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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Migrating narratives: re-inscribing black diaspora cultures

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ABSTRACT

This essay traces the predominant counter-hegemonic, counter-discursive political and cultural models that obtain on either side of the Atlantic – the black Atlantic and the (pan-)Africanist. Typically read as disparate, even oppositional, competing ideologies, this essay examines the ways in which black Atlantic and Africanist thought migrate – travelling and journeying in ironic echoes and reverberations – across space and time, following similar contours that inscribe troublingly totalizing and exclusionary ideational narratives of black diaspora cultures and ontologies. Engaging the delimiting, signifying imprints and prescriptive modalities that inform and structure both theoretical models, this essay attempts to put black Atlantic and Africanist paradigms into conversation in ways that expand critical studies of black diasporic cultures, African cultures, and their intersecting relationships. In this regard, arguing that such intersectional relations can be evidenced in the migratory, border-crossing ethos and transgressive aesthetic of contemporary African diasporic literature, the essay's particular reading of Adichie's *Americanah* and Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* suggests the ways in which these texts advance an ethical imperative for more malleable, inclusive and expansive, ways of reading and re-inscribing the (black) world.

KEYWORDS Black Atlantic; blackness; Africanness; transnationalism; *Americanah*; *We Need New Names*

Introduction: what's so black about the Atlantic?: African critical perspectives

Presenting an analysis of the history of the black Atlantic's countercultural contributions to modernity, Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) is unarguably one of the seminal texts of the twentieth century. In deploying the black Atlantic as the central conceptual, analytic model for black cultural and ontological itinerancy, the text makes an important critical contribution to established black and African diaspora studies. Gilroy's black Atlantic purports a broader counter-hegemonic and counter-discursive, deterritorialized political and cultural system that advances the agential 'cognitive capacities' (p. 6) of the black diaspora in

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the face of modernity's racialized and racist imperatives, including the ethnic absolutism of nationalist populist rhetoric.

Yet critics have noted how the obvious primacy given to the Atlantic engenders an institutionalized 'aura of transatlanticism' which, in failing to engage with and consider the democratizing prospects of other influential oceanic paradigms, threatens to foreclose critical studies of 'black diasporic cultures, African cultures, and their relationship' (Chrisman 2000, p. 12). Still more pointedly, 'Africanist' criticisms have highlighted a limited focus on Africa that has perpetuated the ideological marginalization of the continent.¹ In this regard, *The Black Atlantic's* definitive spatiotemporal focus on transatlantic slavery as the 'frontier' to modernity advances an epistemology that unwittingly participates in a re-territorializing, neo-imperialist project that privileges and endorses the utopic civilizing matrices of Western nations.² That is, in employing transatlantic slavery as the definitive spatial timeline for black diasporic formation, Gilroy puts forward a unidirectional, linear progress narrative that is primarily concerned with engaging blackness forwards toward Euro-modernity while situating Africa firmly backwards in pre-historic atemporality. In this way, the black Atlantic narrative unfortunately becomes infected with the idea of *a priori* primordial blackness in which the 'haunting shadow of Africa' (Gikandi 1996, p. 2) functions as the proverbial 'ghost in the machine' (Morrison 1989, p. 136); within this Western-oriented phenomenology of black modernity, Africans become the 'ghosts of the African diaspora' (Chassot 2018) who signal the 'map to the door of no return' (Brand 2001).

The articulation here of a concomitant Middle Passage sensibility (Diedrich *et al.* 1999) or Middle Passage epistemology (Wright 2015), then, advocates not so much a liminal or hybrid subjectivity often positively theorized in black diaspora studies and accentuated in Gilroy's own scholarship. Despite its effusive recognition of the achievements of black cultural creolization and syncretism, *The Black Atlantic* finally advances a cartography whose teleological orientation of blackness is toward the enlightening New World order of the global North. But although Gilroy's black Atlantic does not in this way necessarily express 'an unremitting disdainfulness for Africa, for things African, and for things that come from our "Dark Continent"' (Masilela 1996, p. 89), it does register the oblique significations and uses of Africa (Wright 2012) in the global imagination.

In proceeding with the ship as the central metaphorical vehicle for black ontological and cultural itinerancy, *The Black Atlantic* rehearses and expands an established tradition in Western artistic practice in which the primary iconic template of the 'slave ship design' is transformed into an ideologically (re)signifying 'imprint' of the embodied black legacies of the transatlantic slave trade (Bernier 2014). This imprint then assumes a hauntological spectre that structures post-slavery blackness and organizes the way in which the black diaspora imagines and intimates itself as a

global citizenry (Brand 2001, Goyal 2014b). Not only does the accent on slavery's 'political perspicacity' (Best 2012, p. 454) and permanence here assume a universality which views black life and experience as normative; the broad iconicization (Dayan 1996) of slavery into a political conditionality underscores the 'the primacy and hegemony' of Western black diaspora 'experience in the understanding of modern black selfhood' (Barnes 1996, p. 107), one that is delimited 'in terms of a singular dimensionality vis-à-vis white power and history' (Jackson 2014, p. 63).

The aura of Africanism: Africa and its (critical) discontents

Disavowing thus the dissonances and discontinuities of blackness does not just problematize and undermine affectations of an 'emancipatory Pan-African solidarity' (Zezeza 2005, p. 40). Black Atlantic institutionalism, Laura Chrisman (2012) further argues, reconstitutes the particular hegemony and monopoly of Western, US-centric scholarship. The re-emergence in the twenty-first century of counter-hegemonic 'global South' scholarship, then, has inspired a renewed commitment to epistemic decoloniality and the recalibration of previously marginalized histories and cultures within a shifting, postcolonial global economy and imagination.³ In this regard, the re-centering of African studies is precisely an attempt to open up and expand critical studies of the continent in mutual relation to the globe. Notwithstanding the strident undertaking of a concomitant 'Africanization' of its curricula – fuelled by the anti-(neo)-colonial Rhodes Must Fall movement of 2015,⁴ African academe has encouraged the advancement of 'indigenous knowledge systems' that acknowledge and foreground the contributions of African epistemologies to global knowledge production. But the need to assert, in the face of historical and neo-colonial imperialism an authentic, countercultural and agential African identity/subjectivity dangerously slides, not unlike the black Atlantic's 'aura of transatlanticism', into an institutionalized aura of Africanism that similarly threatens to foreclose rather than expand critical studies of and discussions around black diaspora cultures, African cultures, and their intersecting relationships.

This is evidenced in the inaugural African Writers' Conference of 1962 convened at Makerere University, Uganda at the imminent demise of colonial regimes and at the onset of growing independence movements – marked not least by the establishment of the Organization of African Unity in 1963. Setting the tone for recurrent debates around the efficacious representation of Africa, Chinua Achebe's *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975) and Ngugi waThiong'o's *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986) are the more widely recognised publications emanating from the event. But underwriting the linguistic accent of the debates was (now) lesser known Obiajunwa Wali, a Nigerian ethnic minority rights political and literary

activist whose scathing essay was published in *Transition* journal in 1963 – three decades before the publication of Gilroy's own pioneering text.⁵ Entitled 'The Dead End of African Literature' and excoriating the growth of postcolonial African writers residing in and writing (successfully, in the English language) for the West, Wali's essay laments how 'African literature as now understood and practiced is only a minor appendage in the mainstream of European literature'. He continues:

The consequence of this kind of literature is that it lacks any blood and stamina, and has no means of self-enrichment. It is severely limited ... and has no chance of advancing African literature and culture. In other words, until these writers and their Western midwives accept the fact that any true African literature must be written in African languages, they are merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity and frustration. (1963, pp. 332–333)

Reading literature primarily as 'the exploitation of the possibilities of language', Wali opines that an emphasis on African literature written in indigenous languages 'would then become the serious business that all literature truly is, reaching out to the people for whom it is meant, and creating a true culture of the African peoples [...] the development of a truly African sensibility' (1963, pp. 333–334).

Emerging as an 'operative concept, applied to an entire area of experience and of existence' Africa, in Wali's discourse, moves beyond its ideological contingency to 'assume the significance of objective fact' (Irele 1990, p. 53) and staticity in ways that obversely echo Gilroy's more fluid black Atlantic thesis. But although seemingly ideologically disparate and despite the spatiotemporal and tonal dissonances of their treatises, there are interesting ways in which the counter-hegemonic and counter-discursive political and cultural models advanced by both Wali and Gilroy parallel, following similar qualitative contours that obtain in totalizing ideational narratives.

Less interested in the virtues of hybrid or liminal subjectivities typically associated with black diaspora studies and uninterested in its culturally and intellectually influencing contributions to global modernity, Wali advances precisely the 'ethnic absolutism' spurned in *The Black Atlantic*. Where Gilroy reads the creolizing effects of the black diaspora as part of a broadly progressive, deterritorialized and itinerant, global ontological thesis, Wali advocates cultural and geographical parochialism premised on a distinctly territorialized Afrocentric pan-African ideology. Seeing no obvious benefits in Western ideological 'midwifery,' he subverts the black Atlantic's forward linear orientation northward to a progressive New World order in favour of a necessary southward development backwards in the (re)discovery of an established 'knowable' African condition. Reminiscent of the 'return' narrative of the anti-colonial diasporic Negritude movement of the 1930s,⁶ this normative African condition is premised not just on class but on an encoded black/

white dualism. Implicitly racialized, it advances nativism predicated on 'autochthonous authenticity' (Mbembe 2002, p. 266) characterized by a territorialized atemporal cartography of Africanness and fuelled by tribal ethnonational aspirations for cognitive and material belonging and dominance.

Not unlike the 'prescriptive modality of black Atlantic thought' (McLeod 2012, p.141) which advances a linear cartography of blackness, the prescriptive tenor of Wali's discourse further instrumentalizes literature – through a developmental discourse that differently mirrors the black Atlantic's progress narrative – into 'serious business ... reaching out to the people for whom it is meant, and creating a true culture of the African peoples'. This is reinforced by a vaguely pseudo-biological discourse which, disturbingly reminiscent of racialized colonial discourse, deploys progressively sexualized references to 'blood and stamina' that culminate in accusations of 'sterility, uncreativity and frustration'. Working within a distinctly heteronormative and heteropatriarchal paradigm, this echoes the elision of the contributions in black Atlantic thought of women and embodied 'others'; it reveals how entrenched and enduring is the androcentric character of both the postcolonial, pan-Africanist and black Atlantic diasporic archives and enterprises.

In ironic resonance with the black Atlantic's Middle Passage sensibility, Wali's notion of a 'truly African sensibility' likewise establishes as an ideologically signifying imprint that, as with slavery's hauntological organizing spectre, structures the way in which 'the' black African, whose 'original thinking' (p. 334) renders him exceptional, imagines himself as a/part of global citizenry. In this regard, Wali's aura of Africanism is similarly institutionalized, working within an erstwhile (pre-)colonial paradigm that underwrites an essentialized, monolithic notion of an authentic indigeneity. Here, it is the 'haunting shadow' of the colonial matrix or archive that acts as the motivating 'ghost in the machine'. Morphing the colonial 'invention of Africa' into an oppositional but similarly overdetermined postcolonial 'idea of Africa',⁷ it paradoxically exposes, as with criticisms of black Atlantic theory, the very limited and particularized ways in which Africa continues to be deployed and signified, and not just in US-based Black Studies programmes.

b) Signifying Africa: contemporary laments

If Henry Louis Gates Jr's seminal thesis on a counter-hegemonic and counter-cultural 'black vernacular' (1988, p. xxii) in *The Signifying Monkey* did much to influence the trajectory of African American literary criticism, the concept and design of a recognizably representative African aesthetic holds sway also in contemporary African literary criticism. With the present impetus toward realizing global South decolonial imperatives, recent symposia and scholarship has debated the efficacy of a current trend of émigré writing practiced by African writers living in the diaspora. Increasingly labelled as Afropolitan

and affiliated with Afropolitanism – an existential phenomenology famously delineated by the critically acclaimed writer, Taiye Selasi – such literature is viewed as problematically espousing an elitist postcolonial cosmopolitan mobility and ontology. Through a contemporary ‘aura of transnationalism’ not dissimilar to that espoused in traditional black Atlantic thought, this literature is perceived as reflecting and unwittingly contributing to the negative socio-political/socio-economic trends of twenty-first-century globalization that perpetuate the continued marginalization of the continent.⁸

In a 2014 article intended to probe the ‘future of literature, reading and literary scholarship in Africa’ on the occasion of the fortieth conference of the African Literature Association (ALA), Dan Ojwang and Michael Titlestad (2014) lament that contemporary African diaspora literature ‘contorts the continent’s past and present’ and maintain that it is finally, ‘by definition, less specifically textured’.⁹ Similarly, Ashleigh Harris expresses concern about its less conversant relationship with and articulation of ‘African everyday life’ (2014, p. 4), arguing that this hazards entrenching global hierarchies and inequalities. Still more pointedly, speaking at a decolonization roundtable at the Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study (JIAS) in 2018, award-winning Nigerian author E. E. Sule, echoing Eileen Julien’s (2006) seminal discussion of the ‘extroverted African novel’ – the Western-oriented and -packaged African novel, laments an increasingly commercialized and largely dominant Western publishing industry whose wilful enticement of African writers results in the presentation in their writing of ‘exotic subjects for consumption by non-African audiences’.¹⁰ Arguing that in ‘the 21st century African literature faces stronger neocolonial forces than in the 20th century’, he expressed his anxiety that the best of a new generation of continental and diasporic writers is:

still speaking to the West by way of positioning their narratives to appeal to Western publics [in order to] maintain prominence in Western literary capitals. While it does not matter where a writer lives, it is important that a writer connects organically to her birthplace, her nation, and speaks about them, to them. Every developing writer needs the services of this kind of writer.

Published in an article entitled, ‘True African literature is crucial in helping the real Africa to emerge’, Sule’s sentiments, which also channel the linguistic concerns that so animated delegates at the African Writers’ Conference, are uncannily reminiscent of Wali’s instrumentalizing, Afrocentric discourse. Disparaging of an African writing scene that is not really African and proposing that it (unintentionally) contributes to a ‘neo-colonialism of the continent’, Sule singles out the internationally recognized writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, for particular attention. Despite her global critical acclaim and linking her rather uncharitably to the lauded ‘godfather’ of postcolonial (English) African literature, Chinua Achebe (1930–2013), Adichie is ridiculed

for writing which, because it is idiomatically 'West-positioned' and framed, is inapplicable to 'everyday' Nigerians.¹¹ The prize-winning *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) – a human tale of the devastating Biafran war and its colonial manifestations – elicited 'sniggers in Nigeria', Sule inveighs, not just because it 'mimics Igbo inflections and idiom' but because it failed to capture the 'truth' of Nigerian life.

Similarly scathing of 'West-positioned' African writing, Ikhide Ikheloa's article, 'How Not to Write about Africa' (2012), takes aim at another acclaimed contemporary writer, NoViolet Bulawayo, whose short story 'Hitting Budapest' was developed into the first chapter of her 2013 debut novel, *We Need New Names*, and won the 2011 Caine Prize for African writing.¹² Predicting the success of a story that traces the spiritual/moral development of the socially impoverished adolescent protagonist, Darling, from the African slums of a fictitious Zimbabwean city – ironically named Paradise – to the urban chaos of 'Destroyed Michygen' – Detroit, Michigan, North America, Ikheloa sarcastically states of the author: 'She sure can write, unfortunately her muse insists on sniffing around in Africa's sewers'.¹³ Also drawing on the scatological theme and tone of the first half of *We Need New Names*, Helon Habila's (2014) review describes as 'poverty-porn' the novel's 'palpable anxiety to cover every "African" topic, almost as if the writer has made a checklist from the morning's news on Africa'.¹⁴

But it is Harris's comprehensive analysis of a selection of twenty-first century African novels in her recently published book, *Afropolitanism and the Novel: De-realizing Africa* (2020), that makes a sustained argument for the unsustainability of the extroverted African novel in both form and content. She maintains that the extroverted African novel's broadly applied postcolonial aesthetic, which advances an Afropolitan cosmopolitanism, is 'devoid of explicitly African styles, forms, and communion with African literary culture' and is in 'danger of de-realizing Africa at the very point that it writes and represents it' (2020, p. 42–3). In this way, she reads the contemporary African diaspora novel as being complicit in material and epistemic extractive global de-realizing processes that posit(ion) Africa as commodified 'raw material' to be refined for non-African, global North consumption (p. 6).

Again, Adichie and Bulawayo, despite their expressed non-affiliation with Afropolitanism, are taken to task, included in a repertoire of émigré writers whose literary styles are 'maladapted to the task of writing Africa' (p. 43). In her reading of Adichie's latest novel *Americanah* (2013) – which also traces a journey of self-discovery by its middle-class, Ivy League-educated female protagonist, Ifemelu, from Nigeria to the North American city of Princeton, Harris is finally discontented with its implied intent. That is, albeit recognizing Adichie's deployment of 'strategic exoticism' to self-consciously manipulate the exoticizing conventions and imperatives of the global English literary establishment for her own politically subversive purposes which include

the 'de-idealizing' of America and a parallel 'actualizing' of Africa, this still does not for Harris 'unsettle the extroverted aesthetics and form of the book' (pp. 45, 51, 33).

Expanding an initial position in the essay, 'Awkward Form and Writing in the African present' (2014), Harris argues in her book analysis of *We Need New Names* that Bulawayo's novel more problematically manifests a structural compromise or 'crack' in form particularly between the sections set in Zimbabwe and those set in the US. That is, while Bulawayo employs a similarly self-conscious posture, her novel registers the awkwardness of writing Africa (from elsewhere) while using and working within the legitimizing literary mechanisms and paradigms of the global North (pp. 52–60). Falling into generic 'absurdity', this gives rise, Harris contends, to a 'new, not yet articulate, literary form' that ultimately fails to 'break new formal ground' (pp. 52–54).

Runaway genres: 'Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold'

To the extent that these texts struggle to achieve existential and ideological authenticity and accord on both sides of the Atlantic, *Americanah* and *We Need New Names* could indeed be read as "failed" narratives. Describing as 'slightly unsatisfactory [...] a book that works better when it is in transit, detailing people and situations who are in the act of becoming. Its structure is complex and sometimes unwieldy', Alex Clark's (2013) review of *Americanah* would seem to endorse Harris's position on the awkward, maladapted aesthetics of (selected) contemporary African diaspora texts.¹⁵ A voluminous, ornamental read, *Americanah*'s hybrid structural mode – segueing from part internet blog, part (migrant) memoir to part romance and which is mirrored in the novel's spatiotemporal and narratorial shifts, does indeed have a rather disorienting effect. Likewise, as various critics have noted, *We Need New Names*' division into two seemingly distinct sections has a similarly disorienting effect of reading oppositionally, with the protagonist's voice apparently influenced by, appropriating and mimicking, those spatiotemporal shifts.

But in an undertaking appropriate to the originary, innovative ethos of the novel form and in line with the interventionist feminist politics of female-authored and female-centred narratives, the disorienting effects of both novels is significant. Not only do they afford alternative as well as non-normative perspectives; as deliberately creative texts they necessarily engage 'the cultural politics of theorizing black [African] diaspora and the black Atlantic' (Walcott 2003, p. 3), initiating both a challenge to and conversation around their prescriptive modalities premised on the twin hauntological imprints of transatlantic slavery and African colonialism. Subjecting both established cultural models to the centrifugal forces and de-realizing/de-actualizing pressures inherent to fiction, the two novels trouble the representational

efficacy – the sustainable “truth value” – of their organizing, structural templates reading, instead, as narratives that articulate the “failures” of theory’s totalizing ideational narratives.

Such an aesthetic enacts what Kegura Macharia has recently theorized as ‘Frottage’, an aesthetic that

tries to grasp the quotidian experiences of intra-racial experience, the frictions and irritations and translations and mistranslations, the moment when blackness coalesces through pleasure and play and also by resistance to anti-blackness. More than simply proximity, it is the active and dynamic ways blackness is produced and contested and celebrated and lamented as a shared object. It is bodies rubbing against and along bodies. Histories rubbing along and against histories. (2019, p. 7)

The notion of an embodied, profoundly material ‘frictional’ aesthetic does not just disrupt the typically abstract teleological imperative of diaspora as destiny (Brubaker 2005, p. 13); it captures the necessarily complex nuances and ironies of black diasporic identity/subjectivity by pointing also to the central workings here of agential creativity which put pressure on the prescribed limits of reality, or its fictional generic mode so often endorsed by African literary critics – realism. That is, as works concerned with imaginatively exploring and articulating itinerant ontologies and epistemologies, *Americanah* and *We Need New Names* explore the complex ways in which ‘to live in the black diaspora is to live *as a fiction*—a creation of empires, and also self-creation’ (Brand 2001, p.18; my emphasis). This ambiguous positioning necessarily counters ‘the hegemony of any single genealogy of blackness’, affording these novels the opportunity to operate as ‘runaway genres’ (Goyal 2019, pp. 15, 20) whose transgressive formal aesthetic translates into an ethical imperative the need not just for ‘fresh itineraries of migration’ (Goyal 2019, p. 15) but for new, inclusive and expansive, ways of ‘reading’ the world.

Drawing intertextually from a postcolonial literary tradition of post-independence disillusionment and despair,¹⁶ *We Need New Names* defies the authorized realist-mimetic paradigm of representing African existence. The novel’s accent on ‘the hard physical facts of day to day ghetto life [...] this cruel externality’ (Marechera 2009, p. 5) of the fictionalized nation of Zimbabwe initiates a flagrantly exaggerated and irreverent, de-realizing/de-actualizing aesthetic in a materialist Bakhtinian carnivalesque mode; its ‘post-colonial picaresque of precarity’ (Cobo-Piñero 2019, p. 2) reflects precisely the ‘absurdity’ of the notion of a universally textured post-/neo-colonial ‘African everyday life’. Entangled as it is with global neoliberal American politics, the children’s abject material poverty in the slums of Paradise presents an existence that is lived ‘awkwardly’ alongside the glaring opulence of suburban Budapest and is highlighted in a pervasively scatological ‘aesthetics of

vulgarity' (Mbembe 1992). Portraying localized cartographic re-enactments of globalized North/South dualisms, *We Need New Names* satirically reveals instead how intricate and intimate – how mobile – is this sanctioned asymmetrical global network of relations. As such, where the tendency is to read the typical African diaspora narrative as inherently externalized – oriented Westward as with the black Atlantic, the children's class-induced peripatetic movements locally in the first half of the novel generate a discursive multilingualism that demonstrates how 'the local and the transnational are complexly interwoven rather than oppositional' (Coetzee 2020, p. 133). Expanding herein existentially Africanist concerns about ethno-linguistic representativity, the children's symbolic country-games (p. 51) and their insatiable consumption of North American media and popular culture indicates not a 'maladapted' African aesthetic; in their "play" at life, the novel points to relational, interanimated "realities" whose translation into an ambiguous, migratory – border-crossing – existentialism informs and is reflected in God-knows' rhetorical question uttered in response to the racial displacement/'dispossession' of a patriotic white farmer by disgruntled war veterans: 'What exactly is an African?' (p. 119).¹⁷

Narrated primarily from the ostensibly naïve, uncensored and irreverent, imaginatively cosmopolitan female adolescent perspective, *We Need New Names* affords a socially revealing, penetrating account of globalized political relations. Likewise, *Americanah's* cross-pollination of seemingly disparate national and cultural identities through its unapologetic, witty exploration of twenty-first century popular cultures and idioms does not just facilitate reading 'across borders and difference' as Bulawayo has elsewhere stated; it unveils, she further argues, the ways in which "stories" speak to the adulterated 'core of our humanity' in revealing ways (2013).¹⁸ This is demonstrated most obviously through the novel's middle-class, Ivy-league educated protagonist, Ifemelu who, 'mired in dissatisfaction' due to the 'oppressive lethargy of choicelessness' (p. 276) that post-independent Nigeria induces, leaves for the United States to eventually set up a profitably popular blog. Satirically entitled 'Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black' (p. 4) and interrogating the politics of transnational blackness and global race narratives, her blog's titular allusion to the formative canonical African American slave narrative evokes broader discussions around race-based self-actualizing/-authenticating narratives. Exploring slavery as a 'site for the reinvention of form', its 'transformation as analog and metaphor' (Goyal 2019, p. 1, p. 5) in *Americanah* here affords further deliberations on the representational (geo)politics of blackness. Shifting affiliative, racial solidarity to include context-specific differentials and contestations, the novel highlights, in a particularly pointed blog entitled, 'To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You are Black, Baby' (pp. 220–221),

the coercive, neo-imperialist 'modes of conscription' (Chude-Sokei 2014, p. 57) that characterize African American ontology:

Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or I'm Ghanaian. America doesn't care. So what if you weren't 'black' in your country? You're in America now. We all have our moments of initiation into the Society of Former Negroes. [...] And here's the deal with becoming black: You must show that you are offended when such words as 'watermelon' or 'tar baby' are used in jokes, even if you don't know what the hell is being talked about—and since you are a Non-American Black the chances are that you don't know. [...] You must nod back when a black person nods at you in a heavily white area. It is called the black nod. [...] When you watch television and hear that a 'racist slur' was used, you must immediately become offended. Even though you are thinking 'But why won't they tell me exactly what was said?' Even though you would like to be able to decide for yourself how offended to be, or whether to be offended at all, you must nevertheless be very offended. (pp. 220–221)

As a contemporary postcolonial African for whom 'race was not embroidered in the fabric of her history; it had not been etched on her soul' (p. 337) and in line with Adichie's extratextual commentary that it was in America that she had to 'learn to what it meant to be black', Ifemelu's wry diasporic perspective in her blog suggest blackness as a mutable process of 'becoming' and advances 'different ways of being black,' the 'many permutations of blackness'.¹⁹ In this regard, while acknowledging its 'communicative capitalism' (Dean 2010, p. 29) – the ways in which it also reinforces racial and spatial, global social inequalities, her use of social media's digital technologies enables the exploration of wider, circuitous relational networks that disrupt and expand black Atlantic and pan-Africanist linear spatiotemporal coordinates and demarcations. Mimicking the 'hyper-ephemerality of the cybertext' – its 'textual instability, mutability and morphing' (Everett 2009, p. 11) – and mirroring the novel's hybrid structural form, her blog underwrites – that is, writes into existence – the (performative) mobility and (even expedient, transactional) malleability of black cultural ontologies. Advancing the prospects for alter-native, protean subjectivities in this way, *Americanah* invokes what Wright describes as a 'space-time' phenomenology of blackness predicated on the 'now,' that is, on 'when and where it is being imagined, defined, and performed' (2015, p. 3).²⁰

This epiphenomenal 'spacetime' is at play also in *We Need New Names*. While the seminal chapter – 'How They Left' – anticipates the structural 'crack' in Darling's narrative, the repetitive emphasis on the mass movement of the 'children of the land' (p. 145) presents an animated picture of an "event" that is rendered continuous due to the perspectival conflation of past, present and future. As such, in that her experience of post-independence depravity which prompts her departure is reflected (and refracted) in Darling's experience of an illusory, and finally dystopic everyday American life, the novel registers migration as an ongoing 'Middle Passage' of comparable

psychical and ontological distress. Destabilizing thus the black Atlantic's progressive linear spatiotemporality – its hegemonic 'New World' oriented blackness, the novel translates the event of migration – and the notion of concomitant subjective syncretism and actualization – into an existential site of constant deferral: 'arm and arm with loss and lost' (p. 146) the migrants are characterized by continuous navigation that results, instead, in subjective precarity.

Not unlike Ifemelu's eventual recognition of America's tenacious 'boundaries of hospitality' (p. 129), Bulawayo's recent/newly arrived African migrants who are 'welcomed with restraint' definitively 'do not belong [...] knowing they will speak in in dampened whispers because they must not let their voices drown those of the owners of the land, knowing they will have to walk on their toes because they must not leave footprints on the new earth lest they be mistaken for those who want to claim the land as theirs' (p. 146). In making broad tropological allusions to the African American interstitial, slave experience of non-belonging, *We Need New Names*' delineation of the contemporary African migrant's experience of America, whose negating mechanisms render them finally 'no longer people' but merely 'illegals' (p. 242), presents a transformative mutation of the traditional African American slave paradigm that includes considerations of modern-day modes of (economic, systemic) enslavement or non-being. Mirroring the economic deprivation and dispossession experienced in the first half of the novel and echoing Frantz Fanon's dystopian postcolonial musings in *Wretched of the Earth* (1963), slavery, and its afterlives, is translated conceptually into a global rather than peculiarly African American phenomenon.

Although appearing to gesture at and even endorse a contemporary Afropessimistic discourse of paraontological, death-bound subjectivity (Sexton 2011, Douglass and Wilderson 2013), *Americanah*'s as, with *We Need New Names*', central imagistic trope of migration alludes to but expands the black Atlantic's signifying imprint of transatlantic enslavement. Troubling the notion of a progressively linear, creolizing/assimilationist Middle Passage perspective that informs a universalized canonical black Atlantic paradigm, the novels' dystopic versions of (Western) modernity afford recognition in the contemporary moment of the variety of enduring black dispersals and their multiplicity of variegated diasporas. In this way, both novels provide a necessarily disruptive and potentially democratizing, interventionist perspective and politics.

Conclusion: re-inscribing blackness

But in diffusing the black Atlantic's hegemonic 'aura of transatlanticism' the novels also dissolve a postcolonial 'aura of Africanism' which, structured by colonialism's hauntological imprint, insists on an unchanging and unchangeable 'autochthonous authenticity'. Tellingly, eventually plagued by a

'homesickness' for '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' (p. 6), Ifemelu's nostalgic "return" to Nigeria after her growing ideological and finally experiential disillusionment with America is met not with a sense of rooted belonging but instead with an unfamiliar and provisional, largely ephemeral, rendition of "home." Confronted with and unsettled by Nigeropolitanism, a Nigerian inflection of the controversially cosmopolitan Afropolitan, she becomes the titular *Americanah*, the recently returned Americanized African whose experience of America becomes an extension of her African self so that she looks disorientedly at Africa 'with American eyes' (p. 385). In an equally scathing and satirical blog that Ifemelu operates in Nigeria, the novel disrupts the Edenic pan-African 'return' narrative; its African translation of a relational worldly blackness again enacts black subjectivity as an ongoing existential "middle passage" in which the self is defined 'beyond one's own origins' (Nwankwo 2005, p. 9), exposing thus the itinerant 'globality of Blackness, its location in so many spacetimes across the world and historical eras' (Wright 2015, p. 114).

This is also evident, most notably, in the parodic representation in *We Need New Names* of Darling's demented relation, Tshaka Zulu. His schizophrenic existence undermines the canonical representation of the controversial Zulu icon whose famed military prowess is read as emblematic, in majority African annals, of the achievement of African anti-colonial warfare and military prowess. Quite unlike his historical namesake's heteropatriarchal, masculinist portrayal, Tshaka Zulu's psychological and subjective fragility and impotence caricatures a monumental, iconic figure whose reduction to a pathetic and finally suicidal character in Bulawayo's novel re-writes a heteronormative genealogical Africanness, prompting a sympathetic, more humane materialist/feminist re-reading of positivist, heteronormative history/historiographies.

Through 'frictional', cross-border aesthetics that necessarily expand the critical study of black diaspora cultures, African cultures and their intersecting relationships, *Americanah* and *We Need New Names* afford a broader and more inclusive appreciation of the multiplicity of variegated migrations and dispersals which persistently trouble totalizing ideational narratives. More significantly, in presenting less stable and more elastic cartographies and configurations of blackness, both novels invite critical ethical conversations around inhabiting, knowing and imagining the world otherwise.

Notes

1. Significant Africanist responses have come by way of two special journal issues both in *Research in African Literatures* in 1996 and 2014a, edited by Simon Gikandi and Yogita Goyal, respectively. See Rinaldo Walcott's *Black Like Who* (2003) for a black Canadian reading of the limitations of the black Atlantic.

2. These readings of the limits of a Middle Passage epistemology in *The Black Atlantic* continue to animate. See Dayan 1996 and Wright 2015.
3. See Mignolo, Quijano and Comaroff and Comaroff as examples of scholars who advance decolonial, global South episteme.
4. Initiated on the (sub-Saharan) African continent and becoming a global phenomenon, the Rhodes Must Fall movement was sparked by the call for the decolonization of, and democratic access to, higher education and involved the removal of the symbolic statue(s) of arch imperialist/colonialist Cecil John Rhodes.
5. Founded in 1961, *Transition* was a notable political and literary journal published in Africa until 1976. Ironically, in the context of Wali's essay, the journal has been published in America since 1991, with an emphasis on the African diaspora.
6. Initially developed by Francophone intellectuals, the political and literary Negritude movement, popularized by figures such as Leopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire, advanced the notion of a diasporic pan-African Black Consciousness.
7. I refer here to the seminal texts of renowned African philosopher, V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (1988) and *The Idea of Africa* (1994).
8. Commercially appropriated and commoditized in mainstream popular culture, Afropolitanism has over the years been the subject of ongoing debates/re-readings which include political, philosophical and literary inflections. See Selasi's essay at 'Bye-Bye Babar' at <http://thelip.robertsharp.co.uk/?p=76>.
9. See 'African writing blurs into 'world' literature' at <https://mg.co.za/article/2014-04-03-african-writing-blurs-into-world-literature/>
10. Sule is a 2013 recipient of the Commonwealth Book Prize for Africa. See <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/life/books/2018-09-04-true-african-literature-is-crucial-in-helping-the-real-africa-to-emerge/>.
11. By far the most internationally recognized contemporary African diasporic writer, Adichie's accolades and achievements are too numerous to name. Suffice to say that, not only has she managed to achieve a status comparable to Achebe, but she has also successfully infiltrated popular mainstream culture as a public intellectual and feminist commentator/activist. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chimamanda_Ngozi_Adichie
12. The novel also won the Etisalat Prize for Literature and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction in 2013 and the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award in 2014 and was shortlisted for both the Man Booker Prize and the Guardian First Book Award.
13. See 'The 2011 Caine Prize: How Not to Write About Africa' at <https://xokigbo.com/2012/03/11/the-2011-caine-prize-how-not-to-write-about-africa/>
14. See 'Tradition and the African Writer.' *The Caine Prize for African Writing* at <http://caineprizeblogspot.com/2014/06/what-is-african-literature-tradition.html>.
15. See <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/apr/11/americanah-chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-review>
16. The novel makes intertextual reference to the canonical, post-independence novels of Tsitsi Dangarembga, Yvonne Vera, Chenjerai Hove and Dambudzo Marechera, among others.
17. In another essay, as with here, I theorize the notion of 'play' as not just an aesthetic but potentially ethical act of subversion. See 'The Ludic Impulse: Race Narratives "at play" in Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* and Zoë Wicomb's

Playing in the Light ' in Colvin, S. and Galasso, S. eds. *Epistemic Injustice and Creative Agency*.

18. See 'Codes don't exclude readers from British literature' at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/nov/24/codes-exclude-readers-british-literature>
19. See 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: "Race doesn't occur to me"' at http://www.salon.com/2013/07/14/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_race_doesnt_occur_to_me_partner/
20. I use the term alter-native to indicate both an anti-nativist stance and the advancement of an alternative purview.

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