ongoing romance with the nation of origin is part of an ongoing process of critique and embrace

which generates the affects of intimacy and distance. Just like Obinze does not predetermine Ifemelu's destinies, the nation does not also predetermine them. Significantly then, we can extrapolate that in her narrative of her experiences with Nigeria, citizen Ifem troubles the supposed intimate/patriotic coupling of the citizen and the nation. In bursting this national romance, Adichie and Atta expose it as quintessentially androcentric in its casting of the nation as both property and object of desire for men, with women as part of this possession and objects of desire (Stratton, 1994). Deviation from the conventional trope of "national romance" is therefore essentially a rejection of the roles and place of the woman in a masculinist romance with the nation. Adichie's twining of national romances and heterosexual romantic love is thus productive in the way it makes us examine questions of home, belonging, gender and migrancy.

5.4 Conclusion

Beginning with the premise that patriarchal nationalism is highly invested in the domestication of women, this chapter took an interest in the movement of female characters out of the "home" as actions that enunciate a process of its unravelling. With regard to this, the chapter examined Adichie's representation of Ifemelu's migration and return in a bid to examine what this means to a woman's belonging in the national home. Through return migratory journeys and a romance aesthetic, Adichie restructures and supplements the discourses of the nation and their ideological underpinnings. In reading Adichie alongside Atta's text, this chapter recognises the tension between women's quest for self-actualisation and fulfilment and patriarchal nationalist cultures, institutions and politics, and the writers' attempts to "unsettle the house" as it is normatively configured. In an attempt to examine these writers' efforts to destabilise the life-giving narrative of the national home, the chapter uses Braidotti's concept of

the undutiful daughter as an interpretive paradigm that unpacks Ifemelu and Enitan's "womaning," experiencing and habitation of the home.

Through the twining of individual and national romances, this chapter examined Adichie's undutifulness to masculinist and Eurocentric categories, her rejection of received literary traditions and fashionable ways of knowing as part of a project to chart out new paths and create new possibilities of knowledge production and envision new and productive relationalities. In addition, I have argued that Ifemelu and Enitan's habitation of the national home mark subversive and disruptive modes of being that challenge and transform regulative and disciplinary traditions and regimes. Their articulateness in imagining national and private intimacies not only stultifies male monovocality and patriarchys' attempts at enforcing female self-abasement and abnegation, it also challenges male-centric national historiographies. In this regard, I argue that Ifemelu and Enitan articulate more inclusive ways of belonging to the nation, re-imagine the roles and place of women in national figurations, expand the boundaries of civic engagement beyond the nation, challenge romantic love in ways that expose its limiting potentialities and productively configure it in ways that refuse self-effacement and non-agency.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

This study's interest in contemporary African fictions of migration/diaspora is an attempt to make sense of African intellectual and cultural productions in the face of migration, African encounters and experiencing of global modernity, the intersections of racial and gendered experiences of migration and questions of the national home and belonging. As fictions that are written by individuals who are living and published in Euro-America, this corpus calls attention to the transformation of African literature by migration and dislocation, its thematic reach, standing and reception in global cultural flows. While acknowledging the politics behind African cultural productions in the heart of the west, this study reads this body of texts as ideologically invested in ongoing African discourses on representation and epistemological productions. As such, the texts are read as being self-consciously aware of the conditions of their production and reception, and working within the limited paradigms of their reception to challenge hegemonic categories.

The study of contemporary African fiction on migration/diaspora as being interpolated in debates on Africa/Euro-American epistemological productions falls within the purview of chapter two of the study. This chapter analysed Adichie's *Americanah* and Cole's *Open City* as texts whose thematic and stylistic choices are geared towards broadening discursive contours through imaginative renditions of female experiences of migration, the salon and black women's aesthetics, the blog and walking as a means of reading Euro-American metropolises through the narrativisation of the portraiture of the complex historical and cultural imbrications of Africa

and the West. In the chapter, I read *Americanah*'s outspoken narrator as not a "killjoy" but also as embodying a "loud femininity" which not only poses a threat to gendered constructs but one which is also used to explore the ideas of silence and conformity as racialised, gendered and often played out against the migrant in American publics. However, the novel challenges the expectations of docility and passivity by creating spaces whose constitution ruptures hegemonic discursive closures through an amplification of difference and different ways of knowing. In her engagement with the hostland, Ifemelu engages and transcends the socio-political and epistemological boundaries placed upon her person as a result of her skin colour, immigrant status and gender. It is from this web of entangled experiences that the author creates a voice that speaks truth to power and undermines its assumptions. By placing these issues within a global discursive context experienced by the racialised migrant, Adichie embraces a multi-voicedness that not only challenges Manichean notions of the world but also monologic representations. Indeed, the poly-vocal world and narratives that the text creates interrupts and challenges the dominance of a Western monologue as represented in its claims to ontological and epistemological objectivity.

In examining Cole's *Open City*, this study was concerned with movement, silences, erasures and histories of spaces and the author's attempt to challenge ideas of purity. The metaphor of movement in the text signals a mobility that is not only coded in physical movement but one that is also coded in the litany of ideas, peripatetic wandering of the narrator from one memory, thought, idea to another. The novel's rupturing of the conventions of form by its adoption of an essayistic, almost diary-like narrative allows the reader entry into the most intimate, seemingly trivial details/accounts that go into construction of space and its boundaries.

The interiorised narrative that Cole presents places the reader in the narrator's mind. As it is, Julius the attentive polymath becomes an essential figure through whose eyes all actions and events are filtered. Although the novel is told from the first person point of view, through the numerous contacts, journeys (physical/mental) and conversations that Julius has, the reader gains entry into a multitudinous and eclectic world, one which is defined by intersections of cultures, histories and peoples. His attentiveness and encyclopaedic knowledge enables Cole to escape the narrowing of experience of first person narratives by introducing a wide range of mediums that the reader perceives the text, that is, music, paintings/drawings, pictures, buildings, and spaces.

Through his construction of the character of Julius and the adoption of the notion of a palimpsest, the study advances that Cole exposes the fictions of order and completeness through embracing instabilities and proliferations of meaning and the chaos that define the organisation of space. In this way, Julius's narrative of complex histories and memories transforms New York and Brussels into spaces of contamination and contestation. These public spaces are reconfigured as spaces within which the character examines his otherness and his place and that of others in the cities. However, by the end of the novel he intimates the impossibility of self-knowledge in the incident where he is accused of rape, an event he had completely and or conveniently forgotten. For a character who is attuned to the textures of global violence, this chapter shows that the knowledge of this act alienates Julius from the reader's empathy by disturbing reader-narrator identifications which in turn perform the political work of destabilising dominant and mainstream narratives. Ultimately, Cole presents us with the fallibility of memory and monological narratives through his portrayal of fragmentary, plural and competing discourses/histories/voices.

Chapter three of the study picks up from the previous chapter in its endeavour to study African contacts and the experiencing of these encounters in a deeply imbricated world. Focusing on the permeability of national borders to African elsewhere, the chapter seeks to examine unequal global encounters which destabilise triumphant and celebratory narratives of globalisation. As such, this study attends to particularised stories of both racialized and gendered mobilities which often get lost in discourses that focus on more privileged movements and contacts. In doing this, the chapter is interested in narratives of these encounters within the continent and also after migration. Bulawayo's *We need New Names* and Mabanckou's *Blue White Red* are the main texts under examination here. As texts that represent mobilities as being multiple and African elsewhere as accessible repertoires within the continent even before migration, the novels represent complex portrayals of the mythos behind the fascinations and infatuations with these outside spaces. In their representation of the currency of these mythos of African elsewhere in Africa and the characters eventual migration, Bulawayo and Mabanckou challenge us to engage with them (Euro-America) as both spaces on a map (a geographical entity) and as imagined spaces. Through the characters' performance of certain fluencies and self-stylisations with these imagined spaces, the authors reveal the social capital placed on mobility and also articulated desires for elsewhere that are closely tied to limited opportunities within the nation and the construction of host nations as spaces of inexhaustible possibilities. The narratives present the diffusion of elsewhere into Darling's and Massala-Massala's worlds as paradoxical in that they function as symbolic spaces of regeneration and escape, while at the same time contacts with these spaces highlight global inequalities and violent encounters.

In reading *We need New Names*, this study focused on the child characters and surmises that Bulawayo represents a contaminated world with disenfranchisement and hierarchical encodings of the meanings of spaces and difference as undergirding this contaminatedness. Through a reading of the choice of a child narrator and characters, narratives of elsewheres circulating in Paradise, children's play/games, photography, voyeuristic tourist encounters and humanitarian interventions, I show how their experiencing, performance and narrativisation of their encounters with foreign spaces, the children seem to be enacting unequal encounters/relations that efface the inhabitants of Paradise. The focalisation on child characters – markedly non-hegemonic and vulnerable as they occupy precarious and fragile spaces – and the circulation of narratives of travel and elsewheres from relatives presents a shift from global relations framed within the lens of public/national and multinational bodies to individualised and personal experiences. This focus on individualised experiences is buttressed by an engagement with the associations of foreign spaces with intimate and affective narratives of loss, neglect and abandonment. This study further posits the children's games as translational paradigms deployed by Bulawayo's characters to make sense of their beleaguered world. Notably, I examine the country-game in the text as a metaphor that enables us to unpack Bulawayo's subtle portrayal of shifts and frictions in global relations/alliances that ultimately imbricate the children characters into global power relations and also enunciate their subordination within a global matrix of disassembling encounters.

In addition, through a reading of the text's investment in visual cultures of Africa, this study builds on Arnett's (2016) authoritative and judicial essay on Bulawayo's text to argue that photography ropes in the children, and indeed the inhabitants of Paradise, into violent, invasive,

objectifying and disenfranchising national/global scenarios. Through a reading of the photography sessions, the photographs, their circulation and consumption, Bulawayo invites us to consider photography as an archive that is implicated in the production of otherness – and as such as an archive that commits epistemic violence. Consequently, Bulawayo disrupts the affectations of care and empathy assumed by both tourist and humanitarian groups by showing how the photographs, consumed within Western spaces, not only become souvenirs of an exotic experience and evidence of their philanthropy and humanism but are also engaged in the production of knowledges in a representational economy that annihilates/infantilises the observed. Significantly, however, Bulawayo's text destabilises this consumption and immobilising gaze that exposes the vulnerability and susceptibility of the characters to homogenising and reductive epistemes. In this regard, the study considers Bastard's character – and to a lesser extent MotherLove – who emits polysemic meanings that challenge mystifications and obfuscations of the camera wielders.

Mabanckou's *Blue White Red* takes up *La Sape*, a largely masculine subculture, as a point of departure to evoke diverse conversations on post-colonial crises and dystopias on marginal black masculinities, identity, migration, belonging, fashion choices and African dandies, colonial legacies/post-colonial hegemonies, global capitalism and consumerism, race and colouration and the cultures of subversion and cohabitation that emerge from such. Within this milieu, Mabanckou's novel explores the centrality of the mythos of Paris alongside the departures, descents and returns of *sapeur* masculinities to Paris and the complex negotiations that the characters make in the quest for individual and collective articulations. This study considers how mobility to France, specifically Paris, is represented as an exclusively male rite of

passage that enunciates complex and subtle ways of performing Congo-Brazzaville masculinities. The study deduces that the journeys to and from Paris and the performances and the circulating narratives of Paris create cooperative meanings and meanings of Paris which enact what Thomas calls “France in Africa and Africa in France” (2007: 5). In this regard, the study suggests that Paris gets reconfigured as a signifier in flux, deprived of its specific and constitutive referents as the characters re-site and disperse it within Congo-Brazzaville.

In considering how the non-hegemonic masculinities in the text exist within dominant socio-cultural formations, the study borrows Fleetwood’s (2011) conceptual framework of excess to examine how the characters’ performances and self-stylisations are communicative acts that encode their bodies with radical meanings and reversals. Fleetwood’s concept of excess enables this analysis to make sense of the “visual and discursive” transgression inscribed upon their bodies, inscriptions that subvert the flattening gaze in the midst of hegemonic cultures that threaten to obscure, mask and erase them (ibid.: 109). Through clothing, the *sapeurs* re-fashion and articulate themselves within spaces that unsettle stereotypical and reductive representations. By examining the various repertoires and textualities that Moki, the dandy, deploys for consumption and appropriation in his village, and the uptake of these repertoires and fluencies by the population, I posit that the text presents multi-sited means of resistance against variegated and pervasive forms of power and authority. In relation to this, I argue that *La Sape* culture represents a space for the rebranding and refashioning of marginal masculinities in ways that both contest but also constitute national and global hegemonies of class, privilege, race and culture. As such, Mabanckou’s text challenges a bipolar political spectrum that conceives of being in terms of radical/reactionary, centre/periphery. In addition, I posit that the performativity

of the *sapeur* masculinity creates tension within the masculine hierarchy as it also participates in the commodification and accessorising of female bodies to the successful *sapeurs*, while also noting the central role that women play in conferring power and legibility to these masculinities.

Chapter four of the study deals with Mengestu's two novels, that is, *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* and *How to Read the Air*. The thrust of the argument in this chapter centres on African masculinities within Washington and New York, spaces which have racial and masculine inflections. In reading Mengestu two novels, this study considered his guarded and studied engagement with celebratory discourses of migration which presents it as laden with opportunities for social mobility while ignoring structural forms of exclusion against black, immigrant non-hegemonic masculinities. In analysing his works, the present study advances that Mengestu's works specifically grapple with the credo of the "American Dream" as a white masculinist configuration layered with capitalist undertones. As novels that begin with stories of migration, Mengestu's novels promise the all-too familiar narrative of migration but ultimately fail to deliver, choosing instead to toy with and deconstruct easy and neat ways in which expectations of migrancy are constructed. In doing this, Mengestu places his characters in *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* within various spaces which enable the reader to examine immigrant expectations vis a vis their undesirability and exclusions from socio-economic and political formations of the mainstream society. This study therefore zeroes in on the commercial, corporate and the academia as spaces that the author uses to narrativise African bodies out of place. In interrogating Sepha's placement in a commercial store at Logan Circle, a Washington neighbourhood, the study examines how Mengestu not only undercuts the striving and progressivist ethos that undergird the American Dream but also challenges capitalistic

commercial engagements through his calculated neglect of his. I argue that even though this latter action is isolated and precarious, it opens up an aperture where we can envision human relationalities beyond and outside the remit of the violent neoliberal human engagements that the text narrates as shown in his use of the store to cultivate non-commercial relations.

The study also critically examines Sepha as the character who seems to bear the biggest burden of political action in the novel. I posit that Mengestu's efforts to create a character who subverts all forms of racial and heteropatriarchal forms of power and privilege fail because of Sepha's sexual escapades with the prostitutes in Logan Circle. Furthermore, I submit that even though Sepha refuses to engage in homosocial bonding rituals that objectify women, his sexual encounters that cultivate a grammar of mutual intimacy fall flat when we consider how the construction of pleasure centres on him. In addition, Sepha's character is also used to examine the tenuous relationship between new African diasporas and old diasporas. However, the study attends to the construction of Logan Circle by institutions of power as predetermining the failure of intraracial mobilisations. Ken's character, the study postulates, moves us to the corporate American world and is useful in the way it challenges the pervasive hegemonic masculinity's image of the self-reliant and self-made man. Through the stasis of Ken – a character who has acquired the social capital that ought to facilitate his social ascendancy and who works harder than his boss – the study proposes a reading of American hegemonic masculinity's success as reliant on disempowered and coerced bodies. Finally, the study postulates an analysis of Joe in *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* as a character who questions the inclusions and exclusions of the neoliberal academia in the face of epistemological productions. Ultimately, I posit that Joe's character turns the margins of the academia as a subversive and productive space

because of the way his poem, existing outside the purview of this academia, represents an incoherence of hegemonic productions of the Congo. Ultimately, this novel's foreclosing of conventional expectations of narrative closure/denouement and the writer's refusal to direct the characters towards "decisive" action suggests that such neat endings elide and trivialise the complexity and recursive nature of the issues at stake, and therefore the need for constant vigilance.

The examination of *How to Read the Air* revolves around the father/son dyad in an attempt to grapple with the disassembling of the fictions of masculinity after migration and the mythos of the American nation. In analysing Jonas and Yosef's embodied reactions to micro-aggressions meted out to them by the mainstream society and the reduction of the "patriarchal dividend" as black immigrants, this study posits an examination of power as something that registers on the body. However, the study interprets the gendering crisis that the novel narrativises as productive in the way it enables a re-negotiation of masculine identities and points towards alternative categories of constructing manhood. In addition, the chapter explores Jonas's lying/falsification not only as ways of negotiating knowledge gaps but also as ways through which Mengestu mobilises uncertainty as a discursive strategy to grapple with the fabricated and insular nature of national histories, epistemological productions, racial and gendered categories.

The final chapter of the study returns us to the vexed questions of home and belonging. It positions itself against discourses that call for the movement away from the nation as a social and political mobilising entity by arguing that in a world defined by marked racial political and economic polarities, postcolonial subjectivities are deprived of the luxury to enter the world on an equal footing with other hegemonic subjects. As such, this study advances the nation's

relevance in mobilising against imperialistic/capitalistic and globalising forces. However, the study also considers the ways in which the nation delimits the fidelity of its citizens because of gendered, class and even ethnic differences. In this regard, and following feminist scholars who have studied the nation as gendered, I examine Adichie's *Americanah* as a text whose representation of the movement of a national "daughter" outside of the home enunciates a crisis in the patriarchal productions of the nation. The study uses Ifemelu developing romance with Obinze alongside her migration and return journeys as interpretive frameworks that are useful in examining both her growth as a gendered subject and also her developing relationship with the Nigerian nation. Placing *Americanah* alongside Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*, the study considers them as bildungsroman whose presentation of their protagonists' "womaning" challenges gendered forms of home and belonging, something that casts them as "undutiful." In so doing, I posit that the writers present female characters engaged in the labour of producing national futures and through a portrayal of their investments in the struggles of women of colour worldwide, they expand the range of civic engagement beyond the remit/purview of the nation. In addition, by discussing Ifemelu's return to nation, to home and to love, I conclude that that the author intimates a continuing and enduring engagement with the nation and that to both Enitan and Ifemelu "nationhood is a relationship carrying responsibilities rather than a mere label or an encapsulation" (Gagiano, 2013: 66).

In the final analysis, this study contends that contemporary African writer's representation of experiences of migration and diaspora gives us fresh lens with which to revisit and complicate questions of cultural and intellectual productions in the context of North/South encounters, nation, home and belonging, gendered experiences of mobility, race/ethnicity,

identity etc. Through their portrayal of characters who navigate their contacts with the world in varying degrees of vulnerability, the texts contest homogenising discourses of globalisation. As such, the study's examination of narratives of migration that place characters not only within the global context but also in local contexts like Bulawayo, Mabanckou or even Adichie's texts, gives us a glimpse of what it means to be African and how this informs one's experience of these worlds. By presenting world cultures, histories and spaces in conversation, they provide us with a global perspective of the human experience that allows for comparison and differentiation. In addition, this study contends that the texts examined here reveal contemporary African experiences and perspectives of the world and that through this polemical imagining of the world from and by African subjects (Mbembe & Nutall, 2004), they provide a counter-gaze which challenges western epistemological certainties and insularities. As such, the texts provide dislocated sites of contesting not only western hegemony but also engage the nation and patriarchy in an attempt to show how they delimit individual characters. Ultimately, the study's critique of the author's engagement with hegemonic forms enables ideological projects that not only destabilise socio-political and economic hierarchies but also imagine ethical horizons of human relations.

Lastly, this study calls for sustained reading of contemporary African fictions portrayal of the experiences of migration by children in/and families. Focalisation on children and mobility will not only offer perspectives of looking at journeying through the lens of age differentials, it might also afford an opportunity of looking at the family as an intimate space that is shaped and shapes their experiences of migration. In addition, looking at children as actors and agents in a mobile world might provide interesting perspectives on their placement within the family and the

destinations of travel. As this study has suggested, such personalised and intimate experiences of migration and diaspora often get subsumed by macro-concerns. Although the present study's analysis of *We Need New Names* touches on this, the number of texts dealing with children and migration warrant an extended interrogation. In addition, the study recognises the need for extended studies on return movements and how they inform individuals' navigation of their transnational worlds.

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