

Transatlantic Shuttle



Sarah Ladipo Manyika's brief but highly acclaimed novel *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun* (2016) can be seen as an instance of extreme Afropolitanism. Manyika grew up in Nigeria, then lived here and there in Africa and Europe, earned her PhD in comparative literature at the University of California, Berkeley, and is a San Francisco college professor. The central figure in her book is Morayo Da Silva, Nigerian expatriate, seventy-five years old, living since decades back in San Francisco, in a rent-controlled apartment with a magnificent view. Morayo had her early childhood in Jos, grew up in Lagos, and married a rather older Nigerian in the foreign service, whose family name she took. (Da Silva? That sounds like an old Lagos Afro-Brazilian family background.) She moved around in the world as the undiplomatic wife of a diplomat, then separated from him to move to America and become a literature professor. Her story is told mostly in the first person, with brief chapters here and there in the voice of a few people for whom she has become a relatively significant other.

The scene is San Francisco, with its ethnic diversity mixed with some American counterculture, such as in Haight-Ashbury.

The problem is that she is getting old. She has a wonderful personal library (idiosyncratically organized, forever being reorganized), but some of her longer conversations are with the Chinese mailman and with her own elderly car, with a manual stick shift and the affectionate name Buttercup. She is losing touch with the paperwork connected to the infrastructure of her life and may soon no longer be allowed to drive Buttercup. Some occasional thought about the future does not include returning to Nigeria. Lagos is very difficult, and if her very early memories are from Jos, that was a different place then, without any of the recent violent conflict between Christians and Muslims. Even Boko Haram is on her current horizon. She has made some donations to one charity organization in Nigeria, but that turned out to be a scam.

There seem to be no Nigerians in the limited personal network she still has in San Francisco.

Morayo breaks her hip and has to spend a period in a rehab facility. One of her closest longer-term friendships has been with a younger Indian expatriate woman, who now tries to see to it that bills and related correspondence are handled, and that her apartment is cleaned up. In the process, however, a number of battered old copies of books in that treasured library are lost, and Morayo just cannot forgive her friend for this. So that relationship is broken. At the rehab, she develops new conversational acquaintances with one old Afro-Guianese who comes there regularly to visit his Alzheimer's-afflicted wife, and with a very talented cook from the Caribbean, named Toussaint. But her last exchange is with a young female street person, just before she heads out on the road with Buttercup.

Hitting the road is, of course, an old motif in American writing. Yet Manyika's book is not so much one about America, even as the San Francisco scene is important. It is more about getting old. (One might compare Morayo's aging with that of Baba of Karo, in chapter 12). In any case, Nigeria is not there much. This is a traveler with a one-way ticket. On the other hand, *Like a Mule Binging Ice Cream to the Sun* is published by Cassava Republic Press; so in a way we are back in Abuja.

Elsewhere in fiction with Nigerian American motifs, there is more back-and-forth mobility. It draws often on the fact that not all of the transatlantic traffic involves the sort of personal success stories that Taiye Selasi foregrounds as she first introduces the Afropolitans as a social category.¹ E. C. Osondu's *Voice of America* (2010) is a case in point: the front flap of this collection of eighteen short stories tells us that it is about "two countries and the frayed bonds between them." (The back flap identifies the author as teaching at Providence College, Rhode Island, and notes that this is his first book.)

Here is a first story about boys in a refugee camp, with nicknames like "Orlando" and "Acapulco," drawn from the T-shirts they have been given by the Red Cross. They daydream about the possibility of being adopted by families in these places. But the boy who got a shirt saying "My Dad Went to Yellowstone and Got Me This Lousy T-Shirt" ends up with the nickname "Lousy." Elsewhere, young boys on school holiday in their home village listen to *Voice of America* together and hear about a girl in America asking for pen pals. One of them responds to the invitation and starts to fantasize about what can come of it; but after some letters have been exchanged, of course, nothing comes out of it.

Another Nigerian-based story is about a bar in Port Harcourt, where veteran American oil workers come together. But among them there

is one young newcomer falling in love with a bar girl who turns out to be a mermaid, a *mamiwata*. That does not end well. Other stories by Osondu are about exaggerated claims about overseas success, occupationally or educationally, and their consequences back home; about underhanded ways of getting visas to enter the United States and stay there; and about complicated relationships between the sexes among Nigerian migrants in America, in and out of marriage, and perhaps involving some intruding new American partner. In our own chapter 5, discussing early Cyprian Ekwensi novels, we noted the absent overseas significant other as a recurrent motif in Nigerian fiction. We find it with Osondu as well.

Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.* (2014), sited in New York and in Igboland (showing local knowledge of both), is centrally more a story of transnational commerce than of personal relationships, but turns out not to have such a happy ending either. Ike (short for Ikechukwu) has an economics degree from a reputable New England college, but he cannot get a job in the corporate sector without a green card, that entry ticket to a fuller American life. Besides, his heavy un-American accent does not help either. For thirteen years he has been a taxi driver in different cities along the Eastern seaboard, finally in New York. By way of marriage to one ebullient Afro-American woman, he eventually gets his green card, but the marriage does not last very long, and the divorce settlement more or less relieves Ike of whatever savings he had.

In *New York* magazine, however, he comes across an article about a fashionable antiquities trader named Gruels, running his enterprise Foreign Gods, Inc. in a corner shop in Greenwich Village. To begin with, Ike is not impressed, but then he gets an idea. He is going to kidnap Ngene, the pagan deity image of his childhood village, fly it across the Atlantic, sell it to Gruels, and make a small fortune.

Relying partly on a loan and a gift from an old acquaintance, Ike gets enough funds together for a return air ticket to Nigeria. He gets through the indignities of semiofficial corruption at the customs control at Lagos Airport, thinking that it had not been like that when he left so many years ago. And he continues, by way of a domestic flight and road transport, to Utonki, the village, and his mother's house. It is evening, and soon enough he is asleep.

At this point Ndibe inserts some thirty pages of historical return to the arrival of the first white Christian missionary to Utonki—this is back to a *Things Fall Apart*-style era of the beginnings of colonialism in Igboland. Stanton, the missionary, sets out rather arrogantly to gain converts to his faith, not entirely without success, although many villagers remain doubtful. But then there is loneliness and tropical

illness. After a year or so in the village, he wades into the river for a bath one early morning, nude (to the astonishment of the villagers who soon also turn up), goes out midstream, and disappears. That, it seems, is the end of him.

Ike's old, frail mother reproaches him for not sending much money for her support during his American years, and forbids him from going to see his paternal grandmother (his father has been dead for some time) and his paternal uncle, who is now the priest in charge of the Ngene cult. Ike's mother, for her part, is now a staunch member of the Christian congregation in the village, and the divide between the adherents of the old cult and the Christians is now a major fact of village life. The mother admonishes him to be on time for the morning church service—although as he expected, Pastor Godson Uka himself turns up late. While he waits, he is introduced to a number of young damsels in the congregation, obviously ready for marriage. It is clear that the church hopes to possess him, body and soul. And more than that: the pastor, whom Ike has quickly recognized as an ill-educated bigmouth charlatan, requests a private meeting with him to suggest that this wealthy American son of the village make a very large donation to God for the purpose of building a fine new church. That will make him extremely rich when he returns to America. Ike tells him off in no uncertain terms, and leaves.

Next, he goes to see his uncle at the Ngene shrine. He finds him in the company of a number of rather diverse, and dubious, followers. There is also an old labor activist, who can still carry on about that ancient radical philosopher white man, Kalu Mazi, with a colossal beard that is now in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. They break a kola nut together. By now Ike momentarily feels a little guilt about the plan to steal Ngene and take him to New York, but he reminds himself that Gruels, the antiques trader, had pointed out that in a postmodern world, a god that did not travel was dead.

He has also discovered that nowadays a number of villagers have cellphones, so he could actually call them from New York.

In a heavy drinking session, the uncle tells Ike that Pastor Uka is a descendant of a bandit-turned-warrant chief in those past days of strange, ill-informed colonial governance (see chapter 3), and that the pastor himself has spent years in jail in Lagos before showing up in the village with his peculiar Christian practice.

People turn up to beg for money from the wealthy returnee: relatives, the now ugly woman who had been his first love but fell for a gangster instead. They bring their stories and their gossip, showing that there are now corrupt practices linking the village to the state capital. A schoolmate

from long ago, now a successful politician, spends weekdays in Enugu and weekends in his enormous village house with a six-car garage. His liquor cabinet is extremely well supplied. He would not have had all that if he were entirely honest. There is crime, too, petty and organized, connecting the village to international drug smuggling. Pastor Uka's church and the Ngene cult have both been involved in offering sacred protection for such activity. Clearly, Utonki is no longer the old idyll, and that helps decrease Ike's moral scruples again. Moreover, if the Ngene sculpture should disappear, suspicions would quickly focus on Pastor Uka, rather than on the visitor from New York. At the priest uncle's house, there is also an encounter with a visiting historian, an Igbo with a British PhD, with a booklet on the fate of Stanton, that early missionary, drawing on obscure London archives as well as oral history from the village cultists. Here is authoritative documentation on the historical importance of Ngene, which should increase value of the sculpture in the eyes of Gruels at Foreign Gods, Inc.

As his time to leave comes, Ike sneaks into the shrine on a dark night and removes the sacred sculpture as his uncle the priest snores in the chamber next door. On his journey back, of course, he has to bribe his way out through Lagos Airport. Returning to his New York apartment, he finds he cannot turn on the light in his apartment—he had forgotten to pay his electricity bill. And wherever he turns—his mail box, his email, his telephone answering machine—there seem to be debts. Big debts. He goes to sleep, and there is a nightmare about the missionary Stanton. Also, a terrible odor spreads through the apartment, and it emanates from the sculpture in its package. He realizes that having taken charge of it, he is now the cult priest, and he has to take care of Ngene.

A telephone call from his sister back in the village informs him that after the disappearance of the sculpture there has been a violent clash between church and cult followers. Pastor Godson Uka has been badly beaten up, and Ike's mother has suffered injuries and is in urgent need of hospital care, which will be expensive. Ike promises to send money.

He needs to hurry to meet antiquities dealer Gruels at Foreign Gods, Inc. Yet Gruels turns out not to think much of the sculpture, is unimpressed with the scholarly documentation of Ngene history, and points out that "African gods are no longer in vogue." When he asks how much Ike wants for the sculpture, Ike responds "350,000 dollars," but Gruels' final counteroffer, before he has to rush off to an appointment, is \$1,500. He writes out a check.

Then after some days (he is beginning to lose track of time), when Ike has begun to regret selling Ngene, his telephone rings. There is

Gruels's voice. Gruels says he immediately recognizes that African accent, and says he had been surprised to sell Ngene so quickly to a Japanese customer, who has already flown home, and who paid cash, so he could not be traced. Anyway, as Gruels got a good price, he was now prepared to add some to the amount he had paid Ike—at a stage when Ike, identifying himself as the new priest of Ngene, actually had in mind buying the sculpture back and returning it to the village. We learn no more.

So this is a dark story, at both New York and Utonki ends, at times funny, but not the sunshine story of future Afropolitan success that both Ike and his parents must once have dreamed of.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie can offer at least a bit more of that. Her *Americanah* (2013) is, in part, the story of two Igbo returnees to Lagos. Perhaps we come to think of their predecessors Obi and Clara coming off the boat together in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*—as beentots who had briefly met in London, but who only became seriously involved with each other on board.

Time has passed, however. Here and now Ifemelu becomes the "Americanah" who has spent an extended period in the United States, and that takes up a good part of the book. For much of the same time Obinze had ended up in London instead. But before that, they had already been schoolmates, and girlfriend and boyfriend, in Lagos. Again, in *Americanah*, for many years, there is that absent overseas significant other.

But this is a big book, approaching five hundred pages, with fifty-five chapters. As chapter 1 begins, Ifemelu is journeying from sedate, odorless, academic Princeton to Trenton, nearby New Jersey state capital, to have her hair braided at a salon in a down-market Black neighborhood. She hopes the taxi on the final stretch will not have a Nigerian driver:

because he, once he heard her accent, would either be aggressively eager to tell her that he had a master's degree, the taxi was a second job and his daughter was on the dean's list at Rutgers; or he would drive in sullen silence, giving her change and ignoring her "thank you," all the time nursing humiliation, that this fellow Nigerian, a small girl at that, who perhaps was a nurse or an accountant or even a doctor, was looking down on him. Nigerian taxi drivers in America were all convinced that they really were not taxi drivers. (Adichie 2013: 8)

This could seem like a comment on Ike in Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.*

Spending hours getting braided and listening to the talk of those rather more Francophone African hair stylists (from Senegal and

Mali), Ifemelu thinks about the decision she has just made, to return to Nigeria, after thirteen American years. She has just sent off an email to Obinze, that boyfriend of long ago, to let him know. Her current Black American male friend (academic, teaching at Yale) would be left behind, although he would possibly join her later.

Obinze opens the message on his BlackBerry, seated in the back of his car behind his driver, on his way home, and wonders what it really means. From here on the story, about two people for a long period with an ocean between them, and with the present textually mixing with reminiscences, moves easily in space and time. Ifemelu grew up in Lagos. Her mother moved between church congregations making different demands. Her father, more secular and intellectual, lost his job when he refused to act deferentially to a new female boss. In Ifemelu's teenage friendship circle, a new boy showed up, fairly short but very nice. His mother, a widow, was a university teacher at Nsukka. Rumor had it that she had been in a physical fight with a colleague, okay for a market woman perhaps but not for a scholar, and had therefore been exiled to Lagos. That was not quite true—she was really in Lagos on a sabbatical. Anyway, her son Obinze and Ifemelu found each other very quickly, in part over a shared taste for James Hadley Chase mysteries. She had a harder time when he tried to make her read *Huckleberry Finn*.

Some years later they went off to Nsukka together as students. Obinze had really wanted to go to Ibadan, having read a poem about it by John Pepper Clark. But his mother was not in good health, and as she returned to her old position in Nsukka, he felt an obligation to look after her. They came to like Nsukka, unimpressive as it has first seemed to them. Nigerian universities, however, were a mess. Staff salaries were not being paid. There were recurrent strikes. America stood out as an alternative, if one could only get a visa. Ifemelu got one, on the basis of an offer of a rather meager scholarship—but Obinze, who had planned to come after, for graduate study, did not.

Ifemelu's passage through multicultural America takes up much of the book. Complementing the scholarship with odd jobs, she would get a range of close-up views of urban America, but also of college life—she felt that American students were taught to talk much without really saying anything. From Nsukka she was used to more intellectual rigor.

As time passed, she would come to move in different circles: at times mostly with white people, more continuously with other Africans and with Black Americans. She would get to know Philadelphia, Baltimore, New Haven, and then Princeton (much different from what it had

been when John Pepper Clark was there some fifty years earlier) on that fellowship. She would cook Nigerian food to commune with Africans, and to impress others with an exotic cuisine. There would be romantic involvements, for one thing with a white, affluent software entrepreneur, for another with that successful Black academic who just might follow her to Nigeria. Language mattered. She picked up American Standard English, but then was pleased to revert to her West African accent to demonstrate her identity. Among Black Americans she noted that mostly some of those of more mature age could code-switch between the Standard and what was occasionally, politely or demonstratively, referred to as “Ebonics” (and which others might think of as the language of the ghetto). Black hair styles also continued to matter: braiding, cornrows, Afros. Her parents came to visit briefly, and she was a bit embarrassed at their lack of sophistication in meeting everyday America.

Basically it was an upward passage. Ifemelu’s multifaceted outsider observations of the racial scene, and not least of the experiences and preoccupations of Black Americans, evolved into a blog, which gradually became a paying proposition, so she could quit doing other jobs. There would be speaking engagements as well (mostly, it turned out, lecturing to people who did not read her blog). So there she was, close to the point where she could choose to take United States citizenship, when she decided to return to Nigeria. It was the early, enthusiastic Obama period of campaigning and eventual election triumph. Even so, she left.

Meanwhile, long ago by then, the young Obinze had been turned away at the American Embassy in Lagos, again, again, and again. Finally, his mother, going to a conference in the United Kingdom, took him along as a “research assistant,” which at least allowed him a sort of visa. And then she left him in London. That visa, of course, expired soon enough, and so he continued his British life doing lowly jobs (such as cleaning public toilets), sometimes on identity papers belonging to someone else, avoiding officialdom, occasionally sneaking into a bookshop to browse. Mostly he was in a circle of other Nigerians—some old acquaintances from Nsukka, some new, more fleeting contacts. But he felt lonely. Through middlemen he tried to find some woman with her papers in order whom he could marry and thereby fix his immigrant status. Just as the wedding was about to take place, however, he was seized by the police, who had received a tipoff about his illegal presence. He was marched off in handcuffs, held until there was a place for him on a Lagos-bound plane out of London-Heathrow. In a back row he had the company of some other

Nigerian deportees, and, at Lagos Airport, had to pay a small bribe to immigration desk staff.

As Obinze thus returned to Lagos, he was basically without means. But a well-connected relative put him in touch with a super wealthy business person, a Big Man. Working for him, and forming his own diverse partnerships, Obinze gradually made his own fortune in Lagos real estate and in other fields, even though it was a style of life he did not always enjoy. The girl he married seemed to have no sharp edges, but became the perfect hostess and sociable party mingler. When their baby girl was born, she was soon enough seeking opinions about what would be the best school—in Lagos but with some expatriate curriculum.

So Ifemelu, the “Americanah,” came back. In some ways, it was a different Lagos than the one she had left. It had become a place where everyone had a mobile phone: her hair braider, the plantain seller. She found a job with *Zoe*, a women’s monthly magazine, paid two years’ advance rent for a modest apartment, and made her way into circles in large part consisting of returnees like herself. She was talking to one of them, a colleague at *Zoe*, when another of them came in and entered the conversation:

“You people must be discussing the next Been-To meeting.”

“What’s that?” Ifemelu asked.

“Doris talks about them all the time, but she can’t invite me because it is only for people who have come from abroad.” If there was mockery in Zemaye’s tone, and there had to be, she kept it under her flat delivery.

“Oh, please. ‘Been-To’ is like so outdated? This is not 1960,” Doris said. Then to Ifemelu, she said, “I was actually going to tell you about it. It’s called the Nigeropolitan Club and it’s just a bunch of people who have recently moved back, some from England, but mostly from the US? Really low-key, just like sharing experiences and networking?” (Adichie 2013: 405)

Meanwhile Obinze is still waiting to hear from her. He wonders what she would be like now: “There was a manic optimism that he noticed in many of the people who had moved back from America in the past few years, a head-bobbing, ever-smiling, over-enthusiastic kind of manic optimism that bored him, because it was like a cartoon, without texture or depth. He hoped she had not become like that” (Adichie 2013: 371). Eventually they are back in touch. They find each other still very close, their best company in every way. Yet between sharing

and obligations, things are complicated. Obinze travels alone to Abuja, a remote place with other habits where Ifemelu had never been. Then everybody is back again in Lagos.

The “tragic hero” motif of such early been-to stories as Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease* is not there in *Americanah*, not in its clear-cut form. It is a story that shows much of the variety of ways of life that can be the outcome of transcontinental traffic, with its difficulties, pleasures, and ironies. It seems that *Americanah* draws a great deal on Adichie’s personal experience—not least in its close attention to cultural detail—without being a disguised life history.² Unlike many of the other stories on the transnational theme, it ends in Nigeria: Obinze and Ifemelu both return to Nigeria, while Sarah Ladipo Manyika’s Morayo and Okey Ndibe’s Ike in their different ways continue in American lives.

Unlike Manyika and Ndibe, Adichie has evidently kept stronger Nigerian attachments. True, her Nigerian husband has his medical practice in the United States, and, for the time being at least, she spends much of her time there and engages with American life. In July 2016, the *New York Times Book Review* published on its front page her satirical short story about Melania Trump’s preparations before the convention where her husband Donald would become his party’s presidential candidate. Adichie is an elected member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Yet she also maintains a home in Lagos and thinks that she might want to raise her daughter there. In October 2020, she wrote in the *New York Times*, from her Eastern Nigerian homelands, to state her support for those demonstrators against state violence who were bringing upheavals to Lagos, Abuja, and many other Nigerian cities, and who were being shot at by soldiers. Under President Muhammadu Buhari’s leadership, she wrote, “insecurity has worsened; there is the sense that Nigeria could very well burn to the ground while the president remains malevolently aloof.” A few weeks later, she reviewed Barack Obama’s new memoir for the same paper.

Perhaps Adichie has found her own combination: in an interview with the *Financial Times*, she laughed and said, “We in Nigeria have an unearned and funny sense of superiority. Nigerians are the Americans of Africa.” Beyond both Nigeria and America, however, especially since *Americanah*, and since she also began engaging in feminist advocacy, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has been globally successful, welcome as a public figure more or less everywhere. (I was in the audience for her appearance at one literary event in Stockholm.) The website Chimamanda.com announces that *Americanah* has been licensed for publication in twenty-nine languages.

Teju Cole, the other best-known Nigerian/Afropolitan writer in recent times, has moved along a similarly globetrotting track. (I just missed his appearance at a similar public event, at a famous art exhibit outside Copenhagen.) Unlike Adichie, however, he already started out in life in the United States—he was born in 1975 (and is thus two years older than Adichie) in Kalamazoo, Michigan, of Yoruba parents, as his father was finishing a master's degree in business administration. (His birth name, according to a *Wikipedia* entry, was Obayemi Babajide Adetokunbo Onafuwa.) Soon after, they were all back in Lagos. But as a birthright, unlike his parents, little Teju had American citizenship.

In his early years, that did not matter so much. He grew up as a middle-class Lagos boy. Yet in the early 1990s, not a happy period in Nigeria, his parents decided to send him back to the United States; and so he was back in Kalamazoo for college (and a side job at McDonald's). He may not have remained in that town for so very long, but he moved on within that native country of his for many years that followed (trying medical school briefly, but also spending some time on African art history at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London).

Aged thirtyish, he was back in Lagos. His first book, *Every Day Is for the Thief*, was published by Cassava Republic Press in 2007, drawing on what he had first written for a blog. Then, after his *Open City* (2011) was a great success in the United States, his American publisher issued an edition of *Every Day Is for the Thief* “in different form” in 2014.³

Every Day Is for the Thief is described on the title page as fiction, but it is hardly recognizable as a novel. There is not much in the way of a plot. In twenty-six brief chapters, it portrays life in Lagos, with chaos, corruption (beginning as usual with the narrator's arrival at Lagos airport—as he has been away in the United States for many years), everyday criminality, and material neglect. The book is illustrated, too, with the author's own photographs. Cole has established himself not only as an author, but as a major photographic artist and commentator.

Then with *Open City*, Cole is in New York. The “I” narrator—not Cole himself, but a fictive somebody—lives in Manhattan. He can observe flocks of geese and other bird life through his window, but is in large part a flaneur on Midtown streets. As he reports knowledgably on what he sees, one gets a sense of what kind of person he is; but not in terms of simple social classifications. Only some comments on a walk through Harlem may suggest that this is someone different from those ordinary white Americans who would mostly not venture there, or see what he sees. But then, in chapter 2, what he sees makes him think of Olodumare and Obatala, Yoruba deities, and so something about his

cultural identity is revealed. He also mentions a patient of his, so he is evidently some kind of doctor.

With time, more of his past and his identity are revealed. He goes by the first name of Julius. His second name, Olatobosun, is not really in use. He is named Julius after his mother, Julia, who is German, born in 1945 just as Soviet troops were moving into Berlin and World War II was over. Then she grew up in Magdeburg, in East Germany. She did not get along with her mother, Julius's *Oma* (who came on one visit to Lagos, where Julius had somehow formed a largely wordless bond with her), or with her Nigerian husband, and that probably was a background factor when they sent Julius off to a military-sponsored secondary school, a boarding school, in Zaria. While he was there, his father died of tuberculosis, so there he was with his mother, the German woman, a widow in Lagos. Julius discreetly started to apply for scholarships in the United States and was lucky to get one. Then, through diligent study, he became that New York doctor, active in local health care.

One way that Julius made cities—first New York, then others—open up was to reflect on the pasts, often dark, of the neighborhoods he walked through. Moreover, it seemed to happen again and again that those minimal fleeting service encounters that were a part of urban living turned into conversations, and sometimes more. Through his rather ambivalent relationship with his slightly physically handicapped woman friend, he became active in the Welcomers, a volunteer group trying to help undocumented immigrants from different corners of the world, held in detention after arrival in the United States. He maintained contact, too, with a professor from the college he had first come to. This man was a specialist in early English literature—but early in his life, as a Japanese American, he had been among those interned in a desert camp during World War II. Much later, as gays were beginning to earn recognition and rights in America, it turned out that this elderly professor was also one of them.

So far this has taken *Open City* to North America and to Africa, and back again to America, but that is not enough. Julius wanted to find his *Oma* again, and believed she might be in Brussels. Taking prolonged winter vacation time, he flew across the North Atlantic. Brussels, he found, had dark spots in its history, and was torn by old and new ethnic divides. The attempt to locate *Oma* failed, but on the other hand he soon found a conversation partner at the Internet and telephone shop where he had to make frequent visits, first trying to track down that grandmother, then just keeping up with his email. Farouq, a Moroccan in charge of the shop, knew about contemporary North African

writers—one, he said, wrote mostly for foreign readers; another wrote for compatriots. Then Farouq also drew him into local networks, in large part composed of other immigrants of intellectual inclination, drinking excellent Belgian beer in cafés, and commenting more or less critically on Deleuze, Fukuyama, and Benedict Anderson. (Perhaps one could sense here that the kind of American readers drawn to *Open City* would find it appealing that they and those Brussels postcolonials were reading and talking about the same authors.) Farouq turned out to be another struggling academic. He had once submitted a thesis for approval at a local university, but that was just after 9/11 in 2001. At a time of ubiquitous mistrust against Muslims, he had been suspected of plagiarism.

Back in wintery New York, Julius tried to reestablish contact with his past woman friend, but it turned out she had moved to San Francisco. A telephone conversation revealed that she was about to get married to a Haitian American, so Julius had better not call again. Belatedly, he learned of the death of his old Japanese American professor. Back on the streets, he had the experience of being mugged by two young thugs. He lost his wallet and his mobile phone, and was slightly hurt, but what impressed him was the careful choreography of the mugging.

Toward the end of *Open City*, Julius was back to bird-watching again, after a fashion. He had happened to get on a tourist boat cruising through New York harbor waters, and admired the Statue of Liberty from a distance. In earlier, nineteenth-century days, when there had also been a lighthouse on that small island, it had attracted all kinds of birds—which thus flew into an early death. The carcasses were passed on to scientific institutions.

Open City established Teju Cole's prominence. Yet the book that says most about Cole himself and his accumulating, under-construction view of the world is *Known and Strange Things*. This is a collection of essays, previously published in the *Atlantic*, the *New Yorker*, *Granta*, the *Guardian*, the *New York Times* and elsewhere. A number of them are about photography—reviews and commentary. One is about the outstanding Malian photographers Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé. Connecting to literature, Cole follows in the 1950s footsteps of James Baldwin in the snow of the Swiss Alps. He also moves among Nobel Prize winners: there is an intellectually tender dinner conversation with Vidia Naipaul in a penthouse apartment on the Upper East Side, New York. He shows his admiration for a Swedish poet, Tomas Tranströmer, belatedly given recognition by the Swedish Academy, hesitantly due to criticisms following earlier awards to compatriots.⁴ And he visits Wole Soyinka in his Abeokuta home, the elderly colleague as vital as ever, at

the time recently in the news due to his campaign against the civilian Nigerian president at the time and his corrupt, voluptuous wife from the Niger Delta: “You can take a hippopotamus out of the swamp, but you cannot take the swamp out of the hippopotamus.” (One could note that meddlesome, high-living head-of-state spouses, “First Ladies,” have repeatedly come in for public scorn in Nigeria, starting perhaps with Victoria Gowon in the 1970s.)

His journeys in and outside the United States take Cole to Selma, Alabama, remembered since the 1960s civil rights struggle (the earth is red like West Africa’s); to Arizona and the border zone with Mexico; to Rome under Prime Minister Berlusconi; to Jerusalem, between Israel and Palestine; to Rio de Janeiro, where he converses with a trader from Senegal selling trinkets, printed cloth, and other goods from Africa. But the trader turns out to be actually a journalist, just trying to earn some money to go to a Brazilian university for a degree. Cole, for his part, reminisces about the cultural and historical links between Brazil and Nigeria, still evident in religion and food in one country, and in architecture and family names in the other. (We saw some of that in Mariana’s story, in chapter 2, and with Soyinka’s visit to Salvador, in chapter 11.)

In November 2008, on election night, Teju Cole is in Harlem, watching television in a bar. CNN flashes the graphic announcing “Barack Obama, Projected Winner, President.” Outside on 125th Street, in a moment, there is a marching brass band playing “When the Saints Go Marching In.”

And then he remarks that “Obama, at the core of his experience, is hybrid” (Cole 2016: 250).

One is tempted to say that in *Known and Strange Things*, Cole emerges as a renaissance man—but perhaps that is a concept with too strong historical Eurocentric connotations. In any case, his map of the world can connect recent events with past intellectual references—violent urban crowds in Nigeria, for example, with Bulgarian (and again a Nobel Prize winner) Elias Canetti’s classic interpretation, from a half century earlier, of the instant achievement of equality in mobs. His close involvement with photography and his experience of blogging grow into an awareness of the future possibilities of communicative practices: “I am not saying there will be a Nobel Prize for tweeting, but . . .” (Cole 2016: 90) In America, he shows how immigrants or long-term visitors, having assimilated as much of a local cultural repertoire as any native is likely to have, can yet go beyond that to insights that the native probably will not have. Cole takes the writings of a liberal *New York Times* columnist as a point of departure in debating “the White

Savior Industrial Complex,” a sense of superiority that sometimes goes with good intentions. Yet in cultural critique, he is nuanced, aware of complexity, showing less of the overt arrogance that evidently John Pepper Clark once exhibited in his interactions with American hosts.

In an interview Cole (2016: 84) has this to say: “My identity maps on to other things: being a Lagosian (Lagos is like a city-state), being a West African, being African, being a part of the Black Atlantic. I identify strongly with the historical network that connects New York, New Orleans, Rio de Janeiro, and Lagos. But, as a subject, Nigeria won’t let go of me.” On the one hand, one may conclude that Cole’s Afropolitanism expands into an even more inclusive cosmopolitanism. His Afropolitan horizons are open in all directions. On the other hand, longing for his childhood home and missing his parents, he can turn to Google Maps—and in a moment he is there, on the street in northern Lagos, with the tree in front of the house, and the surrounding fence. At the back of his mind there is a Yoruba tongue-twister from his childhood: “*Opolopo opolo ni ko mo pe opolopo eniyan l’opolo l’opolopo*” (Many frogs do not know that many people are very intelligent).

The epithet “rootless cosmopolitan” has been around for a long time, put to politically dubious uses. Teju Cole, for his part, is a rooted cosmopolitan.⁵

Notes

1. In her *Behold the Dreamers* (2016), Imbolo Mbue offers another view of the uncertainties of some migrant lives, as she portrays how a youngish couple from her country Cameroon gets involved with New York. Their own situation may be complicated, not least by way of a somewhat dubiously legal immigrant status, but, as the husband finds employment as the personal chauffeur of a financial manager, they get an inside view of Manhattan affluence, with intricate family relationships, as well as a view from the backstage toward the collapse of Lehmann Brothers and the 2008 Wall Street crash. Here is a slice of the American scene as witnessed and commented on by African migrants, also with references to their own home country. (Mbue, for her part, lives in New York, and has two American academic degrees.)
2. For some evidence of Adichie’s continued Nigerian rootedness and also double-sited family life (in Lagos and Baltimore), see an extended interview in the *New Yorker* (MacFarquhar 2018).
3. In a way, Teju Cole thus had a similar experience to that of Okey Ndibe: his first book published in the United States, with a story in large part played out on an American scene, turns out actually to be not the first written. Yet while Ndibe’s *Arrows of Rain* was previously unpublished, Cole’s *Every Day Is for the Thief* had already been around in Nigeria.

4. Remarkably, there is a reference to Tranströmer in *Every Day Is for the Thief* (Cole 2014: 111) as well.
5. The notion of “rooted cosmopolitans” originates with another Afropolitan, the Ghanaian American philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah (1996). It was entirely possible, Appiah argued, to find satisfaction in one’s own country and its way of life, and yet appreciate the diversity assembled as others made their own choices. Appiah could speak with some personal authority: now a New York University professor, he was born and had grown up in what is now Ghana, with a West African father and a British mother (and a grandfather who had been a prominent minister in the British cabinet after World War II). It was especially his father, politically prominent at the time of the Ghanaian struggle for independence in the 1950s (but in opposition to Nkrumah), who had impressed on his children the fact that one could be at the same time a patriot and a citizen of the world.

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