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Beyond 'Victim Diaspora(s)': Post-Soul, the Afropolitan, and Aesthetic Solidarity in Contemporary Anglophone (Im)migrant Novels

ABSTRACT The African diaspora's image of a "victim diaspora" (Robin Cohen) is a legacy of transatlantic slavery and colonialism imposed on its descendants and often delimits reference frames for examining Afrodiasporic migratory experiences (Goyal). However, contemporary anglophone Afrodiasporic writers adopt a liberated aesthetic stance from which they expand such bounded and narrow views. Aesthetic reframing done by these scholars includes the Afropolitan (Selasi) and post-soul/postblack aesthetic (Ashe). The itineraries of these new migrants focus on individual portraits to give faces to the faceless and often single narrative (Adichie) of African migration. They foster nuanced readings and forms of agencies through aesthetic liberation and via material and immaterial mobilities and migration in literary texts. This chapter examines how contemporary anglophone immigrant novels re-negotiate and recast multidirectional mobilities and foreground "frictions" of mobility (Cresswell) and inequalities of agency from which fresh understandings of solidarity, agency, and identity emerge.

KEYWORDS African diaspora, aesthetic solidarity, agency, immigrant narrative, mobility

> *You think watching on BBC means you know what is going on? No, you don't, my friend, it's the wound that knows the texture of the pain; it's us who stayed here feeling the real suffering, so it's us who have a right to even say anything about that or anything and anybody.*
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> **NoViolet Bulawayo, We Need New Names, 285**

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I will miss America, but it will be good to live in my own country again.

Imbolo Mbue, Behold the Dreamers, 373

Here, in this country, it doesn't matter where you came from first to the white people running things. You're here now, and here black is black is black.

Yaa Gyasi, Homegoing, 273

Beyond Aesthetics of Victimhood

This chapter examines how contemporary African diasporic literary productions are renarrating single narratives and portraits of "African identity" toward multiple identifications in the context of migration. I show how post-soul/postblack aesthetics and the concept of the Afropolitan provide avenues of aesthetic solidarity in this reidentification practice. Through a critical reading of three contemporary novels about African migration, the analysis focuses on pluralising their protagonists' identities and representing a variety of migrant experiences of Africans and Afrodiasporic people. Each of the epigraphs cited above evokes aspects of migrant journeys in the respective novels discussed in this chapter and calls attention to the pitfalls of such moves. While they seem pessimistic, they reveal how migrant families, both those who leave and those who remain, are not oblivious to the complexities of their journeys. The novels reflect on their reality and portray compounding influences on their experiences, arming them with the power to control their own stories.

The spatial and migration politics staged in these contemporary anglophone immigrant novels re-negotiate and recast unidirectional mobilities to foreground the "frictions" and inequalities of migrant mobilities (Cresswell 2006) and, in so doing, offer fresh pathways for envisioning and understanding migrant complex identities, transnational belongings, cosmopolitanism, solidarity, and agency. The fraught relationships of global cultural flows that accelerate some mobilities while hampering others, like those of migrants, exacerbate how race, class, and gender categories shape unequal and uneven mobilities through access and stasis for mobile figures.[1] The first part of the chapter outlines the interconnections between post-soul/postblack and Afropolitan scholarship. It engages with

1 See Cresswell (2006); Adey et al. (2014); and Sheller (2018) as well as Gikandi, Goyal, and Schindler in the *Research in African Literatures* special issue, "Africa and the Black Atlantic" (2014). For critiques of male-centric discussions of the Black Atlantic, see DeLoughrey (1998); Newman (2012).

how scholarship on the two concepts fosters aesthetic solidarities that pluralise and represent the diversity of motivations and aspirations of African-descended peoples at "home" and in the diaspora. The second part then reads these critical crossings in the novels following the trajectories of the migrant characters' lives that subvert simplistic readings through victimhood, dispossession, and abjection.

The novels' realistic characterisation and world-building of the transnational lives of migrants facilitate resonance with readers who embark on deeply personal journeys with the protagonists towards attaining personal and collective dreams. The migratory journey is also, simultaneously, a coming-of-age story (*Bildungsroman*), as the novels depict struggles with identity and belonging in new cultural landscapes. Rocío Cobo-Piñero, for instance, has read *We Need New Names* as a "picaresque Journey" (2019, 475). The fast-moving narratives portray worlds collapsing under neoliberal financial fallout, threatening the protagonists' dreams of upward mobility, as happens to the Jonga family in Cameroonian-American Mbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016). They stage social and moral corruption and a breakdown of political and religious systems, as in Zimbabwean-American NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013). Alternatively, they portray a changed home(land) and, in doing so, interrogate the notions of ancestral heritage, racial identity, and translocal belonging, as in Ghanaian-American Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016).

The novels, which are all written by women, depict resilient women and girls facing impossible social and political pressures[2] that are essential to subverting established discourses of victimhood in which women are overrepresented. I contend that the authors' portrayal of spirited women moves them from a default victimised position and instead rethinks gendered tropes of victimhood—something that Bernadine Evaristo's Booker-Prize-winning novel *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) does convincingly. In this way, the narratives find excellent company with a generation of writing, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* (2013), which narrate a similar nexus of identity, race, and familial kinships of migrants. These literary texts reinscribe agency in their representation of the characters and show how they negotiate their identities via diasporic spatial mobilities.

2 For a detailed examination of girlhood in *We Need New Names*, see Chitando (2016).

Old Diaspora, New Diaspora: Establishing Aesthetic Frontiers

Yogita Goyal's injunction that "We Need New Diasporas" (Goyal 2017) is widely shared by many contemporary Afrodiasporic intellectuals and in diaspora scholarship.[3] The "old frames" of theorising and reading the African diaspora as a "victim diaspora" emerge from historical and present "catastrophic origins and uncomfortable outcomes" (Cohen 1996, 507). Some of these catastrophes include the "well-worn frames of racial ancestry or heritage" (Goyal 2017, 643), such as a singular presentation of a "Middle Passage epistemology" (Wright 2015) of victimhood, displacement, and dispossession as a consequence of transatlantic slavery. Western cultural imperialism and colonialism, political unrest, wars, and economic hardships perpetrate the narrative of African victimhood. However, such discourses, I argue, fail to sufficiently account for the agency of continental and diasporic Africans. The intersecting vulnerabilities of race, class, and gender collide, introducing further obfuscation in presenting victimhood biases against women or, as official and media reportage sometimes lumps the terms, 'women and children.' Reconsidering discourses and aesthetics of victimhood demands a shift towards centring Africans' agentive capacities in writing (but also narrating, documenting, and historicising) their lived experiences without limiting African diversity only to racial slavery and victimisation, despondency, and displacement. By "representing black humanity, agency, and futurity in the literature of migration and diaspora" (Goyal 2017, 643), the novels discussed in this chapter offer nuanced paths towards pluralising African and Afrodiasporic subjects globally.

Goyal argues that post-1960 second- and third-generation immigrant writers of African descent like Yaa Gyasi, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Dinaw Mengestu, Taiye Selasi, NoViolet Bulawayo, Mbolo Mbue, and Teju Cole offer alternative narratives and means of narrating the multiplicity of identity in the African diaspora without the 'burden' of slavery, without being reactionary, and without the anti-colonial sentiments of the immediate postcolonial generations. Thus, these writers chronicle diverse migratory histories to inform genuinely multifaceted representations of blackness (641–2). Influenced by globalisation, Goyal argues, these twenty-first-century African and African diasporic writers depart from traditional frames of conceptualising diaspora which are summed up in Selasi's term "Afropolitan" (641).

3 For in-depth discussions of diaspora beyond victimhood, see Avtar Brah (1996); Rogers Brubaker (2005); and Robin Cohen (1996).

In *The New African Diaspora* (2009), co-edited with Nkiru Nzegwu, Isidore Okpewho distinguishes between an "old" and a "new" African diaspora marked by control systems before and after colonisation. The old African diaspora was propelled by enslavement and forced migration, whereas the economic forces that engendered labour migration produced a new African diaspora (Okpewho 2009, 5). The new African diaspora also emerges from political forces, creating a significant presence of political migrants who may be fleeing war and persecution. Capitalist and political forces underscore the African diaspora's "old" and "new" forms, very much like the protagonist Darling in Bulawayo's novel and Yaw Akyekum, the father of the protagonist Marjorie in Gyasi's novel, who emigrates to the US, disillusioned with post-independence Ghana. Yet this "new African diaspora" is by no means homogeneous; it is characterised by globalisation, diverse formations, and multiple locations, struggles, and identities, as well as a "bewildering diversity" and yet "complex threads of connections," as Paul T. Zeleza has pointed out (2010, 2).

These "new African diaspora" novels, Goyal argues further, resist Manichean readings and instead allow for layered readings beyond any "national or ethnic categories" (Goyal 2017, 642).[4] Afropolitans thus chart new ways of engaging with and analysing diaspora. They achieve this by dismantling simple attachments to traditional frames such as slavery, colonialism, and wholesale Pan-Africanism (Goyal 2017, 641–2). When such topics are discussed, these frames are problematised and complexly represented to avoid simplistic readings of African and Afrodiasporic experiences and lifeworlds.

Re-routing Aesthetics of Solidarity through the Black Atlantic: Afropolitan and Post-soul Aesthetics

African and Afrodiasporic writing, out of necessity, has been politically oriented to contest the realities of slavery's subjugation, (post)colonialism, civil rights, and independence struggles through the postcolonial theoretical paradigm of "writing back." Radical and resistant traditions such as Afro-pessimism, black activism, and nationalism partake in such intellectual and activist work. These circumstances engendered socio-political

4 In analysing the new diaspora, Goyal argues that scholars mark three main departures from the old exodus narratives: they are "largely voluntary [...] connected to globalisation and [they] result from the failure of the postcolonial state" (Goyal 2017, 642).

and intellectual movements that formed diasporic connections between aesthetic and liberation efforts, from Pan-Africanism to Négritude, Black Arts, and Black Power movements, as well as contemporary movements for Black Lives. In *Homegoing*, Yaw Agyekum, a Pan-Africanist historian, writes the book *Let Africans Own Africa* (Gyasi 2016, 222), citing the impact of "black people of America's movement toward freedom" on him and Gold Coast political elites, returnees themselves, who are all keen on independence (229). As Robin Cohen writes, Black intellectualism has, since the nineteenth century, documented the parallels between the struggles of "servitude, forced migration, exile and the development of a return movement" (2008, 39) with other diasporic populations (such as the Jewish diaspora), but particularly between African descendants in the diaspora and early "West African nationalists." Such interventions and solidarities continue today between African-American literary aesthetics theorised since the late 1980s and its extensions in postblack/post-soul aesthetics, from the cosmopolitan dialogues of Arjun Appadurai (1996) to "Afropolitan" sensibilities.[5]

In the three decades since its publication, Paul Gilroy's seminal *Black Atlantic* (1993) has offered a familiar route of plotting aesthetic solidarity within the African diaspora, generating much critique and praise. The paradigm has been critiqued for its Anglocentrism, masculinist outlook, and insufficient focus on (perhaps even neglect of) Africa in Gilroy's theorising. However, relegating the Black Atlantic to the status of an "old frame" which contrasts with the impulses of the Afropolitan and post-soul aesthetics in diaspora studies is hasty. Instead, focusing on Gilroy's interrogation of modernity offers an intervention in the transnationalism discourse that tends to ignore or downplay global Africans' roles, places, and perspectives. Beyond the proliferation of the term "diaspora" and its politics, however, Gilroy employs the "black Atlantic diaspora" (Gilroy 2002 [1993], 35) to show the solidarity in Black Atlantic history that involves the recurrent mobile intersections of black people "not only as commodities but engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship—[which] provides a means to re-examine the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory" (16). This position markedly intersects with post-soul/postblack aesthetics, as heralded by Trey Ellis in his 1989 eponymous essay "The New Black Aesthetics" (Ellis 2003 [1989]), and the term Afropolitan, arguably

5 Post-soul/postblack aesthetics, for instance, partly builds on African-American signifying traditions theorised by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in the pioneering *The Signifying Monkey* (2014 [1989]), in which Gates borrows variously from West African folklore and traditions, especially the trickster trope. Such aesthetic continuities and unities connect the texts and artists in their efforts to ameliorate identity representations.

coined by Achille Mbembe in 2007 (Mbembe 2020) and popularised and theorised by Taiye Selasi in the blog essay "Bye-Bye Barbar" (Selasi 2013a).

'Post-soul'[6] and 'postblack' are terms used interchangeably about African-American aesthetic and artistic productions "by African Americans who were either born or came of age after the Civil Rights movement" in the 1960s (Ashe 2007, 611). Over time, it has expanded beyond the US to include African-descended artists,[7] which makes this exploration of aesthetic solidarity worthwhile. Post-soul is essentially interested in an artistic break with earlier artistic and literary traditions; that is, it uses non-traditional art, experimentation, and inventive styles to interrogate, among other things, identity. Thelma Golden, curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem, introduced the term 'post-black' together with her colleague Glenn Ligon as a shorthand for 'post-black art' at the exhibition "Freestyle" in 2001 (14). Golden's exhibition aimed to rethink the representation of art and the artist to transform them from '"black" artists' to artists (14).

In his 2007 essay, "Theorising the Post-soul Aesthetics," Bertram D. Ashe offers a practical interpretive and triangular framework of "the post-soul matrix" to analyse post-soul texts. The matrix consists of "the cultural-mulatto archetype; the execution of an exploration of blackness [...] and the signal allusion disruption gestures that many of these texts perform" (613). His template indicates how the texts and the artists of post-soul challenge and subvert essentialist and monolithic discourses about "Black" identities, akin to what Chimamanda Adichie called "a single story" in her 2009 TED Talk (Adichie 2009), her response to reductive assumptions about her as a Nigerian immigrant highlighting racism in the US. The texts employ postmodernist narrative techniques such as metafiction, parody, and intertextuality to critique established modes of artistic, literary, and cultural expression.

Similarly, Afropolitan writing refuses the burden and expectancy of addressing dystopian and catastrophic portrayals of Africa. Even when such situations are depicted, as Bulawayo does in portraying the social decay and hardship in fictional Zimbabwe, the satirical mode gestures towards critical rather than mimetic readings. Showing similarities does not disregard the contextual differences and experiences from which authors like Gyasi, Bulawayo, and Mbue write, compared to their African-American and other Afrodiasporic peers. Like post-soul writing, their novels foster

6 Nelson George first coined "post-soul" in his 1992 article for *Village Voice* "Buppies, B-Boys, Baps, & Bohos," which evolved into *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps, and Bohos: Notes on Post-soul Black Culture* (1992).

7 See Thelma Golden's 2017 interview with Joachim Pissarro and David Carrier in *The Brooklyn Rail* magazine.

artistic freedom; engage in the practice of "writing back to self" (Mwangi 2009), which is non-reactionary; complicate Africa and Africanness; and revel in their cultural hybridity.

Who are Afropolitans, then? Taiye Selasi sees them as the post-1960s "newest generation of African emigrants" with trans-local attachments and cultural identities. Afropolitans express their African identities forged not against or despite slavery but by being cosmopolitan with specific African sensibilities. Selasi argues that the Afropolitan is forged along three dimensions of identity, "national, racial and cultural" (Selasi 2013a, 530). I add another dimension of relevance, the diasporic, which allows for engagements with diaspora and global African descendants. Moreover, it builds on the solidarities of the Black Atlantic, which is essentially a frame for transnational–global African modes of shared being. Selasi insists that the identities of people of African descent relate to "the history [of slavery] that produced 'blackness' and the political processes that continue to shape it" (530). However, I argue that reductive associations of African descendants' self-identification to racial heritage and phenotype are superficial and problematic. In their study *In Search of the Afropolitan*, Eva Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek write of the Afropolitan as

> confident, often spectacularly attractive, worldly, and profoundly itinerant African or person of African descent. The Afropolitan, it seems, is always about to arrive, yet also most likely soon about to leave. To be Afropolitan is arguably an effect of globalisation and late modernity. *It is a mobile and decentred position that disavows earlier deeply hegemonic phases of modernity as it calls for a reorientation of ideas about Africa and African culture and identity*. (Knudsen and Rahbek 2016, 1; my emphasis)

Achille Mbembe's use of the term Afropolitan diverges from Selasi's use in the question of mobility. Both recognise global African citizens' "willingness to complicate Africa—namely, to engage with, critique, and celebrate the parts of Africa that mean most to them" (Selasi 2013, 529). However, for Mbembe, Afropolitanism reinscribes Africa and Africans as members of the world in contrast to the tendency to write them as separate from it. Therefore, both a global aesthetic and a way of life reject victim identification while remaining cognisant of the "injustice and violence inflicted on the continent and its people by the law of the world" (Mbembe 2020, 60). This worldly belonging often requires a flow of people, ideas, and information. Afropolitans attempt to redefine and expand the notions of Blackness and Black identities, what Ashe calls "blaxploration" or "troubling blackness" (Ashe 2007, 614). Furthermore, these new Afropolitans advocate for pluralising and understanding African identities in all their diversity.

Likewise, post-soul employs the "cultural mulatto" trope (Ashe 2007, 614) to reflect this mode of multiple complex identification and modes of belonging in the world. Regardless, many scholars have intensely debated an 'elitist mobility' inherent in Selasi's deployment of the term Afropolitan. However, both Selasi and Mbembe envision spatial mobilities as part of a complex interrogation of identities for Afropolitans, just as post-soul/postblack envisions such an interrogation for global African descendants.

Mobile itineraries of characters in the novels show that anglophone African diasporic writers adopt similarly liberated aesthetic stances (Tate 1992, 200)[8] from which they address and expand bounded and narrow views of and "single stories" about African-descended peoples (Adichie 2009). While Adichie's rebuttal appears to replay singular assumptions about her American roommate, it becomes a valuable mirror to view the flawed logic of race and identity and a counternarrative to move beyond a reactionary practice of simply 'writing back.' It is also where critiques of Afropolitanism and post-soul arise, resulting from generational differences and artistic renovations. The post-soul artists' attempts at complicating the text of blackness that Bertram D. Ashe has called "blaxploitation" (2007, 614) are often condemned as exploitative. However, "blaxploration," if anything, takes a cue from the 1970s blaxploitation films' 'stick it to the man' formula in problematising iterations of blackness[9] rather than wholly adopting some of its flawed typecasting.

In its earlier development, critics misconstrued postblack/post-soul as pursuing a discourse of "post-race" and thus perceived it as contemptuous of civil rights struggles that enabled their aesthetic freedoms. Writers such as Percival Everett, Paul Beatty, and Colson Whitehead were chastised for their "uncharacteristic" depiction of Black lifeworlds[10] and their glib and careless take on the 'struggle,' signalling race issues in the US. Undeterred by such accusations, these artists acknowledge the critical struggles and strides but carefully distance themselves to create space for new avenues of Black empowerment, aesthetically or otherwise. Christian Schmidt (2017) argues that, if anything, postblack insists on interrogating race without "the yoke of expectations levied on black artists" (2). I agree with his position, since there is nothing 'uncharacteristic' about complexly portraying

8 For further details on aesthetic liberation, see Greg Tate's "Cult-Nats Meet Freaky-Deke" (1992).

9 Blaxploitation alludes to the African-American-led gangster movies of the 1970s, which were anti-establishment and anti-Hollywood. For post-soul and blaxploitation, see Ofori-Amoafo (2022).

10 See more on the critique of depicting black life in Mitchell and Vander (2013).

African and Afrodiasporic peoples' realities, and they do not have to be depicted in limited ways to be considered 'authentic,' either.

Similarly, some scholars chastise the Afropolitan for promoting elitist mobility and being averse to African-situated literary practice (Hodapp 2020, 1; and Musila 2016, 111), what Grace Musila has termed "Africa lite" (110)—an idea of diluting African artistic portraits for global consumption. Musila claims that the Afropolitan fosters an "easy comfort and uncritical embrace of consumer cultures and an equally uncritical embrace of selective, successful global mobility and cultural literacy in the global North" (112). Her claims are not entirely unfounded. There is something quite problematic about mobility politics, especially given the so-called migrant crises in recent years and, more recently, in the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Yet her critique suggests that 'Afropolitans' depict new examples of singular African success stories, with which I disagree. Afropolitanism's flaws notwithstanding, it has excellent prospects in retelling a new "global African immigrant […] and a new narrative of African identity politics" (Wasihun 2016, 392–3) and creating a "*space* [for] critical inquiry" (Knudsen and Rahbek 2016, 3; emphasis in original) about African and Afrodiasporic identities. I contend that the aesthetics of the post-soul and the Afropolitan usefully interrogate and foreground the diverse itineraries of these new migrants.

So, how do mobility and diaspora converge in re-negotiating agency and representation? In conventional scholarship, agency briefly concerns the means for individuals to act in certain situations. Agency, freedom, and mobility are often co-constituted and entangled in practice, seeing that being on the move affords possibilities to change the present and future conditions. In this regard, the three novels offer different aspects of the immigrant experience in untangling the (im)possibilities of being on the move. A journey motif structures all three novels literally and metaphorically, and the motives range from individual-personal to collective-social. Freedom is often associated with agency, because being agentic is conceptualised as having the free will to effect change. Feminist and gender studies scholars' examinations of agency focus on women's ability to effect change rather than being recipients of actions. Sumi Madhok, in this regard, rethinks agency models "in oppressive contexts" (Madhok 2013, 102)—such as colonialism, slavery, and crises—to curtail their inherent "action bias" (107) and theoretical binaries. She argues instead that such agency models overlook social settings and history. Madhok further proposes expanding the notion of agency through its "practise and site" and "background conditions" (106), so that agency does not only mean "the ability to act (freely or unfreely)" or defiance against despots but, instead, focuses on "the sociality of persons"

(106). In this sense, the socio-historical contexts in the novels shape the limits of agency for the characters along political, gender, and class lines.

Gyasi's Translocal Belongings

Yaa Gyasi's award-winning historical novel *Homegoing* has garnered a diverse growing scholarship.[11] Set in Gold Coast/Ghana and the United States, the novel shows how the culture of nineteenth-century Fanteland is altered through inter-ethnic wars and slavery as individuals and families are torn apart and forcibly carted across the Atlantic (Esi Otcher) and within the Gold Coast (ancestor Maame, Effia Otcher, James Collins, Abena Otcher) and Africa. Later, the reverse migrations of latter-generation returnees (Yaw Agyekum, Marjorie Agyekum, and Marcus Clifton) show the complications of familial kinship and belonging to ancestral homelands and to diasporic host nations as well as how the characters negotiate their identities between the two. Although belonging to the new diaspora, the novel successfully weaves traditional frames of slavery and return narratives together with contemporary postcolonial immigrant narratives through the stylistic choice of a nuanced transgenerational narrative, thereby avoiding the trap of limiting the narrative to any single frame. The relationship of subsequent generations to the ancestral home differs based on their retained connections, whether material or immaterial. While Marjorie's ancestor Effia Otcher remains in Fanteland, she, like her descendants, is exiled throughout the novel. Through the inherited touchstone of Maame, the matriarch, symbolised in "the black stone pendant" (Gyasi 2016, 16), Yaw Agyekum, Marjorie's father and the

11 Discussions include those on migration (Landry 2018; Yothers 2018), home and diaspora (Heinz 2020), warmth, or safety. In such associations, home is set up as a pre-existing space, an organic community, and an inborn feeling, i.e. an allegedly natural experience that can become threatened by hostile outside forces. Such a sedentarist metaphysics sees mobility as a pathology or threat and rejects both homelessness and alternative notions of home. However, ideas of home have been 'mobilised' in nomadological approaches to home and mobility. Here, home is reassessed as a dangerous fantasy, and a radical homelessness and nomadic subjectivity turns into a progressive source of resistance to essentialist sedentarism and state control. This binary opposition has led to certain impasses in the discussion of home that the article traces, to then propose a third way of conceptualising home in a close reading of Yaa Gyasi's novel *Homegoing* (Motahane et al. 2021), trauma (Dawkins 2023; Van Rens 2023), and historiography and memory studies (Owusu 2020; Taoua 2021), among others.

fifth-generation grandson of Effia, migrates to the United States, starting an immigrant narrative. The intergenerational model shows both intra-regional and international migrant experiences. To rethink her place and identity, Marjorie Agyekum, Effia Otcher's sixth-generation grandchild, depends on family rituals and transnational mobilities of journeys 'home' to Ghana (Gyasi 2016, 264–6). Nonetheless, these rituals and mobilities cannot retain unproblematic connections on either side of the Atlantic.

In the US, Marjorie is "black" (273), but she is deemed an "obroni" or "white girl" in Ghana (269). These multiple colliding identifications and the refusal to acknowledge her individuality depict a broader identity politics imposed on Marjorie as a diasporic figure, which is symptomatic of the tendency to ignore the diversity of Afrodiasporic personhood and conflates migrants into types, 'victim' and 'poor,' 'homeless,' or even 'Black.' In Marjorie's case, the so-called luxury of mobility, which is the bedrock of her Afropolitan status and should offer agency instead, reveals the blockades to identity and mobility. This way, her cosmopolitanism becomes both liberating and restrictive. Marjorie must forge a new way of belonging away from the traditional binary of home versus diaspora or Afropolitan versus domiciled African that is instead situated at the interstices of the two. Marjorie's status as a returnee—a traditional migrant and diasporic figure often depicted as either temporarily or permanently displaced and disengaged from a person's native culture—is destabilised. Her realisation of a need for alternative ways of identifying beyond the binary of domiciled or displaced diasporic subject gives her room to expand the boundaries of representing her Black identity beyond the discourse of victimhood. Instead, she embodies the figure of the cosmopolitan/Afropolitan and "cultural mulatto" (Ashe 2007, 614).

In opposition to discourses that pivot diaspora against homeland identifications,[12] the novel nurtures translocal belongings that allow Marjorie to identify simultaneously as not Ghanaian and not American while attempting to grapple with her place and position in both societies. The aesthetic choices of locating Marjorie both in and out of the two geographies (Ghana and the US) allow her to interrogate possibilities that make plural identification possible. Unlike traditional tropes of 'return journey,' which perpetuate unidirectional return to a putative welcoming, unchanged, and fixed homeland, *Homegoing* posits a complex ambivalence of return journeys and interrogates home spaces, traditionally considered safe and nurturing, as continuously turbulent and violent.

12 Avtar Brah critiques binarised discussions of homeland versus diaspora and home versus exile that tend to reiterate the "fixity of origins" (1996, 177).

Returning home in the novel does not guarantee homeland belonging and acceptance: in Marjorie's case, it entails the shock of being called a "foreigner" on returning to Ghana and Fanteland. While some characters physically return to the homeland, they naturally meet a changed home space, as happens with Marjorie and her cousin Marcus Clifton, many generations removed, who is particularly shocked by his encounters with locals; the majestic, whitewashed Cape Coast castle; and its sinister history, which completely unravels him (Gyasi 2016, 297–9). Marjorie's retort to being offered a tour to the Cape Coast Castle is, "I'm from Ghana, stupid. Can't you see?" and the boy's response, "But you are from America?" (264) is distinctly different from her grandmother's hearty welcoming "Akwaaba. Akwaaba. Akwaaba" (265). So, while these scenes might seem similar to established diaspora discourses of identity, the logic of returnee politics reveals the difference between Marjorie's choices and her awareness of her multiple identifications. The novel recasts 'redemptive' returns and problematises ancestral heritage as a locus for establishing homeland belonging and identity for diasporans.

Mbue's Disillusioned Dreamers

In *Behold the Dreamers*, Jende Jonga leaves his young family, his wife Neni and six-year-old son Liomi, in Limbe, Cameroon, to pursue the American Dream. He attains asylum status (Mbue 2016, 8), is a hopeful and lively immigrant, and works tirelessly for two years, living in squalor to save and bring over his family (12). The novel opens *in medias res*, as Jende nervously presents an exaggerated résumé (3) at an interview as a driver for the wealthy Clark Edwards, an investment banker on Wall Street with Lehman Brothers (4). He secures employment after embellishing the truth about his 'legal' status with a bogus reference from his riotous cousin, Winston (17) and agrees to sign a non-disclosure agreement (8).

The opening chapters establish how Hollywood has globalised the American Dream and show how Jende and Neni have accepted the myth of a 'rags to riches' narrative with several references to Hollywood movies and characters as symbolic equivalents of success.[13] According to Dominic

13 The imitation luxury bag Neni purchases in Chinatown symbolises her aspirations for a better life, her American dream. Her friend Fatou thinks she looks like "Angeli Joeli" (Angelina Jolie) (12), and Jende describes Mrs Cindy Edwards as being similar to "the wife in *American Beauty*" (28). At the same time, Bubakar, the sly Nigerian lawyer that Jende hires to process his asylum case, jokingly refers to *Jerry Maguire* in their introductory meeting (Mbue 2016, 24).

Strinati, the concept of the American dream expresses the ideology that "material wealth and success in life can be achieved by anyone who has the necessary initiative, ambition, ingenuity, perseverance and commitment" (Strinati 2000, 27). As Jende tells his boss, Clark Edwards, "America has something for everyone" (Mbue 2016, 40).

The novel's opening also reveals the daily struggles of immigrants to secure their livelihoods, from visa applications to impostor syndrome about abilities and possible acceptance into new cultural spaces. Friction, Tim Cresswell argues, facilitates how "people, things and ideas are slowed down or stopped" (2006, 108). He refers to this as "the friction of the national border or the gate of the gated community" (111). This border policing and gatekeeping frustrates the efforts of many immigrants like Jende in fulfilling their aspirations for coming to the US. While mobility can allow increased chances for realising their dreams, the process is markedly more complex with institutions and systems regulating mobility flow; there is no certainty. For dreamers like Jende, it does not offer solutions for their daily hardships of being an immigrant in America. The intertextual references to the now-defunct investment banking company Lehman Brothers in the novel's beginning, Jende's nervousness, and the many telephone interruptions in his interview with Edward Clark foreshadow the later blockages to the Jongas' American Dream (Toohey 2020).

Moreover, the Lehman reference signals the looming crisis in the narrative, referring to the real-life economic and financial collapse of 2008. As the novel progresses, the relationship between the Jongas and the Edwards moves beyond the initial one of employers and trusted employees. Neni becomes a temporary domestic help to the Edwards family alongside her education at the community college, further entangling the two families. The Edwards seem, in part, a personification of an idealised American Dream, so the closer the Jongas get to them, the more they become disillusioned by this unattainable dream and the more their world unravels as they become disillusioned by the promises and lure of the United States. The dysfunctions of the Edwards seem to rub off on the Jongas as they go from a closely-knit immigrant family to a collective of estranged individuals, each clamouring to hold on to their aspirations shaped by the challenges of immigrant life. The dream must be deferred, as the asylum application fails, and the economic turmoil forces them to relocate to Limbe by the novel's end.

Gender identity and societal constraints limit the agency and mobility the characters in Mbue's novel can access. Cindy Edwards's upward social mobility from a poor childhood to upper-middle-class status does not resolve the traumas of being a neglected wife, being an absentee mother in her children's lives, and struggling with drugs and alcohol. Her white castle of

life is portrayed as harbouring dark secrets—the harsh realities of upwardly mobile life. Neni Jonga travels to America to escape the harsh reality of being born female in Limbe and the economic hardships of her family and society. Mobility is, for her, an opportunity to realise "a dream besides marriage and motherhood" (Mbue 2016, 14). Nevertheless, her identity performance as a woman, mother, and wife ultimately delimits Neni's agency in acquiring her education and realising her American Dream of becoming a pharmacist.

Neni was initially unable to access education in Cameroon because of patriarchy prioritising male children, but later emigrated to join her husband, Jende, in the US. Her immigrant journey seems to offer a solution and a way of subverting patriarchy in her native town of Limbe. However, she is unable to escape patriarchy's reach altogether. Neni succumbs to her husband, Jende Jonga's, will and defers her studies to have a second child. Eventually, she quits school and returns to Cameroon with Jende when he can neither stay nor find employment in the US. The limits to Neni's agentic performance through migration arise and are compounded through her multiple identifications as an immigrant, woman, wife, and mother. Using an intersectional lens unveils the limits to her mobility rather than casting her as a passive victim. Neni takes bold steps in realising her dream: she defies her father to travel to the US and marry Jende; she tries her best to continue her education; and when financial strains back her into a corner, she successfully blackmails her employer, Cindy Edwards, to the anger and dismay of her husband, Jende. What ultimately fails her is America, which refuses to allow her to stay to realise her dream.

The novel employs a cyclical narrative, ending with Jende and Edward Clark once more in his Wall Street office and concluding with the arrival of the Jongas in Limbe (368–75). The encounter between Clark and Jende is filled with admiration and respect as the latter says goodbye before he departs for Cameroon. He notices Clark's smile and generally cheerful demeanour (368). Jende refuses to live in "limbo," never fully belonging while awaiting his asylum application (372–3). He consciously chooses his destiny by relocating his family to Cameroon because, as Clark Edwards observes, "[f]amily's everything" (369). Jende thus prioritises his family's well-being over a half-life in America. After Cindy's death and the Wall Street crash, Edwards also relocates from New York to Virginia to be closer to home (368). The two families learn important lessons about friendship and family from their different upwardly mobile journeys which they eventually choose. They forsake the lure of big-city cosmopolitanism for the small towns of Arlington, Virginia and Limbe, Cameroon, where they can reconnect to meaningful relationships. This problematic but brave choice that Jende makes offers an alternative narrative of return migration, one

that is not of victimhood through deportation nor overwhelming successes of "burgas" (well-to-do returnees) but of a family seeking to recollect and reconnect to build a stable environment for their future. The Jongas become the agents in their family narrative.

Bulawayo's Changemakers

NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* interrogates social institutions by situating their histories in oppression and domination. The ten-year-old protagonist and child narrator, Darling Nonkululeko Nkala, and her band of friends offer unique perspectives and commentaries on socio-economic and political life by role-playing adults. Darling narrates the collective suffering of the characters and their fight for survival and calls them up as witnesses to a nation's failing economy. The gaze of tourists and news cameras paradoxically obscures the glaring reality of the children's suffering, fuelling Darling's desire to show that she is "a real person living in a real place" (Bulawayo 2013, 8). The novel synecdochically uses the children to represent a cultural narrative of Zimbabwe. Moreover, it critically evaluates the abuse of political power, the illusion of religious respite, the structure of the home via gender, patriarchal and classist lenses, and how these collectively fuel economic hardships that drive migration. This enables the novel to disillusion the agency of mobility and offer criticism through sobering, witty, and satirical language games. Gender is prominently featured in the novel because the reasons and manner of accessing mobility delimits and shapes people on the move. From the outset, circumstances in the slum, cynically called Paradise, mature the children quickly, and they already dream of escaping the agony. Sbho, at nine, dreams of marrying out of Paradise (Bulawayo 2014 [2013], 12–13), Bastard dreams of going to "Jo'burg," and Darling dreams of going to America (14). The "country-game" (48) that the children—Darling, Bastard, Chipo, Godknows, Stina, and Sbho—play shows their keen awareness of colonial and imperial structures. Their desire to be Western countries rather than African ones in this game (49) is, again, a poignant reminder of the state of collapse and symbolic of their desire to escape their circumstances in Paradise.

The novel's opening, "Hitting Budapest," establishes a tone for character and aesthetic disobedience by enabling our young protagonists to go where they are prohibited from going. As the narrator/focaliser Darling informs readers, "We are on our way to Budapest […] even though we are not allowed to cross Mzilikazi Road" (1). They are adamant about "getting out of Paradise!" (1). Nothing will stop them from enjoying the "guavas"

in Budapest. The guavas are symbolic of all that has been refused to them and their families in the shantytown, Paradise, and to people like them by corrupt political and religious elites because of their socio-economic status. This outlook is simultaneously personal, communal, and global, thus addressing Afropolitan concerns. The narrative successfully depicts the struggles and experiences of ordinary economic migrants, such as the protagonist, Darling, and her relatives. The precarity of their lives is filtered through pain, loss, and violence, but the narrative still refuses to depict them as a monolith.

Using analepsis, Darling recounts the forced mobility and displacement of the residents of Paradise during the post-liberation era in fictional Zimbabwe that leads to their material and immaterial impoverishment (73–7). She emphasises their lack of agency and the power imbalance by stating how "they just appeared" (73) in Paradise. Inequality and poverty loom over residents of Paradise, where Darling lives a life with her family that has nothing Edenic about it. Ironically, the naming and renaming signalled by the novel's title indicate the desperate need for change and renewal, calling for new identifications,[14] and the use of the motifs of "light" and "bones" communicate their needs and suffering. Darling's Grandmother, "Mother of Bones," is a personification of poverty.[15] Her mismatched shoes, their poorly lit and cramped shack (26) huddled next to "Heavenway," the graveyard (132), and her anecdotal foraging for bones to survive (28) connote no Paradise. Their living conditions are contrasted with the well-lighted, spacious, and seemingly fruitful neighbourhood of fictional Budapest to reveal societal inequality. Moreover, the text uses the children's daring and, at times, dangerous mobility across the border from Paradise into Budapest to steal guavas as a microcosm of inequality, class differences, social decay, and unequal access to meeting essential needs.

Frustrated with a life of poverty, graduate unemployment, and the failure of the post-independence state, Darling's "kind and funny" (91) father becomes argumentative, mean, and hostile (92–3). Despite Mother's objections, he migrates to South Africa and works as a miner (22); her cousin Makhosi follows suit. Father eventually abandons the family, and both men return home later sick (89–90). Similarly, Mother is a trader at the border, and her presence in Darling's life is sporadic (21). Darling's Aunt Fostalina

14 See Esther Mavengano (2022) and Polo Belina Moji (2015) for more on the significance of naming in the novel.

15 Mother of Bones is also a historical allusion to a general history of resistance and the figure of Mbuya Nehanda, a spiritual leader and freedom fighter from the Shona ethnic group who lived in the 1800s.

lives and works as a caretaker in "Destroyedmichygen" (49) in the US. This naming is a satirical reference to Detroit, Michigan while at once calling attention to the shared economic decline of Zimbabwe and Detroit.[16] Darling occasionally uses her dream of moving to America to cope with her present sufferings and needs. The United States thus becomes the greener elsewhere in Darling's dreams.

Despite their hopeful and sometimes naïve protests and screams for "Real Change," the abuse suffered by Paradise residents at the hands of security officers during their forced eviction is traumatising for both adults and children. The journey of the adults to vote for change is marred by the risk of assault (65–7), while the children become paralysed and remain rooted in place, anxiously awaiting their return (68–70). The traumatic aftermath of the demolition of the shantytown and their subsequent displacement thus transcends the physical. It offers a broader commentary on human-engineered migrations and their impacts on families and communities, using Paradise residents' and the children's fear of losing their parents when they go to vote for change.

The novel chastises religious institutions through a satirical depiction of new Christian Pentecostal churches in post-independence Africa and is reminiscent of Wole Soyinka's satirical portraits of religious moral degradation in the Jero plays (Soyinka 1996). In the manner of the charlatan, Brother Jero, the tellingly named Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro in the narrative is an extortionist and sexual predator. He desecrates the church and preys on the residents of Paradise who seek the oasis of religion to escape their precarious lives. Young Darling observes that the Sunday robes of the adults "have now lost their whiteness" (Bulawayo 2013, 31), both a biblical allusion to the sins within (Mborro) and the toils without (economic hardships and poverty). While the children are disillusioned by religion and demand "change" (29), the adults need the illusion to cope but are wary of provoking further assault on their livelihoods (29–30). This showcases how the failure of social and cultural institutions engenders forced migrations.

In the chapter "Blak Power," the children are on their seasonal guava "harvesting" (Bulawayo 2013, 111) and encounter a security guard who, like a border patrol guard, stops them, questions their presence in Budapest, and demands they should leave (105). Shortly afterwards, they encounter an angry armed mob who attack Budapest, announcing that they are reclaiming "Africa for Africans!" Deploying this Black nationalist ideology, the mob

16 The novel references the fall of the Great African city of Zimbabwe from a stalwart in African trading in antiquity to the economic crises that peaked in November 2008—which led the country to adopt the US dollar as its currency.

demands that the "white" colonialists "go back […] home" (111), prompting Godknows to ask, "What exactly is an African?" (119). In this instance, the novel complicates the question of identity to escape any reductionist understandings while staging the problematics of anti-migrant rhetoric that often too quickly and carelessly displaces migrants as not belonging and belonging elsewhere and the entanglements of colonial history in the present when the 'white' couple exclaim that they are Africans. Darling is remorseful because she cannot help the white couple being dragged away by the mob led by an "Assistance Police Commissioner" (118), making her, her friends, and the mob "implicated subjects" (Rothberg 2019) in the larger narrative and politics of belonging and identity in global migration. The turning point in the novel occurs, and things take a severe turn, in the chapter "For Real." Democracy and change icons like Bornfree are murdered by police and, by extension, the state (Bulawayo 2013, 133). Soon, angry protestors replace mourners at his funeral, and the BBC and CNN observers again capture events. In "How They Left," Bornfree's death and the deferral of change are catalysts for the next wave of migration by citizens, who leave "in droves" to escape the unbearable life of loss and poverty (145–6), something the novel foreshadows through the children's "country-game" (48).

Darling leaves in the aftermath and immigrates to "Destroyedmichygen" to live with Aunt Fostalina and her family. Her dreamy American days and glorious return home are halted initially by cold, snowy days and, later, by limited funds and visa restrictions. The final three chapters, "How They Lived," "My America," and "Writing on the Wall," offer different aspects of the immigrant experience. The chapters depict diverse people, from students to immigrant workers, and offer yet more portraits of the struggles and precarity of immigrant lives as they adjust to US culture. In "My America," Darling lives her version of an imperfect 'American Dream,' not a Hollywood 'rags to riches' narrative. Darling works in a grocery store, taking extra shifts and, like many immigrants, working multiple jobs to enable her to fund her community college classes. When Darling responds to the phone call from Chipo, whom she has avoided for years, she sympathises with the still-ongoing hardships of their friends and community, which angers Chipo. She accuses Darling of being a traitor for leaving their "burning" country behind and having lost her claims to belongingness (284–6). Darling's uncertain future in the US and the displacement from her homeland become too much to bear. In her confusion, the news of Bin Laden's death from Uncle Kojo, Aunt Fostalina's partner, suddenly transports her back to Paradise, remembering when all the scattered family and friends were together. Nonetheless, the memories of playing with her friends are violent war games where they engage in shootouts (57)

and where they try to "Find Bin Laden" (69). Symbolically, the final scene, in which Bornfree's now stray dog, Ncuncu, renamed Bin Landen by the children, is struck by a bread delivery truck shows ambivalence in Darling's memories. It brings her journey full circle, marking her homeland as forever marred by violence yet comforting because of the symbolism of the familiar scents of "Lobels bread" (18, 90).

Conclusion

When absolute freedom is not the expectation of mobility or agency, as Madhok suggests, small successes become meaningful and teachable experiences. At the ends of the novels, the characters do not experience fairy tale endings. Darling's American Dream is in progress, and Marjorie does not receive the complete homecoming she expects in Ghana. In *Behold the Dreamers*, the Jongas are forced to return to their town, Limbe, in Cameroon because their coming-to-America story is shadowed by the trials of immigration laws, economic downturn, employers, and education strictures alongside other family troubles. They must regroup and redefine their dream from a location of belonging. Mobility is multidirectional in the novels, overturning the traditional pattern of South–North migrations. Return migrations in *Behold the Dreamers* and *Homegoing* metaphorically offer a reversal to the 'route' of Atlantic slavery and open up a space of possibilities for negotiating a new identity beyond its frame.

The characters in Bulayawo's novel are as different from Gyasi's narrative and those in Mbue's text as they are similar in their shared response to expanding the frames from reading transnational African and Afrodiasporic migrations. They collectively desire and search for places of economic opportunities and acceptance, renaming, and reidentification. Together, they tell aspects of more significant immigrant stories: not one, but many. Ashe refers to this in his post-soul matrix as blaxploration, "troubling" (Ashe 2007, 620) the representative texts of blackness, and stretching, questioning, challenging, and representing Africanness in all its diversity. Understanding what it means to be African on the continent and in the diaspora is a helpful strategy. I have shown in this chapter how the post-soul/postblack and the Afropolitan converge through a transnational ethos of the Black Atlantic, which becomes helpful for interrogating Afrodiasporic experiences in a globalised world. Like Knudsen and Rahbek's *In Search of the Afropolitan* (2016), I do not intend to take sides in a war of words about the right way to re-configure what it means to be an African or African descendant now. Just as postcolonial studies have no

consensus on their immediate future and disciplinary boundaries, so are divergent perspectives compounded in examining the Afropolitan.

My goal in this chapter has been to open a critical space to move the debate forward and acknowledge the possibilities of this new wave of Afrodiasporic writers as a significant expansion to aesthetic agency and solidarities across the Black Atlantic world. I have argued that their aesthetic practices foster unity to rethink the representations of (Black) African identities in the modern world. Hopefully, the chapter has demonstrated how these aesthetic solidarities between them move forward theorising, writing, and positioning the figure of Africa and African descendants as already belonging to a globalised world.

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