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Naviguer entre racines et routes : le topos du
retour dans la littérature nigériane contemporaine
et de la diaspora nigériane

Navigating Roots and Routes: The Topos of Return in Contemporary
Nigerian and Nigerian Diaspora Literature

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Abstract

À une époque marquée par une mobilité mondiale sans précédent, le thème du retour émerge comme un prisme essentiel à travers lequel la littérature nigériane contemporaine et celle de la diaspora nigériane interrogent les questions d'identité, d'appartenance et de structures de pouvoir mondiales. Cette thèse examine ainsi l'évolution de ce thème, caractéristique majeure de la littérature nigériane, dans les récits d'après les années 2000, en particulier dans le contexte de la mondialisation.

S'appuyant sur une approche méthodologique qui met en dialogue la théorie postcoloniale, la pensée décoloniale et les études sur le traumatisme, tout en accordant une attention particulière aux choix stylistiques et rhétoriques, aux schémas de caractérisation et aux structures thématiques, cette étude analyse une sélection variée de textes fictionnels et non-fictionnels. À travers des lectures approfondies des textes littéraires, elle met en lumière la manière dont les auteur·rice·s négocient les complexités du retour tout en affrontant les contradictions inhérentes à l'écriture depuis une dissonance géographique. En effet, il est particulièrement remarquable que nombre de ces récits de retour soient aujourd'hui produits par des écrivain·e·s nigérian·e·s établi·e·s dans le Nord global, ce qui soulève des questions sur l'impact de leur positionnement sur leurs représentations du retour au pays. Cette thèse examine, donc, comment cette dissonance géographique façonne leurs récits, influençant à la fois leurs préoccupations thématiques et leurs structures narratives. De plus, cette recherche s'attache à appréhender de façon nuancée la manière dont la littérature nigériane contemporaine traite du désir d'enracinement dans un monde de plus en plus caractérisé par la mobilité, tout en résistant de manière critique aux écueils de l'essentialisme et du nationalisme.

En particulier, le premier chapitre de cette thèse retrace l'évolution du motif du retour dans la littérature d'après l'indépendance jusqu'à nos jours. Alors que les récits du retour d'autrefois portaient souvent une critique des jeunes nations indépendantes à travers la figure du « been-to » tragique, les narrations contemporaines reflètent une société plus fluide et connectée, pourtant marquée par des inégalités persistantes. Ces œuvres, donc, ne se limitent

pas à une seule exploration identitaire individuelle mais interrogent les dynamiques globales de pouvoir et les circuits de diffusion de la littérature africaine.

Les chapitres suivants explorent différentes manifestations du retour. Certains récits, comme *Americanah* de Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie et *A Bit of Difference* de Sefi Atta, illustrent un retour possible, motivé par un rejet du Nord global et une redécouverte du Nigéria. D'autres, à l'instar de *Foreign Gods, Inc.* d'Okey Ndibe et *Travellers* de Helon Habila, montrent comment le retour est entravé par des réalités socio-économiques, notamment pour les migrant·e·s précaires ou les réfugié·e·s. *Every Day is for the Thief* de Teju Cole présente une forme de retour plus abstraite et esthétique, questionnant la représentation du pays natal et la représentation tout court. Enfin, *I Am Still with You* d'Emmanuel Iduma et *Looking for Transwonderland* de Noo Saro-Wiwa, deux oeuvres non-fictionnelles, montrent que le retour peut servir de moyen de confrontation avec les traumatismes personnels et collectifs.

Une constante dans ces textes est leur dimension critique. Contrairement aux récits postindépendance qui ciblaient principalement les dysfonctionnements des personnages nigériens comme métaphore du dysfonctionnement de la nation, les textes contemporains s'attaquent aussi aux illusions du Nord global. Les personnages migrent souvent dans l'espoir d'un avenir meilleur, mais font face à des déceptions profondes, notamment en raison du racisme et des inégalités systémiques qu'ils et elles y rencontrent. Ces récits reflètent ainsi l'injustice structurelle du monde globalisé.

Par ailleurs, la circulation de ces œuvres soulève un paradoxe. Bien que ces textes thématisent le retour au Nigéria, ils sont en majorité publiés dans le Nord global avant d'être accessibles localement. Ce phénomène, qui révèle les structures de pouvoir dans la production littéraire, est souvent abordé de manière réflexive par les auteur·rice·s. Plusieurs textes de mon corpus, en effet, explorent leur propre statut au sein du marché mondial du livre, questionnant la tension entre reconnaissance internationale et enracinement local.

Enfin, cette thèse souligne que l'évolution des genres littéraires montre une diversification des formes de retour. Alors que le roman réaliste dominait auparavant, les auteur·rice·s contemporain·e·s explorent davantage d'expérimentations stylistiques et hybrides. Des éléments de métafiction, l'inclusion de la photographie ou de souvenirs personnels viennent enrichir les récits, témoignant d'un renouvellement du champ littéraire lié au Nigeria.

Cette thèse se conclut en observant que tant que la migration restera une réalité pour les Nigérien·e·s, la question du retour continuera d'inspirer la littérature. Dans un monde de plus en plus marqué par la mobilité et l'incertitude, les narrations du retour offriront de nouvelles façons d'explorer les tensions entre racines et routes, attachement et déracinement, pays d'origine et pays d'accueil. Cette dynamique évolutive atteste de la capacité de la littérature à saisir les mutations du réel et à offrir, à travers l'art, un espace de réflexion critique sur les transformations du monde contemporain.

Introduction

Aim, Topic and Research Questions

In an era marked by unprecedented global mobility and shifting migration patterns, the theme of return has emerged as a crucial lens through which contemporary Nigerian and Nigerian Diaspora literature engages with issues of identity, belonging, socio-political transformation, and critique of the world order. The central aim of this thesis is to examine how this theme has evolved in recent years. Indeed, the earlier context of nationalism and the subsequent disillusionment that shaped past narratives of return has given way to a more transnational and fragmented contemporary reality. At the risk of stating a truism, this new reality is profoundly influenced by globalisation and the dynamics of capitalism, which do not foster global homogeneity but instead amplify and sustain inequalities between regions, classes, and cultures, resulting in uneven and asynchronous development (WReC 2015). These disparities are particularly apparent in the cultural sphere, where literature is informed by and mediates this ‘unevenness’, depicting the coexistence of disparate historical moments and economic realities within the overarching framework of global capitalism.

Contemporary Nigerian and Nigerian diaspora narratives of return vividly illustrate the unevenness of our globalised world, often exemplifying what Silvia Albertazzi defines as “crossover literature,” a “literature of crossings, intersections, and border crossings; not, to be clear, a literature without boundaries” (2021, 27).¹ This crossing occurs not only at the plot level, where characters navigate borders in circular journeys that encompass both departure and return, but also in terms of their publication journey. Indeed, these narratives, frequently published first in the Global North, traverse borders once more when they (re)turn to the homeland of their authors. Through this transborder oscillation, these works reflect the

¹ My translation. The original Italian reads: “letteratura di attraversamenti, incroci, sconfinamenti; non, sia chiaro, letteratura senza confini” (Albertazzi 2021, 27).

complexities and disparities of global realities – not only through the perspectives of their protagonists but also through the mechanisms of their literary circulation. In this context, this thesis examines how the experience of returning to Nigeria is depicted by Nigerian diaspora writers, investigating the tensions that emerge between their homeland and their diasporic worlds.

Additionally, this thesis seeks to understand how these narratives engage with broader themes of globalisation and its inherent unevenness. Emerging from what postcolonial theory identifies as the “periphery” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2013), yet often attaining the attribute of “worldliness” by virtue of their wide circulation and reception (Damrosch 2023), are these narratives of return vehicles of criticism against the world order, as Claire Gallien (2018) attributes to postcolonial literature in general, or do they instead align with what Madhu Krishnan (2019) identifies as the neoliberal discourse that celebrates mobility while overlooking the socio-political and economic consequences? Alternatively, deviating from this straightforward binarism, can these narratives occupy a nuanced space that reflects both critical and complicit elements of the globalised world?

As I have already suggested, a paradox is evident in these narratives, as they depict a return to Nigeria while being predominantly penned by Nigerian writers or writers of Nigerian descent who are firmly anchored in the Global North, where they primarily reside, publish, and work. One might argue, therefore, that these texts are often narratives of return ‘from a distance’: a distance that may provide a vantage point for critically engaging with the homeland,² yet a distance that could simultaneously risk romanticising the act of return through a nostalgic lens. Thus, does their position, straddling both home and host countries, offer a critical perspective from which to examine and critique both nations or does it risk idealising them and romanticising the complexities of each?

In this context, the question of readership appears as central. While these authors grapple with the complexities of return, home, and identity, their works are often influenced by market forces and the expectations of the Global North, where the dominant publishing industry, literary prizes, and global readerships are based (Feldner 2019; Adesokan 2012; Brouillette 2007; Huggan 2000). To what extent do these writers engage in self-reflexive dialogue within their works, consciously acknowledging the contradictions and tensions in writing about

² In a different context, this perspective is attributed to the reflections of V.S. Naipaul. Indeed, the Trinidadian-British author asserted that his position as an outsider living in England afforded him the critical distance required to view and critique his native Trinidad with greater clarity (1993).

Nigeria from a distance? How do these writers navigate the inherent tensions and paradoxes in this dynamic? Are they self-critical regarding their roles within global literary circuits? Do they incorporate meta-reflections on these issues into their texts? What are the stylistic implications of such contradictions? Do these authors confront and reflect upon their privileged mobility in their writing?

By closely reading the literary texts, this thesis will analyse the techniques, themes, and narrative structures these authors use to navigate these complex questions. By addressing these questions, the study will actively engage with contemporary discussions and debates within African literature, contributing to the evolving discourse on return, identity, and globalisation.

Methodological Lenses of Reading Nigerian and Nigerian Diaspora Narratives of Return

This thesis's mono-thematic unity is counterbalanced by a multidisciplinary theoretical approach that draws from various critical and methodological perspectives. Indeed, to respond to the questions outlined above, the analysis is situated at the intersection between postcolonial theory, decolonial thinking, world literature, and trauma studies. Furthermore, concepts such as Cosmopolitanism and what has been often described as its African declination, Afropolitanism, will be valuable tools for analysing the topos of return.

Such a methodological approach may raise concerns among some scholars, primarily due to the differing epistemological underpinnings and historical trajectories of the fields in question. Moreover, some of these fields of study emphasise their distinctiveness as a core aspect of their theoretical foundations. While decolonial thinking and world literature have often been hailed as continuations or, conversely, as surpassing postcolonial theory (Lazarus 2013; Huggan 2020; Gu 2023), proponents of decoloniality – in particular, Mignolo – have consistently highlighted their fundamental differences from postcolonialism. During the summer school I attended in Eindhoven in 2022, *Learning to Unlearn Decolonially: Disobeying, Delinking, and Relinking*, co-led by Rolando Vázquez and Walter D. Mignolo, the latter emphasised the distinction by frequently reiterating the slogan, “You cannot post-colonize, but you can decolonize.” Through this emphasis on semantics, Mignolo sought to clarify that, in his opinion, postcolonialism primarily remains within the realm of discourse analysis. Benita Parry (2004) would likely support his perspective on postcolonial studies,

given her insistence that the field was initially termed “colonial discourse analysis,” indicating that it was, at least initially, primarily an analysis of discourse.

In contrast, decolonial *thinking* (as opposed to decolonial *studies*) has a penchant for praxis: decolonial scholars view themselves not merely as contributors to academia but as advocates for a transformative, practical project to break away from colonial frameworks and foster systemic change. Mignolo himself has elaborated extensively on the distinction he draws between postcolonialism and decoloniality. As early as 2007, he posited that the “programmatic of decoloniality moves away and beyond the post-colonial” and that the decolonial turn “is a project of de-linking while post-colonial criticism and theory is a project of scholarly transformation within the academy” (452). Furthermore, Ramón Grosfoguel, another key figure in decolonial thought, has reinforced this viewpoint, even calling for “the need to decolonize post-colonial studies” (Grosfoguel 2007, 142). On the other hand, postcolonial scholars, such as Ramamurthy and Tambe (2017), have observed that postcolonial studies are experiencing an “eclipsing” and are “increasingly becoming viewed as passé” (504). This sense of anxiety is also reflected within the field itself, as evident during the 18th triennial conference of the European Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (EACLALS) – a long-established forum for postcolonial discussions, which I was fortunate enough to attend. The event, titled *Imagining Environmental Justice in a Postcolonial World* and held in Paris in 2023, was punctuated by frequent reflections on the necessity of engaging with decoloniality to remain relevant and adapt to contemporary intellectual currents. Despite this, not all postcolonial voices, both at the event and within the broader academic community, have rushed to align themselves with decolonial thought. Instead, they have adopted a more measured, conciliatory stance, advocating for a critical engagement between these two fields (Colpani, Mascot, and Smiet 2022).

In comparing postcolonial theory with decolonial thinking, Gu (2023) contends that “while the former mainly adopts a political and ideological approach to colonialism and decolonization,” the latter “seeks to demystify Western notions of universality, modernity, and knowledge and to engage in epistemic reconstitution and knowledge reconstruction by tapping into native cultural traditions and lived experiences of former colonies for inspirations and resources” (n.p.). Nonetheless, despite the epistemological differences between these two fields, they both share a proclivity to critically engage with and denounce the lingering remnants of colonialism. In fact, each has acknowledged that, even after the formal decolonisation and

independence of colonised nations, patterns of dominance and exploitation have persisted. Decolonial thinkers refer to this persistence as “coloniality,” a system of power that endures beyond formal colonialism through the underlying logic of Western civilisation, which has shaped the global order since the sixteenth century. Coloniality extends to all facets of life, including politics, economics, epistemology, and subjectivity, manifesting through entrenched social hierarchies of race, gender, and class (Mignolo and Walsh 2007).

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, in their foundational work *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), use the term “post-colonial” to describe “all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (2). Given Nigeria’s history as a former British colony, applying a postcolonial lens to its literature seems indispensable. Indeed, Nigerian literature emerges from a postcolonial context shaped by the enduring legacies of colonialism. However, as debates among postcolonial scholars in the 1990s highlighted, the prefix “post” in postcolonialism should not be understood “as a temporal marker for a clear-cut transition after independence, but as a marker of relationship that registers the ongoing effect of colonialism on a former colony” (Tsang 2021, n.p.). To convey this point, postcolonial theorists of that period removed the hyphen between “post” and “colonial,” reflecting a more complex understanding of how colonial structures and institutions continue to shape societies long after formal independence (Tsang 2021, n.p.). Thus, applying postcolonial theory allows for a deeper understanding of return narratives, particularly regarding the enduring impacts of colonialism on Nigerian society, culture, and people. However, its relevance extends beyond this, as postcolonial theory, much like decolonial thought, is inherently political. As Nayar (2008) observes, “The postcolonial task of ‘revisiting,’ ‘remembering,’ and ‘interrogating’ is an exercise in cultural pedagogy that is (or ought to be) irreducibly political” (16). This political dimension, evident in return narratives, will be critically explored throughout this thesis.

Despite their differences, therefore, in this thesis, I conceptualise decolonial thinking and postcolonial theory, as suggested by K. Bailey Thomas (2020) in another context, as “liberatory frameworks” (14). Consequently, I engage with both perspectives by situating them within a shared space of commonality and coalition. The intention is not to obscure their distinct genealogical and epistemological developments but to foster a dialogue between “scholars and activists committed to the liberation of all oppressed and dispossessed people” (Thomas 2020, 521). By adopting this approach, the thesis acknowledges the tensions between these fields

while aiming to draw on their complementary strengths, enabling a more nuanced and comprehensive exploration of return, identity, and the legacies of colonialism in contemporary Nigerian and Nigerian diaspora literature.

Furthermore, a specific theory of world literature will be crucial for the development of this thesis:³ that proposed by the Warwick Research Collective (WReC) in *Combined and Uneven Development* (2015). Rooted in Marxist analysis of global capitalism, this theory of world literature (the term is hyphenated here) uncovers its full potential within literary analysis. According to the Collective, world literature must be understood within the framework of the global capitalist system, characterised by stark inequalities among nations and regions. In this context, world literature reflects the structure of global capitalism. Indeed, as the title suggests, the theory revolves around the concept of combined and uneven development, derived from Trotsky's analysis of capitalism's effects on societies that were either non-capitalist or only partially capitalised – primarily Russia and China in the 20th century. In his analysis, the Russian politician and political theorist observed that the introduction of capitalism did not entirely supplant pre-existing social and economic structures but rather coexisted with them, creating a contradictory “amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms” (Trotsky 1967

³ In recent years, alongside the rapid rise of decolonial thinking, world literature has emerged as a significant field of study. However, as Huggan (2020) aptly notes, “there are as many versions of world literature as there are versions of the world, several of them in seemingly direct conflict with one another” (6). Like many scholars tracing the genealogy of the term, this analysis begins with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who is often credited with coining it. In 1827, Goethe proclaimed, “The age of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach” (Goethe 1987 in Puchner 2013), a statement that gestures towards a future-oriented vision of literature. Two decades later, in 1848, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels invoked this idea in one of the most frequently cited paragraphs of *The Communist Manifesto*: “The bourgeoisie has, through its exploitation of the world-market, given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. [...] The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world-literature.” According to Marx and Engels, the globalisation process driven by capitalism has given rise to world literature, facilitating the circulation of literary works across borders. In their view, world literature is part of the broader capitalist expansion, but it may also play a role of utmost importance in disseminating revolutionary ideas. Building on these foundational figures, debates around world literature have expanded exponentially, though without achieving a clear consensus. Referring to the pillars of the field, David Damrosch (2003) argues that world literature is not a mere “super-canon” (Albertazzi 2021, 19), a collection of great works from around the world, but rather a mode of circulation and reading. In his seminal work, *What Is World Literature?* (2003), Damrosch emphasises that texts acquire new meanings as they travel beyond their original cultural and linguistic contexts. For his part, Franco Moretti situates world literature within the global system's unequal power relations between the “core” and the “periphery” of the literary world. In so doing, Moretti advocates for a distant reading approach, focusing on patterns, themes, and tropes across literary forms and trends on a large scale rather than close readings of individual works. Although highly critiqued by Gayatri Spivak (2003), Moretti's contributions highlight the ongoing challenge in defining world literature – a concept that, as Goethe's famous quotation suggests, is always “at hand” but remains broad and inherently elusive in its evolving interpretation.

in WReC 2015, 11). Indeed, emphasising “the context of capitalism as a world system,” the Warwick Research Collective rebuts the paradigm of “alternative modernities,” presenting a vision of modernity that draws from Jameson’s theories as a singular and uneven phenomenon (WReC 2015, 14). Therefore, modernisation need not be understood as a “chronological nor a geographical category;” not even as “something that happens [...] in ‘the west’ and to which others can subsequently gain access” (WReC 2015, 13). Instead, capitalist modernisation is a process that “entails development, yes – but this ‘development’ takes the forms of the development of underdevelopment, of maldevelopment and dependent development” (WReC 2015, 13).

The concept of singular and uneven modernity is crucial to this thesis, not only because the characters in the novels we analyse, through their migratory journeys, reflect the disparities between the Global North and the Global South but also, as the Warwick Research Collective suggests, because these disparities are not confined to what postcolonial theory has traditionally labelled the periphery (in this case, Nigeria). As they argue, “core countries have their own peripheries and semi-peripheries” (WReC 2015, 70). Through their migratory experiences, as represented in contemporary return narratives, characters encounter and register the pervasive unevenness in both their host countries and, upon returning, their home country, Nigeria. This emphasises the systemic nature of capitalism, which “does not smooth away but rather produces unevenness, systematically” (WReC 2015, 12). The Nigeria that these characters inhabit upon their return is as marked by uneven development as the countries they left behind, thereby collapsing the strict binarism between the Global North and South and revealing their entangled relationship.

Furthermore, the concept of combined and uneven development enables us to reinterpret return narratives as more than mere personal journeys of identity and homecoming. Instead, these narratives are situated within the broader structural inequalities of global capitalism, where the characters’ experiences are shaped by economic, political, and cultural forces beyond their individual control. By positioning return narratives within this theoretical framework, this thesis aims to explore how the protagonists’ cross-border movements act as a microcosm for examining global disparities. These movements not only highlight the fractured nature of modernity across different geographic regions but also reveal how capitalism’s uneven distribution of power and resources imposes divergent consequences on individuals, contingent upon their positionality within the global system. In this context, Nigerian and Nigerian

Diaspora narratives of return can be framed as much within the nationalist framework of Nigerian literature as within that of world literature; not only due to their already-cited peculiarity of being predominantly written and published outside the confines of Nigeria but also because they are part of a global body of texts that reflect the experiences of the material unevenness characterising the capitalist world system through specific aesthetic strategies and literary forms (WReC 2015). As will be explored in the following chapters, one such strategy is self-reflexivity.

While these theoretical frameworks aid the analysis of fictional works, trauma studies become particularly useful when this thesis shifts its focus to non-fiction. In this context, the physical return serves as a means to address past trauma. Consequently, the question of the representability of such traumatic events becomes central. Literature is widely recognised as a powerful medium for recounting and exploring such experiences. Within the domain of literary trauma theory, the modalities of representation have been the subject of intense discussion, often yielding contradictory ideas and proposals. One strand of this discussion has centred on the unrepresentability of trauma. James Berger (1997), for example, in his review of pivotal works in trauma studies, foregrounds how trauma theory is a “discourse of the unrepresentable of the event or the object that destabilises language and demands a vocabulary and syntax in some sense incommensurable with what went before” (573). Alternatively, some contend that trauma can be narrativised, albeit not within the confines of what is conventionally defined as ‘traditional’ literature. For instance, Cathy Caruth (1995) regards trauma as a disruption of history and temporality; thus, she does not believe in the possibility of representing it through a traditional literary sequence. Similarly, Whitehead (2004) notes that, at various times, the aesthetics of modernism and postmodernism, with their formal features, have been considered suitable movements for depicting traumatic events because of their ability to mimic trauma’s “symptomatology at a formal level” (161) in such a manner that “temporality and chronology collapse” (3). These works intentionally reflect or recreate the consequences of trauma on a formal level through stylistic features such as “repetition, indirection, undecidability, multiple narrative voices, or through a departure from standard conventions of temporality and chronology” (Kurtz 2023, 67). Notably, while modernist aesthetics emphasise the failure of the narrative, postmodernism employs techniques like “fragmentation, paradox, temporal distortion, contradictory or competing narrative voices,” which, as Kurtz (2003, 67) suggests,

effectively mirror the characteristics of traumatic symptoms in a particularly fitting way. This body of work will provide a foundation for the analysis of non-fiction in this thesis.

Having established the theoretical and research framework, we can now turn our focus to the primary object of analysis in this study.

Selected Corpus

The topos of return in Nigerian literature will be examined through a selection of texts that follow specific criteria. Firstly, the narratives of return selected must have been authored by individuals born in Nigeria, such as Sefi Atta, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Okey Ndibe, Helon Habila, Noo Saro-Wiwa, and Emmanuel Iduma. In instances where the authors were not born in Nigeria, they should have a strong connection to the country or have lived there, as exemplified by Teju Cole, who was born in the U.S. to Nigerian parents and spent his youth in Nigeria. Additionally, these authors must demonstrate significant relevance to the contemporary context by having written award-winning or acclaimed works. Secondly, the chosen texts need to focus on first-generation migrants returning to Nigeria, thus excluding works centred on second-generation experiences. For instance, although written by a Nigerian author and depicting a return of sorts, *Sankofa* (2021) by Chibundu Onuzo was not included in my corpus, as it narrates the story of a Londoner searching for her African father, thereby exploring second-generation identity. Thirdly, the texts must be contemporary and published after the turn of the millennium. The rationale for this specific post-2000 timeframe is not merely symbolic – although, as Ogaga Okuyade (2014) suggests, it may be regarded as a “symbolic turning point” (xxviii). More critically, this period corresponds with significant social, political, and economic changes in Nigeria, notably the country’s return to democracy, increased exposure to globalisation, and the rising phenomenon of migration and return migration. Following the literary decline of the 1990s (Adesanmi and Dunton 2005), Nigerian literature experienced a renaissance after 2000, particularly addressing themes of migration and return. Despite these clear criteria, however, it is crucial to acknowledge that, as with any attempt to delineate and trace borders, a certain degree of arbitrariness is inherent in the selection processes.

At the outset of my research, I intended to include literary works centred on the theme of return produced by Nigerian authors – whether based locally or in the diaspora. However, my study has predominantly ended up embracing the latter category. Five years ago, Maximilian

Feldner (2019) noted that “literature published only in Nigeria is difficult to acquire” (4). Yet today, this assertion can be nuanced, as more Nigerian publishing houses now offer e-books and have established branches in the Global North – Cassava Republic, for example, opened a UK branch in 2016 and expanded to the US in 2017. Furthermore, while the days of informal pamphlets circulating through the Onitsha market (Obiechina 1973) may seem distant, informal publishing channels persist in an emerging phone-based reading culture, which Sarah Brouillette (2020) describes as “picaresque,” as it involves informal routes. Nonetheless, despite these developments, my research remains focused on formal literary channels, as this is where narratives of return are predominantly situated. Indeed, an analysis of these channels reveals that diasporic writers are particularly drawn to themes of migration and return, likely because of their first-hand experiences with these issues. In fact, all the authors in my corpus currently reside or have resided outside Nigeria, and their geographical positioning affords them greater access to publication opportunities in the Global North.

Fourthly, in shaping my corpus, I aimed to select narratives of return that capture diverse manifestations of this theme: successful returns (Adichie’s *Americanah*) as well as impossible ones (Habila’s *Travellers* and Ndibe’s *Foreign Gods, Inc.*); a return characterised by a sense of gratuitousness (Cole’s *Every Day is for the Thief*) alongside deeply emotional journeys (Iduma’s *I Am Still With You* and Saro-Wiwa’s *Looking for Transwonderland*). Finally, I did not want to restrict my analysis solely to the novel, even though it remains the predominant genre within my corpus. Indeed, there is significant scholarly acknowledgement of the overemphasis on the novel in African literary criticism, often to the detriment of other vital forms of African literary expression (Krishnan 2014; Brouillette 2020). Nevertheless, the novel continues to play a central role in African literature. To provide a more comprehensive perspective, I also included non-fictional works, such as those by Noo Saro-Wiwa and Emmanuel Iduma. Additionally, Teju Cole’s work, though classified as fiction, transcends conventional genre boundaries, presenting a hybrid narrative that broadens the scope of this analysis. Through this diverse selection, I aim to offer a more nuanced representation of contemporary Nigerian and Nigerian Diaspora Literature in English.

Now, before detailing the structure of this thesis, let us first examine the current scholarship on return narratives.

Existing Scholarship on Contemporary Narrative of Return

Despite the enduring significance of the topos of return in Nigerian and Nigerian Diaspora literature in English, no single-authored, book-length study has yet been dedicated to its exploration within the contemporary context. Therefore, this thesis aims to address that gap. However, it is crucial to underline that while no such full-length study exists, the theme of return has garnered considerable scholarly attention; articles, chapters, and edited books have explored individual novels or smaller groups of works, generally within the context of Anglophone African literature.

The most comprehensive study to date that examines “ideas of return” in African literature is the special issue of *African Literature Today*, edited by Helen Cousins, Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo, and Ernest N. Emenyonu, titled *Diaspora & Returns in Fiction* (2016). Through close readings of novels from the 1970s to the present, covering various African countries such as Ghana, Somalia, and Sierra Leone, the contributors provide a rich analysis that highlights how the theme of return is significant in African and African Diaspora Literature across diverse cultural and national contexts. However, by grouping works from such a broad temporal framework and extensive geographical range, the issue risks obscuring the distinct historical, political, and social concerns that characterise these different periods and regions. The juxtaposition of post-independence narratives from the 1970s with more recent twenty-first-century works, for example, may inadvertently diminish the specificities of each era, as the motivations, experiences, and implications of return have morphed considerably over time.

Beyond the special issue, numerous academic articles focus on specific narratives of return. One of the most significant attempts at systematising this theme is Eva Rask Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek’s article, “An Afropolitan Literary Aesthetics? Afropolitan Style and Tropes in Recent Diasporic African Fiction” (2017), published in the *European Journal of English Studies*. Anchoring their analysis within the framework of Afropolitanism, the authors trace a *fil rouge* across four contemporary African novels: Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go* (2013), Yvonne Owuor’s *Dust* (2014), Sefi Atta’s *A Bit of Difference* (2013), and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013). Their study reveals that the theme of return in these works is often intertwined with a sense of anxiety around belonging, identity, and the globalised African experience. Furthermore, the article explores how the characters’ multifaceted connections to Africa expose the complexity of African identities in a global context, underscoring how Afropolitanism offers a space for negotiating these tensions.

As a testament to the pervasive nature of the topos of return in African Diaspora literature authored by women, two scholars have explored this theme in chapters of their monographs, published one year apart. Pauline Ada Uwakweh (2023) examines this theme in her work entitled *Women Writers of the New African Diaspora*, which clearly pays homage to Isidore Okpewho and Nkiru Nzegwu's influential appellation from 2009. The following year, Ángela Suárez-Rodríguez (2024) offers a similar exploration, referring to this body of work as Afrodiasporic literature. Using a transnational framework, Uwakweh delves into several novels that exemplify various types of return, some of which are difficult to compare. For instance, the ancestral search for roots in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016) bears little resemblance to the reverse migration of a contemporary figure like Ifemelu in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. Nevertheless, Uwakweh's chapter provides a comprehensive overview of how prominent diasporic writers conceptualise and depict return in their works. In contrast, Ángela Suárez-Rodríguez employs affect studies as the foundation of her analysis, focusing on how experiences of disorientation, estrangement, and unbelonging are represented to challenge and problematise the notion of the 'stranger.'

"What, then, remains to be said?" one might ask. My thesis seeks to provide a more nuanced and contextualised analysis by narrowing its focus to contemporary Nigerian and Nigerian Diaspora literature, specifically within the temporal scope of the twenty-first century. This approach aims to foster deeper engagement with contemporary socio-political dynamics, including the effects of globalisation and shifting migration patterns, which profoundly shape current narratives of return. Additionally, another contribution of the present work consists of integrating the methodological framework discussed in the previous section with close readings of the selected texts. Indeed, a key emphasis will be placed on the language and stylistic choices of the authors, addressing a gap in scholarship where style and aesthetics are often sidelined in favour of thematic analysis. This is particularly true for African literature, which has rightly been associated with "commitment" (Courtois 2019), and postcolonial literature in general, where political, cultural, and social lenses of interpretation dominate over formal and textual analysis (Tunca 2014). While stylistic and linguistic approaches have started to gain traction in African literary criticism, they have yet to establish themselves as a dominant framework (Tunca 2014). However, as Chris Abani, a prominent Nigerian writer who identifies as a Global Igbo, insightfully remarked, "The art is never about what you write about. The art is about how you write about what you write about" (2005, np). In this thesis, I aim to strike a balance

between thematic exploration and formal analysis, as I am convinced that these elements are not opposing forces but complementary aspects that together offer a more comprehensive understanding of the selected texts. Indeed, while numerous works are conducive to character-centred analyses – as they are frequently modelled after redemption narratives or other topoi of the Western Bildungsroman, where characters function as archetypes, and their developmental arcs constitute the primary focus – this study consciously diverges from such conventional approaches. Instead, it adopts a more expansive analytical framework, prioritising an examination of stylistic and rhetorical choices, overarching patterns of characterisation, and thematic structures.

Structural Overview

Considering the questions raised above, the discussion of the selected texts will mainly follow a thematic structure, focusing on the various ways in which return is represented in these narratives. The only deviation from this thematic approach is the first chapter, which adopts a diachronic perspective to elucidate the significance of such a topos and provide its necessary context. By establishing this foundational understanding, the thesis sets the stage for subsequent thematic explorations, allowing for comparative analysis. Indeed, most chapters will examine two texts that depict return in similar ways. The sole exception is chapter four, which centres exclusively on Teju Cole's *Every Day is for the Thief* due to its distinctive blending of photography and prose, as well as its unique portrayal of return, which sets it apart from the other texts in the corpus. Due to this structure, concepts and debates introduced in one chapter may be revisited, expanded upon, or refined in the following chapters.

Chapter 1 lays the contextual groundwork for the thesis, emphasising the significance of the theme of return in Nigerian and Nigerian Diaspora literature. The chapter commences by examining the concept of return through the perspectives of migration and diaspora studies, discussing the evolving nature of this phenomenon as both a physical and symbolic journey. It underscores how return, often viewed as a natural conclusion to migration, is a complex and multifaceted process influenced by global mobility, transnational identities, and socio-political realities. Following this, the chapter traces the historical and literary evolution of the theme of return in Nigerian literature, analysing how various generations of Nigerian writers – spanning from post-independence to contemporary diaspora – have engaged with it.

Then, the next chapters delve into the close reading of the contemporary narratives of return. We start by analysing possibly the most emblematic novel of return: *Americanah* (2013) by the “literary star” Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (France 24 2015). By reading it alongside Sefi Atta’s *A Bit of Difference* (2012), a novel that shares significant thematic parallels, the chapter focuses on how the protagonists register a critique of the Global North through the topos of return. Moreover, by comparing the protagonists’ return to Nigeria with their lived experiences in the Global North, this analysis then challenges celebratory interpretations that idealise these works as mere embodiments of diasporic fluidity and global belonging. Instead, it argues for a more nuanced reading that recognises the complexities and compromises inherent in their narratives. More specifically, the chapter contends that the protagonists’ physical return to Nigeria is prefigured by an emotional return that begins while the protagonists of the two novels still reside in the Global North. This shift is prompted by their encounters with racism and subsequent disillusionment towards the Global North, leading to a critical deconstruction of the so-called ‘American Dream’ and the ‘Home’ appeal of Port Out Starboard Home. However, although both protagonists express profound criticism of the Global North, their actual return to Nigeria does not represent a wholesale rejection of what decolonial thinkers call ‘coloniality.’ Instead, the return is depicted as a blend of negotiation and compromise with the prevailing global power structures, thereby underscoring the interconnectedness of the Global North and South.

Having explored possible returns in the previous chapter, Chapter 3, focusing on Okey Ndibe’s *Foreign Gods Inc.* (2014) and Helon Habila’s *Travellers* (2019), undertakes a critical examination of their (un)feasibility for individuals living under precarious conditions within a global capitalist framework. Through the experiences of their protagonists – migrants struggling to define their place in the world – the chapter critiques romanticised notions of cosmopolitanism and mobility, as well as the often-flawed equation between these two concepts. Ndibe’s *Foreign Gods Inc.* scrutinises the disillusionment of an African migrant who, despite his efforts to succeed in the United States, faces systemic racism and becomes alienated from both Nigeria and the U.S. while attempting to achieve his “American dream” through the commodification of his cultural heritage. In contrast, Habila’s *Travellers* highlights the plight of African migrants in Fortress Europe, where the possibility of return is frequently hindered by the harsh realities of their countries of origin. Through a detailed analysis of these works, the chapter contends that both novels provide a *tranchant* critique of the capitalist structures

that undermine genuine cosmopolitanism, revealing the persistent inequalities and exclusions faced by marginalised individuals. By juxtaposing their lives with ideals of global mobility, the chapter elucidates the inherent limitations of cosmopolitanism in a world dominated by capitalist imperatives.

The following chapter, Chapter 4, explores how Teju Cole employs the figure of the flâneur – a traditionally European literary archetype associated with leisurely observation of city life – as a self-reflexive device to critique and expose the limitations of the narrator’s representation of Nigeria, which is triggered by his return. It examines how the narrator’s oscillation between insider and outsider perspectives shapes his portrayal of the country, revealing both insights and limitations in his observations. It argues that Cole uses the flâneur figure as a self-reflexive device, unveiling the protagonist’s blind spots, particularly his limited critique of the socio-political environment and his entanglement within the neo-colonial structures of global capitalism. Additionally, the chapter also delves into the use of fragmented narrative structure and blurred photographs, which serve as metaphors for the partial and mediated nature of representation. Ultimately, it underscores how the work challenges the notion of transparency in representation more broadly, advocating instead for the recognition of the inherent complexities and blind spots in any attempt to capture the reality of contemporary Lagos.

After examining fictional narratives, the final chapter of this thesis, Chapter 5, shifts its focus to the less explored non-fiction genre by analysing two contemporary works: *I Am Still with You* (2023) by Emmanuel Iduma and *Looking for Transwonderland* (2012) by Noo Saro-Wiwa. Drawing on trauma theory and travel writing, the chapter argues that the authors’ return to Nigeria after extended periods abroad serves as a catalyst for confronting both personal and collective traumas. Iduma’s narrative, framed by his investigation into the Biafran War and the unresolved disappearance of his uncle, engages with the transgenerational trauma experienced by the Igbo people. Meanwhile, Saro-Wiwa, the daughter of the renowned environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, grapples with the profound trauma of her father’s execution by the Nigerian government. In this sense, their returns transcend mere autobiographical accounts of physical journeys and evolve into introspective narratives that critically engage with personal histories entwined with national trauma. Through an analysis of the narrative structure and themes, the chapter contends that these works, despite their engagement with trauma, are

ultimately shaped by an aesthetic that succumbs, in their conclusions, to the pressures of redemptive narratives.

Following this excursus, the final pages of this thesis engage with the concluding reflections, synthesising the key findings and addressing broader implications of the study.

1. Contextual Framework of Return in Nigerian and Nigerian Diaspora Literature

Return, An Attempt at a Definition: Between the Extra-diegetic World and the World of Fiction

While displacement and migration are widely acknowledged as central themes in Nigerian literature (Adejunmobi and Coetzee 2019), the equally significant theme of return has received comparatively less critical attention. Whether expressed as reverse migration or short visits to the homeland, the concept of return has historically occupied a prominent place in Nigerian literary tradition. Since its inception, the recurring motif of characters embarking on journeys back to Nigeria has been evident, reflected in the evolving terminology used to describe these returnees – from the post-independence ‘been-to’ figure to contemporary labels such as ‘Americanah’ and ‘IJGB’ (I Just Got Back).⁴ Though consistently present, the theme has fluctuated in prominence over the decades, recently re-emerging with greater intensity as a vibrant and increasingly central focus in contemporary Nigerian literary works.

Scholars generally agree that the increasing prominence of the theme of return in African literature is shaped by extradiegetic factors, particularly the shifting patterns of contemporary migration. Globalisation has facilitated a more intricate form of mobility, replacing the traditional linear, one-way migration routes that previously dominated migration discourse with a more complex landscape in which return migration has gained growing significance (Conway and Potter 2009). These return mobilities, according to Ángela Suárez-Rodríguez (2023), “constitute the counter-narratives to the ‘brain drain’ phenomenon” (139) and reflect a broader shift in migration studies as a whole. Indeed, as globalisation reshapes the landscape of mobility, it becomes clear that return migration is no longer an overlooked aspect of migration research. At the turn of the millennium, Russell King referred to return migration as the “great unwritten chapter in the history of migration studies” (2000, 7), but this has changed

⁴ IJGB stands for ‘I Just Got Back,’ a term often used by individuals recently returning to Lagos after spending time abroad. The term has become particularly popular in the context of the Lagos lifestyle. For more detailed information, see <https://everythingnaart.org/theijgbguidetolagos>.

dramatically. Since the 1990s, there has been a growing recognition of how return migration contributes to constructing identities, cultural belonging, and transnational relationships. Scholars such as King and Kuschminder (2022) now emphasise that return migration is a key lens for understanding mobility's socio-economic, political, and cultural impacts on migrants and their countries of origin.

The concept of return also occupies a foundational position in Diaspora Studies. For example, William Safran (1991) identifies the desire for an eventual return as a defining characteristic of what constitutes a diaspora. According to him, members of a diaspora perceive “their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return – when conditions are appropriate” (1991, 83-84). In this framework, the notion of home for diasporic subjects is deeply intertwined with the idea of an ultimate, idealised destination, which remains central to their identity and sense of belonging. However, other scholars in Diaspora Studies have placed less emphasis on the orientation toward a singular homeland. Among them, sociologist Avtar Brah, in *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1996), provides a contrasting perspective to Safran's on the notion of home. Brah poses the question, “Where is home?” and argues that,

On the one hand, ‘home’ is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense, it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin.’ On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality (Brah 1996, 192).

Thus, she reconceptualises “home” as a more fluid and multifaceted concept. While it continues to occupy a place of desire in the diasporic imagination, it is also marked by a sense of irreversibility, as the lived realities of migration and the passage of time complicate and transform one's relationship with the homeland. Even when return is physically possible, the emotional and cultural ties may no longer resonate with present realities. Consequently, Brah's redefinition broadens the understanding of “home” for diasporic individuals, suggesting that the sense of belonging is not confined to the homeland but extends to the new locales in which they live and experience their day-to-day lives (Suárez-Rodríguez 2023).

In discussions about home and return, it is essential to differentiate between the Old and New African Diasporas. As Colin Palmer (2000) notes, these represent the last two of five major waves in the history of African migration, each characterised by distinct historical contexts, migration triggers, and cultural identities. The term ‘Old African Diaspora’ typically

refers to the forced migration of Africans during the transatlantic slave trade, when millions were forcibly removed from their homelands, transported, and sold into slavery throughout the Americas, Europe, and the Caribbean (Palmer 2000). This migration, which occurred primarily during the colonial era, had a pronounced racial component and resulted in the widespread dispersal of millions of Africans (Zezeza 2005). For the descendants of this Old African Diaspora, including African Americans, Afro-Latin Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, and Afropeans, returning to their ancestral homelands has proven difficult, if not impossible, as evidenced by the limitations of movements such as “Back to Africa” (Barnes 2005). In contrast, the situation is different for members of what is commonly referred to as the New African Diaspora.

The term, popularised by Isidore Okpewho and Nkiru Nzegwu in *The New African Diaspora* (2009), refers to the wave of African migration beginning in the mid-20th century, often described as voluntary (Zezeza 2005; Falola 2014; Arthur 2010). However, the concept of ‘voluntary’ migration is complicated by the fact that these movements are frequently shaped by structural factors that blur the line between voluntary and involuntary decisions. Economic pressures, political instability, environmental degradation, and global inequalities create conditions that compel individuals to leave their home countries. Thus, the New African Diaspora encompasses African migrants who have relocated to various regions, particularly Europe and North America, driven by the pursuit of economic opportunities, access to education, and an escape from political instability and conflict, as well as by the broader forces of globalisation (Falola 2014). Like other diasporic groups, these African migrants navigate a complex tension between the desire for rootedness and the acceptance of a diasporic existence, reflecting what Hirsch and Miller describe as “a mutual imbrication rather than clear opposition” between these impulses – a dynamic symptomatic of the post-millennial condition (Hirsch and Miller 2011, 2).

As the discussion on home and return expands, it becomes clear that these concepts are not static but evolve across different contexts, including both real-life migrations and literary representations. While earlier conceptions of return in migration studies equated return with reverse migration, contemporary scholarship demonstrates that return can encompass a much broader and more complex array of experiences (Oxfeld et al., 2004; Knudsen and Rahbek, 2017). In *vita reali*, as Oxfeld et al. (2004) note, migration studies have analysed patterns of return using temporal criteria, leading to classifications such as “occasional, periodic, seasonal,

temporary, or permanent returns” (Oxfeld et al. 2004, 6). On a different note, scholars analysing push and pull factors have categorised return migration into three distinct types: “forced, planned, and spontaneous” (Oxfeld et al. 2004, 6). In all these cases, the notion of return implies a physical journey back to a previously familiar location, often perceived as ‘home.’ However, spatial discrepancies may arise between the place of one’s birth or previous residence and the location to which one returns. Whether this destination lies within the borders of the individual’s homeland or elsewhere within the African continent, such a return may signify a movement toward a “reconstructed homeland” rather than an “original place of origin” (Oxfeld et al. 2004, 4).

In some instances, the notion of return is purely metaphorical, as the returnee may have never physically visited the place to which they are considered returning. This phenomenon is known as “reaspora” (Oxfeld et al. 2004) or “ancestral return” (King and Christou 2011) and pertains to the Old African Diaspora. Defined by Bovenkerk (1974) as a “‘return’ that is not a return” (19), it forms part of a broader “roots-seeking phenomenon” (Hirsch and Miller 2011, 9). This concept has a long history, dating back to the 19th and 20th centuries, and is closely associated with the ‘Back to Africa’ movement, where people of African descent in the Americas sought to reconnect with their ancestral homeland after centuries of forced displacement through the transatlantic slave trade. In contemporary contexts, ancestral return has resurfaced in modern iterations, particularly among second-generation descendants (King and Christou 2011) or African Americans (Fehler 2011), motivated not only by a desire to reconnect with a specific geographical location but also by a longing to restore ties to ancestral identity, culture, and heritage (Hirsch and Miller 2011; Fehler 2011). Recent advancements in genealogical techniques and genetic analysis have provided new tools for exploring the concept of ancestral return. Websites such as AfricanAncestry.com, created “by Black people for Black people,” promise to uncover the “African roots” of their clients through DNA testing kits (AfricanAncestry.com). This idea has also permeated entertainment, as evidenced by the 2006 *African American Lives* series, which employed similar methodologies. In the case of actor Chris Tucker, who participated in the programme, the genetic results were followed by a televised “return” to a village in Angola, presented as an authentic ancestral homeland (Hirsch and Miller 2011). This phenomenon was embraced by the Government of Ghana, which capitalised on it in 2019 with the launch of the *Year of Return* initiative. Commemorating the 400th anniversary of the first recorded arrival of enslaved Africans in North America in 1619,

the initiative aimed to encourage members of the Old African Diaspora, particularly descendants of enslaved Africans, to return to Africa, specifically Ghana, as a means of reconnecting with their cultural heritage and ancestral roots.

If migration studies emphasise the increasing complexity of mobility and the problematisation of the view of migration trajectories as linear, transnational approaches to migration further demonstrate how “the traditional one-dimensional understanding of moving out and coming back loses its empirical basis in a globalized world” (Olivier-Mensah and Scholl-Schneider 2016, 2). Return migration, referred to as “remigration” by Olivier-Mensah and Scholl-Schneider (2016), is often regarded as the final stage of the migration process; however, it need not be definitive and may be followed by subsequent re-emigration. Consequently, return migration is a “complex, multifaceted, and heterogeneous phenomenon” as well as “a multi-stage and ongoing process” (Žmegač 2010, 235-236). Like migration studies, transnational approaches categorise return migration into various forms, including “ancestral and roots migration, deportation, co-ethnic returns, or returns after retirement” (Olivier-Mensah and Scholl-Schneider 2016, 3). Furthermore, they highlight that return migration may be planned from the outset, occur spontaneously, or be forced, and it can manifest in different patterns – whether permanent, long-term, or short-term, such as return visits (Olivier-Mensah and Scholl-Schneider 2016).

The expansion and complexification of the concept of return, as reflected in migration studies and transnational studies, is notable in African literature. Historically, literature has often depicted reverse migration, where individuals who had previously relocated abroad return to their place of origin with the intention of resettling. The Igbo proverb, “Agaracha [journeyman/traveller] must come home,” aligns well with the idea of reverse migration. By underscoring the inevitability or significance of returning to one’s place of origin after a period of absence, the traveller in the proverb parallels the returnee in literature.

Focusing on Afropolitan literature,⁵ Knudsen and Rahbek (2017) argue that in earlier African literary works, “return” often signified a homecoming to a familiar place where

⁵ Afropolitan literature is grounded in the concept of Afropolitanism, which will be explored more thoroughly in the pages that follow. This term, introduced by Achille Mbembe (2006) and Taiye Selasi (2005), encapsulates the identities and cultural expressions of Africans and those of African descent within a global context. Specifically, Mbembe articulates a cosmopolitan identity that is deeply embedded in African culture, while Selasi emphasises the experiences of Africans in the diaspora. This emerging identity reflects a global perspective while maintaining a strong connection to African heritage. Consequently, Afropolitan literature engages with themes such as cosmopolitan identity, displacement, and migration, to name just a few.

returnees could reconnect with their roots. In contrast, contemporary Afropolitan literature presents return as a far more complex and multifaceted process – one that is unsettled and ongoing, reflecting tensions between belonging and alienation while often heightening a sense of anxiety. While the following section will problematise what might be perceived as a simplistic view of earlier narratives of return, it is undeniable that contemporary depictions of repatriation are more diverse than in the past, prompting scholars to develop various classifications. Knudsen and Rahbek (2017), for instance, categorise return into several forms, including “homecoming,” “traditional return,” “reconnection,” “relocation,” and “reappraisal or reaspora” (122), although they do not provide precise definitions for these terms. Additionally, Pauline Ada Uwakweh (2023) offers a more formal classification of return journeys in the works of women writers from the New African Diaspora. In her analysis, Uwakweh identifies three distinct types of return: “reverse return” (188), “quest returns” (192), and “performance returns” (196). “Reverse return” refers to a return that serves as “an alternative option to immigrants’ failure to achieve success or financial security in the hostland,” while “quest returns” are driven by second-generation immigrants’ desire to reconnect with their identity and heritage (188). In contrast, “performance returns” act as a symbolic or metaphorical substitute for an actual physical return to the ancestral homeland, often realised through memory or cultural heritage (188). As the meaning of return has expanded to become both “simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar,” scholars have endeavoured to impose structure through these classifications, seeking to systematise and interpret its increasingly intricate dimensions (Knudsen and Rahbek 2017, 117). This illustrates the significance of such a topos in African literature in general and Nigerian literature in particular.

Literary Significance of the Topos of Return in Nigerian and Diasporic Nigerian Literature

Maximilian Feldner, in *Narrating the New African Diaspora* (2019), convincingly argues that Nigerian Diaspora literature operates with a dual focus: it not only portrays “experiences of migration” but also offers “representations of Nigeria” (13). This thesis examines how, by employing the topos of return, contemporary Nigerian and Nigerian-Diasporic Literature navigate the interstice between these two dimensions, highlighting their interconnectedness. The abundant presence of returnees in such literature highlights that in an era increasingly defined as the “age of the refugee, the displaced person, and mass immigration,” – even more

so than when Edward Said (1984) first characterised it as such – “for much contemporary African literature a return home is still fundamentally important” (Cousins and Dodgson-Katiyo 2016, 8). In doing so, literature aligns with Oxfeld et al.’s observation (2004) that “despite common experiences of uprooting, dislocation, and mobility in part characteristic of globalisation, the idea of being rooted still has its own appeal” (2). Thus, Nigerian literature, and African literature more broadly, complicates the scholarly emphasis in recent decades, bolstered by postcolonial studies in particular, on “routes” over its homophone “roots.” This focus, while well-intentioned in its aim to “undermine the purified appeal of either Africentrism or the Eurocentrism” and to challenge traditional understandings of racial and national identity (Gilroy 1993, 190), may inadvertently overlook the enduring significance of belonging and homecoming.

This emphasis on return in contemporary Nigerian literature challenges some of the dominant trends in postcolonial criticism, which often prioritise themes of movement and hybridity over those of rootedness and belonging. In *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011), Neil Lazarus critiques the theoretical tendentiousness of postcolonial criticism, which tends to exalt “migrancy, liminality, hybridity, and multiculturalism” while rejecting nationalism and Marxism (21). However, the literature written in postcolonial societies is often concerned with issues that postcolonial criticism tends to exclude from its “selective tradition” (27), providing a more nuanced and complex understanding of postcolonial realities than the critical discourse. This disjunction between literature and criticism suggests a gap in the current postcolonial discourse, which risks overlooking the complex realities postcolonial societies face, realities that literature often engages in a more nuanced way than the critical frameworks allow for (Lazarus 2011).

In particular, in the discourse around “roots” and “routes,” Paul Gilroy stands as a key figure among the plethora of scholars advocating for the shift from the first to the second. In his seminal work *The Black Atlantic* (1993), he puts emphasis on the trajectories, movements, and connections formed through diasporic and migrant experiences. This shift underscores the fluidity and hybridity of identities shaped by migration, displacement, and transnational interactions and is historically a political reaction against the essentialist, nationalist, and Eurocentric discourses of the Thatcher/Reagan era, which tended to present a reductionist narrative about identities as fixed, singular, and homogeneous. Published a few years later, James Clifford’s *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997) follows

Gilroy's seminal work in which he examines the dual meanings of the homonyms and contrasts the idea of "roots," which ties identity to a singular origin or place, with "routes," which emphasises the pathways and connections that shape identities across space and time. He argues that modern identities pertain more to routes than roots or a single place of origin.

However, as Charles Piot (2001) notes, a significant issue with the dominant discourse on rootlessness, as articulated by scholars such as Gilroy and Clifford, is the marginalisation of Africa. By predominantly focusing on migrancy, routes, and the fluidity of identity within the context of the global movement, this discourse often relegates the African continent to the periphery, reducing it to "little more than passing reference" (156). However, the growing body of literature concerned with the narratives of return challenges this marginalisation as they shift the focus back to Africa. Whether literal or metaphorical, the act of return provides a counter-narrative to the celebratory tone of rootlessness and complicates it by addressing the desire or need for reconnection with homeland and community without succumbing to essentialist or nationalist frameworks. In the words of Rebecca Fasselt (2019), "they cast a more critical light on the idea of a rootless, hybrid post-national migrant subject" (77). In this way, these narratives confront the overemphasis on routes by reasserting the importance of roots – demonstrating that the relationship between movement and place, between hybridity and belonging, is more complex than postcolonial theory often suggests. In this way, return narratives emerge as one of the critical sites envisioned by Mbembe and Nuttall (2004), which disrupt conventional readings of Africa, making the continent less familiar and more complex in its representation.

Historical and Cultural Contexts of the Topos of Return in Nigerian Literature

The theme of return has been pervasive in African literature since its earliest days. Even before the recognised institutionalisation of African literature – signified by two landmark events: the publication of *Things Fall Apart* in 1958 and the launch of the Heinemann African Writers Series in 1961 (Krishnan 2019) –, the first notable portrayal of a returnee figure can arguably be traced to Kwamankra (Lawson 1982), the protagonist of the "protonovel" (DiGiacomo 2017, 254) *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911), penned by the Fante writer and journalist Joseph Ephraim Casely Hayford (1866-1930). As African literature became institutionalised, a dazzling array of texts emerged, foregrounding the theme of return and evolving in response to the changing political, social, and cultural landscapes of Africa and its diaspora. In Nigerian literature, in

particular, the theme of return resonates strongly across generations of writers – from the so-called first generation to contemporary authors. Understanding how this theme of return has evolved over time requires us to delve into the different generations of Nigerian literature. Therefore, the following section traces the literary genealogy of Nigerian literature and its shifting preoccupations, structured through the generational model of periodisation.

Nigerian Literature and the Generational Model of Periodisation Literature

Since the publication of the highly debated introduction to a special issue of *Research in African Literatures* by Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton (2008), generational frameworks have been widely employed to periodise Nigerian literature initially and, subsequently, African literature more broadly. This generational model categorises Nigerian authors into distinct “generations” based on their historical context, socio-political experiences, and thematic and stylistic features (Adesanmi and Dunton 2008). Despite its significant influence in both Western literary scholarship and within Nigeria, where it gained further traction through widespread adoption in literary pedagogy at secondary and tertiary educational institutions (Akinpelu 2024), this model has also drawn considerable criticism. Even its creators recognise its limitations, particularly the arbitrary nature of the historical divisions between generations (Adesanmi and Dunton 2005). Nevertheless, its continued relevance lies in its ability to offer a structured framework for analysing the evolution of literary trends, enabling scholars to trace their development systematically and making the teaching process more coherent.

The first generation of Nigerian writers, spanning from the 1950s to the 1970s, comprises figures widely regarded as the founders of Anglophone Nigerian literature, including Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, and Wole Soyinka.⁶ These authors wrote during a period often referred to as the “wind of change”⁷ era, which, as Kortenaar (2007) notes, coincided with “the first flush of political independence when the ideology of development and modernisation called upon citizens to identify with nation-states” (181). In particular, within the Nigerian

⁶ It is important to note, however, that these authors are not the first African writers to produce works in English; English-language literature in Africa dates back at least to the eighteenth century, beginning with slave narratives such as Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African, Written by Himself*. Additionally, they are not the first African authors to gain international recognition; in 1952, six years before the publication of *Things Fall Apart*, Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was published by Faber and Faber and celebrated as ‘primitive’ writing (Krishnan 2014).

⁷ The phrase “Wind of Change” refers to a metaphor employed by British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in a speech delivered in Cape Town in 1960. It signified the growing wave of self-determination movements across African nations and marked an acknowledgment of the impending end of the colonial system.

context, this period corresponds to the time when the territory – described by British historian Lord Malcolm Hailey as “the most artificial of the many administrative units created in the course of European occupation of Africa” – was striving for unity and independence, which it ultimately achieved on October 1st, 1960 (Hailey in Saro-Wiwa 1992, 19). Literary critics frequently associate the literature of this period with the broader “anti-colonial struggle” (Krishnan 2017, 139). Perhaps no work is more emblematic of this time than Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), which has often been interpreted as a quintessential example of the practice of “writing back” to the dominant imperial discourse (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1989).

Furthermore, this period marked a crucial moment of reflection on the literary language of Nigeria. A watershed event in the history of African literature, the Conference of African Writers of English Expression (1962), held at Makerere University College in Uganda, centred on what Obiajunwa Wali (1963) synthesised as “the fundamental question of defining African literature, and the problems involved for an African writing in a language that is not native to him” (14). Two distinct ideological paths emerged from this event: one advocating for the exclusive use of Indigenous African languages, entirely rejecting colonial languages, and the other embracing an approach described by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2013) as the abrogation and appropriation of the colonial language.⁸ The former stance is exemplified by Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o, who asserted that “[the English] language was the means of spiritual subjugation” (1986), leading him to eventually abandon it in favour of his native Gikuyu. The latter approach is exemplified by Chinua Achebe, whose objective was to fashion a “new English” capable of “carry[ing] the weight of [the] African experience” (Achebe 1965, 30) by incorporating African expressions, proverbs, and words.

For the so-called second generation of Nigerian authors writing during the post-independence era, the use of English was generally taken for granted. While English was established as the national literary language, the fragilities of the Nigerian nation-state increasingly became apparent. During this time, the initial optimism accompanying independence steadily eroded due to the failure to fulfil its promises, giving rise to what Lazarus describes as “the mourning after” (1990, ix). The Biafran War (1967–1970), also known as the Nigerian Civil War, further exacerbated this growing disillusionment. The conflict erupted

⁸Abrogation refers to the rejection of the concept of Standard English, while appropriation “describes the processes of English adaptation” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2013, 4).

when the south-eastern region of Nigeria (the territory of Biafra), predominantly inhabited by the Igbo ethnic group, declared its independence – a move fuelled by ethnic tensions, political unrest, and the aftermath of the 1966 pogroms, in which the Hausa population massacred thousands of Igbo people living in northern Nigeria.⁹ The subsequent Nigerian government blockade resulted in a catastrophic humanitarian crisis, with widespread starvation in the Biafra region, leading to an estimated 1 to 3 million deaths. Even after the conflict's conclusion, Nigeria's political situation remained unstable, characterised by a series of coups and counter-coups that imposed military rule. Economic mismanagement further destabilised the country, as rising oil revenues did not translate into improved living conditions for the population. Instead, rampant corruption and economic mismanagement fostered a reliance on external financial loans, facilitated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank through structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), which ushered in, from the mid-1970s onwards, what Lazarus (2013) describes as “years of neoliberal austerity, structural adjustment, and political rollback” (328).

The literature of this period is often characterised by what scholars like Derek Wright (2008) refer to as “Post-Independence Disillusionment.” This sentiment spread beyond Nigeria, resonating across the African continent as writers articulated their disillusionment with the reality that followed independence and the unfulfilled promises of postcolonial governance. Among the most emblematic works of this period is *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) by Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah. In addition to this growing disillusionment, the post-independence era also witnessed a significant transformation in the literary landscape, as the marginalised voices of women began to challenge the male-dominated narratives of the earlier generation. Indeed, this era saw the emergence of prominent female writers such as Ghanaian Ama Ata Aidoo and Nigerian Buchi Emecheta, who foregrounded the experiences and perspectives of women, offering a critical reflection on both gender and the socio-political challenges of the postcolonial state.

Regarding the third generation of Nigerian writers, it is linked to the literary renaissance that emerged around the turn of the new millennium, coinciding with the country's return to democracy in 1999. According to scholarship, this generation, born after the end of colonialism

⁹ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story “A Private Experience,” published in *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009b), addresses the pogroms through fiction.

– referred to as “the children of the postcolony” (Adesanmi 2005, 967) –¹⁰ shifts its focus from the anticolonial nationalism that preoccupied their predecessors to themes of “nomadism, exile, displacement, and deracination” (Adesanmi and Dunton 2008, 16). In analysing the work of literary critics, Hamish Dalley (2013) identifies a “narrative of disaffiliation from generational precursors,” highlighting how criticism has emphasised this shift in the reception of third-generation Nigerian writers (17). This departure from the past has also been underscored by specific writers, most notably Helon Habila. During his 2018 talk at the African Literature Association Conference, where he discussed the future of African literature, Habila, after referring to Wole Soyinka’s three stages of African writer development outlined in *The Writer in the African State* (1967),¹¹ posed a critical question: “[...] is there a stage where this obsessive focus on writing for the nation or about the nation becomes a weight around the neck, an albatross, stifling the growth of the writer?” (Habila 2019, 5). By invoking the albatross imagery from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), he underscores the burden that African writers may feel in the expectation to address national issues, which can limit their artistic freedom and expression.

However, the relationship between this generation and its predecessors is more complex than a simple break from the past. Some writers have actively positioned themselves, or have been situated by critics, within the broader continuum of Nigerian literary tradition. For example, Okey Ndibe’s connection to this tradition is evident in his linguistic choices in *Foreign Gods, Inc.* (2014), a link he has openly acknowledged (appendix). Similarly, critics often draw comparisons between Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s oeuvre and that of Chinua Achebe, positioning her as his literary successor or ‘literary daughter,’ despite Adichie’s more

¹⁰ Adesanmi translates Abdourahman Waberi’s celebrated title, *Les Enfants de la postcolonie*, from his seminal 1998 work that critically examines Francophone African literature and its engagement with postcolonial themes into English.

¹¹ Wole Soyinka (1997) outlines three stages in the development of the African writer. In the first stage, the early postcolonial nationalist phase, writers enthusiastically embraced the nationalist cause, fuelled by the euphoria of independence. In the second phase, Soyinka describes writers as aligned with nationalist aspirations, where their role became intertwined with state machinery, assisting in the shaping of national identity, often at the expense of their creative and critical autonomy. In the final stage, writers grew disillusioned and bemoaned the failure of post-independence governments to deliver on their promises of freedom and prosperity. Many writers felt increasingly marginalised and co-opted by the political elite, forced to conform or face repression. In response, Soyinka calls for “an honest examination of what has been the failure of the African writer, as a writer.” A compelling parallel can be drawn with the tripartite generational schema pioneered by Adesanmi and Dunton. Both models trace a progression from nationalist optimism to disillusionment, although Soyinka emphasises the moral and philosophical struggles of the African writer, while Adesanmi and Dunton concentrate more on the shifting thematic preoccupations of Nigerian literature, particularly the evolution towards global concerns and transnational identities in the third generation.

nuanced and sometimes ambiguous statements on this matter.¹² Partially breaking from earlier generations, yet simultaneously continuing their traditions,¹³ the third generation of Nigerian writers, as Habila notes, “though born in Africa, [they] live and work outside Africa for so long that the meaning of home has become complicated” (2019, 6). In this contemporary context, the author further reinterprets the well-established botanical metaphor of roots symbolising national belonging (Hogan 2009) to describe himself and his fellow African writers as “a tree whose roots are firmly planted in Africa, but whose branches live in the sunlight of another continent” (Habila 2019, 6). This metaphor aligns with what Madhu Krishnan refers to as “geographical dissonance” (2014, 3), a term describing the tension between the writers’ physical location and their literary heritage (2014, 3).

Apart from Emmanuel Iduma, all the writers discussed in this thesis belong to the third generation of Nigerian authors. Representing various Nigerian ethnic groups,¹⁴ they primarily reside in the Global North: Noo Saro-Wiwa in the United Kingdom, while the others are based in the USA. Unlike previous generations, they do not generally engage in the traditional postcolonial practice of “writing back” to the West, and for this reason, their work has been repeatedly eulogised (Eze 2005; Ede 2015). Chielozona Eze (2005), in particular, notes a shift from what he describes as “novel[s] of resentment,” such as those by Achebe,¹⁵ whose ultimate goal is “to demonstrate to the white man his degree of culpability in causing things to fall apart” (109), to the contemporary generation’s “focus on Nigeria as a cultural, transnational and hybridized space” (110), which opens up “options and possibilities” (101). Migration undeniably influences their writing, but as Adesanmi and Dunton (2008) argue, these authors, while integrated into the global literary scene, maintain deep physical and emotional ties to Nigeria. For instance, both Helon Habila and Okey Ndibe emphasise the significance of reconnecting with the country through regular visits (appendix). Similarly, Chimamanda Ngozi

¹² For a panorama on this topic and a reflection on the limitation of a such comparison, see Tunca (2018).

¹³ For an exploration of the tension between maintaining and departing from a vision of literature as a social commitment in Habila’s work, which he inherits from the first generation of Nigerian writers, see Courtois (2018).

¹⁴ Reflecting an imbalance first noted by Griswold over 20 years ago (2000), my corpus remains dominated by writers of Igbo ethnicity, one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Okey Ndibe, and Emmanuel Iduma. Writers from minority ethnic groups are also represented, such as Noo Saro-Wiwa, an Ogoni, and Helon Habila, a Tangale. In contrast, Sefi Atta has a hybrid background, with a mother who is a “southerner, Yoruba, and Christian” and a father who is a “northerner, Igbirra, and Muslim” (Collins 2007, 123). Lastly, Teju Cole is of Yoruba descent, another major ethnic group in Nigeria. Born to Nigerian parents, he spent his early years in Lagos before moving to the United States.

¹⁵ While a shift is undeniable, it is crucial to recognise that Achebe’s work is often oversimplified, overlooking its depth and nuance. Achebe’s narrative complexity lies in its critique of both external colonial forces and the internal dynamics within Nigerian society that contributed to its challenges and disillusionments after colonial rule.

Adichie and Sefi Atta minimise the effects of geographical dissonance by explicitly stating on their websites that they divide their time between the United States and Nigeria. However, Teju Cole and Noo Saro-Wiwa offer a more ambivalent view of their connection to Nigeria. For Saro-Wiwa, the trauma of her father's execution, the activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, informs a more conflicted relationship with the country. Likewise, Teju Cole, when asked whether he identifies more as Nigerian or American, describes himself as "split right down the middle" (Paulson 2017, n.p.). Despite these varied personal negotiations of identity, Nigeria continues to occupy a significant and enduring place in all their work.

Finally, if we wish to maintain the generational paradigm, it is necessary to incorporate a fourth generation into the traditional tripartite model. While references to the first, second, and third generations are difficult to avoid, contemporary young writers are less frequently identified by the label of a fourth generation. On the one hand, this is because we are still in the midst of its formation; on the other hand, it reflects the possibility that the generational paradigm has outlived its usefulness. Nevertheless, as a simplifying framework, we might adapt Adesanmi and Dunton's assertion to apply it to a fourth generation, noting the presence of "emergent writers who [have] acquired a creative identity markedly different from that of [third]-generation writers" (2005, 1). Following the canonisation of previous generations, Nigerian literature has witnessed exponential growth. While the realist novel remains central, it increasingly intersects with themes such as queer identity and genres like Afrofuturism, speculative fiction, and crime fiction, just to name a few. Notable authors in this emerging generation include Akwaeke Emezi, Chigozie Obioma, Oyinkan Braithwaite, Chinelo Okparanta, and Chibundu Onuzo. Emmanuel Iduma (b. 1989), sharing the same transnational experience as the other writers in this thesis's corpus, is the only one currently residing in Nigeria.

According to Maximillian Feldner (2019), the generational model "correspond[s] to stages in the political development in many African countries since the 1950s" (18). However, as anticipated, the original tripartition has sparked a fierce debate that undermines its foundation. Among the plethora of works critiquing the division, we mention only a few contributions to provide a glimpse of the discussion. Dalley (2013), for instance, contends that "the theoretical implications of organising literary critical discourse in such terms have largely been taken for granted," resulting in a simplified understanding of the intricate "spatio-temporal imaginaries" present within this body of literature (16). Krishnan (2017), on her part, makes a

salient point: the focus on a progression, from the literature of anticolonial struggle and nationalism, passing through that of disillusionment, and culminating in the global shift where there is an emphasis on cosmopolitanism, transnationalism, and the individual, is not only a simplification but also a perspective that underscores “a linear and evolutionary progression.” This, as Irele (2009) suggests, leads to a form of overshadowing of those traditions that do not fit these models. Additional critiques from scholars such as Harry Garuba, Ato Quayson, and Taiwo Osinubi further challenge the generational framework. A detailed discussion of the origins and foundations of the generational model lies beyond the scope of this thesis. However, it is essential to acknowledge that focusing on narratives of return inherently complicates the conventional definitions of these literary generations. Before examining how the theme of return challenges this periodisation, I will first provide a chronological overview of key migration waves. This overview serves as a foundation for exploring the theme of return across different generations, setting the stage for a more in-depth engagement with the current corpus in the subsequent chapters.

Tracing Nigeria’s Migration and Diasporic Waves

Nigerians constitute the most significant proportion of African migrants to the Global North (IOM, 2009). Generally, scholars have identified three waves of migration from Africa to the Global North in the modern era, commencing in the 1950s (Feldner, 2019).¹⁶ These migratory waves can be read as a continuation of migratory patterns established during the colonial period, wherein African subjects travelled to the so-called ‘mother country’¹⁷ as part of the broader colonial project of education – or, as Casimir (1998) more critically describes, “instruction” –¹⁸ designed to produce reliable intermediaries for colonial administrative functions (Daniel

¹⁶ Unlike most scholars, Nnabuihe, Ashindorbe, Oni, and Kosoko (2024) categorise the migratory flux into five distinct waves: the first spanning from 1914 to 1960 during the colonial period; the second occurring between the 1960s and 1980s; the third from the 1980s to the 1990s; the fourth during the 1990s and early 2000s; and the fifth wave, referred to as *Japa*, which emerged in post-2015 Nigeria. The term *Japa* originates from the Yoruba language, meaning ‘to flee’ or ‘to run.’

¹⁷ In colonial discourse, the recurrent use of the term ‘mother country’ in reference to England and France (Ashcroft et al. 2000) reveals a subtle yet pervasive view of the colonized nations as mere ‘cradles of civilization.’ This language also underscores the infantilization of colonized subjects, portraying them as ‘men not fully grown, whose destiny had to be guided by the presumably more advanced states of Europe’ (Cohen 1970, 427).

¹⁸ In his effort to decolonize the history of Haiti, Casimir cautions against conflating education with instruction. The latter, imposed by colonial administrations on intermediary classes, served as a tool for shaping colonized subjects in the image and likeness of the colonizer and as a means of perpetuating epistemicide. However, as Bhabha (1994) famously argued, this likeness could never be fully realised. Instead, it resulted in the formation of a socially racialized hierarchy, with ‘Grand Blancs’ and ‘Petit Blancs’ positioned at its apex (Casimir 1998).

1992). However, migration to the ‘mother country’ also provided fertile ground for the emergence of nationalism and the organisation of independence movements across African nations. During their time in Britain, African students not only encountered peers from other parts of the continent, fostering a sense of Pan-Africanism, but were also exposed to a variety of ideas, ideologies, and political movements.

Long before the first significant wave of migration in the early 20th century, the establishment of the Ethiopian Association of Edinburgh and the Ethiopian Progressive Association (EPA) in Edinburgh reflected the embrace of Ethiopianism by a segment of the West African student population living in Britain (Adi 1993). During this same period, the formation of the West African Students’ Union (WASU) served as a cradle for Pan-African ideas (Adi 1993). Furthermore, the Manchester Pan-African Congress of 1945, in which African students residing in Britain, including Kwame Nkrumah, played a pivotal role, proved instrumental in the process of decolonisation: the decisions made by the intellectuals and activists gathered for the event led to the independence of African countries (Adi 1993). Moreover, having lived in the colonial centre and developed their political consciousness in a context where they were “offended by the gross injustice of the colonial dispensation,” these students returned home after their studies to participate in the liberation struggles of their people (Okpewho 2009, 13). Many of these individuals would later emerge as prominent leaders in the decolonisation process. For example, Kwame Nkrumah became the first president of independent Ghana, while Jomo Kenyatta became both the Prime Minister and the first president of Kenya. Against this backdrop, as documented by social scientist Michael Banton (1953), the 1950s witnessed a significant influx of migrants from West Africa to the United Kingdom. This first wave, which persisted until the 1970s (Feldner 2019), was primarily motivated by educational pursuits, as had been the case in previous years (Banton 1953; Arthur 2009; Feldner 2019). However, the broader context shifted: with the ‘wind of change’ stirring across the continent, this first significant wave of migration straddles what is commonly referred to as the ‘Year of Africa’, i.e., 1960, when seventeen African countries, including Nigeria, achieved independence. Within the context of the former British colonial empire, this independence was not unexpected but rather the result of a carefully managed transition initiated through Constitutional Conferences and Constitutions designed to create common ground in territories characterised by ethnic pluralism and cultural diversity (Calchi Novati and Velsecchi 2020).

In this post-independence era, migration was often viewed as temporary, with the expectation that it would play a vital role in nation-building (Feldner 2019). Families, communities, and governments predominantly sent middle-class young men abroad, chiefly to Britain, to obtain education with the expectation that, upon their return, they would contribute to the development of their respective countries (Arthur 2009, 218). Among these returnees, colloquially referred to as ‘been-tos’ or alternately as ‘beento’ or ‘bintu’ (Hannerz 2022), perhaps the most notable is Wole Soyinka. After completing his studies at the University of Leeds, he returned to Nigeria in 1959. Although Chinua Achebe cannot be classified as a ‘been-to’ *stricto sensu*, he nonetheless broadly fits into this category. Although a graduate of University College Ibadan, which was affiliated with the University of London at the time, Achebe was selected in 1956 to partake in the staff training programme for the BBC in London, after which he returned to Nigeria – only to migrate again later.

As previously discussed in relation to literature, the initial sense of hope that characterised the post-independence era was supplanted by a pervasive disappointment, driven mainly by political instability and economic challenges, which acted as significant push factors for the second wave of migration (1980s-1990s). In the aftermath of the oil boom of the 1970s, Nigeria’s economy became increasingly dependent on oil revenues. However, the collapse of oil prices throughout the 1980s led to a drastic decline in national revenues, compelling the country to tackle its fiscal deficit through extensive borrowing, which resulted in a burgeoning external debt load. This economic recession caused extensive financial hardship, necessitating negotiations with international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank for financial aid. To secure their support, the controversial head of state, General Babangida, implemented a Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). While the SAP aimed to stabilise the economy and mitigate the fiscal deficit, it only exacerbated Nigeria’s economic dependence on foreign aid (Anyanwu 1992) and led to heightened inflation and increased unemployment rates (Danladi and Naankiel 2016). The financial crisis was further aggravated by political instability, marked by a series of incessant military coups. Consequently, the 1980s witnessed a significant brain drain, with many educated Nigerians migrating predominantly to the UK and the US in search of a better life (Mba and Ekeopara 2012).

In contrast to the first wave of migration, these emigrants were less likely to return to Nigeria and often sought permanent residency abroad (Nnabuihe et al. 2024). Once again, Wole

Soyinka stands as a prominent example of this exodus: having firmly established himself as a significant literary figure and a vocal critic of military rule, Soyinka left Nigeria for the third time in 1983. This departure signified a period of exile due to the harsh conditions imposed by military rule. In the 1990s, other notable figures also departed Nigeria, including poet and dramatist Niyi Osundare, alongside playwright and poet Osonye Tess Onwueme.

Finally, the third and largest wave of Nigerian migration began in the early 2000s and continues to the present day. It encompasses both skilled and unskilled migrants, characterised by what Arthur et al. (2012, 18) describe as an “unyielding desire to pursue global economic integration via migration and self-advancement.” This contemporary wave has deepened the divide between two distinct subgroups: skilled migrants, including scholars, professionals, and writers, who typically migrate through legal channels to destinations such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia; and irregular migrants, who often undertake perilous journeys across the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea in search of opportunities in Europe (Arthur et al. 2012). The contrast between these groups underscores the varied motivations driving contemporary Nigerian migration as well as the socio-economic disparities that exist prior to migration. At the heart of these disparities lies Nigeria’s struggling economy, which continues to serve as a major pull factor. In 2020, unemployment among Nigerian youth exceeded 53 percent (Ikuteyijo 2021). Other significant drivers include political instability and escalating conflict in the North, where the insurgency led by Boko Haram, an extremist Islamist group seeking to establish an Islamic caliphate, has caused widespread violence, including bombings, kidnappings, and the notorious abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls, a subject explored in Helon Habila’s writings (Bagaji 2012; Shankar 2014). More recently, the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic have intensified these factors, further pushing Nigerians to seek better opportunities abroad (Ikuteyijo 2021). However, contemporary Nigerian migration is driven not solely by necessity but also by opportunity, as many intellectuals have integrated into the intellectual elite of the Global North, as exemplified by the writers discussed in this thesis.

While the core drivers of migration have remained largely consistent over the last few decades, a distinguishing feature of this wave is the role of “global communication,” which has redefined the “migration and exile experience” (Falola 2018, 13). Technology enables Nigerian migrants to maintain strong connections with their homeland, both affectively and economically. Indeed, migrants contribute to Nigeria’s development through remittances,

which reached \$20 billion in 2023 (Mbachu 2024). Thus, the third wave of Nigerian migration reflects a complex interplay of economic, political, and social forces, as well as the opportunities (at least for some) presented by globalisation. While the challenges of unemployment, insecurity, and political instability continue to drive many to seek better prospects abroad, advancements in technology and communication have allowed migrants to remain connected to their homeland in ways that were previously impossible, having an even stronger impact on the trajectory of Nigerian society. The various waves of Nigerian migration, shaped by a combination of economic, political, and social forces, have resulted in a constantly evolving diaspora.

The idea of return is inherently tied to the existence of this diaspora – without the experience of displacement or migration, the notion of return would bear little significance. While migration is often motivated by the pursuit of better opportunities abroad, the theme of return stands as a powerful counterpoint to this outward movement. These migratory waves, along with the return of diasporic individuals, have significantly influenced the literature produced during these periods. In the following section, I will examine how the topos of return is both addressed and reimagined in the works of Nigerian authors from different generations.

The Narrative of Returns Across Generations

It is a widely acknowledged truth that literature both mirrors and is shaped by its historical context, while also being influenced by cultural and socioeconomic factors. As such, the figure of the returnee partially embodies the ethos of its historical period, representing what German philosophy designates as the *Zeitgeist*. This does not suggest that authors are constrained by deterministic forces that govern their narratives. Instead, it emphasises the inevitability of being affected by the era in which one lives, an era that we, as humans, in turn, help to shape through our actions. As the Cameroonian historian and philosopher Achille Mbembe (2001) proposes, subjectivity can be conceived as temporality because

for each time and each age, there exists something distinctive and particular [... which is] constituted by a set of material practices, signs, figures, superstitions, images, and fictions that, because they are available to individuals' imagination and intelligence and actually experienced, form what might be called "languages of life." (15)

The most frequently cited return narratives by first-generation Nigerian writers include *No Longer at Ease* (1960) by Chinua Achebe, *Jagua Nana* (1961) by Cyprian Ekwensi, and *The Interpreters* (1966) by Wole Soyinka. These works feature ‘been-tos,’ either as central protagonists, as seen in Achebe’s and Soyinka’s novels, or as secondary characters, as in Ekwensi’s. Unlike the narratives of subsequent generations, these texts construct a chronotope that is firmly rooted in post-return Nigeria, with little focus on the characters’ experiences abroad. The only partial exception is Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease*, in which the time spent abroad is referenced through occasional brief flashbacks.

While the overarching focus of these narratives remains on the protagonists’ reintegration into post-return Nigeria, the structure and thematic intricacies of each novel present distinct ways of exploring the ‘been-to’ experience. *The Interpreters*, with its contorted narrative composed of a conglomeration of episodes that have the Yoruba creation legends as a *fil rouge* (see Kinkhead-Weekes 1973), presents a group of ‘been-to’ protagonists – friends living in Lagos during the early 1960s. Each representing a distinct profession, through their various roles, they seek to “interpret or understand the nation” (Ngaboh-Smart 2010, 44). While *The Interpreters* explores collective national concerns through the lenses of different characters, *No Longer at Ease* takes a more focused approach, tracing Obi Okonkwo’s personal struggles upon his return to Nigeria. With a plot structured through a non-linear narrative that shifts between past and present, *No Longer at Ease* chronicles the challenges he encounters as a young Nigerian who, after returning from his studies in England, navigates the moral and cultural complexities of postcolonial Nigeria and ultimately succumbs to the very corruption he initially sought to resist. Lastly, *Jagua Nana*, which is firmly rooted in the Onitsha Market literature tradition, is notable for its fast-paced and episodic narrative, punctuated by swift time shifts and unexpected developments, as well as its use of Pidgin English in dialogue. The novel focuses on the eponymous prostitute living in Lagos and her relationship with Freddie, a young been-to.

As Hannerz (2022) rightly observes, “been-tos are often tragic figures” (94). Their return from abroad does not ensure a smooth reintegration into their home society. On the contrary, it is marked by disorientation and *dépaysement* (Cousins and Dagson-Katiyo 2016), leading to “a state of tension and anxiety” (Davenport 1977, 4). In *No Longer at Ease*, Obi Okonkwo finds himself trapped between the expectations of his Igbo family and community and the Western values he embraced while studying abroad. Although he initially despises the widespread

corruption in Nigeria, overwhelming financial burdens and societal pressures lead him to accept a paltry bribe, resulting in his eventual downfall and arrest. In *Jagua Nana*, once he returns to Nigeria, Freddie throws himself into politics, driven by ambitions of success and upward mobility. His motives, however, are far from noble: “I wan’ money quick-quick; an politics is de only hope” (Ekwensi [1965] 2018, 133), he admits, offering readers a glimpse into the corrupt political environment he seeks to exploit. Driven by this desire, he recklessly enters a political system he barely understands and which will ultimately devour him. Although he runs for election and eventually wins, his victory is short-lived as his political adversary tragically murders him. The sense of disillusionment and personal tragedy among returnees can also be observed in *The Interpreters*, where all the protagonists, despite their intellectual and moral convictions, are unable to bring about meaningful change; their lofty ideals are crushed by the harsh realities of Nigerian society. Among them, Sekoni stands out as perhaps the most emblematic tragic figure: returning to Nigeria with ambitions to modernise the nation as an engineer, his innovative projects are thwarted by his superiors, leading to his mental breakdown, institutionalisation in a mental hospital, and eventual death.

When taken together, these novels exemplify how “the business of generational stratification is both fussy and challenging in the context of African literature” (Okuyade 2013, 4). Indeed, although these novels belong to the first-generation Nigerian literature corpus, they confront the nation’s problems through the lens of returnees, crafting a narrative that is proleptic of the disillusionment characterising the second generation. Many of these works have been interpreted as national allegories, a concept famously articulated by Frederic Jameson in his influential yet controversial 1986 essay “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.” As Jameson argues:

All third-world texts are necessarily [...] allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call national allegories, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel [...] Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic- necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society. (Jameson 1986, 62)

Eschewing a hierarchical vision that the enumeration evokes, for Jameson (1986), the term “third-world” refers to those parts of the world characterised by an “experience of colonialism and imperialism” (67). He suggests that “third-world” literature is inextricably linked to the

national and political context from which it arises, consistently serving as an allegory. Even the most intimate narratives echo broader struggles, whether they tackle the traumas of colonialism, the challenges of independence, or the ongoing difficulties of modernisation and national identity formation.

Jameson's postulation has been the subject of a heated and longstanding debate, particularly within the postcolonial field.¹⁹ Setting aside the complexities of this debate, and without fully endorsing the generalisation that "*all* third-world texts" (Jameson 1985, 62, emphasis added) should be read allegorically, the been-to narratives by first-generation Nigerian writers can indeed be interpreted in such a manner. If, after independence, "what Nigeria is aiming to do is nothing less than the creation of a *new* place and *new* people" (Achebe 1988, 166), these texts highlight the challenges in realising the national project. While engaging with the idea of the Nigerian nation, the been-to narratives of the 1960s reflect how far the country is from becoming the 'imagined community' conceptualised by Benedict Anderson (1983). Moreover, the figure of the returnee captures the anxieties surrounding newly independent Nigeria, epitomised by a detected continuity with the colonial British protectorate.

Making sense of the figure of the been-to in these terms encourages a reading of the return narrative as a critique of the independence movement and the independent nation it produced. Achille Mbembe (2010), among others, emphasised how Western ideals of modernisation and progress became entangled with anti-colonialism. From this perspective, the been-to characters infused with a Western education offer an interesting parallel to the newly independent nation: just as their 'nervous condition' deteriorates into madness or death, their country similarly descends into a cycle of dictatorships, punctuated by coups d'état, thereby reinforcing, as Cobham (1991) observed, "an allegorical correspondence between the psychic crisis of the (usually educated) individual and the socio-political crisis of the modern nation-state" (84).²⁰ Through this pessimistic portrayal, authors underscore the necessity of envisioning a future for the nation that diverges from the bleak trajectory faced by the been-to protagonists.

¹⁹ Among the numerous critiques, Aijaz Ahmad's rebuttal of Frederic Jameson's theory has arguably become the most well-known, reaching a level of recognition comparable to the article it critiques. In his response, Ahmad challenges the over-generalization and essentialisation inherent in Jameson's concept of the "national allegory," and initiates a broader debate that highlights Marxism's entanglement with Orientalist paradigms. For a reading that seeks to rehabilitate Jameson's position, see Lazarus (2011).

²⁰ At the same time, these narratives authored by writers from diverse ethnic backgrounds—such as Achebe and Ekwensi, who are Igbo; Soyinka, who is Yoruba – serve as a synthesis of the nation's multifaceted identity and can be interpreted as an ongoing experimentation with the development of a national literary language.

While the narratives of return by the first generation proleptically hint at the post-independence disillusionment, the second generation plunges unflinchingly into its depths, fully confronting the realities of political instability and economic hardship. During the 1980s and 1990s, the gradual decline of the been-to figure became evident, replaced by literary characters who choose to remain in the West (Egbunike, 2014). As discussed in the previous section, this shift mirrors a broader historical reality: during that period, many African intellectuals, professionals, and writers opted not to return to Nigeria due to political instability and economic hardship. Their characters inhabiting the novels of this period often reflect this decision, with migration and exile emerging as increasingly prominent themes. Buchi Emecheta's *Kehinde* (1994) stands out as arguably the most significant Nigerian return narrative of its time. However, the return of the eponymous protagonist proves to be as unattainable as that of Baako, the protagonist of another classic narrative of return, *Fragments* (1974), by Ghanaian author Ayi Kwei Armah. While Armah's protagonist, Bako, experiences a "dysfunctionality" as a repatriated individual, which ultimately leads him to neurosis (Conway and Potter 2009), the eponymous *Kehinde* finds stability only by leaving her homeland once again. Even her initial "dreams about [her Nigerian] home" were "confused" before her return, as she had grown to appreciate her new life in the United Kingdom (Emecheta 1994, 22). It is only abroad that she ultimately discovers the space to achieve personal, economic and professional fulfilment and emancipation.

Set in the late 1970s, at the cusp of Nigeria's oil boom and subsequent economic crisis, *Kehinde* recounts the vicissitudes of its eponymous protagonist, a Nigerian migrant who has lived in London with her family for 18 years. A distinctive aspect of her character is her bond with her stillborn twin sister, Taiwo, whose presence acts as a guiding force throughout the narrative. The novel begins with her husband, Albert, receiving a letter from his family urging him to "return home" (1). For him, returning represents not only an opportunity to ascend the social ladder – something particularly significant as his job in London is less prestigious than his wife's – but also a sense of national duty, reminiscent of the previous generation: "Nigeria needs us," he asserts (3). After considerable contemplation, *Kehinde* is convinced to leave her cherished job and return to Nigeria, reasoning that "Nigeria was her country too" (47). However, Albert departs first with their children, leaving *Kehinde* in London to handle the sale of their house, a task she never completes. Upon her eventual return, she discovers that Albert, having gained "new confidence" in their homeland, has taken a second wife who is now

pregnant (67). This revelation devastates Kehinde, especially considering that Albert had previously persuaded her to have an abortion before his return to Nigeria to avoid financial strain.

In Nigeria, Kehinde feels alienated as she is subjected to gender norms that compel her to accept this new reality and limit her freedom. Far from being a welcoming home, her native country transforms into the site of the “restoration of patriarchal order” (Toivanen 2012). Buchi Emecheta thus introduces a gendered perspective to the narrative of return, contrasting the experiences of men and women. While Nigeria becomes a space of empowerment for Albert, Kehinde, marginalised by societal expectations, unemployed, and distanced from her husband, finds herself in a state of decline – much like her Jaguar, which “makes strange sounds that had not been there before, as old bones creak under the still taut skin that holds them together” (67). The gradual deterioration of the Jaguar serves as a poignant metaphor for Kehinde’s own unravelling, as both she and the car – once symbols of strength and vitality – succumb to the wear of time and circumstances. Ultimately, what prevents Kehinde from meeting the same tragic end as Armah’s Baako is her decision to leave Nigeria and ‘return’ to London to reclaim her “sanity” (102) – a choice that proves fortuitous, as Nigeria soon plunges into a financial crisis and Albert loses his job. For Kehinde, the concept of home shifts and is no longer anchored in Nigeria. As a symbol of this rediscovered sense of home, Taiwo, who had remained silent during Kehinde’s time in Nigeria, regains her voice upon their return to London. Kehinde’s journey thus underscores the complexities of return, revealing that true belonging and self-realisation may lie not in one’s homeland but in the spaces one creates for oneself.

Having established a diachronic perspective on the topos of return, tracing its evolution across various generations of Nigerian literature, we are now well-positioned to engage with the contemporary reverberations of this theme. Through a multi-layered methodological approach that draws upon a range of disciplinary perspectives, I aim to uncover how contemporary return narratives both conform to, challenge, and expand upon earlier conceptualisations, thereby offering new insights into the evolving dynamics of return in an increasingly interconnected and globalised world.

2. Complexifying the Afropolitan Return: Navigating Blind Spots, Privilege and Status Quo in Adichie's *Americanah* and Atta's *A Bit of Difference*

Americanah (2013) by the renowned Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has swiftly emerged as the quintessential novel exemplifying the contemporary narrative of return – and even the contemporary African novel *tout court*, one might say. The novel's soaring sales have marked it as a representative work of what Idiatha, Journo and Nachtergaele (2019) call the "African Literary Renaissance." A recipient of the US National Book Critics Circle Award and the Chicago Tribune Heartland Prize for Fiction in 2013 and included in the *New York Times* "Ten Best Books" of the same year, the novel has been considered an emblem of Afropolitanism for its ability to challenge – using Adichie's own coinage (2009) – the "single story" of the continent steeped in Afro-pessimism. Moreover, it has emerged as a symbol of the growing prominence of female voices, richly represented in the "New African Writing" (Adesokan 2012). Widely lauded by critics from the Global North, yet sometimes criticised by those based in Africa,²¹ since its publication, the novel has been commented on in an impressive number of articles, book chapters and papers – so much so that offering a new reading of the text has become a formidable challenge. To illustrate this, a brief search on Google Scholar using the book title followed by the author's name yields an impressive 3,890 results. Also, the author herself is the embodiment of what Graham Huggan (2020) identifies as the figure of the "celebrity writer" (5): part of a broader "global celebrity culture," which has been amplified through the proliferation of social media (Huggan 2020, 5). The influence of Adichie, however, extends beyond literary circles, encompassing broader cultural and diasporic dialogues. Carole Boyce Davies (2016) has aptly characterised this era as "the Post-Colonial/Diasporic Chimamanda Adichie Moment," highlighting her pivotal role in shaping contemporary

²¹ For an overview of the disparity in the reception of Adichie's work between Nigerian audiences and those in the Global North, see Pucherová (2022).

discourse. Given its exemplary status, it seems only necessary to commence our exploration of the contemporary narratives of return from this very novel.

In this chapter, I explore Adichie's work alongside Sefi Atta's lesser-known narrative, *A Bit of Difference* (2012). Published within a year of each other, the two narratives of return share numerous common traits. Authored by women who navigate between the Global North and South,²² both novels debuted in the Global North and were later republished in Nigerian editions, epitomising the process of "reversed extraversion" – a concept Adesokan (2012, 16) defines as the outward flow of African cultural production that returns to influence local audiences.²³ Moreover, both works have earned critical acclaim for their nuanced weaving of social commentary into their storylines. Additionally, they both expand their focus beyond the moment of return, offering a broader timespan that captures the transnational experiences of their protagonists. In doing so, they diverge from seminal works by the so-called first-generation writers, which are predominantly centred on the act of return itself.

At the plot level, the female protagonists of the two return narratives come from Nigeria's upper-middle class, and by the conclusion of their sojourns in the Global North, they obtain passports from their host countries, enabling greater mobility across borders. Their journeys illuminate specific gender-based challenges encountered both during their time abroad and upon their return, often intersecting with facets of their romantic lives. At first glance, these protagonists appear as independent and assertive individuals, unafraid to express their opinions – although this perception will be critically examined throughout the chapter. For all these reasons, both novels have significantly contributed to debates on Afropolitanism and Feminism, even though Adichie has rejected affiliation with the former (Gehrmann 2016) and Atta has expressed a complex relationship with the latter (Murphy 2012).²⁴ This is not to suggest that

²² On their personal website, both writers employ the same syntactic structure to underline their transnationality: Adichie "divides her time between the United States and Nigeria, where she leads an annual creative writing workshop" (C. Adichie 2024), whereas Atta "divides her time between the United States, England and Nigeria" (Atta, n.d.).

²³ *Americanah* was initially published by the New York-based Alfred A. Knopf publishing house in 2013. Concurrently, the Nigerian edition became available through Farafina Books, facilitated by contracts granting free co-publication rights to Nigeria (Bgoia and Jay 2013). Similarly, *A Bit of Difference* was published by Interlink Publishing, "a Massachusetts-based independent publishing house that offers a global, cosmopolitan perspective," as stated on their website, while the Nigerian edition is self-published (Pucherová 2022, 70) without modifications (Murphy 2012). These Nigerian editions exemplify the authors' commitment to bolstering the local Nigerian publishing industry.

²⁴ In a conversation with Murphy (2012), Atta acknowledges that while she views herself primarily as a storyteller who writes from a woman's perspective, she "is okay" and "do[es] not care" to be labeled as feminist anymore (112), suggesting that it did in the past. However, she underlines that she "do[es] not mind shrugging [the term] off" in case it limits her (111). In *Feminism and Modernity in Anglophone African Women's Writing*, Dobrota

the author alone holds the definitive interpretation of their works – as Roland Barthes demonstrated in *The Death of the Author* (1967) – but rather to emphasise the significance of these novels in shaping academic and even popular discourse, particularly in the case of *Americanah*.

In addition to the shared similarities in their publication trajectories and plots, another compelling reason to read these two texts together is that they epitomise what Akin Adesokan (2012) identifies as a “gold standard” (5) of “New African Writing” (1). In his article “New African Writing and the Question of Audience,” Adesokan examines the reception and the purported defining characteristics of contemporary African writing in Western Europe and North America. In particular, he uses the term “gold standard” to describe novels that exhibit five distinguishing characteristics:

they are mostly written by women; they are focalized from the perspectives of culturally innocent or marginal protagonists; they thematize the emotional consequences of familial or public upheavals; they are not too long, but if they are, they compensate for their length by being formally or linguistically nonexperimental; and they end happily, or at any rate, not too grimly (Adesokan 2012, 4).

Adesokan (2012) posits that these novels are tailored to meet Western audience’s expectations, situating them within a broader reception context that significantly influences new African fiction. Building on critical insights of works such as Graham Huggan’s *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001) and Sarah Brouillette’s *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (2007), the scholar argues that this dynamic leads to a paradox: “the productive foreignness of a sensibility that is estranged from its own interests” (1). Yet, it comes naturally to ask ourselves: is African Literature only a response to the demands of the Western literary market? Do African authors merely adhere to a pre-established formula in their writing? Is African literature, as Maximilian Feldner (2020) argues, homogenous? And if so, is this homogeneity only a “consequence of the demands of the global literary market and its impact on postcolonial

Pucherová (2022) highlights how the label of “feminist” assigned to one’s novels can reduce their sales in Nigeria, as was the case for Adichie (60). This is due to the perception of feminism as alien to Nigerian society and originating from the West. However, Atta’s unease with the concept is better understood when focusing on a 2019 interview in which she underlines the inseparability of her version of feminism from “racism” and “classism” (Okwuosa 2019). Also, she is critical of the way feminist discourse is enmeshed with capitalism (epitomised in her affirmation by “banks” and “corporations”) in a way that perpetuates systemic inequalities (Okwuosa 2019, n.p.) Therefore, more than against feminism *per sé*, Atta is against what Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser (2019) would define Liberal feminism, which “steadfastly refuses to address the socioeconomic constraints that make freedom and empowerment impossible for the large majority of women” (11).

African writing” or “an effect of processes of commodification and the pressures and demands of literary markets” (Feldner 2020, 48)?

When addressing these inquiries, it would prove beneficial to juxtapose Adesokan’s conclusions (2012) with the insights offered by Madhu Krishnan in *Contingent Canons* (2018). Navigating in the same materialist hummus, the scholar examines how the past and contemporary canon of African literature has been established and consecrated as a market category while shedding light on how such a canon has obscured the broader landscape of African literary production.²⁵ However, Krishnan does not argue that there is an *a priori* formula that African writers (un)consciously apply but instead focuses on the “dynamics of visibility” that produce the canonisation and consecration of certain works. In contrast to the past, when African literature often transcended the borders of the literary sphere to be interpreted through an ethnographic and anthropological perspective,²⁶ today – the scholar argues – visibility is given to an “autonomous individual, unmoored from the pesky business of politics and economics” that perfectly aligns with “the dominant reading of the Afropolitan idea of the mobile subject” (Krishnan 2019, 41); in other words, visibility is given to “the ideal subject of the neoliberal turn” (Krishnan 2019, 42). Thus, through her observations, Krishnan (2019) redirects the focus from the writers’ creations to the literary industry – editors, publishing houses, etc. – which places particular literary works in the spotlight: “There is something to be said about the extent to which it is precisely those texts which at least superficially erode and evacuate political context that become celebrated exemplars of the field in the global market” (Krishnan 2019, 60). Then, one might argue that this dynamic is less about the texts’ intrinsic qualities and more about the reading practices applied to them. This resonates with Eileen Julien’s conclusions when focusing on what she calls the “extroverted African novel,” i.e., “a particular type of narrative characterized above all by its intertextuality with hegemonic or global discourses and its appeal across borders” (Julien 2006, 681). According to Julien (2006), the attribute of extroversion is not inherent to literary works *per se*, but rather, it arises from particular reading practices that highlight and value those aesthetic and thematic elements favoured by Anglo-American literary criticism.

²⁵ Krishnan (2018) distinguishes between “African literature” and “African literary production” (5). The former denotes the collection of works that have attained canonical status, while the latter encompasses the broader spectrum of African literary output, which is almost always ignored by the global literary market.

²⁶ For instance, Henry Louis Gates Jr (1984) dubs this tendency to miscount literature as ethnography and imagination as reality as “the anthropological fallacy.”

Existing Literary Criticism: The Influence of Afropolitanism on Readings of *Americanah* and *A Bit of Difference*

Americanah and *A Bit of Difference* exemplify the type of reading practices described by Julien (2006), which, to some degree, obscure their complexity. The first wave of articles analysing Adichie's novel have read it as prototypical expressions of Afropolitan consciousness. For example, Yogita Goyal's analysis of Adichie's novel (2014) engages with Paul Gilroy's ubiquitous concept of the 'Black Atlantic' but argues that the novel departs from and ultimately transcends this framework. Indeed, she contends that the novel broadens the concept by challenging the traditional focus on diasporic culture and the West's slavery legacy, advocating for a re-centred role for Africa in the discourse on modernity. After lauding the novel for its exploration of the dynamics among nation, race, and diaspora within a neoliberal context, Goyal (2014) argues that it advances beyond Dipesh Chakrabarty's call to transcend provincial views of Europe to also challenge the narrowness of the Atlantic framework itself (xvi). Katherine Hallemeier (2015), on the other hand, argues that "by assuming the economic and political privilege of its Nigerian protagonists and pitying Americans for their limited opportunities, *Americanah* presents an alternative, utopic vision of global power in which the United States stands as a foil to the promising future of late Nigerian capitalism" (232). Rather than presenting a utopian vision, this chapter contends that Adichie, much like Atta, engages with an aesthetic of ambivalence, depicting Nigeria and the positionality of the protagonists in their novels as deeply enmeshed in the same uneven power dynamics as those of the Global North. However, for now, it suffices to note that, as these two interpretations suggest, a branch of literary criticism on *Americanah* contends that the novel embodies an Afropolitan consciousness by emphasising that the novel reimagines global power dynamics, redefines cultural exchanges between Africa and the West, and re-centres Africa's role within modernity.

As a matter of fact, one could argue that the critical reception of *Americanah* in the Global North is profoundly intertwined with the evolving discourse on Afropolitanism as a cultural and intellectual concept. While the initial enthusiastic and largely uncritical embrace of the concept was hailed as a paradigm-changer for its ability to "rethink African knowledge outside the trope of crisis" (Gikandi 2010, 9), it has since gradually come under intense scrutiny. Susanne Gehrman (2016) provides an overview of the critical perspectives on Afropolitanism, highlighting three major concerns: "1) its elitism/class bias, (2) its a-politicalness and (3) its commodification" (62). As Emma Dabiri (2014) argues, "the danger of Afropolitanism

becoming the voice of Africa” lies in its tendency to overlook its privilege while purporting to represent the majority of Africans:

The problem is not that Afropolitans are privileged per se – rather it is that at a time when poverty remains endemic for millions, the narratives of a privileged few telling us how great everything is, how much opportunity and potential is available may drown out the voices of a majority who remain denied basic life chances (Dabiri 2014, n.p.).

As critiques of Afropolitanism have mounted, similar concerns about *Americanah* and its author have emerged. Some unveiled a concern with the work’s entanglement with the neoliberal structures (Krishnan 2019),²⁷ while others with Adichie’s version of feminism (Lascelles 2021; Pucherová 2022; Vergès 2023). Madhu Krishnan (2019), in particular, signals her reservations about *Americanah* by positioning the novel alongside Teju Cole’s *Open City* and viewing it as emblematic of the contemporary canon of African literature we previously referred to. Profoundly characterised by a concern with “mobility and cosmopolitan fluidity” (Krishnan 2019, 53) and emphasising liberal values such as “the celebration of human capital as the organizing principle of selfhood” (59), “meritocracy” (60) and “choice” (60), this celebration of fluidity and human capital with which the novel is infused, “erases the possibility for a larger reckoning with the ongoing symmetries and structures of violence” (61).

On a similar note, Pucherová (2022), who frames Adichie’s visions on feminism under the term “cosmopolitan feminism”, turns to the novel to focus on the troubling questions of class privilege:²⁸ “Focusing on their bourgeois lives [...] the novel hardly ever turns its look away at the less privileged social groups of Nigeria – those without *any* choices, who represent the majority society” (68, emphasis in the original). According to the scholar, the characters that populate the fictional world of the novel fail to empathise with what Mbembe (2006) called “the foreign, the strange and the distant” (11) and, in doing so, the novel remains “ethically

²⁷ Adichie’s entanglement with capitalism has always been part of her authorial self-positioning: her widely viewed *TED Talk We Should All Be Feminists* propelled her to fame, gaining further prominence when featured in the singer Beyoncé’s *Flawless* video and printed on a luxurious 600-euro Dior T-shirt. Also, Adichie has served as a brand ambassador for No.7, the cosmetic line from the British pharmacy retailer Boots.

²⁸ As I read it, Pucherová (2022) describes “cosmopolitan feminism,” which she attributes to both Adichie and Atta, as a form of feminism that emerges from the experiences of African women living transnationally and engaging deeply with multiple cultures, often through migration. While firmly rooted in African identity, these women’s perspectives are also shaped by global influences. This feminism challenges traditional patriarchal structures and embraces individualism, self-definition, and a nuanced understanding of gender intersecting with other aspects of identity, such as race and class. However, it risks elitism and exclusion, as it may primarily reflect the experiences of a privileged minority and faces critique for its potential alignment with neoliberal values.

ambiguous by its disregard for previous commitments, its insulation from the surrounding poverty, and its orientation toward the West” (Pucherová 2022, 70). Thus, these critiques highlight how *Americanah*, while celebrated for its cosmopolitan outlook, has also been scrutinised by some scholars for its apparent alignment with neoliberal values and detachment from broader social inequalities.

On the other hand, analyses of *A Bit of Difference* often employ Afropolitan lenses, predominantly highlighting how the protagonist perceives home and belonging as a member of the diaspora. Unlike readings of *Americanah*, such interpretations are generally limited to the celebratory aspects of Afropolitan identity or analyse the novel in favourable terms. Eva Rask Knudsen (2019), for instance, argues that the novel successfully realised Sara Ahmed’s ‘unhingedness’ of the concept of home from that of belonging (2000). She asserts that the narrative emphasises the fluidity of home as an emotional and psychological state shaped by individual experiences and a journey of self-discovery rather than a mere physical dwelling or location. In the previously mentioned chapter, Pucherová (2022), besides analysing *Americanah*, also broadens her analytical scope to incorporate, among others, an in-depth critique of *A Bit of Difference*, providing an indirect comparison of the two works. While both narratives of return are informed, according to Pucherová (2022), by the same cosmopolitan feminist rhetoric that aims at universality and holds individualism dear, the scholar argues that Atta’s novel, compared to Adichie’s, unveils the role played by class. Indeed, economic materiality serves as a crucial foundation for autonomy: the protagonist’s independence and decision-making are underpinned by her financial stability. Moreover, in alignment with the growing criticism surrounding Afropolitanism and the enthusiasm for the novel, Anna-Leena Toivanen (2019) advocates for adopting Cosmopolitanism as a more preferable theoretical framework, which she applies in her reading. Drawing on the insights of Spencer (2011), Toivanen (2019) contends that the narrative’s cosmopolitanism manifests itself in the “gesture of recognising one’s own positionality as well as seeing oneself from others’ perspective” (Spencer 2011 in Toivanen 2019, 275). Thus, literary criticism of *A Bit of Difference* appears less critical than that directed at *Americanah*. While aligning with key elements of Afropolitanism by offering an exploration of cosmopolitan identity, the novel also seems to interrogate the material realities that shape autonomy and belonging.

Seeking a meeting point between literature and Afropolitanism, Miriam Pahl (2016) adopts a more balanced approach that highlights the complexity of this philosophical thought

and its contradictions. She does this by exploring how Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Teju Cole use their online presence to critically engage with global cultural discourses, offering a nuanced perspective that both embraces and critiques aspects of globalisation, mobility, and cosmopolitanism. In particular, she provides a reading of *Americanah* with a central focus on Ifemelu's blogs as platforms for critical engagement and social commentary, thereby revealing the "diverse layers of Afropolitanism" (Pahl 2016, 83), with its inherent contradictions and ambivalence evident in the narrative of return.

Taking inspiration from Pahl's article, this chapter delves into the two narratives of return and aims to challenge prevailing reading practices. It diverges from celebratory interpretations idealising them as embodiments of Afropolitan rhetoric, advocating for diasporic fluidity and global belonging. Simultaneously, it problematises more critical readings that argue that the narratives erase the ongoing asymmetries of the capitalist world or, to use the terminology proposed by WReC (2015), its unevenness. Through this exploration, the chapter seeks to present a nuanced understanding of these works, arguing that they neither fully reject nor entirely embrace (capitalist) modernity but instead offer moments of self-reflection on their protagonists' entanglement within such systems through an aesthetic of ambivalence. It contends that, in both novels, the protagonists' return to Nigeria signifies a rejection of the West without renouncing capitalism, emphasising that the two are not synonymous. In other words, turning one's back on the West through physical return does not amount to a decolonial disengagement from Western modernity as conceptualised by decolonial thinkers. Instead, the narratives advocate for compromise as essential for a successful return, further illuminating the ambivalence that pervades both stories. By doing so, the novels highlight that the Global North and the Global South, even in their worst aspects, are integral components of a singular modernity to which the two protagonists contribute, despite their critical stance toward the Global North.

Plot Overviews and Narrative Structure

Before delving into the analysis, it may be useful to provide a brief overview of the plotlines and structure of these novels. *Americanah*, a third-person omniscient narrative, traces the lives of two young Igbo lovers, Ifemelu and, to a lesser extent, Obinze, whose paths diverge due to their individual migration experiences. The novel opens with Ifemelu as a focaliser. She is at the peak of her career as a blogger in the United States and is preparing to return to her native

country, Nigeria. The moment of NOW (Ifemelu going to a hair salon) is interspersed with flashbacks of her past. These flashbacks are arranged chronologically and delineate Ifemelu's childhood years, her defining encounter with Obinze, and the development of their relationship set against the backdrop of Nigeria's turbulent political landscape, marked by the military dictatorships of Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1992), General Abacha (1993-1998), and General Abubakar (1998-1999). They then trace Ifemelu's migration to the United States, a country she envisions from Nigeria as brimming with opportunity. However, her optimism soon fades as she faces the realities of Western inequality, financial strain, and limited employment opportunities – the scholarship that allows her to be in the U.S. is only partial. Unable to find work, she ends up in a psychologically distressing encounter with a tennis coach who expects sexual favours in exchange for money. This incident profoundly impacts Ifemelu, leading to a period of isolation and depression, resulting in her severing contact with Obinze.

Resembling a modern fairy tale, Ifemelu's financial burdens begin to ease when she secures a job as a babysitter, which not only provides her with a steady income but also paves the way for an unexpected romance with Curt, her employer's affluent white cousin, thus offering her access to a world of comfort and privilege: "That was what Curt had given her, this gift of contentment, of ease" (200), the narrator says. Their relationship becomes an opportunity for the novel to explore issues of race and privilege in the United States – themes that subsequently form the bedrock of Ifemelu's blog, *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*. Indeed, it is the dissolution of her relationship with Curt that compels Ifemelu to start writing such a blog, which not only becomes successful but also serves as a catalyst for a new romantic chapter with Blaine, a young African American assistant professor. While immersed in her relationship, Ifemelu's fortuitous encounter with an old acquaintance makes her discover that Obinze migrated to England. Later that day, she decides to email him. This email, which remains unanswered, allows the narrative to shift to Obinze's life, positioning him as a momentary focaliser.

Through flashbacks, readers learn that he entered the United Kingdom illegally years earlier. Obinze, the son of a Nigerian professor, comes from the same social stratum as Ifemelu. Destabilising the stereotypical image that some Western readers might hold of Africans, the narrator declares that Obinze's "childhood [was] cushioned by family, by regular meals, by dreams in which there was no conception of cleaning toilets in London" (A 293). His decision

to migrate is not driven by “the kind of poverty that crushed human souls,” or “fleeing from war,” but rather by what it is described as escaping “from the oppressive lethargy of choicelessness” (A 341) and by his hunger for “choice and certainty” (A 341). Yet, once he arrives in the U.K., he discovers, even more than Ifemelu, that it is not the land of opportunity he imagined. As an undocumented migrant, he is coerced to assume another person’s identity, initially to secure employment as a cleaner and, later, as a kitchen delivery worker. Living in the shadows to avoid detection, he orchestrates an expensive marriage of convenience to obtain the necessary documents for legal residency. However, moments before the ceremony, his plan is foiled when immigration officers appear and detain him for deportation. As the narrator notes, emphasising the dehumanisation of migrants, he is reduced to “a thing to be removed” (A 345). From here, the narrative shifts once more to Ifemelu, who, although she has found success as a blogger and is in a relationship, feels unfulfilled with her life, prompting her to make the significant decision to return to Nigeria. Her journey back and the experiences that follow, along with her encounter with Obinze, will be explored in greater detail in the subsequent pages.

Deola, the protagonist of *A Bit of Difference* and the focaliser of the third-person narrative, resonates with Ifemelu through her dissatisfaction with life. The narrative of return (or, more precisely, returns), structured chronologically, begins with an arrival: that of Deola at Atlanta airport. The central character is a 39-year-old Nigerian woman residing in London, working as an auditor for an NGO. She arrives in Atlanta for work. Despite having opportunities to travel, Deola finds little satisfaction in her work, largely due to the dissonance between her personal beliefs and the organisation’s approach to humanitarianism – a subject she frequently critiques. When not travelling for her work, she does not seek to recreate a sense of locality in London as many migrants do, nor does she form the vast connections typically associated with cosmopolitan living, as Gikandi (2009) describes. Instead, she maintains a distance from the Nigerian community in London, engaging primarily with her closest friends: Bandele, a Nigerian author; Subu, a devout businesswoman; and Tessa, a white former classmate.

She begins to contemplate a permanent return to Nigeria due to an increasing dissatisfaction with her job, a lack of future prospects, an awareness of her advancing age, which diminishes her chances of biological motherhood, and the absence of a partner whom she hopes will be Nigerian. Additionally, she is tired of experiencing incidents that are “so trivial [to be] amounted to discrimination” (17) yet still embody a form of veiled racism. This contemplation solidifies into a plan of action, as what was initially supposed to be a brief visit

to Nigeria for her father's memorial lays the groundwork for a permanent return. However, Nigeria is not depicted as an ideal place. Against the backdrop of Nigerians complaining about the living conditions in the country, she faces a different kind of constraint: societal expectations. Relatives and acquaintances pressure her to embrace motherhood, while her professional achievements are often overlooked and undervalued. A fortuitous encounter with the owner of the hotel in which she is staying hastens her decision to come back to Nigeria "For Good" (ABD 279), as their sexual encounter leads to an unplanned pregnancy. After discovering she is pregnant in London, she returns to Nigeria once more to have a candid conversation with her mother. Despite societal expectations, she firmly declines to marry the child's father, fully aware that her decision may subject her to judgment. Even though the title of the last chapter – "For Good" (ABD 279) – suggests a permanent return, the novel ends while she is still in London, poised on the cusp of change. It is a "voluntary exile, after which she will return to Lagos" (ABD 279), the narrator says. Nonetheless, the ending, which features a visit from the father of her future child, leaves Deola's potential return to Nigeria open to the reader's interpretation.²⁹

Migration and Identity: Embracing Nigerian Belonging from Abroad

Afropolitanism often challenges traditional notions of national belonging by embracing a more fluid cosmopolitan identity. While acknowledging their ties to specific places, Afropolitans, as generally described, see themselves as part of a broader African diaspora and global community. For this reason, Susanne Gehrman (2016) sums up the concept of Afropolitanism as "Cosmopolitanism with African roots." This fluidity challenges the idea of a fixed or static national identity. As Afropolitanism encompasses a sense of being "multi-local" and having multiple homes, Afropolitans are individuals who easily navigate multiple cultural affiliations, simultaneously questioning traditional notions of home and belonging. Furthermore, Afropolitanism also celebrates the richness of cultural diversity while recognising the complexity of identity in an increasingly interconnected world. Thus, it is indeed surprising that these novels, so emphatically labelled as Afropolitan, portray protagonists who possess an

²⁹ Most scholars have taken it for granted that Deola eventually returns outside the borders of the narrative, yet some have questioned this assumption. This opens up alternative interpretations, emphasising the inherent ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings within the text.

unwavering sense of identity as Nigerian. Both Ifemelu and Deola focus more on their roots than their routes, even though routes play a role in their self-definition.

In an exchange with her colleague in Atlanta, Deola expresses that she identifies as Nigerian. Her sense of belonging and affiliation with her birthplace is emphasised, on the one hand, by the third-person narration – “She has never had any doubts about her identity [...] she is a Nigerian expatriate in London” (*ABD* 7) – and, on the other hand, by the protagonist’s frequent use of the pronoun “we” (*ABD* 111), which denotes Nigerians. Differently from her friend Subu, who “refers to Nigeria as home but never goes back” (*ABD* 34) and Bandele, who rejects it altogether, Deola views the country as “home” and actively maintains ties with it through regular visits, reinforcing her connection with her country of birth not just emotionally but also through physical presence (*ABD* 50). The juxtaposition of Deola’s perception of the homeland with that of her friends shows readers that belonging is not a monolithic concept but a spectrum shaped by personal experiences and emotions.

Much like the author who created her, Deola comes from a background where her parents belong to different ethnic groups. This intricate blend of her heritage may have inclined her towards prioritising her national identity over her ethnic ties in the first place. However, the experience of migration has further accentuated this inclination. Upon returning to Nigeria to review an NGO, Deola’s immediate response to questions about her origins is simply “Nigeria,” mirroring the answer she would give in London (*ABD* 123). However, as the third-person narrator says, she swiftly recalls that in this context, “she is from whatever state her father is from” (*ABD* 123). Despite being able to navigate both cultural codes, she decides to embrace the one she usually uses in the UK, where the broad national identity she adopts transcends specific regional affiliations based on ethnicity. This decision is also influenced by her awareness of the “ethnic distrust” that she observes as pervasive among Nigerians (*ABD* 124).

The “nostalgia [for the homeland] that is ever present in the diasporic imagination” (Silva 2009, 704) is epitomised in Deola’s case by her desire to find a Nigerian partner (*ABD* 60). This transcends mere racial preferences; rather, it embodies a longing for a “shared history” (*ABD* 60) and cultural resonance: “Her man must taste and smell as if they were raised on the same diet and make the same tonal sounds. Similarity on all fronts is essential,” says the narrator, focalised through the protagonist (*ABD* 61). This statement speaks to the desire for cultural affinity and shared experiences. This “specific[ity]” (*ABD* 61) in imagining her partner is interpreted by Henning Steinfeld (2019) as a rejection of whiteness and an operation of

reclaiming her own reproductive space (172). However, it could also be read as a reverberation of what Silva (2009) calls “diasporic longings of home and belonging” (693), the complex and often nostalgic yearning for a homeland or a sense of place that immigrants and their descendants feel. This longing is not merely about a physical place but encompasses a desire for emotional, cultural, and communal connection. Indeed, even though “England has changed” since she first moved and now “black culture is everywhere,” she still feels a deep “sense of unbelonging” on the island (*ABD* 68), and the phantasied yearning for a Nigerian partner becomes an expression of her unresolved search for connection.

Similarly, in *Americanah*, Ifemelu’s sense of belonging is firmly tied to Nigeria. At the incipit of the novel, while still in the U.S. and planning her return, the third-person narrator states, “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” (*A* 7). This well-established botanical metaphor conveys a profound sense of belonging and connection to her country of birth, in stark contrast to the sense of transience she experiences in the various cities she has lived in across the United States. While Deola’s affiliation with Nigeria is reflected in her clear vision of an ideal partner, Ifemelu’s is epitomised by her accent.

Upon relocating to the United States, Ifemelu has a jarring experience at the university’s registration office, where her Nigerian accent is mistakenly equated with inadequate English proficiency. Even though she has been speaking English her entire life, this encounter prompts Ifemelu to begin “[practising] an American accent” (*A* 164) as a means of adapting and navigating her new environment without being perceived as the Other. As illustrated in *Foreign Gods Inc.* and, to a certain extent, also in *A Bit of Difference*, migrant protagonists often discern that within their new country, there is a perception that a native English accent is frequently wrongly equated with intelligence, whereas a foreign accent is mistakenly associated with its absence. This observation underscores the insidious prejudice that migrants encounter, shedding light on broader societal inequities and discrimination. To escape such prejudice, adopting an American accent becomes for Ifemelu an “act of will” (213):

She had perfected, from careful watching of friends and newscasters, the blurring of the t, the creamy roll of the r, the sentences starting with “so,” and the sliding response of “oh really,” but the accent creaked with consciousness, it was an act of will. It took an effort, the twisting of lip, the curling of tongue. If she were in a panic, or terrified, or jerked awake during a fire, she would not remember how to produce those American sounds.

The protagonist's deliberate effort to adopt an American accent emphasises the constructed and performative nature of her chosen manner of speaking, which is not effortless but rather the result of meticulous study and replication of its features. It does not merge seamlessly with her identity; rather than integrating smoothly with her sense of self, the accent remains superficial, requiring continuous effort to maintain and collapsing under the weight of intense emotional states. The imitation at the core of Ifemelu's American accent might evoke Bhabha's act of mimicry. However, unlike the latter, at first glance, there is no subversive intent, nor is it a means to challenge power. Of course, when discussing the theory of mimicry, Bhabha refers to the colonial relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. The latter imitates the former, ultimately becoming "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 1994, 86). For this process of imitation to occur, it is preceded by a deconstruction of the cultural hierarchy in such a manner that can unsettle the presumed superiority of the coloniser by highlighting the artificiality of colonial authority and identity. Relying on Bhabha to interpret this short passage can be seen as hasty – after all, Ifemelu is not a colonised subject. Dimple Godiwala (2007), however, argues that Bhabha's concept of mimicry can be applicable to "any hierarchized subject who perceives the values of another group as superior to his or her own and aspires to the ideologically constructed behaviour, attitudes, and culture of that group" (61). This is typical of migrants, who, like Ifemelu, internalise hegemonic structures and attempt to make them their own as a way to be integrated – or, more precisely, assimilated – into the new environment. The risk of this behaviour is, as Godiwala (2007) emphasises, to reiterate the hegemonic structures of colonial discourse (49). By adopting an American accent, Ifemelu seemingly endorses the notion that sounding American is more desirable than Nigerian.

When a telemarketer calls her and praises her because "[she] sound[s] totally American," her instinctive reaction is one of "shame" (A 215). What is meant as a compliment weighs heavily on her, like a "garland that she hung around her neck" (A 215) – a garland that, far from signifying achievement, acknowledges the erasure of her Nigerian identity. Indeed, the possible allusion to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous albatross morphs the compliment into a symbol of her cultural estrangement, a reminder of the lost cultural roots she feels she has betrayed by adopting an American accent. This interaction prompts her to question the dominant structures that position Americanness at the top – a behaviour also identified by Godiwala among migrants (2007): "Why was a compliment, an accomplishment, to sound American?" (A 215) and reflects on how the "triumph" (A 215), the "victory" of passing for an American "had left in its wake a

vast, echoing space because she had taken on, for too long, a pitch of voice and a way of being that was not hers” (A 216). Here, the accent can be read as a metonym: it represents a more significant identity issue, namely the loss of her cultural identity or her own ‘alienation,’ as Franz Fanon would prefer, resulting from trying to conform to the surrounding environment. It is not just about the accent itself but about what the accent represents: more complex struggles faced by individuals who feel compelled to change themselves to be accepted by the dominant culture. As a result of this realisation, she resolves to reclaim her authentic voice and abstain from “faking the American accent” (A 216). In doing so, the “two dimensions” of the Black individual, about which Fanon writes in *Black Skin, White Masks*, “one with his fellows, the other with the white man,” coalesce in Ifemelu.

Yet, *Americanah* intricately navigates complexity and ambivalence, as Ifemelu does not outright reject hegemonic structures. She remains entangled within what decolonial thinkers, drawing from Aníbal Quijano, term the “colonial matrix of power.” This is visible once she decides to abandon the American accent. In a seemingly mundane act of purchasing a ticket, her choice to speak with a Nigerian accent delivers “a rush of pleasure” and the realisation that “this was truly her” (A 216). Nevertheless, she prepares a fallback plan in case her accent is misconstrued as a lack of language proficiency by the cashier. This tactic of linguistic adaptation involves that,

she would put on her Mr Agbo Voice, the mannered, overcareful pronunciations she had learned during debate meetings in secondary school when the bearded Mr Agbo, tugging at his frayed tie, played BBC recordings on his cassette player and then made all the students pronounce words over and over” (A 216).

In this context, her mastery of British pronunciation, stemming from Nigeria’s colonial past, serves as a means of asserting authority. Despite writing from a different historical and geographical standpoint, Frantz Fanon’s observations resonate here. Fanon remarks, albeit in language that may appear discordant to contemporary readers: “The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter – that is, he will come closer to being a real human being – in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language” (1967, 18). In the colonial view and its remnants today, language proficiency has been regarded as a marker of civilisation and intellectual superiority. The Nigeria in which Ifemelu lived as a child and teenager was a country where, even if politically independent, the pervasive influence of its colonial past permeated language, with British English maintaining its hegemony. The adoption of BBC pronunciations – a

remnant of colonial-era education – serves as a form of mimicry that subtly reinforces colonial hierarchies. British English thus becomes a latent tool of superiority for Ifemelu, one she momentarily considers using over the American cashier. While she does not ultimately need it, this linguistic strategy remains readily accessible in Ifemelu’s repertoire, a resource she willingly employs during her encounter with Blaine, an assistant professor. This illustrates her nuanced positionality within structures of power and oppression. As Fanon (1967) teaches us, language is not merely a tool for communication but a vehicle for culture and the means by which one assumes a place in the world.

In light of this, the manner in which Deola and Ifemelu navigate language and identity, insisting on their Nigerianness, complicates their categorisation within the framework proposed by Selasi (2005), which describes Afropolitans as individuals who “belong to no single geography but feel at home in many” (n.p.). Their connection to a “single geography” – their country of birth – is indeed emphasised, as will be explored in more detail in the following section, particularly in relation to the racial strictures they face in the UK and the USA, respectively. This theme of affirming one’s cultural roots in response to racial dynamics is also evident in other narratives of return, such as Noo Saro-Wiwa’s *Looking for Transwonderland*. Viewed from this perspective, the return of the two protagonists begins while they are still abroad, ignited by what Elleke Boehmer (1995) describes as the “harsh encounter with a reality of continuing social and political hardship” in the countries to which they migrated (192). Consequently, Nigeria emerges as a powerful emblem, resonating with the historic diaspora’s yearning for repatriation to the African continent and serving as a beacon in the struggle against racism (Goyal 2010, 8).

Race and New Racism: Identity and the Un-belonging of Migration

Both novels delve into the realities of being a Black immigrant in national landscapes that, despite professed ideals of colour-blindness and post-racial harmony, appear to uphold whiteness as the norm of their ‘imagined communities.’ Ifemelu and Deola, grappling with their racial identities, find themselves defined as ‘Black’ by their respective host countries, a label they learn to assimilate into their identity. Initially approaching the concept of race with resistance, they gradually realise that understanding the construct of race is crucial to recognising the dynamics of systemic racism – a pervasive influence that insidiously infiltrates their lives and those around them. Indeed, racism subtly interweaves into their daily existence,

manifesting not necessarily overtly but through insidious microaggressions and stereotypes. The persistent sense of alienation and marginalisation, fuelled by stereotypical views of Africans, culminates in a profound disillusionment with their host countries, ultimately shaping their decisions to return to their country of birth.

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu undergoes significant personal growth, a trajectory that has led critics to view the novel as a *Bildungsroman* (Villanova 2018; Ndaka 2020).³⁰ Setting aside the debate over the applicability of the *Bildungsroman* genre to African literature, which is beyond the scope of this discussion (see Hoagland 2019), it is crucial to recognise that Ifemelu's *Bildung* intricately intertwines with her evolving awareness of race and identity. Indeed, her migration to the US compels her to confront and understand race and blackness, concepts that, as noted by Hallemeier (2015), she did not need to consider in Nigeria, where these did not serve as primary markers of difference in a predominantly black society. Although British colonialism in Nigeria was historically structured around racial hierarchies, it is only upon moving to the U.S. that Ifemelu begins to perceive blackness as a defining aspect of her identity – in contrast to Deola, who, moving in elite circles, is more attuned to these structures.

Ifemelu's changing self-perception becomes particularly evident during a conversation with a Haitian poet who optimistically suggests that Obama's election might indicate the end of racism in the US. Ifemelu counters this idea with her own lived experience: "I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America" (Adichie 2013), highlighting how her migration brought a new awareness of her racial identity in the new context.³¹ Though it is important not to conflate Ifemelu's character with that of the author, nor to interpret the former simply as an alter ego of the latter, parallels can be drawn with Adichie's observations about race in America. In an interview, the writer remarked, "You have to learn what it means to be black in America. So you have to learn that watermelon is supposed to be offensive" (NPR 2014). By referencing the US-specific historical association of watermelons with African Americans in racist and derogatory caricatures, the author sheds light on how the social construction of race is acquired

³⁰ About the African postcolonial *Bildungsroman*, Pucherová (2022) argues that the motif of Africans traveling to Europe has become a standard trope within the genre.

³¹ A reference to the watermelon stereotype also appears in *Americanah*, where Ifemelu, in one of her blog posts, advises that "you must show that you are offended when such words as 'watermelon' or 'tar baby' are used in jokes [...]" (A 2013, 222). This highlights Ifemelu's growing awareness of the coded racial language in the U.S., highlighting how African Americans and Black immigrants are expected to recognise and respond to racially charged terms. At the same time, the phrasing hints to a performative aspect to racial identity, where the individual must align with American cultural codes, even if they do not genuinely feel offended.

within cultural contexts, suggesting that the experience of being Black varies depending on the societal and cultural environment one inhabits. As Mindi McMann (2018) emphasises, the novel underscores the notion that racial constructs are not inherent but are shaped through interactions with particular cultural contexts. Thus, Ifemelu comes to understand the implications of being labelled “Black” in the United States, a label burdened with a distinct set of cultural and historical associations that contrast with her experiences growing up in Nigeria.

In this process of learning about race, Ifemelu’s sentimental relationships play a significant role: her love stories, first with a white American, Curt, and then with a Black American, Blaine, serve to explore and discuss issues of race. According to Hallemeier (2015), these relationships “may be read as allegories for understanding ‘the question’ of race in the United States” (240). By intertwining her relationships with observations on race and American society in general, Ifemelu, according to the scholar, challenges what Fredric Jameson (1986) identified in “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” as a characteristic of Western culture. This characteristic involves “a radical split between the private and the public, between the poetic and the political, between what we have come to think of as the domain of sexuality and the unconscious and that of the public world of classes, of the economic, and of secular political power” (Jameson 1986, 69 in Hallemeier 2015). Differently, Ifemelu challenges the radical split between the private and public spheres, illustrating how personal experiences are deeply entwined with broader social and political structures.

Evoking a classic romance trope, Ifemelu encounters her employer’s cousin, a character reminiscent of a fairy tale prince, who, in the modern version of the novel, is a wealthy white American. Her involvement with Curt elevates her into the circle of the American upper class, a realm of privilege, predominantly white, where she becomes “in her mind, a woman free of knots and cares” (A 241). However, the phrase “in her mind” undermines the adjective “free:” the narrative voice hints at other perspectives beyond Ifemelu’s own, suggesting that her sense of freedom is illusory and rooted in self-deception. This subtle narrative distancing implies that her “freedom” in Curt’s world may be more of a comforting façade than a genuine state of liberation.

Indeed, the allure of a modern fairytale is dented by the external world characterised by disparity and inequity. Within the confines of Curt’s privileged bubble, she remains aware of how it eludes many, such as her friend Wambui, who is forced to illegally juggle multiple jobs to afford a green card marriage (A 249). Moreover, she is constantly reminded that she is not

entirely part of this bubble of privilege; for instance, she is often the only Black person present, with the occasional exception of a waiter, highlighting the pervasive influence of race in the hierarchical structure of society (A 244). Furthermore, her freedom of movement is hindered by daunting immigration procedures and the requirement for financial proof – burdens that Curt, in his privileged obliviousness, never has to consider (A 242). Thus, when she finds a job thanks to “some calls” he makes, “she felt, in the midst of her gratitude, a small resentment: that Curt could, with a few calls, rearrange the world, have things slide into the spaces that he wanted them to” (A 250). Her conflicting feelings arise from the realisation of her boyfriend’s privilege and a society that permits such unbalanced power dynamics. Curt’s effortless ability to “rearrange the world” with just a few calls symbolises a profound socio-economic privilege, one that Ifemelu understands is inaccessible to many – and, as an immigrant and Black woman, out of her own reach as well. In fact, her fleeting access to such privilege is contingent solely on her relationship with Curt. This complicates the portrayal of Ifemelu as a feminist heroine, especially in light of the author’s own reflections (TEDx Talks 2013).³² Further complicating her position is her willingness to accept Curt’s offer of help, along with her decision to conform her appearance to mainstream standards – choosing “straight hair” as a symbol of professionalism (A 252). Through these compromises, she ultimately secures a job that paves the way for her green card. Thus, Ifemelu’s journey emerges as a nuanced exploration of personal compromise and complicity within prevailing social structures, highlighting the intricate interplay between individual agency and systemic inequalities. This theme resonates throughout the novel, which is imbued with an aesthetic of compromise and complicity with the *status quo* – a motif that will be revisited in greater depth later in the discussion.

Turning back to the topic of race, the concept is discussed by Ifemelu in an anonymous blog, *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*. Initially, it serves as a platform to ironically discuss the societal observations she makes from her vantage point of being an “outsider within” (McCoy 2017). As recounted within a memory embedded in the broader flashback structure that

³² Adichie discussed the Nigerian expression “bottom power,” which refers to women using their sexuality to gain favours from men. She argues that “bottom power” is not an authentic form of power because it depends on exploiting a man’s power; “[women] just ha[ve] a good route to tap another person’s power” (Adichie 2013, n.p.). This dynamic renders women dependent on men’s whims and vulnerabilities, as their influence wanes in circumstances such as bad moods, illness, or death. In *Americanah*, the story of Ifemelu’s aunt, Auntie Uju, exemplifies this loss of power. When The General, with whom she is involved, suddenly dies, Auntie Uju and her child are left vulnerable, unprotected from his family’s influence, forcing her to flee the country.

interweaves with the novel's moment of NOW, once again, it is her sentimental love life that propels her to start it; more precisely, the frustration she experiences due to Curt's blind spots regarding racial dynamics: "there were, simply, times that he saw and times that he was unable to see" (A 364). Through this sentence, the narrative voice subtly reinforces a collective understanding shared between the narrator and the narratee, establishing an 'us versus him' perspective. The absence of a direct object following "to see" and "he saw" implies an unspoken yet mutual awareness of what Curt fails to perceive regarding racial dynamics. This stylistic choice fosters a sense of insider knowledge, as if both narrator and narratee inherently understand the racial nuances that elude Curt.

In this context, the immediate catalyst for starting the blog is Curt's perception of *Essence*, a magazine featuring only Black women, as "racially skewed" (364). In response, Ifemelu takes him to a bookstore and selects various women's magazines to illustrate the pervasive underrepresentation of Black women in marketing communications, an issue that remains pertinent today (Mitchell, Stovall, and Avalos 2022). In this situation, Ifemelu expresses her frustration to her partner, but at other times, "she [chooses] silence" even if "she [knows] she should tell him these thoughts, that not telling him casts a shadow over them both" (A 364). Instead, she writes a long email to her friend Wambui about "the things she didn't tell Curt, things unsaid and unfinished" (A 366). Her friend responds by encouraging her to write a blog about these issues: "more people should read this," she asserts, because "this is so raw and true" (A 366). From this point on, the incorporation of blog entries into an already intricate narrative, which interweaves different temporal plans, becomes more pronounced, fulfilling the author's intention for the novel to serve as a platform for social commentary (Adichie 2014).

Because of the blog's role as a critical examination of racism's pervasiveness in American society, Isabella Villanova (2021) characterises the novel as an exemplar of "uprising textualities." This term, initially conceived by Carole Boyce Davies (1997), is assigned to narratives that showcase "women's resistance, reassertion, renewal and rethinking that simultaneously celebrate women's creativity" (Villanova 2021, 91). Villanova posits that the blog effectively becomes a conduit for challenging dominant cultural ideologies and offers pointed and poignant critiques of societal inequities, serving as a metaphorical uprising against the systemic oppression encountered by non-American Blacks in the USA. The blog, therefore, could be read as a tool wielded against the *status quo*. However, despite never using Davies' terminology, Guarracino's (2014) and Pahl's (2016) analyses of *Americanah* complexify such

a view. Expanding the discourse on the blog's role alongside the author's persona and her digital presence, it is noted that Adichie's character is indeed empowered through blogging to express her observations and emotional responses to her experiences in the U.S., which aligns with the concept of "uprising textualities" regarding resistance and reassertion. Yet, scholars note that Ifemelu's blogging ultimately becomes commodified and integral to her identity in ways that challenge her autonomy, raising questions about the authenticity of these resistive narratives when market forces and the pursuit of readership co-opt them. Hence, it can be said that the blog does not entirely reject the *status quo*; rather, as Guarracino (2014) and Pahl (2016) argue, the novel portrays a protagonist who navigates both resistance and complicity within global power structures, simultaneously challenging and conforming to these structures.

As Ifemelu's relationship with Curt ends and her involvement with Blaine begins, the complicity of the blog becomes increasingly apparent. Blaine is a Black American assistant professor at Yale University, politically aware and idealistic. Unlike Ifemelu's previous relationship, she and Blaine share the same skin colour. However, this does not draw them closer: apart from their support for Obama in the 2008 presidential election,³³ they are often far apart and possess different worldviews. For instance, when an elderly white woman asks to touch Ifemelu's kinky hair, she interprets this mundane gesture as an expression of curiosity and permits it. In contrast, Blaine is tense and reprimands her for granting permission. The narrative voice highlights this emotional dissonance, noting, "he expected her to feel what she did not know how to feel. There were things that existed for him that she could not penetrate" (A 388). This disconnect stems from their divergent life experiences: Ifemelu is a member of the "new African diaspora" (Okpewho and Nzegwu 2009) and cannot adopt the lens of the 'Old Diaspora.' This disparity in racial experiences is highlighted in the setting of Shan's (Blaine's sister) salon, described as "a mere gathering of friends" (Adichie 413), yet imbued with an air of pretentiousness. In this passage, Ifemelu is told that she can explicitly write about race in her blog "because she's African. She's writing from the outside. She doesn't really feel all the stuff she's writing about" (A 418). Although initially hurt by this statement, Ifemelu ultimately finds herself reluctantly agreeing with it.

³³ As their relationship dissolves, the shared aspiration to witness Barack Obama's presidency in the United States becomes a poignant dream, paradoxically "unit[ing] them in an intimacy they had never had before" (A 437). The significance of this historical moment, marked by the election of the first Black individual, is emphasised by a series of blog posts authored by Ifemelu.

Furthermore, Blaine often criticises Ifemelu and spurs her to engage politically. On one occasion, he states, “Remember, people are not reading you as entertainment, they’re reading you as cultural commentary” (A 387); on another, “It’s not just about writing a blog, you have to live like you believe it. That blog is a game that you don’t really take seriously” (A 427). The increasing discrepancy between the content of the blog and how Ifemelu acts seems to corroborate Blaine’s stance. Indeed, the narrator says,

[...] as she gave more talks at companies and schools, she began to say what they wanted to hear, none of which she would ever write on her blog, because she knew that the people who read the blog were not the same people who attended her diversity workshops (A 378).

Nonetheless, Blaine’s criticism is mitigated by the focalisation on Ifemelu, which renders Blaine as unpleasant as Curt to the novel’s readers. This is due to his repeated refrain, “You are being lazy, Ifem” (A 387), and his influence on her blog: “She did not ask for his edits, but slowly she began to make changes, to add and remove, because of what he said” (A 386). His remarks subtly shape Ifemelu’s writing, illustrating the power dynamics in their relationship and the degree to which his intellectual authority influences her creative expression.

If Curt’s blind spot is race, Blaine’s is gender. Despite his political engagement and ostensibly progressive views, Blaine influences Ifemelu’s autonomy and self-expression in ways that align with patriarchal dynamics. He appears intent on moulding Ifemelu in his own image, undermining her agency and expecting her to conform to his views while disregarding her individual experiences and perspectives. His portrayal of him underscores this aspect: he is depicted as someone who believes in “unbending, unambiguous honesties” (A 321); his views are presented as “firm, so thought-through and fully realized in his own mind that he sometimes seemed surprised that she, too, had not arrived at them herself” (A 314). Blaine’s rigid idealism is contrasted by Ifemelu’s nuanced perspective on truth, underscoring a fundamental difference in their worldviews.

Ifemelu suggests that the luxury of a ‘purity of stance’ is yet another form of privilege, one which she cannot afford: “To be a child of the Third World is to be aware of the many different constituencies you have and how honesty and truth must always depend on the contexts” (A 396), she states. Coming from a nation first ravaged by colonialism and subsequently by its own government, and later relocating to the US as a migrant, Ifemelu must continually adapt to her environment, as striving to live with dignity necessitates frequent

compromises. In her view, truth is not absolute but rather context-dependent and, to some extent, as argued by Jennifer Terry (2020), a form of privilege. This resonates with Pucherová's (2022) observation that Ifemelu and Obinze, in their quest for happiness and self-realisation, are not portrayed as moral exemplars in the narrative (70). Indeed, for their return to take place, they must engage with the very corrupt system they fled. This compromise with the system, however, is also present in their migratory experiences, highlighting the porousness and interconnection of the two places, which are now "no longer seen as dialectical opposites" (Pucherová 2022, 66); instead, they become part of an entangled reality where survival necessitates negotiation rather than rigid moral absolutism.

Ifemelu's decision to attend a university luncheon instead of a protest for a Black university employee who was unfairly dismissed creates an irreparable rift with Blaine. He indirectly reproaches her for not feeling anger, "an accusation, not merely 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" (A 428). Despite the blog, the narrative depicts Ifemelu as not completely opposed to the *status quo*. For instance, in a discussion with Laura, her employee's unpleasant sister, Ifemelu is merged with the elite of privileged, highly educated Africans with whom she does not personally identify. Her answer, however, is that such a label "feels good" (A 207). Moreover, she is sceptical about Blaine's friends:

These people [...] were so enraged about imported vegetables that ripened in trucks? They wanted to stop child labor in Africa. They would not buy clothes made by unpaid workers in Asia. They looked at the world with an impractical, luminous earnestness that moved her, but never convinced her (A 388)

Ifemelu's juxtaposition of their fervent concern for global issues with her scepticism creates a poignant irony, critiquing a form of activism that often falls short of effecting real change. She notes an evident hiatus between good intentions and effective actions, suggesting that instead of idealism, she favours practicality. Contrary to Karl Marx's prediction, the current capitalist system has shown remarkable resilience, not displaying signs of imminent collapse despite the internal tensions outlined in *Das Kapital*. Ifemelu, reflecting the overall tone of the novel, advocates for a pragmatic compromise with the system. As the author articulates in an interview with *Vanity Fair* – a platform that underscores her enmeshment with capitalism and pop culture –, "I'm not an anti-capitalist person, I just think that capitalism could be more humane" (Weir 2019, n.p.). Unlike the revolutionary zeal of the so-called first generation of African writers

like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o, here, a reformist approach is preferred. This comparison between generations is also drawn by Sefi Atta, who contends that her generation of writers did not come from the “anti-establishment, anti-everything” ideology like the post-war generation: “We did not come from that, we came from a pretty conservative culture, growing up. We were not going to be revolutionaries, we were going to be bankers and get professions and work. So, we did not have that poetic vision of what we were going to be [...]” (Murphy 2012, 11-12). While the former’s works conveyed revolutionary undertones, challenging colonial legacies and advocating for radical shifts towards self-determination, Adichie – and Atta – focus on nuanced changes within existing structures to mitigate negative impacts without any interest in dismantling the system. In this way, they appear to challenge Audre Lorde’s well-known assertion (1984), attempting to dismantle the master’s house with its own tools.

Like *Americanah*, *A Bit of Difference* focuses on and criticises the racism characters experience in the country they migrated to or traverse. In particular, the novel highlights how such seemingly minor incidents accumulate, profoundly affecting Deola and her interactions with the world. Small gestures, such as standing in line, are laden with complex layers of meaning for African individuals living outside Africa. In one instance, while waiting at the airport, Deola becomes acutely aware of these dynamics, underscoring how even ordinary moments are charged with the weight of racial perception and prejudice. As Graham Huggan (2009) emphasises, airports serve not only as “global crossroads” but also as sites reminding “of the social inequalities off which globalization feeds, and which it in turn produces” (2). Reflecting this, as she returns from Atlanta to London, she experiences “an incident so trivial” that she hesitates to label it outright as “discrimination” for “It wasn’t that straightforward” (*ABD* 17). While in a queue, an “executive-looking” man cuts ahead of her (*ABD* 16). The flight attendant, who is a Black American woman, prioritises the man, attending to him before Deola.

The incident illustrates the complex interplay of societal hierarchies and implicit biases that extend beyond simplistic racial divides, showcasing the multifaceted nature of discrimination as outlined in Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality, where race, class, and gender intersect. Additionally, the incident is further complicated when Deola considers the possibility of it being an “innocent oversight” (*ABD* 17). In so doing, the passage appears to highlight that identifying subtle discrimination is challenging. Sumie Okazaki (2009), among many others, emphasises that microaggressions, characterised by everyday

interactions that convey hostile or negative racial slights, do not depend on the perpetrator's intent for their definition. Furthermore, Okazaki (2009) notes the significant adverse psychological effects these microaggressions have on racial minorities, including depression, anxiety, diminished well-being, and self-perception, which can even manifest as physical health issues. In Deola's case, the perpetual undercurrent of racism primes her to a state of vigilance, cultivating a "learned lack of trust" (ABD 17) that characterises her interactions with the world. At the same time, almost paradoxically, she learns to minimise this subtle racism, nearly neglecting it.

Later, the narrative voice informs readers about a series of incidents that led to the realisation of the significance of race – that "race mattered" (ABD 65). Unlike Ifemelu, who discovers race only in the USA, Deola's privileged circumstances provide her with a global perspective, exposing her to the realities of racial discrimination. In Nigeria, at an international school for expatriate children, a ballet teacher patronisingly acknowledges the difficulties Nigerian girls might face (ABD 65). Later, at a summer camp in Switzerland, Deola is mocked for her Afro hair. Finally, in England, at a boarding school, her classmate derogatorily refers to her as a "wog," further underscoring the omnipresence of racial discrimination in her life. After recounting these events, readers learn that Deola is dismissive, deeming these episodes trivial and unworthy of attention: "None of these experiences are worth mentioning, Deola decides. They are laughable" (ABD 66). Amanuel Elias illustrates the relevance of neglect and denial in the persistence of systemic racism. Neglect and denial often manifest as ignorance, silence, indifference, or – as in Deola's case – minimisation (Elias 2024). If taking the initial crucial steps to combat racism involves recognising and overcoming its denial (Nelson 2013 in Elias 2024), Atta's work intriguingly reveals that denial and neglect are not solely perpetuated by those who actively enforce racism; rather, they can also be internalised by those who are subjected to it. This inadvertent complicity allows the *status quo* of racial inequality to persist, remaining unchallenged and unaddressed.

The novel tackles the issue of racism by steering clear of a binary perspective and, in doing so, adds complexity to the matter. Being a victim of the system does not exempt someone from contributing to the perpetuation of its dynamics, the novel appears to caution us. In doing so, it evokes Rachele Borghi (2020), who argues that "Belonging to an oppressed category is

not enough not to be an oppressor” (16) –³⁴ the ongoing genocide of the Palestinian population, occurring as this thesis is being written, serves as a testament to that. Or, as famously argued by the decolonial thinker Ramon Grosfoguel (2007), even though an individual may be “socially located in the oppressed side of power relations does not automatically mean that he/she is epistemically thinking from a subaltern epistemic location” (213). After all, systems of oppression are complex and can implicate even those who are oppressed. For instance, in the opening of the novel, there is a reference to the “moment of anxiety” Deola experiences on the aeroplane to Atlanta upon noticing “a man who looked Arab” (*ABD* 5). This detail reflects the heightened suspicion, racism and xenophobia that became more pronounced after the 9/11 attacks and the following war on terror in the US. In this context, Deola’s reaction is distinctly devoid of any sense of solidarity with the man who appears Arab. She is like other people on the plane, whose wary glances epitomise a collective unease: “She was not the only passenger giving him a furtive look” (*ABD* 5). These “furtive look[s]” reflect how both unconscious and conscious racist gazes reinforce each other, positioning racism as a pervasive, albeit troubling, common denominator within humanity.

Despite that, mobility creates an interconnected world, even if reserved only for some individuals. “Tower[s] of Babel” (*ABD* 17), like London, emerge where a vast array of cultures co-exist. Yet, within these urban mosaics, the seeds of racism still sprout, manifesting subtly in ordinary gestures such as in the hurried steps one might take to avoid a group of Pakistani teens or Romanian mothers seeking aid (*ABD* 17). At times, Deola seems to have internalised the prevailing discourse, as in the following passage:

She also detects some guilt, that aftertaste of the sumptuous meal that was empire. England is overrun with immigrants: African and Eastern European children they granted asylum are leading gangs, Islamic clerics are bragging about their rights and the English can barely open their mouths to talk.

Nigerians can never be sorry for their transgressions, so sorry that they can’t say to immigrants, ‘Carry your trouble and go.’ Nigerians made beggars out of child refugees from Niger and impregnated their mothers. Nigerians kicked out Ghanaians when Ghanaians became too efficient, taking over jobs Nigerians couldn’t do, and named a laundry bag after the mass exodus: the Ghana Must Go bag. Nigerians aren’t even sorry about the civil war. They are still blaming that on the British. (*ABD* 17-18)

³⁴ The quotation is my translation from the original in Italian “Non basta appartenere ad una categoria oppressa per non essere oppressore” (Borghi 2020, 16).

In the passage, the first paragraph employs hyperbole to underscore a narrative that immigrants are encroaching upon the English populace, suggesting an assimilated, perhaps even involuntary, acceptance of this viewpoint by the protagonist. Yet, the culinary metaphor links the UK's colonial past with the current socio-political climate, implicating the historical division and exploitation by the British Empire in today's immigration issues: the consequence of the partition of the world by the British Empire is the current presence of migrants on its territory and the resulting cultural tensions. Such considerations, intensified by the use of words with negative connotations, which load the passage with a sense of decline, conflict, and helplessness, align more closely with the rhetoric characteristic of right-wing political discourse than with the expected tone of a postcolonial novel exploring themes of migration. However, if we consider, as Sefi Atta has frequently argued, that "[her] primary audience is Nigerian" (Murphy 2012, 107), one might interpret the first paragraph, which focuses on the interaction between British society and migrants in the UK, as a device of sorts aimed at drawing attention and criticising Nigerians' behaviour *in primis*. The parallelism between the two nations underscores this comparison, highlighting the contrast between the guilt demonstrated by the British and the apparent lack of remorse exhibited by Nigerians. The sentence "Carry your trouble and go," pronounced by the British, is minimised by juxtaposing it with instances of exploitation and discrimination perpetrated by Nigerians against other African nationals (such as Ghanaians and refugees from Niger) and their compatriots (Biafrans). By this, Atta adopts a tone of condemnation towards Nigerians, departing from the tendency to attribute their present challenges solely to British colonial legacy, instead holding them accountable for their actions and attitudes. In this approach, she avoids the simplistic binary oppositions some attribute to postcolonial and decolonial discourse, opting instead for a nuanced and multi-faceted vision. In doing so, Atta does not adopt a sterile Afropessimistic view of the continent: she is a fierce observer and critic of both the West and Nigeria.³⁵ She does not see it as her responsibility to present a comprehensive depiction of Africa and its varied cultures to the Western public; instead, she believes it is "the duty of readers to open their minds" (Murphy 2012, 107). This responsibility includes recognising that the narratives offered by writers represent individual stories, not, echoing Adichie's words (2009), "a single story."

³⁵ For instance, in another passage, she argues: "Nigerians are as prejudiced as the English, and more snobbish. Nigerians, given any excuse, are ready to snub. Without provocation and even remorse. They snub one another, snub other Africans, other blacks and other races. Nigerians would snub aliens if they encountered them. [...] Nigerians constantly rank each other according to health, education and formation, with ambiguous results: this one is bush, that one is oyinbo."

Nevertheless, *A Bit of Difference* – and, to a lesser extent, *Americanah* – is permeated by what I call ‘representational anxiety,’ a consequence of what has been dubbed “the double public” of African literature (ten Kortenaar 2011). Even if Atta writes primarily for the Nigerian public,³⁶ the material circuits of dissemination are predominantly – yet not only – in the Global North. In such a context, there is too often the expectation towards African writers, as argued by Brouillette, to “become representatives of their purported societies” (2007, 70). While the scholar argues this in reference to the role of post-colonial writers in the global literary marketplace, as the novel under analysis shows, it represents the position of migrants at large. This theme, which will be examined in further detail in the next section, recurs in narratives of return, as this thesis will demonstrate.

The Question of Representation: Deconstructing the “Image of Africa” and of the African Representer

Both novels critically examine and deconstruct what Chinua Achebe famously termed “the image of Africa.” In his seminal critical essay, first presented as a lecture in 1975 at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, the writer condemns the portrayal of Africa and Africans in Joseph Conrad’s canonical novella *Heart of Darkness*: a primordial and savage place, devoid of civilisation and thereby inherently inferior to Europe. In what some have directly or indirectly portrayed as a simplistic interpretation of Conrad’s work, including Edward Said (1994), Achebe illustrates how Africa becomes a locus rather than merely a place, serving as a backdrop, a symbol of exile, darkness, and alienation within the Western tradition. Achebe’s analysis laid the foundation for further exploration by scholars such as the Congolese philosopher and writer Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, whose influential works, *The Invention of Africa* (1988) and *The Idea of Africa* (1994), examine how Europe’s conceptualisation of Africa was shaped through an “ordering of otherness” (1988, 12). Mudimbe describes how Africans, viewed as outsiders, are paradoxically perceived as both intimately connected and distinctly other in relation to the European intellectual perspective. Grounded in colonial discourse, the remnants of this ideological framework persist today, manifesting in contemporary Afropessimistic narratives that depict Africa as either hopeless (de B’béri and Louw 2011)

³⁶ Atta’s only work adapted for Western audiences is her 2005 novel *Everything Good Will Come* (Murphy 2012). All her other works have been published in the same version in Nigeria and the Global North.

or/and doomed (Paravy 2011). As Wesley Paul Macheso (2017) contends, “this image of Africa did not die with colonialism but has been carried over to this era of neocolonialism and is very much alive in Western writings about Africa and Africans” (46). In other words, instead of fading over time, the survival of these reductive portrayals reflects a continuity of historical biases that frame Africa as a place of perpetual crisis.

In the literary field, numerous scholars, including Huggan (2001), Brouillette (2007), Pinto (2013), and Diala (2021), have examined the role of literary prizes in the perpetuation of such a discourse. In particular, it has been underlined that they contribute to an “alterity industry” that fabricates cultural otherness (Huggan 2001, vii). Particularly within African literature, the Caine Prize has drawn sharp criticism for reinforcing Western-dominated standards that dictate literary legitimacy, disseminating global inequalities (Pucherová 2011) and the possibility of engendering a literary canon nurtured by old representations of a generalised Africa as “exotic” and “other” (Pinto 2013). Even Helon Habila (2013) indirectly reiterates this critique in his review of NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* (2013), arguing the novel’s presumed prerogative of covering every conceivable “African” subject, akin to a checklist derived from daily news about Africa (n.p). Habila identifies this as the “Caine-prize aesthetic,” a style that theatrically “perform[s] Africa for the world,” instilling specific images and motifs that evoke pity and fear but lack the tragic depth and potential for catharsis of classical Aristotelian drama (Habila 2013, n.p.). More than 10 years later, in my interview with the author, he does not seem to have changed his mind regarding what he perceives as an exclusive “focus on the bad things” that “keep piling up” (appendix).

In *A Bit of Difference*, the character of Bandele, a writer and one of the protagonist’s few close friends in London, brings to the fore the role of prizes in framing Africa, the physical space, within a specific discursive representational rhetoric. Despite being shortlisted for an African Writers Prize (*ABD* 41), Bandele harbours deep resentment towards the establishment that fosters such accolades. When he meets Deola after a public reading, he laments the “false angst” spread among many fellow writers – female in particular – that births Afropessimistic literary representations of Africa as a “Sob Continent,” “all gloom and doom” (*ABD* 47); he derisively labels these narratives “postcolonial crap” (*ABD* 47), evoking Arif Dirlik’s (1994) accusation of complicity of the postcolonial intelligentsia with global capitalism: scholars and thinkers engaging in postcolonial theory and discourse, are participants within the frameworks of global capitalism. Writing during the years of institutionalisation of postcolonial studies,

Dirlik (1994) argues that postcolonial literature, a product of capitalist accumulation within cultural industries and a tool through which metropolitan universities extend their influence over their peripheries, aligns with the predominant concerns of critics in these urban centres, who promote an engagement with hybridity and post-nationality (in Brouillette 2007, 60-61).

As the narrative unfolds, it is revealed that Bandele did not secure the prize; instead, a writer he disdained for conforming to market expectations clinched a book deal with a work emblematically titled “The Death of the African Writer” (*ABD* 190). This novel gruesomely depicts the murder of a Nigerian writer in exile, symbolising what Bandele describes as a “literary genocide,” in which publishers seemingly favour narratives steeped in tragedy: “the more death, the better.” (*ABD* 191). As Said (1978) would put it, Africa becomes more of an “imagined geography.”³⁷ This imagined geography, Bandele seems to imply, is at the core of African literature production in the Global North and becomes, as Huggan argued, “an exotically cultivated export product” (2000, 34). Bandele feels this discourse, in the Foucauldian sense, hampers his artistic expression; he laments: “[...] suddenly I am an ‘African’ Writer. Suddenly it’s the only way I can get ahead in this business [...] it will all be about trying to fit into the African,” he argues (*ABD* 193). Bandele’s frustration seems to reflect a broader struggle faced by many African writers, who must negotiate the line between artistic ‘authenticity’ – if such a thing exists – and the market-driven expectations that shape literary production in the Global North.

In her 2012 interview with Murphy, Sefi Atta similarly acknowledges the pressures to meet certain expectations in order to secure publication. However, she believes it is possible to craft a story that coincidentally aligns with these expectations (Murphy 2012, 110). This reflection allows the novel’s author to diverge from Bandele’s critique for a more nuanced perspective, resisting a simplistic or reductive view of a dichotomic tension between commercial demands and creative autonomy. Analogously, within the text, Deola provides a similarly insightful take on writers who tailor their narratives to satisfy market demands; she states: “[...] doesn’t [Bandele] realise Africans know when they are being patronized? Doesn’t he know the more naïve they pretend to be, the more they can capitalise on patronage?” (*ABD* 192). Deola’s question brings to light the concept of “strategic exoticism,” as conceptualised by Huggan (2000). This term describes the deliberate use of emphasised exotic elements in

³⁷ Originally, the Palestinian scholar, in his canonical work *Orientalism* (1978), employs this term to refer to the construction of the Orient by Western culture, but over time, it has also been used in reference to the African continent.

literature and other forms of cultural production, “designed as much to challenge as to profit from consumer needs” (Huggan 2000, xi).

Atta does not confine her critique solely to the publishing marketplace but also deepens the examination of Bandele’s stance: it remains unclear whether his desire to write about two lovers in Paris instead of Africa stems solely from a pursuit of free artistic expression or instead as a way of wearing a literary Fanonian ‘white mask.’ Indeed, Bandele struggles with his identity, not only in relation to Nigeria, as previously discussed, but with his sense of Africanness at large – we will explore this aspect further in the section entitled “The Nervous Condition of Non-Return.” Additionally, Bandele himself is involved in an operation of truth manipulation in a way that evokes the writers he dislikes:

Bandele tells just enough of the truth to get sympathy. His father is known as a thieving politician, for instance, but he is a well-respected one, as they all are. His father may also have disciplined his children with a cane, but no more than the average Nigerian parent did. (*ABD* 47)

Deola’s reflections engage with cultural relativism, underscoring the varied interpretations of actions within Nigerian societal norms. As Bandele navigates between two cultures, he strategically extrapolates actions from their contexts, occluding the latter. Thus, the information provided through the focalisation on Deola invites scrutiny of Bandele’s reliability, particularly in his selective omissions. These omissions suggest that he, like the authors he criticises, is aware of the societal expectations that influence the amount of truth disclosed to garner sympathy. Unlike Bandele, Deola appears to accept – or perhaps resign herself to – certain prevailing characteristics of Nigerian society. Her comments not only normalise aspects such as corruption and physical discipline but also challenge readers to consider the complexities of ethical standards within a cultural framework that may be markedly different from their own.

Like *A Bit of Difference*, *Americanah* refers to the preconceived narratives about Africa that pervade literature. Discussing a writer acquaintance whose books struggle to sell, Blaine’s sister, Shan, wryly informs Ifemelu of a strategy for success she shared with him:

I’ve told him he needs to write terrible things about his own people if he wants to do well. He needs to say Africans alone are to blame for African problems, and Europeans have helped Africa more than they’ve hurt Africa, and he’ll be famous and people will say he’s so *honest* (*A* 394, emphasis in the original).

Shan's provocative tip satirises the dynamics of literary success regarding African writers in the Global North. As in *A Bit of Difference*, the passage evokes the existence of an *a priori* discourse about Africa, implying that success for African writers in the Western marketplace is contingent upon reinforcing negative perceptions rather than challenging them or presenting a more balanced view of African societies. Here, the critique of the Western publishing industries and the audience's appetite for African narratives that conform to certain stereotypes or negative portrayals is even stronger than in Atta's novel. It suggests that the audience's perception of honesty may be more about reinforcing their preconceived notions than exploring alternative viewpoints.

Shan's sardonic advice resonates with the biting satire contained in Binyavanga Wainaina's famed essay "How to Write About Africa" (2005). Published in *Granta*, the essay provides satirical guidelines for aspiring writers on portraying Africa, urging them to incorporate typical clichés and stereotypes to achieve success. Wainaina's critique, akin to that of Habila's "Caine Prize aesthetics," serves as a vehement protest against the reductive literary templates that postcolonial writers are often compelled to follow, or as Monica Popescu (2019) puts it, "a *cri de coeur* against the literary 'patterns' demanded of successful postcolonial writers" (30). Such patterns accommodate the continent in a single image or narrative:

Always use the word 'Africa' or 'Darkness' or 'Safari' in your title. Subtitles may include the words 'Zanzibar', 'Masai', 'Zulu', 'Zambezi', 'Congo', 'Nile', 'Big', 'Sky', 'Shadow', 'Drum', 'Sun' or 'Bygone'. Also useful are words such as 'Guerrillas', 'Timeless', 'Primordial' and 'Tribal' (Wainaina 2005, n.p).

Through his humour, Wainaina exposes the trope of depicting Africa as a homogeneous space in a perennial crisis, teemed with the wilderness, suffering, and strangeness rather than a continent rich in diversity, culture, and complexity. The same operation of debunking clichés also involves the representation of Africans, who are often portrayed in a manner that reinforces simplistic and exotic stereotypes. Wainaina's dark humour, much like Shan's sardonic observation, stems from a preoccupation with the ways African literature as a "marketing niche" (Brouillette 2007) has circulated and has been received in the Global North.

Beyond the commentary embedded in *Americanah*, Adichie's most striking example of self-reflexivity emerges in her short story "Jumping Monkey Hill" (2006b), a meta-narrative that harshly criticises the hegemonic influence of the Global North in shaping African literary

production and creativity. First published in the renowned literary journal *Granta* in 2006,³⁸ and later included in the short story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009b), the story follows Ujunwa, a young Nigerian writer invited to a prestigious African writers' workshop held at the eponymous Jumping Monkey Hill in Cape Town, South Africa. Presided over by Edward, a British "Oxford-trained Africanist" who serves as both judge and organiser, the workshop brings together writers from various African countries, each identified solely by their nationality and presenting stories rooted in their personal experiences and cultural backgrounds (Adichie, 2006b, n.p.).³⁹

Over the course of two weeks, participants engage in the process of writing and revising a short story under Edward's supervision. Through the device of Ujunwa's crafted story, the third-person narrative creates a literary *mise en abyme*, embedding one level of fiction within another. This structural layering is established through the interplay between Ujunwa's experiences at the workshop and the story she writes, which centres on Chioma, her alter ego. Chioma, a young Nigerian woman, navigates a workplace environment where she faces sexual harassment and power imbalances, mirroring Ujunwa's own struggles at the workshop. As the narrative unfolds, the ending reveals that Chioma serves as an author surrogate for Ujunwa, reinforcing the text's 'authenticity.' Further complicating the relationship between fiction and reality, a third level of narrative mirroring emerges, as Ujunwa is not only interpreted as an author surrogate for Adichie but also explicitly framed as such by the author herself. Indeed, as Tunca (2020) observes, Adichie has acknowledged that "Jumping Monkey Hill" draws directly from her own experiences at the inaugural Caine Prize for African Writing workshop. As she herself states, the short story "was propelled by rage" (Adichie 2009 in Tunca 2020, 72).

What initially appears to be a hub dedicated to fostering African literature – a luxurious resort designed to nurture literary creation – can be read as a microcosm of the real world, where remnants of colonialism persist in the subtle yet pervasive inequalities embedded in its structure. These traces emerge in seemingly minor details, such as the "discreet black maids"

³⁸ *Granta* is also the journal where Binyavanga Wainaina first published "How to Write About Africa."

³⁹ The act of not naming the writer characters beyond their nationality ("the Ugandan," "the Kenyan," and "the Senegalese") can be interpreted as an allusion to the homogenisation and essentialisation of African writers by the Western literary industry, which categorises them by country rather than as distinct literary voices. In real life, more frequently than not, even this categorisation is abandoned, and they are labelled simply as "African," further erasing the continent's cultural and literary diversity.

who uphold the operations of a resort designed for tourists and the Westernised cuisine featuring “ostrich medallions, smoked salmon, [and] chicken in orange sauce” (Adichie 2006b, n.p.). Edward himself serves as the most emblematic symbol of these colonial remnants – his “posh” British accent, his sexualized gaze upon Ujunwa, and, more broadly, his positioning as an authoritative figure over African literature and expression (Adichie 2006b, n.p.). He exerts self-proclaimed power in determining what is authentically African and imposing his own literary criteria and vision of the Continent onto the writers’ voices. He does so by dismissing the Ugandan author’s work by asserting that “homosexual stories of this sort [aren’t] reflective of Africa,” by reducing the Zimbabwean writer’s story to something “terribly passé,” and outright rejecting the plausibility of Ujunwa’s narrative (Adichie 2006b, n.p.). Blinded by his own convictions, he insists that he is invested in “the real Africa and not the imposing of Western ideas on African venues,” failing to recognise that his perspective is itself an imposition of Western ideals onto African spaces (Adichie 2006b, n.p.).

By the conclusion of the short story, the protagonist confronts not only “Edward’s sexism and racism” but also, “by extension, the global literary market’s expectations for African writing” (Feldner 2020, 58), ultimately abandoning the workshop in a gesture of defiant resistance. After reading her short story, Edward dismisses it, claiming, “It’s never quite like that in real life, is it? Women are never victims in that sort of crude way and certainly not in Nigeria” (Adichie 2006b, n.p.). His remark appears tragically ironic, as he fails to recognise himself as the very perpetrator of Ujunwa’s sexual objectification. At the same time, his critique questions the authenticity of her narrative, undermining a story that, within the text’s *mise en abyme* structure, is a fictionalised recounting of her own (fictional) lived experience. In response, as an act of resistance, Ujunwa “stand[s] up and start[s] to laugh” (Adichie 2006b, n.p.), revealing that it is her own story.⁴⁰

This grand gesture of defiance, however, is not an unambiguous victory. The story’s self-reflexive *mise en abyme* complicates the significance of Ujunwa’s departure, as her refusal to compromise appears to lead to her exclusion from the system that governs literary publication – just as Chioma’s defiance results in her dismissal, foreshadowed by the line, “the last time I would be riding in that car” (Adichie 2006b, n.p.). As the Kenyan writer cautioned the

⁴⁰ In this regard, Daria Tunca (2020) astutely observes that this act of eliciting the veracity of the story creates a paradox: while the narrative asserts the importance of artistic freedom, it simultaneously reinforces the expectation that African fiction must be validated through real-life accuracy – a constraint frequently imposed on African writers by Western audiences, as many scholars, including Krishnan (2014) and Feldner (2020), have noted.

protagonist, antagonising Edward means “clos[ing] doors to opportunity” since he is “connected and could find them a London agent” (Adichie 2006b, n.p.). Furthermore, Ujunwa’s fictional act of resistance and assertion of agency within the narrative is enabled by Adichie’s own negotiation with the literary marketplace. This dynamic underscores what Feldner identifies as the simultaneous “affirmation and rejection [...] inherent in Adichie’s work” (2020, 58), revealing the tensions between artistic freedom and systemic limitations.

In *Americanah*, as in Atta’s *A Bit of Difference*, the tension between compromise and resistance is a central concern. Both novels not only challenge the constraints of African literary production but also interrogate the very role of the African writer in shaping and mediating representation, as well as the complex negotiations required to navigate Western expectations. As Huggan (2000) argues, in the context of African literature as “an export product [...], the writer acts, willingly or not, as a cultural spokesperson or interpreter” (34). It is precisely this role of the African writer as both a spokesperson and a mediator that both novels critically examine and interrogate. More specifically, in *A Bit of Difference*, this critique emerges through the character of Dára, the spokesperson for the charity where the protagonist works, while in *Americanah*, it is directly addressed by Ifemelu herself.

In Atta’s novel, Dára, a Nigerian musician, exploits to his advantage Western stereotypes about Africa. Despite his upbringing as the son of lecturers at Lagos State University, he constructs his persona as an “area boy” from the “streets of Lagos” (*ABD* 35).⁴¹ In the context of migration within the Global North, his origins, having been reshaped, transform into a form of capital: he becomes the voice of the margins. His use of “strategic exoticism,” not as Huggan (2001) purposed – i.e., to “manage to subvert [codes of representation]” nor to “succeed in redeploying them for the purposes of uncovering differential relations of power” (32) – but rather for his own benefit, is problematic (*ABD* 32). His successful reinvention earns him the role of African spokesperson for LINK, the charity organisation where Deola works. As Subu points out, despite his “lies,” “these *oyinbos* don’t seem to be able to see through him,” whereas, according to Deola, they are unwilling to do so (*ABD* 35). In either case, the character of Dára emphasises, on the one hand, that a representative function can be occupied by a person who is not appreciated by the context he is supposed to represent: “In Nigeria, no one would have paid

⁴¹ The meaning of ‘area boy’ is not clarified in the text, highlighting the author’s already-cited deliberate choice to omit explanations of cultural specifics. In contrast, Noo Saro-Wiwa’s *Looking for Transwonderland* provides a definition within the only note of her travelogue. As Saro-Wiwa explains, “Area Boys are organised street gangs who extort money from the public and are involved in other crime, such as selling drugs” (2012, 45)

him any mind, as a college dropout. Overseas, people are asking for his opinions on Africa” (*ABD* 200); on the other hand, it denounces that the Western imagination seems to be filled with *a priori* conceptions linked to Africa and its people. In this context, Dára exploits the tropes that are expected of an “authentic” African voice. By displaying this contradiction, the novel disrupts the concept of African authenticity altogether, aligning with Chris Abani’s assertion that the quest for authenticity in African literature is futile because “we’re looking for something that doesn’t exist. [...] Art is never about its content it’s always about its scaffolding” (2005, n.p.).

As the narrative unfolds, Dára’s deviation from predetermined narratives leads to his marginalisation by the West. His position as a spokesperson is abruptly revoked when, in response to a question about AIDS in Africa, he makes the controversial claim that “Polygamy helps. When men have several wives, they don’t sleep around” (*ABD* 200), provoking scandal. While Deola disapproves of Dára and mocks his argument, she nonetheless acknowledges the legal status of polygamy in Nigeria, where Muslims are permitted to practice it under customary law. Despite this legal nuance, Deola’s colleague firmly concludes, “He can’t be [the charity’s] spokesperson now, not after this” (*ABD* 214). Although Dára was never a good choice as a spokesperson, Deola’s observation underscores the consequences of diverging from the dominant Western narrative of Africa. Indeed, the novel, despite portraying Dára in a largely negative light, also recognises the challenges faced by those entrenched in ‘Otherness’ as they navigate the constraints of representation. His fall from grace highlights the precarity of African voices in Western spaces, where inclusion often depends on adherence to predefined and acceptable portrayals of the continent.

In *Americanah*, the critique does not limit itself to debunking a Western “image of Africa” or to the authenticity of its spokesperson. Instead, it extends to the act of writing itself, exploring the ethics involved in literary creation. As this thesis will later demonstrate, Ifemelu’s approach to gathering literary material is similar to that of the unnamed narrator in Teju Cole’s *Every Day Is for the Thief*: they both prowl for literary material. In the novel’s opening, Ifemelu travels by train from Princeton to Trenton to have her hair braided – a significant detail that highlights the spatial distribution of racial demographics. Having already abandoned her blog in anticipation of returning to Nigeria, during the journey, when a man engages her in small talk, the narrator confesses: “Before [...] she would have started a conversation with him, to see if he would say something she could *use* in her blog” (*A* 4, emphasis added). The lexical

choice of “use” might be interpreted as pointing to a utilitarian approach to human interactions, implying that her conversations might not have been entirely genuine but were at least partly motivated by her need to create content. In other words, she might have engaged with people to extract material for her blog. This idea is further stressed by a metaphor that appears a few pages later. To readers, it is revealed that after her blog became a success, “[...] she began, over time, to feel like a vulture hacking into the carcasses of people’s stories for something she could use [...] Each post scraped off yet one more scale of self until she felt naked and false.” (A 6). Once again, the utilitarian purpose is highlighted – “for something she could use” – but, through the comparison with the vulture, the metaphor exacerbates the question of ethics. Indeed, vultures are generally associated with death, for they feed on the remains of the dead. The metaphor suggests that Ifemelu is – or at least feels like she is – scavenging through the remnants of other people’s experiences (their stories), which are described, once again drawing from the semantical field of death, as carcasses. The temporal markers – “before” and “over time” – act as a literary device, that of a subtle foreshadowing. Placed at the incipit of the story, they give hints about what is narrated later in the novel and point to Ifemelu’s development. It is somehow suggested that this “predatory attitude towards the world,” as Guarracino (2014, 17) defines it, is limited to the blogs in the US. However, as we will see, the return to Nigeria does not represent an act of ‘de-linking’ from it.

Ifemelu seems to have developed a *forma mentis* that makes her see the surrounding world as fodder for her blog. Upon her visit to the hair salon – which becomes the narrative frame of a substantial portion of the narrative – she engages with Aisha, the hairdresser, who is entangled in a complex relationship with an Igbo man from Nigeria. Aisha implores Ifemelu to convince this man to marry her, leveraging their shared ethnic background. Contemplating this scenario, Ifemelu considers its potential as the subject for a blog post, complete with a title: “It would have made for a good blog post. ‘A Peculiar Case of a Non-American Black, or How the Pressures of Immigrant Life can Make you Act Crazy’” (A 22). Moreover, the narrative contains several other instances that challenge the protagonist’s ethical approach to recounting and writing. For example, Blaine relates an episode involving an interaction with an elderly Black woman whose enthusiasm and incredulity at the possibility of Barack Obama becoming president are profound. The woman’s vulnerability, accentuated by her advanced age and the poignant remark she made – “I didn’t think this would happen even in my grandbaby’s lifetime” (A 441) – highlights the deep emotional and cultural significance of this event. Subsequent to

Blaine's narration, "Ifemelu blogged about the story, describing the silver streaks in the woman's gray hair and the fingers quivering from Parkinson's *as though she herself had been there with Blaine*" (A 441, emphasis added). While less critical than the previous sentences analysed, the focus here once again lies on the delicate boundary between inspiration and exploitation in creative work.

This is not to say that Ifemelu's blog is merely a vehicle for exploitation, nor to undervalue the blog's role as a critical platform for discussing and analysing American society – a dynamic that could potentially catalyse societal transformation within both the fictional realm of *Americanah* and, by extension, the reality of the reader. Many literary analyses have already focused on this aspect. Instead, it is posited that the integration of metanarrative elements enhances the complexity of Ifemelu's writing. Her blog simultaneously emerges as a *locus* for analysing and discussing American societal issues and as an output of the blogger's "predatory attitude towards the world" (Guarracino 2014, 17). Indeed, despite – or together with – ethical concerns, the two scenarios previously described could lead to beneficial outcomes. In Aisha's case, the proposed blog subtitle "How the Pressures of Immigrant Life Can Make You Act Crazy" suggests that her behaviour, which might otherwise be viewed as irrational, could stem directly from the challenges faced by immigrants. Similarly, the portrayal of the elderly Black woman's response could serve to humanise the significant historical and political event. This depiction turns the moment into a profoundly personal experience that not only renders the event more accessible but also evokes empathy among readers.

Despite the foreshadowing in the novel's opening that suggests Ifemelu evolves beyond using people around her as subjects of her writing, this attitude persists upon her return to Nigeria. In doing so, Adichie avoids a Manichean view of the United States and Nigeria. The country of migration does not fuel Ifemelu's exploitative outlook, nor does her return signify a symbolic 'rite of purification' from the 'contaminations' she may have acquired abroad. Upon her return, after a brief stint at a magazine, she launches a new blog. This time, the focus shifts away from race, which she claims "doesn't work [in Nigeria]" (A 586), to life in Lagos, encapsulated in her blog titled *The Small Redemptions of Lagos*.⁴² Inspired by her close friend,

⁴² The title of Ifemelu's blog, *The Small Redemptions of Lagos*, can be read intertextually with Chris Abani's *Graceland* (2004). In Abani's novel, the protagonist, Elvis Oke, escapes Nigeria using the passport of a man named Redemption, a symbolic reference to the idea that redemption lies abroad. Ifemelu, in contrast, enacts the opposite trajectory – it is her return to Nigeria that signals a form of redemption, one that is rooted in reconnection rather than exile.

Ranyinudo, one of the initial posts discusses “the many women in Lagos with Unknown Sources of Wealth” (A 521). The source of this wealth is soon disclosed: in Ranyinudo’s instance, it is “a big man banker;” generally, it involves rich men “they can never truly have” (A 521). When her friend confronts her angrily, Ifemelu fails to grasp her perspective and insists that, given the prevalence of the story, anonymity is assured. Nevertheless, Ranyinudo forcefully retorts, “[...] who are you to pass judgment? How is this different from your situation with the wealthy white man in America? [...] Stop feeling so superior” (A 521). After this altercation, Ifemelu removes the post, acknowledging, “It’s easy to be judgmental” (A 521), but she appears to lack a genuine understanding of her friend’s stance, persisting in her self-justification.

The Nervous Condition of Non-Return

In the preceding chapter, it has been argued that the narrative of return crafted by first-generation authors features ‘been-tos’: elite individuals who, after a period of study abroad, typically in the UK, return. Infused with the optimism that characterised that historical era, their aim is to assist in the development of newly independent nation-states. These characters, for whom the return is both necessary and permanent because of a profound sense of belonging and attachment (Knudsen and Rahbek, 2017), perceive Africa as their unequivocal home, thus making it both a point of departure and arrival in the cycle of circular migration. Despite that, novels such as Chinua Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and Wole Soyinka’s *The Interpreters* (1965) highlight the protagonists’ challenging reintegration, focusing on their “dysfunctionality” (Conway and Potter, 2009), which in severe instances, as in Baako from Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Fragments* (1970), leads to neurosis. Similarly, Zimbabwean novelist Tsitsi Dangarembga reinterprets the been-to archetype in *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and depicts a similar unease stemming from the protagonists’ return to Rhodesia. As suggested by the title, various manifestations of this discomfort are explored through different characters but reach a climax in young Nyasha, manifesting psychosomatically as anorexia. The root of this dysfunction, as revealed by the narrator’s mother, is precisely Nyasha’s “Englishness,” which possesses the potential of “kill[ing the returnees] if they aren’t careful” (Dangarembga [1988] 2004, 207).

In both *A Bit of Difference* and *Americanah*, certain characters exhibit a contemporary manifestation of the Fanonian/Sartrean “nervous condition,” echoing the experiences of the

first-generation been-tos. As widely recognised, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Franz Fanon (1961) examines the psychological and emotional disorders suffered by colonised individuals, who are divided between two conflicting cultures, hierarchically structured. These individuals are “split subjects,” estranged from their cultural identity, having internalised a sense of inferiority. Their experiences are saturated with violence and trauma – both physical and psychological. According to the Martiniquais psychiatrist, this colonial system of systemic violence, oppression, and cultural domination results in severe mental health issues for the colonised. This mental state produced by colonialism has come to be known as a “nervous condition,” a term introduced by Constance Farrington through her translation of Sartre’s introduction to Fanon’s work: “The status of ‘native’ is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonized people with their consent” (Sartre 1963, 13). In contemporary literature, authors such as Atta and Adichie argue that the “nervous condition” characterises the experiences of African migrants. These individuals are torn between two cultures, hierarchically placed, alienated from their culture of origin, and yet struggle to assimilate into the perceived superior culture due to their phenotype – a point also emphasised by Ademola Adesola (2023):

The offspring of the natives Sartre refers to have become immigrants in countries from whence the colonizers of yesteryears originated. For various reasons, including the uneasy question of belonging, the condition of immigrants in their new lands of sojourn remains nervous. The immigrants’ painful realization that they cannot find a home in Western countries, because almost everything reminds them of their “otherness.” Their “out-sideness” generates a nervous distress in them. Having departed the places they have known as “home,” the immigrants assume a status of otherness to their “compatriots” who imagine them as belonging elsewhere. (2023, 111)

Thus, the concept of a “nervous condition” can be effectively applied to the contemporary experiences of African and Black migrants, illuminating the persistent psychological and cultural challenges they encounter. In the two novels under analysis, this updated version of such a condition is not attributed to the return to the homeland, as depicted in the narratives of the first generation. Instead, it arises from the severance from their home country and the profound sense of alienation and loss caused by such a severance. This lack of engagement with their cultural and familial origins fosters existential disorientation, highlighting a critical aspect of diasporic experiences: the profound effects of non-return and the unresolved tensions it creates. This is encapsulated in Deola’s words: “Every Nigerian she knows abroad is to some

degree broken” (*ABD* 53). Specifically, minor characters epitomise such a condition: in *A Bit of Difference*, the previously mentioned writer Bandele, whereas in *Americanah*, Bartholomew, Ifemelu’s aunt’s partner and Dike, her younger cousin.

In the previous section, we analysed the pressures of the literary market as perceived by Bandele and his preference for writing about ‘non-African’ themes.⁴³ We concluded the analysis by arguing that Atta adds a layer of complexity to her criticism of the literary dynamics since it is not clear whether Bandele’s interest in depicting two lovers in Paris stems from a desire for creative freedom or is a symbolic adoption of a literary-declined Fanonian ‘white mask.’ Indeed, his troubled relationship with Nigeria emerges in his estrangement from it: “Nigeria is not *my* home” (*ABD* 50, emphasis in the original). Despite receiving only fragmented glimpses of Bandele’s life through Deola’s perspective, readers learn that he is the son of a ‘been-to’ who studied at Cambridge and belongs to the Nigerian upper social class with access to international education. Aligning him with narratives written by the first generation, he is perceived as a foreigner in Nigeria, partly due to his accent, which not only marks him as different but also reinforces a pejorative perception of effeminacy: “His English accent made him effeminate” (*ABD* 44), says the narrative voice, almost aligning itself with the prejudiced perception of the character, as if momentarily adopting the viewpoint of a society that equates foreignness and certain accents with a lack of masculinity. Furthermore, his brother feels ashamed of him, perceiving him as “lost” and detached from their cultural roots (*ABD* 44). Being gay and feeling that he could not be accepted for that in Nigeria, he is estranged from the country not only physically but *in toto*. His overt rejection of African affiliations is exemplified by his reluctance to associate with African writers (*ABD* 41). When he is hospitalised for depression (*ABD* 51), Deola’s friends dismissively refer to him as “the bobo who went mad because he couldn’t accept the fact that he was black” (*ABD* 54). His inability to reconnect with Nigeria in any meaningful way leads him to reject his African identity, yet in the UK, he

⁴³ Bandele’s perception of literary market pressures, which he feels compel him to focus on ‘African’ themes, implicitly casts subjects like love as ‘non-African.’ This issue is addressed by Okey Ndibe in the interview included in the appendix. Ndibe notes that, historically, “African writing used to be a very serious, brave business: we were fighting colonialism, talking about our relationship with Europe, and so on. It had to be political; it had to be revolutionary” (appendix). This perspective underscores the longstanding expectation that African literature should primarily engage with social and political issues. However, Ndibe highlights a shift among contemporary African writers, who now assert their right to explore a wider array of themes, remarking, “Sometimes, we want to write revolutionary literature. Sometimes, we just want to write a love letter” (appendix). By embracing personal themes such as love, these writers challenge the perhaps outdated, market-driven notion that African literature must exclusively revolve around struggle or social critique.

remains perceived as African. At the same time, the novel suggests that, like his father, he is regarded as “too English” in Nigeria (ABD 45). This liminal position, which straddles two divergent identities and cultures, falls short of the transformative potential envisaged in Bhabha’s concept of the Third Space; instead, it becomes a site of un-belonging, heightening his sense of alienation and psychological distress.

The metaphor of being lost is also employed in *Americanah* in reference to Bartholomew, Ifemelu’s aunt’s new partner. Living in Massachusetts for the last thirty years, he is described as “one of those people who, in his village back home, would be called ‘lost.’ *He went to America and got lost*, his people would say. *He went to America and refused to come back*” (*A* 143, emphasis in the original). Here, the concept of being lost is loaded with both literal and metaphorical meanings since it extends beyond mere geographical dislocation to signify a severance from native cultural moorings. Paradoxically, Bartholomew ostensibly maintains a superficial connection with his Nigerian roots, aligning himself with the nation’s most conservative views and following its news closely, as if to use Nigeria – or more accurately, the Nigeria he imagines from abroad – as a moral and ideological compass. He often makes statements like, “A girl in Nigeria will never wear that kind of dress” (*A* 142), which signify his attempts to anchor his identity in a Nigeria that, as Ifemelu observes, has evolved beyond his static perceptions. This contradiction underscores his struggle with identity: he is seen as “an exaggerated caricature” (*A* 142) of his former self, ossified and out of step with the current Nigerian societal dynamics. Despite his professed Nigerianness, however, he is the emblem of a person wearing the Fanonian “white mask” – literally, for he bleaches his skin.

His attempt to assimilate into American society operates through language:

Bartholomew wore khaki trousers pulled up high on his belly, and spoke with an American accent filled with holes, mangling words until they were impossible to understand. Ifemelu sensed, from his demeanor, a deprived rural upbringing that he tried to compensate for with his American affection, his gonnas and wannas” (*A* 141-142).

This operation of assimilation remains incomplete: the informal contractions which punctuate his speech fail to mask the evident gaps and mangled words that render his attempts at assimilation comic. Like the bleaching of his skin, they are superficial efforts to align with an American identity. His caricatured assimilation into American society and his outmoded connection with Nigeria make Bartholomew stand as a dual caricature – misaligned both with

the America he tries to embrace and the Nigeria he no longer understands, belonging to neither of them.

In *Americanah*, it is posited that the return to one's native soil may offer a therapeutic respite for individuals who suffer from the profound disorientation and resultant "nervous condition" induced by the experience of migration. Re-engaging with one's origins after an interval of alienation has the potential for healing. This point is accentuated through the character of Dike, whose separation from Nigeria occurs in infancy when his mother is compelled to leave the country following the sudden death of the married general with whom she was involved, leaving her vulnerable to the whims of his family.

Upon relocating to the US as a baby, Dike experiences significant alienation from Nigerian, specifically Igbo, culture while growing up; this reflects his mother's own challenges with assimilation into American society. From her perspective, this cultural severance is strategic and aimed at facilitating a smoother integration for her son than she experienced herself. This intent is articulated during a conversation between Auntie Uju and Ifemelu shortly after Ifemelu's arrival in the US, where Auntie Uju instructs her, "Please don't speak Igbo to him [...] Two languages will confuse him" (A 134). Despite this, the Igbo language continues to permeate his life, albeit relegated to becoming a "language of strife" (A 211). Igbo is used to admonish him when his behaviour does not meet expectations, as it is the warning of being "sen[t] back" to Nigeria when his academic performance declines (A 211). Nigeria hereby transforms into a symbol of threat rather than a source of cultural identity and belonging.

Stripped of his Nigerian cultural heritage due to the absence of his mother's role as a cultural intermediary, Dike finds himself navigating an alternative identity: that of a Black American. This identity is portrayed as contentious within the private sphere of his home. A poignant example occurs in a dialogue between Ifemelu and Auntie Uju, where Ifemelu recalls an incident: "Do you remember when Dike was telling you something and he said 'we black folk' and you told him 'you are not black?' [...] you should not have done that." Auntie Uju's response, "You know what I meant. I didn't want him to start behaving like these people and thinking that everything that happens to him is because he's black" (A 470), reflects her internal conflict about embracing this racial identity.

However, Dike's lived experience in the U.S. aligns more closely with that of African Americans than with African migrants. This alignment becomes particularly pronounced following his relocation with his mother from New York to a predominantly white community

in Massachusetts. In this new setting, he becomes one of the few Black students at his school and is subjected to a litany of prejudices, stereotypes, and assumptions. A particularly significant incident illustrates this dynamic when the school principal accuses him of hacking into the school's computer network, leading Dike to lament, "You have to blame the black kid first," while discussing the incident with Ifemelu (*A* 433). Precariously navigating the tensions between being Black in the U.S. – a self-perception his mother actively rejects – and a weakened sense of Nigerian identity, Dike struggles to define himself, knowing only what he is not, yet remaining uncertain of who he truly is. As Ifemelu poignantly remarks to Aunty Uju, "You told him what he wasn't but you didn't tell him what he was" (*A* 470). Caught between two elusive identities, he succumbs to a profound depression and, to his family's astonishment, subsequently attempts suicide.

For Dike, the journey to his homeland harbours therapeutic possibilities. He visits Ifemelu in Lagos after she relocates there. Accustomed to being "the only black person in the room," a phrase derived from the title of Nadeesha Uyangoda's book (2021), as soon as he arrives in Lagos, he exclaims, "I've never seen so many black people in the same place" (*A* 518). Throughout his stay, Dike gains insights not just from Nigeria but also from his personal history; he reconnects with his family, learns about his father, and he even visits the house where he spent his early infancy. Nevertheless, a sense of in-betweenness pervades his experience. His limited proficiency in Igbo serves as a reminder of this cultural liminality. His return is less about resolving the dichotomy between the US and Nigeria and more about embracing this state of liminal identity itself. The trivial act of driving confidently through the streets of Lagos symbolises this reconciliation of his roots and routes, an act that "meant something to him that [Ifemelu] could not name" (*A* 524). Possibly, it is coming to terms with what Zeleza (2009) defines as the diaspora, i.e., "a state of being and a process of becoming, a kind of voyage that encompasses the possibility of never arriving or returning, a navigation of multiple belongings, of networks of affiliation" (32).

The Dark Side of Afropolitan Return: Navigating Complicity and Compromise with the Status Quo

For the protagonists of the two novels, their return signifies disillusionment with the American dream and its British counterpart, both of which have dimmed in allure. Indeed, returning serves as a means to overcome the dissatisfaction associated with living as a migrant in the Global

North. Atta's Deola, in particular, finds neither professional satisfaction nor romantic fulfilment. As the third-person narrator elucidates, revealing the roots of her discontent and inclinations towards returning, "With the social network to which she belongs, love is so contained, so predictable, and marriage might be as banal and unsatisfying as her career" (*ABD* 40). She reiterates her dissatisfaction throughout the narrative, as when talking with her friend, Tessa, she tells her, "I'm not getting anywhere" (*ABD* 280), a phrase that operates on both a literal and figurative level, encapsulating profound meaning within a trite expression. Indeed, this statement reflects both her stalled progress in immediate circumstances and more profound existential frustration, hinting at a pervasive sense of inertia in her life.

Her discontent is further exacerbated by her work for a charity, where she finds herself enmeshed in what one of the novel's chapters aptly refers to as "the business of humanitarianism" (*ABD* 177). She is less critical of what Heike Härting (2008) identifies as "the legacy of the imperial and racialised structures of representation and perception – of viewing the racialised Other" in humanitarianism (62) and more critical of her own privileged position as someone not requiring such aid: "Africa does suffer, unduly, unnecessarily, and if all she has to cope with is the occasional embarrassment about how Africans are portrayed, then she is fortunate" (*ABD* 37). This juxtaposition between substantial suffering and minor embarrassment underscores the disparity between what she perceives as profound issues and those more superficial, relating to mere form. This sentiment crystallises when she disregards an email from her colleague Kate, who expresses disappointment with Deola's critique of the charity's vetting policies, choosing instead to focus on more significant challenges: "She is going home, where she will have a lot to deal with, but not this rubbish anymore" (*ABD* 284). This decisive dismissal of her colleague's concerns reflects Deola's broader rejection of the Global North.

In Adichie's narrative, Ifemelu – contrasting with Deola – exemplifies outward success, yet her accomplishments unfold against the backdrop of the 2008 US financial crisis, serving as the chronotope of the story. Scholars such as Krishnan (2019), Hallemeier (2015), and Goyal (2014) have noted that her achievements are somewhat unexpected, providing a stark contrast to the prevailing economic turmoil of the non-diegetic world. At the novel's outset, the narrator delineates Ifemelu's achievements: "Her blog was doing well, with thousands of unique visitors each month, and she was earning good speaking fees, and she had a fellowship at Princeton and a relationship with Blaine [...] and yet there was cement in her soul" (*A* 7). This passage

embodies a prevalent theme in contemporary literature, highlighting the dissonance between external accolades and internal discontent. The use of the adversative conjunction “yet” introduces a profound sense of dissatisfaction, contrasting her professional and personal validations with her emotional turmoil. The listing of her successes not only builds rhythm but also amplifies the impact of the metaphor that follows. The metaphor of “cement” effectively conveys the durability and immobility of Ifemelu’s emotional state, suggesting a deep-seated, hardened pain – the “dull ache of loss” – that solidified within her (A 7). It is her eventual return that seems to offer a resolution, potentially melting away the emotional stasis and resolving the underlying dichotomy between her external success and internal struggle.

Thus, after many years abroad, both Ifemelu and Deola decide to return permanently to Nigeria. While Ifemelu’s homecoming is explicitly depicted within the narrative, Deola’s occurs beyond the novel’s ending, leaving opposite scholarly interpretations on whether it actually occurs. While it is impossible to know what actually happens outside the borders of the narrative, the novel concludes with Deola poised to “go back for good,” where she is “loved [...] and surrounded by people she knew” (ABD 240; 283). Even if their return is greatly desired – and in Ifemelu’s case, even imagined beforehand (A 190) – both texts highlight the protagonists’ privileged positions. Deola, with her British passport, and Ifemelu, with her American one, possess the means to alter their choices at will (A 481). More specifically, Ifemelu argues that the document “shield[s] her from choicelessness. She could always leave; she did not have to stay” (A 481). Differently from Obinze in *Americanah*, who is deported from the UK, Ifemelu and Deola’s statuses provide them with an escape route not available to all, highlighting the enmeshment between the perception of return and privilege.

Ifemelu’s actual return unfolds in the seventh part of the novel. Having never visited Nigeria during her years in the U.S., her homecoming elicits an initial sense of *dépaysement*:

At first, Lagos assaulted her: the sun-dazed haste, the yellow busses full of squashed limbs, the sweating hawkers racing after cars, the advertisements on hulking billboards [...] and the heaps of rubbish that rose on the roadsides like a taunt. (A 475)

The overwhelming sensation experienced by Ifemelu while returning is produced by the urban chaos surrounding her. Visual and kinesthetic images contribute to the portrayal of a bustling, frenetic urban landscape where life moves relentlessly, to the point of ripening to decay in “heaps of rubbish”. Lagos, depicted as a *locus* of sensory overload, impacts the protagonist with

nearly violent force. The lexical choice of the verb “assaulted,” drawn from a semantic field of violence, personifies the city, giving it an active role and casting it almost as an antagonist. In this tableau of bustle and hustle, the presence of the “sweating hawkers racing after cars” underscores a survivalist rhythm, with inhabitants perpetually in motion to meet their basic needs. Thus, upon her return, Ifemelu perceives Lagos as an alien and hostile environment, transformed during her years away. Yet, as the presence of the temporal adverbial phrase “at first” suggests, this initial perception is subject to change. Over time, Ifemelu experiences “the dizzying sensation of falling, falling, into the new persona she had become, falling into the strange familiar” (A 475). This often-cited oxymoron (“strange familiar”) encapsulates the paradox of reencountering Lagos – a city that is both recognisable and has significantly changed during her time abroad. Her presence in the city provokes a profound shift in her identity, characterised metaphorically by her “falling into the new persona.” Here again, the city emerges as the catalyst for her transformation, while her own response is depicted through the passive “falling.” Yet, this evolution is not marked by violence; instead, in the city, she feels at “home” and at “peace,” reaching a state where “she [... spins] herself fully into being” (A 586) – a hint at reconciliation between her former and current selves, rooted in the familiar yet foreign landscape of her homeland.

In Sefi Atta’s *A Bit of Difference*, the narrative revolves around two significant returns: the first is a business trip during which she attends her father’s memorial service, and the second is a visit that prepares for her definitive return and during which she reveals her pregnancy to her mother. Upon her first arrival in Lagos, Deola encounters a landscape in transition, a blend of the unfamiliar and the familiar, reminiscent of Ifemelu’s experiences. She notes, “Some of the sights along the way are new to her, like the organized labor mass-transport vans, but most are familiar” (ABD 72). This return thrusts her into the vortex of family expectations, particularly the pressures to marry or at least to procreate – “at least born pikin” (108). The use of “pikin,” an informal, colloquial term in Nigerian Pidgin, underscores the familiar, almost casual way these pressures are expressed in her community. Despite these pressures, as noted by Pucherová (2022), Deola exhibits a nuanced resistance to the Nigerian cultural imperatives of marriage and motherhood (185). Her resistance might appear as ambivalent since, in the end, she ends up having a baby. However, her acquiescence to motherhood juxtaposed with her refusal to marry underscores subtle defiance, prioritising personal desire over societal norms

(ABD 250). And while she feels a sense of relief, of being “glad” (ABD 175), when she leaves Lagos, she ultimately decides to schedule the final return.

In doing so, her approach starkly contrasts with Ifemelu’s “maniac optimism” (A 460). Informed by her family’s cynical observations – “traffic, poor quality repairs and servicing, stupid and devious help. Mosquitos. Good schools are expensive, as is pediatric food and medicine. Any serious illness and she would have to get on the next flight to Lagos if she wants to survive” (ABD 266)⁴⁴ – Deola knows what awaits her. As the narrative nears its conclusion, the protagonist entertains contradictory impulses. While throughout the novel, she asserts a strong, almost monolithic connection to Nigeria, as she approaches her definitive return, she reveals a more nuanced sense of belonging. This introspection is poignantly captured when she questions, “Why did she think she would not miss London?” (ABD 297). This moment reflects the profound impact of her London sojourn and her experiences as a migrant, which have unexpectedly deepened her affection for both locales. In the subsequent analysis, we will explore how these experiences have reshaped her perception of Nigeria and redefined her sense of the world.

Return and the Unveiling of Blindspots

In both *Americanah* and *A Bit of Difference*, the protagonists, whether through a brief return as with Deola or a permanent one as with Ifemelu and Obinze, come to realise how migration has transformed them. This transformation extends from trivial changes in taste to a profound shift in their perceptions of their privileged status in Nigeria.⁴⁵ Having lived as migrants in the Global North – essentially becoming somewhat subalterns in this context –, through their return, they gain critical insights into their own class-related blind spots. This newfound awareness is a direct consequence of their experiences outside their home country, elucidating how the same person can inhabit different social classes depending on the societal framework in which they are situated. This shift in perspective is evident in how they perceive the individuals employed by their families. While their views of these workers evolve, it does not signify a complete departure from what, at times, appears to be a patronising attitude. Instead, their supposedly

⁴⁴ Deola’s comments reflect an elitist perspective, disparaging the underprivileged while relying on their services.

⁴⁵ For instance, in *Americanah*, Ifemelu finds “kitsch” houses which she once considered “beautiful” (A 484 – 485). Additionally, a few pages later, she admits that she is “now a person who has learned to admire exposed wooden rafters” (A 535).

initial sense of entitlement gives way to a nuanced ambivalence towards their positions of power and privilege.

In *A Bit of Difference*, two passages, in particular, provide a critical lens through which the complexities of class dynamics are portrayed. Differently from her family, thanks to her experience abroad, Deola seems to understand labour and social expectations placed upon domestic workers such as Comfort, her mother's domestic worker, and Mr Mashood, her brother's driver. Yet, her ambivalence towards them persists. Let us begin by examining her description of Comfort.

Whenever Comfort falls asleep in the kitchen, her mother calls Comfort lazy. Comfort wakes up at six-thirty in the morning to sweep the floor and she doesn't stop working until nine at night. [...] Deola recalls being so dependent on house help and quarrelling with truant drivers [...] Now she's embarrassed to order anyone around, but she won't put up with the everyday inconvenience her family is accustomed to. (*ABD* 81)

In striking contrast to her name, Comfort's existence is anything but comfortable. The glaring juxtaposition of her mother's sardonic moniker with Comfort's gruelling daily labour, which begins before dawn and ends late at night, sharply criticises this misnomer. Deola, reflecting on this irony, becomes aware of her mother's blind spot in recognising Comfort's true conditions; a realisation that prompts Deola to reconsider her own past reliance on domestic help and her interactions with them. Her present embarrassment about issuing orders seems to indicate a significant shift in her perspective, shaped by her experience as an expatriate. This change suggests a growing self-awareness and a deepening understanding of the unequal power dynamics she once accepted unquestioningly. However, the tension between her past complicity and her current discomfort does not imply that she has entirely disengaged from them.

Another passage focusing on the driver of Deola's brother helps us corroborate this point. Following her father's memorial service, Mr. Mashood, her brother's driver, accompanies Deola to the airport.

She is not to tip him too much. That might spoil him [...] His name is Mr Mashood. He has a quiet pride, unlike Comfort, who sulks whenever she is called and has to be corrected several times. Comfort parades her discontent, which doesn't earn her much sympathy. Mr Mashood is always courteous, as if he has decided that antagonizing his employer is not worth his while.

During lunch, Deola saw him in the garage, eating his share of the caterer's food with a spoon and clicking it against his top teeth. He bowed slightly to greet her. *She might not have noticed him had she not lived overseas and had the experience of being ignored at work.* (ABD 175 – 176, emphasis added)

Drawing on her own experiences of invisibility while working in the UK, Deola's encounter with Mr. Mashood seems, at first glance, to prompt a significant moment of self-reflection and empathy. However, evoking Selasi's nod to the brown waitress in *Bye Bye Babar*, which prompts her false belief to inhabit the same "minority status" (2005, n.p.), Deola deludes herself into believing she fully understands Mr Mashood. In her description of him, she wraps him in an aura of noble restraint, which is enhanced by his comparison with Comfort – the same Comfort she seems to empathise with in the previous quotation: his "quiet pride" is compared to Comfort's sulking; unlike his good behaviour, she, on the contrary, has "to be corrected several times," a patronising statement that reveals a complex layer of Deola as a character. Deola might have learned to notice the people who are invisible to her family members, yet she slips into the same patronising attitude. In other words, although she recognises the disparities and challenges faced by domestic workers, her actions and thoughts still occasionally reflect the ingrained prejudices of her upbringing. Indeed, even the comparison between Comfort and Mr Mashood can be read as problematic, for it is triggered by the mere belonging to the same social class. Deola, despite her experiences of invisibility abroad, returns to Nigeria still entrenched in a social class that "hop[s] from one luxury car to another [...] in deprived Africa" (ABD 115). This privileged status affords her liberties uncommon to many, such as engaging in a sexual encounter in the North of Nigeria – a place where, typically, "they sentence women to death for fornication," but not "a woman like [her]" (ABD 133). Deola's path toward genuine empathy *vis-à-vis* those Spivak terms 'subalterns' is fraught with contradictions. These contradictions stem from her privileged position, which she does not seem ready to relinquish.

Noticing and judging the *status quo* do not necessarily translate into the ability to extricate oneself from it. Returning, then, often entails adaptation to the prevailing social order. In *Americanah*, Obinze exemplifies this phenomenon. Despite his previous invisibility in the UK as an undocumented migrant, upon his return, he seamlessly assimilates into the very societal structures he once critiqued. When readers first encounter him, he has risen to the status of a "Big Man" (A 30), encapsulated by an array of status symbols. Now married and the father of a two-year-old daughter, he has entered the elite echelons of Nigerian society, where university strikes become "forced holidays" (A 26), his home is furnished with imports from Italy, and his

household includes a nanny and a “housegirl” from Benin (*A* 35). Even educational choices for his child – between a “French school” and one offering a “British curriculum” (*A* 35) – reflect a privileged lifestyle. It is only through subsequent flashbacks that readers come to understand how Obinze has acquired this affluent lifestyle.

Deported from the UK, Obinze begins attending the lavish gatherings of a local Chief, navigating a complex mix of emotions: “Obinze felt repulsion and longing [for the rich people attending the party]; he pitied them, but he also imagined being like them” (*A* 31). He grapples with an emotional dichotomy – a sense of superiority derived from his awareness of the attendees’ ethical and moral corruption, juxtaposed with his own aspiration to belong to their world.

The Chief’s declaration, “I was Babangida’s friend. I was Abacha’s friend. Now that the military has gone, Obasanjo is my friend” (*A* 31-32), underscores his deep entrenchment in and perpetuation of the power structures that render Nigeria a land of “choicelessness,” as Obinze himself describes (*A* 341). Despite his critiques, Obinze ultimately becomes complicit in the very system he condemns, working for the Chief and benefiting from the same mechanisms of corruption he once abhorred. Indeed, Obinze’s success is linked to his complicity in the corruption endemic to the Nigerian elite, where the so-called “free market” devolves into predatory capitalism. His role is that of “evaluation consulting,” but, in reality, involves undervaluing properties and “[making] sure it looks as if [he is] following due process” (*A* 32).

Nevertheless, Obinze is largely depicted in a positive light throughout the narrative. As Ifemelu’s true love, he is frequently celebrated by other characters for his kindness and thoughtful gestures. The following excerpts from the novel highlight these aspects of his character:

The traffic was moving. A light rain was falling. The child beggar ran along, his doe-eyed expression more theatrical, his motions frantic: bringing his hand to his mouth, again and again, fingertips pursed together. Obinze rolled down the window and held out a hundred-naira note. (*A* 24)

Ifem, I do what rich people are supposed to do. I pay school fees for a hundred students in my village and my mum’s village. (*A* 541)

The initial excerpt portrays a moment of everyday Lagosian urban life, illustrating – using the formulation coined by Trotsky (1967) and later adopted by WReC (2015) – the “combined and uneven” world system’s impact on Nigeria. Within the confines of his car, Obinze, distanced

from the harsh realities faced by the impoverished, encounters a child beggar amid inclement weather. This meeting starkly highlights the profound socio-economic chasm between them. The child's gestures and facial expressions, which appear rehearsed, underscore a survival strategy in the face of adversity. In this performance, Obinze, perhaps guilt-driven, plays his part by dispensing what amounts to mere crumbs of his wealth, which he accrued through his complicity with the country's predatory capitalist system. Despite this, Obinze is depicted in a seemingly positive light. When his driver criticises the act of giving money to someone who, according to him, has "big money," Obinze retorts, "So why are you working as a driver instead of a beggar, Gabriel?" (A 24). This episode, however, prompts no reflection as he abruptly shifts his focus to memories of Ifemelu, who has just emailed him.

The second sentence is pronounced by Obinze in one of the exchanges with Ifemelu after they finally meet again towards the novel's conclusion. In such exchanges, they reflect on their changed perceptions of the city. Having both returned from abroad, they grapple with whether the city has transformed or whether their matured perspectives reveal an "adult Nigeria that [they] didn't know about" (A 530). Ifemelu perceives it as "a transactional city [...] depressingly transitional" (A 530), while Obinze laments "the mentality of scarcity" prevailing in the country (A 533). It is during these discussions that Obinze straightforwardly reports his contributions towards school fees for children in his and his mother's village – a gesture of charity that he sees as fulfilling an expected role of the wealthy, aimed at giving back to the community. However, his tone of "awkward indifference" (A 541) while making this statement could suggest a deeper realisation: this charitable act is superficial, unable to address the underlying societal issues he personally helps to sustain; it does not help him reconcile with his moral dilemma, for his engagement in charity is akin to applying a band-aid to a self-inflicted wound. It is rather his way of playing his part, of understanding his social role as a wealthy individual.

To a certain degree, Ifemelu herself unwittingly reinforces the very system she critiques. Upon her return, she starts working for *Zoe*, a Lagosian magazine. There, she initially feels uncomfortable with being addressed as "Ma" (A 495) by Esther, her senior. However, she quickly adjusts to a social milieu in which "status [...] surpasses age" and bolstered by symbols of affluence such as "a car and a driver and the spirit of America hanging over her head," she gains a certain prestige (A 495). Faced with the expectation "to play the madame" (A 495),

Ifemelu conforms to it, interacting with Esther “always in that manner that was both playful and patronizing” (A 495), thus embodying the role expected of her in this status-driven context.

Ifemelu’s ascent within Nigerian society’s ladder is symbolised by her tenancy in Ikoyi, a symbol of affluence when she was a child: “Growing up, Ikoyi has reeked of gentility, a faraway gentility that she could not touch” (A 486). Now, as a successful returnee, she has access to the most affluent neighbourhood of Lagos and the life that comes with it, epitomised by residents with “faces free of pimples and drivers designated ‘the children’s driver’” (A 486). After securing the flat and paying two years’ rent – an experience that enlightens her about “why people took bribes” (A 486) – she begins some renovation work. One week after the tile job was completed, she visits the flat. Dissatisfied with the quality of the work, which the worker attributed to the fragile nature of the tiles, she refuses to make payment for the substandard job and resorts to threats, leveraging her societal status to intimidate:

And if you want trouble, trust me, you will get it [...] The first thing I will do is call the commissioner of police and they will lock you up in Alagbon Close! [...] Do you know who I am? You don’t know who I am, that is why you can do this kind of rubbish work for me! (A 486)

She herself is surprised by her own reaction, of using her position as a means of intimidation. In her threat, the authenticity of her connections is irrelevant; instead, it is critical to note that she conforms to a societal norm where privileged individuals wield the power to threaten workers with imprisonment, illustrating the uneven power dynamics.

This episode echoes Obinze’s reflections on the behaviours of the wealthy, shared with the readers at the outset of the novel through the third-person narrative voice:

People often told him how humble he was, but they did not mean real humility, it was merely that he did not flaunt his membership in the wealthy club, did not exercise the rights it brought – to be rude, to be inconsiderate, to be greeted rather than to greet – and because so many others like him exercised those rights, his choices were interpreted as humility. (A 40)

As the narrator implies, the “rights” associated with wealth in Nigeria include behaviours typically considered negative, highlighting a societal structure that not only tolerates but possibly encourages such behaviours among the affluent. Obinze’s more reserved demeanour, viewed against the backdrop of his social circle’s overt privileges, is viewed as humble. Yet, the passage’s critical tone points out the irony of such a label: rather than humbleness, it is a

deviation from the expected arrogance associated with wealth. The fact that such a minimal action is enough to earn the label of humility serves as a potent critique of the ways in which societal norms, shaped by wealth and privilege, can distort perceptions and expectations.

Now, let's turn back to Ifemelu's threat to the worker. After reading Obinze's thoughts, it could be said that her actions conform to a societal system where wealth ostensibly confers certain "rights." This is not an isolated instance of her displaying the "right" to rudeness towards people providing a service. At a hair salon, upon receiving a message from Obinze asking her not to accompany him to Abuja because he needs time alone, she redirects her frustration toward the hairdresser, who attempts to blow-dry her hair with an inadequate brush: "Can't you people think?" (A 557). Ifemelu's use of "you people" in her rhetorical questions underscores a clear division and disparity between herself and the person she addresses. Although she speaks to an individual, she adopts a generalised address that lumps the hairdresser to a homogenised group from which she extricates herself and implies a sense of superiority.

The ambivalence she feels between her ideals and the way she acts in these circumstances becomes visible with the comment her friend Ranyinudo makes in reference to the incident with the tile worker. She says: "'You no longer behaving like an Americanah!' [...] despite herself, Ifemelu [feels] pleased to hear this" (A 488). While her pleasure is involuntary – "despite herself" signals her behaviour might not be aligned with her ideals – Ifemelu is gratified by this comment, which she interprets as a validation of shedding the traits that make her an "Americanah" in Nigeria – a term used derisively for returnees who are perceived as having adopted American attitudes. Thus, thanks to Ranyinudo's comment, she interprets her behaviour as gesturing a reconciliation of her identity within the Nigerian societal framework.

This ability to readjust to Nigerian society – to understand its expectations and conform to them while harbouring private criticisms – distinguishes contemporary fictional returnees like Ifemelu and Obinze from first-generation returnees such as Obi Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960). Unlike Ifemelu and Obinze, who navigate between societal expectations and their personal convictions, finding a compromise, Obi is caught in a web, unable to reconcile the two. This inability to adjust effectively to the prevailing norms not only isolates him but also leads to his eventual downfall as he is arrested for bribery. Critically, he is not reproached for the act of bribery *per se*, but for his lack of acumen in adhering to the unspoken customs and norms of Nigerian society regarding how bribes are handled. His journey thus ends in disillusionment and estrangement from his own community, making his return *de*

facto impossible. In contrast, Ifemelu and Obinze successfully integrate their global perspectives with local realities, enabling their successful reintegration – albeit through a nuanced complicity in the power structures and hierarchies they critique.⁴⁶

Towards a Conclusion

Hallermeier (2015) contends that *Americanah* articulates an “alternative, utopic vision of global power [...] promising future of the late Nigerian capitalism” (232). As my reading has hopefully suggested, Adichie’s novel, along with Atta’s, presents a more problematic representation of Nigeria and of the protagonists’ enmeshment within the local manifestations of the ‘combined and uneven system.’ At first glance, their return might seem to be the unproblematic apex of their personal development – a stage of self-acceptance and conflict resolution typical of the *Bildungsroman*. From this perspective, migration emerges as a crucial phase in their formation, during which they confront the illusory and transient nature of the dreams associated with the Global North. Abroad, they come to understand, in the words of Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2016), that “a South [...] also exists in the geographic North (Europe and North America), in the form of excluded, silenced, and marginalized populations, such as undocumented immigrants, the unemployed, ethnic or religious minorities, and victims of sexism, homophobia, racism, and Islamophobia” (19). Their return to Nigeria represents an attempt to flee from this oppressive system and the pervasive unevenness within it. However, what these novels ultimately depict, in my interpretation, is the presence of an interconnected capitalist system, or more precisely, capitalism as a world system, as explored by the Warwick Research Collective (WReC) in their seminal work *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World Literature* (2015).⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Another novel that explores the theme of complicity is *Sankofa* (2021) by Chibundu Onuzo. The Nigerian author, who holds a PhD in History with a focus on the West African Students’ Union, brings her academic expertise into fiction through this novel. It follows Anna, a British woman of mixed heritage, who embarks on a journey to reconnect with her estranged father, Francis Aggrey – a former West African revolutionary who later became the dictator of the fictional country of Bamana. As Anna pieces together her father’s past through his journal from his days as a been-to student, she grapples with the contradictions of his legacy: his initial fight against colonial oppression contrasted with his eventual authoritarian rule. In doing so, the novel raises critical questions about ideals, power, and ethical compromise.

⁴⁷ In an effort to redefine the concept of World Literature within the global capitalist framework, the Warwick Research Collective (WReC) employs the concept of “the singularity of modernity” and its “simultaneity” (12). They repudiate the notion of alternative modernities, such as those proposed by Gaonkar (2001), drawing instead on Trotsky’s analysis of global capitalist development and Fredric Jameson’s perspectives on modernity. In so doing, they posit that modernity is not a phenomenon that originates in the West and then expands to its peripheries;

In novels such as *Americanah* and *A Bit of Difference*, this concept is illustrated through the protagonists' experiences upon their return to Nigeria. Despite their geographical relocation, they cannot evade the global reach of capitalist dynamics. As Aaron Bady (2014) observes, "Africa has its West, just as the West has its Africa. Or maybe the distinctions collapse under the strain" (n.p.). This comment incisively underscores the mutual constructions and inevitable convergence of capitalist dynamics between Africa and the West, challenging the traditional binaries that often delineate them. However, in the novels, a distinction emerges: while in the Global North, their life trajectories partially (yet not completely) align with marginalised communities, in the Global South, they occupy a central role in the creation of societal unevenness. Indeed, both novels highlight what decolonial thinking calls the recognition of the protagonists' "positionality," i.e. "the geo-political and body-political location of the subject that speaks" (Grosfoguel 2007, 2013). Their privilege is not only admitted but underlined, for, in Deola's words, "worse than the smell of privilege is a cheap attempt to mask it" (*ABD* 99). Their positionality, which highlights their enmeshment within the system, might be one reason why, unlike the protagonists of the novels analysed by Anna-Leena Toivanen (2013), the novels do not "expose[e] the inhospitable nature of the postcolonial African nation state towards the female revenants" (432); on the contrary, their privileged status enables them to navigate with ease the postcolonial nation.

While literary criticism has rightly concentrated on the protagonists' critique of the Global North, the complexities of their compromises with the Nigerian *status quo* have often been overlooked or, alternatively, have been interpreted as purely agenda-driven, thereby obscuring any nuanced critique that may be embedded within such compromises. Yet, the protagonists' entanglement with capitalism does not inherently suggest that the novels have neoliberal claims. Such a reinterpretation, I believe, represents a reverberation of the common and risky practice of reading fictional characters merely as ventriloquists for the author's views. This is influenced, as Sarah Brouillette (2007) has demonstrated, by the strong emphasis in marketing postcolonial literature on any connections between books and their biographical authors to the extent that the concept of "authorship" heavily brands the literary work (66). Although there can be a degree of correspondence between an author's experiences and their

rather, the capitalist system produces modernity that is unevenly distributed (heterogeneous) and whose development is combined, as disparate regions are woven together by the global capitalist system.

characters' lives, it is simplistic and reductive to assume that characters in literature are mere replicas of authors.

Conclusion

It is difficult to interpret the protagonists of *Americanah* and *A Bit of Difference* purely as positive exemplars or models to emulate; rather, they are complex characters marked by profound contradictions. This is worth analysing not because complex protagonists are a novelty in African literature – such intricacy has been a defining feature of the canon since its beginnings, as exemplified by Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Instead, the distinctiveness of these characters lies in their challenge to conventional reading practices prevalent in leftist academic circles. As Aaron Bady (2014) notes, "For the literary left, Africa has long served a particular symbolic function in the West, standing in as the racial proletariat par excellence" (n.p.). Today, even decolonial thinking has significantly kept alive this symbolic function of the Continent. Criticising postcolonialists' tendency to criticise colonialism while keeping Western critical thought at the centre of the debate (Grosfoguel 2016),⁴⁸ decolonial thinkers attempt to find alternative epistemologies. This is a noble attempt. However, as Goyal (2014) rightly points out, "African literature (like all literature) can't be reduced to a blueprint or a manual for change" (xvi). On a similar note, Adichie in *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017) cautions against idealising the oppressed, advocating for a more nuanced portrayal of their experiences: "In teaching about oppression, be careful not to turn the oppressed into saints" (59). I believe that, together with Adichie, Atta also adheres to this principle, analysing the oppression and marginalisation faced by their protagonists in the West without sanctifying them. This de-sanctification is visible in their return to Nigeria. They present characters who are inextricably caught in the web of oppressive structures, thus resisting simplistic narratives of victimhood or heroism, underlining that, as Teju Cole (2016) articulates, it is impossible to completely disentangle oneself from the "transnational networks of oppressive practices" (344).

⁴⁸ Ramon Grosfoguel's positioning (2016) of postcolonial theorists such as Said, Spivak, and Bhabha at the forefront of Western critical thought might be justified by the institutionalisation of postcolonial studies, which has facilitated their inclusion in universities across the Global North. However, Grosfoguel seems to overlook that decolonial thinking is undergoing a similar integration: he himself holds a Full Professorship at the University of California, Berkeley, and another prominent figure in decolonial thought, Walter D. Mignolo, is based at Duke University.

3. Impossible Returns: Navigating the Precarities of Capitalism and its Limited Cosmopolitanism in Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.* and Helon Habila's *Travellers*

Is return always attainable? The novels *Foreign Gods, Inc.* (2014) by Okey Ndibe and *Travellers* (2019) by Helon Habila argue that return can remain elusive for individuals living in precarious conditions. Though differing in style and content, both novels explore the intersections of privilege and cosmopolitanism within the capitalist world system, ultimately depicting a disillusioned reality where specific individuals are relegated to the margins of society. This is exemplified by the multitude of refugees who cannot return, such as Mark, Manu, and Basma in *Travellers*, who are relegated to the status of non-citizens (Arendt 1943; Agamben 2008) in Fortress Europe;⁴⁹ and by Ike, the migrant protagonist of *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, who grapples with the evaporation of his American dream, yet remains unable to relinquish it and, in his attempt to keep this dream alive, destroys all bonds with his homeland. While these characters experience different types of disillusionment with the West – manifested as the United States in *Foreign Gods, Inc.* and Fortress Europe in *Travellers* – unlike the protagonists of *Americanah* and *A Bit of Difference*, except for the privileged narrator/protagonist of *Travellers*, the novels seem to imply that return is not always possible.

The impossibility of return is frequently interpreted metaphorically in postcolonial studies as the inability to ‘come back’ to a pre-colonial ‘authenticity,’ highlighting the disruption and transformation of identities and places resulting from colonial histories and migratory movements. Ian Chambers (1994), for instance, argues that “to return [...] ‘fully’, to

⁴⁹ Coming from German “Festung Europa,” the term “Fortress Europe” historically referred to the Nazi-occupied territories during WWII and the planned defensive barrier against British and American invasion. Currently, it is generally used to describe “the ensemble of policies, strategies and mechanisms deployed to keep refugees and ‘irregular’ migrants from entering Europe” (Ajana 2020, 467). Indeed, the term suggests that the European Union (EU) is becoming like a fortified stronghold aiming to restrict or even prevent the influx of migrants from outside its territory. This occurs via border fortification (such as in that of the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla) and increasing externalisation of borders (such as the recent agreement between Italy and Albania that entails the construction of holding centres for asylum seekers rescued in Italian waters).

African, Caribbean or Indian roots in pursuit of a displaced and dispersed authenticity today hardly seems feasible [...] It is impossible to ‘go home’ again” (74). Instead, individuals are “subject to ever wider and more complex webs of cultural negotiation and interaction” (Chambers 1994, 74). This perspective dialogues with Homi Bhabha’s notion of hybridity (1994), a cornerstone of postcolonial studies. Hybridity occurs in the “third space,” a complex site of negotiation, translation, and transformation, challenging the notion of fixed, pure identities and underscoring the impossibility of returning to an authentic pre-colonial state. Beyond the colonial context, the symbolic interpretation of the impossibility of return also pertains to mobility. Chambers (1994) further posits that for migrants “always in transit,” the “promise of a homecoming – completing the story, domesticating the detour – becomes an impossibility” (5). The ever-changing nature of their identities and the uncertain, mutable nature of their points of departure and arrival render the notion of returning to a pre-existing, stable home unfeasible. In other words, the person who returns is not the same as the one who had departed; both the individual and the home have changed over time.

In the two novels under analysis, the impossibility of return is not confined only to metaphorical interpretations. Instead, they both adopt almost a materialist approach, emphasising the capitalist system’s material conditions, factors, and structures that render return impossible for specific individuals. In doing so, they diverge from the exaltation of migrancy that has characterised postcolonial theory since its earliest days, revealing its more troubling aspects. However, the capitalist system’s influence extends beyond its impact on their characters. In the last part of the chapter, I will argue that it also permeates the works’ aesthetics as they both exhibit a form of anxiety about their imbrication within the literary marketplace, manifested through what Sarah Brouillette (2007) calls self-reflexivity. This anxiety is epitomised by the titles of both novels. Thus, I will first focus on how these texts portray the capitalist system’s structures and factors that render return impossible. Then, I will shift my focus to the aesthetic dimension, discussing how the influence of the capitalist system extends beyond the characters to permeate the works’ self-reflexivity.

The Novels: Context, Plots and Narrative

Travellers by Helon Habila is a novel that delves into the experiences of African migrants in an inhospitable Fortress Europe. The novel stems from what the author describes as an “external inspiration” (appendix). On 3 October 2013, a boat carrying around 500 migrants from Libya,

mostly originally from Eritrea and Somalia, sank off the coast of the Italian island of Lampedusa. More than 360 people attempting to reach Europe perished in the shipwreck, marking it as one of the deadliest among the myriad of still ongoing disasters involving migrants in the Mediterranean Sea. The tragedy had a significant impact on the media, briefly spurring a collective desire to prevent further loss of life. In response, Italy initiated a short-lived military and humanitarian operation, *Mare Nostrum*, to rescue migrants at sea.⁵⁰ In the wake of this anticipated catastrophe, the German national newspaper *Der Freitag* commissioned writer and journalist Helon Habila to pen an article about the disaster, seeking to provide an “African perspective” on the Lampedusa migrant shipwreck (Habila 2019c). As the author reports in this article, after the shipwreck, “For days [people] were fishing out the bodies [of migrants]” (Habila 2014b-Freitag article). During this time, Habila was in Berlin as a fellow of the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program, where he commenced his research by “interviewing African migrants [...] hanging out with them,” as well as engaging with members of NGOs, social workers and activists (Habila 2019d, n.p.).

The request to provide an “African perspective” places the author in what Ezekiel Mphahlele dubs “the sensitive point” of his community (1962, as cited in Lazarus, 2011). Not only does “the writer understand himself or herself as a spokesperson” (Lazarus 2011, 50), but this role is also conferred upon them. Indisputably, Helon Habila has recurrently been recognised as a spokesperson, called upon to articulate African issues, mirroring Sarah Brouillette’s observation that “those writing from or about the developing world [...] are expected to act as interpreters of locations they are connected to through personal biography” (2007, 70). Another notable instance occurred in 2007 when a British film company approached him to write a screenplay. This endeavour, initially cinematic, eventually evolved into the novel *Oil on Water* (2010), which explores the repercussions of the oil industry’s violence in the Niger Delta (Habila 2019b). Habila has recounted his initial reluctance:

I told the film company that I wasn’t really a script writer, and it’s true, I had never written a film script before, but they said it didn’t matter, and that what they really wanted was a story-line by a Nigerian author.

⁵⁰ Following the end of Operation Mare Nostrum, the European Union introduced Operation Triton in November 2014, under the management of Frontex, emphasizing border control along with limited search-and-rescue missions. Later initiatives, such as Operation Sophia and Operation Themis, broadened their mandates to include efforts against human trafficking and other security concerns while continuing humanitarian rescue activities. In the present day, NGOs are instrumental in rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean, yet they encounter numerous challenges and controversies and even face criminalization.

Again, I protested that I wasn't really from the Niger Delta, but in the end I gave them their script. (Habila 2019b, 1).

Helon Habila's reflection encapsulates his journey from reluctance to acceptance of the role as a scriptwriter. His initial self-doubt coincides with the film company's emphasis on cultural authenticity, which is superficial, glossing over significant ethnic and class disparities. Conscious of these nuances, Habila endeavoured to bridge these gaps by conducting interviews with the residents of the Delta. This investigative approach mirrors his method of writing the article for *Der Freitag*, which later evolved into *Travellers*, a comprehensive work of fiction encompassing the numerous stories he encountered.

Thus, Habila turned to fiction via factual elements. As a journalist by training, his work of fiction originates from journalistic research and interviews. This foundation significantly impacts the aesthetic of his novel: many parts of its narrative, such as the refugees' monologues and a particular letter from one of them, take on the role of direct testimonies. Referring to the amalgamation of fact and fiction in Habila's oeuvre, Cédric Courtois (2018) employs the term *faction* coined by David Lodge. As easily inferred, this portmanteau combines the words "fact" and "fiction" and describes a narrative that blends factual events with fictional storytelling. The objective of *faction* is to convey the truth of events – in this case, the experiences of migrants – while utilising the narrative techniques of fiction. The result is a novel that highlights the injustices and social inequalities faced by refugees and simultaneously enhances the emotional and psychological depth of the story. As Szeman (2016), quoted by Courtois (2018), emphasises the need to use fictional narratives to inspire actionable responses to climate change, the same approach can be applied to the refugee crisis. Fiction can humanise statistics, which aligns with Habila's intent as expressed in his own words: "All I wanted to do was to do justice to the people who entrusted me with their stories and to go beyond the statistics and the headlines and in the process to humanize them as much as possible" (Habila 2019e, n.p.). His words encapsulate his concern about ethical storytelling and reflect an effort to foster empathy through literature.

The fictional novel Travellers is composed of six "books," each initially presenting seemingly unrelated stories of refugees connected only through their encounters with an anonymous (partial) narrator and protagonist, whom Simon Gikandi (2010) would readily describe as a cosmopolitan. As the narrative unfolds, the initial loose connections become more intertwined, revealing interrelations. Given the overlap of certain biographical similarities, it is

tempting to interpret the protagonist as an *alter-ego* of the author. The use of first-person narration enhances this impulse. Both author and protagonist are Nigerian men residing in the United States, embedded within the world of letters (the protagonist is a history PhD candidate whose research focuses on the 1884 Berlin Conference but remains incomplete), and spend a brief period in Berlin because of a fellowship. However, while the author received a DAAD fellowship in real life, in the diegetic world, the protagonist's arrival in the German capital is prompted by Gina, his wife, a painter who is the recipient of the Zimmer fellowship. In Berlin, the narrator encounters several "travellers," as the title suggests, many of whom are connected to the status of refugees. However, Berlin is not the only place the narrator visits. The novel is characterised by significant mobility across different geographies: the protagonist's encounter with Portia, the daughter of a well-known Zambian intellectual, leads him to Basel, where she reconstructs her deceased brother's life. Subsequently, a minor mistake in taking the wrong train leads him to a refugee camp in Southern Italy, after which he briefly returns to Nigeria and then proceeds to the United States to complete his PhD. A short stay in London leads to a reunion with Portia, with whom he ultimately decides to "return" to Africa – not to Nigeria but to Zambia. Throughout his journey, the narrator meets numerous other "travellers," whose stories are woven into the narrative.

The narrative of *Travellers* oscillates between the main first-person narration of the unnamed protagonist and third-person narration, focalised through the perspectives of various characters such as Manu or the protagonist himself. Adding complexity to this structure are the interspersed stories of other migrants that interrupt the rhythm of the primary narrative yet are embedded within it: some of these stories are recounted directly as testimonies, such as the monologue of the Somalian Karim or Juma's story through a letter, while others are conveyed indirectly through the accounts of secondary characters, such as Katharina narrating the story of David/Mousa or Matteo relating the tale of Basma/Sophia. By weaving together different narratives and points of view, these stories act as pieces of a puzzle, creating a multifaceted image of refugee life and highlighting the diversity within the refugee community.

Shifting focus to *Foreign Gods, Inc.* by Okey Ndibe, the novel follows the vicissitudes of Ikechukwu Uzundu – "Ike for short" (*FGI* 1). Differently from the privileged protagonists that tend to populate the contemporary Nigerian narrative of return, Ike ironically defines himself as "a plebeian, a cipher, and a certified member of the lumpen proletariat" (*FGI* 28). He is a Nigerian migrant living in the USA who has been working as a taxi driver for thirteen

years, although he holds a *cum laude* degree in Economics from Amherst College (*FGI* 14). In the apparently inclusive United States, his Nigerian accent jeopardises his career prospects, denying him the possibility of working in his field of study. At the novel's outset, his life is in shambles due to his gambling addiction and recent divorce, which have exacerbated his already precarious economic situation. Weary and exasperated by his financial struggles, he comes across an art gallery called Foreign Gods, Inc., which specialises in buying and selling sacred objects and reproductions of gods from around the world. This discovery leads him to consider a desperate solution: returning to Nigeria to steal the statue of Ngene, the war god of his home village, and selling it to Mark Gruels, the gallery's owner. However, complicating matters is Ike's special bond with the deity, as he was chosen by it to be its next priest. Ngene's predilection for Ike is evidenced by the fact that he faints whenever "the sky open[s] and [weeps] its waters" (*FGI* 196). Ultimately, his decision to steal the effigy does not lead to the expected results; instead, it causes him to sever all ties with his family.

The novel opens in *medias res*, with Ike having already determined to carry out the heist. As the narrative progresses, it gradually builds a comprehensive understanding of his motivations and the broader context. The novel displays a complex narrative structure that interweaves the present-day main story with flashbacks of Ike's past and a parallel narrative set in the distant colonial era. The parallel colonial narrative is graphically differentiated from the main present one by the use of italics. Echoing elements of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), it recounts Reverend Stanton's violent arrival in Utonki, his efforts to introduce Christianity and initiate colonisation, and his conflict with Ngene. Besides Stanton's story and the flashbacks to Ike's past, the main narrative is characterised by linearity; it revolves around a straightforward plot: Ike's decision to execute the heist, his journey back to Nigeria, the theft of the statue, and his return to the United States. As the two narrative threads converge toward their conclusions, the realism characterising them gives way to increasing elements of what Michael Löwy (2007) dubs "critical irrealism" centred around Ngene.

Atypical Narratives of (Impossible) Returns

As rightly noted by Eleni Coundouriotis, *Travellers* "does not fit the typical returnee narrative" (2022, 193). Indeed, against the backdrop of refugees who avoid return at any cost – sometimes even choosing death instead – the unnamed protagonist is the only one who voluntarily decides to return. His return, however, is a failed one. While the narrative does not dwell on its

temporality since it remains largely the object of narrative elision, a succinct flashback reveals that his family is ashamed of “a son who had gone to America [and] had returned poorer and thinner than he had left” (T 247). Thus, as soon as he recovers his health, “[his] father clear[s] his bank account” and gives him the money to go back to the US to spare the family the shame of his failure (T 247). Following this physical return, which lacks any reconnection in the sense conveyed by Knudsen and Rahbek (2017), another final return is anticipated, whereas its actual realisation is situated beyond the confines of the narrative. This time, not to Nigeria but to Zambia, Portia’s home country. In this decision, Coundouriotis reads, “a decolonial gesture: opening the future by turning a back to Europe” (2022, 194). While this might be true for the protagonist, it is essential to juxtapose his return to the continent with the numerous impossible ones of the refugees inhabiting the diegetic world. Such a juxtaposition emphasises how the agency of specific individuals is constrained by the structures of the world system, revealing a harsh critique of the current configuration of the world.

On its part, *Foreign Gods, Inc.* exemplifies contemporary narratives of return by exploring themes such as cultural alienation, identity conflict, economic hardship, and racism. The novel’s temporality spans the protagonist Ike’s time abroad and his return to Nigeria, depicting his dislocation and struggle to reconcile his Nigerian heritage with his American life. The financial pressures Ike faces, exacerbated by systemic racism, compel him to steal a deity’s statue, highlighting the moral compromises driven by desperation. This return journey becomes a profound exploration of self and community, addressing familial tensions, the clash between traditional beliefs and modernity, and the commodification of cultural artefacts. However, a distinctive element makes the novel stand out among the vast corpus of narratives of return. While this topos is typically grounded in realism, Ndibe situates his novel within what Michael Löwy describes as the “broad territory, between reality and irreality” (2007). Indeed, it could be characterised as an example of what the French-Brazilian philosopher dubs “critical irrealism,” a genre that combines realism and irrealism to critique the reality of capitalism. As the author argued in an interview, his ambition in the novel was to explore “the impulse for conspicuous consumption [...] at the most absurd level – with humans desiring to acquire, to collect gods and sacred objects” (Cumpsty 2021, 29). Ultimately, the novel’s blending of realism with elements of the fantastic deepens its critique of contemporary socio-economic conditions and the commodification of culture.

Like *Travellers*, Ndibe delves into the impossibility of the return. The unwelcoming reception Ike receives upon his arrival in Nigeria after ten years abroad foreshadows his failure to return. Upon his arrival at the Lagos airport, Ike encounters a hostile environment where the airport officers, acting as the country's representatives, demand bribes. His refusal to engage in what is described as the "Nigerian customs' ritual" results in a thorough inspection of his luggage, causing a delay (*FGI* 76). Identified as a returnee, Ike becomes a symbol of broader societal tensions: the interaction reveals not only the personal animosity towards Ike but also suggests a generalised perception of returnees. Those returning from abroad seem to be often viewed as assuming an air of superiority. This stigma is evident in the derogatory remarks directed at Ike. One officer derisively calls him a "common rat" and accuses him of attempting to educate them about their jobs: "He thinks coming from America gives him the right to teach me my job" and "He thinks he can blow grammar" (*FGI* 76). Another remark, "He washes plates for a white woman in America and thinks he can come here and make mouth" (*FGI* 77), further diminishes Ike's status, implying that his employment in the U.S. is menial, despite any pretensions of grandeur officers read in Ike's behaviour. Their linguistic choices accentuate the divide that prevents them from speaking a metaphorical common language: Ike communicates in standard English, while the officers use Nigerian Pidgin, highlighting their profound social and linguistic separation.

The pervasive corruption in Nigeria, manifested by such an episode, makes Ike wonder: "Had Nigeria changed so much since he was last here, or had he grown in innocence in the years he'd lived in America?" (79). The inquiry captures the dilemma of many returnees in narratives of return. Like Ifemelu in *Americanah*, he wonders whether the changes he perceives upon returning to his home country are due to actual changes in Nigeria or to alterations in his perspectives. The question suggests the struggle to reconcile his memories of the country with his current reality, or at least what he is experiencing. The encounter with an environment that has dramatically changed after the eleven years he spent in the US is ostensibly visible in the description of the objects that Ike finds in his family's home in Utonki – From Lagos, he boards a subsequent flight to Enugu, ultimately reaching the village.⁵¹ Inside the house, "he felt the sensation of being in a place that was at once familiar and strange" (*FGI* 92). The paradoxical juxtaposition of familiarity and strangeness underscores the disorienting nature of his return.

⁵¹ In his portrayal of this rural setting, Ndibe echoes return narratives characteristic of the first generation of Nigerian literature. For instance, in *Things Fall Apart*, the *been-to* protagonist's repatriation to Nigeria involves a dual journey – initially to the former capital and subsequently to a rural locale.

The furnishings and objects, unchanged from his youth, now bear the marks of time: “the sofas were now discolored, dirty and torn in places” (*FGI* 88), the mirror, “the object of [his] childhood fascination was now a blemished relic, broken” (FG 89), the pictures “had accumulated so much dust and many cobwebs” (FG88). This stark transformation not only highlights the passage of time and its effect on the physical environment but also suggests significant implications for Ike’s emotional state, symbolising the unwelcoming nature of his return.

Indeed, even within the rural community, he is not welcomed under traditional customs. If Chris Abani’s *Graceland* (2004) illustrates the degradation of many traditional Igbo rituals, having “been streamlined for the convenience of modern life” (Etter-Lewis 2010, 169), Ndibe portrays a scenario where some customs have vanished entirely. The third-person narration reveals the traditional ritualistic greeting for a visitor returning after a long absence: “The people of Utonki often ululated on sighting a long-gone visitor” (*FGI* 88), typically followed by a rhetorical inquiry into his identity and a communal song. While upon his return for his father’s funeral a decade prior, this ritual was observed meticulously, now, he encounters “only a scrawny dog stretched out in the dust” (*FGI* 88). Despite this, Ike is not overly saddened, as he is “too tired to face crowds” (*FGI* 88). Once he arrives at his mother’s home, Ike finds that she is absent, further exacerbating the sense of an unwelcoming return. Instead, he is enveloped by “a tangle of smells,” among which is “a faint, elusive odor, hard for the nose to grasp” (90). Given subsequent events, though readers may not understand this at this point of the narrative, the scent can be interpreted as the presence of Ngene. Upon his mother’s return, the situation further deteriorates as he faces her reproaches for his neglect and failure to provide financial support while abroad. The phrase “a patch of darkness stood between them” (*FGI* 127) effectively symbolises their deep emotional and psychological divide. Additionally, the protagonist learns of his family’s disintegration: his mother, now a follower of a questionable pastor, is convinced that her late husband’s brother and mother were complicit in his death.

The pages detailing Ike’s return to his home village are filled with references to darkness. This abundance culminates in the final section of Chapter Ten (*FGI* 136–137), which recounts his walk from his mother’s house to his grandmother’s. In a mere 291 words, the adjective “dark” is used twice and the noun “darkness” four times. Such a repetition appears to support the colonial stereotype of Africa as a mysterious and dangerous “dark continent,” or at the very least, to adapt to it, as we will see. In Chapter Two, I referred to how the motif of darkness,

which was engrained in colonial imagination, was used to represent ignorance, savagery, and the unknown in colonial literature. This functioned as a counterpoint to the West's supposed enlightenment and, in the end, justified the colonial enterprise. As Binyavanga Wainaina (2005) pointed out, this motif has not remained confined to the past but persists in contemporary literary works.

In this specific passage of *Foreign Gods, Inc.* (FGI 137-137), the motif is evident from the opening sentence: "Darkness dominated a starless sky" (FGI 136). The protagonist's reaction to the darkness – feeling "wrapped by this endless dark fabric" and experiencing "a strange susceptibility" – echoes colonial narratives that depict the colonised land as inherently dangerous and filled with evil forces. The inclusion of references to nocturnal animals, along with the "faint swell of drums floating in from afar, uncertain distance", further contributes to rendering the setting mysterious and exotic. Exoticism is exacerbated by the mention of "witches, wizards, and demonic forces" taking on "flesh, real and menacing," mirroring colonial fears of the supernatural and the unknown. The protagonist's physical disorientation and fear as he moves "with an awkwardness" towards his grandmother's hut and his heart "clogged his throat" takes up the colonial trope of the coloniser or outsider feeling lost and threatened in the dark and unknown lands.

Ike is the focalizer of the third-person narrative, exerting a substantial influence on the stylistic word choices. Therefore, instead of understanding this passage as the author's adoption of colonial discourse or vestiges, it might be read as a reflection of the protagonist's distorted perception. This thesis is supported by the author, who says that "there is a metaphorical darkness that [Ike] sees. But [...] the darkness is in his heart" (appendix). Following this train of thought, the recurring motif of darkness can suggest that Ike feels alienated from his culture and has internalised colonial viewpoints. His prolonged residency in the United States has distanced him from his cultural roots, and the once-familiar environment of his homeland is now foreign to him. Therefore, as the plethora of words indicating obscurity suggests, his homecoming seems to him like a voyage to a realm that is viewed as enveloped in darkness. His mindset, shaped by years of living abroad, interprets the surrounding landscape through a lens of fear, further alienating him from the cultural context he once knew. Yet, subtle, fleeting images of return are interspersed within the text. For instance, at the conclusion of this passage, his fear dissipates upon hearing his grandmother's voice. For a brief moment, he briefly regains a sense of ownership over the night, free from fear: "His fear uncoiled and seeped away. He

hastened toward his grandmother's voice. He swung his arms with abandon and strode fearlessly, as if he owned the night" (*FGI* 137). It is within human connections that the essence of return resides, yet in his quest to steal the deity, Ike overlooks these bonds.

From this brief analysis of the two novels, it becomes evident that, despite employing very different techniques and styles, both works utilise the topos of return to offer a scathing critique of contemporary society. In particular, they both challenge the notion that mobility necessarily leads to cosmopolitanism, instead highlighting its blind spots and entanglement with capitalism. By doing so, they contest the celebratory vision of mobility, exposing the persistent inequalities and systemic failures inherent in these experiences.

Migrancy as a Fostering Force of Cosmopolitanism?

The celebration of migrancy has characterised postcolonial theory since its earliest days and reached its pinnacle with its institutionalisation in the 1980s. Fuelled by a robust anti-nationalist spirit and by the desire not only to question the West but also to oust it from its *locus* at the centre of the world, the most emblematic postcolonial critics such as Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, and Homi Bhabha deployed "a form of root-less/route-oriented [...] belonging" and hybridity (Farrier 2011, 2), with migrants and diaspora tending to be equated, as Benita Parry (2009) argues, with a new sort of cosmopolitanism. In particular, Homi Bhabha (1994) has highlighted the importance of the margin as a site for resistance. In such a context, the migrant tends to be used as an epitome of our age: Salman Rushdie defines the migrant as "the archetypal figure" (2002, 415), and Edward Said alludes to the "age of the refugee" (2000, 174). Even though the latter urges against an aestheticisation of exile since it might cause the banalisation of "its mutilations" and "the losses it inflicts on those who suffer them" (Said 2000, 138), his approach still mirrors what David Farrier defines as "the dominant postcolonial emphasis on the creative potential of migrancy to unsettle fixed notions of boundaries and belonging" (2011, 2). He dubs this proclivity of postcolonial studies "to thematise the liberatory aspects of displacement" as a textualist approach, which he juxtaposes to a materialist perspective embodied in works by Andrew Smith, Aijaz Ahmad and Neil Lazarus, favouring an engagement with the genuine experiences of displaced individuals (Farrier 2011, 3). The latter counterposes a vision of the interstices as the "'smooth space' of productivity and difference" typical of the 1990s to one of "detention and exclusion through inclusion" (Farrier 2011, 7). However, despite the work of materialists, the exaltation of migrancy is still, according to Lazarus (2011), one of the pillars

of what he calls the “selective tradition” of postcolonial scholars.⁵² In contrast, postcolonial literature is steeped in works problematising the impact of migration on individuals, engendering a discrepancy between postcolonial literature and theory *vis-à-vis* the nation, which can also be displayed in the discourse on migration.

The most recent debate on Afropolitanism seems to have displayed the same bias. The Afropolitans, as conceived by Taiye Selasi (2005) – are “the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you”, unique for their “funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes” (Selasi 2005, n.p.) – and portray only a tiny fraction of African emigrants. Achille Mbembe, on its part, philosophically redirects the concept of Afropolitanism (2006), adding philosophical and ethical depth. He discusses how global influences have always shaped African identities. Yet, a considerable contradiction persists. As Dustin Crowley remarks, “Afropolitanism’s postnational ideal itself is revealed to be an effect of the nation, granted unevenly through mechanisms of legality and free movement” (2018, 126). Freedom of movement is granted by the same national structure. Cosmopolitans and Afropolitans tend to disdain or at least be suspicious of. Thus, if Anders Stefansson observed twenty years ago that “sedentariness” has been “pathologized” (2004, 185), this tendency not only persists but appears to be intensifying in our increasingly mobile world.

Furthermore, the presumed correlation between mobility and cosmopolitanism should not be accepted uncritically. Simon Gikandi (2010) notes that some migrants may choose to “recreate locality” within Western metropolises rather than adopt a liminal, hybrid, and multicultural existence. This choice may stem not only from a preference for maintaining traditional cultural identities but also from pragmatic constraints that might limit the feasibility of embracing a cosmopolitan lifestyle. These constraints can often impose significant limitations on the ability of migrants to fully integrate into the host society’s cultural and social frameworks. Also, Cosmopolitanism and Afropolitanism are not devoid of criticism, and some critiques are shared between the two concepts. Clifford (1998) expresses “mixed feelings” towards the former because of its elitism, Eurocentrism and universalist roots. These criticisms also apply to Afropolitanism, leading some to reject the label, such as Marta Tveit (2013) and Emma Dabiri (2016). Susanne Gehrmann, who describes the concept of Afropolitanism as

⁵² Drawing on Raymond Williams’s critique of modernism, Lazarus (2011) applies the concept of “selective tradition” to postcolonial studies. In doing so, he compares the two movements and states that both postcolonial studies and modernism present a “selective tradition” as universal.

“Cosmopolitanism with African roots” (2016, 61), summarises these criticisms. They primarily focus on its entanglement with neoliberal capitalistic infrastructure. In particular, the extensive criticism that Afropolitanism has attracted can be categorised into three main points: “(1) its elitism/class bias, (2) its apoliticalness, and (3) its commodification” (Gehrmann 2016, 62). The novels analysed in this chapter concentrate on the first point — *Travellers* – and the last – *Foreign Gods, Inc.*

Against a Blind Exaltation of Migrancy: Cosmopolitan Rhetoric and Capitalist Realities in *Foreign Gods, Inc*

Foreign Gods, Inc. illustrates how the cosmopolitan rhetoric espoused by the privileged elite often remains superficial and fails to address the deeply entrenched inequalities inherent in the capitalist world. This absence of intersection occurs within a wider disparity between intellectual discourses and real-life experiences in societies. In the African context, Achille Mbembe (2020) contends that traditional politico-intellectual paradigms, including anticolonial nationalism, reinterpretations of Marxism, and Pan-Africanism, have become “institutionalised and ossified” (57). Consequently, these paradigms no longer adequately analyse the ongoing social and cultural changes occurring within African societies. *This ossification process leads to a disconnect between the intellectual sources and African people’s experiences and aspirations.* Afropolitanism, as he envisions it, is a response to this gap by providing a flexible, inclusive, and globally engaged framework, which emphasises cultural intermingling and hybridity, rejects rigid and essentialist notions of African identity, encourages cultural criticism and creativity, and situates African identities within a global context (Mbembe 2020). However, *even Afropolitanism, with its emphasis on hybridity and mobility,* often mirrors the experiences of a privileged few who have access to global mobility and economic opportunities. Thus, as Dustin Crowley (2018) correctly stresses, it is of utmost importance to consider who benefits from its privileges and the conditions under which these privileges are accessible, as well as to recognise the legal and national frameworks that facilitate them.

Far from an idealised vision of Afropolitanism, Ike’s experience as a migrant in the USA is marked by profound exclusion: he’s relegated to what he perceives as the fringes of society and has scarce social contacts. As mentioned earlier, his exclusion is attributed to his accent. During a job interview, an employer criticises his language skills, stating that “if he wanted a job in the corporate world, he’d have to learn to speak English” (33). Moreover, during a taxi

ride, a client undauntedly affirms that he cannot understand him because of his accent: “It’s hard to understand your accent” (19), he says. But he does not limit himself to such an observation: he further argues that in his company, “one of our smartest attorneys is from [Nigeria]. His name escapes me, but he’s a smart, smart kid. Not a bit of an accent” (22). While the sentence might appear simply a compliment about a Nigerian attorney, it encapsulates biases and microaggressions towards the protagonist. First, it is significant that the client cannot remember the attorney’s name, which suggests a lack of genuine recognition. This is further reinforced by the patronising undertone of the repetition of the word “smart” coupled with the diminutive term “kid.” Second, the affirmation exposes his underlying cultural biases: “Not a bit of an accent” ties the attorney’s perceived intelligence to his lack of a noticeable Nigerian accent, reinforcing a common stereotype that associates intelligence with the lack of an audible non-American accent when speaking English. This demonstrates a prejudice that associates the absence of a foreign accent with professionalism and intellectual competence, thereby marginalising individuals possessing one. By highlighting instances of discrimination, the author denounces the pervasive accent discrimination in the United States. As Rosina Lippi-Green (2012) noted in her examination of language and social justice in American society, individuals with non-standard accents encounter discrimination across numerous areas of life, such as employment, education, and social interactions. In such a context, not even “a high degree of education” offers “protection from discrimination based on a foreign accent”, as it happens to Ike in the novel (2012, 251).

This stereotype seems at odds with the celebration of cultural differences observed within certain elite circles, such as academia. Ike underlines such hypocrisy in the following passage:

We’re supposed to be living in this new global setting – a village, many call it. In college, I took classes where the buzzwords were ‘synergy,’ ‘hybridity,’ ‘affinities,’ ‘multivalency,’ ‘borderlessness,’ ‘transnationality,’ whatnot. My sister lives in Onitsha, near my village, but she has Internet access. A gallery somewhere in this city buys and sells deities from Africa and other parts of the world. Many American companies are selling stuff to people in my village. They’re certainly selling stuff to me, to lots of people who speak the way I do. But I apply for a job and I’m excluded because of ‘my accent,’ quote, unquote. It’s worse than telling me outright I’m a foreigner; I don’t belong. Then academics rush in to theorize me into an exile. That’s why I refuse to wear that tag. (55)

Ike’s words vividly convey his frustration and disillusionment, highlighting the gap between lofty academic discourse and the harsh realities of discrimination and marginalisation. The

academic buzzwords he mentions ironically contrast with his personal experience of exclusion due to his accent. These terms, emphasised by single quotation marks, are stripped of their meanings – signifiers whose signified concepts have been lost, proliferating as mere academic jargon. They are listed extensively, culminating in the slightly derogatory term “whatnot,” signalling the concepts’s futility. By juxtaposing academic discourses with the protagonist’s lived reality, the passage challenges the optimistic narrative often associated with globalisation and mobility, exposing the persistent undercurrents of exclusion and discrimination that migrants endure despite technological and economic advancements. The commercial exploitation of cultural elements while disregarding the people from those cultures further exemplifies this hypocrisy. Beyond the protective bubble of scholarly environments, Ike’s experiences underscore the limited real-world relevance of cosmopolitan ideals. Thus, his narrative reflects a societal hypocrisy where capitalist interconnections in the marketplace coexist with the systematic exclusion of certain demographic segments, portraying an American society rife with inherent contradictions.

A superficial appreciation for diversity does not amount to genuine acceptance of it, the novel seems to imply. This is evident in the commodification of foreign deities by Mark Gruels, the titular gallery. In her work *Programme de désordre absolu* (2023), Françoise Vergès explores the intricate entanglement of museum institutions with coloniality and asserts that while these institutions present themselves as custodians of humanity’s heritage, they often perpetuate colonial narratives and power structures and that the extractivism of artworks is deeply intertwined with industrial extractivism (10). More than twenty years ago, Graham Huggan highlighted the role of “European museum collections” in preserving “the exotic myth of an unchanging, uncontaminated Africa” (2001, 45). In *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, the selling of deities by the corporation is the embodiment of capitalism: “a new diversion for the wealthiest of the wealthy,” as described in an article in the *New York magazine* – an article that leads Ike to discover the gallery in the first place and that he re-reads obsessively (69). In other words, the gallery’s existence is a mere economic response to market demand, catering to “the growing exotic taste for primitive deities and sacred objects” (69). The trade of religious artefacts reflects the commodification of cultural differences, where sacred objects become essentialised symbols of their countries of origin, not limited to the African continent but to cultures considered primitive. These objects are commodified for consumption by buyers seeking a taste of the exotic without questioning the system in which they live. Therefore, from their position

of privilege, the buyers' "willingness to engage with the other," an exchange that embodies cosmopolitanism, according to Hannerz (1990, 239), is compromised: their engagement is only superficial and materialistic for the circulation of the go(o)ds allowing for such exchanges mirrors the mere dynamic of the Laws of Capital.

This exchange is bolstered by a distinctive cosmopolitan rhetoric "that celebrates the circulation of cultural objects" (Hallemeier 2019, 143). The gallery owner argues that the circulation and consequent commodification of foreign deities are necessary because "in a postmodern world, even gods and sacred objects must travel or lose their vitality; any deity that would remain stuck in its place and original purpose would soon become moribund" (64). By being removed from their original context and inserted into the commodity market, these deities become part of the logic of capital and, consequently, are kept "alive" (64) and part of modernity. Such a discourse perpetuates a troubling dichotomy between locality and mobility, past and present. Indeed, Mark Gruels links locality with the past, suggesting that the static artefacts are remnants of history rather than active participants in the present.

In contrast, the present and future are associated with mobility, progress, and modernity, embodied by the movement and transaction of these artefacts in global markets. This evokes a sedimented discourse that often denies African cultures a dynamic role in contemporary global discourse. Such a discourse has been an object of criticism by V.Y. Mudimbe in *The Invention of Africa* (1988) and, more recently, by Binyavanga Wainaina in his satirical essay "How to Write About Africa" (2005). The former explores how colonial discourse constructs Africa as a place stuck in the past, reinforcing stereotypes of primitivism and backwardness, whereas the latter mocks the Western tendency to depict Africa as a monolithic entity defined by being trapped in the past, as epitomised by terms such as 'Timeless' and 'Primordial' (Wainaina 2005, n.p). In the novel, this discourse extends beyond Africa to encompass other non-Western cultures, including those in South America and Asia. These cultures are viewed as frozen in time, outside *modernity*, and denied a dynamic role in the contemporary world. Thus, Mark Gruels's discourse and the gallery's practices collectively reinforce a narrative in which Africa and other so-called "primitive" cultures are anchored in the past; at the same time, the forces of globalisation and capitalism propel the present and future.

When Ike visits the shrine where Ngene's body is respected and revered,⁵³ the narrative dismantles the dichotomy proposed by the gallery's owner. Far from being anchored in the past,

⁵³ "The spirit of Ngene is in the river, but its body is here, in this statue" (FGI 2014, 200).

the shrine exists within the same contemporaneity as Gruel. Indeed, as the narrative illustrates, it is part of the singular, uneven, and combined modernity discussed in Chapter Two (WReC 2015): The silence of the shrine during rituals is disrupted by the buzzing of a generator (*FGI* 258), and Ngene's priest uses a mobile phone. The third-person limited narrative voice, with Ike as an internal focaliser, depicts the shrine as thriving, describing it as "freshly polished" with walls that "glowed" (*FGI* 173). The presence of globally recognised cars, such as a Mercedes-Benz and a Toyota, parked in its vicinity contrasts sharply with traditional expectations for a religious site. Indeed, evoking Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, Ndibe's narrative of return depicts a Nigeria where spheres of tradition and modernity overlap: at the shrine, a place that evokes tradition, modern luxury cars are set against the backdrop of customary Igbo *uli* drawings. The presence of a driver and a police officer sleeping in the vehicles underscores the high social status of visitors. When considered collectively, these elements refute Ike's earlier assertion that Ngene is a "retired god, a slumberous deity, in limbo" (*FGI* 169). The juxtaposition between the vibrant description of the shrine and Ike's ongoing ruminations and justifications underscores the unreliability of his perspective. Contrary to Ike's desire to believe that through his heist, he "would become the instrument to refuel Ngene" (*FGI* 169), the deity appears very much alive and not in need of being refuelled.

The narrative perspective, in this instance, underscores a discrepancy between the diegetic reality and Ike's point of view. Nevertheless, the overall use of focalisation significantly contributes to aligning readers with Ike's perspective. The story in the moment of NOW is told from a third-person limited perspective, with Ike as a focaliser. This approach allows for an in-depth portrayal of his thoughts and feelings, fostering empathy from readers despite his flaws. Indeed, he is a character with gambling and alcohol problems who often justifies his behaviour and shirks responsibility. Also, he frequently blames others, especially his wife, for his life's shortcomings. In his negativity, he resembles Okonkwo, the protagonist of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. However, as in Achebe's *opus magnum*, the narrative's access to the protagonist's inner thoughts and struggles presents a nuanced portrayal of a multifaceted personality. Readers gain insight into his challenges in the migratory context and the tragic dimensions of his actions. Having Ike as the focaliser means that he assumes the role of filtering the fictional reality of the work.

This filtered perspective is why there is a parallelism in how Ike's entrance to the shrine and his entrance to the gallery at the novel's beginning are described. Both scenes are rich in sensory details, vividly describing the atmospheres of the two places.

Ike pulled at the gallery door – surprisingly light. A wide sprawling space unfurled itself: gray marble floors, turquoise walls and glass-paneled showcases. A multitude of soft, recessed lights accentuated the gallery's dim, spectacle atmosphere. In the middle of the room, slightly to the left of the door, a spiral staircase with two grille-work bannisters rose to an upper floor. Ike knew from the *New York* magazine piece that people went upstairs only by invitation. And that those invitations went only to a small circle of long-term collectors or their designated dealers.

There was an otherworldly chill in the air. There was also a smell about the place, unsettling and hard to name. (*FGI 2*)

Ike crouched and entered the low open eaves that served as the shrine entrance. The transition from the glare of sunlight to the shadowy dimness of the shrine left him unseeing. A twinkle of mote swarmed before his eyes, tinted gray. There were several men in the shrine – their voices and silences touched him – but he was too blind to tell them apart. (*FGI 173*)

Just as Ike's eyes rest on the two cars outside the religious site, before entering the gallery, he notices "a gleaming black BMW" (*FGI 2*). This parallelism extends to the use of light and dimness in the descriptions of both places: the shrine features a stark transition from sunlight to shadow, while the controlled lighting in the gallery enhances its dimly lit ambience. The exact words, though in different grammatical forms – "dim" as an adjective and "dimness" as a noun – emphasise this parallelism. The sunlight left behind when Ike enters the shrine is mirrored by the artificial lights in the gallery. An antanaclasis is present in the gallery description, where "light" first refers to weight and then to sources of illumination, enhancing the emphasis. The transition into these dimly lit spaces heightens the sense of entering a significant place of sacredness or reverence. The gallery, thus, is presented as a modern-day temple, akin to yet profoundly different from Utonki's shrine. Moreover, both places share the presence of a "smell," which, as the narrative progresses, becomes a symbol of deities' resistance to commodification. This smell, increasingly produced by Ngene as a defence mechanism – only subtly when Ike returns to his mother's home, becoming a "stink" during the heist, and an unbearable odour by the novel's end – remains a persistent presence in the gallery, suggesting that the deities continue to produce it even when confined in "glass cases" (*FGI 2*). This linguistic parallelism supports Thobekile Masombuka (2024), who, drawing on theories

from Rebekah Cumpsty, Liz Bucar, and Michael Löwy, frames Western capitalism as a type of religion, which the protagonist Ike aspires to be part of, despite its exclusionary nature.

In the gallery, Ike experiences exclusion. Even before any social interactions, the presence of “a spiral staircase” points to the upstairs area he has no access to, a place only dedicated to “small circles of long-term collectors” (2). Physical barriers limit his potential access to the physical place: a sign in capital letters, “PLEASE DO NOT ASCEND UNLESS ESCORTED (3), as well as “an electric key code” (3). These physical barriers can be read as symbolising socio-economic divisions and exclusionary practices that separate those who belong to the upper echelons of wealth and privilege from those who do not. However, the materiality of physical spaces is often politically charged, as frequently underlined by geography scholars. For instance, Sarah Schindler (2014) explores how urban design features regulate and limit access for certain groups, primarily poor people and people of colour. “Architecture,” she says “can be, and is, used to exclude” (Schindler 2014, n.p). In the novel, access to the upstairs level is contingent upon economic capital and social status – a capital Ike does not have. As a symbol of his exclusion, Ike’s accent reemerges when the woman who welcomes him recalls their previous call, noting, “I recognize that accent” (6). Such a remark provokes vexation in Ike: he “stiffed at the word ‘accent,’ and his eyes blazed” (6). The seemingly casual comment is perceived as hurtful because the accent is a marker of his foreignness and is interpreted by him as the reason behind his marginalised status in society. Thus, the physical exclusion from the upstairs section is reinforced by an invisible social and cultural prejudice barrier which impedes his access to this place of privilege, which is linguistically and metaphorically constructed through deliberate word choices and imagery as heaven. Indeed, the gallery is metaphorically constructed as heaven through its physical layout and the symbolism associated with it. The spiral staircase evokes the metaphor of the ascension, the title of the last section of the goods catalogue, “Heavenly Inventory” (3), directly invokes religious and divine imagery, and the need for an escort to reach the upstairs level might evoke the guide to reach the divine present in many religions.

Furthermore, Ike’s brief conversation with Mark Gruels is relegated to a minor part of the owner’s hectic schedule, squeezed between a meeting with a buyer and another engagement. In stark contrast, at the shrine, Ike becomes the focal point, with his presence being genuinely valued. Upon his arrival, he is warmly welcomed by his uncle Osuakwu, the Priest of Ngene. Unlike his previous encounter with his mother, the shrine offers Ike the opportunity to

experience a profound moment of return. Osuakwu's affectionate greeting, "My son, my son" (174), accompanied by his heartfelt proverb-laden speech that blends earthy humour into his welcome, contrasts the business-like directness of the gallery's owner. To mark Ike's significant return, a kola nut is ceremonially broken. This essential Igbo ritual, known in Igbo as Iwa Oji, symbolises an invitation to the gods, ancestors, and chi (personal spirits) to engage with and influence human affairs (Azinwa, 2004). In this context, the breaking of the kola nut symbolises Ike's physical and spiritual return, reconnecting him with his roots and reintegrating him into the shrine community. This is markedly different from how he is perceived as an outsider status at his mother's Pentecostal church, a status highlighted by remarks such as, "I bet he now speaks through the nose, like *oyibo* people. He even looks *oyibo*" (FGI 143, emphasis in the original) and "He's as handsome as a white man" (FGI 145). At the shrine, his uncle emphasises Ike's belonging to the community, countering the notion that living in a different cultural environment could have changed him. As an expression of this concept, Osuakwu asserts, "That a man lives among white people doesn't mean he's become a white man" (183), implying that Ike's time in the USA has not altered his identity as an Igbo man nor erased his cultural roots or connections to his community. The declared freedom of movement within the shrine further symbolises Ike's reintegration into the community. His uncle reassures him, "You can walk in and out of here at will, and there won't be anybody in the world to throw a suspicious eye in your direction" (FGI 190). This hyperbolic expression – "anybody in the world" – conveys a profound sense of security and acceptance for Ike within the community.

Ike's name bears significant symbolic weight: "Ikechukwu" translates from Igbo as "the power of God," while "Uzondu" means "Life's path." This meaning suggests an alternative trajectory for Ike, one in which he can return home to succeed to his uncle as the Priest of Ngene after a period of apprenticeship. As has been said, Ike faints every time a storm occurs. While unconscious during these episodes, a "smile" appears on his face, "absolute calm" invades his body, and he sees "indescribably beautiful things"; all signs that – as his grandmother told him – "Ngene has favored [him]" as it did with his uncle years ago (FGI 16-17). During the brief period that Ike returns to Utonki, his uncle, a custodian of Igbo spiritual traditions, endeavours to impart his profound knowledge to the protagonist through an intricate tapestry of oral stories, rituals, and proverbs. This attempt at generational transmission, or "diachronic inheritance," as Durrant (2020) terms it in a different context, is hindered, as in Chris Abani's *Song for Night*. In Abani's work, the protagonist's amnesia concerning the forgotten song and its subsequent

reinvention symbolises a unique mode of reconnecting with Igbo spiritual cosmology in a necropolitical world that severs ties with knowledge repositories. Unlike *My Luck*, the protagonist in *Song For Night*, Ike has immediate access to this ancestral wisdom but shows a lack of interest in it. This disinterest is partly attributed to the time he spent abroad, which has distanced him from such knowledge – but only partly.

The feelings of “fear” and “shame” that the protagonist experiences (*FGI* 17) when he faints by the will of Ngene are not solely a result of his time abroad. Even in the rural Nigeria of his childhood, his reaction to storms was met with social disapproval, as revealed through a flashback. During a storm at school, when Ike collapses, his French teacher, misinterpreting the situation and believing he is feigning illness, violently beats him with a cane. Subsequently, Ike is sent home from school to seek medical treatment for his condition, marking him as different. This incident underscores that the Nigeria of Ike’s early years is already profoundly disconnected from traditional pre-colonial knowledge. Consequently, the shame Ike feels can be seen as an internalisation of colonial values, leading not only to the devaluation but also the erasure of indigenous beliefs and practices. His condition, misunderstood and stigmatised, becomes a source of personal shame, reflecting the broader societal shift towards colonial ideologies. As Annalisa Pes (2019) elucidates, shame is a pervasive element in colonial contexts, where power dynamics are structured by a binary and hierarchical distinction between the superior colonisers and the inferior colonised. This binary framework perpetuates feelings of inferiority and inadequacy among the colonised, as their cultural practices and identities are consistently undermined. In other words, colonialism operates as a shaming ideology (Johnson 2013 in Pes 2019), systematically instilling a sense of unworthiness and self-rejection in the colonised populations. Thus, with the infiltration of colonial beliefs, traditional Igbo spirituality induces feelings of shame in Ike. Therefore, his migration merely exacerbates a process of cultural alienation that had already begun in his childhood.

Ike’s cultural alienation and distancing from Igbo spirituality are ostensibly reflected in his fixation with the written word. Through this fixation, he ends up embracing Gruels’s thoughts. The gallery owner’s statement, “I don’t buy stories, I buy things” (8), followed by “Not just stories your uncle told you, something. We have a process of authentication, and it’s fairly rigorous. The gallery’s policy is to insist on things that are written down” (10), suggests a clear distinction between oral narratives and written records. The gallery’s insistence on written authentication implies that only tangible, documented items hold value within their

system. This implies that the oral stories told by the protagonist's uncle are considered insignificant or valueless in the context of the gallery's rigorous authentication process. Even if the protagonist criticises academic discourses, ironically, he fails to recognise that this preference for writing parallels what he learned in university. In *Underdevelopment and African Literature* (2021), Sarah Brouillette addresses the tension between literacy and orality within the context of African literature and its development. She contends that the separation between these two categories is misguided and asserts that "the fetish for literacy and printed objects is itself a symptom of a developmental ethos that promotes nation building, economic development, and integration into productive employment" (Brouillette 2020, 4). Thus, the high regard for literacy and printed materials seems not just a cultural preference but is tied to a broader ideology. Brouillette, therefore, is critiquing the way that literacy and printed texts are valued as tools for achieving these developmental goals, often at the expense of other forms of knowledge and cultural expression, such as orality. Ike falls into this trap and adopts this binarism between orality and written records, where the latter is privileged, and the former is devalued. This highlights a significant tension in his character: while he dismisses the abstract discussions of the academic world, he simultaneously seeks validation through the very means he critiques. Ike remains overly focused on finding written sources to validate the importance of the deity to Gruels, unable to perceive the inherent contradiction. Additionally, he obsessively and repeatedly reads the *New York Magazine* article penned by Gruels to alleviate his conscience as he is preparing his return to Nigeria to steal Ngene (*FGI* 69).

Furthermore, although the circulation of cultural differences through migratory movement primarily leads to his exclusion and isolation, as Hallemeier (2019) rightly observes, Ike remains ensnared by the "cosmopolitan myth" that capitalism can still produce equality. He aspires to a successful life in the USA, which, from his adopted perspective, equates to financial success. To achieve this goal, he is willing to sever all ties with his home community and disregard his uncle's teaching: "Go, but always return" (*FGI* 261), a teaching that underscores the importance of maintaining connections with one's roots. Disregarding it, Ike finds himself in a position where returning becomes increasingly impossible. The more he chases the capitalist dream, the further he distances himself from the possibility of reconnecting with his heritage and community. On a similar note, in his analysis of the novel, Gideon Brobbey (2022) argues that the pursuit of material wealth and modernity in contemporary Nigerian society leads to the erosion and violation of traditional African metaphysical and cultural values. However,

as has hopefully transpired from this chapter, I contend that Ndibe presents a picture of Nigeria where modernity is intertwined with Nigerian culture, yet African tenants endure. It is Ike who is blind to this reality, and by choosing to steal Ngene, he allows capitalism to supplant spirituality and religion. This supplantation is linguistically evident in the passage describing the heist, where religious language is adopted to reference the allure of money.

Preposterous as the response was, it sufficed to bolster his resolve. It was as if a force stronger than dread had come to the rescue and pried him from his fluctuating heart. The *guiding force* held up *beatific images* to his imagination. It showed him glimpses of all the pleasures to be had as a man if only he stood firm. Instantaneously, the welcoming waft of crisp dollar notes filled his nostrils. He pictures *a penitent Queen B kneeling before him*. Cadilla and the insolent horde that gathered at his store would be dazzled by his affluence, *struck with awe*. All his bills would be paid off, with lots of cash to spare. *The vision* took on a *palpable force* and that force melted his fear and sluiced away its sediments. (268, emphasis added)

The response to which the passage refers is the motivation Ike would provide if caught stealing Ngene, i.e., saving the god from Pastor Uka. The use of religious language imbues the moment of the heist with a sense of divine purpose and redemption, highlighting a sharp disparity between his underlying materialistic and capitalistic aspirations. Through language, the heist is portrayed as a near-spiritual quest: the “guiding force” alludes to spiritual intervention, offering “beatific images,” a term deeply rooted in the spiritual semantic field. These images, however, are infused with the prospect of wealth, which Ike believes will bring about his redemption and give him a new status, endowed with power over others. The accumulation of money is seen as a means to reverse power dynamics, making those who previously wronged him seek his forgiveness, akin to sinners. His ex-wife is envisioned in a common religious motif, kneeling in penitence, symbolising repentance and the seeking of forgiveness. Differently, Cadilla and the others are depicted as experiencing awe, comparable to believers witnessing a miracle. Additionally, the term “vision,” which carries strong religious connotations, further underscores the religious undertones of the passage. These linguistic choices reflect how the protagonist frames his material desires within a religious or spiritual quest.

Nevertheless, the heist does not produce the expected results: trends change rapidly in the fast-paced world of capital. By the time Ike returns to the USA, African gods are no longer in vogue; Ngene is just nothing more than “another African God” (316) and the gallery has too many of them. Even the two written accounts that testify to the deity’s authenticity fail to increase its value. The protagonist is paid far less than he imagined and is left worse off than

before his trip to Nigeria. Thus, as Mathias Nilges nicely puts it, “his complicity in extending the logic of capital [...] only further consolidates those structures that excluded him” *in primis* (2017, 192), rendering his isolation complete in both New York and Utonki. Indeed, in orchestrating the robbery, Ike borrowed a sum of money from his sole friend in the USA, but since he is unable to settle the debt, he avoids his calls.

The most tragic outcome, however, is that he also cuts all his family ties. When in Utonki, Ike is, for a brief moment, part of the community that revolves around Ngene’s shrine and plays an active role in unmasking Pastor Uka. This Christian pastor is, in reality, a conman looking for money. The depiction of Pastor Uka parallels that of the Christian missionary Mr Stanton, the protagonist of the story that fissures Ike’s narrative and takes place during colonial times. The intertwining of the two events, far apart in time, shows how the present is rooted in the past and how the current “amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms” stems from the imperialist enterprise, to use an expression by Trotsky borrowed by The Warwick Research Collective (2015). Readers are left to hope that Ike will change his mind and that the enemy of Ngene is truly Pastor Uka. Yet, in the end, all hope is dashed: it becomes clear that parallels can be drawn not only between Pastor Uka and the Christian missionary but also with Ike, as all of them, for different reasons, seek to displace Ngene. As the author puts it, “Ike becomes a homegrown version of Reverend Stanton” (appendix). In the end, Ike does indeed steal the god, leaving behind a catastrophic situation. His uncle is heartbroken, and his mother, still under the influence of the preacher, is wounded in the turmoil following the theft. For Ike, there is no coming back: the desire to embrace the ideology of Capital has turned into exclusion from both communities.

Towards the novel’s ending, the critique of the harsh realities of capitalism is intensified by the prominence of supernatural and nightmarish elements, which gradually occupy more narrative space, ultimately supplanting the realism that initially characterises the story. This shift allows the narrative to adopt a dream-like tone reminiscent of Löwy’s concept of critical irrealism, an aesthetic “founded on a logic of the imaginative, of the marvellous, of the mystery or the dream” (Löwy, 2007, 205). According to Löwy, critical irrealism facilitates an indirect yet potent commentary on social realities by constructing an imagined world that contrasts starkly with the mundane and often oppressive realities of capitalism. In a world where, as Fredric Jameson famously posits, “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism,” envisioning African metaphysics and spirituality prevailing over capitalist forces

offers not only an imaginative escape but also a sense of justice against the pervasive and negative reach of capitalism. As soon as Ike brings Ngene to his New York apartment, he enters the realm of the fantastic through his sense of smell: he persistently detects the strong odour left by Ngene – terms such as “smell,” “stink,” and “stench” permeate the final pages. Subsequently, a bizarre swarm of maggots and flies invades his home. The third-person narrative, focalised through Ike’s perspective, repeatedly emphasises the presence of the odour and the sight of the insects, which can be read as symbols of the degeneration of the protagonist’s mind as a consequence of the deity’s power. This interpretation is foreshadowed by his uncle’s warning that those who refuse the role of the deity’s priest are driven “into madness” (*FGI* 196). Even after Ike steals Ngene, as soon as Ike falls asleep, terrible dreams await him:

Once again, the flood came. This time, there was no heraldry. One moment, he was safe; he luxuriated in a bed of plumes. The next instant, he was immersed in a flood. It churned and tugged and tumbled. Underneath the rage, it was airless. Afraid of asphyxiation, he lifted his head for air. Bobbing along the surface was the statue of Ngene. It gazed at him, seemed amused. Disconcerted, he ducked under. The stream’s howl deafened him. The maddening siren belched from a vortex.

He clambered awake, his pounding heart reverberating in his ears. With his left cuff he swiped a streak of saliva that dribbled down one part of his cheek. A sticky substance smeared his cuff. From habit, he brought the cuff to his nostrils, then turned sharply from the rotten, sickening stink. [...]

His eyes remained drowsy from interrupted sleep. Yet, the moment he shut his eyes the image of Ngene appeared. Reclining against the wall at the very spot where he’d left it for several days, it looked grotesquely emaciated. There was a terrifying indeterminacy about its visage. It seemed to be weeping and laughing all at once. (*FGI* 327)

Ike’s immersion into the realm of dreams marks an abrupt transition from a state of calm, epitomised by “a bed of plumes,” to sudden chaos as he becomes “immersed in a flood.” Metaphorically, the flood could be interpreted as the overwhelming circumstances Ike faces. The narrative employs brief, staccato sentences in the opening lines to enhance the rhythm and convey the protagonist’s urgency and crisis. Verbs such as “churned,” “tugged,” and “tumbled” describe the flood in a way that personifies it, exacerbating its sense of menace. Moreover, these verbs, consistent in their grammatical structure (past tense, ending in -ed) and the repetition of the /d/ sound they engender, create consonance and two of them – “tugged” and “tumbled” – form an alliteration. This rhythmic quality not only reinforces the sense of violent motion and struggle but also immerses readers in the chaotic force of the water, thereby

enhancing the nightmarish quality of the scene. Thus, through language, the narrative conveys a sense of disorientation and menace, drawing readers into Ike's harrowing experience.

While Ngene's power manifests predominantly in the realm of sleep, morphing the protagonist's dreams into nightmares and making him unable to rest, it soon begins to impact his physical state. The pungent odour surrounding him begins to intrude into his body, making his saliva "rotten, sickening stink." Once again, the haunting presence of the deity becomes increasingly palpable. The more Ike's physical exhaustion and psychological turmoil become prominent, the more vivid and inescapable Ngene's presence becomes. He is described as "grotesquely emaciated," suggesting a deterioration due to Ike's neglect and actions. At the same time, he is simultaneously laughing and weeping. This duality of opposing emotions exacerbates Ike's unease. Ngene's laughter may signify its revenge against Ike for disrupting it from its context, demonstrating a power as formidable as during colonial times when it drove Stanton to suicide. However, he also weeps, possibly reflecting his entrapment within capitalistic circuits, or, as Guels puts it, becomes part of "a visible and powerful cultural current and force" (*FGI* 69), as will be seen in the next part of the chapter. Unable to understand the deity's ambivalence, the novel culminates with the protagonist hearing "voices" (330) outside his door and a knock. The ending remains open, leaving the identity of the visitors anonymous. They could be interpreted within the realm of realism as social services coming to assist him or as debtors demanding their dues. However, in building a transition from realism to the increasing presence of the supernatural, the narrative hints at Ike's belief that Ngene is seeking divine retribution. This ambiguity leads readers to infer that the protagonist may have lost his mind.

Against a Blind Exaltation of Migrancy: *Travellers'* Refugees, "mote[s] in the eye of Cosmopolitanism"

In *Travellers*, the exaltation of migrancy is deconstructed by the presence of numerous refugees who populate the novel's pages and struggle to integrate into Fortress Europe. The interwoven narratives likely stem from the author's writing process, beginning with interviews. Amidst this array of stories, the cosmopolitan protagonist serves as the unifying thread, encountering these refugees and listening to their accounts. This encounter highlights a significant disparity between the cosmopolitan protagonist, who enjoys a privileged life, and the precarious conditions the refugees face. Such a juxtaposition offers a scathing critique of the elitism

inherent in cosmopolitan lifestyles. Indeed, while displacement is a critical trait defining both the refugee and the cosmopolitan, their experiences diverge significantly. For the cosmopolitan, displacement represents a “form of recognition” (Gikandi 2010, 24) and serves as the access point to Appiah’s “global tribe” (2006, xiii). In contrast, it might mark refugees’ entry into Mbembe’s “death-worlds” (2003, 40). Through this juxtaposition, the novel seems to highlight that encounters do not necessarily foster cosmopolitanism, as underlying inequalities often shape these interactions.

According to Ulf Hannerz (1990), a prominent theorist of cosmopolitanism, the concept involves an openness to and active engagement with cultural diversity through encounters with different peoples and cultures, thereby enhancing one’s understanding and appreciation of global interconnectedness. However, such encounters do not occur in isolation. Simon Gikandi’s essay “Between Routes and Roots” (2010) starts his self-critical examination of his privileged position and potentially the entire postcolonial elite by such an encounter. Identifying as a cosmopolitan because he is inclined towards difference and has “an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other” (Hannerz 1990, 239), when confronted with refugees, Gikandi must admit that “[he has] nothing in common with these people” and that “[they] do not share a common critical discourse or set of cultural values” (Gikandi 2010, 23). Through this observation, the scholar seems to realise what Franz Fanon identified in *The Wretched of the Earth* as “the first duty of the native poet,” namely, “to see clearly the people he has chosen as the subject of his work of art. He cannot go forward resolutely unless he first realizes the extent of his estrangement from them” (182). This realisation of estrangement, according to Fanon, is crucial for any authentic engagement with the subjects of one’s cultural or artistic endeavours, mirroring Gikandi’s reflection on the disconnect between cosmopolitan ideals and the realities of refugees. In this estrangement, there is an apparent distancing from the celebratory conception of cosmopolitanism, adapting Bhabha’s formulation, which describes the migrant as “the mote in the eye of history, its blind spot that will not let the nationalist gaze settle centrally” (Bhabha 1994, 318). For Gikandi, the “mote in the eye of cosmopolitanism” is the refugee who impairs its idealistic vision (Gikandi 2010, 23) and reveals its limitations and contradictions; in other words, “the refugee is the Other of the Cosmopolitan” (Gikandi 2010, 26). In order to challenge what sometimes appears as superficial inclusivity of cosmopolitanism by highlighting the stark exclusions and inequalities that persist within its framework, Gikandi proposes a contrapuntal reading: “A discourse of cosmopolitanism remains incomplete unless

we read the redemptive narrative of being global in a contrapuntal relation with the narrative of statelessness and, by extension, of locality, where we least expect it, in the metropolis" (Gikandi 2010, 26). Thus, he emphasises the need to include the experiences of the marginalised and stateless in discussions of global interconnectedness in order to reveal the complexities and contradictions inherent in cosmopolitan ideals.

In *Travellers*, the encounter between Gina, a prototypical cosmopolitan figure, and refugees underlines the inequalities between the two. The context of their encounter is Gina's project of realising a polyptych entitled "Travellers", comprising a series of portraits depicting "real migrants" (*T* 2019, 4). The unbalance of power creates an asymmetry in representation. This is not only because Gina has the power to represent, while the others can only be represented, but also because she holds the power to choose who gets represented and how. Indeed, the sitters undergo a strict selection procedure – it is insufficient to be a refugee or an asylum seeker. Indeed, when Mark presents himself as a sitter, he is turned down. As the narrator observes: "Later, when I asked [Gina] why, she said he wasn't right and didn't elaborate, but I guessed he looked too young, his face was too smooth and lacking the character only time and experience brings" (*T* 4-5). In comparison, Manu, a former doctor now working as a bouncer in a nightclub, and a woman named Bernita with a four-year-old daughter seem perfect for Gina's work. As the narrator says a few lines below,

His face was lined, prematurely old, and I knew Gina would love those lines, each one of them an eloquent testimony of what he has left behind, to the borders and rivers and deserts he had crossed to get to Berlin. She would also love the woman's hands that tightly clutched her daughter's arm, they were dry and scaly, the nails chipped, no doubt ruined while working in some hotel laundry room, or as a scullery maid. (*T* 5)

The two passages juxtapose three characters – one rejected for his youthful appearance, and the other two accepted for their weathered, experienced looks – highlighting the subjective nature of Gina's selection criteria. This comparison implies that Gina's models must embody a prototype of migrants that aligns with stereotypical images of hardship and experience. She prioritises visible signs of struggle, making a physical appearance a symbol of life's adversities. Consequently, Mark is rejected for being "too young" and having "too smooth" a face, illustrating the superficiality of such evaluations. Indeed, the novel further reveals the complexity behind Mark's story, which, although different and less visibly marked by hardship than Manu's, is equally profound: Mark, born a woman named Mary, left Malawi to embrace

his gender identity as a man. Thus, while his physical appearance does not immediately convey his struggles, they mark his life path.

In Gina's project, individuals who do not visibly display their hardships are rendered invisible, raising critical questions about whose stories are told and whose are overlooked. Gina's approach to determining the "real migrants" mirrors the refugee status determination process, where migrants must prove their eligibility for international protection. This process of judgment and selection reflects broader societal mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, prompting a reflection on the criteria used to deem someone suitable or unsuitable. Gina's pursuit of authenticity through visible signs of precarity ultimately results in representations that, while aiming for realism, may be constructed or even distorted.

The painter's representation is further compounded by her tendency to overwrite the migrants' stories. Once the canvases are displayed, the protagonist observes significant alterations introduced by his wife, evidenced in the ekphrasis he provides:

A woman holding her broken child, grieving as only a woman can. She was wearing the bulky winter jacket, her face staring down at the figure in her arms, the light falling on her covered head like halo. Three small canvases carried sketches of the child alone – I moved closer. No, they were not the child – not the woman's child. It was a white child, the boy from the motherless children's home, standing over the fence, shouting *Schokolade!* And yet, it wasn't him in the next canvas. It was a more generic child, an everychild. Anyone's child. And the next one was even more generic, genderless, neither white nor black; what was clear, though, was the almost accusatory pain in its liquid eyes. (*T* 41)

Exemplifying an ekphrastic style, the passage uses descriptive language to bring an artwork to life through the narrator's words. His movement is opposite to the view offered in the paintings. As the narrator moves from a distant to a closer vantage point, which would typically transition the view from the general to the specific, the representation of the child in the paintings paradoxically shifts from one particular individual to a generalised figure. The face of Bernita's child held by her is superimposed by a white one that the painter and the narrator used to see when passing by an orphanage, constantly shouting "Schokolade" to them (*T* 41). Then, in the following sketches, the child's face becomes increasingly indistinct, evolving into a "generic, genderless, neither white nor black", representing "anyone's child" (*T* 41). This transition is interpreted by Helga Ramsey-Kurz (2020) as projecting Gina's own sorrow for losing her baby. It can also be viewed as an effort to emphasise the universal nature of grief and suffering, for the indistinctiveness of the child can allow viewers to project their own experiences, emotions,

and anxieties onto the work, thereby enhancing their identification with migrants. In that case, the child represented by Gina can engender a connection between “us” – viewers – and “them” – refugees – encouraging empathy. The “accusatory pain in [the child’s] liquid eyes” might evoke a sense of moral responsibility in viewers to protect the child; however, as Kirkwood (2017) noticed in *vita reali*, humanisation risks strengthening paternalistic relations. Additionally, de-contextualisation is akin to the process by which migrants are converted into a universal theoretical category (Gallien 2017).

The context of the presentation of the paintings epitomises the discrepancy between the cosmopolitan elite and refugees. Members of the international elite admire the portraits of refugees while sipping wine, engaging in small talk, and making assumptions, all the while immersed in their privileges. Although they appear eager to listen to the voiceless, they do not truly hear them when the narrative becomes uncomfortable, evoking Spivak’s conclusion of *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988). This is evident in their approach to Mark. Having been previously declined as a sitter, Mark attends the presentation of the paintings at the narrator’s residence when the narrator extends an invitation to host him. Once there, when Mark recounts his experience with racism in what one of the participants, Anna, defines as “the most liberal and welcoming of all European cities,” the guests feel “uncomfortable” (T 42- 43). Mark’s cryptic sentence, “Even in Berlin, I miss Berlin” (42), anticipates the depiction of explicit racist gestures, such as women clutching their bags when he is nearby. The statement, encapsulating a sense of nostalgia despite his physical presence in the German capital, suggests a disconnection between the Berlin he inhabits and the Berlin he had imagined before confronting its harsh realities. Moreover, the gap between the elite and refugees is also blatantly evident in their differing perceptions of the city. As Gikandi notes, the “elites are, by virtue of their class, position and education, the major beneficiaries of the projects of decolonization” (2010, 29), while the failure of such a project falls back on the shoulders of the masses. For Gikandi, “elites profited (directly or indirectly) from the inequalities and corruption of the postcolonial state” (29), and this opportunism also intrudes on the diasporic experience. Within the international context, Gina’s representation of refugees secures her a place within the elite. Thus, her engagement with the Other is not only “enabled by [her] own position of privilege” but also a requirement for maintaining that position (Gikandi 2010, 32).

While it is important to underline that we do not have access to Gina’s direct thoughts, for they are filtered by the unnamed narrator, the novel seems to indicate that Gina’s

representation is ambivalent because it oscillates between an effort to evoke empathy and the problematic aspects of selective, superficial, and potentially distorting portrayals. Her approach highlights the complexities and ethical challenges inherent in representing the experiences of marginalised individuals. This duality in representation raises critical questions about the authenticity and impact of such artistic endeavours. On the one hand, Gina's efforts to elicit empathy aim to humanise those who are often overlooked or misunderstood and bring attention to their struggles. On the other hand, the selective nature of her portrayals may inadvertently reinforce stereotypes or offer a skewed perception that fails to capture the full depth of the individuals' experiences. This ambivalence reflects the broader ethical dilemma faced by artists and writers who attempt to give voice to marginalised communities: the balance between advocacy and authenticity and the risk of reducing complex human lives to simplistic narratives for the sake of artistic or rhetorical effect.

Ramsey-Kurz (2020) argues that, as the narrative progresses, unlike Gina, the protagonist learns to appropriately and compassionately listen to refugees' stories and contrast his own narrative with theirs. According to the scholar, the protagonist's moral development is facilitated by his physical separation from the circle of cosmopolitans around which he initially revolves. While I agree that he distances himself from the abstract projections of the refugee, I believe his status remains ambivalent, reflecting his complex stance towards the structural disparities inherent in cosmopolitanism. At the incipit of the novel, the protagonist criticises the circle of intellectuals to which his wife Gina belongs. He disapproves of her criteria for selecting what she considers "real migrants" for her portraits, deeming her choices arbitrary and exclusionary. Furthermore, he regards himself as somewhat superior to the elite members, referring to them disparagingly as "the "self-centred, overambitious classmates back in graduate school" and "Gina's oversensitive, even narcissistic fellow Zimmer artists" (*T* 30). Although the protagonist perceives their involvement within the status quo, akin to the postcolonial elite that Gikandi critiques as "a major component of the American and European high culture" (2010, 33), he fails to recognise that the same applies to himself. He is under the illusion that he is different from those he condemns and that he genuinely 'sees' others. When he meets Mark, he is intrigued by him, sensing "something unusual" (*T* 5). However, as a cosmopolitan, his engagement with the Other always has a safe exit if necessary (Hannerz 1990), and he is conscious of this possibility. When he encounters Karim, a man wanting to share his story, he knows he "could always feign sleepiness if it got boring" (*T* 167). Moreover,

when Mark faces difficulties, such as when the church where he lives is raided by the police, the protagonist chooses to abandon him, prioritising his own comfort: “I was tired, sore, and all I wanted was to get home, take a shower, and crawl into bed” (*T* 28), he says; a sentence that underscores the selective engagement that often accompanies cosmopolitan ideals, revealing a significant disparity between the experiences and opportunities available to cosmopolitans and refugees. Indeed, this retreat into personal comfort illustrates the limitations and ethical challenges of cosmopolitanism in genuinely addressing and empathising with the struggles of marginalised individuals.

Worse yet, the narrator repudiates Mark’s vulnerability, which can render him a non-citizen in Agamben’s terms (2008). Also, he dismisses Mark’s and his friends’ ideas and struggles as naïve reveries:

How long before they saw the world as it is, vile and cruel and indifferent, and there is really no changing it; how long before they moved out of their crumbling ivory tower and joined the rest of humanity swimming in what Flaubert described as a river of shit relentlessly washing away at the foundation of every ivory tower ever built? One day they’d start shaving and become bankers or middle managers and drive BMWs and Mercedes-Benzes; they’d start a family and surround themselves with the empty accoutrements of position and power, the same things they now derided. But now, right now, they were free and pure as morning dew on a petal, and something in me wanted to lean in and sniff the fragrance from that bud. (Habla 2019, 19)

This passage is pregnant with the narrator’s disillusionment triggered by what he perceives as an inevitable transition from youth idealism to adulthood conformity to societal norms. The two opposing states are conveyed by two juxtaposed metaphors: on the one hand, the “crumbling ivory tower” suggests detachment from ordinary people’s everyday concerns and struggles; on the other, the intertextual reference to Gustave Flaubert’s “river of shit” encapsulates the grimness of how the narrator sees reality.⁵⁴ From this perspective, Mark and his entourage inhabit the realm of idealism, but he already foresees what their future will look like, becoming part of the very system they currently deride. The tone of his rhetorical question at the incipit of the passage is, therefore, critical, conveying an undertone of envy for their naivety, a feeling of loss represented by a simile that compares their purity to the freshness of dew on a flower.

⁵⁴ Gustave Flaubert’s original line can be found in *Correspondance*, more specifically in the letter to Ivan Turgenev (November 13, 1872): “J’ai toujours tâché de vivre dans une tour d’ivoire. Mais une marée de merde en bat les murs, à la faire crouler,” expressing the relentless intrusion of harsh reality into the ivory tower.

The comparison enhances the sense of fragility and transience of their presence innocence and emphasises the contrast with their foreseen future.

However, from what Durrant describes in another context as “the uninterrogated position of cosmopolitan privilege” (2020, 613), the narrator disavows his own involvement in constructing such “ivory towers,” In other words, he splits the ambivalence within him and projects all his anxieties about his cosmopolitan position onto Mark, avoiding his own contradictions. In doing so, the protagonist’s behaviour echoes Durrant’s reflections on the impossibility of the cosmopolitan to acknowledge the precarity of refugee life “because it threatens to reveal the instability of the citizenship underwriting cosmopolitan privilege” and the ease with which “a citizen can become a non-citizen” (Durrant 2020, 608). The disavowal of the refugee is exacerbated by the cosmopolitan’s involvement in structures of exploitation, which produces the same metamorphosis from citizen to non-citizen despite the cosmopolitan’s desire to engage with the Other (Durrant 2020). Indeed, contrary to the narrator’s expectations, Mark’s death during a demonstration precludes him from conforming to societal norms, underscoring the precariousness of his life.

As the stories of other refugees unfold, their precariousness becomes increasingly impossible to disregard. Despite this, however, I am not convinced that, as Ramsey-Kurz asserts, the protagonist “distinguishes his narrative from all other tales he has heard” (2020, 175). Destabilising the novel’s realism through an improbable plot twist (Coundouriotis 2022), the narrator projects himself briefly into the position of the Other – the refugee. In the chapter titled “The Interpreters,” he encounters another refugee, Karim, and his son, Mahmoud. The title alludes to the fifteen-year-old son’s role as an interpreter, having acquired multiple languages throughout his arduous journey from Somalia to Germany, which began at the age of four. Additionally, the title can be interpreted as an intertextual reference to Wole Soyinka’s narrative of return. After listening to Karim’s story, the protagonist gets off the train but soon realises he has forgotten his bag with all his documents on the train, taking Karim’s bag instead. Mistaking a person for Karim, the protagonist follows the man and inadvertently boards “the wrong train” (*T* 192), deporting undocumented migrants to Italy. Encircled by cramped passengers and crying babies, the protagonist relinquishes his desire to fight. Having listened to numerous stories of refugees and asylum seekers, he accidentally becomes one of them. We can interpret this as an empathetic gesture based on Agnes Woolley’s definition of empathy as “crossing from self to other by putting oneself in another’s shoes” (2020, 153). However, there

is a danger in appropriating someone else's story as our own. In the novel, disparities persist, yet the narrator fails to recognise that, unlike the other passengers, he has access to a potential way out.

When the narrative transitions from the protagonist's first-person to third-person narration, he is depicted in a refugee camp "staring into the water, quiet and motionless" (T 203). Following the initial confusion and bureaucratic hurdles, the camp director intervenes to facilitate his release, and he is free to go. Yet, he decides to remain, as "he has nowhere to go," or more precisely, "he wants to go nowhere" (T 205). Opting to stay at the camp is a deliberate choice. Despite exhibiting symptoms that suggest depression, unlike the voiceless undocumented migrants, he retains the ability to reclaim his own voice. Accordingly, his first-person narration supplants the third-person narration again, allowing readers direct access to his innermost thoughts and his motivation for this decision.

I am trying to decide if I want to go out there, to live, or to wait here and embrace whatever comes. No, I am not a fatalist, I am not reckless, but I feel if I wait here long enough, presently something would be revealed to me, someone would step up to me [...], and they would say, Listen. And they would tell me a story, a fable, a secret something so pithy, so profound, that it is worth the wait. (T 208)

Disregarding the numerous instances in which individuals like Manu, Karim, and Mark have approached him to share their stories, whether in fragments or in full, the protagonist waits for something more significant. He is ensnared within a dichotomous tension: the desire to actively engage with life and take action versus a contrasting inclination to accept whatever comes passively. In this state of liminality, he yearns for enlightenment that would confer meaning upon life itself.

Shortly thereafter, the anticipated fable unfolds. Matteo, a local painter who often volunteers at the camp, decides to assist the protagonist and invites him to his home. As they converse, Matteo opens up to the protagonist and reveals his story, described as "a fairy tale" (T 211). And, like a fairy tale, it starts with the conventional opening line that has been used in oral and written storytelling for centuries, signalling a departure from realism and an entry into the realm of fable: "Once upon a time a man came upon a woman lying on the seashore, half-covered by the foaming waves. A mermaid, he thought" (T 211). The timeless tone of the *mise-en-abyme* is emphasised by the fact that the woman cannot recall her identity or past; she only knows herself as the mother of a young boy who is nearby on the beach. This fairy tale,

however, quickly morphs into a tragedy marked by acts of violence and erasure. Matteo falls in love with her and is driven by fear of losing her to persuade her that they have been lovers for years. Echoing past colonial practices, identity imposition is symbolised by Matteo naming the woman with a new name: Sophia. This supposed happy ending in their marriage is marred when the woman regains her memory and realises her name is Basma; she has a husband and a daughter, who, as the protagonist and the readers learn, have been encountered earlier in the narrative. While the protagonist reflects on Manu and his daughter Rachida, who every Sunday wait for Basma at Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin, he nearly rationalises Matteo's actions as manifestations of affection: "He is a good man" (*T* 233). As the statement implies, according to the narrator, Matteo's unethical behaviour towards Basma does not define his entire persona but represents only a part of who he is. Concurrently, Matteo exhibits admirable qualities: he volunteers at the camp and is instrumental in rescuing the protagonist. However, being a good person with noble intentions does not necessarily equate to consistently making ethical decisions. This complexity in Matteo's character underscores the multifaceted nature of human behaviour. At the same time, the protagonist's readiness to empathise with him and adopt his viewpoints reveals a tendency to align himself with Matteo and not with the displaced Basma.

Following the conclusion of Matteo's narrative, the protagonist is roused from his lethargy and resolves to confront the traumatic experiences of displaced individuals. His commitment leads him on a reverse journey across the Mediterranean. Starting his travel from the coast of Tunisia, he ultimately aims to reach Nigeria, engaging with the stark realities faced by refugees along the way. On board the boat, he succumbs to sleep and is haunted by a vivid dream of a mass drowning:

A restless, writhing motion fills the water. Fish. [...] but when I bend closer [...] I see they are not fish, they are human. Bodies floating face-up, limbs thrashing, tiny hands reaching up to me. Hundreds of tiny hands, thousands of faces, until the surface of the water is filled with silent ghostly eyes like lamps shining at me and arms reaching up to be grasped; they float amidst a debris of personal belongings, toys, shoes, shirts, and family pictures all slowly sinking into a bottomless Mediterranean. I drift past, and they drift past, and God drifts past, paring His nails. I pull back, tears on my face. I had not thought death had undone so many. I repeat the line over and over, rolling it over my tongue like a prayer, till my whisper turns into a scream. (*T* 234)

The passage begins with a tranquil tone that abruptly transitions into a tableau of horror as the narrator discerns that what initially appears to be fish swimming in the sea are, in fact, human bodies and personal belongings helplessly adrift. This transformation symbolises the dehumanisation of the individuals lost in the Mediterranean, who remain indistinguishable from marine life until viewed closely. They are depicted as a conglomerate of anonymous bodies and body parts, their deaths silent and forsaken. In the description, despite the profound emotional impact this vision imparts on the narrator, a chasm between him and these people is present. Symbolically, their divergent directions highlight this chasm, further exacerbated by the passage's auditory evolution: from the oppressive silence of the drowning to the narrator's cathartic scream, releasing his grief and horror. Also, the dream remains precisely that – a mere hallucination. The protagonist is safe, and his prayer, a quotation from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, indirectly quoting Dante's *Inferno*,⁵⁵ comes from that cosmopolitan life securing his protection.

Furthermore, the gulf between the narrator and the refugees he observes is manifested in the potential for legal return. Although familial pressures thwart his return to Nigeria, it is notable that bureaucratic obstacles do not significantly hinder him, despite his lack of official documentation to corroborate his Nigerian nationality; his return is slowed but not halted. After two months, he successfully persuades the authorities and reaches Lagos. In contrast, the concept of an impossibility of return is a fundamental aspect of attaining refugee status (Leibowitz 1983). Indeed, according to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the protections afforded by refugee status cease not only when conditions in the refugee's home country improve to the point that protection is no longer necessary but also when an individual voluntarily seeks the protection of their country of nationality – the act of physical return falls into the latter category. Therefore, individuals whose refugee status has been granted are typically unable to return to their country of origin.

After the brief, unsuccessful attempt to return, the narrator retains the ability to depart and freely cross borders, a liberty not afforded to the refugees who populate the narrative. A narrative ellipsis strategically accelerates the story's pace, revealing through intermittent

⁵⁵ The line from Dante Alighieri that influenced T.S. Eliot, found in Canto 3, verses 55-57 of *Inferno*, reads: “e dietro le venia si lunga tratta/di gente, ch’i’ non averei creduto/che morte tanta n’avesse disfatta.” In this segment, Dante observes a plethora of souls lining up behind Charon, the mythological ferryman of Hades, who is responsible for escorting the deceased souls across the infernal rivers Styx and Acheron. This image is employed by T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* to evoke the spiritual emptiness and pervasive existential angst characteristic of the contemporary era.

flashbacks in conversations that the narrator has navigated between the USA and London, gradually adapting to the cosmopolitan lifestyle he had previously, though not wholly, eschewed. In this period, through his first-person narration, readers learn that he accomplishes several significant milestones: he completed his PhD, finalised his divorce from Gina, and rekindled a relationship with Portia, with whom he reconnects in London. The novel seems to approach its conclusion and resolution, but “the stories [keep] coming, discursively, randomly” (T278), as he says. Indeed, during his stay in London, he and Portia encounter Juma, a Nigerian asylum seeker who launches a hunger strike to contest his impending deportation by British authorities. Viewing the risk of death as preferable to repatriation, Juma emerges as yet another character whose return to his home country is impossible. His protest illuminates the profound contradictions within the British system that, despite its professed democratic and peaceful values, simultaneously poses existential threats to lives deemed “ungrievable,” a term employed by Judith Butler (2004).⁵⁶ It is in this context that Maria López (2022) draws upon Butler’s theory of the intrinsic connection between political resistance and vulnerability to analyse Juma’s actions, suggesting that Juma, much like Mark previously, uses the vulnerability of his body as a precarious yet potent political instrument. As Butler argues, “political resistance relies fundamentally on the mobilization of vulnerability, which means that vulnerability can be a way of being exposed and agentic at the same time” (2016 in López 2022, 199). Deprived of his freedom, Juma exacerbates his vulnerability – a condition initially created by the British government and Fortress Europe – in a manner that makes this vulnerability visible. In this visibility stands the political act.

The novel’s conclusion again demonstrates the massive discrepancy between the different possibilities of movement at the cosmopolitan narrator’s and the refugee’s disposal. In the last book, the novel embeds a long affect-charged letter Juma wrote from the detention centre after his deportation attempt fails. Addressed to Portia and the protagonist, his letter is a literary device that simulates an authentic testimony, enhancing reader engagement with his plight and possibly an empathic response. The first-person perspective makes the passage deeply personal. His story becomes the ultimate testimony of the unprivileged travellers lost in the cracks of the

⁵⁶ In a nuanced portrayal, rather than subscribing to a binary depiction of a uniform West, Habila examines the diversity within its population. Notably, the same society that includes individuals vocally demanding “Foreigners out!” (T 254) also comprises members of the organisation The Guardians, who actively support foreigners. These members play a pivotal role in concealing Juma after his asylum application is denied and he is faced with deportation.

nation-state. Through his own words, Juma guides the readers through his harrowing journey, beginning with the attack by religious extremists on the school where he taught. Unaware that he was leaving his homeland, his journey took him through Cameroon and the Federal Republic of Niger to Libya, where he was arrested. This is followed by his perilous crossing of the Mediterranean and the Strait of Dover. The letter concludes with Juma's contemplation that, although he is cognizant that his hunger strike may not effect any change, there remains but one circumstance under which he would consider ending his protest:

I want the perfect food. I tell them I want *manna, or ambrosia*, the food of the gods themselves, and they thought I was joking, but I am serious. I want the perfect food, but where can I find it here on Earth? I want my *mother's food*, the one I grew up eating. I want the first food I ever ate in this world. I want my *mother's milk*, but by now, I am sure my mother is dead. (T 293)

The food metaphor in Juma's letter poignantly reflects his profound sense of permanent loss and displacement. As an asylum seeker denied refugee status while physically present in the UK, Juma inhabits what Edward Said (2000) terms "the perilous territory of not-belonging," a space "beyond the frontier between 'us' and the 'outsiders.'" From this position of alienation, his yearning for "the perfect food," emphasised by the repetitive phrase "I want," serves as a powerful metaphor for the impossibility of returning to his homeland. Juma's juxtaposition of the idealised "manna or ambrosia" with the deeply personal "mother's milk" underscores this impossibility. Both are equally unattainable: manna and ambrosia because they are mythic, and mother's milk because Juma believes she is dead. Since the milk serves as a metaphor for his yearning to regress to a time before his traumatic experiences, the safety and comfort of his mother's arms, and his belief that she is dead signifies an irreversible severance from his past and homeland. The potential for deportation to Nigeria, though unlikely due to the country's refusal, would not equate to a proper return. The Nigeria he once knew has changed over time, and his connections have been irreparably broken. As Edward Said (2000) articulates, the experience of exile renders return impossible, both physically and psychologically, because both the exile and their homeland undergo profound changes. The death of Juma's mother signifies the end of any remaining ties to his former life, symbolising the complete uprooting from his place of origin. Thus, Juma's realisation that his mother is likely dead underscores the permanence of his loss and the disconnection from his past and homeland. If the letter represents a form of direct speech quoting Juma's written words verbatim, the novel's last page

reverts to the narrator's first-person perspective. The effect of faithful reporting produced by direct speech (Leech and Short 2007, 320) is diminished by positioning the narrator as an interpreter of the fictional reality he inhabits. The narrator, who previously reported the stories told by refugees, ceases this activity and replaces reporting with imagining. He envisions Juma's physical and psychological deterioration, culminating in his death in the cell where he is incarcerated.

Juma sits in his cell, thirsting for mother's milk, unable to eat anything else, he shrinks, he regresses, back to childhood, curled up in a corner foetus-like, his flesh withers, his bones become as frail as twigs. One day the guards open the door and he is not there, only a pile of twigs on the floor. The cleaner comes and sweeps up the twigs and bags them and throws them into the dumpster. (*T* 295)

With a sombre tone which conveys a profound sense of tragedy, the narrator depicts a progressive decline, beginning with Juma's initial longing and inability to consume food, advancing through his physical regression, and culminating in his ultimate death and complete obliteration. Whether his mother's milk symbolises Juma's yearning to regress to the safety of his childhood, in the narrator's imagination, his regression to a prenatal state – illustrated by his assumption of a fetal position – portrays the zenith of his vulnerability. Employing Judith Butler's words, as a possessor of "an ungrievable life" who "has never counted as a life at all" (2004, 38), his death is depicted not merely as a loss of life but as an enactment of dehumanisation. This is evidenced by the simile "as frail as twigs," which likens the fragility of his bones to that of twigs. This comparison presages a metamorphosis, realised in the following sentence when his flesh is described as having transformed into "a pile of twigs on the floor." Such imagery not only underscores the brittleness of his physical deterioration but also the callous indifference with which his remains are treated. The guards and the cleaner, in disposing of his remains with mere detachment, symbolise the complete erasure of his existence. In their act of indifference and neglect, they synecdochically reflect the societal failure to recognise the humanity of asylum seekers and refugees and respond to their suffering.

The passage, rich with its complex rhetorical figures and vivid imagery, is crafted to evoke pity and sorrow among its readers and render the suffering of refugees visible – or readable, impossible to escape from. This starkly contrasts with the conclusion of Juma's letter, which features terse sentences delivered in a detached, matter-of-fact tone. Ramsey-Kurz

(2020, 175) suggests that the narrator's imagination might "honor Juma [']s" persistent resistance by prolonging it beyond the point where Juma is physically unable to speak for himself." Yet, the narrative intensifies the notion that solidarity has its limits, for "even the kindest and most empathetic among us can become emotionally exhausted" (T 295). Despite the narrator's intense desire to understand refugees by listening to and internalising their stories, their fates diverge sharply. The final sentence of the novel, "Let's go" (T 295), which signals the narrator's decision to "return" to the African continent, encapsulates his ultimate realisation of their profound estrangement. This separation is underscored by his freedom to move and return to the African Continent juxtaposed against the forced migration of refugees and their inability to return. Unlike earlier narratives of return, the concept of a homeland is no longer assumed. As a self-described post-nationalist author in the introduction of *The Granta Book of the African Short Story* (2011b, viii), Helon Habila seeks to "liberate [himself] from the often predictable, nearly obligatory obsession of the African writer with the nation and with national politics," thereby addressing broader issues. Rather than viewing the return to Africa and the new arrival to Zambia as a decolonial gesture as Coundouriotis interprets it (2022, 194), I read it as exposing the vast disparities "produced by the structures of state formation and global capital that underwrite the privileged lifestyle of the cosmopolitan and occlude the lives of the stateless (Durrant 2020, 615). This interpretation underscores the complex interplay of privilege, mobility, and marginalisation that defines the contemporary experience of return.

Reverberations of Capital on Literature: Self-Reflexivity as a Self-Critique

Until now, we have argued that both novels delve into the intersections of privilege and cosmopolitanism within the capitalist framework. The novels, written by Nigerian authors residing in the USA and serving as professors in American universities, have been published by American publishing houses. This context potentially influences the fact that both novels exhibit a form of anxiety about their imbrication within the literary marketplace, a phenomenon Sarah Brouillette (2007) describes as self-reflexivity. This self-reflexivity underscores a tension between their critical perspectives on capitalism and their existence as commodities within that very system. This self-awareness reflects a broader trend in contemporary literature, where authors grapple with the ethical implications of their work's participation in global markets. In this way, the novels not only explore the personal and societal impacts of capitalism and cosmopolitanism but also interrogate their roles within the literary and cultural economy.

This tension is not isolated to these works but is part of a larger narrative within African literature's journey in the global literary marketplace. After languishing at the margins for many years, African literature has secured a foothold in the global literary marketplace, carving out its own "marketing niche" (Brouillette 2007). The year 2021 marked a significant surge in Anglophone African writers receiving major literary accolades, including Abdulrazak Gurnah's Nobel Prize, Damon Galgut's Booker Prize, and David Diop's International Booker Prize. Moreover, African literature, in general, and Nigerian literature, in particular, is experiencing a robust expansion in global bookselling markets. This emerging pattern has bolstered the confidence of Western publishers, who are increasingly eager to publish works categorised as 'African books.' Yet, the control over African literature extends beyond Western publishers: the continent has seen alternative publishing networks rise. In recent years, African publishers like Nigeria's Farafina, Parrésia, and Cassava Republic have solidified their presence in the literary sphere. Notably, Cassava Republic expanded its operations to London in 2017 and the United States in 2018, subverting the traditional centre-periphery dynamic. Additionally, the proliferation of book festivals across Africa, such as the Ake Festival in Abeokuta, the Litfest and Storymoja Festival in Nairobi, and the Writivism Festival in Kampala, further enriches the literary landscape. These developments lend credence to Thomas Hale's optimistic assertion that the "21st century will be the century of African literature" (Hale 2006, 19).

Nevertheless, a closer examination of the current neo-colonial dynamics in global interactions reveals that African writers' participation in the Western literary market remains mired in unequal power distribution. While it is inaccurate to claim that Africa is only in the sole hands of the West – even the very dichotomy West/Africa is characterised by fuzzy borders – it remains a fact that many of the most prominent African authors are published by Western publishing houses and reside in the Global North.⁵⁷ Their works often exemplify what Simon Gikandi (2009) characterises as "the metropolitan culture of the modern west" (22). For this reason, concerns about Western publishers' influence on African writing have been widely expressed. For instance, Nigerian poet and scholar Tanure Ojaide repeatedly inveighed against "foreign publishers bringing out texts that conform to their notion of 'African' literature, which is usually a distorted Western view of Africa" (Ojaide 2009). Moreover, as discussed in the previous chapter, the idea that a certain kind of literature is prone to literary success in Western Europe and North America made Nigerian scholar and novelist Akin Adesokan (2012) employ

⁵⁷ Among the authors discussed in this thesis, Emmanuel Iduma is the only one who resides permanently in Nigeria.

the formulation “golden standard.” This issue is not novel: Timothy Brennan (1997) discussed the emergence of “new cosmopolitan writing,” a genre seemingly tailored for postcolonial popularity, suggesting a strategic eye towards securing favourable reception in the West.

It is indisputable that the ongoing debate itself is indicative of the entrenched structural inequalities within what Pascale Casanova (1999) has influentially termed the *World Republic of Letters*. Authors originating from Africa or perceived to be from the Global South frequently face accusations such as those of engaging in Afro-pessimistic discourse or acting as native informants. Helon Habila reflects on the complexity of this situation, stating, “It’s a very tough position to navigate as a writer” (appendix). Analysing this situation, Sarah Brouillette (2007) suggests that some postcolonial writers manifest anxiety about their own complicity with the Western literary market, an anxiety they materialise in their works by incorporating moments of self-reflexivity. As she puts it,

Self-reflexivity involves writers incorporating into their aesthetic arsenals various kinds of meta-commentary: on the act of writing itself, on the status of literature within culture at large, and on their own careers as authors, especially as they recognize themselves as ‘tributaries’ in a vast field of cultural exchanges that operates substantially outside of whatever sphere they can be said to control. (68)

Like many novels by Nigerian authors, both *Foreign Gods, Inc.* and *Travellers* were published in the Global North. The former was released by New York City-based Soho Press in 2014, while the latter was concomitantly published by the American W. W. Norton & Company and British Penguin in 2019.⁵⁸ Obviously, these publishing houses differ considerably. Soho Press, although reputable, is a smaller, independent publisher often championing voices that the larger industry might overlook. In contrast, Penguin is one of the largest and most influential publishing houses globally, with extensive distribution networks and substantial marketing resources. Being published by Penguin typically means greater visibility, broader reach, and potentially higher sales, reflecting a marked difference in the exposure and impact an author might experience between the two publishing houses. This brief comparison points to the nuanced ways the capitalist framework influences literary production: it is insufficient to be published in the West to inhabit a position of power within the literary market. At the same time, at the risk of stating the obvious, being published on the African Continent does not mean

⁵⁸ As disclosed by Helon Habila in the interview he granted me, all of his novels are available in Nigerian editions. Although these editions do not provide him with financial remuneration, they facilitate his literary presence across Africa. *Travellers* was published by Ouida Books, symbolically representing a sort of literary return.

eschewing capitalism. Despite this, the fact that the most acclaimed African authors are published in the West is significant. It highlights the uneven economic and political conditions underpinning publication, which, according to Emily Apter (2013), undermines the utopian ideal of World Literature's one-worldliness.

These novels, which critique global capitalism through their content, nonetheless remain entrenched within the system. As Lindsay Caplan (2022) remarks in a different context, "there is no place outside capitalism from which to critique (or create)" (88). The embeddedness of these novels shapes their aesthetics through a mechanism of self-reflexivity. Self-reflexivity serves as a prism through which the novels critique their existence within the capitalist marketplace. It instils a meta-narrative awareness, a consciousness of their roles as commodities within the very industry that produces and circulates them. Each novel, in its own way, interrogates and subverts its participation in these dynamics. *Travellers* engage in a self-sabotage of narrative representation, while *Foreign Gods, Inc.* probes the commodification of its narrative. The very titles of these works – *Foreign Gods, Inc.* and *Travellers* – are emblematic of the novels' introspections about their commercial entanglements. They underscore the inherent anxiety regarding the commodification of narrative and culture, reflecting a profound unease with the global capitalist systems that facilitate their international circulation.

Commodification of Subversion in *Foreign Gods, Inc.*: From Gods to Literary Goods

A pronounced ambivalence marks the denouement of Ndibe's narrative. Upon its arrival in the United States, the deity Ngene is indeed revitalised and regains its ancient vigour, as the gallery owner previously anticipated. Thus, mirroring its past interactions with Reverend Stanton, the deity begins to exert its influence anew by haunting Ike and precipitating him into madness. Simultaneously, it exudes a pervasive odour – an act of resistance that persists even after Ike divests himself of the deity. As Gruels admits, "Ngene farted storms from its rump [...] it has character, an audacious personality" (*FGI* 330). This metaphorical use of odour underscores Ngene's role as a symbol of resistance against external forces attempting to exploit or diminish it. The metaphor also conveys a sense of disruption and challenge to the status quo, reinforcing the theme of resistance within the narrative. Yet, this resistance paradoxically increases Ngene's market value, ultimately categorised by the gallery as "a class act – as far as [the

gallery's] African inventory goes" (*FGI* 330). This peculiarity makes it especially desirable to a Japanese collector, who purchases it precisely because of its strong smell. Through this development, Ndibe's novel posits that even acts of subversion and resistance can be assimilated into – and thus commodified by – the very capitalist structures they oppose. Contrary to Masombuka's argument that "in this subversion at the novel's end, Ngene himself resists the games capitalism imposes on him" (2024, 9), the narrative offers a profound critique of the inescapability of commodification within a market-driven world.

At this juncture, a question arises: can a parallel be drawn between the reintegration of Ngene's subversive actions into the capitalist market and the potential assimilation of the novel's critical commentary into the same market system? An affirmative response encapsulates what theorist Sarah Brouillette (2007), influenced by Bourdieu, devises as postcolonial writers' "anxiety about [the] commercialization" (3) of their work and their own imbrication with the marketplace. According to the scholar, "the postcolonial author has emerged as a profoundly complicit [to the market] and compromised figure whose authority rests, however uncomfortably, in the nature of his connection to the specificity of a given political location" (2007, 3). Okey Ndibe seems to be aware of the impossibility of critiquing capitalism from a position outside of it, understanding that the subversive elements within the novel might paradoxically enhance the marketability of the novel.

As Brouillette (2015) years later remarks in reference to what is often considered the continuation of postcolonial literature, namely world literature, "laments about the commercialization of culture have become an important motor within the cultural and academic industries" and writers that engage in "anti-market – even anti-capitalist – views are central to a key niche within [the market]" (97). Thus, since "talk of saving literature from 'reduction' to commodity status is now scarcely possible" (Brouillette 2007, 3), Ndibe makes the capitalist entanglements of his work apparent through the very title of his novel. As mentioned earlier, *Foreign Gods, Inc.* shares its name with the gallery within the story that commodifies deities, thereby self-critically accentuating the author's own market's possible complicity. His narrative, which critiques capitalist exchanges, is itself inextricably linked to those very exchanges. Therefore, the Inc. from the title in *Foreign Gods, Inc.* calls into question the fact that the novel can become part of that category of cultural objects representing the "Other" that are under the yoke of the marketplace.

Ndibe's disillusioned narrative emphasises then that his novel, like Ngene, can end up being considered a commodity for a general hypothetical reader in search of a taste of the exotic. In his 2020 update of *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001), Huggan states that following today's capitalist fixation on particularity and diversity, the "perceived otherness of postcolonial writers/writing is commercially exploited as a package of attractive cultural commodities circulating within a global marketplace of culturally 'othered' goods" (2020, 2). On such occasions, he links the literary exotic to the emergence of world literature, noting that it threatens to replicate the paradoxes of the postcolonial exotic insofar as its aim

– the fostering of a cosmopolitan sensibility of worldliness that is open to different worldviews and is temperamentally averse to totalizing explanations– is challenged by a late-capitalist ideology of globalism that seeks to market cultural difference in its own image, and to establish a basis for the material conditions that govern the international trafficking of readily identifiable (multi)cultural texts" (Huggan 2020, 13).

The novel seems to be cynical about the possibility of creating a cosmopolitan sensibility – either on a personal level, as in Ike's case, or on a literary level, as in the case of the project of world literature in a context in which capitalism co-opts and commercialises cultural diversity thus challenging the genuine cosmopolitan ideal of open and equal cultural exchange. As the novel's ending seemingly implies, the profusion of capital in the configuration of our modern world precludes the creation of a genuine single cosmopolitan community. The circulation of individuals and goods does not contribute to the realisation of the project but, in fact, pushes it further away. Indeed, after Ngene's sale, the protagonist is shown to be completely isolated from the world: "What went on the streets no longer touched him" (327-328).

Representation in *Travellers*: between Failure of Registration and Self-Reflexivity

Travellers' criticism of the non-relation between cosmopolitanism and the plight of refugees also implicates the act of representation. Helon Habila seems aware that when "non-migrants talk in place of, or with, refugees", there exists a need for a "sustained vigilance regarding the ethics and politics of representation" (Gallien 2018b, 745). The burgeoning corpus of texts classified as "Refugee literature" is marked by an intent to subvert the dominant media narratives about refugees, which Brant, Heinrich, and Soeting (2017) argue are characterised by "the continuing and evolving forms of the colonial gaze." However, a notable contradiction

arises as most of this literature is predominantly authored not by refugees (Gallien 2018) but by cosmopolitan writers. Consequently, in this context, the question of representation assumes utmost importance.

Postcolonial studies provide valuable insights into the complexities of representation. While David Farrier identifies the in-betweenness of refugees as “a scandal for postcolonial studies” (2011, 8), Claire Gallien upholds the foundational principle of postcolonialism: its capacity to “intervene in and disrupt the power dynamics” (2018, 724). Power dynamics are crucial in discussions of representation. According to Lazarus (2011), the critique of specific representations is “one defining gesture of scholarship in the field [of postcolonial studies]” (114). Indeed, postcolonial studies highlight that, despite efforts to achieve accurate representation, it is essential to recognise that “representing her who cannot represent herself” is the “original act of erasure” (Cherniavsky 2011, 153). This aporia is central to one of the foundational pillars of postcolonial theory, i.e. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988). In this essay, Spivak underscores the complicity of Western intellectuals in the silencing of subaltern voices, highlighting the complexities and ethical challenges of representing marginalised groups. Subalterns experience epistemic violence through the marginalisation of their voices within Western discourse. This marginalisation can occur even with well-intentioned intellectuals, including leftist figures – from Marx and Foucault to Deleuze and Derrida – whom Spivak criticised for their complicity in Western interests. Thus, the risk of epistemic violence always accompanies the process of representing the other.

Years later, Spivak revisits the theme of representation. In “A Critique of Postcolonial Reason” (1999), she addresses the figure of the native informant – the source of information for Western ethnographers during colonial times, who produced commentary on the Other. The native informant’s voice is overshadowed or “foreclosed” in Spivak’s psychoanalytic terminology. Thus, while the subaltern may speak without being heard, the native informant, though both speaking and being listened to, becomes invisible, disappearing within the ethnographer’s narrative. The debate around the complicity of the native informant extends beyond the colonial context, permeating the contemporary capitalist era. The Francophone Moroccan writer Leila Slimani has even been accused, unjustly, in my opinion, of being a native informant (Boudjahlat 2017). Within this framework, intellectuals in the Global South and members of the Western postcolonial elite might question whether their work echoes that of the

native informants. Specifically, they might ponder if they “museumize” or exoticise their national origin, two processes celebrated within white capitalist culture, as Spivak (1999, 398) reminds us.

Simon Gikandi reverberates Spivak’s preoccupation when arguing that in case the character is a cosmopolitan, his claim to speak about and for the refugees might cause the “eli[sion] of the circumstances by which the majority of the ex-colonial[s] enter [...] the world system” (Gikandi 2010, 34). Even so, according to Spivak (1988), to dismiss representation is equivalent to reiterating the work of ideology in the crudest sense. Moreover, the British author of Jamaican and English descent, Zadie Smith, in “Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction” (2019), acknowledges and laments the percolation of identity politics in storytelling. She critiques the restrictive notion that only individuals who have directly experienced certain events are entitled to narrate those experiences. Instead, she emphasises the importance of imagination in fostering empathy.

Sam Durrant offers an alternative perspective that accommodates both the potential for empathy in fiction and the importance of ethical considerations. In doing so, he delves into the concept of “the failure of registration” of the refugee life from the Cosmopolitan’s position of privilege (2020, 615). The way I read it, the term refers to the inability of cosmopolitanism to acknowledge and integrate the experiences and lives of refugees. Durrant argues that this failure is a fundamental aspect of cosmopolitanism, which is intrinsically tied to global privilege and exclusionary practices that render refugee lives ungrievable and invisible within the cosmopolitan framework. This idea is rooted in the broader critique of cosmopolitanism’s structural limits, where even well-meaning attempts at inclusion and empathy fall short of addressing the systemic issues that produce and sustain refugee destitution. According to the scholar, the “self-critical recognition” of this failure can be “potentially ethical,” and it can “acquire [...] a specifically political valency if it can recognise the way in which its failure of registration is produced by the structures of state formation and global capital that underwrite the privileged lifestyle of the Cosmopolitan and occlude the lives of the stateless” (615). My reading of *Travellers* suggests that although the protagonist and partial narrator develops a refugee consciousness and attempts to distance himself from abstract projections, as Helga Ramsey-Kurz (2020) maintains, the novel is dotted with reminders of the discrepancy between the two figures and the fact that the protagonist cannot fully register refugee life. Indeed,

specifically, when he retraces their path, the structural disparity between them is more pronounced than ever.

We have already engaged in a detailed examination and critique of Gina's series of paintings titled 'Travellers', positing that its portrayal of refugees is, at best, contrived. However, this series is not unique in its problematic representations, which are both embedded in and underscored by the overarching narrative. The novel continually scrutinises its representations to such an extent that their systematic deconstruction emerges as a form of self-reflexivity, which ultimately challenges the portrayal of refugees advanced by the narrative as a whole.

Previously, we addressed the context within which the novel emerged, particularly noting how Habila served as what he termed a "translator" (appendix) providing an 'African perspective' on the so-called refugee crisis. In their quest for perceived authenticity, Western media often solicit diasporic intellectuals to comment on issues related to their countries of origin. These viewpoints gain traction within academic circles, transforming the intellectuals into cultural spokespeople. From the literary perspective, this phenomenon is closely linked to the dynamics of the literary market, mainly what Susanne Gehrman describes as the "marketability of Afropolitan authors." Scholars such as Graham Huggan (2001), Sarah Brouillette (2007), and Madhu Krishnan (2014) have emphasised how publishers of postcolonial, particularly African, literature highlight the biographical connections between authors and their fictional characters. This practice suggests that such correlations might somehow authenticate the narratives.

Furthermore, postcolonial authors are often positioned as experts, tasked with presenting Africa to their audiences (Brouillette, 2007; Krishnan, 2014). Thus, they represent not just their countries but the continent at large and even embody the broader conditions of marginality. However, in this context, a contradiction might appear: the most emblematic African authors are characterised by what Krishnan (2014) calls "geographic dissonance" – while they are representative of African literature, they mainly reside outside the continent, primarily in the Global North.⁵⁹ This geographical – and potentially class-based – dissonance introduces a palpable tension between the represented and their representer. In this specific instance, the gap

⁵⁹ For this reason, scholars such as Sule Emmanuel Egya (2020) have expressed doubts about the utility of their works in Africa.

between the author, residing in the USA, and the stateless refugees becomes evident through the former's need to familiarise himself with the latter's experiences via interviews.

Returning to the character of James Kariku, he could be read as an embodiment of the dissonance between the "African expert" and the African continent, of the wide divide between the representer and the represented (*T* 135). This gap serves as a site of self-reflexivity, where Kariku's portrayal functions as a meta-commentary, potentially extending to critique the role of the author himself. As a Zambian poet who has spent almost his entire life in exile, Kariku is revered in Europe as an "African expert," lauded as a "hero, telling [the] truth to power," despite being largely forgotten in his native country (*T* 135). His insights are sought after with each political upheaval back home. Analysing James Kariku, it becomes challenging not to draw parallels between Europe's constructed perception and demands of the fictional poet and the earlier-mentioned scenario where Habila is asked to offer an "African perspective." Thus, it is tempting to interpret the figure of the poet as a self-criticism of Habila's role as an intellectual.

Readers meet the poet through his daughter's words, Portia. In an intimate conversation with the unnamed narrator, she depicts her father as an idealistic young intellectual and a political dissident opposing Kaunda's regime. His activism, manifested through his writings, leads to his imprisonment and ultimately forces him and his family into exile in England. While his wife longs for their home country, he "become[s] more and more settled in exile" (*T* 133), so much so that, with time, he "become[s] something of a professional exile" (*T* 134). Hence, even after his wife returns, although "he could have returned home anytime he wanted", he chooses to transition "from fellowship to fellowship, from asylum city to asylum city" (*T* 134). According to the writer, the poet's attitude reflects a dissociative coping mechanism stemming from the trauma experienced during his incarceration for political writings (Habila 2019e). Despite his profound disconnection from Zambia and his disengagement from a reality he no longer considers his own, he continues to engage with the broader narrative of the continent in his public discourses, in which he addresses African nationalism and Pan-Africanism "that sometime, long ago, meant something but are now void" (*T* 140).

This discrepancy between the representer and the represented permeates the novel. The arguably impossible task of representing the refugee experience, ostensible in the narrative, reverberates in *Travellers* – the novel – since it is itself the product of the process of representation. The 'uneasiness' towards this portrayal process perceptible throughout the

entire narrative is embodied by the novel's title, which, as already articulated, synchronises with the title of the portrait series painted by Gina. Thus, the title becomes, like in Ndibe's text, a form of self-reflexivity "on the act of writing itself" (Brouillette 2007, 68). By selecting a title that mirrors the name of Gina's series, the author seems to acknowledge the inherent limitations of his portrayal, thus critiquing his role as a cosmopolitan writer. In doing so, he implies a form of self-awareness, intentionally highlighting the partial and constructed nature of his representation. The title, therefore, invites the reader to approach the novel as 'a' representation that could be as partial and tainted as Gina's artistic renditions.

Although it is true that "migrant, refugee, émigré, expatriate" are terms that can "limit and confine," as the author notes, the assertion that "in the end, we are all travelling" risks obscuring the significant disparities among different migratory experiences (Habila 2019e). It is precisely this occlusion that the novel paradoxically underscores. This "self-critical recognition" to use Sam Durrant's formulation (2020, 615) endows the representations in *Travellers* with an ethical dimension. The novel attains its ethical stance by acknowledging its own "failure of registration" (Durrant 2020, 615) via the title and the ongoing problematisation of representations, which critiques and reflects on the limitations of the narrative as a whole.

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods Inc.* and Helon Habila's *Travellers* and showed that return can be impossible for individuals living under precarious conditions in the capitalist system. Indeed, the two texts explore the significant challenges faced by individuals contending with the precarity of the capitalist system, emphasising the pervasive disillusionment and systemic barriers inherent within it. In doing so, they challenge the celebratory narratives of migrancy and cosmopolitanism and highlight their blind spots. Furthermore, it has been argued that this critique of socio-economic structures perpetuating inequality and exclusion reverberates from the diegetic world to the literary works via self-reflexivity as they navigate the tension between offering critical perspectives and existing as commodities within the global literary marketplace. By acknowledging their imbrication within the system, Ndibe and Habila underscore the complexities of critiquing capitalism while being aware that it is from within its confines.

4. The Return of a Flâneur: Blind Spots of the Modern Gaze in Teju Cole's *Every Day is for the Thief*

Unveiling Blind Spots: The Flâneur as a Self-Reflexive Device

The previous chapter concluded by examining how the theme of return can intersect with the concept of “self-reflexivity,” as articulated by Sarah Brouillette (2007). In this context, self-reflexivity underscores the intricate relationship between literature and the dynamics of the global literary marketplace. In African literature, particularly Nigerian literature, self-reflexivity seems to be accentuated by the persistent disparities within the global marketplace, a phenomenon that becomes especially pronounced in narratives of return. These narratives, frequently first published in the Global North, are often read as representations of Nigeria, shaped as much by readers’ expectations as by authorial intention. The Nigerian narratives of return discussed in this thesis were initially published in the Global North. While almost all have African editions – such as *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, published by Parresia Publishers; *I Am Still With You* by Emmanuel Iduma, published by Masobe Books; and *Foreign Gods, Inc.* by Okey Ndibe, published by Bookcraft Africa – they were released after the initial publication in the Global North.⁶⁰ Such positioning not only influences how these works are received but also reflects the layered and sometimes conflicted roles of authors who navigate both personal expression and projected cultural expectations.

Every Day is for the Thief ([2007] 2014) by Teju Cole, however, presents an exception to this pattern, following an unconventional publication trajectory.⁶¹ Conceived initially as blog entries posted on a site called *Modal Minority* by the writer, photographer, and art historian

⁶⁰ At times, maintaining a presence in the African market sometimes requires compromises, such as authors forgoing royalties for these editions such as in the case of Helon Habila. In an effort to make *Travellers* and his other works accessible in Nigeria at an affordable price, the author opted not to receive payment for the Nigerian edition, which was published by Ouida Books (appendix).

⁶¹As the epigraph suggests, the title is derived from the first part of a Yoruba proverb, which continues, “but one day belongs to the owner.” This adage conveys the notion that, although wrongdoing may persist without consequence, justice and accountability are ultimately inevitable.

Teju Cole during his visit to Nigeria in December 2005 (Hallemeier 2013; Zuckerman 2014; Rippl 2018), the work reflects Cole's multifaceted identity and transnational experiences. Born in the United States to Nigerian parents, Cole relocated to Nigeria with his family as an infant. He returned to the U.S. at the age of 17 to continue his education, though he subsequently moved back to Nigeria a year later to complete his bachelor's degree. His academic journey then took him to London, where he enrolled in an African art history programme before eventually returning to the U.S. to pursue a doctorate in art history at Columbia University. These transnational movements underscore Cole's emergence as a quintessential Afropolitan figure, characterised by his versatility and aversion to rigid literary genres. Cole is particularly noted for his literary experiments with social media and the internet (see Pahl 2015), one of which includes the blog from which the *Every Day is for the Thief* originated. The blog, which Cole took down "with no explanation" in 2007 (Lewis-Kraus 2014 in Rippl 2018, 482), featured a combination of prose, poetry, vignettes, and links to music downloads (Zuckerman 2014). Recognising the potential of its content, the Abuja-based publishing house Cassava Republic opted to publish a selection of posts detailing Cole's trip to Nigeria. The novella defies straightforward genre classification: part fiction, part memoir, and part travelogue.⁶² Reflecting on the creative process, the author emphasises this blend of fact and fiction in a note included in the first edition published by Cassava Republic:⁶³

I have sought to capture a contemporary moment in the life of the city in which I grew up. Much of the impetus comes from real-life events. The unnamed narrator of the story is similar to me in certain ways, and different in some other ways. But he and I are not the same person. My hope is that the fictional story I've told through him is, in the deepest sense of the word, true. (Cole 2007, 6)

After its publication, the book received little critical attention. However, following the international success of *Open City* (2011), a newly revised edition was published in 2014 by Penguin Random House in the USA and by Faber and Faber in the UK. This revised edition, which includes different images and is adapted for Western or global readership (see

⁶² This is a conscious choice by the author, as revealed in the interview with Louis Klee (2023), where he argues: "In all my work, I've always had a feeling of responsibility toward [...] freedom. This may sound like a paradox, but freedom always involves an element of responsibility, I think. What I mean is that I've always been eager to retain in my work the right to not stay too tightly to an established form" (125). Through these words, Cole suggests that his artistic endeavors are driven by a responsibility to innovate and to deviate from traditional structures.

⁶³ This point has been further emphasised by the author in interviews (Cole 2016).

Zuckerman (2014),⁶⁴ has sparked significant interest among critics. The novel has since been analysed through various theoretical lenses, including Cosmopolitanism (Hallemeier 2013), Afropolitanism (Rodríguez 2020), Trauma and Memory Studies (Soto 2021) and its intersection with the travelogue genre (Kappel 2017).

Every Day is for the Thief is characterised by a high degree of fragmentation of its narrative structure, further enhanced by the integration of photographs taken by the author. These images are dispersed throughout the short chapters without a strict order – sometimes appearing at the beginning, sometimes within the text, and occasionally at the end of each chapter – creating a dynamic interplay between the visual and textual elements. Together, they shape a story of a return. The unnamed narrator (here again, Habila’s *Travellers* might come to mind), the son of a Nigerian father and an American mother, returns to Nigeria, the country where he spent his childhood and adolescence before migrating and spending fifteen years in the USA. Upon his return, he is not welcomed by his parents but by his uncle and aunt because his father has passed away, and his mother, with whom he has lost contact, now resides in another part of the United States. During the one month he spends in Lagos, he navigates the city like a modern flâneur: somewhat detached, he observes the urban landscape and its inhabitants through visits to various landmarks and locations. Yet, he is also a returnee. The result is a narrative that intertwines observations about the city and the country with personal memories, reflections on his relationship with the land of his childhood, and the complexities of navigating his dual identity as both an insider and an outsider.

In this chapter, I examine the protagonist of *Every Day is for the Thief* as a modern incarnation of the flâneur. The concept of flânerie has been central to interpretations of another novel by Cole: *Open City* (2011), whose protagonist’s frequent analysis through this lens has been so pervasive that it has reignited debates about the relevance and significance of such a figure in contemporary literature. Nonetheless, comparatively few critics have used this label for the protagonist of *Every Day is for the Thief* – notably Wawrzinek (2018) and Sircar (2020) – and only one, Leff (2021), has engaged with flânerie as a broader theoretical concept in relation to the text. The relatively limited application of this label to Cole’s first novel might be attributed to several factors. Firstly, its setting – the city of Lagos – may be perceived as an

⁶⁴ Zuckerman (2014) offers a discussion on the Westernization of the text, highlighting specific examples and the implications of these modifications on its reception in Western markets. For instance, the term “janded man” (2007, 14), which appears in the Cassava Republic edition, is removed in the Random House edition, where it is simply replaced with “man.” This modification dilutes the cultural specificity of the original term, potentially rendering the text more accessible to a Western audience.

atypical backdrop for the metropolitan pedestrian typically associated with the flâneur. More importantly, the traditional notion of the flâneur often implies a degree of nonchalance, detachment, and a lack of commitment to one's surroundings. In contrast, the narrator, despite his detachment, appears deeply personally invested in critiquing the corruption and myriad challenges confronting the country.

My application of the flâneur figure to analyse *Every Day is for the Thief* represents a departure from previous interpretations, which have primarily framed the flâneur within the Eurocentric modernist or, alternatively, the postcolonial context. In contrast, drawing on Ronaldo Vazquez's *Vistas of Modernity* (2020), my analysis situates the flâneur within a decolonial framework, exploring how modernity in Cole's narrative is intrinsically linked to coloniality. The flâneur, as is well established, is deeply intertwined with the concept of modernity. Vásquez's decolonial work has prompted me to reconsider this modernity in conjunction with coloniality. Decolonial thinking posits that modernity and coloniality are inseparable, two sides of the same coin. Drawing on the work of Aníbal Quijano, who introduced the notion of *colonialidad del poder*, Walter D. Mignolo (2019), arguably the most prominent figure in decolonial thought, translates this expression as the "colonial matrix of power" and further elaborates on the concept. From a decolonial perspective, coloniality is understood as the "darker side of modernity," a fundamental aspect of our society's structural and underlying order (Mignolo and Walsh 2018). Similar to the critiques put forth by postcolonial scholars, decolonial thinkers emphasise the need to challenge the narrative of modernity by highlighting the enduring structures of power, domination, and control that originated during colonialism and continue to shape contemporary global relations. Thus, coloniality, shorthand for the colonial matrix of power, is distinct from colonialism as a historical epoch. While colonialism may have been formally dismantled through decolonisation, coloniality persists in various forms, including epistemic domination, economic exploitation, and racism.

The narrator of *Every Day is for the Thief* demonstrates a keen awareness of the colonial imprints on the city's topography, endeavouring to make visible the often-obscured traces of the colonial past. Yet, he exhibits a lesser consciousness of the ongoing coloniality and his own entanglement within it. In this chapter, I argue that interpreting the protagonist as a flâneur provides a lens through which his blind spots can be unveiled. These blind spots, accentuated by the strategic use of images, function as a self-reflexive device, a literary device employed

by the author to critique the representation of Nigeria triggered by the protagonist's return. I will support this thesis by focusing on blind spots in the protagonist's portrayal of the country. Before doing so, however, I will introduce the genealogy of the flâneur.

Tracing the Flâneur: Traditional, Postcolonial, and Contemporary Interpretations in *Every Day is for the Thief*

Intricately connected to the metropolitan space, the flâneur is characterised as a “sophisticated urban loiterer” (Faradji 2002, 2), a figure that navigates the urban landscape, placing the city and its inhabitants under close scrutiny. Originally a French literary figure, the concept of the flâneur is most commonly traced back to Charles Baudelaire. While the embryo of the flâneur can be discerned in Rousseau's *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* under the guise of the *Rêveur philosophique* (Lee 2011), it is *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (1863) – summa of Baudelaire's aesthetics – that fully brings the flâneur into prominence. In the essay “L'Artiste, homme du monde, homme des foules et enfant,” the decadent poet, drawing inspiration from Edgar Allan Poe's story “The Man of the Crowd,” examines the flâneur, whom he distinguishes from and favours over, the dandy.

For the perfect flâneur [...] it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement [...]. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet remain hidden from the world. (9)

Thus, the flâneur becomes the prototype of the modern artist who stands out not only for his aptitude for observation of metropolitan life and his ability to encapsulate it in writing but also for what might be termed as his cosmopolitan mindset. According to Baudelaire, he is “*the man of the world* [...] a spiritual citizen of the universe” (7).

Nearly a century later, it is Charles Baudelaire who is identified as the prototypical modern artist in Walter Benjamin's *Der Flâneur* (1938) and in *Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire* (1938). In his analysis, Benjamin highlights the significance of the flâneur, a figure that sprouts new ideas and perspectives in the context of modernity. For Benjamin, this male pedestrian, who belongs to the upper-middle class, is an artist who “walks long and aimlessly through the streets” while keenly observing the metropolitan environment ([1938] 2010, 124).

As a member of the leisure class, the flâneur is intricately linked to the phenomenon of industrialisation and the nascent consumer culture. As Pfalzgraf (2021) observes, “he [was] most comfortable in the covered, splendidly ornamented shopping passages which flourished in Paris” (20), emblems of consumer culture par excellence. However, the flâneur’s leisurely pace and freedom of movement have also been interpreted as acts of resistance against industrialisation in general and Taylorism in particular. In this light, the 19th-century trend of strolling with tortoises – ⁶⁵ an activity that compelled the flâneur to adopt a slow, deliberate pace – was interpreted by Benjamin (1938) as a protest against the accelerated rhythm of modern life. This slowness allows the flâneur to become an eyewitness to the spectacle of modernity; his “chameleonic quality,” as described by Aatkar (2020, 33), enables him to blend into the crowd unnoticed, granting him the freedom to observe the urban milieu and its inhabitants.

Since then, the figure of the pedestrian artist has kept sparking debates, with the characteristics of the flâneur evolving and being reimagined in response to the changing dynamics of urban environments and society. Simultaneously, the discourse surrounding flânerie has increasingly intersected with considerations of privilege. Feminist scholars have criticised this practice for excluding women, whose experiences in urban spaces have often been obscured (Wolff 1985). Others have highlighted how the concept remains confined to specific segments of the population, perpetuating the marginalisation of racialised individuals. For instance, in 2018, the arrest of two Black men at a Starbucks coffee shop in Philadelphia for occupying a table without making a purchase prompted Teju Cole to post on Facebook: “This is why I always say you can’t be a black flâneur. Flânerie is for whites. For Blacks in white terrain, all spaces are charged” (Cole 2018). Through these words, the author highlights that the traditional concept of the flâneur, with its associations of freedom, detachment, and privilege, does not apply to Black individuals due to the racialized nature of public spaces in predominantly white societies. Furthermore, the invisibility often ascribed to the flâneur is not extended to racialised individuals in Western metropolises, where their mobility is frequently constrained by “police practices of warrantless searches, racial profiling, and stop and frisk” (Sheller 2018, 62).

⁶⁵ As Walter Benjamin writes, “Around 1840, it was briefly fashionable to take turtles for a walk in the arcades. The flâneurs liked to have the turtles set the pace for them. If they had had their way, progress would have been obliged to accommodate itself to this pace” (1983, 850).

The desire to engage with the postcolonial experience has led to the coinage of the term ‘postcolonial flâneur.’ The term is typically credited with first appearing in Adebayo Williams’s 1997 essay, “The Postcolonial and Other Fellow Travelers.” Nevertheless, Williams’s main concern is not the postcolonial flâneur *per se* but rather to critically examine the framework of postcolonialism, particularly its limitations and contradictions, within the context of contemporary global and historical developments. As discussed by Williams, the postcolonial flâneur is an adaptation of the traditional concept of the flâneur, tailored to fit the postcolonial context. Depicted as the “celebrated hangabout completely lost in a crowd while contemplating the wonders of the megalopolis,” he navigates the complexities of the postcolonial city, embodying both an observer and a participant in the urban landscape (Williams 1997, 821). Unlike the traditional flâneur, whose detachment allows for a leisurely exploration of the city, the postcolonial flâneur is engaged in a critique of the “master-narratives and paradigmatic discourses” that have shaped both the colonial and postcolonial experiences and possesses the capacity to challenge such narratives by considering the “tales” of others, which are often marginalised in mainstream discourse (821). While Williams employs the term in relation to postcolonial subjects, Liesbeth Minnaard broadens the scope by using “postcolonial flânerie” to refer to “flânerie in the age of globalization” (80). For Minnaard, the term “postcolonial” is not confined to people and places directly involved in colonialism but rather extends to the contemporary globalised world order that impacts everyone. Through her analysis of the poems of Ramsey Nasr, a poet of Palestinian-Dutch descent and former City Poet of Antwerp, Minnaard emphasises how, unlike the “flâneuristic detachment” of the past, the sense of “‘being out of place’ [in postcolonial flânerie] is largely not self-chosen” (84). Instead, it arises from “processes of marginalisation and exclusion” within the urban environment (84).

Although Williams and Minnaard present differing perspectives on the postcolonial flâneur, they both emphasise his capacity to subvert dominant discourses. In a different vein, Simon Gikandi (2010) adds another layer of analysis by interrogating the elitism and privileged position of flâneur. In doing so, Gikandi juxtaposes the cosmopolitan postcolonial flâneur (and, by extension, himself) with refugees, whose migratory movements are not an expression of affiliation with the global cultural circuit, as in the case of the flâneur but rather a manifestation of the unevenness of our contemporary world. For Gikandi, the members of the cosmopolitan elite are “the flâneurs of our age” (32), “informed spectator[s] of the manners of the urban city,”

who are “tempted to become one with the crowd” (22). In his essay, Gikandi also addresses the inherent danger in cosmopolitans’ “claim [...] to speak for the others” (34).

This thesis has already emphasised that the question of representation has been at the core of postcolonial studies since its inception. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) can be viewed as a deconstruction of the West’s portrayal of the Orient, while Gayatri Spivak’s *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) highlights the ethical dimensions of this debate. The relevance of this question remains significant today. While the representation of the Other by Westerners has been extensively studied, to the point of becoming a distinct branch of comparative literature— *imagology* (Gnocchi 2013)— current scholarship is increasingly focused on how postcolonial writers living abroad represent their cultures. In our present context, marked by the increasing presence of African novels in the Western literary market, which continues to be the “primary context of reception” (Adesokan 2012, 3), scholars have begun to explore the intersection between this literature and the demands of global literary markets (Huggan 2001 and 2020; Brouillette 2007; Adesokan 2012). As previously discussed, Huggan (2001) argues that postcolonial authors operate within an international literary market where readers frequently seek out books like tourists pursue the exotic. Despite this, these authors maintain agency through the use of “strategic exoticism.” Furthermore, as explored in the previous chapter, Brouillette (2007) underlines that “the postcolonial author has emerged as a profoundly complicit and compromised figure whose authority rests, however uncomfortably, in the nature of his connection to the specificity of a given political location” (3-4). In *Every Day is for the Thief* (2007), Cole both engages with and destabilises theis representation of Lagos by employing the figure of the flâneur – a protagonist who aimlessly explores the city and finds material for his writing. Through this character’s detached observations, Cole seems to interrogate the complexities of representing Nigeria while navigating readers’s expectations.

From the very incipit of *Everyday is for the Thief* (2007), the narrator traces the genealogy of his narrative in Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family* (1981) and, as will be later shown, he repeatedly alludes to the work throughout the narration. While both books share the theme of returning to one’s native country after living abroad, Ondaatje’s primary focus is on retracing his family history, whereas the narrator of *Every Day is for the Thief* – a doctor with a predilection for art and literature— is more concerned with offering a portrayal of Lagos and Nigeria. To achieve this, he adopts a flâneuristic approach. He does not however restrict himself to the traditional flâneur’s ambulatory motion, instead using various modes of transportation

such as buses, cars, and *okadas*. In his wonderings, he maintains an observant eye and strives for a detached attitude.

A flâneur in Lagos may seem unconventional, as Basile Ndjio (2011) suggests,

If Benjamin's bourgeois flâneur had lived in this African necropolis, he would not have enjoyed walking down the streets, because the few available sidewalks have been turned into free markets by street vendors, or are constantly congested by drivers who are trying to get around the potholes that generally riddle the roads. Benjamin's famous character would also have been in danger, since at night there are no streetlights to prevent the walker from falling into one of the countless open sewers that deface the public space [...].
(105)

According to Ndjio, contemporary African urban agglomerations, which he terms "necropolises," are so engulfed in insecurity, violence, and terror that the lives of their inhabitants "are permanently subjugated to the power of hazard and uncertainty, and above all to the tyranny of death" (103). The harsh realities of life in African cities seem, therefore, incompatible with reflective flâneuristic explorations. Contrary to this vision, the unnamed narrator in *Every Day is for the Thief* (2007) can be interpreted as a flâneur who navigates the contemporary Nigerian city of Lagos. His flâneuristic movements – taking public buses and *okadas* – reflect an outsider's deliberate exploration of the urban landscape, as he engages in modes of transportation often associated with the masses but does so out of choice rather than necessity. This choice highlights the narrator's privilege and elitism; he can observe and experience these aspects of Lagosian life without being bound by them, thus deconstructing the cosmopolitanism he appears to embrace.

The Complexities of Return: Navigating Insider-Outsider Identity

From the novel's outset, the narrator's privileged status is distinctly emphasised. Unlike other migrant characters who struggle to obtain legal status in the West, such as Obinze in *Americanah* (2013) or Jende Jonga in *Behold the Dreamers* (2016), he possesses dual citizenship. This grants him significant freedom of movement, as he can use both his Nigerian or American passport to access various territories. Consequently, his visit to the Nigerian consulate in New York in the first chapter serves to collect his "green Nigerian passport" (4), which affords him unrestricted mobility within Nigeria. This ability to easily traverse borders epitomises what Gillian Young describes as the cosmopolitan's "power through footloose

freedom and [a] sense of control” (Young 2009, 147), highlighting his privileged position within the global hierarchy – a stark contrast to the experiences of less privileged individuals, who are often constrained by rigid national borders.

Before his physical return, while still at the consulate, the duality of the narrator’s legal status manifests as a duality of vision: although he describes his journey as a return, suggesting a deep familiarity with the country, his estrangement from it is already evident. He requires explanations for basic procedures and struggles with the corruption he encounters at the consulate, where officers take expediting fees that do not officially exist. From his liminal position straddling familiarity and estrangement, he initially resolves to maintain his moral integrity by “insist[ing] on a receipt” (*EDT* 7). However, this high moral stance quickly crumbles when he realises that doing so would delay the release of his passport. This leaves an “unspoken” question lingering: “[...] isn’t it this casual complicity that has sunk our country so deep into its woes?” (7). This episode becomes a portent for his return: as the story unfolds, corruption, which the narrator continually observes in Nigeria, becomes a *fil rouge* of his voyage and one of the reasons that taint his reconnection with the country. As one of his fellow countrymen remarks while waiting at the consulate, “This should be a time of joy. You know? Going home should be a thing of joy” (6), but such issues cast a shadow over this experience. The narrator’s already moderate optimism gradually erodes, revealing the complexities and disillusionment of returning to a place that has changed – or perhaps that he no longer understands in the same way.

Once on the territory of Nigeria, he has the opportunity to observe the country and its inhabitants from what Simon Gikandi (2010) dubs the “suspended pose” of the cosmopolitan, i.e., between the tourist’s detachment and an insider position. Indeed, notwithstanding the use of possessive determiner in reference to Nigeria – “our country” (7) – his affiliation to the topography that he observes and tries to encapsulate in his travelogue is problematised from the incipit of the novel. Like the protagonist of the book that inspires his travelogue – *Running in the Family* (1982) by Michael Ondaatje – who returns to Sri Lanka and feels like a “foreigner” (Ondaatje 1993, 79), the unnamed narrator of *Every Day Is for the Thief* comes back as a “stranger” (*EDT* 17). This alienation from the country of origin echoes the “self-reported alienation” observed in Brouillette’s analysis (2007, 29) of Derek Walcott’s essay “What the Twilight Says.” On the one hand, this positioning can enhance the authenticity of his representation of Nigeria. Like Walcott, the narrator is not really a total stranger and “as

someone who is partly a member of the culture that he partly experiences as a visitor, he is conscious of the underbelly machinations and incongruities that an actual outsider might not acknowledge” (Brouillette 2007, 27). On the other hand, however, the self-reported alienation complicates such representation because he is not a complete local either. Consequently, his narrative is marked by a paradox: it projects a sense of ‘authenticity,’ derived from the narrator’s lived experience and familiarity with Nigerian culture, yet is inevitably limited by his partial outsider status. This duality makes his representation of Nigeria both insightful and incomplete, revealing as much about his estrangement as about the country he attempts to depict. In other words, his supposedly ‘authenticity’ stems from his direct knowledge of Lagos and his personal connection to its culture, language, and past, but his years abroad and Western-influenced perspective also create gaps and biases that shape his portrayal.

The narrator’s estrangement is evident in the way his family perceives him. His assimilation into Western culture causes him to behave in uncanny ways to his Nigerian family, who perceive some of his actions as mere eccentricities; other times, they become concerned for him. For example, they are baffled by his insistence on taking a *danfo* to the city centre. When reminded that he frequently used this mode of transportation during high school years, his uncle remarks, “Ehn, that was a long time ago. You’re not quite as hardened now. Yes, you are street-smart, no one doubts it. But like it or not, America has softened you” (*EDT* 33), suggesting that migration has transformed him. This futile incomprehension broadens the gap between him and his family. The latter do not understand that for him, the *danfo* assumes a symbolic connotation: being the “carrier of the masses, [it] is the perfect symbol of [the Nigerian] context” (35); being “on the *danfo*, being there on the streets” becomes an “exercise” (35) devoted to (re-)discovering the city. Thus, his family’s attempt to secure a private driver is interpreted as an expression of their elitism, of “keeping the lines of privilege taut” (34) and as an obstacle to his immersion in the city: “The degree to which my family members wish me to be separate from the life of the city is matched only by my desire to know that life” (35), he claims to reflect the tension between them.

Paradoxically, however, when he succeeds in riding the *danfo*, the narrator exhibits the elitism he attributed to his Nigerian family, though in his case, it is an intellectual elitism. On the typical Nigerian bus, he notices a “mysterious woman” engrossed in a book by Michael Ondaatje (*EDT* 42). The narrator is captivated by her, whom he observes intensely while imagining a connection based on their shared reading. Indeed, this imagined kinship is rooted

not only in their presumably shared passion for literature but, more specifically, in their mutual engagement with the same author. Therefore, he projects onto the woman a sense of being alike, of being both “eccentric” (42) and different from the mass of Nigerians whose “literacy rate,” he says in what reads like an ethnographic commentary “is low, estimated at fifty-seven per cent” (42). Lost in his musings, he imagines initiating a conversation with her: “We must talk. We have much to say to each other” (43). Yet, a significant contradiction emerges: the impulse for interpersonal connections does not lead to action, and the woman leaves without the narrator talking to her.

This episode marks the beginning of a broader pattern of failed human connections, where the protagonist retreats into what Katherine Hallemeier (2013) terms the “literary cosmopolitanism” of the protagonist: an “immersion in an elite cosmopolitan literary culture” that does not necessarily entail genuine engagement with others (240). This argument parallels Vermeulen’s concept of aesthetic cosmopolitanism (2013), developed in reference to Julius, the protagonist of Cole’s more well-known novel *Open City* (2011). Vermeulen argues that although the novel reflects on “how aesthetic form can contribute to the furthering of cosmopolitan understanding,” it ultimately becomes “a catalogue of failed attempts to forge intercultural connections by artistic means” (2013, 42). At times, the “immersion in an elite cosmopolitan literary culture” (Hallemeier 2013, 240) justifies these failed attempts to forge connections: shortly before the woman disembarks, the narrator reflects on W.H. Auden’s line, “Poetry makes nothing happen” (*EDT* 43). The line, derived from a poem written in 1939 titled “In Memory of W.B. Yeats,” contemplates the significance of poetry in the world and has often been interpreted to suggest that poetry does not directly operate through action but instead exists on a distinct level: it “survives” across time as a potent form of expression, encapsulating the fundamental nature of existence and providing “a mouth” for the articulation of the human condition (Auden 1939). Echoing this sentiment, the narrator frequently opts for introspection and contemplation over taking decisive action.

The reference to Auden is only one of the manifold intertextual references dropped across the narrative, highlighting the aesthetic quality of the narrator’s cosmopolitanism. During his Lagosian strolls, he – much like Julius in *Open City* – frequently cites authors from the canon of World Literature, such as Gabriel García Márquez, William Faulkner, and Vikram Seth. Significantly, apart from the Yoruba historian Samuel Johnson, he refrains from mentioning other African writers, underscoring a caesura from his native cultural context and

an inclination towards a transnational, yet predominantly Western, literary canon. The narrator's aesthetic cosmopolitanism, however, fails to foster authentic human connections, which remain either merely imagined, as in the case of the mysterious woman, or abruptly severed, as illustrated when the narrator declines to share his contact information with a young boy aspiring to emigrate. In this instance, the narrator defers the exchange until their next meeting, fully aware that he "will never see [the boy] again" (EDT 153). This "socially asymmetrical situation" (152) starkly reveals the narrator's privileged detachment and underscores the inherent limitations of the cosmopolitanism he seeks to embody through his readings.

Returning to the intertextual references, one, in particular, invites critical reflection on the narrator's ability to accurately represent Nigeria and its inhabitants: Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. When the protagonist visits an Internet café, the Tomsed Cyber Café – "fifteen minutes' walk from [his] aunt's place" (EDT 25) – he has the opportunity to observe the so-called "yahoo boys" (27): young scammers who send "emails which promise a large share of one fund or another in exchange for a small advance fee" (25). In portraying them, the narrator seems to evoke representations of the Other, which are integral to colonial discourse: the young men have "a certain look" (25) and "shifty faces" (27). The colonial undertone is further emphasised through the analogy he employs: observing the young men "composing a 419 letter", "[he] feel[s] as though [he] discovered the source of the Nile or the Niger" (26), evoking the image of explorers "discovering" geographical landmarks in Africa, often with a sense of superiority or novelty. Towards the end of the small chapter, he acknowledges that "all this" reminds him of *Gulliver's Travels* (28). While this connection appears to stem primarily from the shared appellation between the contemporary scammers and the "race of uncouth creatures" in the satirical novel (28), one might consider whether, as Yvonne Kappel (2017) suggests, it also reflects a more profound affinity between Gulliver and the narrator—specifically, their mutual contempt for the Yahoos.

The narrator's irritation towards the yahoo boys may also arise from an underlying recognition of their similarities. Much like Gulliver, who struggles to admit his resemblance to the brutish Yahoos, the narrator is hesitant to acknowledge his own likeness to the scammers. Yet, both are engaged in the craft of storytelling; if "those [yahoo boys] who tell the best stories are richly rewarded" (27), the same holds true for the narrator and the narrative he constructs about his return to Nigeria. This parallelism extends beyond the narrator to encompass the

author himself, blurring the line between the two. In this light, the “yahoo boys” provide a distorted mirror image of the author himself, as they both rely on narrative construction to achieve their respective goals. While the “yahoo boys” craft stories to extract financial gain, the author utilises his literary work – consumed in the same Global North that receives the scammers’ emails – to pursue his objectives: constructing a representation of Nigeria and, perhaps, shedding light on the country’s corrupt officials. Yet, this representation may be as carefully crafted – and potentially as fictional – as the tales spun by the “yahoo boys.” In such an operation, the author’s aims appear more noble, but that underlying mechanism remains strikingly similar, offering a meta-narrative reflection on the act of writing: they both engage in storytelling as a means to an end, whether that end is financial or artistic reward. This parallel, however, is only skimmed with great reluctance, without being overtly acknowledged by the narrator, which suggests a subconscious recognition of the uncomfortable similarities between his attempt at literary fame and the dubious achievements of the scammers. By skirting this connection, the narrative avoids directly asserting – yet subtle hints – that the representation of Nigeria may be as much a product of narrative construction as the emails crafted by the yahoo boys.

This point is further emphasised by the narrator’s implicit caution to readers regarding the potential for representational manipulation. In describing a gorge near his aunt’s house, he notes, “Viewed *from a certain angle*, the gorge can still look primeval, can still conform to a certain idea of Africa: no gasoline fumes, no gleaming skyscrapers, no six-lane highways. Africa as bush and thicket” (22, emphasis added). The gorge, a metonymy of Africa, can evoke two distinct visions of the continent depending on the observer’s perspective: a comprehensive, more accurate portrayal where modernity is visible or a selective, incomplete – and potentially fictitious – version that aligns with the colonial trope of Africa as an exotic, timeless, and impenetrable land. By underscoring with a triple negation what this reductive perspective overlooks – namely, elements of modernity and development – the sentences expose this skewed view as an illusion that cannot withstand the passage of time: trees have been cut, new buildings have risen, and satellite dishes now proliferate across the landscape. Thus, the narrator does not share the pretence of the colonial discourse, an integral part of modernity, where the “power of representing the real becomes the power of producing the world as representation” (Vázquez 2020, 25). In other words, in modernity’s conception of the world, its representation becomes the only reality and nothing else outside of it is contemplated. On the contrary, the

narrator underlines his artifice: only a specific and partial perspective can perpetuate the colonial depiction of a primaeval country. In doing so, he does not reduce the world to an image, as decolonial thinking imputes modernity's representations (Vázquez 2020), but highlights how the captured image is the object of artifice. This critique extends beyond the "Africa as bush and thicket" imagery to encompass the broader act of representation through narrative, and, as will be further examined in the subsequent section, through photographs. In doing so, the narrator seems to indicate that a comprehensive depiction of Africa is far more intricate and cannot be encapsulated through a singular lens – even if that lens is his own and is itself quite particular.

The peculiarity of the lens through which the narrator views Lagos intertwines the perspective of an insider and an outsider, creating a dynamic that is occasionally evident in the text as it shifts between these vantage points. This dynamic is stylistically exemplified in the text during his visit to Lagos's Chinatown. The two paragraphs describing this scene (*EDT* 144-145) are laden with rhetorical contrasts, marked by the use of the conjunction "but" no fewer than six times in close succession. The narrator's strategic use of the coordinating conjunction acts as a rhetorical pivot, introducing contrasts or complications that challenge the preceding statements, thereby reflecting the nuanced complexities of the city. When the narrator first describes the unexpected sight of a Chinatown in Lagos, he subtly acknowledges its oddity through the question, "Chinatown in Lagos?" only to immediately juxtapose this with a sense of normalcy: "But there it is, another signal that we are in a normal place, or a place that aspires to normalcy [...]" (144). The subsequent "but" shifts the focus to the integration of the Chinese community, who now consider Lagos their home, while simultaneously highlighting the significant challenges they face, such as corruption at the ports and erratic delivery times: "But it isn't an easy life for the Chinese" (144). This contrast continues as the narrator balances the visible presence of the Chinese with the influx of people from all over the world, emphasising the pervasive influence of globalisation in Lagos: "But not only the Chinese are new to the city" (145). This recollection starkly contrasts with the narrator's memory of a time when such diversity was rare, as exemplified by the reactions to his white mother, who was often the subject of stares. The portrayal of Lagos as a globalised, multicultural hub with a thriving economy, where "there is a lot of money to be made" (145), is further tempered by the lingering shadow of the past. This is conveyed through a metaphor that hints at its potentially destructive force: "But the past continues to gather around like floodwater" (145). Finally, the last "but"

intertwines the national past with the narrator's personal memories, blurring the boundaries between the two: "But perhaps I am also thinking of mine, perhaps the two are connected [...]" (145). The exploration of Lagos' Chinatown, with its layered contrasts and rhetorical shifts, echoes earlier moments in the narrative where the protagonist's perspective oscillates between that of an insider and an outsider.

The first concerns the figure of the cannibal. When the topic of cannibalism arises in a family conversation, the protagonist initially distances himself from such rhetoric and tries to disparage it. After all, cannibalism has often been interpreted by postcolonial scholars as the "evidence of a rhetorical strategy of imperialism," serving to delineate the civilised from the savage and emerging as a marker of primitivism (Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin 2013, 26). In *Every Day is For the Thief*, the topos of cannibalism is introduced by the protagonist's uncle, a Nigerian Yoruba. This could be interpreted as an instance of the percolation of colonialist ideology within Nigerian society. The narrator's uncle associates cannibalism with the Ogoni people, asking, "Awon ko l'o m'an je'yan ni? Aren't they the ones who eat people?" (134). As a response, the narrator engages in a critical dialogue with his uncle, attempting to dismantle the stereotype through the use of irony.

Oh come on, Uncle, come on, I say why are *you Nigerians* so fond of rumours? *We – and what I mean is you –* are so tribalistic sometimes, And anyway, don't *our Yoruba people* also have some kingship-related and grimly nonvegetarian ritual?" (134, my emphasis)

In his response, the shifting use of pronouns highlights the complexity of his identity, which navigates between two cultures and perspectives. The alternation between "you" and "we" illustrates how he simultaneously aligns with and distances from the group he critiques – namely, Nigerians and the Yoruba. Through irony and rhetorical questions, he challenges the construction of the Nigerian Other through the notion of cannibalism. In doing so, he momentarily aligns himself with the perspective of an outsider, reflecting Vince Marotta's argument that adopting an outsider status can foster "a critical and 'objective' stance" *vis-à-vis* "one's own culture" (Marotta 2010, 109 in Suárez Rodríguez, 2020). However, in the context of the novel, this stance proves illusory, not only because Marotta's conclusions are not universally applicable – since an outsider's perspective can also lead to blind spots and misunderstandings – but also because the narrator, as an inhabitant of the liminal space of in-betweenness, frequently shifts his position, never permanently settling on a single viewpoint.

An illustrative example of this dynamic occurs when the narrator, who initially adopted an outsider's critical perspective, is drawn back into an insider position. His uncle recounts a story about an albino colleague, Constance, who was posted in the Ogoni region. During her orientation week, "there was a racket at the gates every night" because people "wanted the albino brought out to them so they could cook and eat her" (*EDT* 135). Even if the story reaches the narrator through the filter of two different people – Constance and his uncle – he does not critically assess its validity. Instead, he abandons his initial scepticism regarding the stereotype of cannibalism and shifts his focus from deconstructing such a stereotype to appreciating the humorous delivery of the story. He mainly focuses on how his uncle's choice of Yoruba words enhances its comedic effect: "The particular Yoruba choice of words" chosen by the uncle "makes the story even funnier" (135). However, this humour is inaccessible to non-Yoruba readers, as the narrator neither translates nor explains why it is funnier in Yoruba, thereby framing the narrative from an insider's perspective and privileging his cultural context over the Western reader's understanding. Consequently, this moment in the narrative effectively positions non-Yoruba readers as the Other, thereby inverting the conventional power dynamics in postcolonial literature, where it is typically the native who is cast as such.

The second instance of this unstable, oscillating positionality is evident during the narrator's participation in an engagement ceremony. As in other moments throughout the narrative, he initially adopts an outsider's perspective, akin to the ethnographic research methodology popularised by Bronisław Malinowski, known as participant observation. In these instances, the narrator endeavours to observe, study, interpret and represent Nigerian culture with the detachment of an ethnographer, thereby invoking the tradition of modernity, where "being at a distance reveals the condition of separation [of the subject from the world] that characterises modernity's exercise of the gaze" (Vázquez 2020, 30). At the event, his description of the engagement rite is interspersed with direct dialogue recounting how armed robbers killed Mrs Adelaja's husband. The juxtaposition of these violent memories with the joyous wedding occasion creates a stark contrast. Periodically, the narrator provides readers with explanations and contextual information through sentences like the following: "Home invasions were extremely common in Lagos in the 1990s, and they still happen, though less frequently" (45). Purely informative and devoid of stylistic embellishment, these sentences do not display apparent emotions.

However, unlike 19th-century ethnographers, the narrator is not an objective outsider and is quickly drawn into his family's history. He disrupts the alternation between the description of the engagement rite and the dialogues to share personal memories of two specific incidents that affected his family – one occurring while they were still in Nigeria and the other after they had moved to America. The first incident involves a failed robbery attempt where the robbers could not break into the house, leaving the family terrified and huddled together as they listened to the robbers attempting to force their way in. The second incident, which took place after the narrator had left the country, was more violent, with the robbers physically assaulting family members and stealing valuables. The narrative then returns to one of the participants telling the story of how Mrs Adelaja's husband was killed. Although the narrator attempts to maintain a detached attitude, his involvement is revealed through the interjection "those bastards" when referring to the robbers (47). Thus, he oscillates between an outsider's perspective and an insider's, causing his desired detachment to crumble under the weight of family ties. Yet, this dissolution does not lead to a reconnection with the country or a sense of home. Instead, Nigeria evokes in him a profound sense of horror, which is conveyed through the use of intertextuality. The chapter concludes on a sombre note with a quotation from Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*, specifically from Canto III. This line, which inspired T.S. Eliot's reference quoted by Helon Habila in *Travellers*, appears as Dante witnesses the souls of the damned, eternally condemned to Hell. Its inclusion in the narrative creates a dramatic parallelism: just as Dante's journey through Hell exposes him to the hopelessness of the damned, the narrator may be expressing a similar despair about the state of his society, where violence and death can become inescapable.

The Blind Spots of Return: Visual Opacity and Fragmented Perspective

The narrator's dual perspective, balanced between that of a stranger and an insider, is further mirrored in the 19 black-and-white photographs interspersing the text. These photographs may be interpreted as an homage to Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, a work that the narrator considers an essential part of his literary heritage. Cole emulates the narrative structure of the Sri Lankan-born author, where images are strategically placed at the beginning of each chapter, creating a complex interplay between the transparency and obfuscation of their meanings. While "for Ondaatje, writing sometimes elucidates, sometimes obfuscates the [...] photographs on display" (Kim 2015, 402), Cole appears more inclined toward the latter, using

visual ambiguity to complexify the representation he gives of Nigeria. This attitude evokes the concepts of transparency and opacity as elaborated by Édouard Glissant in his critique of Western approaches to understanding the Other.

The Martinican poet, philosopher, and literary critic identifies an imperative of transparency imposed by the dominant West upon non-Western cultures: “If we examine the process of ‘understanding’ people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is [a] requirement for transparency,” Glissant asserts (1997, 189-190). This demand functions as a form of control, wherein dominant powers insist that others must be fully comprehensible and assimilable according to their own terms. In direct opposition to this, Glissant advocates for “the right to opacity” or the right to remain inscrutable, free from interpretation through the lens of Western thought. The images woven into Cole’s narrative seem to embrace this right to opacity. They not only “dimly evoke rather than represent reality” (Neumann and Rippl 2020, 203) but at times destabilise the representation offered altogether.

The relationship between opacity and transparency becomes particularly significant when examining the novel through the lens of a travelogue. Traditionally, the travelogue genre adopts a stance of transparency, where the traveller, typically a Westerner, endeavours to comprehend and fully describe the cultures encountered during their journeys. This approach often establishes a highly imbalanced relationship between the observer and the observed, positioning the traveller as an authoritative figure. Referring to the novel, Yvonne Kappel (2017) explores the role of images within the text, linking them to the tradition of the colonial travelogue, in which images “function as complements to the written accounts” (76).⁶⁶ However, Kappel contends that the photographs in *Every Day is for the Thief* diverge from this tradition for they “do not comply with the traditional travelogue’s claims to knowledge acquisition via visual documentation” (75), primarily because there is no direct or explicit connection between the images and the content of the chapters.

This observation holds for several of the images presented, as will be examined shortly. Nonetheless, many of them could also be interpreted as visual supports for the episodes described in the short, fragmented chapters. To cite specific instances, Chapter Eight recounts the previously mentioned episode of the mysterious woman, with the accompanying photograph depicting a woman in a *danfo*. Moreover, the graphic corollary of Chapter Twelve

⁶⁶ The 2022 BNF exposition *Visages de l’exploration au XIXe siècle*, which showcased the archives of the French Société de Géographie, including a plethora of *carnets de voyage*, effectively demonstrated how visual documentation was pivotal in establishing the authority of explorers’ narratives.

is a snapshot of the market, the location where, as the narrator discloses, a boy was killed after being accused of theft. In Chapter Eighteen, a picturesque image of a school field, with a goat at its centre, corresponds to the location where the narrator and his family awaited a container filled with *Tokunbo* – “second-hand imported consumer goods” (*EDT* 102) – and were met with hostility by local area boys demanding money. Thus, the graphic intertextual elements complicate the narrator’s position as an untarnished storyteller, suggesting that he is not fully disengaged from the tradition of the colonial travelogue. He is not, as Nuvolati (2009) reads the figure of the flâneur, the last superhero, but he is imbricated in the contemporary “colonial matrix of power” (Mignolo 2019).

His position as a partial outsider propels him to visually document his journey through Nigeria as if to offer readers a ‘tangible witness’ account reminiscent of the methods of 20th-century ethnographers. Simultaneously, however, this compulsion to document is thwarted by an artistic impulse. Indeed, in a 2014 interview, Cole describes the photos as “narrat[ing] an imagined Lagos, much like the text in which they are interspersed” (n.p.), blending visual and narrative elements in his portrayal of the city. The coexistence of these dual impulses highlights a tension between documentation and interpretation, reflecting both a desire to record and an acute awareness of the limitations and inherent biases within one’s lens.

This tension is further underscored by the ambiguous presentation of the photographs, which lack captions or ekphrases in the strict sense. As a result, their connection to the text is often ambiguous, requiring readers to infer their relationship. In some instances, this inference proves so elusive that it becomes almost impossible to discern the intended connection. Thus, the narrator’s drive to document his journey coexists with a counteracting force that, if not entirely dismantling the representation of Lagos offered in the novel, certainly seeks to destabilise it. This destabilisation is visually reinforced by three categories of photographs, all of which disrupt clear vision: blurry images, filtered pictures, and photographs offering only partial views.

The blurry and hazy images share a common aesthetic that obscures more than reveals. Examples include the indistinct landscape where only a palm tree is discernible (*EDT* 20), the blurred figures in an unclear indoor environment – potentially the setting of the engagement ceremony recounted (49) – and a windshield covered in raindrops, offering only a partially visible view of the outside world (122-123). These images may highlight the inherent

challenges of documenting a place or experience in a manner that fully captures its complexities.

To illustrate this complexity, let us examine the two photographs in Chapter Twelve and the text they frame. As previously mentioned, the chapter begins with an image that seemingly portrays the market the narrator visits. The picture, devoid of people, depicts an empty street lined with ramshackle houses. A puddle is at the centre of the image and reflects part of the building. This image introduces the content of the chapter. The text reveals that the narrator arrives at this particular location to “see with [his] own eyes” (*EDT* 60) the place where, akin to an incident in Abani’s *Graceland* (2004), a mob brutally murdered an eleven-year-old boy by setting him on fire after he attempted to steal a baby. The construction of the chapter is intricate, blending observation, memory, and hearsay. It starts with the narrator as an observer visiting the market, which he describes as “the essence of the city” (*EDT* 55), and recounting typical experiences such as haggling and navigating the chaotic environment. His perceived foreignness is emphasised by the surprise he elicits when speaking Yoruba. The remark, “I didn’t know you knew the language, I took you for an oyinbo, or an Ibo man!” (57), made by a vendor, underscores that the narrator does not appear as a local. The narrator’s irritation at being perceived as an outsider is a recurring theme in contemporary Nigerian narratives of return, also present in *Looking for Transwonderland* and *I Am Still with You*.

After grounding the reader in the everyday life of the Lagosian market, the narrator abruptly shifts in tone and focus: “Here, I’m told, is where the boy was killed” (59). This sentence has a jarring effect, transitioning the narrative from the mundane to the tragic with stark immediacy. Although the narrator was not physically present at the time of the boy’s murder, he reconstructs the event by interweaving fragments of past experiences – “I’ve seen it before. At least, I’ve seen it in its constituent parts, if never all at once” (59) – with imagination. The outcome of “stitch[ing] the various vignettes into a single story” (59) is the following vivid description:

An old car tyre – from where? – has been quickly sourced. The boy’s clothes are torn off, he is knocked down repeatedly. Space has been created out of the congestion. A gaggle of school girls, in green and white school uniforms, has joined the spectators. And a new twist: in the crowd, there stands a man with a digital camcorder. The single eye of his machine collects the event: this fragile body, which, shed of clothes, is now like a dark sapling whipped about in the wind. The tire is flung around the boy. He is losing consciousness but revives into panic when he is doused with petrol. From the distance, two traffic officers – the ones they call Yellow Fever – watch. The splashing liquid is lighter than water, it is fragrant, it drips off him, beads in

his woolly hair. He glistens. The begging stops. He stops begging and he is not yet lit. The whites of his eyes are bright as lamps. And then only the last thing, which is soon supplied. The fire catches with a loud gust, and the crowd gasps and inches back. The boy dances furiously but, hemmed down by the tire, quickly goes prone, and still. The most vivid moment in the fire's life passes and its colour dulls and fizzles out. (*EDT* 60-61)

The harrowing violence of the passage captures the brutal death of the young boy with cinematic immediacy. In free indirect discourse, the narrator's reflections and the narrated events seamlessly intertwine, blurring the boundaries between his thoughts and the recounted event. His tone remains predominantly detached as if observing the unfolding violence from a physical and emotional distance. The immediacy of the past event is heightened by the use of the present tense, even though the event took place six weeks before. This deliberate collapse of temporal distance forces the reader into the scene, akin to witnessing a recorded video as it plays out in real time. The narrative's vivid sensory details – the smell of petrol, the sound of the fire, and the visual of the boy glistening with petrol – intensify the reader's immersion.

Furthermore, the use of various rhetorical devices elevates the text's aesthetic quality. Metaphors abound, such as the comparison of the boy's body to "a dark sapling whipped about in the wind," which evokes a profound sense of helplessness and vulnerability. Similarly, the boy's desperate, involuntary movements as he succumbs to the flames are metaphorically described as "dancing," a term that grotesquely contrasts with the brutality of his death. The fire itself is personified, as it "catches with a loud gust," imbuing it with an active, almost malevolent presence in the scene. The passage also features alliteration, as seen in the phrase, "The splashing liquid is lighter than water, it is fragrant, it drips off him, beads in his woolly hair," where the repetition of the /l/ sound imparts a fluid, almost lyrical quality that stands in stark contrast with the violence being depicted. Moreover, the narrative's rhythm is further shaped by its paratactic structure, characterised by short, direct sentences devoid of conjunctions, which mirrors and amplifies the chaotic, fragmented nature of the violence. A particularly striking example is the terse sentence "He glistens," which aestheticises the boy's death through a verb typically associated with beauty or positive connotations, thus highlighting the disturbing dissonance between the language used and the horrific reality it describes.

This scene triggers a critical reflection on the ethics of spectatorship, positioning the reader as a witness to the violence. It also raises questions not only about the morality of passively observing such events but also about the implications of the dissemination of such

material. The presence of a character who records the boy's suffering "with a digital camcorder" (*EDT* 61) deepens this reflection, as the narrator imagines the scene as filtered through the lens of this man's camera. This mediation doubly mediates the event – first through the camcorder's eye, which captures and reproduces the violence, and second through the narrator's text, which reconstructs the recorded scene for the reader. By rendering the spectacle accessible to an even broader audience, the recording becomes a symbol of how violence can be commodified, reproduced, and circulated, prompting the reader to question the responsibility involved in consuming such violence.

There are those who will copy the tape, it will move around, perhaps provide some grim entertainment for the men in the shops, or in police stations or homes. It will finally be broadcast on the national news, to outrage and in an instant forgetting. I cannot find the will to hunt the tape down, but I hear about it here and there. (61)

In the narrator's view, the dissemination of the video fails to produce a lasting impact: the initial public outrage is fleeting and quickly gives way to oblivion. Instead, the video serves as a source of "grim entertainment," which underscores the ethical concerns associated with the consumption of violent content. The narrator himself abstains from engaging with such material because he lacks the motivation or emotional strength to search for the video of the violent incident. However, as Zuckerman (2014) notes, "he hardly needs to: his words are doing what even Lagos's own recorders are somehow failing to do" (n.p.) – conveying the event with a vividness that transcends the capabilities of the local recorders.

Intricately composed following the rule of thirds, in a rendering of the complex narrative issues of the text describing the boy's death, the visual interpretation of the event is encapsulated in the blurred photograph at the end of the chapter (*EDT* 63). The image features a man in mid-stride in its foreground, captured while running and significantly out of focus. To the right, a car in motion appears, with its passenger blurred in the frame. In the background, dark smoke, which alludes to the fire that claimed the young boy's life, rises behind a stark white wall. The overall composition, marked by its lack of sharp focus, conveys a scene captured in haste, where details are obscured, leaving the viewer with an impressionistic rather than an exact representation of the moment. This constructed image – where "the fire depicted in the photo is not the fire that consumed the boy's meagre body" (Rippl 2018, 478) – seems intentionally decentred. Such a decentring angle, which does not portray the body of the boy or

anything that could resemble it, opposes bystanders' "voyeuristic pleasure in the spectacle of the other's pain" of the text (Neumann and Ripple 2020, 211).

This technique of using visual ambiguity to reflect narrative themes is not confined to this particular photograph but is a recurring strategy throughout the novel. Many images similarly incorporate visual elements that obscure or fragment the view, creating a sense of partiality and incomplete understanding. For instance, a cracked window (*EDT 2*), a fishing net (115), or raindrops (122-123) serve as barriers that limit visibility, echoing the thematic decentring in the photograph of the boy's death. Similarly, the photograph of the school field discussed earlier is partially obstructed by a cement fence (104-105), while the image of the woman in the *danfo* is seen through two sets of vehicle windows (40). At other times, the perspective suggests a constrained or incomplete view, evoking the partial view of the gorge "viewed from a certain angle" (22). This sense of partial visibility is also evident in the first of the photographs that extends across two pages. Taken from inside a car, the view is limited by the windshield and the raindrops that rest on it, revealing only a section of an overpass (12-13). Additionally, the photograph of students walking toward a school, taken from a slightly lower angle, offers a restricted view: the students' faces remain unseen, and the building is only partially visible, focusing instead on the immediate area where the students are heading (32). Other examples of this motif of partiality include a bird's-eye view of three individuals walking on a worn concrete surface, which omits the broader context and thus conveys a sense of incompleteness (157) and a photograph that appears to capture a moment from a ceremonial event, possibly the Eyo festival (140). The limited perspective of specific photographs, or the presence of filters that impede visibility in others, can be interpreted as a visual metaphor for the limited and fragmented perspective the narrator provides. Thus, the interplay between narrative and imagery reinforces the idea that readers' understanding of Lagos is inevitably shaped by the narrator's partial and mediated perspective, emphasising that his representation is inherently incomplete and filtered – marked by intentional blind spots.

The concept of blind spots is indeed significant to the author, who, years later, publishes a work explicitly titled *Blind Spot* (2017). This work, which first appeared in Italian as *Punto d'Ombra* (2016b), features 150 photographs paired with prose fragments, with the relationship between the two being deliberately non-illustrative. As Cole disclosed, the title was inspired by a personal experience: one morning, he awoke with a partial loss of vision in one eye, a condition known as papillophlebitis, colloquially referred to as 'Big Blind Spot Syndrome'

(Neumann and Rippl 2020). From this physical affliction, a broader metaphorical significance was derived: what does the photographer overlook or leave unexplored, intentionally or unintentionally, when capturing an image? Indeed, as the author argues, *Blind Spot* “can also be seen as the fourth in a quartet of books about the limits of vision” (Cole 2017, 325), with *Every Day is for the Thief* being the first of these works. As in *Blind Spot*, in *Every Day is for the Thief*, through the unnamed narrator’s introspective monologue and the photographs interwoven with the text, readers are presented with a perspective that inherently contains blind spots and figures out of frame. As the author says, “To look is to see only a fraction of what one is looking at. Even in the most vigilant eye, there is a blind spot. What is missing?” (Cole 2017, 325). In the following section, we attempt to answer this question.

A Blind Spot: Recognising Colonialism, Overlooking Coloniality

Through his wanderings, the narrator of *Every Day is for the Thief*, much like Julius, the protagonist of *Open City*, deploys an “unflinching look at the legacies of colonialism in twenty-first-century” (Hartwiger 2016, 7). However, while Julius unveils the vestiges of colonialism in New York, the unnamed narrator of *Every Day is For the Thief* directs his critical gaze toward the urban landscape of Lagos. During his visit to the old city centre, he focuses on Lagos’s historical involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. Lagos had, in the past, one of the busiest ports for sending “human cargo” (*EDT* 113) to the United States. During his visit, the narrator draws a transnational connection between the city as a point of departure and New Orleans, the destination for slaves, a city known to have had “twenty-five different slave markets” in 1850. This transnational connection complicates the Manichean division that portrays Africa solely as a monolithic victim of violence while rightly not absolving the West of its role as a perpetrator. The involvement in the triangular trade of Nigeria’s past,

is a secret only because no one wants to know about it. It was at those markets that buyers came to bid on the black men and women who had survived the crossing, but that is a history that is now literally submerged. Actually, it was submerged long before the recent flood, the city’s slaving past drowned in drink and jazz and Mardi Gras. High times: the best cure for history. (*EDT* 112 – 113)

Historical amnesia is exacerbated by the lack of material vestiges that could be linked to this dark chapter of history. He notes that “little physical evidence remains” (114-115) of this past, primarily due to the peculiar morphology of the region: “The calm water of the delta made it

possible to berth the ships” (113) with ease, thus eliminating the need for forts. Consequently, this past is literally submerged by the water as well as metaphorically submerged in the collective memory. To emphasise this metaphorical erasure, the narrator employs irony in the phrase “High times: the best cure for history,” critiquing contemporary Nigerian society’s tendency to use celebration and revelry as a form of escapism from past wounds. This powerful image resurfaces later, with the narrator describing the nation’s past as “continu[ing] to gather around like floodwater” (145), suggesting a persistent undercurrent of unresolved history. The act of uncovering the city’s hidden and suppressed history aligns the narrator with the figure of the postcolonial flâneur, who navigates the urban space with an awareness of its colonial past and postcolonial present and reminds us that “our globalized world is still in important ways marked by this history and by the practices and ideologies involved in the colonial project” (Minnaard 2013, 83).

While the narrator’s gaze acknowledges the traces of colonialism, he remains tragically oblivious to the broader and more insidious presence of coloniality in Nigeria, underscoring the recurring theme of blind spots. Throughout his narrative, he offers severe critiques of the country’s governance and pervasive corruption, yet his critique is incomplete. He fails to recognise the role of neo-capitalism in perpetuating the country’s shortcomings and views specific capitalist developments favourably. Examples include the MUSON Centre and the emergence of new eateries modelled after American fast-food chains, which align Nigeria more closely with the Global North— a standard the narrator implicitly upholds as his compass.

After an unsatisfactory experience at the National Museum, the narrator visits the MUSON Centre, an institution that, since its establishment in the 1980s, has assumed a “leading role in the musical and theatrical life of the country” (*EDT* 81). Once he arrives, he immediately notes the elite status of the venue, as evidenced by the parking lot filled with luxury foreign automobiles. Though the Centre is largely accessible only to “wealthy people” (81) due to its high costs, the narrator convinces himself that the democratization of the space may be possible in the future. As a compromise, he rationalises that, in the meantime, “[this] is better than nothing” (86). Once inside, he is struck by the pristine and well-organized environment, where transnational influences are evident, such as a restaurant named “La Scala” (81) and a professional company performing a play by Molière (82). The narrator is so enthralled by how the centre presents itself that he overlooks certain aspects of its operations.

In a matter-of-fact tone, almost passing by, he mentions the centre's collaborations with major corporations, stating: "MUSON also understands the value of running a nonprofit organization in partnership with corporations: the Agip Recital Hall is named for an oil company, as is the auditorium, Shell Hall" (*EDT* 82). The juxtaposition of cultural spaces, such as a recital hall and an auditorium, with the names of oil corporations, fails to provoke any further reflection from the narrator. However, both Agip and Shell have been extensively criticised for their involvement in the exploitation and despoliation of the Niger Delta (Ferguson 2006; Nixon 2011). Shell, in particular, has also faced severe scrutiny for its allegedly complicity in the execution of Ogoni environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa by the Abacha regime (Nixon 2011). Given his background as a Nigerian writer, Teju Cole is undoubtedly aware of these controversies. Yet, his character appears to overlook these ethical concerns, instead perceiving the collaboration positively. Moreover, by speculating that the "secret" to the centre's successful management lies in its status as a "private venture" (82), the narrator implicitly endorses the exclusion of the Nigerian government, referred to as the "great bungler" (83). Still, he overlooks the government's collaboration with the multinational corporations mentioned earlier. The only aspect he criticises harshly is the discriminatory pay structure. "It is a sour note" (85), he says, highlighting the racial inequality embedded within the institution, which diminishes the value and recognition of qualified Nigerian educators in comparison to their white counterparts.

Later, the narrator's visit to the new Nigerian eateries scattered across Lagos makes him describe them as "a small example of something that is being done right in the new Nigeria" (148). While he acknowledges the absence of American chains as a positive aspect, he overlooks that the underlying economic model remains identical. This perspective suggests that the narrator often implicitly positions the West as the reference standard, particularly the United States. For instance, he notes, "In general, these restaurants are as clean as the average McDonald's; they are air-conditioned, and they have functioning toilets" (147). While this statement appears factual and neutral, the simile subtly suggests that Western-centric norms are viewed as a universal benchmark of modernity, exemplifying cultural hegemony wherein Western standards become the default measure of progress. The narrator's characterisation of these "new eateries designed on the American fast-food model" (147) as a "modest triumph" (148) further underscores this alignment with Western ideals.

The examples of the MUSON Centre and the fast-food eateries illustrate that the narrator's vision for improving the country hinges on the adoption of the Western neo-capitalistic model. They also underscore his inability to recognise this very model as a driving force behind uneven global development, overlooking the fact that "capitalist development does not smooth away but rather produces unevenness, systematically" (WReC 2015, 12). He fails to engage in "thinking and doing beyond the dominant paradigm" (Vázquez 2020, xvii), as decolonial thinkers advocate, thereby revealing his entanglement in coloniality.

To delve into the reasons for this oversight, the concept of positionality in decolonial thought proves significant. The concept refers to an individual's embeddedness within the colonial matrix of power; it involves critically assessing one's social, cultural, and historical path of life in relation to power structures. Decolonial thinkers rightly believe that positionality is crucial because it shapes how one perceives, interprets, and represents the world. To make one's biases more transparent, many scholars have adopted the practice of including positionality statements in recent years. Returning to *Every Day is for the Thief*, the novel subtly discloses elements that collectively contribute to constructing the narrator's positionality, offering readers insights into the perspective from which he views and describes the environment he observes. This focus on his positionality is not intended as a critique of the narrator's blind spots as if he were a real person; instead, I read it as a narrative technique designed to highlight these blind spots within the larger framework of the novel. Indeed, it is evident that even if he offers background information on how his perception of the world is formed, the narrative exposes his lack of critical engagement with it for he prefers to remain detached from a critique of his implication within the colonial matrix of power.

Readers are introduced to the narrator as a highly educated doctor who harbours a penchant for writing. He openly acknowledges that his time spent residing in the United States has significantly "changed" him; he has "taken into [himself] some of the assumptions of life in a Western democracy" (*EDT* 17). This internalisation profoundly influences his perception of Nigeria. Furthermore, his portrayal of the country is sometimes compromised by his desire to write. Indeed, the country and its people are often viewed through the lenses of the author as writing material – a rich repository of stories awaiting to be told and written:

The air in the strange, familiar environment of this city is dense with story, and it draws me into thinking of life as stories. The narratives fly at me from all directions. Every-one who walks into the house, every stranger I engage in conversation, has a fascinating story to deliver. (64)

The passage parallels the unnamed narrator of Habila's *Travellers*, who, as discussed in the previous chapter, observes that in his encounters with refugees, "the stories kept coming, discursively, randomly" (T 278). Similarly, the narrator of *Every Day is for the Thief* perceives the country as a fertile ground for storytelling, where every interaction holds the potential for a new narrative to emerge. Through these sentences, both Habila and Cole personify stories, imbuing them with agency as though they possess the capacity to act independently and gravitate toward the narrators, who, by contrast, are depicted as passive recipients of these narratives.

Given the richness of material at his disposal in Nigeria, the narrator of Cole's novel ends up having "pity" (EDT 65) for all the writers whose only source of inspiration is the American suburbs, a setting he perceives as creatively stifling, describing the United States as an "arid patch for stories" (66). Consequently, his return to Nigeria is marked by an almost 'exotic' perception of the country, where every challenge and incident is seen as having the potential to morph into writing material; even inconveniences like "power cuts" become sources of enjoyment (66). When he witnesses an altercation between two men, one of whom is "bleeding at the mouth" (65), his focus remains on the aesthetics of the event: "Well, this is wonderful, I think. Life hangs put here. The pungent details are all around me. It is a paradise for the lover of gossip" (65). His detached tone in this reaction vividly contrasts with the scene's violence, as he maintains an observational stance, focused on its potential as a material for writing.

The abundance of material even leads him to contemplate going back to Nigeria permanently:

No such aridity here, but that doesn't mean I can just move to Nigeria. (66)

And yet, and yet. The place exerts an elemental pull on me. There is no end of fascinations. (68)

I am not going to move back to Lagos. No way. I don't care if there are a million untold stories, I don't care if that, too, is a contribution to the atmosphere of surrender. I am going to move back to Lagos. I must. (69)

The quotes, positioned closely together in the text, convey the narrator's profound internal conflict and the contradictory emotions he feels *vis-à-vis* Nigeria, as well as the possibility of returning permanently. The abrupt shifts in his stance – oscillating from firmly denying the possibility of returning to affirming it with conviction, only to reverse course again – underscore

his inner turmoil and evoke the sense of an ongoing internal dialogue. This vacillation suggests that the narrator is experiencing a kind of cognitive dissonance as he grapples with the dual forces of attraction to and repulsion from the idea of return. According to Maximilian Feldner (2019), the narrator's indecision reflects a common dilemma shared by the so-called third-generation Nigerian writers. For these writers, "Nigeria exerts an undeniable gravitational pull on their characters, a pull that is offset by their difficulties and struggles of actually living in the country" (Feldner 2019, 2). In the scholar's view, this tension is so pervasive that it represents a "constitutive feature of contemporary Nigerian literature" (Feldner 2019, 2). Notwithstanding the country's magnetism, the narrator ultimately chooses not to return, as evinced by the novella's ending.

The narrative's concluding chapter shows the narrator is already back in New York, having recovered from malaria contracted in Nigeria. He is in his warm apartment but cannot sleep. While describing the outside landscape as muted by snow, "a memory of Lagos returns to [him]" (EDT160). The present moment, therefore, intertwines with a flashback: "I am there again" (154), he says. The use of present tense within the flashback creates an immersive experience for readers. In such a flashback, he describes a flâneuristic moment: "letting go of my *moorings* makes me connect to the city as pure place, through which I move without prejudging what I will see when I come around a corner" (159, emphasis added). The "mooring" he releases can be interpreted not only in the literal sense of getting lost but also metaphorically as letting go of the mental anchors that had previously kept him emotionally detached from the country. By relinquishing these anchors, the narrator feels a deeper connection to the city in its most authentic, unfiltered form. The memory transports him to the streets of Lagos, where he likens his experience to navigating a labyrinth rather than a maze. Unlike a maze, which is full of dead ends, the labyrinth suggests a sense of direction, of arrival to a "meaningful center" (159). This centre consists of a street where coffins are crafted, a space that evokes in the narrator a profound sense of reconnection: "It feels like a return, like a centre, though it is not a place I have ever been before" (159), he claims.

Yet, these coffins are initially mistaken for boats – a confusion, which is deeply symbolic when viewed through the historical lens of the Atlantic slave trade. Indeed, through this interpretative key, boats evoke the forced displacement of the transatlantic slave trade, where countless lives were taken across the ocean, often ending in death and loss of cultural moorings. This symbolism becomes even more poignant when considering the narrator's

current home in the USA, a country profoundly shaped by the legacy of that same forced migration. The coffins, which at first appear as boats to the narrator, thus serve as a haunting reminder of lives lost and histories erased in the crossing. This moment draws the narrator into a larger legacy of diaspora and historical trauma. By “letting go,” he allows himself to hint at these hidden undercurrents of the past, experiencing Lagos not only as an individual returning to his homeland but simultaneously as a diasporic subject, a product of the transatlantic triangle. In this light, the street of coffins becomes a symbolic “meaningful center” (159) that embodies both a return to his roots and an acknowledgement of the painful legacies of forced displacement. This connects him to a shared history of the African diaspora.

His further decision not to photograph the scene, “intended only for the memory, [...] only for sidelong glance followed by forgetting” (161), suggests that certain experiences and histories are too intimate to be captured and archived. Whereas earlier, the limitations of his visual representation were suggested through blurriness and physical filters, here, he deliberately chooses to preserve this memory without any visual aid, recognising that it carries a depth beyond what a photograph could convey. This moment of reconnection with his homeland allows him to part from it with a sense of closure. Although he feels the pull towards remaining, he understands that “it is not possible for him to stay” (161), accepting the inevitability of moving on.

Conclusion

In *Every Day is for the Thief*, Teju Cole reimagines a flâneur, traditionally a symbol of European modernity, within the urban landscape of Lagos, imbuing the act of returning with a sense of detachment, ungrounded observation, and even a gratuitous quality. After returning to Nigeria, the protagonist roams the country’s topography, observing his surroundings – yet Nigeria remains elusive until the novel’s end.

During such strolls, the protagonist’s privileged, dual perspective – oscillating between an insider and an outsider – shapes his observations of Lagos and Nigeria, rendering his narrative both insightful and limited. Cole’s use of the flâneur serves thereby as a self-reflexive device, exposing the narrator’s blind spots, particularly in his selective critique of the socio-political landscape: while he is acutely aware of the visible scars of colonialism, his failure to fully grasp the enduring impact of neo-colonial forces, particularly those embedded in global

capitalism, reveals the limitations and partiality of his representation of Lagos. The work's title serves as a significant indication of this: "Every day is for the thief" constitutes only the first part of a Yoruba proverb that continues with a second part: "but one day belongs to the owner." The proverb's meaning underscores the idea that one may engage in unethical behaviour and remain unpunished for a time, but eventually, accountability is inevitable. Given the narrator's persistent criticisms of the Nigerian government, it is almost inevitable to interpret the "thief" in the proverb as a metaphor for the government itself. The second part of the proverb, which appears in the work's epigraph, thus introduces a more optimistic vision of the future – one that, precisely because it is yet to unfold, the narrator is unable to represent. For now, however, as suggested by the other epigraphs drawn from Maria Benet's 2005 poem taken from the collection *Mapmaker of Absences*, he can only open a "window" – "one of many" – onto the "town" (*EDT*, n.p.).

5. Non-fictional Travelogues of Return: A Possibility of Healing from Trauma?

Journeying Through Trauma

It might be tempting to affirm that fictional novels dominate Nigerian literature in a way that does not leave space for non-fiction. However, such a statement would be biased by a literary elitism of sorts: while fiction garners both national and international literary prizes in a way that obfuscates the rest, the African literary scene boasts a rich array of non-fictional writings. More than 20 years ago, Wendy Griswold (2000) remarked in her pathbreaking study of reading practices in Nigeria that, in the country, “reading is inclined to be more instrumental than ludic, more aimed at acquiring skills and knowledge needed for social and occupational mobility” (110). According to Sarah Brouillette (2020), Griswold’s thesis remains pertinent even today. Nevertheless, literary criticism hardly adventures in the analysis of such works, preferring centring on the analysis of novels, as Krishnan (2014) laments. In an effort to bridge this gap, this chapter explores two non-fictional works where the authors recount their return to Nigeria: the recently published *I Am Still With You: A Reckoning with Silence, Inheritance and History* (2023a) by the writer and art critic Emmanuel Iduma and *Looking for Transwonderland: Travels in Nigeria* (2013) by Noo Saro-Wiwa, daughter of the renowned Ogoni activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and well-known travel writer. While these works do not align with Griswold’s (2000) concept of “instrumental” reading, they do belong to the realm of non-fiction, specifically falling under the genre of travel writing.

The definition of travel writing as a literary genre has been the object of intense debate. The common thread is that this genre is made up of texts about travel and journeys pervaded by an assertion of veracity. While some scholars advocate for an inclusive definition of the genre comprising a wide range of text, from travel accounts such as *The Travels of Marco Polo* to guidebooks like *Lonely Planets* (Thompson 2011), others reject a conceptualisation of the genre’s fuzziness and embrace a narrower definition (Thompson 2011). Among them, we cite

the one that Paul Fussell included in *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between the Wars* (1982). According to the scholar, travelogues, which he calls travel books, are

a sub-species of memoir in which the autobiographical narrative arises from the speaker's encounter with distant or unfamiliar data, and in which the narrative – unlike that in a novel or a romance – claims literal validity by constant reference to actuality. (Fussel 1980, 203)

While highly criticised for being simplistic (Holland and Huggan 2000, 10) and problematic (Thompson 2011, 13), this definition is useful for the purpose of this chapter for its emphasis on autobiography since both Noo Saro-Wiwa and Emmanuel Iduma's narratives of return could share characteristics of memoirs. Nevertheless, the autobiographical narratives do not stem from an "encounter with distant or unfamiliar data" typical of colonial travelogues (notice the distance evoked by the word "data" Fussel employed) but rather from that encounter with the unfamiliar familiarity of the authors' country of birth, Nigeria, after years living abroad. This perspective sets their narratives apart from typical travelogues. While prototypical travelogues are predicated on the "possibility of return" (Holland and Huggan 2000, 5), the return serves as the catalyst for their travelogues.

Saro-Wiwa, who identifies as "a member of the diaspora" with a "dual identity" (Hällén and Remington 2015, 279) and ethnically belongs to the Ogoni "micro-minority" (Nixon 2011), returns after many years away from the country from which she migrated as a child. Differently, the Igbo writer Iduma comes back from the USA, where he previously relocated to pursue higher education. Their return, however, is not a point of arrival; instead, it represents a point of departure. As we will later see, once the writers return to their country, they start travelling within its territory and emotionally confronting its history and the traumas that permeate it. And, since the history of the country is intertwined with that of the writers' families, returning to the country entails confronting trauma in both works. More specifically, Iduma, who belongs to the "generation after" the Biafran War (1967-1970), investigates the trans-generational trauma experienced indirectly by the conflict.⁶⁷ Saro-Wiwa, by contrast, tackles the primary trauma experienced when her father was murdered by the Abacha government.

⁶⁷ While Iduma was born after the conflict, it can be said that he bears what the Holocaust scholar Marianne Hirsch (2012) calls "post-memory" (5). The term describes "the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up" (Hirsch 2012, 5).

Informed by travel writing and trauma theory, this chapter contends that the return journeys detailed in *I Am Still With You* and *Looking for Transwonderland* are not mere physical movements within Nigeria's topography but also introspective journeys into oneself that allow authors to confront and navigate their personal pain and trauma. In other words, they are "inward" stories, as Thompson (2011, 96) would call them, for they go beyond merely chronicling the authors' "literal travels"; instead, they intricately chart "emotional and psychological voyage[s]" within the authors themselves (Thompson 2011, 96). The act of physically traversing Nigeria's landscapes serves as a catalyst, prompting a confrontation with their traumatic pasts as their exploration triggers memories and reflections. Furthermore, this chapter will argue that while initially, it appears that Iduma and Saro-Wiwa come to terms with the impossibility of attaining transformative self-realisation and filling all the gaps in their personal narratives, they ultimately succumb to the yearning for a redemptive conclusion.

Un-weaving Nigerian Individual and Collective Memory and Trauma

Ranging from the claim that trauma is "an *accretion of excitation* in the nervous system, *which the latter has been unable to dispose of adequately by motor reaction*" (Freud 1892, 137) to the observation that it is "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth 1996, 11), today, the current consensus is that "it is a pathological mental and emotional condition, an injury to the psyche caused by catastrophic events or the threat of such events, which overwhelm an individual's normal response mechanisms" (Kurtz 2023, 18). Trauma, however, can also concern a whole community. This is ostensible in *I Am Still With You* and *Looking for Transwonderland* since both tackle, to different degrees, a traumatic and emblematic event of Nigerian history that is woven into their personal and familiar stories as well as that of their ethnic group, Igbo and Ogoni respectively. While Iduma's work excavates the onslaught of the Biafran war, Saro-Wiwa's narrative circles around the murder of her own father, the environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, by the Abacha regime in 1995. The two events are chronological cornerstones of Nigerian history and collective past or, given their tragic nature, examples of what Kurtz (2023) identifies as the "founding traumas" (47) that shape nations and their narratives. In the two texts, however, collective trauma and memory are offered through the personal perspective of the authors. For this reason, Nicklas Hållén (2017) argues about Saro-Wiwa's narrative of

return that the work “emphasizes the locality and roundedness of the standpoints from which the narrative is told” (63). This observation holds relevance for Iduma’s work as well. Given the strong subjective dimension of the travel recollection, they can be interpreted as a kind of personal “therapeutic recuperation of traumatic history,” which, according to Kurtz (2023), is endemic in African literature.

As will be observed later in greater detail, this recuperation intertwines individual and collective traumas yet never conflates the two. This defies Judith Herman’s (1997) equating of individual and collective trauma and instead corresponds to the differentiation made by memory studies in recent years. In the introduction to the Spring and Summer number of the 2008 *Journal of Studies in the Novel*, Stef Craps and Gert Buelens (2008) observe that seminal theorists of trauma studies like LaCapra, Erikson, and Hutcheon traditionally “assume an unproblematic translation from individual to collective trauma” (4). While the editors hope to overcome the shortcomings of the study of trauma all too often fixated on personal psychology through “a shift from the individual to larger social entities, such as communities or nations,” they are aware that “a simple metaphorical extension may be reductive and politically irresponsible” (4). Indeed, as Kurtz (2023) remarks, individual and collective trauma cannot be simply conflated: “while individual trauma is meaning-breaking, group trauma is a meaning-making event. For individuals, identity is lost in trauma, but for communities, trauma can be a powerful force in creating and shaping identity” (47). In other words, traumatic events become signifiers of a national narrative that creates an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983). Kurtz (2023) goes as far as extending Anderson’s well-known formulation to the field of trauma arguing that “group’s trauma is, in fact, an ‘imagined trauma’” since “communal trauma only exists through acts of communication and representation” (46).

The centrality of traumatic events in shaping a sense of identity and belonging is evident in cases such as the Biafran War for the Igbo, the Rwandan Genocide for the Tutsi, and, beyond the African continent, the Holocaust for Jews, echoing Roger Luckhurst’s observation (2008) that “traumatic identity is [...] at the root of many national collective memories” (2). However, the formulation of an “imagined trauma” can become problematic because it leaves room for misunderstanding. Therefore, at the risk of sounding redundant, it is important to highlight that Kurtz’s “imagined trauma” (2023) does not imply that traumatic events and their effects do not exist nor affect people. Instead, he refers to how “trauma is a socially mediated attribution” (Alexander 2013 in Kurtz 2023, 46) embedded in discourses in the Foucauldian sense.

Furthermore, Jeffrey Alexander, in his influential work *Trauma: A Social Theory* (2012), argues that “cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (6). This definition shows the importance of memory when dealing with traumatic events. Indeed, mainly since the 1990s, trauma and memory studies have been considered complementary to such a degree that they started to be merged within a single study field or, in other cases, to be perceived as a subset of one another (Whitehead 2004). Memory enables us, according to Jan Assman (2010), not only to construct an “image or narrative of the past” but also “to develop an image and narrative of ourselves” (15).

When engaging with literary texts that depict either collective or personal trauma, it is important to always keep in mind that, as Homi Bhabha (2004) argued in relation to postcolonial texts, “the category of literature [...] is necessarily and thoroughly mediated: that its reality is not given but produced; its meanings transformative, historical and relational rather than revelatory; its continuity and coherence underscored by division and difference” (96). In a similar vein, Thompson (2011) examines travel writing as a form of “textual artefacts,” emphasizing how writers skilfully transform their travel experiences into crafted travel narratives (27). Thus, viewing trauma and its depiction in travelogues as a psychological experience that is truthfully mirrored in literature can be problematic. After all, trauma intrinsically “resists integration and expression,” defies “understanding and representation” and the action of writing implies that “some distance from trauma (even when the experience of writing is itself intimately bound up with trauma)” has been achieved (LaCapra 2000, 186). Instead, as Dalley (2013) argues, literature can be interpreted as a mode of mediating the representation of historical events. Following this train of thought, in this chapter, we read trauma not as a truthful and un-mediated representation of the traumatic experience of Iduma and Saro-Wiwa but rather as an investigation of the narrative strategies they employ to represent trauma. The aim is not to deny the existence of writers’ traumatic experiences; instead, it is to focus on the stylistic devices they use to represent such traumas. Before delving into the in-depth analysis of the works, however, it might be helpful to contextualise the two historical events that hold significant relevance for the narratives.

Understanding the Historical Context of *I Am Still With You: The Biafran War*

In *I am Still with You*, Iduma retraces the topography of the Biafran War (1967–1970), a conflict that raged only seven years after the country's independence from British rule. Causing the death of an estimated one to three million individuals, the war was defined by Amadiume and An-Na'im (2000) as "the first expression of massive suffering inflicted on society by an internal African war" (2). Also known as the Nigerian Civil War, the conflict ignited when the secessionist Republic of Biafra unilaterally proclaimed its independence from the Federation of Nigeria. Far from being an unanticipated event, the internecine conflict could be seen not only as the consequence of the tense political climate characterising the early postcolonial years but, going further back in time, also as a result of the "divide and rule" colonial policy. As Xypolia (2016) among many argues, during colonialism, the British Empire deliberately employed a "divide and rule" strategy that allowed the colonial power to emerge victorious from the antagonisms between local communities.⁶⁸ Indeed, the fierce opposition between Igbos and Hausas exacerbated during the war was kindled well before the turbulent years after independence (1960).

During British rule, the colonial dyad education and religion played a significant role in developing a system based on competing ethnicities (Falola and Ezekwe 2016). Although the earliest missionaries who arrived in the southern regions of modern-day Nigeria may not have been conscious of their dividing role, by converting the Yoruba first and the Igbo subsequently, they laid the foundation for a long history of rivalry. Indeed, the majority-Muslim residents of the northern regions, since they resisted conversion, did not generally have access to colonial schooling. Conversely, thanks to their colonial education, the Igbo population became part of the most prestigious social strata of the colonial system, and from the 1950s, many of them migrated to the northern region to compensate for the lack of functionaries in the area. The unbalanced distribution of power among Nigerian ethnicities also pervaded the military: whereas the precolonial Nigeria military was mainly made up of Hausa-speaking members, the officers consisted mainly of Southerners, in particular Igbos (Falola and Ezekwem, 2016). It is within this context that the anti-Igbo sentiment started to grow (Brexter, 2015).

Conversely, the amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates of Nigeria by Lord Frederick Lugard in 1914 placed the former region in a "commanding position" within the federal system (Doron 2022, 401). In order to cover pre-existing power gaps between ethnic

⁶⁸ In the past, literature often adhered to a binary portrayal of colonised versus coloniser dynamics. However, contemporary works, such as Yaa Gyasi's novel *Homegoing* (2016), delve into tensions among local groups during the colonial era.

minorities, numerous Northerners were elevated to military officers. The Igbo community strongly opposed this decision, which caused them to decline in status and power (Falola and Ezekwem, 2016). Simultaneously the country's situation exacerbated: "growing corruption, ethnic chauvinism, religious intolerance, lack of justice, and poor political leadership" (Falola and Ezekwem 2016, 19) were widespread. Also, the fear that the other ethnicity would dominate (Falola and Heaton 2008) engendered a confrontational climate between the most significant political parties, reaching its climax with the coup d'état of 15 January 1966 led by Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu, during which the prime minister Tafawa Balewa was killed along with two regional premiers and a number of northern military leaders. Because of the climate of fear established by Balewa in the previous years, the majority of the population supported the coup. Nevertheless, given the pivotal role of Igbo officers in the design and implementation of the coup – apart from a member of Yoruba descent, they were all Igbo – an intense anti-Igbo sentiment spread within northern circles of power. A counter-coup followed in July of the same year, following which Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon took over as the new head of state and of the armed forces after Igbo Head of State Aguiyi Ironsi and many other Igbo officers were kidnapped and killed. Simultaneously, the anti-Igbo sentiment materialised in an actual pogrom against the Igbo civilians and military living in the north (Doron 2022). Interpreted by historians as a furious reaction to the coup d'état, the massacre, described as spontaneous riots carried out primarily by the Hausa community, led to the death of thousands of people. Recently, fictional works like Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and Abani's *Song for Night* (2007) have vividly captured the trials and tribulations of people living the carnage. Moreover, they represented a source of inspiration for many writers. For instance, Iduma discussed the significant role that Kainene, one of the characters in Adichie's fictional work, played in inspiring his narrative (Adimora 2023). Similar to his uncle, Kainene as the meaning of her Igbo name forbodes – let's keep looking – disappeared during the conflict, never to return.

After the waves of killings, on 30 May 1966, the governor of the Eastern Region, Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Ojukwu, declared the independence of the Republic of Biafra, giving rise to a thirty-month civil war. According to Nixon (2013), the discovery of oil in 1957 on the territory of the Niger Delta had an important role in the conflict: on the one hand, it nurtured the Igbo aspiration to form a separatist nation and, on the other, the fear of losing the wealth derived from oil fuelled the federal resistance to the secessionists. Exacerbated by

the embargo on Biafra, the “total war,” as dubbed by Gowon (Odogwu 1985), caused an unparalleled humanitarian crisis on the Biafran territory of which the West was made aware when *The Sun* published images of starving children (Palmberg and Petersen 2011). Despite the worldwide media attention, the Biafran project of an independent sovereign nation-state never materialised. On January 15, 1970, the conflict ended when Yakubu Gowon representing the Federal Military Government (FMG), embraced Philip Efiog, the second president of Biafra (Doron 2022). While reabsorbing the region into Nigeria, Gowon declared that the war left “no victors, no vanquished” (Oyewo 2019 in Doron 2022).

Written at the turn of the new millennium, the introduction to *The Politics of Memory* (2000) by Amadiume and An-Na'im argued that the Biafran conflict had slid into oblivion. In the spirit of reconciliation, public discourse about the war was hampered until 1999, when the country transitioned to democracy – only memoirs and fiction managed to tackle the topic (Doron 2022). This operation of “active forgetting”, to use Reinhardt's term (2005 in Doron 2022), erased any reference to tragic conflict from public discussion. According to Murray Last (2002), the national strategy consisted of minimising “the public memorializing of the conflict” and of excluding victims' views from the political dimension only to limit it to the private sphere (315-316). Far from being successful, this strategy proved to keep real reconciliation “out of the public domain [and] the sense of ambivalence was left unresolved, the scale of anger and resentment still felt could not be assessed nor its location identified” (Last 2002, 317).

It is within this silenced space that literature seeps and fills the lacuna. Two years before Last's argument, Wendy Griswold (2000) observed that war represented a rampant theme in literary works, mainly those written by Igbo authors. While previous generations of Nigerian writers did not shy away from writing about the conflict,⁶⁹ the works of new generations have provided new impetus to the discussion. An example is *Song for Night* (2007) by Global-Igbo (as he defines himself) Chris Abani, who, even by obfuscating the chronotope of the story and never mentioning the word Biafra, gives birth to a novella that draws fully from the violent confrontation. Another example is *Under the Udala Trees* (2015) by Nigerian-American author Chinelo Okparanta, who, differently than Abani, opts for realism when writing a novel telling the story of Ijeoma, a young girl that discovers her sexuality within a war-torn context. Possibly the most famous novel by a contemporary Nigerian writer recounting the war, however, is *Half*

⁶⁹ Notable fictional works addressing the Biafran War include Cyprian Ekwensi's *Survive the Peace* (1976), Flora Nwapa's *Never Again* (1975), Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died: Prison Notes* (1971), Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* (1982), and Chinua Achebe's *There Was a Country* (2012).

of a Yellow Sun (2006) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Drawing on first-person testimonies from members of her immediate family, intimate friends, and other countrymen who took part in the war as well as from her personal research, Adichie wrote a novel that has been described as a “masterpiece in balancing truth and fiction” (Jordison 2020). What is certain is that the novel, together with its 2012 film adaptation by playwright Biyi Bandele, have tackled the sense of unresolvedness to which Last (2002) refers and have opened up a dialogical shared space.

Today, while new scholarly works have emerged as a result of the revived attention, deepening our understanding of the conflict, as Nnamani (2016) remarks, Biafra “still remains an intractable unfinished business that seriously threatens the corporate existence of Nigeria” (Back page). Or as Oloyede (2009) puts it, “the Biafra war, as an event and Biafra, as an assumptive world, continue to disrupt individual and collective memories and as such tend to ‘frame’ state and politics in Nigeria as evidenced both in political discourse and political practice” (1).

Understanding the Historical Context of *Looking for Transwonderland: The Assassination of Ken Saro-Wiwa*

Noo Saro-Wiwa is the daughter of Kenule Beeson Saro-Wiwa (1941-1995), better known as Ken Saro-Wiwa, an iconic figure of the environmental struggle against the oil-driven despoliation of the Niger Delta. Born in Bori, near Port Harcourt, Ken Saro-Wiwa was an Ogoni, one of the 300 ethnicities that make up the population of Nigeria. Nixon (2013) defines the Ogonis as a “micro-minority” since they include only 500,000 of the 140 million Nigerians (Nixon 2013). This marginalized status does not only refer to their numerical presence but also mirrors their asymmetrical power position in generally “undemocratic, often destitute nation-states that register in the global economy principally as sites for the unregulated extraction of oil, minerals, and timber” (Nixon 2003, 117).⁷⁰ Simultaneously, it is these micro-minorities that generally have to bear the socio-ecological consequences of such plunder.

Traditionally, the Ogonis devoted themselves mainly to agriculture and livestock farming. However, in 1958, on the eve of the country’s independence, the Ogoni way of life was permanently disrupted. For the first time, Nigerian crude oil was shipped to a Shell Haven

⁷⁰ Even if figures change, depending on the source employed (according to the 2006 National Census, for instance, this ethnicity is made up of a population of almost 832,000 people), within the Nigerian national context, they represent a numerical minority.

refinery at the outlet of the River Thames (Kashi and Watts 2010). The oil in question was derived from the first oil site discovered in Nigeria in 1956 in Oloibiri. Two years later, another source in Bomu (Ogoniland) was added to what soon became a long list of oil sites (Kashi and Watts 2010). In a few years, such discoveries completely changed the lives of the people living on that territory: Shell-BP (as it was known at that time) dug numerous wells, starting a process that resulted in the devastating pollution of this land. In this context, Nigerian independence did not interrupt this destruction: the colonial relations of exploitation between the colony and metropolitan state soon mutated into neo-colonial configurations where Western multinational corporations became agents of depletion of nature in the name of capital. In addition to the Dutch oil colossus, for example, other multinational corporations such as the American Chevron made their way to the exploitation of the Nigerian territory creating a system that, in only a few years, transitioned from cash crops to oil exportation (Falola and Ihonvbere 1985). Oil became the mainstay of the Nigerian economy (Falola and Ihonvbere 1985), rendering the country, as Nixon (2013) calls it, a petro-state.

With the country's independence, however, the strict binarism between the coloniser and the colonised was unsettled, displaying a more complex configuration where Western and African actors intersected and aligned their role of exploiters, giving birth to what Ken Saro-Wiwa referred to as "recolonization" or "indigenous colonialism" (Saro-Wiwa [1992]2000): a process in which third-world governments often joined forces with multi-national corporations in the plunder of their own land or, at best, were incapable of opposing them via regulation. An example of the active participation of African governments in depleting their own land is the one implemented by the regime of Sani Abacha (1993-1998). While he gained international prominence due to the widespread (though delayed) international condemnation of the repeated human rights abuses culminating in the murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the "Ogoni Eight," it should also be noted that he supported policies that exacerbated inequalities in the country. Through these policies, the communities most impacted by oil extraction received only a minuscule share of the revenues generated from it. The basis of such an allocation regime was laid in 1985 by another dictator, General Babangida (Obi and Onuoha 2022). While the 1960 Nigerian Constitution asserted that fifty per cent of the mining revenues had to be allocated to the state where the extraction took place (Nixon 2013), General Babangida set the percentage only to three per cent – even if it must be specified that this percentage represented an increase compared to the previous years (Obi and Onuoha 2022).

This uneven situation led to general dissatisfaction in the oil-producing states, which in the 1990s culminated in the foundation of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), led by Ken Saro-Wiwa. As Nixon (2013) recalls, the activist previously attempted to attract international attention: he contacted international non-governmental organisations such as Greenpeace and Amnesty International without any success. Not discouraged by the unresponsiveness of international organisations, he started a series of travels with the aim of educating himself and finding comparable instances of exploitation (Nixon 2013). Through these travels, he discovered that a multitude of marginalised people existed everywhere (Nixon 2013). Also, they made him recognise the imperative need for the convergence between minority and environmental rights. At a time when environmentalism and postcolonial theory seemed incompatible (Nixon 2013), Saro-Wiwa managed to imagine environmental concerns through the life experiences of minorities. The MOSOP demands included “the right to control oil, compensation for oil pollution, and self-determination” (Obi and Rustad 2011 in Obi and Onuoha 2022, 605).

For Ken Saro-Wiwa, an essential component of the political struggle was his literary production. In 1992, the same year he was first detained, Ken Saro-Wiwa published *Genocide in Nigeria* ([1992]2000) through his own publishing company, Saros International Publishers. The book comprises a collection of previously written articles and columns where he emphasized the precarious conditions of the Ogoni people, trapped between Western oil companies and the Nigerian federal government at the hands of ethnic majorities. These pages denounce the blatant disregard of oil companies and the Nigerian government for the environment of the Ogoni people, where gas flaring and oil spills were – and still are – regular occurrences causing “the total destruction of Ogoni life, human, social, cultural and economic” (Saro-Wiwa 2000, 83). The work, which weaves first-person narrative with quotations by the government and letters, can be read as a call to action: the author not only denounces the “no-win war with Shell-B” (44) but also underlines the need for the international community to “do something to mitigate the Ogoni tragedy” (9). It represents an accurate analysis of a system that prioritised oil interests to the detriment of the people living in the Niger Delta through the destruction of the environment and their economic marginalisation (Saro-Wiwa 1992).

Genocide in Nigeria (1992) is only one of the many works written by the Ogoni activist Saro-Wiwa.⁷¹ While most readers might associate his name with *Sozaboy* (1994), a canonical novel denouncing the Nigerian Civil War through the eyes of a patois-speaking child soldier, it might be less known (at least in the Global North) that his “instrumental aesthetic,” as Nixon (2013) defines it, extended to various other forms of media, including television. In Nigeria, the 150 episodes personally written and produced of his TV show *Basi and Company* kept 30 million Nigerian glued to the screens at its peak (Nixon 2013). With its mix of moralism and satire, the show lampooned Nigerian society, its widespread corruption and oil-driven avarice. Offering a different path to the socialist doctrine, often inextricable from anti-neocolonial struggles (Nixon, 2013), Saro-Wiwa made use of capitalism, which he never rejected, to attract attention to the plight of the Niger Delta and the country’s injustices.

As observed by Roy Doron (2022), during the era of Ken Saro-Wiwa’s and the Ogoni’s environmental fight, a lingering legacy of the Biafran War was the tendency to view “any challenge to state authority [...] as a potential secession, especially when it threatened to harm the state’s revenue” (415). Following this train of thought, it is easy to understand the Abacha regime’s motivation to eliminate a dissident figure like Saro-Wiwa, whose activism, alongside that of his supporters and fellow fighters, jeopardised the country’s agreements with Shell. Indeed, although the oil company publicly upheld the impossibility of influencing the Nigerian government’s decisions, the latter helped violently suppress Ogoni’s uprisings against the Dutch multinational company (Nixon 2013). After the January 1993 anti-Shell rally, the government’s Mobile Police, for instance, razed twenty-seven villages, during which 2,000 Ogoni were murdered and 80,000 displaced (Nixon 2013). The same year, the mounting protests drove Shell out of Ogoniland. While this may seem, at first glance, like a victory, Shell simply relocated its operations to other parts of the Delta. Even today, holding a substantial 47 per cent share of the oil industry, Shell remains the largest foreign investor in Nigeria.

⁷¹ Other Nigerian writers from diverse ethnic backgrounds than the Ogoni have recently drawn attention to the plight of the people living in Delta. One example which has gained international recognition is Helon Habila’s novel *Oil on Water* (2010). While sharing a critical perspective on the current situation with Noo Saro-Wiwa, Habila adopts a distinct approach in his work. He delves into the realm of fiction, giving life to a thriller centred around the efforts of two journalists, Rufus – a homodiegetic narrator – and Zaq. Their mission is to locate Isabel, a British citizen who was previously abducted by what appears to be militants advocating for environmental justice. Along their journey, however, they end up finding a bigger story: that of the destruction of the Niger Delta. Despite differences in genre and style, both texts share a common characteristic that Heerten and Moses (2014) ascribe to Nigerian literature. This characteristic involves accentuating the fragility of the current situation by contrasting it with an idealised “pristine past” (13).

In 1994, four Ogoni chiefs were killed at a political rally. The government took this opportunity to suppress the political unrest of the MOSOP and arrest Ken Saro-Wiwa. He was accused of complicity in the chiefs' murders, even if – as Noo Saro-Wiwa recalls in *Looking for Transwonderland* (2012) – he was not even physically there. A *pro forma* tribunal was set up, and alongside eight other activists, he was sentenced to death. As Noo Saro-Wiwa (2012) reminisces:

He was hanged along with eight of his colleagues at a prison in Port Harcourt. Our families were informed after the executions, which had been carried out furtively and without warning, behind closed doors, the victims' remains kept from us for more than a decade. (LT 31)

Following the state's execution of Saro-Wiwa, the international community, which had been advocating for negotiation with the Nigerian government instead of isolation, as recommended by Mandela, came to the realisation that this approach was no longer tenable (Nixon 2013). With the worldwide outcry sparked by Ken Saro-wiwa's murder, a coalition made up of the European Union, Canada, the USA and South Africa was soon formed: they imposed economic sanctions and suspended the country from the Commonwealth of Nations (Falola 2022). Even its old-time ally, Shell, publicly distanced itself from the dictator. While the oil company had consistently maintained its innocence, in 2009, it chose to resolve a 1996 lawsuit brought forth by Saro-Wiwa's family, which accused the company of complicity with the Nigerian government. Shell ultimately paid over 15 million dollars in settlement.

Once again, it is his daughter who tells us what happened to the Ogoni activist's body after his murder:

His body had been dumped unceremoniously in a grave after he and his eight colleagues were murdered by Sani Abacha's regime. It had taken some years to retrieve the remains: we had to wait for democratic elections, then ask the government to locate the grave, and finally the bones had to be identified through forensic tests. (LT 290)

Ken Saro-Wiwa remains a source of inspiration for human rights and environmental activists. He understood the importance of transnational alliances cemented between minorities sharing a subaltern status in the neo-colonial configurations and the different shapes political opposition can take – from political movements to art. While his personal fight was put to an end by the

necropolitics of Abacha's regime,⁷² his legacy is still alive, and sadly his works are still of relevance to the current problems in the region. Having established the historical context, we now turn our attention to our analysis of the travelogues, which serve as a prism through which to view the interplay between personal experiences and broader historical narratives.

The Return of Prodigal Progeny in Search of Healing

The two travelogues, *I Am Still With You* and *Looking for Transwonderland*, are both narratives of return, yet their authors approach this theme in distinct ways. Noo Saro-Wiwa's return to Nigeria is only temporary, undertaken to mend her troubled relationship with the country. In contrast, Emmanuel Iduma's return is characterized as "long-term" (*SWY* 6), driven by a relentless determination to uncover the truth about his uncle's fate. These two different approaches are symptomatic of how today works: "elaborate on a reconnection or notion of going back, which is emphatically different from the certainty implied by the notion of return" (Knudsen and Rahbek 2017,118) present in the previous generations. Indeed, Knudsen and Rahbek suggest that today's return narratives do not assume a straightforward or inevitable homecoming. Instead, they delve into the nuances of returning, presenting it as an act laden with uncertainty, introspection and a questioning stance towards the idea of belonging and identity.

The return – or brief reconnection – displayed in *Looking for Transwonderland* coincides with a four-and-a-half-month journey in Nigeria undertaken by Noo Saro-Wiwa with the precise aim of writing the book (Hållén and Remington 2015). Supported by a contract with *Granta* publisher covering travel costs (Hållén and Remington 2015; *LT* 18),⁷³ the author comes back to her birth country "as part-returnee and part-tourist" (*LT* 9). She embraces the role of a tourist in her manner of travel, rather than only revisiting the places of her childhood, she opts to explore the country more broadly, engaging with places typically sought out by tourists. Her journey takes her through cities such as Abuja, Kano, Lagos, and Calabar, where

⁷² By "necropolitics", I refer to Mbembe's conception of "the power in the power and the capacity in the power and the capacity [of the state] to dictate who may live and who must die" (2003, 11).

⁷³ The pivotal role of the British literary magazine in establishing travel writing as a popular literary genre is widely acknowledged, especially thanks to its influential travel-themed special issues during the 1980s and 1990s (Thompson 2011). However, alongside this recognition, critical perspectives emerge: they concern its contribution to the perpetuation of a modern incarnation of colonial discourse. One prominent critic, Charles Sugnet, contends that *Granta*'s articles play a role in "restoring the lost dream of empire," allowing readers to indulge in a nineteenth-century fantasy (Sugnet 1991 in Holland and Huggan 2000).

she immerses herself in experiences offered by museums and wildlife parks. Her time in Lagos is particularly illustrative of this approach; it is where she explicitly identifies with the tourist perspective, aiming to experience the city as a “destination”: “I was here as a tourist and I wanted to make a ‘destination’ out of the city” (LT 26). This deliberate choice to step into the shoes of a tourist allows her to experience Nigeria through a new lens, initiating a path of re-evaluation that helps her begin to disassociate the country from the negative connotations it holds in her mind. Conversely, the perspective of the returnee consistently weaves itself into the narrative, manifesting through occasional flashbacks to her past. This perspective becomes increasingly visible towards the end of the travelogue, especially during her visit to Ogoniland – her birthplace and the setting of her childhood summers. It is from this standpoint that trauma is contained, suggesting a deep intertwining of personal history with the broader story of her return.

The oscillation from an insider to an outsider position is linguistically evinced in the text, a topic that will be explored in greater depth later in this chapter. For now, suffice it to give one example of this shifting perspective. In a passage from the *Prologue*, which unfolds at Gatwick Airport, the behaviour of her compatriots is described: they “gesticulat[e] angrily” (1) and complain loudly. In response to this scene, she explains:

Nigerians like to shout at the tops of our voices, whether *we*’re telling a joke, praying in church or rocking a baby to sleep. I also wanted to tell them that *we*’re not crazy – decades of political corruption have made *us* deeply suspicious of authority – but there was no one to discuss this with, so I had no choice but to sit and watch our national image sink further in the eyes of the world. (1, emphasis added)

This passage serves as an elucidation of Nigerians’ behaviour as armed police arrive to oversee the situation. The frequent use of inclusive pronouns like “we” and “us” may seem to indicate the author’s self-identification with the individuals she describes. Yet, this sense of inclusion is juxtaposed, perhaps even challenged, by using the noun “Nigerians”, which conveys a distanced, outsider perspective. Stylistically, the contrast between “Nigerians” with “our” results in a sentence that lacks grammatical coherence. This apparent inconsistency, far from being a flaw in conventional style, epitomises the author’s complex relationship with her homeland and reflects her internal struggle with the sense of belonging resulting from her hyphenated identity and mixed cultural heritage.

Indeed, while she was born in Nigeria, she migrated to Great Britain with her mother at such a young age – one-year-old (Zhong 2023) – that her full affiliation with the country has been precluded. Even though, in her childhood, she frequently used to visit Nigeria, the annual vacation came to an end when her father was murdered by the Abacha regime. The traumatic event permanently severs “[her] personal links with Nigeria” (LT 7), from which she almost uninterruptedly kept at a distance for over ten years.⁷⁴ As she reveals in the narrative, Nigeria hereby became “an unpiloted juggernaut of pain, and it became the repository for all [her] fears and disappointments; a place where nightmares did come true.”(LT 7-8). Therefore, her return, an act of “re-engaging” with the country, aims at “dissociating it from the painful memories lurking in [her] mind’s dark matter” (LT 9); it is that of healing from the trauma engrained in her relationship with her birth country, of exorcising and “wip[ing] away the negative associations and starting a new relationship with the country” (LT 305). The physical proximity to Nigeria gives her the opportunity to work through her negative relationship with the country with the aim to “cure [...her] emotional fear of [it]” (LT 304). In the *Prologue*, Noo Saro-Wiwa already traces a path of healing: while the point of departure is the negative “personal associations” she cites, she hopes that, by the end of her journey, she will “learn to be less scared of [the country], perhaps even like it, and consider it a potential ‘home’” (LT 9). From her position as a diasporic subject, the author associates healing with a vision of Nigeria as home, a vision that would open up the possibility of envisioning a permanent return. On the contrary, as we will elucidate in the penultimate section of the chapter, the text’s conclusion encapsulates the author’s conflicting emotions by reconstructing a narratological moment of healing, all the while not relinquishing numerous negative conceptions present in the *Prologue*.

Of note is that Saro-Wiwa’s conflicting relationship with the country is not only the result of the trauma of losing her father at the hands of the government. As she reveals in the text, her dislike of Nigeria started well before that terrible event, with the annual sojourns during the summer holidays. In the prologue, she explains how her father considered that his family’s migration to the UK was only a way for his children to acquire an education. Afraid that they would go “soft” due to “the luxuries of English life,” he often included in their summer stay a visit to his native village (LT 4). Described by the author as an experience of “character-building” (LT 4), for it lacked material comforts such as electricity, running water and

⁷⁴ During this period, she returns only briefly in two occasions: in 2000, to attend her father’s official funeral and in 2005, when “his real funeral” took place, during which his previously identified remains were buried (Saro-Wiwa, *bordersliteratureonline*).

television, the sojourn in Bane represented for the author a site of profound cultural shock. The “tropical gulag,” as she describes it, was the place where she experienced severe discomfort, for she could not speak the “native language”, nor did she like the too-savoury food and she deeply detested the many insects stinging her body (*LT 5*). Reading the author’s admission, one might label her experience as an instance of reverse culture shock, i.e., “the process of readjusting, re-aculturating, and re-assimilating into one’s own home culture after living in a different culture for a significant period of time” (Gaw 2000, 2).

This troubled relationship with the country is crystallised in a passage in which the narrator admits:

Having to spend those two months in my unglamorous, godforsaken motherland with its penchant for noise and disorder felt like a punishment. I wanted a real holiday, riding banana boats in Barbados or eating pizzas by the Spanish Steps, like my school friends. (*LT 3*)

As Cui, Geertman, and Hooimeijer (2016) demonstrate, within migratory contexts, peer pressure can be as determinant as parental pressure in shaping one’s attitude about a place. Giving voice to the teenager-self, Noo Saro-Wiwa shows her adhesion to the imaginary holidays shared by her peers. Therefore, together with the common definition of what a holiday should be, Noo Saro-Wiwa might have adopted her peers’ perception of the country, mainly present in Western representations: a noisy, unglamorous place plunged into disorder.

Unlike her parents, who “believed that without their country they were nothing,” for the author, the physical departure from the place she was born in engenders an affective estrangement from it (*LT 5*). Her mother expressed a sense of belonging linguistically, reserving the term “house” for their UK residence and “home” – with its deeper emotional resonance – for Nigeria. In contrast, the author feels no such attachment to the country, not even during the trips within Nigeria arranged by her father. To exacerbate her unease, during the last holiday spent in Nigeria, while her mother stays in the UK, she finds out that her father has a “polygamous ‘other life’” (*LT 6*). The opposite worldviews of the narrator and her father are succinctly conveyed through two sentences: “He called it [polygamy] tradition. I took it as a betrayal” (*LT 6*). The declarative sentence, representing her father’s perspective, is juxtaposed with one that conveys her own interpretation. Their brevity has a shot-like effect on readers and emphasises the wide gap between the two. By the end of that summer, although “the two halves of the family had warmed to each other,” she begins to draw a parallel between her family’s

story and the broader context of national political dysfunction: “Nigerian family life now seemed to me as treacherous and unpredictable as the military dictatorship that destabilised Nigeria during those years” (LT 7). When her father, a public figure, is murdered, the imbrication between family’s and nation’s dramatic stories becomes even more grounded.

By contrast, in *I Am Still With You*, Emmanuel Iduma recounts, if not his definitive, at least his long-term return after years spent in the USA. This return allows him to explore the Biafran war, an event that has often been described as the collective trauma of the Igbo people (Oloyede 2009). Appending to the tradition of Igbo writers interested in the civil conflict, Iduma argues that he is “fascinated” by the “Biafran past “(*SWY* 16). This fascination, rooted in his personal family connection to the war, evolves into an investigation of the conflict. His uncle on his father’s side, who enlisted in the Biafran army, tragically vanished without a trace amidst the turmoil of the war. Iduma’s personal connection with this mysterious figure not only shapes his narrative but also infuses his journey with a profound personal dimension, as he seeks understanding and reconciliation with the conflict’s haunting legacy. In his quest to “reconstruct his] uncle’s life,” in whose honour he was named, and to fill the “gaps in [his] family history,” the author decides “to speak with [his] relatives” and journeys to the towns marked by the war’s final battles (*SWY* 5-6). This pursuit carries profound significance for his generation, untouched directly by the war’s devastating events yet bearing witness to its enduring aftermath. As the author argues, “We are a generation that has to lift itself from the hushes and gaps of the history of the war” he argues (*SWY* 4). Renewing the metaphor of the Phoenix rising from its ashes, Iduma employs it to refer to the arduous yet transformational journey of excavating the buried past. From this perspective, writing about the conflict becomes a powerful act of rebirth, contrasting the devastation of silence. There is a gleam of hope in this operation of uncovering the past; like the mythical bird, the dangerous act of “burning oneself” – in this case, with the knowledge of the war – becomes a chance to rise from the ashes of a muffled self, to reclaim one’s past amidst the rubble. Thus, the whole narrative represents an attempt to fill those gaps by initiating a conversation with the generation that lived during the war.

When questioned, his family members generally share with him what they know – often fragments of a larger story mixed with rumours and few facts: instances of episodic memory, which is perspectival, idiosyncratic and fragmented *per se* (Assmann 2006): Therefore, the family’s testimonies are not perfectly fitting into a puzzle. On the contrary, some accounts

contradict each other even in insignificant details. For instance, Daddy Onitsha, a paternal figure for the narrator and a trustworthy friend of his deceased father, recalls Iduma's uncle as having a fair complexion. Conversely, his cousin Otu describes him as "dark, ebony" (SWY 98). As the historian Marc Bloch demonstrated (2014), not only is memory fallible, but depending on the emotional state and social environment of the present, the same memory might engender different stories and narratives. By assembling the memories of different people, the book attempts to create a collective memory of the war with the help of social memory. The difference between the two has been summarised by Assmann (2006): on the one hand, social memory is derived from autobiographical memory, which is based on lived experience and for this reason, each individual has a slightly different memory of events because of their unique, distinctive location and viewpoint. Survivors' memory of the Biafran war, for instance, will differ greatly depending on whether they were Igbos fighting for independence or Nigerians fighting against it, whether they endured starvation or managed to escape the conflict by migrating abroad. On the other hand, collective memory is more homogenous and belongs to either the survivors' second and third generations or to people unrelated to the event, both through historians' work of reconstruction and representations via public narratives (Assmann 2006). In other words, as Halbwachs (1950) argued, a community's common interpretations of the past help build its collective identity through communal memories. Emmanuel Iduma, born in 1989, well after the end of the war, has access to the collective memory of the war, which typically occurs via "cognitive learning (or semantic memory) about the past, imaginative and emotive identification with images, roles, values, and narratives, and various forms of action such as celebrations, processions, and demonstrations" (Assmann 2006, 7). The members of his family, on the other hand, as first-hand witnesses of the conflict, shared a social memory of the conflict. However, the narrator also attempts to embrace social memory through his investigation. The oscillation from collective to social memory reduces the distance from his family.

Family ties are indeed central to the narrative. In particular, as in *Looking for Traswonderland*, Iduma's work reveals the centrality of his father. For instance, it is his death that triggers the author's return. Far away from Nigeria, Iduma learns about his father's death over the phone. Only a month earlier, during a video call on WhatsApp, the narrator saw his face while he was brought to the hospital. Even though digital technology enables his separated family to stay in touch, this is not enough for the narrator. After viewing a Black father with

his son in the New York subway, the author starts “to plan [his] move back to Nigeria” (*SWY* 72). His return to Nigeria, therefore, can be interpreted as a way of coming closer to his father, as the title implies – even if, after his death, this closeness can only take the shape of a spiritual connection.

The title appears to be inspired by one of the two epigraphs that introduce the narrative. Examples of what Gérard Genette (1997) defines as peritextual elements, the epigraphs represent an integral part of the work. They are to be distinguished from the epitext, which are made up of external elements of the texts, such as reviews, interviews and critical analyses of the work. Residing “inside” the text’s confines, epigraphs can be a narrative framework (Studniarz 2017). They can also make up what Williams (1998) terms as “bracketing” or “bookend frame,” i.e., structures that “open or introduce the story and then return to close or conclude it in a formal if not thematic symmetry” (Williams 1998, in Studniarz 2017, 7). In Iduma’s text, the first epigraph is a biblical passage, specifically Psalms 139:18 – “When I am awake, I am still with you.” The title, therefore, is a clear contraction of such biblical verse, which echoes with his personal story. Uttered originally by David, the third king of the United Kingdom of Israel, the pronoun “you” in this context addresses God, highlighting the divine omnipresence in people’s lives and David’s existence in particular. By contrast, as a later passage reveals, in Iduma’s work, the pronoun “you” alludes to the narrator’s father, illustrating a reinterpretation of the biblical verse within the context of his own story.

The intricate relationship between writing this work and his father is underscored by the author in an interview, in which he reveals that his father’s passing was what drew him to this story, for he felt compelled to “recover something of his life” (Adimora 2023, n.p.). He goes on to say that since “[his father] would have been the easiest person to speak to” after his death, he “had to go around [his] absence” by writing about his life through that of his uncle (Adimora 2023, n.p.). Writing about the war and his missing uncle represents, therefore, a way of remaining with his father. This is emphasised by the fact that the sentence that makes up the title resurfaces once again in the text:

How this. Not how long, how much, or however. Maybe how, however. I don’t want how as adverb or mere word. I want how for how, how for how much of love or loss. I want to place it in front of God. How God, how of expanse. I want *how in repetition*. How how how. How. How, how. How to contemplate what outlasts what. How a lamp is left on throughout the night, to keep wake. How my beard, unshaved for days, fathers my face, that *face fatherless* when shaved. How to transfer a man’s consciousness to those he leaves

behind. How I dread the afterimage, my father's body laid for viewing. How the palms, long after they are held open, resemble a book, hence letters. How I will cease to be known by my body. How long I would remain surprised that anyone reaches a great old age. *How a son is a father doubled or halved*. How two breaths are not of the same duration. How I am unable to recite a psalm without weeping. *How I am still with you*. (*SWY* 99, my emphasis)

The excerpt is part of a brief narrative fragment in which his cousin Otu compares Iduma's father with his uncle, Emmanuel: the latter was "handsomer", he argues (*SWY* 99). This apparently insignificant observation makes the narrator plunge into the above-mentioned "invocation" (*SWY* 99). The reason behind it might be that the comparison made the inextricability of the two figures come out – and the inextricability with himself. Stylistically, the passage gives a general impression of echolalia, the involuntary repetition or echoing of phrases, words, or sounds spoken by others or, in this case, by oneself. The repetition of "how" serves as a structural anchor, creating a rhythm that reflects the narrator's search for understanding and his struggle to articulate grief. While repetition is generally a "form of superfluity or redundancy of expression," people "need [...] to express [themselves] superabundantly on matters which affect [them] deeply (Leech 2013, 84). In this case, the repetition of "how" becomes almost incantatory, resembling a howl – a possible echo of pain and loss. This device transforms the word from a mere adverb into a multifaceted expression of inquiry and lament, as he grapples with his father's absence. Through this rhythmic repetition, language shifts from a vehicle of meaning to a visceral expression of grief, embodying a "how" that transcends explanation and instead inhabits the space of enduring, unanswerable questions.

Language thus appears to have a life of its own, as if beyond the narrator's control. It resembles an expression of the unconscious similar to what in trauma studies is referred to as "repetition compulsion", i.e. an individual's proclivity to compulsively repeat traumatic memories and emotions as an effect of trauma (Freud 1961). In displaying this characteristic, the passage seems to be the stylistic mirroring of Cathy Caruth's observation that trauma "imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (1996, 3–4). Furthermore, the fragmented syntactic structure, with short, disjointed sentences, reflects the fragmented nature of the narrator's thoughts and reflections, whose pain is emphasised by the alliteration "without weeping". Together with repetition, the passage stands out for the presence of several alliterations clustered in a few lines (love or loss, lamp is left,

fathers my face, face fatherless). Alliterations have a mnemonic function, notably observed in forms such as alliterative poetry (Leech 2013), but here, they also signal a sense of relentless obsession regarding his father. His inability to confront this pain directly is instead revealed through his loss of control over language. The reference to his body betrays his pain for having lost his father through unusual collocations: his “beard [...] fathers [his] face” and his “face fatherless when shaved” (*SWY* 99). From this vantage point, the search for his uncle’s story is not only a way of “recovering the original story of [his] name” (*SWY* 8), as he says; instead, the whole narrative can read as the author’s pursuit of proximity with his father – a way of being still with him, as the title of the work suggests.

The exploration of his personal bond with his father takes place indirectly through the investigation of the war, which can be read in psychological terms as a distancing coping mechanism. According to Giesbrecht, Müller, and Miller (2010), psychological distancing describes the ability to “step back and without an immediate response, survey the environment, and reflect on the course of action instead of being dominated by immediate simulation” (337). Investigating the war is, therefore, a way of displacing the focus from the grief of losing his father, substituting personal trauma with collective trauma. In other words, it circles around his memory without blatantly tackling it. Thus, like Noo Saro-Wowa, Iduma braids his personal loss with that of his country in general – and Biafra and Igbos, in particular.

Nationality, Ethnicity and Migrancy: Between the Estrangement of Return and the Idea of Homeland

Embarking on a journey to excavate the past and present of their family and nation, both Iduma and Saro-Wiwa initiate their exploration in Lagos. Once they arrive in the bustling megalopolis, their physical return does not translate into an immediate feeling of being home but rather into a profound sense of disorientation. The sentiment of permeating *dépaysement* is underlined in both narratives. While in Saro-Wiwa’s *Looking for Transwonderland*, this sensation of being an outsider weaves through the narrative, emerging throughout her trip and lingering even in its conclusion, Iduma’s *I Am Still With You* charts a trajectory where this initial sense of estrangement is gradually dismantled.

In the latter, this initial absence of a sense of belonging is captured through the author’s lexical choices, which are devoid of emotive resonance. He contends that after spending “close to seven years” (*SWY* 10) in New York City, he “finally *relocat[es]*” to Lagos (*SWY* 9, my

emphasis). The verb “relocate” starkly lacks the affective dimension typically associated with homecoming, subtly signalling an emotional disconnect from the homeland. This sense of estrangement is further amplified by Iduma’s contemplations while still in New York: he thinks that, once back, he “need[s] to become familiar with [...] the feeling of being out of place” (*SWY* 9). While he acknowledges that the “land” has a “pull” on him, at the same time, he also entertains the possibility that “in a year or two,” he could “think of Nigeria with a grudge” (*SWY* 10). After all, the years he spent abroad left a gap between him and Nigeria, which he does not know any longer. Hence, he ruminates on “what kind of country [he] was returning to” (*SWY* 11). In doing so, his reckoning evokes what Feldner (2019) identifies as a constitutive characteristic of Nigerian literature, i.e. the tension engendered by the “gravitational pull” exerted by the country and “the difficulties and struggles of actually living” (2) on its territory. Iduma seems well aware and anticipates this tension even before moving back.

Once back, however, his fears do not fully materialise: he does not long for New York nor his life as a migrant, and thanks to the support of his wife, the writer Ayòbámi Adébáyò, he comes to view Nigeria as home. As illustrated in the work’s incipit, he begins to engage with the country’s political landscape by participating in an anti-government protest in Lagos in October 2020, which called for the dissolution of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, despite his narrative being deeply entrenched in Igbo history and his efforts to navigate their collective trauma, he still finds himself feeling “estranged from [...] his] ethnicity” (*SWY* 14). “Raised outside Igboland,” he “had never arrived at an understanding of what made [him] distinctly Igbo” *in primis* (*SWY* 109). His decision to marry a Yoruba, therefore, despite triggering his stepmother’s anxieties, seems only natural to him. His estrangement from his ethnic group becomes even more evident when language comes into play. As frequently mentioned within the text (*SWY* 183; 216), his knowledge of Igbo is rudimentary, and his “inability to complete a sentence in Igbo without resorting to an English word or phrase” (*SWY* 183) has a negative effect on his quest since the people he asks questions to do not always trust him – “How can you trust a person who cannot speak Igbo well?” (*SWY* 147). Other times, he is perceived as not looking Igbo based on his physical appearance – a driver once tells him that

⁷⁵ The Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) was a controversial unit of the Nigerian Police Force, widely criticized for alleged human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings and torture. In 2020, widespread protests erupted across Nigeria, demanding the dissolution of SARS and broader police reforms. The movement, known as #EndSARS due to its strong online presence, prompted the Nigerian government to announce the disbanding of SARS in October 2020. Despite this, protests continued as demonstrators called for deeper police reforms and accountability for SARS officers.

he does not look Igbo but rather “like a Yoruba man” (*SWY* 218). Interestingly, even if he feels estranged from his ethnicity, he always trumpets his affiliation to it – “I am a proper Igbo man,” he replies to the driver (*SWY* 218) – and finds satisfaction when he is “perceived as native” (*SWY* 169). By showing what appears like contradictory impulses in relation to his ethnicity, Iduma foregrounds its complexity.

Noo Saro-Wiwa finds herself in a similar position: on the one hand, a pervasive sense of estrangement permeates her narrative, with language playing a crucial role in amplifying this feeling. On the other, when erroneously perceived as a foreigner, she promptly corrects those who make that assumption. For instance, during her visit to the National Museum in Lagos, when the guide starts to offer an explanation seemingly tailored for tourists, she immediately asserts, “I know... I’m Nigerian,” and shares with readers that she is “piqued at being mistaken for a foreigner in [her] own country, especially when speaking in [her] best Nigerian accent” (*LT* 26).

Even though she was born in Nigeria and firmly asserts her non-foreigner status, her arrival in Lagos turns out to be “the most alienating of homecomings” (*LT* 13). Not only does she arrive in “a country [she] had never lived in, and a city [she’d] visited only briefly (*LT* 13), but the language she hears in the streets exacerbates her sense of estrangement. As she explains to non-Nigerian readers – or diasporic ones in her intentions (Hållén and Remington 2015) – “although peopled by every Nigerian ethnicity, Lagos is a city of the Yoruba, the dominant ethnic group in the south-west (*LT* 13). To her, “their melodic lingua franca sounded [...] as foreign to [her] ears as any language from Cameroon or Ghana” (13). Underlining her sense of unfamiliarity, a few lines later, she adds, “I might as well have arrived in the Congo” (13). From the viewpoint of Amimo (2020), this comparison drawn between Lagos and the Congo “is troubling considering the wide usage of the latter in literary and critical works to signify the exotic and the primitive” (173). Amimo’s consideration evokes Holland and Huggan’s idea (2000) that the Congo is a complex textual zone. These terms, drawn from Brain McHale’s work on postmodernist fiction (1987), refers to how the Congo is one of those places that are constantly reconstructed, creating overdetermined spaces that are not purely geographical but infused with ideological and mythical dimensions. Since the publication of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, they continue, “[it] has become [...] an abject zone of extreme yet undifferentiated “other-ness” (Holland and Huggan 2000, 69). However, Noo Saro-Wiwa’s reference to the Congo – as well as Ghana and Cameroon, omitted entirely by Amimo (2020) – is not necessarily

symptomatic of an imperialist attitude. While it's essential not to presume that the author is entirely immune to exoticism, here she seems to underscore the profound cultural diversity within Nigeria itself. Even if Lagos and Ogoniland are part of the same country, they differ culturally and linguistically to such an extensive degree that they seem to belong to two different nations.

The national diversity of Nigeria is further emphasised in other parts of the narrative, especially when she visits the northern part of the country. Here, her position as a returnee mingles with that of the tourist. And since "all travel requires us to negotiate a complex and sometimes unsettling interplay between alterity and identity, difference and similarity" (Thompson 2011, 9), her journey to Kano becomes a nuanced exploration of alterity and identity, intertwining the portrayal of the Hausas' otherness with a revision of her hyphenated identity. "[The Hausa] were all ebony-skinned Muslims, wearing djellabas and kufi hats, and speaking in rapid Hausa filled with Arabic-sounding glottal stops and rolled Rs" (*LT* 141). Faced with the "true north" and the alterity of the Hausa, she contends not only that their "shared nationality seemed a rather abstract and unreal concept" (*LT* 141) but also that, while there, she strongly identifies as both Ogoni and Christian (*LT* 143). Her identity, however, is not fixed and changes, shaped by interactions with the broader environment and other individuals.

Noo Saro-Wiwa's identification with being Ogoni and Christian does not exempt her from experiencing frustration with the Nigerians' excessive focus on Christianity, on the one hand, and a sense of estrangement when she arrives in Ogoniland, on the other. This sense of estrangement is once again triggered by language. Indeed, she is not fluent in the Khana language, a language that is predominantly spoken by the Ogoni people in the south-eastern part of Nigeria and often acts as a lingua franca among members of this ethnic group. During her childhood, the family talked largely in English, expecting that Khana would be acquired spontaneously later in life. In her case, this never occurred, partly due to the dominant status of English as a lingua franca among Nigerians. As she matured, her "childhood indifference" toward the language transformed into "embarrassment" and later evolved into profound "resentment" (*LT* 293). At the origin of such resentment is the feelings of inadequacy and discomfort experienced due to her linguistic limitations. For this reason, she generally chooses to remain silent: "I preferred to stay mute than speak Khana like an articulate toddler" (*LT* 294). This decision, however, builds a metaphorical wall between her relatives and herself and makes her "feel small" (*LT* 294). The communicative divide is further exacerbated by her perceived

disconnect in lifestyles and values: “there was little about my life that I could tell them: property ladders, career choices, publishers – they were meaningless details in this context. Births, deaths, marriages were the only news worth sharing” (*LT* 294). Thus, the linguistic disconnection engenders a profound sense of a wider disconnection, leading the narrator to centre on the contrasting values between herself and her family. Yet, her ethnic language does not simply isolate her; it also yields a contrasting effect, moulding a complex relationship that defies easy categorization, revealing the intricate and multifaceted nature of her connection to it.

This becomes clear upon her arrival in Ogoniland. During the four months she spends travelling within the territory of Nigeria, she identifies “as an ethnic foreigner” (*LT* 289), implying a sense of affiliation to the land of the Ogoni specifically rather than to Nigeria as a whole. For instance, when she visits Benin, she “feel[s] more Ogoni than ever” for the history of the region “didn’t seem to be part of [her] own” (*LT* 256). She also highlights her minority status, drawing a comparison between being an Ogoni in Nigeria and Black in the UK: “My ethnic minority status in Nigeria had grown almost as strong as my identity as a racial minority in England” (*LT* 256), she argues. Her sense of affiliation to Ogoniland also hinges on the ethnic language she does not fluently command. Indeed, she says: “Being in a place where Khana was widely spoken carried a new and deep significance. These were *my* people – not sharp-nosed Hausas, or Efiks, Biroms or Yorubas – but Ogonis” (*LT* 289, emphasis in the original). Language serves as a crucial marker of her identification with the Ogoni people and the simultaneous distancing from other Nigerian ethnic groups. This might appear as a paradoxical symbol of cultural identification, especially when juxtaposed with the sense of estrangement engendered by the same language to which we referred in the previous paragraph. This seeming contradiction dissipates for readers as they discover that Ogoniland is the only place where everyone can pronounce her name accurately.

Having the name Noo (pronounced ‘gnaw’) is a heavy cross to bear. Not only is it the same word for ‘crude oil’ in Khana – the most unpoetic of injustices – but the specific tonality of the name makes it impossible for foreigners and most Nigerians to pronounce correctly. Barely a day goes by when I’m not explaining my name to a new acquaintance, repeating it, spelling it, repeating it again, then resignedly accepting their mispronunciation. Finally, I was in the one place on Earth where everyone gets it right straight away. (*LT* 289)

Ogoniland represents a place where she does not have to constantly explain, spell, and repeat her name – only to accept its mispronunciation with quiet resignation. However, the positivity conveyed in the passage is somewhat overshadowed by the reference to its meaning. The phrase “the most unpoetic of injustices” alludes to her father’s tragic fate – being murdered by the government due to his environmental advocacy against the devastation caused by oil exploitation. Thus, much like her relationship with language, her connection to Ogoniland embodies a complex interplay of belonging and estrangement.

This interplay can also be read as one between imagination and reality or, better, between the imagined place and direct contact with it. Indeed, her sense of belonging is more robust when she is away. From this perspective, one might interpret Saro-Wiwa’s Ogoniland as what the Indian-British writer Salman Rushdie (1992) famously dubbed an “imaginary homeland”. As it is widely known, the term refers to the idea that, for those who have experienced displacement or exile, their sense of belonging to a homeland might be more abstract or rooted in memory, imagination, or even literature rather than being a physical or geographical location; it might be one of the manifold “fictions” about the place (Rushdie 1992, 10). As a diasporan, the illusionary nature of Noo Saro-Wiwa’s sense of belonging becomes visible when, once she arrives in Ogoniland, the sense of estrangement does not dissipate. In fact, one might say that her malaise is exacerbated by the physical proximity to the territory because it is the background of her trauma: it is where her father was murdered. Thus, the physical proximity makes her plunge into a state of “anxiety”, whose only remedy is sleep (*LT* 280).

Her initial aspiration to regard the country as a potential place of return is eventually set aside. When the consideration of returning surfaces briefly during her visit to the tranquil village of Esie, renowned for its significant sculptures discovered in the 1930s, she immediately withdraws it. Instead, she indulges in the fantasy of kidnapping one of the statues:

A small part of me considered the possibility of working in Nigerian tourism to try to stem the decline. But that spark of inspiration immediately fizzled at the prospect of misallocated funds, apathy and dealing with the fecklessness of state bureaucracy. By the end, my thoughts degenerated into a kidnap fantasy in which I abduct Esie’s entire collection, like a social worker removing children from their neglectful parents. I would keep the sculptures in my backyard and lavish them with the love and attention they deserved, my conscience cleared by the conviction that I was taking better care of them than our government ever will. (*LT* 268).

Her aspiration to return and work in Nigerian tourism remains a fleeting fantasy, dissipating quickly as she envisions potential challenges. This initial motivation morphs into a whimsical daydream of “kidnapping” the statues, reminiscent of the plot elements of Ndibe’s *Foreign Gods, Inc.* (2014) – even if, just a few lines earlier, she bemoans the isolation preventing these artefacts from public accessibility: “It was quintessentially Nigerian that such impressive artefacts should be hidden in this adobe hut in a quiet village, like a jewel furtively tucked away in a fat woman’s bosom” (LT 226). Ironically, realising her fantasy would only intensify this isolation, making her the sole beneficiary of the statues’ beauty.

As the passage reveals, in her *reverie*, she casts herself as an active protagonist – underscored by the repeated use of the first-person pronoun “I” – envisioning herself as a rescuer of the statues, which she portrays as vulnerable children deserving of love. On the one hand, this depiction can be interpreted as drawing on the ethos of the quest tradition so pervasive in travel writing. Indeed, as articulated by Thompson (2011), travel writing is imbued with motives of quest and bravery, which play a central role in the process of self-fashioning, particularly in the context of shaping masculinity. Consequently, considering this perspective, one could contend that Noo Saro-Wiwa, despite her gender, aligns herself with this tradition, in which travellers embark on journeys in pursuit of knowledge, new opportunities, or various objectives, employing the imagery of the quest to dignify and ennoble their endeavours (Thompson 2011). On the other hand, however, an additional perspective emerges when considering her actions through the lens of the “saviour” figure, linking her role to the Western humanitarian tradition (Bell 2013). Her fantasy of “rescuing” the statues from governmental neglect, like a social worker removing “children from their neglectful parents” (LT 268), parallels the interventionist mindset of Western aid. This tradition often rests on the assumption that an outsider’s intervention is necessary to “save” neglected communities or resources – a mentality with solid colonial overtones (Bell 2013). In this light, she positions herself as the sole caretaker, assuming an exclusive responsibility for the artefacts’ well-being and embodying a dynamic where she alone can adequately provide care. In embodying such a position, her imagined intervention complicates her position, aligning it with that of a Western tourist. While she attempts to reclaim control over a neglected heritage, she inadvertently reproduces the isolating practices she critiques. However, using the verb “degenerate” further reflects her awareness of this paradox, signalling a subtle self-critique that questions the coherence of her vision. Thus, her fantasy exposes the contradictions within her role as a would-

be saviour and the underlying complexity of her relationship with Nigeria - a nation she draws her loyalty yet, paradoxically, fuels her desire to “rescue” its culture from within a profoundly conflicted identity.

Trauma and Aesthetics in Returnees’ Travelogues

In their seminal work *Tourists with Typewriters* (2000) – a foundational text frequently referenced throughout this chapter – Holland and Huggan contend that, while travel writing and postmodernism are often perceived as aligned due to their shared tendency to destabilize traditional narrative structures, postmodern devices are not incorporated as consistently in travel literature as they are in contemporary novels. This inconsistency, they argue, is due to the genre’s need to guard against skepticism and maintain an “authenticity standard” (Holland and Huggan 2000, 158). Similarly, while *Looking for Transwonderland* and *I Am Still With You* engage with themes of trauma, they do not fully embrace the aesthetics typically associated with trauma narratives. However, both texts exhibit a key characteristic commonly linked to postmodernism: a fragmented narrative structure shaped by a persistent oscillation between past and present. According to Ehlers and Clark (2000), this formal aspect typically mirrors the temporal disarray often symptomatic of trauma. In the next section, we will examine the narrative structure of both works in greater depth.

Narrative Structures: Between the Linearity of the Journey and Fragmentation of Trauma and Memory

The narrative structure of Noo Saro-wiwa’s travelogue-cum-memoir – as Krishnan (2018) dubs it – at first blush, presents a seemingly linear structure, mirroring the chronological progression of the author’s journey of temporary return. Unlike *I Am Still With You*, where the challenge of tracking the author’s journey is mitigated by the inclusion of a map in *Looking for Transwonderland*, the journey can be reconstructed through a rapid look at the book’s contents. With the exception of the epilogue and prologue, the chapters are organised around specific geographical locations. The author’s circular journey begins and ends in Lagos, the country’s former capital and presently its largest city in the southwestern region. From there, she advances towards the city of Ibadan, where she visits the book’s eponymous amusement park called

Transwonderland. Then, she heads to Abuja, the “pristine,” “immaculate,” and “dullest” capital city (LT 111) and, after that, ventures northward to explore Kano and Nguru as well as the Yankari, where her fascination with wilderness becomes evident through her description of an “unspoilt, beautiful, peaceful, untouched” landscape (LT 167). After that, her exploration progresses south-eastward to Jos, Maiduguri, Sukur, Calabar, Cross River State, and Benin. Only after these extensive travels does she make her way to Port Harcourt, in Ogoniland, which is her birthplace and where her father used to live.

Among the multitude of places visited, only one lends its name to the book’s title: the name of the amusement park, Transwonderland. The place is particularly significant for the author because “as a child, amusement parks symbolised everything that [she] liked about the West” (LT 98): a mixture of Disney-esque fantasies and an allure of artifice that Nigeria lacked. Her dreams of spending holidays in the USA and living that fantasy are hindered as she finds herself obligated to stay in her home country. Thus, she prefers elements associated with Western culture over those emblematic of her Nigerian heritage: “hot dogs over tasty plantain, the smoothness of a plastic toy over the soft frond of a palm tree, the garish green of Kermit the Frog over the brilliant white of an egret” (LT 98). As an adult, she says that “[she]’s outgrown such thinking” (LT 98) and, indeed, refers to her childhood fantasies as made up of “fake textures and colours” just like those found in an amusement park, where illusion is central (LT 98). Yet, a persisting yearning for a Nigeria that resembles the West becomes apparent in the motivation behind her visit to Transwonderland: in an outdated guidebook, the amusement park is described as “the closest thing Nigeria has to Disney World” (LT 98). She still has a “residual urge for Nigeria to ‘achieve’ and be a place that people admire and want to visit, a credible tourist destination” (LT 98).

In spite of the fact that it was actually Noo Saro-Wiwa’s agent who came up with the travelogue’s title (Hållén and Remington 2015), the author acknowledges the deep significance it has. Transwonderland stands for “this other side of Nigeria, Nigeria as a travel destination” (Hållén and Remington 2015, 275) and as “separated from the murder and the dictatorship” (Public Radio International 2012). Nevertheless, as her visit to Transwonderland reveals, this separation is impossible. Indeed, a plaque discloses that the amusement park owes its existence to Miriam Babangida, the wife of Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, the military dictator in power from 1985 to 1993. Moreover, Transwonderland appears to the author as “decrepit”; “a forlorn landscape of motionless machinery” (LT 99), which she likens through

an analogy to “corpses that refuse to die,” hereby emphasizing its expired economic viability (LT 101). Thus, as she argues in an interview, Transwonderland is “a metaphor for post-independent Nigeria” (Public Radio International 2012) with all its shortcomings. Nevertheless, even if neither her “childhood dreams of a modern, artificial Nigeria” (LT 101) nor her desire to assume the role of a sole tourist are satisfied by the visit, the visit ends up being exciting due to the amusement park’s rides. This excitement is triggered *in primis* by the “tantalising possibility of catastrophe” (LT 100). This interplay between repulsion and attraction, criticism and enjoyment, is what makes the visit to Transwonderland the epitome of the entire journey.

Unlike Transwonderland, many of the places she now sees “with adult eyes” have already been introduced to her in her childhood by her father (LT 9). Indeed, when she was a teenager, her father decided to take his children on a road trip across Nigeria “to instil a love of country” in them (6). Despite that, rather than presenting flashbacks or memories of her past, she displays an emotional distance from her private history and prefers to provide impersonal information about the country and its people. In other words, the information she disseminates in the text serves as a recurrent interruption to her nostalgic reflections. This pattern becomes particularly noticeable during her visits to various places such as Kano, the Jos Museum, and Ibadan. To illustrate this, let’s focus specifically on her experiences in Ibadan.

Ibadan. I had always liked the name. It sounded unusual – not Nigerian, not English; almost Arabic. Ibadan was the city where my father attended university. Its name brought back memories of him conversing with his friends; of *loud*, intellectual gripes that hung in the *tobacco clouds* above the *clink of brandy glasses*. Academic books were read as fervently as the Bible back then, a distant era of enlightenment, before the colonial baton of educational progress had been fumbled and dropped.

The Yorubas, Ibadan’s dominant ethnic group, were among the first people to mix with European missionaries, and consequently became the most educated Nigerians. Among them was Samuel Ajayi Crowther, born in 1809, the first African bishop and one of the first Nigerians to receive higher education. Yorubas embraced literacy and education, and by the late 1950s, a million of their children were enrolled in primary schools in the south-west. Grammar schools and universities were built, transforming Ibadan into the intellectual heart of Nigeria. The University of Ibadan, where my father studied in the early 1960s, became one of the finest academic establishments in the developing world, a refinery for our newly tapped intellect. (LT 84, emphasis added)

The positive perception of Ibadan is triggered by the connection her father has with the city. The mere invocation of its name serves as a mnemonic trigger, unlocking fragments of the past she associates with him. The reminiscence of her father engaging in conversations with his

friends is painted with vivid and sensory imagery, creating an atmosphere steeped in nostalgia. She momentarily plunges into the past through auditory perception (the clink of brandy glasses and the loud conversation) and visual perception (tobacco clouds). Yet, the nostalgic tone is abruptly abandoned. The sentence referring to the academic books creates a transition from an affective to a matter-of-fact tone, conveying information about Ibadan, the Yorubas, and the educational developments in the region. Thus, the language becomes more straightforward and informative, prioritising an exposition of information over an exploration of emotions. Information, thus, can be read as a strategic mechanism for tempering the emotive intensity inherent in the recollections and escaping it; in other words, it acts like a bulwark against the overwhelming nostalgia.

It is this abundance of information that disrupts the linearity of the narrative structure. This includes explanations concerning the country's geography and history, like the one in the examples provided, together with what can be seen as generalisations about its population. Some examples of generalisations are the following: "Nigerians love to transform every place into a giant market, no matter how grand the location" or "Nigerians have very little trust in our public figures." (*LT* 155). They are delivered as if they were an uncontaminated truth through a matter-of-fact language characterised by stylistic elements such as the use of the collective noun "Nigerians" and of the present simple. While the former generalises the entire population and implies a shared attitude, the latter indicates a habitual or regular action or a general truth. As Thompson (2011) underlines, the inadvertent production of "misperceptions and unwarranted extrapolations" is ingrained in the genre of travel writing itself (71). Since travellers possess merely a limited perspective on the people and places they observe – Thompson (2011) continues – when they extrapolate broader conclusions about the observed people based on their personal experiences, they rely on the rhetorical device of synecdoche. However, compared to the travellers that the scholar has in mind, who explore a foreign country, Noo Saro-Wiwa adopts a more authoritative stance as her perspective is not solely external; rather, it is simultaneously informed also by an understanding from within.

As a diasporan residing outside the country, however, her posture garnered significant criticism within Nigeria, a point she openly acknowledged in an interview (Hållén and Remington 2015). Facing the criticisms of Nigerians who challenge her decision to use the pronoun "we," she contends that, as a member of the diaspora, adopting the distancing pronoun "they" would imply a detachment from her cultural heritage. Simultaneously, however, she

acknowledges that her extensive use of the inclusive pronoun “we” is influenced more by a commitment to stylistic consistency than an adherence to her emotional inclinations: “It is best to be consistent. If you are going to say ‘we’ on some occasions, then just use ‘we’ all the time” (Hållén and Remington 2015). Any deviation from this self-imposed rule is thereby an example of internal deviation, which refers to a phenomenon where linguistic features within a text diverge from the established norms or expectations set by that very text (Leech and Short 2007). In this case, any departure from the consistent use of “we” becomes a noticeable instance of internal deviation.

If we look closely at the text, we can remark that she employs a pattern that creates a sense of distance that paradoxically contrasts with the inclusive use of “we.” Let’s analyse the following example that displays such a pattern: “*Nigerians* have a special talent for landing in people’s bad books all around the world. *We’re* louder, brasher, more noticeable than other Africans, who seem mild and timid in comparison” (LT 104, my emphasis). In this sentence, it is notable that the generalisation begins by employing the national demonym. This establishes a sense of distance before transitioning to the inclusive pronoun “we.” It is her double vision that is stylistically unveiled by the alternations between the use of the collective nouns *Nigerians*, only then followed by the pronoun *we*. Moreover, other times, she deviates from the rule of consistency by using “they.” To illustrate this, let’s examine a few sentences that discuss the influence of religion in the country:

But for all Nigerian religion’s flaws, I couldn’t imagine *Nigerians* surviving without it. By following the path of Jesus, people told me, *they* were paving *their* way to an afterlife of everlasting peace and happiness. Knowledge of this helps *them* endure the constant anxiety over financial survival. It makes them very happy. *Their* faces reflect a genuine euphoria as *they* calmly negotiate Lagos’s nightmare streets. [...] Faith in God imbues *Nigerians* with an optimism that I rarely see anywhere else in the world. [...] While *we* replaced our benevolent gods with Jesus, *we’re* still convinced that the traditional, malevolent spirits are out to get us, a part of that universal human obsession with the ‘dark side’” (LT 66-67, my emphasis)

In her travelogue, Noo Saro-Wiwa repeatedly adopts a critical stance towards the “fervent” religiosity she observes in the country, which she sees as a coping mechanism, particularly in the face of constant financial anxieties. Reading the quotation, at first sight it might seem that she aligns herself with the individuals whose beliefs she critiques; however, the distance she maintains is evident – whether consciously or unconsciously – through the initial avoidance of the first-person plural pronoun. Analogous to the earlier instance, she initiates with the use of

the generic term “Nigerians”; however, in contradistinction to the preceding case, she employs the term “they” before transitioning to “we.” This linguistic choice engenders a pronounced distancing effect to the extent that the inclusivity inherent in the collective first-person plural pronoun “we” is effectively undermined, rendering it a reluctant identification of sorts. Hence, when readers encounter the use of the pronoun “we,” they come to the realisation that it sharply diverges from the external perspective she assumes. Indeed, this passage highlights the constant negotiation – even tension – between the positions of a tourist and a returnee.

As previously mentioned, the linearity of the work’s narrative structure is disrupted not only by generalisations but also by the inclusion of a profusion of informational details about Nigeria and its people. The author’s exposition of history, customs, and usages challenges the assumption that the narrative was written with a Nigerian readership in mind: presumably, a Nigerian reader would not require an explanatory note for terms such as “area boy” (*LT* 45), for instance. The proliferation of information and explanations imparts a sense of distance, almost reminiscent of ethnographic observation. The majority of them, albeit not all, do not intersect with the author’s life and that of her family. This observation leads to the consideration that while Iduma incorporates materials about Biafra from diverse sources to engage with the collective trauma of the war, Saro-Wiwa utilises facts as a means of sidestepping direct engagement with her personal trauma. Thus, the prevalence of this abundance of information within the narrative can be interpreted as a manifestation of trauma itself. In the context of the overall narrative, these details serve a role akin to speech fillers, reminiscent of the characteristics associated with the recollection of trauma (Brewin 2016). Nevertheless, in contrast to the overarching tendency, certain passages are deeply evocative of her personal history and traumatic experiences. For instance, as previously emphasised, the prologue delineates the tumultuous relationship with Nigeria and its intersection with that of her father.

This oscillation between an observational and introspective narrative mode is, according to Rob Nixon (1992), a characteristic of the modern genre of travel writing. In his book focusing on Naipaul’s travel writing, he argues that the genre alternates between “an autobiographical, emotionally tangled mode” and a “semi-ethnographic, distanced, analytical mode” (1992, 15). *I Am Still With You* and *Looking for Tanswonderland*, much like many travelogues analysed by Thompson (2011), navigate a dual narrative path. On the one hand, they provide readers with information about the places explored by their narrators, while on the other hand, they bring autobiographical elements to the forefront. This dual focus not only enriches the texts with

details and observations about Nigeria but also imbues them with an introspective dimension rooted in personal experiences and history. This interplay illustrates the delicate equilibrium between external exploration and internal contemplation, a defining characteristic of the travel genre. Indeed, from Fussell's perspective (1982), this fusion of personal narrative with exploratory observation represents the quintessential aesthetic ideal of travel writing. In *I Am Still With You* and *Looking for Tanswonderland*, the voices of the authors-narrators accomplish this fusion while using first-person narratives. Behind this approach, as is often the case, lies the underlying assertion that the text constitutes "a true record of [authors'] experiences" (Thompson 2011, 27). Yet, travel writing resides at the intersection of fact and fiction, or borrowing a term coined by David Lodge, travel writing is *faction* – a combination of the two.

This alternation is also visible in *I Am Still with You*, as the author navigates between a distanced perspective, focused on recounting the Biafran war, and an "entangled" one, where the narratorial self assumes a more prominent role. This shift engenders a more fragmented narrative structure compared to that of Noo Saro-Wiwa. When asked about this stylistic feature, Iduma draws attention to the even more fragmented structure of his 2018 travelogue, *A Stranger's Pose* (appendix). He adds that *I Am Still With You* is structured around an overarching narrative arc that commences with his re-entry into Nigeria and culminates in the encounter with his maternal uncle (appendix). Nevertheless, he concedes that "what happens within that telling is what can be considered fragmentary" (appendix). This fragmentation is the result of a long writing process, whose point of departure was the linear account contained in a day-by-day record of his trip (Iduma 2023b). This initial record evolved as he annotated fragments of readings and research (Iduma 2023b). From this log, he subsequently wrote the first draft, which mirrored Noo Saro-Wiwa's narrative structure since each chapter was devoted to a place he visited (Adimora 2023). Unsatisfied by this form, Iduma adopts a more fragmented form because, in his words, "this wasn't a linear story" (Adimora 2023, n.p.). This absence of linearity is also underscored in the narrative when the narrator reflects on the sensation of "being out of step with linear time in which memories of the past have no sequence" (*SWY* 199 – 200). Thus, the usual sense of time, with its linear progression and orderly sequencing of memories, is disrupted.

While the narrative retraces his journey on the traceless steps of his uncle, his account is persistently interrupted by the incursion of references to a multitude of materials recounting

the conflict: descriptions of videos (*SWY* 12) and photographs (*SWY* 41; 98; 102; 145; 173; 190; 207) mingle with excerpts of articles (*SWY* 80-81) documents, poems (*SWY* 112) as well as interviews conducted by the author (*SWY* 95). The incorporation of these fragments extends Nixon's semi-ethnographic mode, pushing the boundaries of travel writing through the intersection with investigative writing. Indeed, the narrative connects the author's personal experience of travel and his story with research in order to uncover the hidden story of the conflict. The reliance on research materials intensifies as the author comes to the realisation that he will possibly never discover the burial location of his uncle. Therefore, the unfillable gaps are filled with historical research to such a degree that, for the author, "the writing process felt like weaving" (Adimora 2023, n.p.). The narrative thus seems to be governed by a pendular motion between the past (the war) and the moment of NOW (the journey), both recounted in brief sections making up the numerous chapters. This oscillatory motion is only interrupted by sections focussing on Iduma's personal life, in which he reveals how his path and that of his family intersect with the conflict. The sections act as a binding force between the recounted events of the conflict and the journey, for they show the legacy of the conflict – not only at a personal level but also at the national one, giving the "sense of being enfolded in a sequence of histories and inequalities larger than all of us" (*SWY* 2).

The focus on the larger picture through a horizontal non-hierarchical movement from the personal to the historical and *vice versa* is a constant topos in the travelogue. In an interview, the author argues that "the historical is invariably personal" (Adimora 2003, n.p.), evoking the well-known slogan popularised by second-wave feminism that "the personal is political."⁷⁶ This suggests that personal experiences are intricately connected to and influenced by historical events and contexts. As he further explains:

I don't think that I would write the story of my family if I couldn't reckon with something broader, both historically and politically. For me, this book was a way to propose that when we're thinking about our individual stories, we can't think in pockets of events, we have to figure out a way to broaden the scope of our thinking about our lives, in order for the lives of others to enter ours. (Adimora 2003, n.p.)

⁷⁶ "The personal is political" is a foundational slogan of the second-wave feminist movement, which gained prominence in the 1960s and 1970s. It emphasises the interconnectedness of personal experiences and broader socio-political structures. The phrase was popularised by Carol Hanisch through the publication of an essay with that title in 1969.

This belief is stylistically reflected in the way the author braids past and present, creating a space for conversation between plural temporalities. The importance of memory and its conveyance emerges as a central theme in the texts, highlighted by the second epigraph drawn from *The Winter Vault* (2009) by the Canadian poet and novelist Anne Michaels. This quotation – “The past does not change, nor our need for it. What must change is the way of telling” – underscores the immutable essence of the past and the dynamic nature of its narrativisation. In the interview contained in the appendix, Iduma underlines the significance of the epigraph and asserts that “the war can never be undone, but Nigerians and myself, at least I can understand better what the motivations were for the war” (appendix). “Bringing together all those voices from different books, all those personalities and protagonists and ideas,” he continues, aims to render the war more “consequential and more realistic” (appendix). In other words, by assembling all these fragments and shards together, the author offers readers a plurivocal narration of the war, seeking to foster a sense of proximity to it.

The careful interlacing between the historical and the personal characterises the narrative in its entirety, marking the entire text with a blend of introspection and external observation. Frequently, revelations from Iduma’s research on the war evoke introspective moments, prompting reflections on his own life and that of his family or past memories. For instance, Iduma’s reference to the writings by the Biafran Ministry of Foreign Affairs secretary, Godwin Onyegbula, shifts in the following section to a work authored by his father. This work is of great significance to the narrator, as it includes a poem he wrote, incorporated by his father. This inclusion not only honours the narrator but also symbolically integrates him into his father’s legacy. Indeed, it is revealed that they both share a deep dedication to literature.

This connection between the personal and the historical reverberates also in his use of images. In the travelogue, three zoom-ins of the same photo titled *Recruits in Biafra* (1968) intersperse the text (*SWY* 41; 103; 197). They, as the author argues, have to be read as an integral part of the narrative (appendix).⁷⁷ Taken by the Italian photojournalist

⁷⁷ Iduma is an enthusiastic connoisseur of photography and is known for having created a newsletter titled *Tender Photo: Conversations on African Photography*. While his passion for photography developed in high school, he initially decided to study law at Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife, Nigeria. After graduating, he got in contact with *Invisible Borders*, an organisation made up of a group of photographers travelling around Africa (Adimora 2003). After travelling with them and seeing the “overlaps and convergences” between photography and writing, he decided to study Art Criticism (MFA) at the New York School of Visual Arts (Adimora 2003, n.p.). That experience led to the writing of *A Stranger’s Pose* (2018), a book which – using Iduma’s words – “interweaves text and photographs and some poetry, and it was pushing the boundaries of what travel writing could be” (Adimora 2003, n.p.).

Romano Cagnoni,⁷⁸ the photograph depicts a gathering of bare-chested men arranged in multiple rows. They stand in a school playground, which was converted into a training camp for the Biafran Army (*SWY* 41). The first time the zoom-in is embedded in the text, the image is complemented by an ekphrasis, i.e., a description of the visual representation. It occurs as the author begins to inquire about his uncle from family members, yielding meagre information in response: his father's cousin, born after the war, is only able to deliver hearsay about a ritual performed to relieve the "begrudged spirit" of his uncle, who hunted his relatives' dreams" (*SWY* 37). After the encounter, the narrator reports this second-hand information to his brother, Emeka, and becomes aware of the presence of a "cleft" between the two: whilst "Emeka wanted his truths empirical and communicable (*SWY* 39)" and believed that the quest would equate to "an unfolding of gradual revelations that would climax in dramatic fashion" (*SWY* 92); Iduma "as a writer [...] was content with the irresolvable" (*SWY* 39). Indeed, at this point of the narration, he opens to the possibility of the irresolvable: the quest he embarked on might never come to the hoped-for result, i.e., that of finding out what happened to his uncle and his burial site. Within this context, teeming with gaps and lacunae, Cagnoni's photograph showing Biafran soldiers replaces the absence of a picture of his uncle. In other words, the absence of facts and tangible objects is filled with imagination: "One of these men could be my uncle," argues Iduma while observing the picture (*SWY* 43). According to the author, "photography is another way to search for my uncle," and "every time that the photograph is brought closer, it's an attempt to look for [his] face" (appendix). The deeper his awareness grows that he will not uncover sufficient details about his uncle, the more the picture is magnified. This resonates with Kurtz (2023), who argues that photography compensates for "silence" and reveals itself as a more effective way of representing trauma (72).

Facing the silence of not finding tangible elements of his uncle – neither photographs nor his burial site – Iduama turns to Cagnoni's photograph. Every time the progressively zoomed photo is embedded in the text, his thoughts are drawn to his elusive uncle. For instance, the second time the picture appears in the text, it is juxtaposed with the ekphrasis of a different picture, a picture that belonged to his father. It displays the author's father, captured alongside another brother and individuals. As the author scrutinizes the faces of the two, he says: "If I

⁷⁸ While in the memoir the photo is dated in 1967, many sources among which the website of the *Fondazione Romano Cagnoni* indicate 1968. Indeed, the Italian photojournalist left for the territory of Biafra the same year and remained until 1970 with the aim of covering a war which, in his own words, had "little newspaper coverage because there were no strong political or economic interests" (<https://www.centropalazzote.it/romano-cagnoni/>, my translation).

were to blend the features of the two men [in the picture], I could arrive at the nearest possible visage of their missing brother [the author's uncle]" (102). The blending of their features represents a mental exercise triggered by the desire to construct a visual approximation of the appearance of their missing uncle since he does not know his real face. In this way, this operation is similar to the reliance on Cagnati's picture: they represent means through which the author grapples with the absence of a direct visual record of his uncle. Similarly, the final inclusion of the picture in the text – this time magnified even more than in the previous two instances – comes after the introduction of another piece of acquired information. The author's encounter with Dr Chike leads him to believe that his uncle, who had ascended in rank during the war, might have been affiliated with BOFF – the Biafra Organisation of Freedom Fighters. This conclusion stems from the uncle's lack of a degree, a factor that might have posed a barrier to securing a leadership position within the regular army. Even in this case, Iduma argues that "[he] can picture [his] uncle" (*SWY* 196).

Summing up, the works' fragmented narrative structures have opposing effects: the presence of a polyphony of voices from different sources is a way of engaging with the transgenerational trauma in *I Am Still With You* whereas, in *Looking for Transwonderland*, the profusion of general information about the country represents Noo Saro-Wiwa's strategy to postpone tackling her personal trauma as well as to distance herself from it. Nevertheless, if Ilka Saal is right when stating that "coping with trauma entails not only the repair of incurred physical damage but also the reconstruction of shattered narrative structures" (2011, 453), the stitching together of all these fragments evokes a path towards healing and reintegration.

Return Travelogue: A Genre of Memory and Healing?

We have repeatedly contended that the two texts can be classified as travelogues, as the narratives' backbone consists of the itineraries that the authors follow within the country. Indeed, fragments of information about both the authors' personal histories and the historical backdrop of the country are woven within the exploration of Nigeria's diverse topography. Writing a travelogue, however, comes with metaphorical baggage because it has historically been associated with the colonial project of reinforcing European norms and exacerbating the "otherness" of mostly non-European places and peoples. This association has spurred ambivalent feelings in the postcolonial field, as Steve Clark (1999) succinctly captures, describing travel writing as "a kind of love that dare not speak its name" (3). Examining critical

perspectives on the genre, even a foundational work of postcolonial theory like Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) emphasises its significance in the colonial project. Showcasing how the Orient (the physical space) has been orientalised by the West, he famously contends that "even the most innocuous travel book [...] contributed to the density of public awareness of the Orient" (192). Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* (2007) further illustrates how travel writing played a role in constructing "the rest of the world for European readerships at different points in Europe's expansionist trajectory" (5). The "contact zone" resulting from the colonial encounter, she argues, is a site where individuals "previously separated by geography and history are co-present [...] in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (Pratt 2007, 8). In a similar vein, David Spurr in *The Rhetoric of Empire* (1993) categorises travel writing as one of the "discourses of colonialism," where "one culture comes to interpret, to represent, and finally to dominate another" (4). Meanwhile, Holland and Huggan (2000) underline how even contemporary travel writing capitalises on and exoticises cultural differences.

Conversely, some scholars have directed their attention towards the subversive potential inherent in travel writing. Drawing precisely from Holland and Huggan's concept of the "counter-travellers" (2000), María Lourdes López Roperó (2003) identifies a distinctive sub-genre of travel writing in the postcolonial travelogue: "no longer an instrument of imperial expansion," she contends, "travel writing has become a powerful vehicle of cultural critique" (51). Similarly, Claire Lindsay (2016) perceives these narratives as harbouring radicalism. Beyond serving as a platform for "social commitment," Lindsay highlights their capacity for what Walter D. Mignolo terms "diversality." Representing an alternative to universality, diversality represents "a project that is an alternative to universality and offers the possibility of a network of planetary confrontations with globalization in the name of justice, equity, human rights, and epistemic diversality" (Mignolo 2008 in Lindsay 2016, 33).

Far from attempting to be exhaustive, this rough cast of the debate aims at underlying how, as an African or African-descent writer, writing a travelogue is not devoid of implications. Indeed, while *I Am Still With You* (2023) has not yet been subject to extensive debate given its recent publication, different analyses of *Looking for Transwonderland* focus on its literary genre. For Hållén (2017), "by shifting the focus from 'static' [...] to the fluidity of identity," Noo Saro-Wiwa offers a "counter-discourse response to a Eurocentric tradition of Western travel writing" (60). On a different note, Maureen Amimo (2020) identifies the travelogue as

an exemplification of African travel writing, able to display the crisis of nationhood by unravelling anxieties through personal travel. Finally, Cruz-Gutiérrez (2016) argues that the travelogue represents an instance of “countertravel writing” as described by Holland and Huggan (2000).

When asked about the implications of writing a travelogue, both authors deny any convergence between their work and remnants of colonial discourse (Hållén e Remington 2015; appendix). After all, it is impossible to define the authors as “metropolitan travellers”, which, according to Clarke, Dutton, and Johnston (2014), are “representative of imperial culture” (223); nor are they easy to categorise as “subaltern travellers,” i.e. “representative[s] of the colonized” (Clarke, Dutton, and Johnston 2014, 223). A harsh binarism within the current historical moment no longer stands: we cannot superficially affirm that since the two authors employ a travelogue as a literary genre, they perpetuate the colonial discourse; nor can we argue that, since they are Nigerians, their strategy is that of automatically “writing back.” More than contesting colonialist tendencies in travel writing as in the postcolonial travelogues identified by Thompson (2011), they seem to have a different focus altogether. Iduma argues that “[he] wasn’t quite interested in taking down or working against any particular mode,” but simply wanted to recount his travel experience (appendix). After all, he argues, “any genre” – the “novel” *in primis* – can be stigmatised for its enmeshment with the colonial discourse. Indeed, the automatic association of travel writing with colonial discourse – whether seen as perpetuating or dismantling it – can be interpreted as symptomatic of a broader challenge. This challenge lies in the persistent reliance on what sometimes seems as unchanged discourses and keywords within the field of postcolonial studies. To escape this entrapment, Saro-Wiwa advocates for what today we would dub the decolonisation of the genre, asserting the imperative for diverse voices to contribute varying perspectives. Notably, she specifically calls for a shift in focus from novel to travel writing among African writers (Cruz-Gutiérrez 2016).

Travelogue’s Un-straightforwardness and Memory-Evoking Places

The act of recounting travel experiences can be interpreted as an indirect means of narrating the latent traumatic experiences of the narrators. This indirectness aligns with Caruth’s (1996) perspective on the power of testimonial literature, asserting that trauma necessitates expression through a language that is inherently literary, as it “can never be asked in a straightforward way” (5). The un-straightforwardness of the works is produced by the apparent initial focus on

chronicling the travel itself. Yet, within this narrative framework, fragments of past memories and events subtly intrude, transforming the travel account into a conduit for revisiting and grappling with personal and collective memory. If Jan Assmann (2010) is right when he argues that “*memory* is [...] a metonym for physical contact between a remembering mind and a reminding object” (17), one can posit that the topography of Nigeria assumes the role of a reminding object. The various destinations that the authors/narrators visit serve as a trigger, prompting them to remember and immerse themselves in their past experiences. The journey is a way to approach trauma indirectly – or un-straightforwardly – and Nigeria, as a reminding object, exemplifies what Maria Tumarkin (2005) dubs traumascapes: places that are “full of visual and sensory triggers, capable of eliciting a whole palette of emotions” and “catalyse and shape remembering and reliving of traumatic events” (31). Nigeria, in this context, is a site “where events are experienced and re-experienced across time” (Tumarkin 2005, 31), as the presence of different temporality in both narratives epitomises. The authors/narrators, by navigating the traumascapes of Nigeria, engage in a complex process of confronting and negotiating with their pasts and trauma within the framework of their travel experiences.

In *I Am Still With You*, this is precisely the narrator’s *modus operandi*: he “visit[s] the places where violence unfolded” with the aim of “access[ing] an unmediated narrative of what occurred there” (*SWY* 170). Even if the un-mediatedness might appear as an aporia, the physical space makes him plunge into the belligerent past. This characteristic renders him a quintessential traveller, whose “physical presence at a site” often is “a spur for memories, reflections and imaginings” (Thompson 2011, 112); Yet, differently from such a figure, these places do not “lead [him] far away from [his] immediate surroundings” (Thompson 2011, 112). Africa is not “a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity,” a mere background, as in the criticism Chinua Achebe provides to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* in *An Image of Africa* (1988). A good illustration of this is when Iduma crosses the Niger Bridge on his way to Onitsha and notices a statue of Chukwuemeka “Emeka” Odumegwu Ojukwu, the secessionist leader. While he referred to the man who served as the President of the Republic of Biafra (1967 – 1970) in a previous passage, and he continues to be a focal point throughout the text, here it is the statue that kindles the focus on what Igbos perceive as a historical “hero” (*SWY* 48). While the collective memory is evoked by the author once he sees the statue, his journey to Onitsha also brings forth a personal recollection: he remembers being falsely accused of theft and arrested on the same bridge as a student, with his father’s intervention ultimately

securing his release. Both fragments of the past – the national emblematic figure and his own personal encounter with authority – are intricately interwoven in his account of the journey to Onitsha, rendering this brief section a convergence of three temporal layers.

We have already argued that in *Looking for Transwonderland*, visiting sites previously explored with her father does not inherently evoke her memories – or, better said, she refrains from immersing herself in such recollections. However, an exception to this pattern occurs when she visits Port Harcourt and the house in which her father lived. Here, the “reminding object” (Assmann 2010) that triggers her memory is the family house. While a detailed analysis of this passage will follow in the next section, for now, suffice it to say that the vision of the house prompts her to draw a comparison between its past and present state: the “noiseless street” enveloped in a “mysterious forest” teeming with “wildlife” is replaced by a “superhighway;” (LT 271). While the context has changed, the house’s appearance remained “more or less the same” (LT 271). Once inside, objects such as photographs act as catalysts, prompting her to recall “a few shards of memory” (LT 274). By observing them, the author substitutes the collective image of her father as a national and international hero with a more intimate and personal one, revealing a confessed “attrition” between the two (LT 274).

Accepting an Incomplete Story: A Possibility of Healing

In her exploration of Nigeria’s traumascapes, Noo Saro-Wiwa explicitly articulates her goal as healing her relationship with the country. Conversely, when questioned about literature’s potential to heal trauma, Emmanuel Iduma, though cautious about its healing capacity, acknowledges its ability to “understand or give us language for the past” and “for what [he] was coping with already” (appendix). On a different occasion, he states: “The story of my writing has been a story about finding form; it’s been about the attempt to keep looking for the form that makes the story possible” (Adimora 2023, n.p.). If trauma is viewed as ineffable, resisting expression through language, scholars such as Caruth and Herman would view Iduma’s statement precisely as a definition of healing from it. Caruth (1996), in particular, emphasises the value of narrative and storytelling in healing and claims that sharing one’s trauma can be a critical step towards recovery; this is also the premise on which the whole field of trauma studies is based. On a parallel note, Herman (1997) traces a three-step path that can facilitate healing: first, creating a sense of safety, thanks to which feelings of fear and powerlessness give way to ones of security and control; second, remembering and mourning to

reconstruct the traumatic story that allows significance, coherence, and meaning to take the place of fragmentation and disintegration; and finally, re-establishing new connections between survivors and their community, thanks to which reintegration (and in some cases reconciliation) take the place of a feeling of isolation and disconnect.

Relying on Herman's tripartite schemata (1997), both narratives could be positioned within the second phase: that of remembering and mourning. Toni Pressley-Sanon (2018) adopts this vision when he describes Saro-Wiwa's homecoming precisely as "a ritual of mourning not only for her father [...] but also the resultant severed relationship with Nigeria" (161). Similarly, it can be said that Iduma's narrative uses writing as a ritualistic process to make sense of the grief of losing his father. However, differently from Saro-Wiwa, he seems not to be aware of that. The un-straightforwardness characterising *I Am Still With You* is founded on the fact that his whole quest, as the title suggests, can be interpreted as a way of being with his father through the creation of a narrative space in which the author is able to engage with and come to terms with the experience of his loss. Indeed, when he starts interviewing the members of his family, he tells his uncle a lie: "I am writing a book about my father's life" (*SWY* 96). This sentence might be considered an atypical Freudian slip: although a deliberate lie – whereas, in the typical Freudian slip, it is not deliberate – it still reveals his unconscious thoughts and desires.

Paradoxically, while trauma studies underline the power of storytelling in mending the disintegration of trauma, in both narratives, coming to terms with loss means accepting the incompleteness of the story and the lack of an epiphanic moment. In this, they initially seem to deviate from the travel accounts' tendency, identified by Thompson (2010) "to be plotted so that it progresses towards some sort of conclusive, climactic scene, in which the traveller seemingly gains an epiphanic insight into him- or herself" (115). Rather than relying on a singular transformative revelation, the authors initially grapple with the complexity of their experiences by acknowledging the fragmented nature of their stories. It is these partial stories with their gaps and lacunae that significance, coherence, and meaning must be sought and established.

In *Looking for Transwonderland*, for instance, the itinerary of Saro-Wiwa's return is organised in such a way as to build up a climax: after travelling across Nigeria, she finally arrives in Bane, her father's village. However, she observes that "returning" to the village, "there was no cathartic awakening or joyful homecoming" (*LT* 295), re-echoing the sense of

un-homely homecoming she felt when in Lagos. This sense that her return did not bring the expected results emerges even in the previous few pages: while visiting her father's house in Port Harcourt, Saro-Wiwa realises that "[she]'ll never know [his] the full story" (LT 273). Even here, there is "little sense of homecoming or belonging" (LT 27); even here, the concept of homecoming is tainted with a sense of un-belonging, encapsulated in her use of quotation marks when referring to the house as "home" (LT 271). Also, the choice of the possessive "our" fails to bridge the emotional distances as it is coupled with the neutral term "house:" "Our house used to stand on the very edge of town" (LT 271). The "emptiness of the house" makes her aware of "the void left by [her] brother and father's deaths" (LT 273) because it parallels it. The pervasive use of vocabulary belonging to the lexical field of emptiness ("emptiness", "void") and solitude ("lonely", "abandoned", "alone", "inhabited") accentuates the author's feelings of loneliness and the profound impact of familial losses. The imagery of a home now devoid of its occupants intensifies the sense of family depletion. Even as she discovers a "common ground" with her father through shared books (LT 272), the subsequent chapter's title, "Reconciliation," proves elusive. Her thoughts go back to the time when, as a child, because she used to live in London, she felt "at the margins of the extended family [...] a separate appendage on the family tree" (LT 273). Thus, despite the apparent connection found in the shared ground, the emotional estrangement from her father persists, and she acknowledges that even before his death, he "had his common life in Nigeria, away from [theirs]" (LT 273-274). Thus, not even his house gives her the sought-after "sense of homecoming and belonging" (LT 274), reiterating the disrupted relationship with the country.

The same awareness of the impossibility of tracing the whole story makes its way as the narrative of *I Am Still With You* progresses. The "gaps in [the author's] family story (SWY, 5) cannot be filled despite extensive research, innumerable interviews and the many trips taken to the war's "physical markers" (164); his quest is unsatisfactory as he is unable to find much about his uncle. While the author makes readers participants in his often unremarkable discoveries along the way, he also gathers a "cumulative" "truth" in the form of a summary (SWY 98): it is unveiled that his second uncle, Oko, a good wrestler of between 22 and 25 years of age, left his hometown, Afikpo, before the conflict to find a job and he joined the Biafran army before the conflict was ignited. With the war, he advanced in rank to a command position and eventually died in the conflict. Before his death, however, he managed to come back home – some say to take a protective talisman. Soon afterwards, he died – allegedly providing cover

for his comrades. His story does not end there: the author learns that since his uncle's body was not buried, his spirit visited the oldest man of the family in his dreams, and the family had to perform a ritual to appease him. This paucity of information, characterised by uncertainty and unreliability, is not a *denouement* as its position in the middle of the work suggests (*SWY* 129). As the author realises, there are no satisfying narrative climaxes or final resolutions – yet he is still unable to let go of his search.

There is another chance for a climactic narrative point when the author attempts to meet with “someone who was purportedly an actual member of the pro-Biafran movement” (*SWY* 183). With the intermediation of Chris, a family friend, the narrator comes into contact with Onyekachi, a member of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), the separatist organisation that still advocates for the independence of Biafra. Despite Onyekachi's suspicion, they convene for a meeting. Yet, the author's one-hour bus ride and the two-hour waiting in Aba end up in a “failed rendezvous” since Onyekachi turns off his phone and does not show up (*SWY* 184). This time, the story's climax was within reach – yet impossible to achieve once again.

Therefore, we can conclude this section by saying that both narratives display – at least initially – a concern with incompleteness and a proclivity to eschew the closure that a complete story would provide. By that means, both works mirror what Madhu Krishnan (2010) identifies as a characteristic of the war narrative written by the so-called third generation: the rejection of “notions of completeness, logic and sensibility,” which epitomise “the importance of continued negotiation and interrogation necessary in the postcolonial condition” (n.p). Notwithstanding this concern, in the end, both authors succumb to the urgency of turning their narratives into redemptive ones. Redemption, according to McLean et al. (2020), indicates “when a challenging, negative, or traumatic experience is narrated in a way that communicates growth, meaning-made, or resolution” (1). The two travelogues end up displaying a reconciliation with their traumas. Yet this reconciliation, as it will be argued in the next section, is dented by this very incompleteness.

Fantasy of Forgiveness, Fantasy of Healing?

The travelogues' endings exhibit a notable shift in direction: while throughout the narrative, both texts have rejected the idea that the story can reach a complete wholeness and have highlighted the impossibility of filling all lacunae and gaps, in the end, they morph into

redemptive narratives. In his pathbreaking work *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), LaCapra examined precisely those kinds of narratives, focusing, on the one hand, on the post-trauma desire for closure, hope and healing and, on the other, on the responsibility of the historian to deliver a complex, nuanced and truthful account of the past. In this work, LaCapra (2000) defines redemptive narrative as works “where the end recapitulates the beginning after the trials of the middle, and gives you – at least on the level of insight – some realization of what it was all about” (LaCapra 2001, 156). Both travelogues feature a redemptive conclusion, emphasizing the authors’ desire to convey that their journey is not merely a physical one but, as observed in numerous travelogues examined by Thompson (2010), an “emotional and psychological” voyage fostering “an emotional and psychological evolution” (96). This signifies a reconnection with Nigeria for Noo Saro-Wiwa and an understanding of the history behind his name for Emmanuel Iduma. Thus, returning to the previous section and referring back to Thompson’s quote (2010), while, at the beginning, the travelogues seem to initially deviate from the typical trajectory of travel accounts, leading to a conclusive, climactic scene where the traveller gains a profound self-insight (Thompson 2010, 115) in the end, they do exactly this. In doing this, they display “moments of anagnorisis,” as the scholar dubs these climactic scenes (Thompson 2010, 116).

Looking for Transwonderland concludes with a return to Lagos, tracing a nearly complete circular motion in space since it ends in Lagos, where Noo Saro-Wiwa’s journey began. In the last chapter, and in the epilogue in particular, she draws conclusions from her four-and-a-half-month journey. Focusing on the work’s ending, Pressley-Sanon (2018) argues that her return represents “a step toward coming to terms with, if not fully healing, her traumatic history” (161). The author herself appears to share this viewpoint, as evidenced by her choice of the final chapter’s title, *Truth and Reconciliation*. Of note is that the title is possibly inspired by the name of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, institutions generally created in the aftermath of a conflict to address past injustices and human rights abuses in order to foster healing and to build a path towards a peaceful future.⁷⁹ In Noo Saro-Wiwa’s final chapter, the concepts of truth and reconciliation, while not entirely distinct from their traditional political and social justice connotations, take on a personal dimension. Echoing the ethos of Truth and

⁷⁹ Possibly, the most well-known *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* is the South African one formed in the aftermath of Apartheid. Chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, it aimed to unearth the truth about human rights violations committed between 1960 and 1994 and provided a platform for victims to share their experiences and for perpetrators to confess their crimes, offering amnesty in exchange for truthful testimonies. Its role was crucial in facilitating national healing and in forging a new path of reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa.

Reconciliation Commissions, Noo Saro-Wiwa's journey through Nigeria symbolises her endeavour to confront and understand the country's injustices towards her and her family. This exploration represents her quest to reconcile with a turbulent past, seeking to resolve conflicts and pave the way for a more positive relationship with the country.

Yet, as shown by Zhong (2023), the work's ending highlights the author's persistent ambivalence in relation to Nigeria. In opposition to the last step of Herman's tripartite path towards healing (1997), in which new connections with the community are re-established, the last chapter starts with the narrator completely isolating herself from the bustle and hustle that surrounds her and from the passengers of the bus on which she travels. Her discomfort is stylistically mirrored by the abundance of words belonging to the semantic field of noise, such as "loudly," "noise," and "chaos" (*LT* 297), which punctuate the first page of the chapter. Not even the encounter with Maurice Archibong, a journalist and "expert" of Nigeria that she previously encountered in Benin, alleviates her feelings of estrangement, contrary to initial impressions. The initial moment of connection, during which she opens up about her desire to steal one of the figurines of Esie, morphs into a moment in which she "feel[s] more isolated than ever" because of the interlocutor's "openness to the supernatural," which she views with suspicion (*LT* 299). This triggers the compilation of a list detailing the country's shortcomings, which are interspersed throughout the chapter: "The enthusiasm for the paranormal" (*LT* 299) is followed by the fact that "confident, educated, articulate [people] are a rare specimen" (*LT* 302) and that "under the glimpses of hope [...] lurked the belief in witchcraft, the oil dependency, the politicians' constant acceptance of low standards, all of it waiting to negate [people's] achievements in an instant" (*LT* 303). Simultaneously, she highlights few "glimpses of hope" (*LT* 303): Lagos, which she describes "unstructured" and "dirty" is also "Nigeria's greatest success" because it is inhabited by 250 ethnic groups living "relatively harmoniously" (*LT* 302); "the mechanised farms, Cross River State's tourism, and Lagos's fancy new bus transit system" (*LT* 303) and the "indigenous heritage" (*LT* 304). As in response to her intentions leading up to the journey – "hopefully, I could learn to be less scared of it, perhaps even like it, and consider it a potential 'home'" (*LT* 9) –, she argues that "Nigeria [...] couldn't seduce [her] fully" (*LT* 304). Reinforcing such a conclusion, the epilogue describes the few hours before her departure back to her "chosen home [the UK]" (*LT* 305); it seems that the journey did not foster a vision of the country as a permanent home where she could actually live.

However, completing the operation of drawing the line of her journey, she argues somehow unexpectedly that “[her] journey had cured [her] emotional fear of the country” (*LT* 304). She further stresses the healing power of her temporal return, arguing that “travelling [to Nigeria] as an adult helped [her] to finally wipe away the negative associations” (*LT* 305). Maybe these are the statements that inspired Madhu Krishnan (2018) to define the work’s finale as “a moment of utopian hope, invoking forgiveness toward the country” (156). Observing the last pages, however, it is difficult to argue that the travel completely helped her heal from the traumatic memory, which made her associate the country with negative feelings of fear and disappointment (*LT* 8). The redemptive impulse of the narrative remains only on the surface and can be read as a reverberation of what Zhong (2023) identified as “a rhetorical writing strategy rather than a truthful representation of her traumatic experience on the journey” (171). At best, it helped her accept the profound sense of ambivalence towards the country. Indeed, whereas before her journey, Nigeria was a place of horror *tout court*, “a place where nightmares did come true” (*LT* 8), after travelling across its territory and meeting a multitude of Nigerians from different ethnic groups, she starts associating the country with Fela Kuti, the well-known controversial inventor of the Afrobeat.

The occasion for this association is provided during the last night in Lagos when she isolates herself again, this time from her family, and goes to The Shrine, a club dedicated to the musician. It is there, late into the night, “while the workers cleared the tables and swept the floor,” and she attempts to “avoid getting mosquito bites,” that she feels “happy” (*LT* 308). This revelation seems a perfect conclusion: a moment of anagnorisis, as Thompson (2011) would define it, allowing her to reconcile with and accept the country as it is. This does not mean crafting a completely positive picture of the country, however. Indeed, the ambivalence persists, as can be perceived from the association between Nigeria and the musician:

[Fela Kuti]’s the embodiment of everything I love about Nigeria: intelligent, funny, passionate, exciting, raw, an ‘African man original’, not a “gentleman”. He took the best elements of Nigerian music and mixed them with foreign genres to create something so fresh and superior, it gives listeners a swaggering pride in being Nigerian. But Fela was also incorrigible and untamed, railing against government immorality while grabbing his dancers’ buttocks on stage; he had a messy family life and a distaste for upward mobility. (*LT* 308-309)

By aligning the qualities and shortcomings of the musician with those she views in the country itself, Noo Saro-Wiwa offers a view of the latter nuanced with complexity. Therefore, the

author's portrayal of Fela Kuti serves as an allegory for Nigeria. The attributes she lists underscore how the country is a place of innovative fusion, capable of producing unique and influential cultural expressions. Simultaneously, however, she acknowledges the less savoury aspects of Kuti's character and behaviour, among which a certain level of stubbornness and refusal to conform to societal standards, a confrontational stance, disrespectful behaviours indicative of objectifying women and a supporter of the status quo. This blend of positive and negative traits, as illustrated through the musician, ultimately mirrors the intricate, multifaceted nature of the nation itself.

This co-presence is further emphasised when the author argues that Nigeria "can be stylish, sublime, beautiful, yet no matter how much it amazes or bedazzles you, it's always that little bit jagga jagga" (LT 309). "Slang for 'messed up,'" as she previously explained to readers, the term embodies the ambivalent nature of her relationship with the country (LT 243). Thus, rather than a moment of authentic healing, it seems more what Hermann (1992) dubs "a fantasy of forgiveness" in which "the survivor imagines that she can transcend her rage and erase the impact of the trauma through a willed, defiant act of love (189). The feeling of forgiveness mentioned by the narrator does not refer to the relationship with the country; indeed, the sentence "so all was forgiven" (LT 304) refers to "her parents" (LT 305). What she forgives is "the unspeakable train rides, the itchy tropical nights in the village, the enforced essay-writing in hotel rooms" (LT 304) that her parents forced upon her. And she exonerates them because, as she realises now, these episodes represented "a way of 'breadcrumbing' the trail between my village and my life as an émigré" (LT 304-305). For she is not "brave enough" (LT 304) to live in Nigeria, the "new relationship with the country" (LT 305) involves her physical absence from its territory. Her gratitude towards her parents comes exactly from the fact that they allowed her to live abroad. For this reason, it is difficult to affirm that the narrator's journey helped her completely recover and overcome the troubled relationship with the country. Nevertheless, it aided her to accept such a troubled relationship, which, in itself, constitutes a form of personal growth, albeit different from the one she initially envisioned at the incipit of her journey.

Although distinct in content, the redemptive structure is also evident in *I Am Still With You*. The moment of anagnorisis does not contribute to "reconstruct[ing his] uncle's life" (SWY 6) as he envisioned at the beginning of the travelogue. Instead, it involves the revelation of a fragment of his name's history. This revelation comes from an unexpected source, diverging from the originally anticipated direction of the journey. In this, consciously or unconsciously,

he mirrors a strategy he referred to in his previous travelogue published in 2018, *A Stranger's Pose*, in which he writes: "To question identity [...] you look in both agnatic and uterine directions" (200). Having found little information in his agnatic lineage, the conclusion of *I Am Still With You* unveils the connection between his name and the 'uterine' side through a flashback.

This flashback is triggered by a video that a driver, Solomon, shows him. The video captures what some believers would define as a miracle: a man allegedly healed by a well-known pastor. The driver is sceptical, and the vision of the short video is preceded by his "monologue about the delusion of religion in Nigeria, the irrationality of miracles, his distrust of [the Pastor's] theatricality" (*SWY* 223) – all elements that Noo Sara-Wiwa would presumably agree with. Differently, Iduma focuses on the symbolism of that recording: "I'm watching the dead as he returns to life. I want my dead to become undead, for there is nothing ennobling about mourning," he argues (*SWY* 223). There is no apparent healing nor acceptance of the losses he suffered from, yet mirroring the passage from a negative beginning to a positive ending, the narrator "feel[s] invincible" and is filled with "happiness" because of a recent revelation (*SWY* 223). A few weeks earlier, he reveals, he managed to fill a small gap in his family's history when he visited Ajah, his mother's oldest brother. During this encounter, he realises that the name Emmanuel is not only shared with his paternal uncle but also with his mother's younger brother. Similar to his paternal uncle, his maternal one Emmanuel experienced a sudden death: stricken by frequent seizures, he tragically suffered one while bathing in a stream and drowned.

This revelation plays a significant role in achieving what Thompson (2011), referring to other travelogues, calls "a sense of closure and completion" (97). Even though he could not uncover the history of his uncle and, for this reason, resorted to alternative approaches such as the inclusion of pictures of others, historical research and bits of fiction, ultimately shifting his focus to the maternal side, he, as other travellers did before him, manages "to convert a mishmash of impressions into a coherent narrative" (Holland and Huggan 2000, 14). Indeed, he realises the "burden of significance" of his name, for it represents a "precious keepsake to [both his] parents, for brothers lost and beloved" (*SWY* 226). This discovery is functional to his "sense of return" (*SWY* 221), which is finally achieved. After all, for Iduma, the journey seems to have been a cathartic experience that helped him simultaneously release from the burden of the traumatic past inherited from his parents and family and come to terms with the loss of his

father. Whether it is or not full healing, it surely is, as Krishnan (2010) argued in another context, “a turn toward the hope and possibility of transformation” (n.p.).

Conclusion

In contrast to earlier generations of authors who primarily explored themes of return in novels, some contemporary Nigerian writers exhibit a notable interest in non-fiction, particularly through travel writing. The analysis of the two travelogues-via-memoirs by Emmanuel Iduma and Noo Saro-Wiwa sheds light on Nigeria as a locus of trauma. In this context, their return journeys equate with an engagement with trauma. For this reason, these works offer an insight into the potential of return narratives to investigate trauma through writing. Indeed, both authors navigate the landscapes of Nigeria and the terrains of their personal histories, tackling the traumas tied to their nation’s and families’ pasts. Their accounts extend beyond mere physical travels, delving into emotional and psychological voyages that reveal the complexities of identity, belonging, and trauma. While initially, their returns do not translate into an epiphanic moment of healing, and the narratives resist such vision, in their end, they both succumb to the pressure of redemptive narratives. While it might not be said that the journeys of Iduma and Saro-Wiwa culminate in complete healing, which might be interpreted more as a writing strategy than a truthful rendering of their experience, it is made clear that they initiate a process of introspection and reconciliation with their pasts.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined how return is represented in contemporary Nigerian and Nigerian Diaspora literature. Focusing on a varied tapestry of narratives encompassing both fiction and non-fiction, this study has shown that the act of returning transcends mere physical journey and serves as a trope through which authors tackle issues of identity, belonging and displacement, exposing the intricacies of diasporic experiences. Furthermore, through the lenses of returnees, these narratives interrogate the complex dynamics between homeland and hostland, as well as the global systems of power and visibility that shape the positioning of African literature within the world order.

In briefly tracing the evolution of narratives of return from post-independence Nigerian literature to the present in Chapter 1, a significant transformation in their portrayal emerged. In the post-independence era, this central discursive theme, prevalent in both Anglophone and Francophone African literature, was often employed to critically examine the newly independent countries been-to characters found at their return. Emerging from a context characterised by the temporary migration of the middle-class elite to the (ex-)imperial metropole for colonial education, this topos frequently expressed the anxieties and dysfunctions of the newly independent nations through the depiction of the returnee, who was often portrayed as a tragic figure.

As the subsequent chapters have demonstrated, the contemporary reincarnation of the topos of return offers a wider spectrum of representations reflecting the characteristics of a more open, dynamic, and fluid society. While earlier narratives expressed a collective preoccupation with nation-building, contemporary accounts reverberate the necessity for individuals to adapt to an ever-evolving landscape in their quest for connection, belonging, and identity. Consequently, the contemporary narratives of return resonate with the realities of a globalised and interconnected world marked by tragically uneven societal conditions (WReC 2015). This context is characterised by diverse cultural and economic exchanges, shifting identities, and the ongoing negotiation of belonging.

The selected corpus underscores a profound preoccupation with the search for rootedness, echoing Simone Weil's poignant assertion that "To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognised need of the human soul" (1943, 41). Thus, the exploration of return in this literature not only highlights individual journeys but also reflects a broader human desire for

belonging in an increasingly fragmented world, one that starkly contrasts, however, with the exclusionary political movements that have gained traction in the recent years. In doing so, these narratives provide insights akin to those found in the works of other diasporic communities analysed by Hirsch and Miller (2011), presenting “alternatives to the celebration of rootlessness and diasporism by making space for the persistent [...] magnetism of the idea of belonging, even while casting a critical eye on the obsession with roots” (5). These works, therefore, challenge readers to reconsider the significance of rootedness and belonging, without however falling into the trap of nationalism and exclusion.

Furthermore, our selected corpus demonstrated that the theme of return is not always portrayed through the lens of tragedy, as it often was in the past. Rather, it reveals a nuanced spectrum where return “can be intended from the beginning, occur spontaneously, or be forced” (Olivier-Mensah and Scholl-Schneider 2016 in Suárez-Rodríguez 2024); simultaneously, they can be both possible and impossible, purposeful or even manifested in a gratuitous aesthetic exercise. Indeed, in Chapter 2, the emphasis was placed on narratives that depict return as a feasible and constructive process, serving as a mode for characters’ self-advancement and reflecting their journeys toward personal growth and fulfilment. Works such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* and Atta’s *A Bit of Difference* explore this theme through characters who, upon realising that the Global North does not always offer the opportunities they once envisioned while making them confront challenges – such as racism – they do not face in their homeland, choose to return to Nigeria as an assertion of their agency. On the flip side of the coin, Chapter 3 illustrated that return can also equate to privilege, for it is not always accessible to individuals living on the margins, such as refugees or individuals in precarious economic situations. For these individuals, return can be an impossible endeavour. In Okey Ndibe’s *Foreign Gods, Inc.* and Helon Habila’s *Travellers*, the characters grapple with deeply entrenched systemic barriers that impede their ability to return home meaningfully. The impossibility of return in these two works highlights a reality where broader socio-political conditions complicate the quest for belonging. On a different note, Chapter 4 revealed that return can be characterised by a sense of gratuitousness. Notably, Teju Cole’s *Every Day is for the Thief* serves as an aesthetic exercise that paradoxically creates and disrupts the representation of Lagos, the city of the protagonist’s return, via prose and images. In contrast, Chapter 5 delved into a distinct exploration of return, centring on non-fiction works, i.e., Emmanuel Iduma’s *I Am Still With You* and Noo Saro-Wiwa’s *Looking for Transwonderland*.

This chapter investigated how return can be a means of confronting – if not completely reconciling – with both personal and collective traumas through a physical presence in the land where they originated.

Taken collectively, these narratives of return are infused with a strong critical ethos. This characteristic echoes previous works in which the experiences of returnees served as a critical lens through which authors interrogated the newly independent Nigeria. Today, however, the criticism is directed not only at Nigeria but also – if not more so – at the Global North, primarily the USA and Europe, where many characters migrate. The chosen chronotope of the narrative influences this shift: in the first generation of Nigerian literature, the storyline typically unfolded almost entirely within Nigeria, after the characters' return. In contrast, contemporary return narratives often incorporate their experiences abroad, particularly in fiction. When not depicted in the present, flashbacks provide insight into the character's lives in their host countries. Through this expanded temporal and spatial framework, a critical perspective is applied to both the homeland and the host country. In the context of Nigeria, these narratives poignantly critique the nation's systemic failures and shortcomings by illuminating the pervasive corruption, inadequate governance, and economic instability that characterise the state, as evidenced by the struggles of returnees and their interactions with locals. At the same time, these works resist a purely Afropessimistic portrayal of Nigeria as 'hopeless,' instead highlighting pockets of resilience and possibility amidst structural challenges. As for the Global North, many return narratives emphasise the disillusionment experienced by characters who migrate in search of better opportunities, only to encounter racism, exclusion, and unmet expectations. In doing so, these narratives reflect the pervasive unevenness inherent in our contemporary modernity.

This unevenness reverberates on the narratives of return at a material level, revealing a notable paradox. While these novels depict characters returning to Nigeria, their publication and success in the Global North reflect the economic and cultural power structures that still shape global literary production. Indeed, all the analysed works were initially published in the Global North, only to later "return" metaphorically to Nigeria through subsequent local editions. This phenomenon must be understood in the context of what Pascale Casanova (1999) calls "The World Republic of Letters," which has historically been dominated by European and American publishers. In the context of African literature, the publication and distribution landscape indicate that it has been significantly influenced by the publishing industry in the

Global North, which continues to play a vital role in disseminating these works. Consequently, many African writers, including those whose works are analysed in this thesis, have gained visibility and recognition through platforms provided by Western publishing houses. However, there exists a less visible reality regarding local contexts and platforms that strive, as Madhu Krishnan (2023) articulates, “to return African literature to Africa” (n.p.). In our case, the subsequent Nigerian or African editions of these narratives of return can be interpreted as manifestations of this effort.

When examining the analysed works collectively, the marketplace paradox of Nigerian narratives of return, which underscores the dynamics of power and visibility in the literary field, significantly influences the aesthetics of this literature. Indeed, far from resolving this tension, many authors often inhabit and engage with this paradox through what Sarah Brouillette (2007) refers to as “self-reflexivity.” As has been argued, this concept involves authors incorporating meta-commentary into their texts, allowing them to critically engage with various aspects of their writing, their identities as authors, and the broader status of literature. For instance, in *Americanah* and *A Bit of Difference*, such reflexivity draws attention to the representation of Africa within Western discourse. In *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, the narrative reflects on the status of African literature in the global arena, paralleling the exchange of cultural go(o)ds with that of literary works (appendix). Furthermore, both *Travellers* and *Every Day is for the Thief* exhibit a propensity to question the representations articulated within their textual confines. Thus, the pervasive nature of self-reflexive elements can be interpreted as a reflection of the aesthetics associated with the “combined and uneven development” of the global system (WReC 2015).

However, this thesis revealed that self-reflexivity is less pronounced in the non-fiction travelogues *Looking for Transwonderland* and *I Am Still With You*. This may be attributed to the genre’s inherent reliance on the writer’s discursive authority (Huggan and Holland 2000). Nevertheless, even when addressing traumatic personal and collective experiences, the analysis highlighted a strong preoccupation with aesthetics, emphasising the crucial role of form and style in representing deeply personal narratives.

Finally, another significant shift from the past is evident in terms of literary genre. Whereas earlier narratives of return were predominantly equated with the realist novel *tout court*, this no longer holds. Contemporary works not only integrate non-fiction into the array of narratives of return, but they also provide a growing space for experimentation and even playfulness. As Okey Ndibe argues, referring to contemporary literary trends, “African writers

are having fun” (appendix). For instance, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s inclusion of blog posts, characterised by their witty and informal language, within her realist novel *Americanah* serves as a testament to the impact of technology on literature. Similarly, authors are increasingly blurring the boundaries of literary genres or outright refusing to conform to rigid classifications. Teju Cole, for example, consciously resists the boundaries of genre in *Every Day is for the Thief*, which is labelled as fiction yet originated from a personal blog. Likewise, Emmanuel Iduma, whether intentionally or not, challenges a narrow definition of the travelogue by blending it with memoir and incorporating fragments from academic sources. This evolution of the genre of narratives of return thus reflects a broader trend in contemporary African literature in general, where authors actively engage with the genre as a more fluid and dynamic construct.

In considering these findings, it must be acknowledged that one limitation of this study is its focus on prominent works by established and primarily diasporic authors. Expanding the corpus to include emerging local voices and lesser-known texts would surely enrich the research, offering a broader and potentially more diverse perspective on the theme of return. In the past, the writers that appended themselves to the lineage of Onitsha market literature often portrayed been-to characters negatively (Hannerz 2022). Analysing narratives representing returnees by local authors who live in Nigeria only and exploring whether this disparity persists in contemporary literature would provide valuable insights. Such an investigation could reveal how representations of return differ between diasporic and locally-based authors.

For now, it can be said that given the vibrancy of African literature, particularly Nigerian literature, there is little doubt that the theme of return will continue to exist, evolve and inspire in the future. As long as migration remains a reality, so will the experience of return, with all its complexities, challenges, and even contradictions. As new generations face new socio-political landscapes, the narratives of return will likely adapt, reflecting the changing conditions of diasporic life and the different nuances of return. In so doing, these narratives will continue to enhance our understanding of the diasporic condition, bridging roots and routes, homeland and hostland, belonging and displacement in a literary exploration of what it means to go back – to places, to people and to selves left behind.

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Appendix: Interviews

An Interview with Helon Habila – Zoom Conversation, 15 April 2023

Gabriela Banita (GB): For Nigerian diasporic writers, Nigeria seems to have a pulling force. How often do you return to Nigeria and would you ever return there permanently?

Helon Habila (HH): I just came back from Nigeria two weeks ago. So, I go there as often as I can. It's not easy. It's very far away from America, but I have my family there: my mother is still there. It's always going to be important to me, even if I don't go there often physically, in my thinking in so many ways, it's always going to be home because it has made me who I am: the culture, the people, the politics, everything I know is from my youth, from growing up in Nigeria. So, it's always going to be there in every writing that I do, in the way I behave, in the way I think.

GB: Would you ever like to publish directly with a Nigerian publishing house?

HH: I am published with a Nigerian publishing house already because all my books have a Nigerian edition that's separate and different. I wish I had the cover here to show you for *Travellers* (Habila 2019), but it's not here. So, what happened was: the British publisher, Penguin, had all the African rights for my books. But then it was too expensive for people to buy it in Nigeria because, by the time they changed the money from pounds to Nigerian money, it was going to be too expensive. I didn't like that. So, what I did was to get my agent to talk to my publisher to give me the African rights. That means I'm not going to get money from African rights. I took back the African rights, so now I can get any publisher I want in Africa to publish just for Africa, not for export, but just for Africa. So, I've always had a separate Nigerian edition for all my books, starting from my first book, *Waiting for an Angel*, to my second book, *Measuring Time to Oil and Water*, my third book and even *Travellers*, which came out in 2019.

GB: That's beautiful! Why do you think the narrative of return is so pregnant in Nigerian literature? Or do you think it is?

HH: I don't know if I think it is or not. But return is always important. There's always departure, then arrival, then return, not just in Nigerian literature. I think it's always a motif in a lot of

literatures: when you look at the *Odyssey* (Homer 1919), for instance, it's all about return for Odysseus. So, whenever there is travel there's always return, or at least the idea of return or the desire for return. Now, whether we actually return or not, it's a different thing, but we always seek to return. So, that's important.

And that's also what I talk about in *Travellers*. Is return really possible? Because once the home is destroyed or once you leave home, something changes, and it's very hard to come back to that same place. Even if you do return physically, I don't know if you can psychologically return because something has changed in you, and you are a different person. It's like a hope that you cling to that home is always going to be there. I wonder if you're going to come back to the same home that you left because there's something almost pure about that. And I've been thinking about this so much recently. It's complex!

One of the best ideas I've come across recently about the idea of return or about departure is the idea that there's a parallel being, someone like you, after you've left home, that person is still there. It's almost as if that person never left because you always think of what you might have been if you hadn't left, you know? I keep thinking about that. It's almost as if there's somebody like Helon Habila still in Nigeria living the life I would've lived if I had stayed. And I'm imagining that kind of person, you know, what kind of father I might have been, what kind of employer or employee I might have been, what kind of teacher I might have been if I had not left Nigeria. So that idea is still always in my mind. It's almost as if I didn't leave because that idea is still there, you know? But of course, I had left physically. So it's, it's a kind of complex idea about return, but it's always the desire for return.

You mentioned that in African literature, in most African literatures, in early African literatures, there's this trope of the African coming to the West to study, then to return home. That's always the idea. In African literatures, when you think of Chinua Achebe's (1960) *No Longer at Ease*, for instance, or when you think of Lenrie Peters' (1966) *The Second Round* – he's from Gambia, by the way – or when you think of Ama Ata Aidoo's (1985) play, *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, they all center around the theme of return to Africa. Most of this first-generation of African writers write about that extensively. And what they always talk about is how a person changes when he or she comes back. It's like the African has been taken out of him; now he's become like a half-baked African, super westernized. And he has left his culture; he's forgotten his culture. And then there's that conflict, that psychological conflict. So, what they're trying to do is to dramatize the loss of tradition, the loss of culture; how leaving home

changes you and you become a different person, and you can never recover who you were. In *No Longer at Ease*, for instance, the character Obi goes to study in England, comes back, and he's a different kind of person; he doesn't behave like he used to behave and he becomes gradually corrupted because of that change. So, the idea is that when you leave home, something changes in you; that purity, that traditional purity, you have lost it, and you can never recover it because you have become like this hybrid African, you're never pure. So, there's that idea of hybridity.

Now, return is actually less important. Now I think the thinking has changed that you can leave home, and then you've left, and there's no home. Home is gone, you know, and you have to accept that and live with that. Painful as it is, home has gone. You can never recover home. So, I think you see that more and more in the new writing. And I think in *Travellers* you see that too, that somehow they have lost home and they can never recover it: home is gone. That's a little different from what the first generation was writing about: you can come back, even though you have changed, you become a bit hybridized and corrupted, but you can physically come back, but now there's no coming back. You've left Africa and you're gone. You've become a different person.

GB: Have you ever wanted to write about this parallel being? About yourself, never leaving home; the way you imagine this parallel being.

HH: That would be interesting. I've never thought about it, but it's interesting. I might someday, I don't know. It would be interesting to consider what I might have been if I hadn't left: what kind of father would I have been, what kind of husband would I have been. You know, because even fatherhood, the way I bring up my children in America is different from how I would've brought up my children in Nigeria. It's as if I don't know what to do here. It's as if I'm learning how to be a father. But if I had stayed there and I had my friends around me who are also fathers, it would be nothing. You know, I would behave like my father behaved before me, how my friends and my uncles and cousins behave with their children, then that would not be a problem at all. But now I have to learn. What do I do? How do I treat my children? Because I can't treat them the way my father treated me in Africa. That would be a totally different concept of bringing up a child. So it's like that person would've been different, and now I'm behaving differently – I have to learn everything from scratch. So, it's a complex situation to

travel and to learn to be a different person in a new place that's culturally different from what you knew.

GB: I took inspiration from a question you asked Achebe ([2007] 2013): what is your relationship with Nigeria? And have you ever felt like giving up on it?

HH: All the time! You know, all the time! Because when you love a place so much, it's so painful when things are not working the way you hope they might work. So, all the time, I think: I'll never talk about Nigeria again. I'm tired. Things will never work out. But you keep coming back because you love the place, and it's the only place that you have that you can call home. I mean, America is home, but in a different way for me. But Nigeria is the first place that I knew; everything about me, as I said earlier, has been formed in Nigeria, and you can never give it up! So, there's that love-hate relationship because of all the possibilities, all the potentials that Nigeria has; what it could become if things were working out the right way, you know?

GB: Now, talking about labels and fitting categories, your works are usually labelled by Western critics as instances of "African literature" or "Nigerian literature." Yet, several times, you expressed discomfort with these labels. You are not the only writer who feels straitjacketed with such categories: Chris Abani, for instance, rejects nationalistic labels and considers himself a Global Igbo (Abani 2015). You have defined yourself as a post-national writer. Where does this discomfort come from, and why do you think literary critics use these labels, despite your statements?

HH: First of all, to be clear, my discomfort is not with being called African. I'm Nigerian. I'm African and Nigerian. So, there's that! I have no problem with that. The only problem is when critics use that handle, that representation, to limit you. It's almost as if they're saying that you can only write about Africa, or you can only write about Nigeria, or you can only write about certain issues, or that you are not allowed to talk about other issues. Or when they come to a panel discussion, and all they ask you about is African politics and African anthropology and all that. They'll not ask you about character or plot, you know, or setting or talk about writing, the craft of writing. You know, it's like they just have some preconceived ideas of what an African writer should be. So that is where most African writers are uncomfortable, especially when that is the recurrent approach by most Western critics when they call you an African writer.

So that's my personal discomfort with that. I'm just a storyteller like any other storyteller. I can write about anything, anywhere. For instance, with *Travellers*, most of it is not set in Africa: it is set outside Africa. In fact, there's just one scene set in Nigeria when the main character goes back home briefly before he comes back to America; that's the only scene that you find in Nigeria. I think the rest of the book is set in Europe and other places. There's a kind of growing outwards as a storyteller. I'm not just concerned about Africa, but I'm concerned about the African – whether it's outside Africa or in Africa; a particular human being in this world. How do you define yourself as a Black person in this world? And it doesn't have to be in Africa, it can be anywhere else. So, the issue for me is kind of larger than just the question of an African in Africa, Africa, African politics.

GB: For years, you have lived and worked in the US. The operation I previously referred to – that of framing you exclusively within the category of African literature – somehow erases your being part of the US. First of all, do you feel like being part also of the US or some other places? On the other hand, some Nigerian literary critics have criticised the literary success of African diasporic writers and stated that these works are not useful to African countries. The Francophone Moroccan writer Leila Slimani has even been accused of being a native informant (Boudjahlat 2017). Within this context, for some critics, you are only African, and you are a representative, an expert on African issues, whereas, for others, you are not African enough. What do you make of such controversies? Where does this need to label come from?

HH: Critics have to have labels. That's what critics do. They have to have an angle to approach your work, and they usually do that by classifying you. They are like forensic investigators: they put you on a table, and label you, and look at you. They label every part of your writing: Is this African, is this not African? There's an obsession with the forensic labelling of writers. But for me, I'm just a writer, you know? I understand what they say about Slimani – being like an informant or other African writers being just informants. They just care about telling you about Africa and all that, you know? But it's more complicated than that. Rather than as an informant, I see myself as a kind of translator, if you like. You're always translating something from a language, from an experience, from a worldview to another worldview. So, you're almost like a mediator. You're in the middle, and you take one experience and transform it based on your experience, based on your own transformation that you're going through because of your travels, because of your education, because of your character, because of all these

things. It's like alchemy: you take these experiences, and you change them for your reader. So you are more of a translator, I think, than an informant because an informant is just somebody who just tells the information, without changing anything. But you, you alchemize it, you change it into something that's unique. So, you're always translating, whether it's from one language to another, whether it's from one worldview to another, whether it's from one experience to another.

As for me being erased or sidelined as an American writer, I can only say that I write about things I know. I don't write things because I want to join a certain conversational trend. Art has to grow organically. And, the beauty of America and American literature is its diversity and inclusiveness. Diverse in a way that European literature, say, can never be. The cliché of America being a melting pot comes to mind here – it is true, as most clichés are. You just have to look at recent American literature in the last ten, twenty years and you'll see what I am talking about. Most of the writing is about outsiders and their stories of their own America and American experience. Just like it was for the Jewish and European immigrants many many years ago. In a way you can say that the truest American narrative is the immigrant narrative – unless you are a native American, you are an immigrant. That's the beauty of this place.

GB: You talked about how people sometimes want you to talk about certain issues. Have you ever made compromises when publishing your work?

HH: I think you have to make compromises all the time. Once you work with editors, with readers you have to make changes. You have to accept some suggestions. Of course, you are finally responsible for everything: it's your story. But you are not perfect, you know? And there are things you might not know or understand. There are things that some people know better than you. So that's not to say that you are, you are giving away your authority as an author. It's like a workshop, you know? I teach creative writing, so in the classroom, we sit down, and we discuss a story, and we suggest to the writer that maybe if you did this differently, maybe if you go deeper into this character, he'll be more interesting, maybe if you change the plot like this. So, that's the kind of compromise. I take suggestions from my editors and my publishers because they're professionals. With my third novel, *Oil on Water*, I had to change the opening section. The opening section was from a different part, but my editor sat down with me and said, why don't we kind of make it easier for the reader to get into the book? I put in an

introduction that's kind of more welcoming, more accessible. I saw what she meant, and I saw how useful and practical that could be.

When you go back, you look *Oil on Water*, there's an opening section where the main character is talking about visiting his father in prison. That was not part of the novel. I had to write it in later based on the suggestion of my editor because it makes sense. That is why the Nigerian edition has a different opening section from the American and UK edition. I think all writers have to make that kind of pragmatic decision at some point. You have to trust your editor, even if you don't like it.

GB: In your review for *The Guardian* of *We Need New Names* by NoViolet Bulawayo, you refer to what you dub "the Caine-prize aesthetic" (Habila 2013, n.p.) as a product of judges, publishers and agents. You wrote several novels in which you dealt with complex topics. As a recipient of the Caine prize yourself, have you ever felt the influence of such an aesthetic on your work? Or, on the contrary, have you ever been afraid of having your work pigeonholed as Afropessimistic?

HH: It's a very tough position to navigate as a writer. Because you want to tell the truth all the time, you know, you want to capture reality the way it is because you write in a realist mode. That's the difficulty of realism: to portray things the way they appear, the way they are. So, when you write about corruption, for instance, or when you write about poverty or all these things, you are writing things people expect you to write so much so that it becomes predictable that that's what African writing is about. I'm very uncomfortable with that. But then what do you do? It's a difficult thing. Is it possible to represent Africa without writing about these things? And if you do, is it then Africa? Or are you being disingenuous? Are you being deceptive? Are you being blind to reality? On the other hand, if you only write about these things, you are also being false because Africa is more complex than that. Good things are happening in Africa: there are people falling in love, there are beautiful flowers, there are musicians singing, there are poets, and there are moments of excellence. But you cannot only write about that. So, I think if you want to be true, you have to have a mix of all these things if you want to show Africa in its totality.

My argument, my objection comes from when people only focus on the bad things. They do it in such a redundant way that they keep piling it up. They pile it up, they pile it up. It's like, come on! Gimme a break! It's not that bad. So, when I was talking about *We Need New*

Names: they live in a ghetto; they're so poor; then the grandfather impregnates the granddaughter and then they have HIV, I'm like – come on! You know, it's like, it's not that bad, you know? It's almost as if this is a performance you are doing! And then, of course, I go back to what is beginning to emerge, almost as if it's an aesthetic that the prize is focusing on because all the winners have some kind of similarity. I know that I won it too, but mine is not that bad. I think, mine is more psychological, even though, of course, the main character is in prison. But it's not about prison; it's a love story. It's actually called *Love Poems* (Habla 2000). So, it's more complicated than that. It's more psychological: I'm looking at the psychology of the place and the psychology of incarceration and the psychology of being silenced as a journalist. I'm tackling other issues that I think all novels should tackle.

I think we have to be more kind of imaginative in the future as African writers. How do we represent Africa without performing this poverty porn? How do we change the paradigm? Because we are artists, we have to find a new language, a new idiom to be true to what we're writing about. And also not to make you so redundantly bleak and negative. I won't say I have the answer. I'm still trying to find it, but we have to find a way to show the totality. Because it's almost become like a reflex reaction, that when you become an African writer, that's just what you see: it's just people dying and hunger and all that. It's become almost the go-to imagery for African literature.

I'm happy with what's happening now, with younger writers: there's so much imagination, fantasy writing, the use of more historical mythology and all that. It has changed the way we represent Africa in literature. That's the kind of imagination I want: not the predictable style and language and image that we've had for almost fifty, sixty years since independence. There's a new, more imaginative way of representing Africa that doesn't have to go back to the same tired tropes of African culture and African politics that are always negative. I think we're making progress in that sense. My only word of caution to this approach, this resort to mythology and fantasy, is this: don't go too far into fantasy and mythology and metaphor that you lose sight of what is real. If you are going to have any value as a writer, any usefulness at all, you have to engage with reality at some point.

GB: You talked about *Oil on Water* and *Travellers* before. I would like to ask you something about them. You were extremely open about how both novels stem from external requests. You talked about how a British film company contacted you to write a script about the land

despoliation of the Niger Delta (Habila 2019b) and how a German newspaper wanted an “African perspective” on the so-called refugee crisis (Habila 2019c). To do justice to the people affected by these situations, you decided to interview them. My question is: why did you choose to be so open about the external requests? Was it an ethical positioning of sorts?

HH: Is it ethical positioning? Maybe? But I don’t see it as a problem at all. I’m an open person by nature, and I understand that artists usually have external inspiration for their work. You know, you are not obliged to be original. All you have to do is be interesting, meaningful, and significant. Most writers take their inspiration from other writers: same with artists; Picasso used African imagery for inspiration to paint his cubist art. I’m not saying that the ideas have to come from me. They can come from somewhere else. All I have to do is to translate it and to write something, to make something: that alchemy that we talked about, to make it original translation. The originality is not in my inspiration, but in my translation.

With *Oil on Water*, the movie company wanted me to try writing a movie script: that got me interested in that story about the environment and its abuse. *Travellers* came from the newspaper asking me to write my view of what’s happening with the African migrants. And I did something interesting with it. That’s the obligation: to be interesting and to change something that’s in the news; or something that’s out there into something that’s unique. Because you bring a kind of uniqueness based on who you are as a human being, as an artist.

GB: Do you think that you managed to do them justice?

HH: I think so, to the best of my ability. I always want to kind of maintain the integrity of the story itself, to be truthful in an artistic way, not in factual truth; to be truthful to the experience, to make it convincing, make it meaningful. So, when I interviewed all these people in Germany for *Travellers*, my intention was to raise their truth to a kind of higher artistic truth, and to make it more significant, as an experience when I represent it as an artist, to kind of enlarge their truth into something that’s bigger and more meaningful. So, in that way, I would say I’ve done them justice by taking their literal truth and resonating a kind of metaphoric truth that other people can see and understand and place themselves in the shoes and in the experience of an African who is totally from a different place, from a different culture. I want someone in America or in Europe to pick up that book and read it and say, “Oh my God, I understand: this could be me!”

GB: A small addition to the question: Did the script that later became *Oil On Water* ever become a movie? Also, where can we read the article at the basis of *Travellers*?

HH: I don't know if the script became a movie. I lost touch with them. I lost interest in them. They may have made it, I don't know. I'm not interested. Even if they did make it a movie, they must have made so many changes because, you know, in movie making, they go through different scripts and revisions and changes. The article for *Travellers*: it's in German, and it's published by a newspaper called *Der Freitag* (Habla 2013b).

GB: Now I'm referring especially to the *Oil on Water* and *Travellers*. Your works are populated with characters who write about or are part of the intellectual elite who represent voiceless people. They are the ones speaking. Sometimes they genuinely want to know the story of the people they meet; other times, as in the case of the painter Gina in *Travellers*, they use them as "material" for their work. Do these characters – the representers – epitomise your own doubts and discomfort about representing voiceless individuals?

HH: I'm trying to understand your question: how characters are used by other characters. Yeah, I think all writers do that. All artists do that. There has to be a kind of distance between material and representation. You know, the material is the inspiration for it, but there is the material, and then there's how you change it.

For people like Gina, there are the migrants that she sees that she wants to paint. But the painting becomes its own thing when she does it. So, you are taking some aspect of certain things, and then again: the idea of translating or changing the material. You are an artist. There are so many considerations. You're not just telling the story, but you have to make it interesting. You have to make it psychological. You have to bring so many elements into refining what you're trying to say. You have higher, more complex expectations and obligations as a storyteller. You have to bring a style. You have to bring all your education, and all your training as a storyteller to change this thing and to make it what you want it to be.

You take the same story and give it to two different writers. They'll come up with two different interpretations. So, whether it's on a character level, when a character talks about another character, or when a character does something, there always has to be some change. You have to bring that uniqueness of style and of point of view and how you see the world. I think that determines a lot of things in storytelling.

As to whether I myself am comfortable about the characters I write about, in essence benefitting from their tragedy? This is a complex ethical issue that most writers and even journalists grapple with and have to answer for themselves. I will repeat the point I made earlier. By writing about a migrant who lost everything, am I throwing light on a larger issue, am I using one life, one tragedy, to illustrate a larger condition and thereby giving value and meaning to that person's suffering? I think I do that with my stories and interviews about these vulnerable characters. We can suffer in silence and obscurity, or we can suffer and have our suffering become an example and a commentary for others. That's a gift only the writer or the artist can give to these people whose stories we write about. When Gina paints these migrants, she is saying, I see you. You are not invisible. We elevate their suffering. That's how art works. That's why art is said to illustrate the human condition.

GB: Talking about style, you said that "writing is an incestuous business" and that "style feeds on style" (Habla 2013, n.p.). Who are the authors that nurture your writing?

HH: A lot of them, too many. Some of them I don't even know. But I always talk about a tradition; that you always come from a tradition. Every writer, whether you're European or American or African, you come from a tradition of storytelling. And you learn from that tradition. That tradition determines the way you interpret the world. Of course, it's just formative. You get more complex as you grow older, as you meet other traditions and you learn from them. I don't know if it's okay to say, "These are the people who influenced me." As they've influenced me and I have now evolved, I keep changing all the time. Even if I was inspired by people like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka when I was growing up, or J. M. Coetzee from South Africa, and I like their work, or Shakespeare – I enjoy his language and all that, and it's part of my education as an African colonized by the British. I had to read most of Charles Dickens and others, so they formed my progress as an artist. But I also change because I've met other writers, I've seen the world, and I've experienced other traditions. As artists, we keep moving from influence to influence, but always as an African, because Africa is where I see the world.

I feel that it's important to represent myself as an African. But at the end of the day, you also ask what does it mean when I say I'm an African? Or when I say I'm a Black person: what does it mean? And I think in my books, that's what I'm trying to understand because there's no one answer. There's no one meaning and there's no one tradition. Because you learn from other

traditions, so there's a kind of incest. And they change. And they grow. And that's what makes it so exciting, I think.

GB: I would like to ask you, what do you like about your style?

HH: I think, my style has a kind of seriousness that I bring to issues, I like that. I think, my style has a kind of integrity. I bring that to my subject matter. I think my style has a kind of rigor, a kind of rigorousness which is also the seriousness that I like. And that is the kind of writing that I enjoy. So, I think one of the best ways that I can explain my style is when I talk about these writers that I really enjoy, and I try to be like them. When I look at people like Toni Morrison, she says that she's always writing for her village. The idea of you writing for a certain community, of representing where you come from, that's very important. For me, that's seriousness, and that's seeing yourself as part of a collective that's particular in this world, that has a particular history, has a particular origin.

GB: Last question: are you working on a new project?

HH: I'm working on a novel at the moment.

GB: Do you want to tell us something about it, or do you prefer to keep it a secret?

HH: It's partly set in America and partly set in Nigeria. It's more of a domestic subject matter, not very political. So it's going to be different from my other novels because this one is deliberately unpolitical in so many ways. I'm trying to do something different.

An Interview with Emmanuel Iduma – Zoom conversation, 4 August 2023

Gabriela Banita (GB): As you might remember from my email, my thesis focuses on the topic of return in Nigerian literature. Therefore, I would like to ask you why is the narrative of return so pregnant in Nigerian and African literature – if you think it is?

Emmanuel Iduma (EI): When people write stories and tell either fictional or non-fictional stories, they write in a very particular kind of way. So, the sense is that when I'm writing the story of my family or writing the story of my experience of return, I'm speaking from a very personal perspective: in the sense that this is my experience, or this is my family's experience. Or even in fiction, it's a series of events that the writer is telling and they might have at heart.

I think that it's people like you that make these connections across books. The reason why I say that is that, in the first place – I would have to be very honest – I haven't paid attention to return as a theme across books, simply because it didn't occur to me as some kind of motif running through Nigerian or African literature. But I think that I can still answer the question of why it's important concept, at least for myself. Return would suggest that there has been some kind of journey to somewhere; or some kind of movement outside of a certain place, or a certain centre, a certain kind of home. After my previous writing – the book that I wrote before *I Am still with you, A Stranger's Stranger* [*A Stranger's Pose*], as I call it in multiple places – I began to think about the next work that I wanted to write, the idea for me was to connect myself to a more grounded experience, an experience that felt more directly connected to the notion of home or belonging. So, my book, *I Am Still with You*, sort of takes off from the point that *A Stranger's Pose* ended. In *A Stranger's Pose*, I end with actually trying to look for a photograph of my uncle and then writing a bit about my father. And *I Am Still with You* begins with the moment after I returned to Nigeria. So, I think that, I wanted to sort of find myself, or sort of locate myself within the question of belonging. The book returns to Nigeria; it returns to a place that had shaped me, that I had been away from because of many reasons that I hope go into in the book. Does that help?

GB: Definitely! And in relation to that, I think, the next question is a good continuation of what you were saying. You personally decided to go back to Nigeria after years of living in the US. How was this transition? And how has your relationship with Nigeria changed after your homecoming?

EI: The transition was, to be honest, very easy. I left Nigeria in 2013, and I came back at the end of 2019. But I don't think there was any year between 2013 and 2019 that I didn't come back. Sometimes I would spend six weeks, sometimes two months. Nigeria was not foreign to me in the sense of the immediate surroundings. What was different was that I was coming back to Nigeria to be based fully in Nigeria at the time, or mainly in Nigeria. The transition was not difficult. I think that I was quite fortunate, and all of this is in the book, because I came back right before the pandemic started. I wasn't going to come back to Nigeria and then go back into a very busy life. Under the pandemic, things were just shut down for several months. But for a large part of 2020 and even in 2021, I didn't have to meet people. So, I think that it was a very smooth transition. There was a second question you asked...

GB: Your relationship with Nigeria...

EI: I think that what has changed for sure is that I am more interested in writing about Nigeria than any other place. That was always important to me throughout, even when I was in New York. But I think that being in Nigeria and living there over the last few years has made it clear that there is so much to unpack and uncover about Nigerian history, about my view of it, that I would rather keep doing that. The Nigerian Civil War, which is the background of the book, is one way to do that. I've also written in the past about my relationship with language. Also, I'm always writing about photography one way or the other anyway. So, there are all these different modes of engagement for me with Nigeria that I just felt more drawn to after I returned.

GB: Regardless of where you reside, it can be said that your work contributes to world literature. This is particularly evident in the publication process. For instance, your latest book was first published by the Scottish publisher William Collins, and then became available in Nigeria a few months later. This pattern seems common among many Nigerian writers striving to make their work more accessible. If you don't mind sharing, could you explain how the publishing rights work?

EI: I think it works pretty much the same across the world. What, in my experience, I have tried to do is, in the first place, to make my work available to as many people as possible. Even if the stories that I tell originated or originate from Nigeria or concern a Nigerian audience or a Nigerian experience, I hope that there are parts of those stories that are universal and that

concern human life wherever. And besides, I think that any writer wants to be published globally in the first place.

When I started writing, I started young, and I did not really understand how it worked. I was not as patient as I should have been, which I don't regret, but that's what it was.... In my first publishing experience, I published in Nigeria with a new publisher called Parrésia. This was in 2012. A friend of mine was friends with a person who was starting the publishing house. And I wanted my friend to help me edit the book I had finished. And she recommended this other person who said "Oh, I've read it! Instead of editing it for you, I'd like to publish it." And of course, she edited it eventually. I didn't have to pay. I didn't have to self-publish it, but I also got professional experience. And then from then on, I had that experience. However, when the book came out, it was only available in Nigeria.

By the time I was writing my next book, I was living in New York. I wanted it to be available where I was at the time. So, I also had a similar experience there because of the work that I'd been doing with a magazine. I submitted a manuscript to someone at Cassava Republic because I'd met one of their directors. And they accepted it. During this period, I didn't have an agent. I was working with my direct connections. But when I started thinking of writing *I Am Still With You*, I felt it was a bigger book, and I felt that I needed to work with an agent just to help me navigate and get a better publishing deal. Everyone wants a better publishing deal! A bigger publisher means better distribution. A bigger publisher means publicity. So, I got an agent, and... that's how this third book happened. I think that that's fairly what happens as to the pragmatics of it. Some people, before even their first books, have an agent. Some people, like me, wait until they are taught before they get an agent. If you're going to get published in a place like Nigeria, I feel like you can publish without having an agent. But if you're going to get international publishing experience, you would most likely need an agent for that.

GB: What about Masobe? About the distribution rights...

EI: The way it typically works is that you negotiate rights. My Nigerian publisher, for instance, has only Nigerian rights. They can only publish and distribute within Nigeria. The agent helps you navigate the difference because if you publish worldwide, it has to be a very big publisher that can distribute across the world. I have a publisher in the US, Algonquin, that is part of a bigger publisher. I have another UK publisher. And then I have Masobe in Nigeria. For instance, if I was going to publish in Spain, I would need a Spanish publisher, also in translation. But of

course, my publisher doesn't have the right to distribute in Spain. So there has to be a local publisher who has the rights to distribute within either Spain, or South America, or Europe... rights are negotiated based on territories.

GB: Interesting! Thank you. Moving on to the next topic, I'd like to focus on *I am Still With You*, more specifically. This work feels especially significant for readers in Nigeria, as it addresses the collective trauma of the Biafran War. In your travelogue/memoir, you also embark on a personal quest to uncover the story of your uncle, who went missing during that time. When you were growing up, did your family discuss his disappearance or the war more broadly? If so, how was this trauma conveyed to you, and what impact did it have on your understanding of your family's history?

EI: I tried to respond. That's part of what the book is trying to investigate. But telling the story of my experience or talking about my experience of discovering the war from childhood up to the point at which I'm writing the book... When I was growing up, it was something that was always discussed. I don't think any family just always discusses a war. It's not like people were trying to repress it. It came up. It would come up in one conversation or the other. By the time I was a teenager, I knew that the war had happened. And I knew that one of my uncles didn't come back. And I also knew eventually that I was named after that uncle. I can't quite clearly put into words or tell you the timeline of how all of this happens. It's just like any tragic event in a family or a country: you get bits of the history, except you're now very intentional about getting the clip of the very big story. You only get the story in parts because people are not generally interested in revisiting the past in this very constant manner. I don't think we are. I don't think that's how we think about the past. I think people would rather move on from difficult things, things that bring up sad experiences or sad memories, experiences that are traumatic. People are not always interested in talking about them every day. So, this is one of the reasons why I wrote the book to see how much I could discover on my own about the war.

GB: Moving on to your narrative, it not only braids together your travels, your personal life, and that of your family, but it also mentions a multitude of works, both academic and literary texts. Has literature had to fill the silence of those untold stories of the war? And do you think that literature can help heal from collective trauma?

EI: Yes, literature was very big for me because I started reading historical texts quite early on, or I became interested in them quite early on. Before I even started writing or thinking that I would write a book, I'd already started gathering texts and building a personal library or collection of texts. So, there's far more that I know about the war, or that I researched, that didn't make it into the book, just because much of it is not necessary. For instance, photography doesn't make it into the book because the book is not about only the war. So, I think that these books certainly helped me. Even the way I use them in the book form these connections between the personal and the historical. I will retell a story and then connect it to my own, to my own experience or like a family story. In that sense, in the sense that I used those texts, I think that literature definitely can help... I wouldn't say healing from trauma. I don't quite understand what that would be like but I would say surely that it can help us understand or give us language for the past.

The whole question for me – and this is what you see in the epigraph of the book – is the past does not change. What must change is the way of telling; the language that we use about the past is for me the most important thing. Because there's nothing that we can say that can alter the experience of the past. What can be changed is our understanding of what happened or our coming to terms with what happened. The war can never be undone, but Nigerians and myself, at least, can understand better what the motivations were for the war. I can understand better who the key people were in the fights of the war, and what ordinary life looked like. In bringing together all those voices from different books, all those personalities and protagonists and ideas, the war can begin to take shape to me as something more consequential and more realistic, so to speak, than if I didn't have access to those materials.

Also, I was not working only with fiction or I was not working mainly with fiction as my source for the texts. I was working with nonfiction mainly: biographies, memoirs, and research papers. I think that all that for me produced a different kind of relationship with the war than if I were working only with imaginative recollections or imaginative recuperations of what happened.

GB: I would like to go into the genre and narrative form of your work because it seems that the work also represents a quest of form. Apart from being a photographer and a writer, you are also a literary critic. The form of *I Am Still With You* with its fragmentation and its avoidance

for a linear sequence could be read as a literary representation of trauma. When crafting your work, have you studied works in the field of trauma studies?

EI: Well, not quite. I didn't think that my work was that, but I think it can be framed as that. I don't have any problem with people framing it as that, but I was working with a very personal experience, and how my story intersects with a historical experience. So, there is what you can describe as the trauma of the war.

There are people who were traumatised, who in some ways are traumatised. We can talk about second-hand trauma (the next generation) and how they experienced the trauma of the war, but I wasn't working in a scholarly mode. So, I didn't feel the need to draw my ideas from any of such scholarship. Since you referred to my work in criticism, I wasn't working as a theorist in this book. I didn't have any theoretical parameters that I was working within. What I had was simply some of the books that I looked up to; books that I felt were doing similar things. For instance, *The Return* by Hisham Matar. He's also investigating the disappearance of his father in Libya. Books like that were important to me because they were general audience books or nonfiction books that were similar in terms of preoccupation as mine was.

To be honest, I didn't set out to write a fragmentary book. In fact, I've written a more fragmentary book than the last one. The previous book, *A Stranger's Pose*, is very fragmentary. There are several passages around particular ideas or experiences, but it's not a linear story. But in this book, there is actually an arc: It begins when I come back to Nigeria and ends when I meet my uncle at the end – my mother's brother. What happens within that telling is what can be considered fragmentary. But in terms of the arc of the story, I think it's pretty linear because I was very interested in a linear telling of my experience of being in Nigeria and investigating these things.

GB: Maybe the notebook helped you. I was reading in an interview that you had a notebook where you took notes...

EI: Absolutely! Just to remember stuff, to bring in detail.. notebooks are always helpful because, when you're keeping a notebook during an experience it's immediate, but when you return to read afterwards, it's not as immediate. It's almost revelatory.

GB: In terms of genre, and I'm highly simplifying here, *I Am Still With You* could be labelled as a travelogue. This literary genre has been considered a tool for colonialism and the spread of

colonial discourse. Do you think there is a need to decolonise travelogues today? And do you think there are still implications in using a genre whose past is so deeply linked to the colonial discourse?

EI: I think that, you can say that about any genre. You can say that novels have been used for colonial discourse and, therefore, any colonised person who is writing a novel is perpetuating that discourse. You can say that about any form.

The previous book is my more classic attempt to engage with the travelogue. I wasn't quite interested or even invested in the conversations around what the travelogue was, or whether I was part of a lineage of travel writing. It was later on that this became a thing that I had to think through, especially once I was done with the book, and I was sort of pitching it and thinking about how it could sit within the imagination of the reader, which is an important thing to do. I'm not saying that that's unimportant. But I wasn't quite interested in taking down or working against any particular mode. I just simply had a travel experience. And I was reporting on my travel experience. But I think that in terms of the contents.

In terms of what I do with the form, that's always been important to me. The people who travelled, the colonial officers who wrote travelogues, or explorers who wrote travelogues were writing travelogues because they wanted to report on an experience. In the most basic way, you can describe it as such: they wanted to report on an experience. And what they reported on became a travel narrative or became a travelogue. But there's also the content of what they wrote, which is where the problem is. So that's what we are still dealing with, how they imagined Africans etc.

For my purposes, I've had a travel experience. Now, let's talk about the content of my report on my travel experience. In the first place, just as they had the right to report on their travel experience, everyone has the right to report on theirs. So, I'm not worried that I'm writing outside of or in response to. I'm simply telling you: "this is what my travel experience was."

GB: I think it's really powerful also not to engage in this kind of discussion...

EI: It's not like I'm not engaging. I have a piece that I wrote about this same thing. It is simply that I'm saying that the work can be contextualised as an engagement with previous travel narratives about Africa. But what's more important to me is the experience itself. So, someone can hold up the book and say "this is Africa's writing about travel experiences within Africa." And that's true. But for me, it's not. The larger point is not simply to classify it as such. It's

also to look at the experience that is being described within the text and to understand that my framing is more of an African within the African continent than an African who is bothered about how Europeans have seen me because that's actually not interesting, to be honest.

GB: Thank you. That is perfectly clear.

Focusing on photography, your passion for it is noticeable since it often permeates your writing. This is the case of *A Stranger's Pose* but also of *I am Still with You*. In your latest book, in particular, the text is punctuated by zoom-ins of a 1967 photograph by the Italian photojournalist Romano Cagnoni where many bare-chested men can be seen in a school playground, which was transformed into a training camp for the Biafran Army. I would like to know why you decided to include this particular picture and yet not in its entirety.

EI: There are many uses of photography. Photography can be illustrative, photography can be evocative and it can simply be a record of an event, of a person, or even to some degree an experience.

I didn't actually intentionally want to include any photographs because I felt that this was not a book that needed photographs, but that photograph was particularly striking to me because of the number of people it shows who are waiting to be enlisted. And when I also realised that I couldn't find any photograph of my uncle, the question that I asked, which I wrote in the book, was "could one of these men be my uncle?". Every time that the photograph is brought closer, it's an attempt to look for the face of my uncle; that's how it can be taken or interpreted. And I simply wanted to include that photograph as another way to search for my uncle.

As you've mentioned, I'm interested in photography in many different ways: in writing about it and using it as a way to spur my writing, in thinking about what photography means in contemporary African society and what art uses. Those are questions that are beyond the scope of the book and which I continue to find other ways to engage with.

GB: I think you've also answered to the next question I had... From time to time, the text contains descriptions of or references to photographs – yet they are not shown (98; 102; 145; 173; 190; 207). The majority of them are taken by yourself, others are family pictures. Why did you decide not to include them?

EI: I've always been interested in the textual elements of a photograph. In general, the expectation is that when a text describes a photograph, people want to see what the photograph is. I sometimes play into that. I don't have any problem with it as an expectation. Sometimes I'm happy to include it. In fact, I have a whole project that is based on this notion, in which I also show it. However, you just point to specific aspects of the photograph: not describing the full thing so that people can also engage with the photograph on their terms. But for the book, I was just recounting that I went to a place, I took photographs. I didn't immediately see why that would be necessary to include in the book. In fact, many of the photographs were not taken for the sake of being reproduced. They were taken to help in recollection, to help in thinking about what I had seen and experienced, and not necessarily because I felt that they could be included in the book. And I think that also it will be interesting for people to think about a photograph without seeing it. Just as you describe a scene that you witnessed without necessarily putting a photograph of it, could it be possible to describe a photograph of something and not show that photograph? And sometimes reading is a little bit like that. You have to make up images in your mind.

GB: That's true!

The next question is a personal one. Apart from the quest of finding the story of your uncle, it seems that sometimes when reading the text, a parallel can be drawn with the act of being, as the title of your book suggests, with your father. Also, it seems that a parallelism can be drawn between your father losing his brother and you losing your father. Did writing help you deal with your loss?

EI: I don't actually think that the writing helped me deal with the loss. I think that to some degree, the writing helps me understand what the loss was – if you understand the distinction. Actually, this is what I was saying earlier about trauma: when I think about how the writing helped me deal with the loss, I don't know what that would look like. Does it help me come to terms with the fact that the person is gone because I'm writing about a person in the past tense? Maybe because I'd already become a writer before that happened, I wasn't looking to writing as a means to cope with anything. I was at best looking to write to give me language for what I was coping with already. I think the distinction might be subtle, but there is one that can be made because I don't generally believe that writing can do much of what people say it can do. When we write, we are making language, and language is a form of comprehension. So, if

there's anything that writing can do or can help with, it's simply to understand what has happened, not to make it any less painful.

GB: Last question: I would like to know how was the reception of the book, especially in Nigeria.

EI: That's still unfolding. The book just came out in Nigeria in April. I think, so far, there's been good responses. People have read it and written about the experience of reading it. So, I think that it's not bad, I would say. I've been pleased with the responses from Nigeria.

GB: Thank you very much!

An interview with Okey Ndibe – Zoom conversation, 12 August 2024

Gabriela Banita (GB): My thesis examines the theme of return in Nigerian literature. Your novel *Foreign Gods, Inc.* can be labelled as a narrative of return. Why do you think this theme is so prevalent in Nigerian literature – if you think it is?

Okey Ndibe (ON): I think there's a historical basis for it: the British conquered Nigeria, and they governed it for roughly a hundred years. And I think that psychologically, there were so many impacts. Part of the impact was that a lot of Nigerians began to think of England as, indeed, the land of civilisation. Hence the desire to go out there. But of course, along with that was this impulse to reject this colonial imposition, to reassert the autonomy of the people. So those two impulses, whether it is the impulse to, in a sense, believe at the back of your mind that this white conqueror must be superior to you, or a rejection of that, and therefore, an insistence on the reassertion of your rights to control your life. I think that there is a curiosity about this colonising power.

So people go out there, but whether you accept the British superiority narrative or reject it, when you venture outside, you are always aware that you're venturing outside from a home, a location, which is the natal home. And so there's always that hold that that home has on you. And once you venture outside, whether it's now to Britain, to Saudi Arabia, Canada, or to the United States, or to Germany, France, Romania, wherever you go, you are constantly aware that there is a culture to which you have become habituated growing up that should become acculturated, and that you are encountering a different cultural worldview. So, for a lot of Nigerians and for a lot of Africans, the claim of home never leaves you even when you leave home.

In a sense, in my experience, Nigeria became more important to me, became more real to me in a lot of ways, only after I left Nigeria to come to the United States. So, I don't know if you've read my memoir essays, *Never Look An American in the Eye* (2016)... So you are aware, therefore, that I've lived in America now longer than I lived in Nigeria. But I still have problems settling in, reconciling with certain cultural practices in America. Even now, when my wife and I invite our friends over for dinner in their American sensibility, they want to say, "What do we bring?" I always say, "no, you're not to bring anything." If there's something that you'll like, whether it is to drink or to eat, you tell me, I'll provide it. So this comes from my Nigerian growing up: when somebody invites you to come and eat, you don't bring anything. What you do is that you go hungry. They want you to eat a lot. That's how they know that you

are appreciative of this. So all of that in the three and a half decades that I've lived in America, I still bristle with a bit of anger when Americans invite me to dinner and say, "okay, bring the dessert."

So, I tell people that I'll go crazy if I don't return to Nigeria from time to time. I don't go enough. I typically go two to three times a year, but I feel a certain spiritual rejuvenation when I go back to Nigeria, which is a paradox because I also feel intensely angry about the way in which basic things don't work in Nigeria, how people are not on time, about basic amenities: hospital, water, electricity isn't available. So that gets me upset because I know that these problems can be solved relatively easily, but just to be in the midst of the people in Nigeria, my siblings, my circle of friends and my relatives: there's no replacement for it!

So, there's a historical angle to it, where we have a sudden curiosity about this colonising white man. And so we go to his home to figure him out, but we are always aware that we are leaving our home to go to his home, and that it is his home. I became an American citizen in 1996, but when people say, "where are you from?" instinctively, I think Nigeria rather than America. I mean, I lived longer in America than in Nigeria.

GB: I would like to know a little bit more about the context and the inspiration behind *Foreign Gods, Inc.*

ON: So my first novel, *Arrows of Rain*, was the story that I had to tell if I was gonna write at all. It was the first story that I needed to tell because I was trying to figure out what this Nigeria means. I was also trying to figure out the ethical question of the role of the artist or the role of the human, broadly speaking, the imperative, the duty to speak when moral issues are in contestation to speak and to speak with moral courage. So, that has been sort of the central idea in my evolution as an intellectual and as a writer. That was the first story I needed to tell.

Foreign Gods, Inc. seemed to me to be the story that I had to tell because I came to America, and I became a Nigerian-American. It was a way of examining in some ways what it means that I navigate between these two localities, America and Nigeria.

When I came to America, I was struck by this hyper-consumerism, the idea that things are consumed. So, there's a hamburger, which is already too big, too large, and Americans tell you, "Buy one, get one free." When you go to the mall, you already have too many shirts, but they tell you, "There is a sale," so you can buy more of what you don't need. So that compulsion,

obsession with consuming, getting more and more with the grandeur of cars – Americans love their cars big, they like their hamburgers big, they like their steaks big...

So it struck me as a subject that I wanted to study. Still, I was also aware that the culture of consumption of what we might call consumerism is a subject that so many writers have dealt with, whether in fiction or non-fiction, in essays and so on. So, I knew that if I was going to come to the subject, I needed to take it to a place where I could be saying something that was either original in terms of what I brought to the subject or bringing different original insights to an old problem. Hence, my idea of studying the consumption of the sacred. So what does it mean when people now begin to acquire and own gods? So it's no longer: "We're going to conquer a country; we're going to take their oil resources. We're going to enslave their people." It's: "We're gonna go actually and take their gods. We're gonna go and take their sacred objects." What does it mean when that happens?

Then, I also wanted to critique what is loosely called the American Dream. So, the propaganda is that you come to America, and if you take your vitamins, exercise and work hard, you will succeed. And nobody does much of a critique of success: What does success look like? What does it mean to say somebody has succeeded? Typically, it is: you have a house with two car garages... you have certain accoutrements of material well-being. Let's leave that analysis alone, whether this is really success. But even then, some people come and do everything they're asked, and yet they do not succeed. So, I wanted to take a look at Ike Uzundu, who came to America, studied hard, excelled in school, and had a legitimate dream of doing well in the corporate world. But something as fixed as his accent gets in the way. When he applies for jobs, he looks excellent on paper. So, he is invited for interviews, but then he speaks in a heavy accent. That excludes him. And so: the life of a cab driver. Over the years, I've encountered many cab drivers, and I'm curious. When I get into a cab, I converse with the cab driver. On one occasion, I was in DC to give a talk, and my cab driver was from Lebanon. He is was man with a PhD in mathematics. But he came to this country and said that because he had an accent, he couldn't get any jobs. He wanted to teach here as he was doing in Lebanon, but he couldn't get a job. And America doesn't forgive you: you have to pay your bills. So, here he was a PhD in math, driving a cab to make a living.

Also, I know Nigerians who have master's degrees, and that is what they do and typically, when you look at it, they have a strong accent. So, Americans say, "We don't understand you." So, you are excluded. So, there was some part of that in the investigation.

But then, when I came to America, I actually had a cousin who lived in the Boston area, and he owned a shop, which he called *Shop Afrique* in what you call Central Square in Cambridge, Massachusetts. And my cousin was making a ton of money. What was he doing? He owned the shop. He would go to different African countries, buy masks, scrape them a little bit, put them in a store, and tell the customers who were strolling that this was some kind of God in Africa. And people were writing checks for 4,000 / 5,000 dollars to buy these things, which my cousin picked up for less than \$5. And he made a good living for himself. When I came to America, I would go visit him on weekends, and we'd go to his shop. And on one occasion, he let me manage the shop. Somebody came in and started talking about the mask. And I said, "It has a certain kind of energy", and that sort of language, and that person said, "Oh yeah, I like it," and paid 4,000 dollars to pick it up. So, I was intrigued by the idea that people would hear that something is a God in a different culture and say, "Okay, I'm going acquire it. I'm going to consume it. Yeah, I'm going to privatise it. It's going be in my home, and I'm going to own it." These are the reasons I wanted to write this story, which would bring out all these elements.

GB: You talked about Ike's inability to achieve his American dream, but it also seems that his return is impossible. What do you think about those people like Ike who are caught in between?

ON: First, it's impressive that you correctly say his name. Many Americans call him Ike /i:ke/, and I tell them Ike /i:ke/ means buttocks. Ike /Ike/ is strength, whereas Ike /i:ke/ is backside. So, in many ways, the novel examines whether this guy is a person of moral strength or if he is an ass.

Anyway, that's part of the dilemma, part of the predicament for everybody who ventures away from home. When you venture into a different culture, you are changed. And when you return to your home, your home has changed. Your home always changes even when you're there because that's the human experience: change is central to the human experience. But your home changes in ways that sometimes you cannot account for.

To give a quick example: I go back to Nigeria two or three times a year; I have some friends who don't go for 10 or 15 years – I would die if I stayed away for that long. Now, even if I go home to Nigeria, each time I go there, there are changes in the language, the way people talk. So, it's like I come in and have to learn the language I knew. You think you master the new, language that people speak, you come back, and the language constantly keeps changing. If I were in Nigeria, I would be changing with it. So, I will not, in a sense, be aware that

something is changing. But when I go back, I am acutely aware of it because people use phrases, and I'm totally lost until somebody tells me what it means. Then I start using it with everybody, and I start understanding. Then, you come back the next time, and it changes again.

In Ike's situation, he faces the usual predicament. People expect a certain level of material success once you leave home and you go abroad. So, his mom, his sister, and his other relatives expect that he will do well materially and he'll take care of them. And we know that Ike is struggling: just what he goes through to get a green card, which becomes sort of the ticket for him to play this American lottery. So, when he goes back, he sees that his mom has changed – she's falling under the spell of a rogue pastor – his uncle, the Chief priest, has changed – now has a cell phone – and so on. In New York, he got sold on the idea of migration, that gods have to migrate and travel to retain their dynamism. Otherwise, they're irrelevant.

So, America has changed him. He returns to Nigeria and the people there – that's part of the irony that in America they say have an accent here – He goes home, his people say, “you speak like America, so you are no longer like us.” It's a price that we all pay. Sometimes, we're not aware of it.

Sometimes we're acutely aware of it. When I go to Nigeria, for example, the first few days people find me extremely annoying because I comment on everything. If there is dirt by the roadside, I say: “Why is this thing there?”; “Why are the police not controlling traffic?” The people in Nigeria have accepted that life. They accepted that there'll be dirt all over the place. For example, there's a big party going on, but just around that party, there is dirt all over the place. There could be a terrible smell, but people are eating and drinking. So, when I start pointing out, they get angry. It is like, “Hey, this is not America. You are now outside. So, stop speaking like an Americanah.” And it takes me a few days to tell myself, When I see these things, that people don't care because people are so hungry; life is so difficult that when people are sick, they have no good hospitals or hospitals to run to. When they go to the hospitals, they often don't have the money. So, they end up dying because of that. They have real problems. So when I go there, and I start getting angry that people came 10 minutes late to an event, they just look at me and say, “Whoa, this guy has become an Americanah:”

So Ike is caught in that sort of pondering—that America has changed him and has returned to his society that has changed. Society looks at him now as a stranger in a lot of ways, and in a sense, he has to be a stranger to contemplate what he's come to do, which is to steal what used to be the god of war for his community.

GB: When he returns to Nigeria, the narrative is replete with words that evoke darkness. Was this a conscious stylistic choice to echo colonial discourse? And if so, can we draw a parallel between Ike's current perception of Nigeria and Reverend Stanton's view during colonial times?

ON: Absolutely. I'm happy that you got that. So, Ike becomes a homegrown version of Reverend Stanton. He has come the same way that Reverend Stanton tried to dislodge Ngene from the community and failed. Ike has come to do the same thing. And so for him, there is a metaphorical darkness that he sees. But of course, as he proceeds, we see later that the darkness is in his heart. When he is in his apartment, there's that stench that is overpowering... How do we read that clearly?

One way of reading, it is that the stench is coming from his own treachery, from his own act of betrayal. He stinks! And I hope that people read that.

But the other way is that it's a symbolic development of the deity itself. This is the most male of deity. This is the kind of deity that will come out of the square and fight. And so, when you find that kind of deity that fights and sweats a lot, then there is a stench that comes with that. So it's also a marker of the fact that this guy has brought into an illicit shrine, which is his apartment in New York, a deity that is a God of war, the most masculine deity that you could say is imbued with toxic masculinity.

GB: Interesting! I would like to talk a little bit more about that later. For now, I would like to ask: In *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, the commodification of Ngene seems to reflect a broader theme of the commodification of subaltern culture in general and African in particular. How do you view literature's role in critiquing and participating in this commodification?

ON: Literature broadly defined, right? So, literature, not just necessarily like literary acts but the body of discourses, whether it's journalism, anthropology, sociology, religious studies and so on, were always implicated in the commodification of the African. So, the slave trade, for example, became morally admissible for a Christian Europe because the African was conceptualised not as human but as more like a piece of burden.

Achebe, Ngugi, Soyinka and so many other writers have spoken about how Europe justified its dispossession of Africa and of its resources, whether they were oil or gold or ivory, or its art by suggesting that they didn't really belong to Africa, that they're a providential

bequest, and that the Africans lack the know-how to exploit and to explore these resources. So, Europe comes to as if they were liberating these resources. This is a certain kind of conception of resources that are found in Africa, which is ongoing: the war in the Congo, for example, or the contestation around Niger, which has a huge deposit of uranium, and which makes this sort of marginal country, the site of conflict between superpowers.

So, literature, European writing, and Euro-American writing have always participated in the idea of commodification of the Africans. So, we see a contemporary incarnation of that trend still happening. Clearly, my novel wants to look at that. And, as I said, once I sat down to look at the idea of commodification, I wanted to take it to the realm of the sacred because it seems to me to be the most unusual that people would want to consume the sacred, want to consume gods that were coming to being in societies where they had a certain kind of organicity, but they transferred to different locations and they're now privatised again. The second level of this commodification is that not only do we conceptualise them differently, but a deity that has a communal social function is now the property of one man or a woman who can buy one to make her brother feel better about his ex-wife who's left him.

GB: So I'm not sure you would like my next questions because in *Foreign Gods Inc* I read the pungent order as emanating from the Ngene...

ON: I agree with that. It's one of those moments of ambiguity in the novel. There are different ways of reading it. So, clearly, the deity is a very strong deity, and so it's emanating a strong odour. But remember that after he sold the deity the order remains in his apartment. So, in this case, it is now his own moral status. Yes, so it is not either or. It is both of them.

GB: Okay, so this odour somehow enhances the deity's market value... So, it seems that you address the commodification of subversion through the sale of Ngene. In *Arrows of Rain*, you talked about the theme of the danger of silence, or as you said about that of speaking up. Could you elaborate on whether you see a parallel between the commodification of subversion and the position of African literature in the global literary market? If, on the one hand, we have the danger of commodification and, on the other, that of silence, is there a possibility of coming out of this aporia?

ON: That's a very complex question.

So the core of my intellectual project is this imperative to speak, this rejection of silence, especially when moral questions are in contention. So, the artist, but beyond the artist, the human... In fact, when I teach a class, I have each student tell a story. So you don't just say your name. You tell a story about yourself. And part of the way that I sell this epistemologically is by telling my students that you are a full citizen. You are a full member of a space when you have a voice within that space. If you feel that your story doesn't belong, if you feel you have a story, but you can't tell it, then your membership or your citizenship within that group is merely contingent. It's not fully fleshed, it's not fully formed. So, the rejection of silence and the claim to speech is essential to what it means to be human for us.

But then we know that speech can also be problematic in many ways. Some people use speech to sell the idea of either gender inferiority, gender superiority, racial superiority, or racial inferiority... In fact, politicians use speech as a way to deflect, as a way to deceive, as a way ultimately of being silent. So, if you go to Nigeria and you ask an appointed question to a Nigeria politician, "What are you doing to address the healthcare crisis in the country"? The typical politician in Nigeria will say, "Well, we're working with all the stakeholders in the country to move the nation forward. So, this doesn't say anything. So, it's the use of spoken words, but he might as well be silent. Because if somebody says what's the content of this speech? There's nothing to it. So, speech in that sense can be a way of being silent, a way of being deceptive, a way of dodging, deflecting.

On the other hand, silence can be a strategic move. Silence can be a move of resistance. If a bunch of people go to see a person of power. There are five of you, and four of them start praising this man who is hideous, and they start saying, "You are the kindest, most visionary leader we've ever seen in history." And you choose to be silent. If you say to him, "Nope, you are not visionary; you are vicious," he takes your life; you're dead. But you can show your resistance by just staying silent. So, you don't become complicit in this veneration of an autocrat.

It's a way of saying that speech and silence can become extremely complicated categories. A speech is important, but it is a speech that is tied to a human vision and to an awareness that humans must always examine an issue and assume the most moral position possible in any situation. So, if Hitler speaks against a group that he targeted, I can't celebrate that kind of speech. Any speech that leads to the devastation, denigration of a fellow human, of the environment, of a value that is important to a group of people will be objectionable to me.

Then we come to commodification... We can't, as a society, even spend the most minute amount of time without being implicated in the economy of commodification. So, you and I are speaking, I have a computer: it's a commodity! As we're talking, because I didn't quite sleep well at night, I'm drinking a coffee, so I'll stay awake. So, I depend on this commodity to enable us to talk. So, just to transact our lives as humans, we need commodities. So, when we talk about commodification, part of what we're trying to point to is a certain excessive, a certain abrasive attachment. And also, a different aspect of it is the commodification of something that should not be commodified. So, the human being should not be seen as usable. A human being is useful, but not a usable object.

The people's object of worship is useful for the people, but it should not be seen as something that you then acquire and put a price tag on – the game that happens in *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, where there are fashions; so African gods are in vogue at a certain time, and they fall out of favour, and they are discounted – because, in those spaces where these deities came into being they are never discounted, they have an intrinsic value that never falls out of season. Of course, in the case of Ngene, a lot of people became Christian converts, or in some cases, some would become Muslims, and some would become Hare Krishna people and so on. So they will no longer worship the deity. But in the eyes of those who worship the deity, the value is constant. If anything, the value grows.

So, I go from this first novel, where I look at silence in its different guises, and I particularly point to its danger. I don't know whether you have the latest edition of the 20th anniversary where I have an essay because I tell part of the story of how that came about. So, you now see how Soyinka and Sophocles are important to me. So, the idea that Creon, the king, would declare that one of his subjects not be buried because the subject fought against the city was the act of a traitor. Okay. But Antigone, the sister, says: he's still my brother traitor or not. He's still my brother.

So anyway, because you asked a very complex question, maybe you can point me to another part of the question so that I can complete it, because I have a sense that I haven't quite completed the answer.

GB: Let's say that the point of departure of this question was that, at one point, the protagonist mentions a desire to write a book, which led me to consider your work's position in the global

literary market. And, since commodification is so pervasive, I wondered whether your work reflects on the role of literature within this commodification.

ON: Oh, definitely!

[...]

GB: I'd like to shift our focus to literary influence. Many contemporary Nigerian authors appear to distance themselves from the legacy of the first-generation writers. However, from your books—and particularly your memoir—it seems you take pride in this affiliation. Could you share which aspects of their writing you feel you have inherited, and how they have influenced your work?

ON: Three major African writers have been extremely influential in my development as a writer, but broadly speaking, the canon of African literature is important to me. I was fortunate that when I was in secondary school, I read a lot, but then I came upon the African Writer Series, I began to read it more. In secondary school, a lot of my friends were reading American thrillers: everybody was reading James Hadley Chase. I didn't read one, but I read scores and scores of African writers.

Wole Soyinka was a great influence, especially his prison memoir. When I encountered the way in which this man suffered for speaking up about the genocide committed against the Igbo people – and I happened to be Igbo –, I was moved by it. And when in his prison memoir, *The Man Died* (1971), he says that “The man dies in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny,” it stays in my memory and it's become sort of motto that drives my own political and moral position. I feel that when I encounter injustice, it's my duty to speak – in condemnation of it. Also, in that same book, Soyinka says that “justice is the prime condition of humanity” and this is so central. If we understand that we must be just to every human being, regardless of their race, gender, sexual orientation, whatever it is, that this person is irreducibly human, and we must respect their humanity... there's nothing more important! So that's sort of what I got from Soyinka: this idea of the rejection of silence, the system of speech, especially when moral issues are at stake.

Then, Chinua Achebe was magical for me growing up. It was the first time I encountered in his novels in an unapologetic way the use of traditional Igbo resources of storytelling, the use of Igbo names, the use of Igbo cultural practices, wrestling, cooking, festivals... These were things that were still there when I was growing up. So, for me, it was my life being reflected in

a very rich and sophisticated way in literature. Also, particularly Achebe's attitude to language - something that I'm still striving to learn: the use of proverbs, for example. But also, there's a certain kind of simplicity of diction. I've said of Achebe: "that is a man who never wasted a word." When I read his essays or his novels, I said to myself: "Is there a word in this sentence that I can remove and it still stands?" And the answer is no, because Achebe has this very spare, economic, laconic style, which is beautiful. So, he is one of the richest writers for me. And that richness lies defiantly in simplicity of diction.

Then, there is Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o. I met Ngugi years later, and we're very close now personally. But when I read him as a student in secondary school, and then subsequently recreationally as an adult reader... To see the breadth of his writing, to see something that he does that is somewhat close to what Achebe does, but he has a more sophisticated register of language. He brings in his Kikuyu tradition, but Ngugi is a highly well-read person who brings in so many other intellectual practices. And Ngugi is somebody who can talk theory, high theory, and yet he's accessible. It's rare in our world where, where we plunge into Foucault, Lacan, Derrida and we emerge with a headache! In Ngugi, there is the idea of encounter with other cultures. Encounter is important. But you start from one place – home –, then you go to meet the world – the rest of the world. But as you go and, because you recognize where you're coming from, you never miss your way, you can always retrace yourself, but your encounter becomes even richer precisely because of your sense of being centred in a particular cultural universe that you might call home.

So those three, but there are other ones. There is Kofi Awoonor, became a friend of mine. I read his poetry in secondary school, and I encountered his first novel, *This Earth, My Brother...*, which introduced me to the stream of consciousness in literature before I found James Joyce. Ayi Kwei Armah who is extremely lyrical in his writing, and also to Flora Nwapa. To read Flora Nwapa, for example, and even some of Nadine Gordimer, was very important to me in my intellectual growth.

Then, I came to America and encountered people like James Baldwin, Tony Morrison, like my old professor, John Edgar Wideman, whose work I studied for my PhD and so on.

So, I've been very fortunate! I've been fortunate as a writer, not only to have met so many other writers, but so many generous other writers who have been and continue to be generous to me.

GB: So, about your style evolution. I would like know if you perceive your literary style changed from the first to your latest novel and if there are particular elements of your style that you consciously redefine over time.

ON: When I wrote my first novel, as I said... There's this woman... I just forgot her name. But she has a book, which is called, I think *This Writing Life* ... I should have a book somewhere here. So, she says, "write as if you were about to die." And she says, "at the same time, write as if you are writing for an audience consisting entirely of terminal patients." And she says, "what story would you start to tell somebody who is about to die that will not engage with this triviality." So, it's a way of saying, as a writer, do you have a subject that is so important and that you consider inescapable? For me, the subject was the subject of my first novel: silence and power. The tension between power and silence was the subject that I was most interested in growing up. And, that interest came from reading Soyinka's *The Man Died*. But then I came here and encountered Sophocles' *Antigone*, which has made that subject more compelling. That's the novel that I was meant to write. That's the most emotionally intimate story that I had to tell.

Having written that, I wanted to write a novel that would be a kind of homage to my identity as a Nigerian and as an American, hence *Foreign Gods, Inc.* In a sense, I wanted to speak about both America, my adopted home, Nigeria, my natal form. So, the style has also changed because I am talking a bit about New York, but ultimately taking the reader to Lagos, to this community that I have created.

The novel that I've written now represents another progression in my development. Because now the two major characters in the current novel are not African, they're not Nigerian. The two central characters are actually Americans: one, a professor of anthropology, and one, a private investigator who goes to look for him. So, that is a very important progression. So what is it that I've held on to? I have created Utonki as a community. It's something that I've become committed to. And Utonki doesn't exist anywhere except in my imagination. I've created it and it's become real to me. It's going to be a space that will recur in perhaps everything that I write. And so, I'm trying to map it in more memorable ways so that people would encounter the novel and feel like they have visited it.

GB: From the outside, African literature seems to have gained momentum. Do you have this perception? Have things changed since you received that response from an editor stating that

they judged novels from outside the US with harsher requirements due to Americans' difficulty in picking up books from other cultures?

[...]

ON: Absolutely. Things have changed a lot. I think that Chinua Achebe was always well-known. Even now, if you look at some of the African writers, who have become really big.... Once a reviewer says that somebody is heir of Achebe, they become big. So, Achebe has always been big, mostly on the strength of *Things Fall Apart*. Soyinka is not been commercially big, but he is a Nobel Prize winner. Wa Thiong'o has been well-known. But, by the time I finished my first novel, I was getting discouraging responses from Americans. Some of them were reading the novel and saying that it was a well written novel, but they didn't think Americans were going to pick up an African novel.

I think that it began to change after Ben Okri won The Booker Prize. So, African literature slowly began to have a kind of cache, if you like. But then when Chimamanda emerged in the scene, with her first novel... She was hailed at as Achebe's literary daughter and she became a household name. So things have since changed!

So now you can find a bunch of writers who have been very fortunate in the West. My hope is that African writers, especially those of us outside of Africa, will be read more in Africa. That's for me very critical. That's why I go to Nigeria a lot. I do literary festivals a lot. So yes, there is a greater receptivity to writing by Africans. But even so, there are still a sense that a lot of publishers, a lot of literary agents still don't know how to read African works. For example, when I finished *Foreign Gods Inc.*, I was trying to sell it. I sent it to about a dozen agents, and they either ignored me or wrote to say "no". They would praise the novel by saying, but they would also say "we don't think it's for us," And yet it became one of the big books of 2014. It was widely and positively reviewed, but agents and publishers didn't take to it. So, I ended up selling it directly without an agent to my publishers in New York, Soho Publishing. An African writer and friend who knew I was looking for an agent, said to me "there's this independent publisher in New York." They had actually approached him because he won a short story prize, the Caine Prize. And they said to him "if you write a novel, we would like you to submit it to us," or if you could introduce other people to us. So, he introduced me, and I sent them the manuscript. Within two weeks, they accepted it, and it became their big book of the year. So, they've become my publisher since. They're dynamic, but of course, part of it is that their budget is low. So, even though my books were widely reviewed, they're limited in the budget

for doing publicity and promotions and so on. But they've been good enough to send me to several cities within America, and they did send me to the UK to do readings.

GB: Lucky them! Interestingly, numerous articles about the book were written both this year and last year. It seems that it has become even more relevant today.

ON: A friend of mine a few months ago sent me a notice: somebody was presenting on it at a conference. But it is not something that I monitor at all. I've been busy also trying to finish the current novel.

GB: Maybe it's better because sometimes when you write and you read what other people think, then you may get influenced.

ON: Yes, precisely. I don't want critical responses to the book to overburden the work that I'm doing at the moment.

GB: So, in that same response, the editor categorised you as non-American despite your naturalisation in the USA. Indeed, you define yourself as "proudly Nigerian American" (143). Yet, publishing houses often eliminate the second part. What are your thoughts on this?

ON: Identity – how people identify, how people are identified... it is a very complex, very problematic, very slippery phenomenon. Even I am susceptible to that. So, in my memoir, for example, I spoke about my wife as a Nigerian. And a friend of mine, who is American, reminded me that her mother is American. And, so, that the fullness of my wife's identity should have been articulated.

But, I guess, for some Americans, when they see your name, when they see my name... Okey Ndibe it not an American name. So, even if you said to them that in 1996 you naturalized, you are an American citizen, they still view you as a Nigerian writer, an African writer. You're actually lucky if they say Nigerian because Africa becomes a kind of wholesale rubric, where they just throw people.

I don't walk around worrying about that because when I actually think of who I am, of my identity, I think immediately of my parents who were extraordinary parents and the values that they imparted. I think of them, I belong to them. So, when people say what accounts for how you behave and how you treat others... it is not a cultural thing, but it is part of my culture to be gregarious and be warm. But it's a particular thing that my parents taught me: to be

grateful for anything. You have to be grateful because, in a sense, I also see it as a gift. So, I've worked hard, but other people have worked harder than I. So, if I have somebody like you doing work on my novel, it's not because I'm the hardest working writer. I have to recognize that there is a measure of blessing, which some people might call luck, in that. So, my parents added these values in me.

In Nigeria, I wrote a weekly column, for example, for 18 years. If you know anything about Nigeria that is that politicians bribe journalists a lot. So if I chose I could be a millionaire in every currency, if I was open to taking bribes. But I said to people that my parents, even in their grave, would be ashamed of me if I took a dime to shape my opinion. So, when at any moment I face a challenge – a politician in my homestead offered me close to a million dollars just to get off his back. I wasn't tempted, and I wasn't tempted, not because I'm an Igbo, but because I had C and E, Chris and Elizabeth as my parents, because they gave us some values. They gave all five of us, their children, certain kinds of values. When I said to them that I wanted to be a journalist, they said to me, "Be a voice for the voiceless and tell the truth." Always, a politician who is giving you money, he's giving you money to tell a lie. And I can't betray my parents that way. I can't betray the principles that they've given to me.

So, it's a way of saying that identity for me is not something I over-worry about. I'm amused when I say to people, "I'm an American as well", but they think "He's really not American." They forget that they themselves are immigrants. They came from Poland, Italy, and Ireland. It's like your accent, or your name excludes you. And, then, I go back to Nigeria, and some Nigerians say, "You speak like an American now." Or "We had a meeting. I came ten minutes late, and you want me to apologise? You have become American!" – That sort of thing.

GB: So, it is more about values than identity, labels...

ON: Absolutely. You've put it brilliantly: values over identity any day. And by the way, some years ago, I gave a talk, which I called "Towards an Ethnicity of Values" (2021). It's about what you just said. So, I see myself as belonging to people who share my values. I'm not so much invested in ethnicity; I'm invested in ethics. So, you could say, towards an ethnicity that is based on ethics.

GB: Did you write it as well?

ON: Later, I wrote a column. So, I'm sure you can find it online.

GB: Short question: Do you have a Nigeria edition of your books?

ON: Yes, all my books are now published in Nigeria. It wasn't the case in the past. So, the same publisher of Wole Soyinka in Nigeria – Book Craft Africa is its name – has a Nigerian edition of all my books. And I actually I did a book on Wole Soyinka for them. I interviewed Wole Soyinka for several days on the road. I travelled with him. The first part of the book is a long essay that I wrote about my relationship with him, studying him and getting to know him, and then the second part is a question and answer on his life. It's called *The Man Lives: A Conversation with Wole Soyinka on Life, Literature and Politics* (2019).

GB: I'll check it out! Another short question: turning back to *Never Look an American in the Eye*, I was quite surprised by your memoir's title. Did you choose it yourself, or was it a decision made by the publisher?

ON: So, when I was writing I actually did see it as a memoir. I wanted to write a bunch of essays about my life in America. So, the title I gave it was *Going Dutch and Other Misadventures*. I finished and submitted a book to my agent at the time, and then I went to Mantua in Italy. In Mantua, I was telling everybody that I had done this book *Going Dutch* and they kept saying, "what does that mean?" So, I don't know if what it means...

GB: In Italian, it's *alla romana* – from Rome, the city.

ON: Okay. So, in Nigeria, this doesn't happen. If ten friends go to eat, one friend will pay for everybody. So, in Italy, nobody knew what it meant. Then, from Italy, I went to South Africa for the Cape Town Book Festival, and of course, Cape Town and South Africa are partly Dutch. So, I was telling people again about it and they didn't understand it. So, I came back, and told my agent that people didn't understand the title's meaning. I then changed the title to *Robbing a Bank* because there was a moment when I fit a description of the robber at the bank. So, I said, *Robbing a Bank and Other American Misadventures*.

My publishers felt that some people might think you really robbed a bank, so they wouldn't touch the book. So, they came up with the title, which derives from what my uncle said to me. So we have *Never Look American in the Eye*, which has come with a very interesting story because when I give readings in the Americas, my Nigerian friends come and say, "The title of your book is wrong. Americans want you to look them in the eye, so you should change

the title”. I say, “Read the book; there’s a story there...” So, it was my publisher who chose the title.

GB: It’s very interesting to know a little bit about how it was created.

ON: So, I chose the title my first novel *Arrows of Rain*. In fact, when I was writing it, the title was *Dry Dreams*. Then, I changed it to *Spikes of Rain* because Achebe has a novel *Arrow of God*. So, I didn’t want people to think that I’m copying it. But then I said, even Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* was taken from Yeats so I chose *Arrows of Rain* in the end. *Foreign God, Inc.* was my title. And, *Never Look An American in the Eyes* was chosen by my publisher.

GB: Thank you very much. And the last question: Since you are a writer but also a professor, looking forward, what do you see in the future of African literature?

ON: I think that African writers are having fun. African writing used to be a very serious, brave business: we were fighting colonialism, talking about our relationship with Europe, and so on. It had to be political; it had to be revolutionary. Now, African writers are saying, “No, we’re going take a deep breath. Sometimes, we want to write revolutionary literature. Sometimes, we just want to write a love letter.”

Two years ago, I was invited by the Caine Prize to be the chairperson of the judges’ committee. I read 267 short stories by writers from all over Africa. And I came out of it really energised – just from the sheer breadth of topics that writers are examining, from the sheer multitude of styles in which they were writing. So, African writing has become audacious in a way that is really heartening. Somebody might say that is a betrayal of Achebe, Soyinka, and Nwapa’s generation. But it’s actually just writers deciding that we don’t have a single story to tell. We have many stories to tell. We have many dimensions of our experience to explore, and we will do it. So, the manuscript that I’m trying to edit at the moment is set in Africa, but its two main characters are American. So, I said, “Why not?” I’ve taken them to Africa to look at their lives from within that. Before, it would’ve been seen as a betrayal, “How dare you write a novel in which there is not one African character!?” It seemed to me to be a profitable way to grow as a writer; to do this, and so I’m doing it. And I may come to a point where I write a novel that is set entirely in America, where, and if I’d like, I’ll have them just be a cast of Caucasian Americans. Why not?!

So, I think that there's a lot of burgeoning in talent in Africa. The unfortunate thing that I see is that some of the most consequential writers, in terms of their reach, critical reception, sales, and commercial success, are based abroad. I think that there's something asymmetrical about it. Those on the continent who are experiencing eating, smelling, and touching the continent on a day-to-day basis should and perhaps do have the most compelling stories to tell from in that space.

GB: Thank you so much.