



UNIVERSIDAD DE OVIEDO

PROGRAMA DE DOCTORADO EN GÉNERO Y DIVERSIDAD

TESIS DOCTORAL

**Mobilities and Mobility Justice in  
21<sup>st</sup>-Century Afropolitan Women's Narratives**

**Movilidades y justicia en la narrativa afropolitana de autoras  
del siglo XXI**

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Oviedo, Junio 2022

## RESUMEN DEL CONTENIDO DE TESIS DOCTORAL

1.- Título de la Tesis	
Español/Otro Idioma: Movilidades y justicia en la narrativa afropolitana de autoras del siglo XXI	Inglés: Mobilities and Mobility Justice in 21st-Century Afropolitan Women's Narratives
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Programa de Doctorado: Género y Diversidad	
Órgano responsable: Centro Internacional de Postgrado	

### RESUMEN (en español)

Esta tesis examina la representación de las movilidades africanas y afrodiaspóricas y la justicia de la movilidad en las narrativas afropolitanas contemporáneas de escritoras africanas anglófonas. El corpus incluye *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009) de Chika Unigwe, "The Sex Lives of African Girls" (2011) de Taiye Selasi, *Americanah* (2013) de Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Welcome to Lagos* (2017) de Chibundu Onuzo y *Behold the Dreamers* (2017) de Imbolo Mbue. La tesis se inscribe en una reciente línea de investigación dentro de los estudios literarios poscoloniales que explora las representaciones literarias de las movilidades, considerando estas como desplazamientos específicos evitando limitarse al entendimiento de movilidad como sinónimo de migración (Aguiar et al. 2019; Toivanen 2015; 2017a; 2017c; 2018; 2021a; 2021b). Este enfoque proporciona una perspectiva innovadora para ampliar los límites de la literatura afropolitana y desestabilizar la occidentalización del concepto de movilidad. Metodológicamente, la tesis combina teorías de las ciencias sociales, los estudios espaciales y los estudios literarios. La literatura africana y de la diáspora africana contemporánea y las etiquetas utilizadas para clasificarla constituyen el tema del capítulo 1. El capítulo 2 proporciona el marco teórico para el análisis crítico de las narrativas seleccionadas, presentando el concepto de "justicia de la movilidad" (Sheller 2018) y las consideraciones clave de los estudios de movilidad relacionadas, seleccionando los conceptos de "fricción" (Cresswell 2014) y "motilidad" (Kaufmann y Montulet 2008, 45) como fundamentales para el estudio de las movilidades en las obras de ficción. Los capítulos 3, 4 y 5 comprenden el análisis crítico del corpus de ficción, organizado en torno a diferentes tipos de movilidades y espacios relevantes para su estudio: las micro-movilidades y el hotel-vivienda (capítulo 3), las movilidades urbanas y los interespacios poscoloniales (capítulo 4), y las movilidades transnacionales a través del análisis de las aero-movilidades (capítulo 5). Cada capítulo analiza las obras en su contexto y examina cómo el estudio de las movilidades puede revelar no sólo los temas principales de las obras y las subjetividades de los personajes, sino también las estrategias narrativas empleadas. Finalmente, las conclusiones resumen los resultados de mi estudio y evalúan el potencial de "modelar el afropolitanismo intra-africano" (Neumann 2020) a través del estudio de las movilidades dentro del continente africano.

## RESUMEN (en Inglés)

This thesis examines the representation of African and Afrodiasporic mobilities and mobility justice in contemporary, anglophone, Afropolitan narratives by African women writers. The corpus includes Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009), Taiye Selasi's "The Sex Lives of African Girls" (2011), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), Chibundu Onuzo's *Welcome to Lagos* (2017) and Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2017). These works were selected because, on the one hand, they conformed to a common temporal and authorial framework, namely, fictional works written in the latest two decades, by contemporary Afrodiasporic or West African women authors belonging to the most recent generation of African writers, and, on the other, they depict the different dimensions of mobilities: from micro-mobilities to transnational travel, taking place both within and outside the African continent. The thesis is part of a recent line of research within postcolonial literary studies to explore literary representations of mobilities, considering them as specific, physical displacements (Aguar et al. 2019; Toivanen 2015; 2017a; 2017c; 2018; 2021a; 2021b), providing an innovative perspective through which to expand the limits of Afropolitan literature and to destabilise the Western-centricity of the concept of mobilities. Methodologically, the thesis combines theories from the social sciences, spatial studies, and literary studies.

Contemporary African and Afrodiasporic literature and the labels used to classify the most recent literary works constitute the topic of Chapter 1. Chapter 2 provides the theoretical framework for the critical analysis of the narratives selected, presenting the concept of "mobility justice" (Sheller 2018) and key considerations of mobility studies that are intrinsically related to this idea, selecting the concepts of "friction" (Cresswell 2014) and "motility" (Kaufmann and Montulet 2008, 45) as fundamental for the study of fictional mobilities. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 comprise the critical analysis of the fictional corpus, organised around different types of mobilities and spaces relevant to the study of mobilities: micro-mobilities and hotel-dwelling (Chapter 3), tourist and urban mobilities and postcolonial interspaces (Chapter 4), and transnational mobilities through the analysis of aeromobilities (Chapter 5). Each chapter discusses the works in their context and examines how the study of mobilities can reveal not only the themes and the characters' subjectivities, but also the narrative strategies deployed by the authors. The conclusions summarise the findings of my study and evaluate the potential of "modelling intra-African Afropolitanism" (Neumann 2020) through the study of mobilities within the African continent.

## Acknowledgements

This doctoral thesis would not have been possible without the unconditional support of my husband, my mother, my father, my brother and my grandmother. All of them, together with my daughter Vera, who came to teach me what life is all about, have managed to rescue me in the darkest days, painting them in colour. I am eternally grateful to them all for having understood that in order to write my thesis I needed a ‘room of my own’, with the consequent giving up of endless family plans this implied.

I would not have been able to carry out this research without the contract funded by the *Programa de Formación de Profesorado Universitario (FPU)* of the Spanish Ministry of Universities (FPU2015/04245). Nor would I have been able to get this far without the scholarships and awards I have received over the years: *Beca María Cristina Masaveu Peterson a la Excelencia*, *Premio de Fin de Grado en Estudios Ingleses*, and *Beca Liberbank de Retención de Jóvenes Talentos*.

I would like to extend my thanks to the training I received during these eleven years as university student, from undergraduate studies to the Gender Studies postgraduate programmes at the University of Oviedo, and to the research group Intersections, of which I have been a member. I am grateful to my supervisors, Dr. Emilia María Durán Almarza and Dr. María Isabel Carrera Suárez, for all their generosity and advice in research-related questions and practicalities. Without their guidance, this thesis would not be a reality today. I have learned a lot from you both as university professors and as researchers.

I would also like to thank all those academics who encouraged me to follow this research path, especially Dr. Dieter Stein, for believing in me already in my years as an Erasmus student at the University of Bonn, and Dr. Anna-Leena Toivanen, who helped me to set a clear direction in my study during my research stay at the Centre for Teaching and Research in Postcolonial Studies (CEREP) of the University of Liège—facilitated by the generosity

of Dr. Daria Tunca—opening my eyes to the literary study of mobilities and helping me whenever I was lost.

Thanks also to the following scholars for their company, inspiration and support: Esther Álvarez López, Patricia Bastida Rodríguez, Margarita Blanco Hölscher, Rocío Cobo Piñero, Aurora García Rodríguez, Luz Mar González Arias, Bénédicte Ledent, Gonzalo Llamedo Pandiella, Marta Mateo Martínez Bartolomé, Lena Mattheis, Christina Jurcic, Carla Rodríguez González, and Lioba Simon Schumacher. I should also thank the anonymous peer-reviewers and the editors who facilitated the publication process of my article in *Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies*, and my review in *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*.

Last but not least, I would like to express my gratitude to my new colleagues, for their kindness and help in facilitating my transition to secondary education during the most difficult year of my thesis. And finally, to all the people who shared this journey and pushed me to get through it: Alba, Marta, Paola, Sofía, and Sole.

I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my grandparents: Cándido Corte Corte (1927-2008), María González Palacio (1927-2015), and Ángel Amasvindo García Álvarez (1935-2019).

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## **INTRODUCTION**

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This dissertation explores the literary representations of African and Afrodiasporic mobilities in contemporary anglophone narratives written by the latest generation of African women writers. It aims to contribute to the recent interest in the development of a literary understanding of mobilities. To do so, this project focuses on displacements taking place not only whilst the characters are outside of Africa in postcolonial metropolises of the global North, but also within the region of Western Africa. A second goal of this dissertation is to explore how “mobility in/justice” (Sheller 2018) is revealed in the selected works of fiction. In order to achieve a fully representative picture of mobilities, it is essential to explore the representation of both transnational travel and everyday mobilities; that is, concrete and tangible displacements performed by African and Afrodiasporic characters, both outside and within Africa. Analysing the access of different characters to mobility systems is fundamental to exploring the relation of politics and aesthetics and the representational strategies of mobility justice in postcolonial fictional works. This line of enquiry will help to explore the specific meanings of mobilities in postcolonial texts, helping to challenge the consideration of everyday mobilities as trivial phenomena.

As Anna-Leena Toivanen notes, “contemporary African and Afrodiasporic literatures feature a wide variety of representations of (modern) mobilities” (2021), but they have not received the critical attention they deserve. According to her, one reason for this might be the obvious nature of mobilities in our globalised world. Mobility is one key defining element in cosmopolitan visions of the African condition which is worth exploring. Recently, mobility has become a significant subject of enquiry in the social sciences. The new mobilities paradigm (Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 2007; Sheller 2014) has been essential to drawing attention to this issue. In spite of the sharp divide between the social sciences and the arts and humanities, which has proven difficult to overcome

(Merriman and Pearce 2017), some scholars have demonstrated that the genealogy of mobility studies lies in the humanities (Merriman and Pearce 2017; Aguiar, Mathieson and Pearce 2019). Some recently published articles and volumes have engaged with how a mobility studies approach can be applied to the study of contemporary literary texts (Culbert 2017; Davidson 2017; Livesey 2017; Toivanen 2017a; 2017c; 2021), thus contributing to “a partial ‘recasting’ of discussions of movement in the arts and humanities disciplines” (Merriman and Pearce 2017, 494).

However, in the field of postcolonial studies,<sup>1</sup> the term “mobility/ies” has been mostly contemplated as a synonym of migration, as Toivanen (2017c) has observed. Although the outcomes of transnational travel have been widely analysed by postcolonial literary scholars (see Toivanen 2021a), the study of representations of mobilities *per se* have only recently started to be analysed. Peter Merriman and Lynne Pearce highlight the potential of postcolonial studies to “contribute to a de-centring of mobilities scholarship which has all-too-frequently focussed on modern modes of transport and mobility in developed countries” (2017, 496). Mobility as concrete physical movement is a key trait of the latest African fiction that has mostly gone unremarked (Toivanen 2021a), except for Anna-Leena Toivanen’s contributions (2015; 2017a; 2017c; 2021). My understanding of fictional mobility/ies aligns with hers, as we both see mobilities as far more than mere displacements of characters in a narrative: the portrayal of the mobility event is fully meaningful and productive. The meanings of mobilities are not created exclusively in real life contexts, but also through representation (see Cresswell 2006). Indeed, while representations might lead to the reader feeling estranged, they may also or alternately

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed account of the connections between mobility and postcolonial studies, see Peter Merriman and Lynne Pearce’s article “Mobility and the Humanities” (2017), in which they establish connections with the early theorisations of Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, among others.

feel a sense of identification between what is narrated and their own mobile experiences, thus helping them to understand the mobile event and mobilities in their entirety.

Human physical travel is not simple and unproblematic, and “covers a wide variety of mobilities” (Toivanen 2017a, 1) besides migration. Critical studies of mobility in the field of postcolonial studies can shed light on the mobility potential of diasporic subjects both in the global North and the global South. The study of mobilities from a literary perspective can contribute to elucidating how mobility and mobility systems are experienced by postcolonial protagonists and how the embodiment and performance of (im)mobilities shapes fictional characters’ (spatial) subjectivities. And, certainly, the study of mobilities in contemporary postcolonial works of fiction can unveil how sociological concepts are specified in literary texts, helping us to fully understand the differential dimensions of mobility. Means of transport and systems of mobility have different effects on the traveller’s experience and embodied practices of the journey. Therefore, this study attempts to contribute to extending the body of publications that have explored concrete mobilities in contemporary anglophone Afrodiasporic narratives.

The idea for this study evolved from an initial research project in which I interrogated the utility of Afropolitanism to analyse contemporary literary manifestations and offered a more complex conceptualisation based on the understanding of the Afropolitan subjectivity as a spatial subjectivity which has emerged in contemporary metropolises. This research process began with my Master’s Degree final project, where I studied “spatial textualities”; that is, the ways in which novels and narratives create and recreate different types of spaces and how these spaces influence migrants’ process of subjectivity formation, focusing specifically on Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go* (2013). In the context of that research project, I understood the Afropolitan subjectivity as a type of multilocal spatial subjectivity which emerged and developed in global cities, thus

providing Afrodiasporic imaginaries with an urban meaning that constructs multiple ways of being. My analysis of *Ghana Must Go* led me to notice that most of the descriptions of the urban landscape were in passages where characters were moving about, either by car or on foot, with the substantial differences this implies in terms of the experience of space/place and the emotions elicited. In fact, I observed the significance of airports as liminal spaces and transit zones and became aware of the centrality of postcolonial pedestrianism (Carrera Suárez 2015), automobility and aeromobility and the social class connotations of these mobility systems. Increasingly, I began to focus my attention on the recurrent presence of representations of literary archetypes such as the African traveller and various types of mobilities in contemporary works of fiction written by Afrodiasporic women writers.

Given that the subjects portrayed in the narratives chosen for this study are either citizens of the global South or racialised mobile Afrodiasporic individuals, my initial hypothesis is that the mobilities of Africans and Afrodiasporans is portrayed as being characterised by high degrees of friction and illustrative of mobility injustice. As a consequence, the study of these mobilities may contribute to revealing how mobility injustice is conveyed through several representational strategies in texts that feature African and Afrodiasporic fictional characters on the move.

The corpus of fictional works was chosen according to the following criteria: Firstly, the fictional works selected are written by contemporary Afrodiasporic or West African women authors belonging to the latest generation of African writers and have been classified by some critics as Afropolitan literature. Secondly, the selection was grounded within a time frame, including only fictional works published from 2009 to 2017. This criterion was adopted to account for the most recent Afropolitan literature published up to the time when I was developing my thesis idea. Thirdly, I selected

narratives that depicted the different dimensions of mobilities: from micro-mobilities within a West-African household to transnational travel. In order to do so, I included both migrant narratives, which depict transnational air mobilities and other fictional works portraying mobilities within the region of western Africa. Works that focused exclusively on mobilities within Africa needed to be included in order to explore the overlooked displacements of Africans inside of Africa and to challenge a Western-oriented Afropolitanism. The fictional works selected for this study are: Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009), Taiye Selasi's "The Sex Lives of African Girls" (2011), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016), and Chibundu Onuzo's *Welcome to Lagos* (2017). With the exception of Taiye Selasi's short story "The Sex Lives of African Girls" and Chibundu Onuzo's *Welcome to Lagos*, the rest of narratives have been classified as Afropolitan literature. I include them to argue that it is possible to expand the geography of Afropolitanism.

Developing a theoretical framework to analyse such a diverse body of work as that presented here has been one of the greatest challenges in writing this thesis. The representation of very diverse mobilities performed by African and Afrodiasporic subjects has complicated the task of finding a unifying framework. After close readings of a broad selection of fictional works, including both novels and short stories, the concept of mobility justice suggested itself as an overarching framework through which these works can be examined fruitfully. The theoretical perspective and methodology employed for this analysis are interdisciplinary in nature, putting into dialogue theories from the social sciences, spatial studies, and literary studies. My reading of the literary narratives that make up the bulk of this dissertation is mobility-, space-, and emotion-focused throughout. I do not conceive mobilities in opposition to space; that is, movement versus immobility. I am interested in exploring the representations of the mobilities of African

characters and the emotions that these experiences of mobility, which include interactions with different types of spaces, elicit in the characters. Therefore, my reading focuses not only on how these mobilities and the spaces they traverse are portrayed, but also on the effects these experiences have on the characters so as to analyse the power dynamics that influence these displacements.

The thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 “Reframing Afropolitan Narratives” situates the thesis within contemporary African and Afrodiasporic literature. In order to do so, I present different labels that have been used to classify the most recent literature written by African authors. Firstly, I offer a general overview of third-generation African writing. Secondly, I discuss the concept of Afropolitan literature and its many criticisms to then propose new ways of conceptualising Afropolitanism, by shifting the focus on movement within the African continent.

Chapter 2 “Reading Mobility (In)Justices: Conceptual Approaches” provides the theoretical framework for the critical analysis of the narratives selected. It is made up of six sections. Section 2.1. “The New Mobilities Paradigm” introduces the emerging field of new mobilities studies, and Section 2.2 “Reading Mobility (In)Justice” presents Mimi Sheller’s concept as an overarching notion through which to observe all the narratives selected here, as well as key considerations of mobility studies that are intrinsically related to this idea, such as the question of access. “Friction” (Cresswell 2014) and “motility” (Kaufmann and Montulet 2008, 45) emerge in this context as key theoretical concepts for the study of fictional mobilities. In the next section, 2.3 “Moorings and Rhythm” I discuss the importance of paying attention to immobilities and its associated rhythms in the study of mobilities. Section 2.4. engages with the necessary relationship of motion and emotion to achieve a better understanding of mobilities. The presentation of theorisations about aeromobilities constitutes the theme of section 2.5, and then, to

conclude this chapter, I present zombified mobilities as a form of conceptualising the African and Afrodiasporic mobilities represented in the selected narratives.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 comprise the critical analysis of the works selected. Chapters 3 and 4 engage with mobilities taking place within the region of western Africa. Chapter 3, whose title is “Mobilities and Moorings in Taiye Selasi’s ‘The Sex Lives of African Girls’” analyses the textual representation of (im)mobilities and hotel-dwelling by its female protagonists in this short story. The first section, entitled “Hotel-Dwelling: Moorings and Transient Homes”, analyses the narrative purposes that the textual representation of hotel-dwelling serves in this short story. The second section, “Upper-class Female (Im)mobilities: Sexual Violence and Female Empathy” presents how Selasi manages to convey complex themes through the representation of her female protagonists’ restricted (micro-)mobilities.

Chapter 4, “Zombified Mobilities in Chibundu Onuzo’s *Welcome to Lagos*” studies the representation of postcolonial interspaces and tourist mobilities within Lagos in this narrative. In section 4.1, whose title is “Exploring Lagos’ Interspaces”, I explore how the depiction of interspaces helps to configure the abject, zombified quality that prevails in the novel. Section 4.2., “The Lagos Precarious Tourist”, focuses on the representation of an uncommon tourist in an unexpected touristic destination in Makoko, one of the biggest slums in Lagos.

The objective of chapter 5, “Literary Aeromobilities: A Comparative Analysis”, is to explore the depiction of aeromobility in a selection of contemporary anglophone Afrodiasporic women’s narratives and the diverse meanings of aeromobility in the context of two different aeromobile experiences: that of first-time travellers and that of returnees. The first part, “First-time Travellers: From Distress to Hope”, studies aeromobility scenes performed by two young Nigerian female characters in Chika



Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*. The second part entitled "Migrant Returnees: Dehumanisation, Disillusionment and Discomfort" analyses the representation of other types of aeromobile subjectivities: the deportee and the returnee.

Finally, the conclusions bring together the results of the research and the analyses conducted and described in the preceding chapters, highlighting the parallelisms and singularities observed and suggesting possible lines for future research.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **REFRAMING AFROPOLITAN NARRATIVES**

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## 1. REFRAMING AFROPOLITAN NARRATIVES

Contemporary African and Afrodiasporic literature has been the object of a variety of debates about how to label or define this type of writing. In spite of the difficulty of pigeonholing contemporary African and Afrodiasporic authors in terms of ideology and style (Coker 2017), many literary critics agree on the utility of the term “third-generation African writing” to refer to those narratives published from the year 2000 onwards written by authors born mostly after 1960 who are from sub-Saharan countries, especially Ghana and Nigeria, or by writers now residing in Western countries whose ascendants are from such places. Unlike second-generation narratives, these works of fiction, predominantly located in Western urban environments, no longer deal with nation-building and (de)colonisation, but rather, as a result of their multilocal affiliations, tend to put the emphasis on diasporic identities, multilocality, globalisation, transnationality and dislocation (Adesanmi and Dunton 2008; Coker 2017; Krishnan 2013; Toivanen 2021b). Furthermore, as Zeleza points out, “multidimensionality, multifocality and multivocality” (2007, 13) is also apparent in the third-generation corpus, where there is a clear predominance of Nigerian writers (Adesanmi and Dunton 2008). Other significant features of third-generation African writing are, according to Adesanmi and Dunton, their fast pace, “a more expansive creative space”, and a “fluid plot” (2008, 16).

Though certainly one way of distinguishing the current generation of African writers from those before them, there is no consensus on the usefulness of the concept, with third-generation topics sometimes being considered a continuation of second-generation preoccupations. The concept of third-generation African literature has, however, been criticised for the rigidity of the label (Krishnan 2013) and its subsequent

danger of oversimplification of the narratives, as well as for “its reliance on spatio-temporal constructs that fail to account for the complexity of the texts it classifies” (Dalley 2013, 15). Third-generation writers’ detachment from the continent’s colonial past is also observed with concern. In spite of these critiques, the term third-generation African and Afrodiasporic writing is still widely used by Africanist scholars around the world.

Within third-generation African writing, some specific traits and themes of third-generation women’s fiction need to be highlighted, given the distinctiveness of their literary works. Some of these themes are gender consciousness, “the rethinking of family relationships” (Nadaswaran 2011), their “writing back” African male writers (Coker 2017) and the more prominent presence and position of independent, young female characters, who tend to have unstable relationships with the maternal figure (Nadaswaran 2011). As I have argued elsewhere (García-Corte 2021), there is a recent tendency among third-generation African women writers to portray tropes of mobility as part of the lived experience of the modern African subject—see for example Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go* (2013), Noo Saro Wiwa’s *Looking for Transwonderland: Travels in Nigeria* (2013), Chimamanda Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013), Chibundu Onuzo’s *Welcome to Lagos* (2017) and Imbolo Mbue’s *Behold the Dreamers* (2017).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, mobility constitutes a crucial characteristic of third-generation African fiction that deserves further attention, for it is a defining element of cosmopolitan visions of the African condition.

Contemporary Afrodiasporic writing has commonly been classified as Afropolitan literature (Bastida-Rodríguez 2017; Gehrmann 2015; Hodapp 2020; Knudsen and Rahbek 2016, 2017; Neumann 2020), although Taiye Selasi herself, who coined the term Afropolitanism in her 2005 much-cited essay “Bye-Bye, Babar (Or: What is an Afropolitan?)” has claimed that Afropolitan literature *per se* does not exist, because

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<sup>2</sup> For recent research on the relevance of the mobility theme in contemporary African and Afrodiasporic writing, see Cobo-Piñero (2020), Green-Simms (2017), and Toivanen (2021).

Afropolitanism, as she conceives it, refers to an identity position (Selasi 2013b). Although Selasi repeatedly warns that literature does not need labels which refer to national or continental boundaries, the term Afropolitan literature continues to be widely used by literary scholars. Some of the novels that have been classified as representative of Afropolitan literature are Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011), Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* (2013), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013), and Yvonne Owuor's *Dust* (2014). The first three are paradigmatic Afropolitan narratives in the sense that they are "novels set mainly in the US about well-educated Africans and their ability to move in and out of Africa as they please" (Hodapp 2020, 4). In addition to these, the literary production of Dinaw Mengestu, Aminatta Forna and Chika Unigwe has also been classified as Afropolitan by some critics (Bastida-Rodríguez 2017; Hodapp 2020).

Eva Rask Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek posit that Afropolitan literature promotes "conversation across diversity from positions within and outside the African continent" (2016, 10). In line with third-generation African literature, Afropolitan writing has been described as a "worldly" literature (Hodapp 2020, 5) which engages with global issues, albeit in an apolitical manner, according to many. Nonetheless, Hodapp claims that what has been defined as apolitical is actually political, in the sense that these works of fiction display a "politics of refusal" (5), for they imply a refusal of "the limitations of nations (and nationalisms), regimes, and promises of liberation that never materialize" (5). Another noteworthy characteristic of Afropolitan literature is its positivism, which constitutes, in Hodapp's words, "a strategy of representation bent on escaping a defensive position for the continent" (6). With regard to other recurring stylistic traits, Eva Rask Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek, who have attempted to define a literary "Afropolitan aesthetics" (2017, 9), claim that the trope or recurring motif of a "mobility-induced

anxiety which entwines place and self” (9) is present in most of these narratives. The characters’ anxiety, they argue, is often linked to a complicated return to Africa, which they are not able to define as home or a safe place of belonging. From their point of view, Afropolitan writings also share another important feature: their ability to maintain the distinctiveness of African countries “in terms of culture, history, politics and global embeddedness” (20). Last but not least, they add that it is: “Perhaps the complex and slippery signifier of Africa [...] [that] stands at the centre of an Afropolitan literary aesthetics” (21). On her part, Aretha Phiri emphasises the important ethical dimension of Afropolitan literature, which involves “respect for the diversity and specificity of all people” rendering “each person simultaneously responsive to the intrinsic otherness of the self” (2020, 154).

The definition of Afropolitan literature suggested by James Hodapp, as “an African-flavoured literature that offers Western readers a taste of Africa without alienating them too much by being ‘too African’” (2020, 2) indeed addresses two popular, and pertinent critiques of Afropolitan literature: its lack of direct involvement with the continent’s colonial history (Ede 2020), and the question of its targeting of a Western audience (Dabiri 2016; Musila 2016), which is closely connected with the widely accepted mechanisms of African writings’ legitimisation through Western publishing industries and prizes.

From a mobility studies approach, it is interesting to point out that most of the discussions about Afropolitanism as a literary aesthetics or as an identity position take global mobility standing as a synonym of migration as their point of departure. That means that, in order for a text to be considered Afropolitan, the presence of transcontinental mobility seems to be necessary. It is in this sense that I consider Birgit Neumann’s contribution to be highly pertinent to the current discussion on

Afropolitanism. Neumann's chapter "The Worlds of Afropolitan World Literature: Modelling Intra-African Afropolitanism in Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *Dust*" (2020), suggests however that Afropolitanism can also be found without leaving the African continent. Acknowledging that one of the most common criticisms levied against Afropolitanism is its implicit focus on matters outside of the African continent, Neumann calls for the importance of stories "about travelling within Africa" (2020, 14). Following Mbembe's sense of Afropolitanism as "the interweaving of the here and there, the presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa" (2007, 28), Neumann argues that it is only by focusing on narratives that portray travel within Africa that we can "confirm the centrality of the continent in histories of global exchange" (2020, 14) and "account for the pluralities of African modernities and the complexities of Afropolitanism" (14).

Certainly, the global South cannot be left out of discussions about Afropolitanism or reduced to an abstract signifier of home and return in Afropolitan narratives. Novels that engage with movement within Africa, such as *Welcome to Lagos* (Onuzo 2017) are, therefore, vital to "redefine movement within Afropolitanism" (Hodapp 2020, 7) and this might perhaps lead to making the worldliness of Afropolitanism truly liberating. A thorough study of fictional mobilities in such novels can contribute to refuting the Western-centric character of ideas about mobility. In this way, other creative modes of being mobile are brought to the fore, challenging the assumption of mobility as a Western concept that is commonly measured by the extent to which mobile subjects can reproduce Westernised mobilities.

A combination of the words "African" and "cosmopolitan", "Afropolitan" refers to the processes of subjectivity formation that affect peoples of African descent who inhabit various metropolises around the globe—mainly the global North—as a consequence of globalisation and contemporary waves of migration. Selasi, "who is



herself of mixed cultural heritage and exhibits a transnational [...] subjectivity” (Phiri 2020, 125), attempts to revise what it means to identify oneself as an African in the context of current spatial reorganisations. Through this concept, she tries to show her rejection and disapproval of the common oversimplification of Afrodiasporic subjectivities and the “mode of being of the contemporary African diaspora” (Phiri 2017, 144). Selasi defines Afropolitan subjects as “Africans of the world” (2005, n. p.) who “belong to no single geography, but feel at home in many” (n. p.). She celebrates the hybrid urban identity of affluent 21<sup>st</sup>-century Africans by emphasizing its most positive traits, including multilingualism, an ability that constitutes one of the Afropolitan’s main empowering tools in their liminal position. The most powerful message of Selasi’s essay is that each Afropolitan has the choice of how to form and shape their own identity by defining their relationship to the places where they live or visit. This idea is echoed in her TEDx talk “Don’t Ask Where I’m from, Ask Where I’m a Local” (2014) in which she suggests a three-step test she refers to as “the three ‘R’s” to reflect on how come to relate to one’s locality, first by focusing on one’s daily rituals or routines; then, the relationships that shape one’s “weekly emotional experience” (Selasi 2014, n. p.) and, finally the restrictions that impede one’s presence in certain spaces. In “Bye-Bye, Babar”, Selasi also points to potential identity crises that may be experienced by hybrid Afropolitans, who are required to “form an identity along at least three dimensions: national, racial, cultural” (2005, n. p.) and who, in her view, run the risk of “get[ting] lost in transnation” (2005; n. p.).

Selasi’s essay has been read by many as an unacknowledged celebration of the privileges of a few advantaged African and Afrodiasporic subjects, even though the author herself has claimed that it was written “from a position of pain” that was a consequence of a deep feeling of “non-belonging” (Bady and Selasi 2015). The criticism

of Afropolitanism as an elitist notion (see Tveit 2013) is, arguably, understandable since Selasi explicitly refers to a restricted group of Afrodiasporic subjects who are highly educated, have therefore cultural and symbolic capital and who enjoy the privilege of crossing national and symbolic borders without much effort. Certainly, not every Afrodiasporic individual can be considered Afropolitan, but only those who enjoy the privilege of a voluntary mobile life. Despite this, the version of Afropolitanism that Selasi offers in her essay is further complicated in her novel *Ghana Must Go*, which “articulates more complexly and illuminates more creatively the cultural and subjective anxiety associated with the negotiation of identitarian roots and routes” (Phiri 2017, 144) that characterises Afropolitan lives.

From a different perspective, Dabiri argues that the Afropolitan narrative reinforces the imperialist hegemonic view that African progress can only be measured “by the extent to which it can reproduce a Western lifestyle” (106), distracting attention away from the African continent where “most Africans have almost absolute immobility in a contemporary global world that works very hard to keep Africans in their place” (106). Thus, for this author, the immediate consequence of prioritising the Afropolitan narrative over other less advantaged experiences is that what happens on the African continent continues to be shadowed.

Creative authors like the widely read feminist writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have also positioned themselves as voices of dissent towards the Afropolitan label, stating that: “I’m not an Afropolitan. I’m African, happily so [...] I’m comfortable in the world, and it’s not that unusual. Many Africans are happily African and don’t think they need a new term” (in Barber 2013). A leading voice in Afrodiasporic writing, Adichie defends a continental African internationality which, according to Dabiri, “does not seek legitimacy via detours through our Anglo-American ‘superiors’” (2016, 107),

and thus promotes “a sense of contemporary Pan-Africanism” (107). Barbadian-Nigerian author Yewande Omotosu has also stated his resistance to being classified as an Afropolitan and claims himself to be “of the continent” (Fasselt 2015) instead, thereby subscribing to Adichie’s idea. In the same vein, Shadreck Chikoti and Binyavanga Wainaina have favoured the notion of Pan-Africanism over Afropolitanism, whose contribution to “the endless proliferation of labels” (Tunca and Ledent 2015, 4) they reject.

Further reasons why Afropolitanism has been challenged include its endorsement of global hierarchies (Toivanen 2015) and the impossibility of it being conceived as an African version of cosmopolitanism (Toivanen 2017; 2021). Toivanen has, indeed, repeatedly highlighted the problems with Afropolitanism, which in her view represents “a very limited reconceptualization of the concept of cosmopolitanism and resonates with traditional understandings of cosmopolitanism as the position of the travelling elite” (2021, 10). That limited reconceptualization has to do with conceiving cosmopolitanism as “an identity position” (10) that emerges automatically in multicultural encounters, leading to the omission of the ethical and political dimensions of cosmopolitanism, which she believes should instead be considered as an orientation or an ethical disposition of openness to the world.

In an attempt to challenge the Western-centricity of the concept of Afropolitanism, the narratives selected as corpus for this dissertation include some paradigmatic Afropolitan novels as well as other works that have not been classified as such. The authors include Afrodiasporic women born in Western Africa who now live somewhere else in the Western world and those who were born in Western countries but maintain some sort of connection with different countries of Western Africa. More specifically, the authors selected here were born in, or maintain close ties with,

Nigeria—Chibundu Onuzo, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Chika Unigwe—, Ghana—Taiye Selasi—and Cameroon—Imbolo Mbue. With the exception of *Welcome to Lagos*, the selected novels have been classified as Afropolitan literature. These texts deal with international migration and “well-worn oscillations between Africa and the West” (Hodapp 2020, 7). Indeed, the five novels selected can all be classified as migration narratives, given that their plots engage with the aftermath of migration for Afrodiasporic subjects of diverse socio-economic backgrounds and statuses. The United States of America constitutes the migrant’s promised land in *Behold the Dreamers*, *Ghana Must Go* and *Americanah*, whereas in *On Black Sisters’ Street*, Belgium is the protagonists’ unchosen destination in their much-desired Europe.

*Ghana Must Go* and *Americanah* have in fact been classified as Afropolitan literature *par excellence* (Hodapp 2020; Knudsen and Rahbek 2016; 2017; Phiri 2017; 2020). Both novels critically engage with the effects of globalisation on West African peoples and locales, and they epitomise the experiences of Afropolitans who struggle to come to terms with a life characterised by navigating across multi-local affinities and transient homes. The main characters in both pieces of fiction go to the United States in search of a better future and they follow similar routes, changing cities several times. These texts also share their protagonists’ process of subjectivity formation as African migrants in the United States, as well as their experiences of racial discrimination and their embodiment of a strong feeling of alienation in the host country, which leads them to materialise their desire of coming back home. The protagonists in both narratives voluntarily go back to their countries of origin after some time living abroad.

The inclusion of *Welcome to Lagos* seeks to broaden the Afropolitan debate by following Birgit Neumann’s suggestion to model “Intra-African Afropolitanism” (2020) and to study, in Hodapp’s words, “the almost entirely overlooked circulations of Africans

inside of Africa in African literary and Afropolitan studies” (2020, 9) as a way to “confirm the centrality of the continent in histories of global exchange” (Neumann 2020, 14). Apart from including Afropolitan characters that enjoy easier access to global networks of movement, the main plot in *Welcome to Lagos* addresses internal migration and different forms of movement and travelling within Nigeria. In addition to this, the Afropolitan nature of the novel lies in the fact that, as Birgit Neumann states, “both the African continent and African way of being in the world are deeply steeped in movement” (15).

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**CHAPTER 2**

**READING MOBILITY (IN)JUSTICES:  
CONCEPTUAL APPROACHES**

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## **2.1 The New Mobilities Paradigm**

The so-called ‘new mobilities paradigm’ (Sheller and Urry 2006; Sheller 2014) has been central to turning mobilities into a significant subject of enquiry, offering an alternative interpretation of mobility that includes not only physical and technologically-enhanced human travel, but also the circulation of materials, images and ideas, as well as the examination of information technologies and the regulation of mobility. This novel area of enquiry considers mobility as a meaningful performance and everyday practice that goes beyond its deeply rooted understanding as simply movement from point A to point B, and focuses instead on the study of mobility systems, understood as “a subset of powerful, interdependent knowledge-based systems that organize production, consumption, travel and communications round the world” (Urry 2007, 273). The new mobilities paradigm does not assume, however, that circulation and movement constitute a new phenomenon that has emerged as part of the contemporary global condition; on the contrary, it acknowledges mobilities as having always been a feature relevant to the emergence of different types of subjectivities and spaces (Sheller 2018). What makes these worldwide mobility systems worth analysing is that they are “arguably moving people and things differently, in more dynamic, complex, and trackable ways than ever before, while mobile subjects face new challenges of forced mobility, uneven mobility, and disrupted mobility” (Sheller 2014, 795). Sheller’s and Urry’s contributions offers a solid social theory to examine our frenetic contemporary world in which mobility constitutes a constant “for both rich and even for some poor” (Urry 2007, 4). The new mobilities paradigm constitutes an interdisciplinary theoretical approach that is fundamental to my study of the representation of mobility justice in the selected corpus of fictional works by West African and Afrodiasporic women writers.



In a first reading of my corpus, I was already able to appreciate the importance of the mobility theme in the sense that “migrants are also travellers whose mobile subjectivities are shaped by the ways in which different systems of mobility allow them to travel” (Toivanen 2018, n. p.). Peter Merriman and Lynne Pearce highlight the importance of “skilful textual analysis [to] shed new light on a wide range of mobilities debates and theories” (2017, 500). They add that “retrospective representations of movement through literary and other texts are no less evocative, important, lively, and dynamic”, for “experiences of mobility are not confined to the ‘now’” (2017, 498). Exploring the literary representations of mobilities contributes to unveiling prevailing power hierarchies in the contemporary world and “trace how particular movements, experiences and sensations may be grounded in very different ontologies, embodied practices and cultural and historical contexts” (497). The analysis of textual representation of mobilities in the texts under study uncovers valuable information about the characters’ possibilities and restrictions as well as how different factors affect their mobility potential and the feelings that their experiences of being on the move generate. I agree with Toivanen in considering that: “Representations of mobility practices are full of meaning”, since a “focus on them allows for more nuanced readings of these so called ‘migrant novels’” (2018). And, as Eva Rask Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek claim, “gender affects encounters and conversations, in both positive and negative ways, and this certainly impacts on how and where characters move and whether they are allowed to move in the first place” (2016, 7). It is important to highlight at this point, however, that “the standard postcolonial vocabulary available [...] falls short of being adequate” for these narratives, which “defamiliarize well-known concepts—such as home and belonging, community, feminism, politics, or class, even ‘race’” (7).

That said, circulation of peoples and things is not unique to contemporary times (Schivelbusch 1986; Sheller 2014), as Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* (1993) acknowledges by pointing at the interconnectivity of routes already established during the era of the slave trade. Neither can African mobilities *per se* be claimed to constitute a new phenomenon (Mavhunga 2012; Mavhunga et al. 2016). In fact, the status of Africans as mobile subjects is neither new nor peculiar to contemporary times: "From antiquity through Trans-Indian and Trans-Atlantic Ocean trades in humans as slaves, all the way to the contemporary moment of heightened migration and diaspora, Africans and things African have been travellers in the world for a while" (Mavhunga et al. 2016, 44). Nonetheless, there is a distinction that should not be disregarded which is related to the reasons behind such journeys and mobility experiences, which can be "*voluntary, forced and induced*", this being "mediated by the play of differences—ethnicity, gender, age, class, sexuality, place" (Durán-Almarza 2014, 4). In her article "Urban Mobility and Race: Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* and Teju Cole's *Open City*" (2017), Aliko Varvogli points out that there is, however, a voluntary component to one of the commonest mobile experiences, that is, migration, as it is "generally seen as being driven by the desire for self-improvement" (242). In this way she makes a useful distinction between migration and forced exile. But acknowledging Africans' status as travellers, whose daily mobilities may also be at will, is substantially different to considering whether their migrations are voluntary or not. Although migration can be considered as voluntary, it should not be confused with mobility, as the latter is a much broader term; it can include transnational journeys that are necessarily part of a migration, but the term 'mobilities', as I understand it, refers rather to the concrete and tangible fact of displacement.

Clapperton C. Mavhunga, Jeroen Cuvelier and Katrien Pype call for an academic twist in African mobilities in order to explore how “African mobilities become constitutive of the world outside them and vice versa” (2016, 44) by focusing not only on people’s geographical movement but also on technological advances and developments. These academics emphasise that the idea of mobilities is itself “Western-centric” (45) and they highlight the need “to go rogue on the concept” itself (45). In this sense, they claim that “African mobilities is a theoretical standpoint [which] serves as a critique of Western notions of mobility that have been universalised, built on nostalgia about what one, following Western assumptions, readily concludes are the technological and scientific wonders” (44). I take notice of these authors’ call to do away with the “tendency for concepts to reflect a Western-centricity” (48) and try to rethink some well-established notions in the field of mobility studies. Throughout the chapters of analysis, I will discuss the extent to which the selected works support or refute the Western-centricity of mobilities.

Needless to say, the fictional works studied here contain representations of real-world phenomena. But it is precisely through the study of these representations that we can better apprehend how these mobilities are perceived, interpreted, and given various meanings in ways that may resonate with real-life embodied experiences or, on the contrary, distance the reader from them (see also Toivanen 2021a). The production of meanings and effects of everyday mobilities in cultural texts is worth exploring so as to understand differing interpretations of real-life phenomena in a more precise manner.

## 2.2 Reading Mobility (In)Justice

In spite of the fact that freedom of movement is taken for granted as a human right in the contemporary world, there is no doubt that mobility systems cannot be accessed on equal terms by everyone. The conception of the modern liberal subject as a moving person hides the fact that our increasingly mobile world is only possible at the expense of its associated moorings. Questions of access to mobilities are not ignored in the new mobilities paradigm, for there is an acknowledgement of the fact that the displacements of many people presuppose the existence of immobilities (Sheller 2014, 790) of many other more disadvantaged subjects. The new mobilities paradigm has also highlighted how immobile material constructions, which include (im)mobile platforms, “enhance the potential mobility of some, while detracting from the mobility potential (or ‘motility’) of others by leaving them in a relatively slower or intentionally disconnected position” (796).

Lately, mobility researchers have been considering not only who and what is (de-/re)mobilised and under what situations, but also the “intersectional racialized, gendered, classed, and sexual (im)mobilities inscribed into landscapes and imaginaries of belonging” (Sheller 2014, 793). This sensitivity to power differences and the connection of mobilities with developing a feeling of belonging undoubtedly comes out of the field of migration and diaspora studies and of “postcolonial feminist critiques of the bounded and static categories of race, nation, ethnicity, community, and state” (Sheller 2014, 793). The question of access cannot be understood without the concept of motility, which alludes to “the manner in which an individual or group appropriates the field of possibilities relative to movement and uses them” (Kaufmann and Montulet 2008, 45). Some motility determinants include “physical aptitude, aspirations, accessibility to transportation and communications, space-time constraints, knowledge [and] licenses”

(Urry 2007, 38). It is certainly the case that human displacements are conditioned by race, gender, class and sexual social markers, among others and undoubtedly, the mobilities of vagabonds and the kinetic elite, which includes business and political leaders who are regularly travelling the world, differ widely. Although subjects belonging to kinetic elites may stay still, they nonetheless maintain the potential for movement. Both their staying in one place and their movement constitute conscious decisions that emerge from their privileged access to power structures. Therefore, although motility does not necessarily equate to observable movement, the kinetic elites' empowered position allows them to enjoy the privilege of decision making. Conversely, high degrees of movement do not necessarily imply that those travelling or moving around also possess a high degree of motility. For instance, the hypermobility of transnational sex workers is oftentimes one of the visible results of their being trapped in human trafficking networks, and the same applies, for example, to undocumented migrants who come to Europe from various African countries. The mobilities of both of these groups of underprivileged subjects do not come out of a conscious decision, but rather the individuals are clearly being forced into it by diverse socioeconomic conditions and a lack of better options.

Mobilities, therefore, depend on “network capital” (Elliott and Urry 2010, 10-11), which refers to “a combination of capacities to be mobile” (Sheller 2018, 34) from a financial, cultural, and social perspective. One's motility, therefore, depends on money, one's knowledge of the world as well as on social relationships and connections that facilitate one's transit (Sheller 2018). Doreen Massey has also drawn attention to the question of access through the concept of “power geometry” (2013, 154), which highlights that access to mobility systems is conditioned by the differentiated relative “power in relation *to* the flows and the movement” (149; original emphasis) of different social groups.

Various authors have echoed Massey's ideas by proposing related terms. Tim Cresswell concurs this idea of unequal access to free movement by arguing that mobility systems always constitute systems of immobility as a result of "friction", a key quality of mobilities which implies elements of viscosity, stickiness, blockage or coagulation (2014). According to him, "the practice of power is [...] often about the management of friction—increasing it for some and erasing it for others" (2014: 111). In this way, he is able to "draw attention to the way in which people, things, and ideas are slowed down or stopped" (108), thus opposing Manuel Castells's "space of flows" which, according to Cresswell, "paints a picture of a world where the key actors in the process of globalization can travel easily in a self-contained and seemingly frictionless bubble" (108). The concept of friction points to a mobile world full of obstacles which result from a complex entanglement of factors, the most important being power, which sometimes and under certain circumstances facilitate the circulation of certain individuals, while impeding and even blocking movement for others. It is clear, then, that people's mobilities are complex; although the circulation never stops, it takes place on very asymmetrical and irregular terms.

Cresswell's description of mobilities as embedded in higher or lower degrees of friction resonates with that of Jana Costas. Drawing on the Sartrean metaphor of stickiness, she conceptualises mobilities as contingent, and after declaring her disagreement with existing metaphors such as Zygmunt Bauman's liquidity or Manuel Castells's flows, which she argues describe mobility as unimpeded circulation (see Costas 2013). Cresswell and Costas coincide on the need to complicate extant conceptualisations of mobilities through the study of the effects of friction or stickiness.

Taking unequal access to mobilities as a point of departure, Mimi Sheller introduces her concept of "mobility justice" to encourage thinking about "how power and

inequality inform the governance and control of movement, shaping the patterns of unequal mobility and immobility in the circulation of people, resources, and information” (2018, 37). Sheller believes that mobility justice needs to be the result of a combination of

the struggles for accessibility and bodily freedom of movement, for equitable infrastructures and spatial designs that support rights to movement, for fair and just forms of sustainable transport and ecological urbanism that reduce environmental harms and burdens, and for the equitable global distribution of natural resources and rights to move or dwell. (43)

Ensuring equitable rights to move and freedom of movement to everyone, she argues, cannot be achieved by working only in terms of transport justice and spatial justice, and taking initiatives to ensure that each mode of mobility has a space in towns and cities. In Sheller’s words, mobility justice takes place at various scales: “from micro-level embodied interpersonal relations, to meso-level issues of urban transportation justice and the ‘right to the city’, to macro-level transnational relations of travel and borders, and ultimately global resource flows and energy circulation” (37). All the different levels need to be carefully studied for a better understanding of the concept of mobility justice. Achieving freedom of movement can never take place at the expense of what Sheller defines as an ongoing ‘Triple Mobility Crisis’ (23), referring to the simultaneous climate, urbanisation and migration crises.

According to Sheller, some key questions inherent to her concept of mobility justice are: “Who can ‘appropriate’ the potential for mobility (including the right to stay

still as well as to move)?”; “What rights to mobility exist in a particular context and how are they exercised and protected?”; and “What capabilities of mobility are valued, defended, and extended to all?” (39) in a given context. Further questions connected with mobility justice posed by Sheller include:

What (im)mobilities have we given up to become ‘mobile’ in modernity? What vectors of normative or hegemonic movement are we channelled into or conversely prohibited from exercising? What stories do we tell ourselves about the world becoming ever more mobile, and which forms of demobilization or forced mobilities do these stories mask? (41)

These stories that we tell ourselves include works of fiction. The representation of motility is certainly worth exploring in contemporary works of fiction, given the large amount of displacements that can be found in such narratives. Sheller is encouraging us to think beyond the narrative of unimpeded circulation, to consider mobilities from all angles. In Sheller’s view, many social movements, such as the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, have emerged out of mobility justice struggles. The BLM movement, which is arguably a continuation of the Civil Rights Movement, has devoted itself to fighting against Black people’s restricted mobilities in the United States since its very inception. In addition to this, Sheller underlines the importance of studying mobility justice by paying special attention to “the management of mobilities under post-slavery and postcolonial regimes” (39) both in the global North, a space she prioritises in the work where the quote is taken from, but also in non-Western countries, where “differing political cultures and ‘mobility regimes’” (39) govern people’s lives.



### **2.3 Moorings and Rhythm**

A proper study of mobility justice cannot be undertaken without analysing interactions and transactions occurring in the different kinds of spaces relevant to mobilities, that is, spaces where or around which mobilities take place. Despite the fact that space is generally understood as a static, immobile entity, the new mobilities paradigm envisages it as “economically, politically and culturally produced through the multiple mobilities of people, but also of capital, objects, signs and information moving at rapid yet uneven speed across many borders” (Urry 2007, 269). Through these lenses, the meaning of a place does not only emerge from its morphological features; rather, it is also constituted by the movement that occurs there (Jensen 2009, 140). One of Mimi Sheller’s central claims is that the co-constitution of mobilities and spaces needs to be further studied (2018). Sheller argues that mobilities “make place” (2018, 69; see also Urry 2007), often re-shaping spaces to reinforce prevailing power hierarchies so that “the most powerful groups are able to occupy public space (including streets) and dominate political decision-making, while others may be marginalized, unable to assemble, or unable to stay in place” (47). For Mimi Sheller and John Urry, there is a great need to analyse “those immobile infrastructures that organise the intermittent flow of people, information, and image, as well as the borders or ‘gates’ that limit, channel, and regulate movement or anticipated movement” (2006, 212). Interestingly, they highlight that studying mobilities not only involves focusing on who moves or what is being moved and the power regimes that govern these transits, but also on the static constructions that enhance or limit mobilities, since these are crucial to configuring and defining mobile environments.

The concept of “moorings” is also fundamental to understanding the relevance of spaces to the study of mobility justice and mobilities, more generally. “Mooring” is a metaphor introduced by John Urry (2007) that alludes to immobile, place-bound infrastructures that become critical for mobility systems, whose complex combination with movement functions “to differentiate, channel, and separate various flows through shifting or sorting devices that speed some kinds of movement while slowing or stopping others” (Sheller 2018). According to Sheller, moorings inform us about “embedded regulations, legal and juridical systems, bureaucracies, and social practices” (2018) that affect worldwide circulation. Without being mobile itself, the concept of mooring helps to explain why immobile and static places become enlightening and therefore cannot be overlooked in mobility studies research work.

They have also conceptualised physical, infrastructural moorings as “transfer points” (Sheller and Urry 2006, 219) and “interspaces” (Urry 2007, 12). These are defined as places of intermittent movement “‘in-between’ home, work and social life” (12) that enable mobilities and facilitate encounters. As a result of the increase in flows of people, human beings are spending more and more time in such in-between spaces these days. Examples of such “places of in-between-ness” through which travellers are expected to transit for relatively short periods of time include “lounges, waiting rooms, cafés, amusement arcades, parks, hotels, airports, stations, motels [and] harbours” (Sheller and Urry 2006, 219). Although these places were presumably designed to facilitate the mobility and circulation of peoples, a wide spectrum of varying experiences can be found there that depend on the specific motilities of each passer-by.

For a critical review of this concept of interspace or transfer point, the following questions need to be addressed: Given that the experience of transit through such transfer points or interspaces cannot be generalised, who are those who move with relative ease

through these sorts of spaces? What kind of problems do African travellers face in global North airports? Does African returnees' transit through a non-Western airport constitute a comparable experience to fluid passengers' traversing of airports? And are we taking into consideration that such "transfer points" may even become a place to spend the night and sleep for underprivileged individuals? If so, should they be conceptualised as places of simple "transfer" in such cases? Given that social and political identities and markers deeply influence one's transit through such moorings, I suggest calling them "viscous interspaces" as a way of acknowledging the different ways in which kinetic elites and vulnerable travellers of unprivileged sociocultural backgrounds may act in or interact with these types of spaces.

In addition to moorings, another concept that ties space and mobilities together is that of rhythm. Henri Lefebvre points out that: "Everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm" (1992/2013, 15). Rhythm is a useful concept for emphasising the importance of the temporal as well as the spatial dimension in the study of mobilities. Movements are orchestrated according to temporal coordinates. At the same time, the concept of rhythm offers a perception of mobility from a corporeal and metaphysical point of view that challenges the view of mobilities as constant changes of locations or movement from point A to point B. As cultural geographer Tim Edensor argues,

rhythm provides a valuable focus in exploring the multiple temporalities of places and forms of mobility, the processes that flow through and reproduce and reconstitute place, the regulation and synchronisation of mobilities, the ways in which mobilities may be sensually experienced, as well as the contestations and multiple mobilities that interweave in and through place. (2013, 163)

Henri Lefebvre's "rhythmanalysis" (1992/2013), which considers space and time together for the study of everyday life, has sparked a renewed interest within the social sciences and humanities in exploring the potential of rhythm. According to Edensor, rhythm is the result of "repeated individual encounters and movements in familiar space, reiterated temporal patterns of engagement that, crucially, converge with those of others" (2013, 163). What interests me is Edensor's conception of places as dynamic, as "ceaselessly (re)constituted out of the processes which flow to, through and across them" (163). Contrary to static conceptions, this approach views places not as unchangeable but as mobile entities, subject to change due to the mobilities, transactions and interactions that occur there. Furthermore, the "multiple mobile rhythms of place" are "conditioned by institutional and normative procedures" (164), social practices and natural cycles. In this context, Edensor introduces the term "mobile eurhythmia" (2013) to refer to movements that are regulated and orchestrated through dominant spatiotemporal conventions and routines. These processes are oftentimes disrupted by "somatic intrusions", such as blisters in a stroll, and other "contingencies of travel", such as traffic jams, accidents or flight delays, which may end up leading to arrhythmia, i.e., an interruption or rejection of regular tempos. Despite the imposed nature of the collective rhythms that give temporal shape to place, there is always space for the performance of subversive pulses as deliberate acts of defiance and interference. Postcolonial subjects may contribute to the breaking apart, alteration and asynchronisation of rhythms through the performance of alternative spatial practices and temporalities.

Another noteworthy aspect of rhythm is that "the repeated inscription of rhythmic practice [and its rhythmic reliability] and experience may also shape a mobile sense of place", which provides pedestrians, commuters and travellers with "a sense of

spatial belonging” (Edensor 2013, 164). This process can ultimately lead to the emergence of a feeling of “dwelling-in-motion” (Sheller and Urry 2006, 214). Simultaneously, “the regular rhythms of mobility also facilitate automatic, unreflexive activities” (Edensor 2013, 166) which may shape the creation of a comfortable feeling of familiarity and homeliness, although these may not be experienced by every subject.

The concepts of rhythm, eurhythmia and arrhythmia are illuminating concepts for the study of fictional African/Afrodiasporan mobilities to the extent that they can elucidate how individual and embodied rhythms align, or fail to align, with imposed collective tempos, as well as why and how their mobile rhythms might be disrupted or interrupted in postcolonial (poly)rhythmic locations.

## **2.4 Motion and Emotion**

Sensorial and psychological perceptions and feelings are also worth exploring in the examination of mobilities, for emotions experienced while on the move may help to visibilise the power structures that inform mobility justice. Mimi Sheller highlights that focusing on the study of emotions “also signals the need to pay attention to how an individual’s daily routines reinforce the embodied aspects of transport injustice and reproduce elements of race, class, gendered, and (dis)abling embodiment” (2018, 113-114). Exploring the co-constitution of motion and emotions reveal how embodied practices of distinctive modes of mobility contribute to shaping distinct feelings in the West-African and Afrodiasporic contexts of the selected narratives, as well as how those emotions point to the hidden power hierarchies of contemporary worlds.

Analysing the intertwining of motion and emotion means focusing on the emotional side of mobility systems, which “provide ‘spaces of anticipation’ that the journey can be made” (Urry 2007, 13), thus enabling planned and risk-free repetitions of movement performances. John Urry has warned about the anxieties that the interdependence of these mobility systems can cause in the case of their disruption. Travelling and the subsequent interaction with space, the mobile platforms and the people involved certainly has an effect on travellers’ consciousness and their experience of the journey, awaking a particular set of individual and collective emotions and attitudes.

A key consideration of the new mobilities paradigm is “the recentring of the corporeal body as an effective vehicle through which we sense place and movement, and construct emotional geographies” (Sheller and Urry 2006, 216). With the concept of “emotional geographies” they are referring to the “flows, circulations, distributions, intensifications and interferences of emotion” (Sheller 2004, 223) elicited by using different modes of mobility. Indeed, emotions become fundamental in contemporary conceptions of movement and space since “motion and emotion” are “kinaesthetically intertwined and produced together through a conjunction of bodies, technologies, and cultural practices” (2004, 227). Exploring the “affective and embodied relations between people, machines and spaces of mobility and dwelling” (221) therefore becomes fundamental to unveiling the individual (im)mobile experiences of mobile subjects. Different sorts of mobility imply the use of different technologies and therefore evoke distinct feelings and sensory experiences in the subjects who perform them. Hence, very distinct affects circulate (Ahmed 2004) between the machinery involved and the mobile subjects and among the travellers who may enjoy these mobile emotions.

Mimi Sheller notes that “kinaesthetic investments (such as walking, bicycling, riding a train or being in a car) orient us toward the material affordances of the world

around us in particular ways and these orientations generate emotional geographies” (2004, 228). Indeed, choosing one means of transport over another is influenced by power structures at the same time as it reproduces existing mobile power hierarchies, and this apparently conscious, individual decision contributes to the development of a particular emotional disposition and perception of the routes and environment involved that is necessarily different from the one the travellers could have developed had they performed a different kinaesthetic investment.

## **2.5 Literary Aeromobilities**

One relevant mobility system that is frequently represented in the fictional works selected is aeromobility. By aeromobility, I refer to the mobility system surrounding air travel, including its norms, the embodied practices of physical movement and displacement of subjects using airplanes, and those (im)mobile infrastructures and varied mechanisms that regulate and make air travel possible.<sup>3</sup> The study of fictional aeromobility, therefore, addresses not only the analysis of individual experiences inside aircrafts, but also those episodes of access and restrictions in the use of mobile infrastructures, comprising “the daily performances and narratives that play out all the way from the check-in stand to the departure gate” (Schaberg 2013, 2) and which take place in airports in both the global North and the global South. In other words, the analytical focus must take into consideration the different stages and landscapes of aeromobility, including the various

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<sup>3</sup> For a thorough discussion of the meaning of the term “aeromobility” in mobility studies, see Zuskáčová, Veronika (2020) “How We Understand Aeromobility: Mapping the Evolution of a New Term in Mobility Studies”. *Transfers* 10 (2-3): 4-23.

events taking place at the airport—departure, passage, and arrival (Leed 1991, qtd in Toivanen 2021b) as well as those happening on the plane and the flight route (Adey, Budd, and Hubbard 2007, 774).

It is worth mentioning, however, that aeromobility does not constitute the main theme in the selected corpus; none of the works is exclusively located at the airport, nor are their main characters airport labourers or frequent air travellers. This is because, as Anna-Leena Toivanen notes, oftentimes “airports and air travel feature marginally in literary texts as markers of narrative transitions” (2021b, 3). The selected narratives do, however, contain depictions that engage the emotional and material experiences of diverse Afrodiasporic travellers. Indeed, the recurring presence of such passages featuring aeromobility indicates that they fulfil certain narrative purposes (Toivanen 2021b), allowing for an in-depth discussion of the workings of aeromobile (in)justices.

Airports are indeed pivotal spaces that play a key role in the uneven experiences of aeromobilities. John Urry defines them as moorings, “interspaces” or “transfer points”, given that the main function of such spaces of intermittent movement “that are ‘in-between’ home, work and social life” (Urry 2007, 12) is to manage people’s mobilities. Marc Augé’s classification of airports as “non-places” of the supermodern era which “cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity” (1995, 77-8) does not prove convincing, since his concept does not account for the wide variety of experiences taking place there (Merriman 2004). Augé’s notion of non-place has been widely criticised (Korstanje 2009, 2015, 2018; Merriman 2004; Üngür 2015), given that his proposal overlooks the fact that the air traveller’s experience is “striated by gender, race, ethnicity, class, caste, colour, nationality, age, sexuality, disability, etc” (Sheller 2018, 10). These social categories intersect to create a unique airport transit experience, either by facilitating it, if the air traveller conforms to the features of a prototype



user—heteronormative, middle-class, white, European or American citizen.—or impeding, it if they do not. While Augé claims that non-places enable people to rid themselves of the everyday restrictions, who thus become “no more than what [they] do or experience, [thus tasting] for a while the passive joys of identity-loss” (1995, 103), reality shows otherwise, with airports constituting places of extreme social exclusion and violence for racialised subjects, undocumented migrants and deportees. Peter Merriman (2001) has pointed out several failures and weak points in the conceptualization of non-places. Firstly, he suggests that in contrast to Augé’s romantic account of certain travellers’ experience, airport workers perceive airports as material places where they need to carry out their daily activities to earn a living. Merriman also argues that Augé fails to clearly explain the “relations between, and co-production of, non-places and places” (151). Additionally, Merriman contends that considering travellers as “solitary observers of everyday life” overlooks the fact that such places constitute, above all, “meeting places” (151) where a variety of complex social interactions take place.

In more general terms, access to aircrafts is determined by several conditions that are defined by the traveller’s ableness. Getting inside an aircraft can only take place after a process of passing through the terminal has been successfully completed: moving on foot from the check-in desks through the security checkpoints and the duty-free shops before arriving in front of the gate to board the plane, as well as experiencing inoperative moments of waiting, which might be expected or caused by delays or other unforeseen contingencies. Besides, entering a highly secured airport terminal also presupposes the use of various means of transport to get there that depends not only on the individual’s budget, but also on infrastructural development, failures and impediments.

The condition of airports as paradigmatic of Foucauldian heterotopic spaces is more convincing than their classification as non-places. Airports constitute social spaces

of a different kind that are “in relation with all other sites, but in such a way to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986, 24). Indeed, airports can be regarded as counterspaces or spaces that are absolutely other, given their exceptional and oppositional character and their resistance to easy categorisation as private/public spaces due to the diverse set of transactions and activities that occur there. These moorings are dissociated from traditional time, and time is conceived differently within such spaces. As happens with heterotopias, airports have opening and closing systems that isolate them from the surrounding space. As Salter puts it, “airports are national spaces that connect to international spaces, frontiers that are not at the territorial limit, and grounded sites that embody mobility” (2008, ix). This contradictory nature of airports is also illustrated in Christopher Schaberg’s definition of airports from a cultural perspective. In his view:

Airports are sites where identity is confirmed or questioned; they are spaces of public display; they are contested zones where privacy and national security vie for priority; they are complex factories for the production of patriotism and the privilege of mobility. At the same time, airports can be considered as generic spaces, forgettable and often uncomfortable. They are designed to be passed through, and in rapid fashion [...]. And yet, airports are also enmeshed with matters of place, region, and slow time. (2013, 1)

This description of airports aligns, to a certain extent, with their classification as interspaces in the new mobilities paradigm, for it reinforces their primary function as

places of transition. What is more interesting about Schaberg's definition, though, is that it emphasises the cultural dimension of such places and their potential to be spaces where identity is explored in a variety of forms and where plural meanings and uncommon narratives emerge. Schaberg's contribution opens up a new space of enquiry by studying "the textuality of airports" (2013, 1); that is, "how [they] read, or how they are interpreted, in a range of contexts" (1) in order to appreciate "how and why humans travel by air" (1). More generally, Schaberg calls attention to exploring "the culture of flight", which constitutes and is constituted by "a dispersed set of sensibilities, individual feelings, and collective moods circulating around the subject of air travel" (4). Therefore, as occurs with the analysis of any mobility system, the emotions and feelings elicited by aeromobility and those using it to travel cannot be separated for a thorough textual analysis of the literary works. Airports are known to be places where multiple affects circulate as a result of travellers' movement through and interaction with these spaces and with other individuals. For instance, waiting and welcoming episodes might be as intense as farewells. Undoubtedly, there are a whole lot of emotions that travellers and those waiting might embody as a result of the variety of events that happen inside the contradictory space of the airport. As Peter Adey puts it, "airports are remarkably emotional places of dread, boredom, fear, excitement, sadness, and terror. Airports have atmospheres of tension, a stressed feeling" (2009, 278). This tension, however, might also involve feelings of intense happiness, like those experienced in reunions with one's loved ones. But above all, airports constitute spaces of sharp contrast, for the "image of an excitable body awakened by airport imagery, signs, symbols, and the hustle and bustle may be contrasted with passivity [...], such as a body, hungered, fatigued, or exhausted from standing in the immigration queue" (278). Furthermore, interactions inside airplanes

are equally relevant, for planes constitute a distinct kind of space that favours social interaction between peoples from very different backgrounds due to the physical closeness of their bodies.

## 2.6 Zombified Mobilities

As represented in the selected novels, African mobile subjectivities are diverse and complex, and include, among others, transgressive African travellers, pedestrians, chauffeurs, deportees or first-time aeromobile subjects. The circumstances that condition the mobile event differ widely in each of these cases, especially as regards the voluntary, induced or forced nature of the mobility. *Welcome to Lagos* features arguably voluntary African mobilities and carnivalesque tourists. *On Black Sisters' Street* portrays the aeromobilities of newcomers flying to the postcolonial metropolis. The deportees or undocumented migrants forced feature prominently in *Americanah* while *Behold the Dreamers* tells the story of a West African chauffeur. Obviously, this does not constitute an exhaustive description of the mobile subjectivities featured in these works, but it illustrates the complexity of any attempt at generalisation as regards the literary representation of concrete forms of mobility, because each of these practices is contextualised, located in a particular space, and conditioned by a number of variegated sociocultural and individual factors.

There are, however, two useful concepts that can shed light on the ways in which mobilities and interspaces are represented in this diverse corpus: abjection and zombification. The abject is defined by Julia Kristeva as what is “beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” (1982, 1). Abjection refers to “all that is repulsive

and fascinating about bodies and, in particular, those aspects of bodily experience that unsettle bodily integrity” including “death, decay, fluids, orifices, sex, defecation, vomiting, ill-ness, menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth” (Tyler 2013, 27). Inspired by Kristeva, Toivanen defines the abject as “something revolting and strange to the self, but paradoxically also a part of it, posing thus a threat to the boundaries of the self” (2015, 2). Abjection involves a process of exclusion, and a feeling of uneasiness. Toivanen has pointed out the way this concept is approached in postcolonial studies, where it “is frequently used to describe the discomfort that informs the making of racialised subjects” (2). Thus, abjection is used to refer to “the unease with which former colonial empires deal with their pasts” (2). In the same vein, she also draws on the utility of the concept in the study of postcolonial mobilities by coining the term “abject mobilities”. One of the most obvious example is the displacement of colonised subjects to the former colonial metropolises, whose racially marked bodies “represent all the discomfoting ambiguities of the empire’s painful and shameful history” (Gilroy 2005, 100). Toivanen cites forced and undocumented migration (2015, 2) as examples of abject forms of mobility. In addition to this, she warns us against considering abjection as “an attribute of the underprivileged postcolonial mobile subject” (2). For her, abjection should instead be “revealing of the processes of inclusion and exclusion that are central in the making of non-abject (white, European, class-privileged, cosmopolitan, etc.) subjectivity” (2).

Some representations of mobilities in these literary productions can be more accurately classified as “zombified” (Toivanen 2018), to borrow another of Toivanen’s terms to define the representation of literary mobilities in postcolonial fiction. The zombie figure constitutes a pertinent metaphor through which to read mobilities, given the obvious connection of such a figure to colonial history and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. In such an imaginary, the historical zombie figure, or the Haitian zombie, was conceived

as a victim of slavery who had been captured in Africa and sent to work to the point of exhaustion in the Caribbean colonial plantations, being “condemned to wander aimlessly or to serve the interests of the evil sorcerer responsible for its degradation” (Glover 2017, 215). This myth is believed to have originated in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Central West Africa, but nowadays the zombie figure has become detached from its cultural and historical roots (Lauro 2015, 15). This conception differs widely from mainstream representations of zombies as monsters seeking destruction (Toivanen 2021a). I borrow Toivanen’s notion of mobilities as “zombified” (2019) to refer to “the way in which the novels’ travellers turn into zombie-like dehumanized, alienated figures who lack agency, emotion, and identity” (2019, 3). Both abjection and zombification reveal as helpful metaphors for the exploration of mobility injustices and dehumanisation in the selected narratives, as will be discussed in more depth in the following chapters.



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**CHAPTER 3**

**MOBILITIES AND MOORINGS IN TAIYE SELASI'S "THE SEX  
LIVES OF AFRICAN GIRLS"**

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This chapter explores the textual representation of West African female (im)mobilities and moorings in Taiye Selasi's "The Sex Lives of African Girls" (2011), applying notions of mobility studies, such as the driving-event, friction, and arrhythmia, to carry out an in-depth textual analysis.

Taiye Selasi is an Afrodiasporic writer, photographer and filmmaker of Ghanaian and Nigerian descent born in London in 1979 and raised in Boston, Massachusetts. She has enjoyed a mobile and privileged way of life, having studied at Yale and Oxford University and lived in various countries, including the United States, Portugal and Italy. She has published four short stories, and two novels: *Ghana Must Go* (2013) and *Anansi and the Golden Pot* (2022). Apart from proposing the controversial term of "Afropolitanism" in her article "Bye-Bye, Babar (Or: What is an Afropolitan?)" (2005), she became famous thanks to her TED talk "Don't Ask Where I'm from, Ask Where I'm a Local" in 2015, where she overtly rejected the identification of "home" with one's country of origin, thus addressing a central preoccupation of African third-generation writers. Instead, she opts for identifying with one's "locality".

Her conceptualization of locality can be observed in her fiction, where she depicts a wide variety of multilocal characters most of whom, however, have trouble developing a sense of belonging. Also, in tune with third-generation fiction, her works place an emphasis on diasporic identity and transnationality, but without omitting what happens within the region of West Africa. All these concerns are apparent in "The Sex Lives of African Girls" (2011), her debut fictional writing, where various female protagonists voice patriarchal oppression. The title of the short story is quite ironic, "mocking Western anthropological theses of old" (Whittington 2012). This dark story, where everything seems to be inevitable, depicts an apparently conventional wealthy West African family that takes in the father's niece, whose mother is unable to financially

support her. Its ironic tone contributes to the questioning of traditional gender roles which confine women to the private space of the family home.

Set in Accra and Lagos, the protagonists of this short story are a “motherless child and a childless mother”, thus granting importance to a realist representation of the feminine in “a recognizable social world” (Bryce 2008, 49-50). Tim Cresswell’s concept of friction illuminates the description of the highly restricted mobilities of the female characters in the short story, pointing to a complex mobile world defined by various factors and determined by numerous obstacles. As I have pointed out elsewhere, “people’s mobilities are defined by higher or lower degrees of friction, as they are characterised by ambiguity and instability: the circulation is sliding, it never stops but takes place on very asymmetrical and irregular terms” (García-Corte 2021, 77).

Taiye Selasi’s “The Sex Lives of African Girls” (2011) features the tragic series of realisations that occur in a single day in the life of an 11-year-old girl named Edem.<sup>4</sup> She has lived with her affluent uncle and his family in Accra for three years without really knowing them nor the rest of the inhabitants of their household, after her mother, Dzifa, leaves her at Murtala Muhammed International Airport in Nigeria, kissing her quickly and murmuring a clear command: “Do as you’re told” (Selasi 2011, n. p.). Selasi’s story portrays the everyday life of a West African family riddled with complex female characters, who resist easy categorisation. Thanks to formal experimentation and different literary tropes, Selasi is able to convey a powerful critique of the most elitist sectors of Nigerian and Ghanaian modern-day, patriarchal society, in which women tend to become mere male commodities and objects of exchange. A deconstruction of hegemonic mothering, temporary dwelling in a hotel, the girl protagonist’s vulnerability in a

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<sup>4</sup> Hereafter, “The Sex Lives” will be used to refer to Selasi’s “The Sex Lives of African Girls”.

patriarchal environment, the use of second-person narration and the use of the sceptical voice of a child protagonist are all features in Selasi's story.

The presence of an uncommon "you" voice or second-person narrator is a formal characteristic that proves disruptive for the reader. Given that the protagonist is an innocent, young adolescent girl, the use of a second-person narrator helps the authors to portray the protagonists' naïveté. The blurring of the distinction between the narrator, the narratee and the main character of the story allows the reader to feel empathy for the girl in the vulnerable environments she inhabits. Selasi herself confesses that "[t]his 'you' voice appeared in my head from the beginning and guided me through the text, limiting my view of things to her view: I rarely looked where she wasn't looking" (Selasi and Igarashi 2011). The "you" voice is used in present tense at the beginning and at the end of the narrative, contributing to fixing the story's circular structure. Indeed, both the beginning and the end portray the same scene, which is, the moment in which Edem is observing through the window what is happening outside in the garden, an action that is interrupted by the girl's uncle approaching her and trying to abuse her. The use of second-person narration in present tense is known as "completely coincident narration" (DelConte 2003, 211), because it makes the narrator, the reader and the protagonist merge in time and space. Elsewhere in the story, the actions are narrated through the "you" voice in past tenses, while the protagonist's feelings and thoughts are conveyed in present tenses, which proves helpful to facilitate understanding. Selasi's use of "partially coincident narration" (DelConte 2003, 211), that is, when second-person narration is used in past tenses, has at those points in the story the effect of slightly detaching the reader from what is being narrated. However, formal experimentation in this story goes even further, as Selasi uses a mix of the stream of consciousness technique and interior monologue to provide a faithful representation of the protagonist's line of thoughts with

the immediacy of their actual occurrence, without regard to logical argument or narrative sequence.

### **3.1. Hotel-Dwelling: Moorings and Transient Homes**

The fact that part of the story is set in a hotel room facilitates the portrayal of a complex mother-daughter relationship and the understanding of Dzifa's absence, which determines the protagonist's later life in her uncle's household. The time when Edem and her mother live in a hotel is presented by means of a flashback that finishes by recalling the day her mother saw her off at the airport, which was the last time they saw each other. Hotels have been considered as "transfer points" or "interspaces" within the new mobilities paradigm, as they facilitate people's mobilities by serving as locations where travellers stop to rest, and a "collective or communal space" (Treadwell 2005, 216) which guests share. Hotels are also mostly situated nodal points in tourist or professional-oriented spots, such as city centres, as is the case with the hotel in this short story, which is situated in Lagos city center.

Some time before their farewell at Murtala Muhammed Airport, Edem recalls, they were "living [...] in a thirteenth-floor hotel room, free of charge, care of the hotel proprietor. [...] On the nights that he [Sinclair, the hotel proprietor] visited, at midnight or later, he'd hand you a mango, smiling stiffly. 'Go and play'" (Selasi 2011, n. p.). However, although Edem thinks so at the time, their dwelling at the hotel is not "free of charge", but Dzifa is a sex worker in there. And while her mother has sex with the hotel owner, Edem

[would] go to the pool, glowing green in the darkness. The sounds of the highway of Lagos night. There were no guests or hotel staff at the pool after midnight. No sweating waiters in suits with mixed drinks on silver trays. No thin women in swimsuits, their skin seared to crimson, their offspring peeing greenly in the water. Only you. (Selasi 2011, n. p.)

Edem's escape to the swimming-pool introduces her innocent, timid reflections on the unequal circulation of global flows. The quote above demonstrates how hotels constitute "important gateway space[s] between the local and the global" (Davidson 2006, 169). Indeed, in hotels, locals and tourists can have direct contact with each other's world through the observation of one another's customs, behaviours, actions and belongings. Davidson's quote reinforces the character of hotels as spaces where different cultures and social classes come into close contact. What is more, these interspaces become "markers of social hierarchy and economic class" (van Herk 2014, 143) and constitute "gendered and racialized spaces, given the nature of the global division of labour" (Toivanen 2017a, 2), as this excerpt suggests: in spite of being located in Lagos, the customers of the hotel are mostly white. It is in this hotel that Edem has the opportunity to observe sunburnt, probably American or European, white women's obsession with getting tanned. This serves as a comment on the different practices performed by subjects from the global North and the global South, the former being the ones typically served by the latter. In addition to this, this scene also illustrates Doreen Massey's concept of "power geometry" (2013, 20), for it is mostly the white upper social classes of Europe and America that are involved in tourism mobility and thus are able to access this sort of privileged interspace. The fact that this "communal space" (Treadwell 2005, 216) of the swimming pool can be

appropriated by the lower-class West-African girl only at night, when there are no tourists, is illustrative of the fact that access to mobilities is conditioned by social groups' differentiated relative "power in relation *to* the flows and the movement" (Massey 2013, 149; original emphasis).

In the story, Dzifa is depicted as an "unmotherly mother" (Splendore 2002, 185) whose marginalised lifestyle serves to destabilise the hegemonic cultural conception of mothering, which is commonly located within the private space of the family home. As Anna-Leena Toivanen has argued, the hotel "is frequently conceived, both in fiction and in theory, as a place and symbol of in-betweenness, deviance and displacement" (Toivanen 2017a, 1). In Selasi's short story, however, the hotel becomes one of the settings where sexual violence occurs, in this case, in the form of the material exploitation and abuse of sex workers.

Dzifa's life story illustrates the effects of glocal gendered regimes in the life options of poor, uneducated women who strive to become financially independent in the global cities of the global South. Her vulnerable status is depicted as having been determined at birth by the gendered prejudices that sustain her mother's belief that because her father "was drowned in the river" (Selasi 2011, n. p.) just one day after she was born, Dzifa must be cursed. When, in her early teens she is withdrawn from school, because her mother is a "believer in boys-only education and a product of the same" (Selasi 2011, n. p.), Dzifa runs away and hitchhikes "her way to Nigeria", where she is to meet Edem's father, who eventually disappears when he learns that she is pregnant.

Although the reference to the hitchhiking episode is brief, it is not irrelevant in terms of her characterisation. Female hitchhiking "is paradoxically both constraining and resistant" (Gao et al. 2020) because of women's vulnerability in such travelling experiences. Given the restrictions imposed on her as regards education, hitchhiking

represents a liberating journey from the patriarchal family home. Dzifa is thus portrayed as a rebellious woman who rejects her own fate. However, her precarious status as a young, uneducated, migrant and unexperienced single mother in Lagos limits her options of finding economic independence through formal means, and so she finds in the informal economies of sex labour in high-end hotels a way of making a living.

Hotel-dwelling in “The Sex Lives” serves therefore to articulate a critique of the inequality and the global division of gender labour, where local women—and men—are employed in formal and informal service and care industries, often under exploitative arrangements. Whereas the hotel functions as a transfer point for global North professional travellers and tourists, who use the hotel amenities as temporary, in-between places of work, leisure, and rest (Urry 2007), for Dzifa and Edem, the hotel is a place of mooring, the only home they know, but also the place where Dzifa works 24/7. The gendered bourgeois separation of ‘home’ and ‘work’ spaces, and of the public and the private spheres, that have been pointed out by feminist scholars as unfunctional in most women’s realities, is reformulated in the story to account for the materialities of disenfranchised global South sex workers. The restricted mobility Dzifa and Edem experience in their everyday lives reflects therefore their limited social mobility and function as a metaphor for the precarity (Butler 2010) they are subjected to.



### 3.2. Upper-Class Female (Im)mobilities: Sexual Violence and Female Empathy

Although Dzifa seems doomed to precariousness, Edem will eventually move to Ghana, where she is given the opportunity to start a new life in his uncle's accommodated upper middle-class household. The theme of female immobility is further introduced immediately after that scene, in the description of the party Edem's family is hosting, an event that reaffirms their status as members of Ghanaian high society: "The young ones [girls] sit mutely [...] waiting to be asked to dance by the men in full suits [...] The bolder ones preening, little Aunties-in-training, being paraded around the garden, introduced to parents' friends" (Selasi 2011, n. p.). Their mobility restrictions are underlined by the fact that those of them who are moving around are accompanied by their parents, and comes to be defined metaphorically by the visible "complications" caused by wearing ostentous garments which include "the *gele*", "the ankle-length skirt" or "gold leather stilettos two sizes too small with a thick crust of sequins and straps of no use" (Selasi 2011, n. p.), which obstruct free walking:

You can barely manage movement in the big one-piece *buba* you borrowed from Comfort, your cousin [...] You've been tripping and falling around the garden all evening, with night-damp earth sucking at the heels of the shoes, the excess folds of the *buba* sort of draped around your body, making you look like a black Statue of Liberty. (Selasi 2011, n. p.)

The type of clothes these women wear represent an “intrusion” (Edensor 2013, 167) to their mobile rhythms, causing their “tripping and falling”, which ultimately leads to what Lindsey B. Green-Simms refers to as “suspended animation” (2017, 23) or moments of movement disruption. The conscientious account of their inability to move around freely is metaphorically conveyed through this description of their not very comfortable clothes, constituting a symbolic hint to the high degree of women’s physical and emotional immobility that is evident throughout this short story.

Women’s immobilities in “The Sex Lives” is further represented through the character of the housemaid, Ruby, who comes from “backwater bloody Lolito” (Selasi 2011, n. p.), as Auntie refers to the Ghanaian rural area she was also raised in. On a spatial dimension, the young woman is never depicted outside of the household. Her visible actions take place “[f]rom the washroom to the kitchen” (n. p.), but she also secretly frequents the study, where Edem finds her on one occasion engaged in oral sex with her uncle:

She was kneeling there neatly, skinny legs folded beneath her, her hands on his knees, heart-shaped face in his lap. The sound she made reminded you of cloth sloshing in buckets, as rhythmic and functional, almost mindless, and wet. Uncle whimpered bizarrely, like the dogs before beatings. (Selasi 2011, n. p.)

The sexual exploitation and abuse of the houseworker underlines her physical and figurative immobile condition. As with Edem’s wandering through the hotel, her walk

through the different rooms in the house is restricted by doors and thresholds she herself knows that should never be crossed.

The depiction of Ruby as a trapped and highly immobile female subject contrasts sharply with that of Comfort, Edem's cousin and Ruby's and Uncle's secret daughter. Comfort is characterised as a highly mobile Ghanaian of the world who is always on the move, someone with a high degree of motility who appropriates and uses the field of possibilities relative to movement available to her. She is studying at Oxford but has been at Harvard for an exchange programme for some months, and after the Christmas break, she is going back to Oxford again. Unlike her biological mother, Comfort's advantaged position as the daughter of a well-off Ghanaian family grants her unrestricted access to mobilities and global flows. Nonetheless, her tangible physical mobility does not translate into absolute freedom at the personal level, for she is tied to a fiancé she has not chosen, but has sex with one of the houseboys in secret. The characterisation of Comfort underlines the idea that the success of young girls from elite circles is not exclusively defined by studying at American and British universities, and having high degrees of motility, but also by having influential husbands from the same social class that tie them back to their culture of origin.

Although less relevant to the plot, automobility also reflects women's unprivileged position in this environment, where flashy luxury cars like Mercedes Benzes glamourise the atmosphere of the story. Although they enjoy an affluent social status, neither Edem nor her Aunt Khadijeh are financially independent or have total control over their own physical displacements outside of their household. Their mobility is circumscribed within the male-dominated social system in which women are valued as commodities and where "the only rung lower than motherless child is childless mother" (Selasi 2011, n. p.). This sentence is repeated twice—in the third and the final, ninth,

section—to confirm the story’s circular structure. It metaphorically symbolises the potential empathy Edem and Auntie develop for each other, for the former is depicted as a motherless child and the latter is a childless mother, performing the role of mother without having given birth to her child, Comfort. In addition to this, both Edem and her aunt are abused by their uncles, and it is only when this sentence is repeated at the end, when Auntie interrupts her husband’s attempt to abuse Edem, that solidarity emerges as a strategy to fight the sexual abuse, mistreatment, and abandonment they both suffer. Edem and her aunt embrace each other tightly while crying, a symbolic act that represents the emergence of an emotional bonding between the two women.

Only two distinct “driving-events” (Pearce 2017) take place in the short story, reflecting the difficulty its protagonists have in accessing mobility. A useful concept to describe a car journey in terms of the embodied perceptions and emotions it evokes, Lynne Pearce uses the notion of “driving-event” to distinguish a complete car journey from the diverse driving sequences it might be composed of. In her view, “driving-events” are the shorter units that have some sort of coherence in terms of “a driver’s [or passenger’s] thought-train and/or mood” (592). The notion of driving-event is helpful “to denote a unit of (mobilised) time-space that could be contrasted with others [...] and applied to the driver’s [and passenger’s] consciousness” (594). To borrow Pearce’s words, “each and every car journey [constitutes] a unique and non-reproducible event in the lives of the drivers and passengers concerned on account of the variable psychological and situational factors involved” (585). Edem’s and Auntie’s driving-event to Auntie’s uncle’s shop to invite Auntie’s mother to the party the family is hosting is defined by silence, inaction, and lack of agency, given that they are driven by Kofi, their chauffeur:

You sat in the back, silent with Auntie. You glanced at her quickly, holding her bag in your lap, trying to interpret her vacant expression. Did she know this morning after serving Uncle's breakfast, Ruby removed her little shirt and knelt between his knees? Would Uncle send you away if you shared this with Auntie? Would Auntie like you better if you did? (Selasi 2011, n. p.)

Referring to a potential revelation of the secret of infidelity that Edem has just discovered helps to position the car's backseats as a space which can potentially provide moments of empathy for Edem and her aunt. Nonetheless, Edem's imagined opportunities for the emergence of empathy that this physical proximity with her aunt may allow are not in fact realised in this space. This driving-event seems to be determined by an invisible unsurmountable boundary which impedes communication between them. From the car, Edem observes the eurhythmia that characterises West-African city life:

The market was crowded with Christmas returnees haggling unsuccessfully over the prices of trinkets. And the fray. The bodies pushed together in the soft rocking motions, the sellers shouting prices over heaps of yellowing fruit; the freshly caught fish laid in stacks of silvery carcasses, their eyes still open wide, as if with surprise at being dead. *You pushed through the traffic* to the back of the market and parked outside Mahmood the Jeweller's. (Selasi 2011, n. p.; emphasis added)

Edem's vantage point from the car allows her to observe the city's eurhythmia, in which she cannot participate. The multitude impedes the vehicle's free movement, evincing the fact that a car driving through highly populated and congested cities is defined by high degrees of friction and subsequent moments of "suspended animation" (Green-Simms 2017). In terms of social class, this scene also illustrates Paola Jiron's "tunnel effect" (2009), which alludes to the fact that African cities constitute places where people are "separated [...] by [...] boundaries that define their routes, speeds, times, forms and means of circulation and socialisation" (2009, 128). In this sense, the scene provides a powerful metaphor whereby the metal body of the Mercedes Benz marks a real and metaphorical boundary that isolates its passengers from the eurhythmia of West-African markets and impedes the protagonists from mixing with the lower classes.

After Auntie's mother refuses to come to the party and their subsequent argument in Auntie's uncle's shop, which is all witnessed by Edem, the driving-event that takes them back home is described as an ordinary one: "You got in the car. She got in the car. Kofi glanced back at her, started the car [...] Kofi pulled up to the gates and honked. George opened the gates with much clanging of locks. Kofi drove in, Benz tyres crunching white pebbles" (Selasi 2011, n. p.). Auntie and Edem do not exchange a single word. The apparent sense of solidarity on Edem's part indeed continues to be defined by a silent sort of empathy. The "automotive emotions" (Sheller 2004) generated by the two silent driving-events contribute to increasing Edem's sense of awkwardness and discomfort, which come to preside over the general tone of the story.

What is more, it is of note that the women are transported in a Mercedes Benz. Jonathan Haynes observes that this make of car "appears ubiquitously as the symbol of the desired good life, the reward of both good and evil, the sign of social status and individual mobility" in popular Nigerian and Ghanaian films (Haynes 2000, 2). Mercedes

Benzes “are key to [...] video films’ aesthetics of wealth and glamour” (Green-Simms 2017, 6), and they serve this same purpose in “The Sex Lives”, contributing to further characterise Edem’s foster family as well-off individuals belonging to the Ghanaian elite. Selasi’s choice of a Mercedes Benz also serves as an ironic comment highlighting the fact that “West African car driving has a certain gendered dynamic” (Green-Simms 2017, 10). And although it is Mercedes Benzes that many affluent businesswomen, known colloquially as Mama- or Nana Benzes, drive in West African countries, the female characters of this story are depicted as disempowered passengers who are not fully in charge of their mobilities, thus highlighting that “cars in West Africa are [...] associated with patriarchal power structures” (10).

The unfolding of events in Selasi’s short story takes on a more dramatic tone after Edem and her aunt arrive home from their brief excursion to Mahmood’s jewellery shop. Edem’s aunt, who returns home in disgust, ends up taking her bad mood out on Francis, the cook, and slaps him for using the kitchen that was not to her liking. Edem, who witnesses everything, has the reaction to chase after the cook.

You dropped Auntie’s bag and ran out the side door but you didn’t find Francis [the cook] so you ran down the path. You hurried through the thicket along the side of the kitchen between the house and the Boys’ Quarters to the garden, crying now. The rocks and knotted roots cut through the soles of your chale-watas as you pushed through the low-hanging leaves. (Selasi 2011, n. p.)

Selasi manages to increase the dramatic tone of the events thanks to the image of Edem going after the cook through the use of verbs such as “ran”, which is used twice, “hurried” and “push through” (n.p.) which reflect not only the girl’s difficulty in keeping up with Francis, but also the hostile environment in which the action takes place. The depiction of the garden as an unfriendly space through its “rocks and knotted roots” that impede Edem’s passing is further emphasised later in the text by the sudden “driving rain” which falls on her “shoulders and face like a weight” (n.p.). Edem’s confusion and her desire to escape from this house where she is unable to develop a sense of belonging are thus reflected in this scene through the use of the garden as an inhospitable space. Instead of an artificial space which provides direct contact with nature and where one can take a breath of fresh air, the garden constitutes an insecure space where the protagonist’s walk and eventual run is obstructed by natural as well as human disruptions.

The scene continues with her trespassing through “the little door across the garden”, which leads to the discovery of her cousin Comfort’s affair with Iago, one of the houseboys. Her aimless running from this discovery eventually results in her seeing the nude Francis having a shower, which “was too much to see in that moment” (n.p.). The angry cook invites her to “Regardez!” adding “*Je suis un homme, n’est-ce pas?*” (n.p.) asserting his male identity and power in front of a disempowered girl as a response to the denigrating situation he has just experienced—being slapped by Edem’s aunt Khadijeh. The girl’s wandering ends in her bedroom, which is apparently the only safe space for her in the house. Ultimately, Edem’s moving from one place to another in such a hostile environment, always within the limits of the garden, symbolises her status of immobility and lack of opportunities as a foster child in the family.

Selasi’s portrayal of some of her West African female characters’ extremely restricted and unequal access to mobilities and technologically-mediated mobility



systems in spite of their high motility or mobility potential underlines the fact that high degrees of motility do not automatically translate into actual movement, thus complicating Selasi's apparently oversimplified portrayal of Afropolitans as characters with easier access to global flows in her 2005 essay. Selasi's protagonists' sporadic access to automobility and their condition as passengers does not allow them to experience the supposedly liberation which emerges out of driving a vehicle. The sense of entrapment that defines both the protagonist's and her aunt's lives is conveyed by means of their restricted mobilities, which are circumscribed mainly by the private space of the house. In this sense, these female characters' individual rhythms fail to align with dominant spatio-temporal rhythms. For Edem's mother, her arrhythmia is forced, given her lack of choices after having rejected the gender roles assigned to her. Auntie's asynchronicity with imposed rhythms in Selasi's story is defined by her affluent middle-class status, which prevents her from participating in everyday mobilities. Women's mobilities in "The Sex Lives" ultimately challenge the dominant ideal of mobilities as smooth and uninterrupted displacements and instead emphasise the frictional and unequal character of (im)mobilities, which, for them, take place on very irregular and asymmetrical terms.

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**CHAPTER 4**

**ZOMBIFIED MOBILITIES IN CHIBUNDU ONUZO'S *WELCOME  
TO LAGOS***

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This chapter studies the representation of postcolonial interspaces and tourist mobilities in Chibundu Onuzo's novel *Welcome to Lagos* (2017). It focuses on the portrayal of a bridge that becomes a temporary home for the main group of characters and two different hotels whose representation allows for a discussion of issues of mobility justice. Onuzo's creative representation of a tourist in an uncommon tourist destination will also be discussed.

Chibundu Onuzo is a novelist of Nigerian origin who is considered one of the promising voices of African literature. She was the youngest female writer, at the age of twenty-one and while she was studying History at Kings College, London to be published by Faber & Faber. Her debut novel is titled *The Spider King's Daughter* (2012). Five years later, she published her second novel, *Welcome to Lagos* (2017), and her third one, *Sankofa*, was published in 2021. Her most recent novel is perhaps the one that best fits with the third-generation themes of diasporic identities, transnationality and dislocation. When asked about the influence of Western publishers in her works, Onuzo confesses that she had to adjust her language in her first novel after being told that copyeditors did not understand the novel, but she refused to do the same with her second, claiming that it is up to the author which language to use, and that mediators in the publishing industry should make suggestions that writers can accept or reject (Sahara TV 2018). Being the daughter of two doctors, Onuzo belongs to the Nigerian middle class, a feature she shares with most third-generation African female writers. Her middle-class status, however, has not prevented her from having contact with people from other social classes with whom she used to gather at mass when she was a child (Sahara TV 2018). This variety of people from different backgrounds is undoubtedly reflected in *Welcome to Lagos*, which portrays the "multivocality" (Zeleva 2007, 13) that defines third-generation African fiction.

*Welcome to Lagos* (2017) is a multifaceted novel that covers a wide variety of themes ranging from a critique of local corruption, foreign policies and African women's discrimination to religious issues, female solidarity and dislocation. Classified by Helon Habila (2017) as an attempt to redefine the genre of the "Lagos novel", this piece of fiction narrates the daily survival of a group of five runaway Africans—female and male—whose life paths become interwoven as they are on their way to Lagos to start life anew. This group of Africans comprises a military officer, Chike Ameobi, and his subaltern, Yemi, who are deserters disenchanted with the murders the military have carried out of non-military people in the Niger Delta; Fineboy, a rebel who wants to become a radio DJ in Lagos; Isoken, a young adolescent girl they save from being raped and whose father might have been murdered by rebels; and Oma, a woman who has abandoned her rich but abusive husband. Lacking the money or connections to make it in Lagos, this mixed interethnic group is everything other than "Welcome to Lagos", which underlines the ironic tone of the title. Habila observes that the "title is an in-joke referencing the fact that, unlike most cities, Lagos has no 'Welcome' sign" (Habila 2017, n. p.). Onuzo, however, does depict various advertising billboards that welcome the group to the city. The effect of translating these signs 'welcoming' them to Lagos is ironic, though, and can be read as a critique of what Onuzo herself defines as the failure and ineffectiveness of translating Western ways of doing things to African cities without taking into account the population and their reality, ignoring the fact that what works in the global North may not work in a completely different context (Sahara TV 2018).

The central plot of *Welcome to Lagos* addresses the topic of the failed Lagos promise. The "Lagos dream of sudden changes in fortune, the wheel always turning, non secure, top wobbling, bottom grasping, middle squeezed" (148) proves to be unachievable for the disadvantaged protagonists, who endure very difficult situations following their

arrival in the city, being forced to move from one place to another in search of secure shelter.

After being sojourners under a Lagosian bridge for some time, the improvised group moves into an apparently abandoned subterranean apartment which they eventually discover is owned by the fugitive Minister of Education, Chief Sandayo, who has stolen ten million dollars from the Basic Education Fund. When the runaway politician comes to their shelter, he becomes the group's prisoner. After discussing what they should do with the money the corrupt politician has brought with him, they agree to spend it on remodelling schools and providing them with the materials they are in such urgent need of. In spite of the minister's initial opposition, he eventually becomes a full member of the group, joining them in their daily tasks of buying and distributing school materials and equipment.

Onuzo's novel reflects the social reality of "about 2,000 souls [who] daily move from countryside to city to realise their dreams" (Habila 2017). Nigerians arrive in Lagos, which has become Africa's boom town with more than 9,000 millionaires (Draper 2015), thinking that anything is possible there, including getting rich. Indeed, "Be Very Rich" has become the city's slogan (Draper 2015, n. p.). So many people come to Lagos looking to change their luck that, according to Robert Draper, "Lagos has transformed itself into a city of Davids clamoring to become Goliaths" (2015, n. p.).

Apart from this, mobility is a constant throughout the novel, for mobility "and daily experiences on the road are a vital part of social life in Lagos: they are intertwined with identity, longing, and status in a way that seems particularly pressing and unrelenting" (Green-Simms 2017, 3). Nigerian cities' street life is frenetic, as Onuzo's depiction of Edipie Motor Park, in Yenagoa, illustrates: "It was a large, trampled field with vehicles of all sizes coming and going, small, dusty minivans, large, sleek luxurious

buses, trailers with art twisting all over their bodies, movement and noise and dust rising from the spinning tyres” (2017, 31). This quote is in line with the images of the front cover page and the back cover of the novel, which already unintentionally indicate the relevance of the mobility theme that recurs throughout the novel, since they include a colourful picture of a Lagosian street teeming with traffic: cars, motorbikes, buses, *danfos*—informal yellow minibuses—and *okadas*—motorcycle taxis with passengers sitting behind the driver—, as well as passers-by trying to zigzag across the road, dodging the vehicles and/or mingling with traffic. This image, which resembles Ato Quayson’s description (2014) of Oxford Street in Accra, constitutes a reflection of the lack of formal regulation that means West African streets are “characterised by a level of dynamism, spontaneity, and flexibility” (Green-Simms 2017, 11) which differentiates them from streets elsewhere. This portrayal of Nigerian roads, which “always smelt of exhaust, a lace of petrol on the atmosphere, smog in each breath” (Onuzo 2017, 114), as lively and dynamic spaces as well as the general aged condition of vehicles and the dangerous nature of Nigerian roads are repeatedly-addressed topics in Onuzo’s novel.

Last but not least, the narrative also highlights the clear correspondence of people’s social classes with the cars they drive. As Green-Simms observes, “many of the contradictions of modern Lagos play out on the road, in cars and around cars” (2017, 2). Indeed, the first thing that strikes the group leader, Chike, when they arrive in Lagos, is the “big cars, models [which] you would never see anywhere else in Nigeria” (Onuzo 2017, 66). Jeeps, Mercedes, Toyotas—Camry and Corolla—and Peugeots are some of the makes and models that appear in this novel, all of them contributing to illustrate the variety of cars that inhabit Nigerian roads. The novel also portrays the explicit discrimination against drivers and their differential treatment by traffic wardens on the grounds of the type of vehicle they are driving. A Peugeot is depicted as an ordinary

vehicle that “without even the mystery of tinted glass, must make its way slowly down the road like everyone else” (340). Through this type of comments, Onuzo criticises Nigerians’ conception of cars as material symbols of prosperity and signs of the “good life”.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4.1. Exploring Lagos’ Interspaces

Urry’s interspaces acquire relevance in Onuzo’s novel thanks not only to their importance in the development of the plot, but also to how they are portrayed and their significance in terms of the representation of mobility justice.

I contend that the way mobilities and interspaces are portrayed in this novel can be conceptualised as “zombified” to borrow Anna-Leena Toivanen’s term (2018) to define the representation of certain types of mobilities in postcolonial writings.<sup>6</sup> Thanks to its connection with colonial history, the zombie figure constitutes an appropriate metaphor through which to read mobilities in this novel. I borrow Toivanen’s notion of mobilities as “zombified” to refer not only to how the novel’s “travellers turn into zombie-like dehumanized, alienated figures who lack agency, emotion, and identity; [...] [and] are represented as threatening invaders” (Toivanen 2018, 3) of Lagos, but also to the poor state of infrastructures and to means of transport themselves, which ultimately symbolises the postcolonial state’s condition of stagnation when it comes to local corruption and the unequal distribution of wealth. In this sense, it cannot go unremarked that “Zombie” is

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<sup>5</sup> The connection of brands and type of cars with class status and the conception of certain cars as material symbols of prosperity and signs of the “good life” is also depicted in Imbolo Mbue’s *Behold the Dreamers* (2016), although the story is set in New York City.

<sup>6</sup> Note too that Toivanen applies the concept of “zombified mobilities” to the analyses of narratives dealing with undocumented migrants arriving in Europe.



the title that Onuzo gives to the first of the three parts the novel is divided into. In addition to this, the imagery used to describe mobilities and interspaces also revolves around abandonment, confinement, darkness, and images of death. The zombie metaphor is thus used as a lens through which to analyse the novel's representation of interspaces and the mobilities performed by this group of Nigerians, who, lacking agency, wander aimlessly through Lagos, unable to find a place and/or a position in this West African megacity with its uncertain number of inhabitants, estimated as between 14 and 20 million people (Adeshokan 2020). Three distinct interspaces figure prominently in the narration: a bus station, an inn, and a bridge.

The first depiction of interspaces is to be found at the beginning of the second part of the novel, where all the chapters are introduced by extracts taken from the fictitious *Nigerian Journal*, a publication led by David West, one of the secondary characters of the novel. Unlike the extracts leading into other chapters, this one has the epigraph "Monday Morning in Lagos". This introductory text is shaped as an extract from an editorial that describes the atmosphere in a bus station by focusing on the type of characters that frequent this space, including travellers, street vendors, and fraudsters. Despite having reached their desired destination, Onuzo's protagonists can only find themselves lost both physically and psychologically in this bustling location. Those who arrive in the bus station for the first time, the JJC's—Johnny Just Come—, as they are called in Nigerian slang to refer to a person who is naïve or new to a situation or a place, are classified into two types by West:

a JJC [see explanation above] with a destination and a JJC whose ambition saw no further than reaching the city. At first, they are indistinguishable. They both study the bus park with a dazed expression, taking in the hawkers with large trays

of groundnuts wobbling on their heads, the young boys walking aimlessly in groups. Lagos is no different from anywhere, except there are more people, and more noise, and more. But when they are done marvelling at the sameness of it all, one type continues on his way and the other remembers that he has nowhere to go. (Onuzo 2017, 71)

Except for Oma, who has already been to the city, the other characters can be classified as “JJs”, who perceive the interspace of the bus park as an insecure in-between space that may devour the innocent newcomers, who are exposed to a variety of dangers. While they seem to be masters of their own destiny through their taking an active position in their displacements on their way to Lagos, the group’s mobilities slow them down as soon as they reach Lagos and are overwhelmed by their surroundings. The description of the environment in the Lagos bus station can be analysed through the zombie metaphor, and it is two-fold. On the one hand, the comparison of the surroundings with a carnivorous living thing recalls the popular conception of zombies as flesh-eating monsters. On the other, the depiction of JJs as potential victims that wander aimlessly is also reminiscent of the zombie figure. This bus park can thus be considered to represent the megalopolis of Lagos as a whole, which is itself depicted as “a carnivore of a city that swallowed even bones” (Onuzo 2017, 324).

The zombified description of the megacity is emphasised with the introduction of numerous disgust-evoking images. Indeed, disgust and abjection define the portrayal of the two other crucial postcolonial interspaces (Urry 2007, 12) in Onuzo’s novel: a “rundown hotel” (Onuzo 2017, 85) called Tamara Inn, and a bridge, both of which constitute in-between places of refuge for the protagonists as they wander around the city

trying to find a safe place to live. The first nights after their arrival in Lagos, Chike and his companions, who still do not know each other well, stay at Tamara Inn, which is located in a humble “neighborhood of small businesses and modest houses, the industrial rumble of generators filling the air. Roadside food was there for the foraging” (78-79). This type of accommodation proves very convenient for this mobile group who evoke the figure of the vagrant: aimlessly moving from one place to another without a fixed destination.

Their interaction with this space, however, clashes with its denomination in the new mobilities paradigm as interspaces. Instead of constituting a mere transfer point, Tamara Inn becomes temporary home for the group, which acknowledges that lower classes may in fact have to live in inns as they offer cheaper accommodation and accept cash, day-to-day and/or week-by-week payments. In this way, Tamara Inn grants them a liberating feeling of anonymity, especially both for the deserters Chike and Yemi and for runaway Oma, who has abandoned her abusive husband. The inn becomes a source of “a homeliness that [is] outside or extraneous to the institutional construction of family home” (Treadwell 2005, 214). This homeliness is the starting point of a sense of cohesion and familiarity among the group. Tamara Inn might, therefore, be better classified as a *viscous interspace* in acknowledgement of the reduced speed and rhythm of the othered subjects that inhabit it. In order to understand the viscosity of such a place, it is worth focusing on its portrayal and on the use the protagonists make of the place as well as its possibilities and restrictions.

The gothic portrayal of the inn as deteriorated and empty of guests creates an undeniable atmosphere of abjection, darkness and abandonment that transcends the walls of the space. Apart from being “led to their room by torchlight” (Onuzo 2017, 79), there was an evident lack of cleanliness in the place: “the room’s curtains [...] a pale yellow

that showed the dirt” (79); there was a “mesh of mosquito netting nailed to the wooden window frames” (79) and the mattress had “a large brown stain, some waste product excreted or blood released” (81). The awakening of the emotion of disgust in the reader is immediate thanks to the implied reference to the preceding physicality and presence of the bodies of strangers. The reference to blood resonates in the description of the other relevant interspace that appears in the novel, the bridge, when describing hygiene routines of the characters.

Given that the five Nigerians “share one room” (Onuzo 2017, 79) in this deteriorated hotel, the bathroom becomes the only place which allows any form of privacy in this unwelcoming hotel room. Depicted as a space of refuge for young Isoken, the bathroom’s peculiar insularity allows her to cry freely, “the sound passing through the door and into the room” (80).<sup>7</sup> Despite this perception of bathrooms as protective and calm spaces, the circulation of disgust caused by “hairs in the drain” (84) also reminds the other woman of the group, Oma, of the proximity of the bodies of the others with whom she is sharing the hotel room. According to Sara Ahmed, “through disgust, bodies ‘recoil’ from their proximity, as a proximity that is felt as nakedness or as an exposure on the skin surface” (2004, 83). Since the hair in the drain is assumed to be pubic hair, with its implied proximity to the body’s orifices, this description further contributes to evoking fear of being contaminated with parts of others’ bodies.

In addition to this, it is also worth focusing on the distribution of the space within the room by the protagonists, where they organise themselves as follows: “Women on the bed, men on the floor, Fineboy as far away from the women as possible” (Onuzo 2017, 81). Given that Fineboy is characterised as a sexual predator, having been accused by

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<sup>7</sup> This portrayal of the toilet as a space of refuge can also be observed in Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go* (2013), for the youngest daughter of the family, who is bulimic, also uses bathrooms as a refuge where she finds peace (see García-Corte 2016).

Isoken of trying to rape her, Chike makes sure he has no interaction with the women of the group. This serves as a commentary on the vulnerability of women in this type of environment. The depiction of the characters' "spatial practices" (LeFebvre 1992) in such a space also emphasises "the impossibility of separation or personal distance in limited quarters" (2005, 215) as argued by Treadwell.

The portrayal of the inn contrasts with other types of spaces offering accommodation for travellers that appear in the narrative, and serves as a commentary on the lack of mobility justice. When she goes to the bathroom, the oldest woman of the group, Oma, cannot help remembering the type of hotels to which she had grown accustomed. Oma frequented "hotels with continental breakfasts and satellite TV" with "service on silver trays and in-house dry cleaning", as well as king-size beds (Onuzo 2017, 84). Thinking about these differences between types of indoor accommodation, Oma reflects on her precarious position after making the decision to leave her husband.

This more upscale hotel is precisely the type where a crew of journalists stays when they come to Lagos to interview the fugitive Minister of Education Chief Sandayo, because of his theft of money. Sandayo had been convinced to be interviewed by the BBC by the founder and senior editor of the *Nigerian Journal*. The two main journalists in the crew that interview Sandayo are BBC veteran David West, the white presenter of the programme on which the interview is to be broadcasted, and the black BBC correspondent in Lagos, Richard Brown. Located in a privileged area from which they can observe yachts, this hotel is just the opposite of Tamara Inn.

It is worth analysing the observations on this hotel by these privileged subjects, as well as the use made of it. David West is worried that "Caucasians draw attention in this place" (Onuzo 2017, 262), while Richard Brown denies it and points out that it only happens outside the hotel. To this end, their hotel is portrayed as a secure space and a

meeting point for upper-class peoples from different places of origin, as is confirmed by West's observation of peoples from diverse ethnic groups: "There were other white men [...] Shorts-and-sandals types in a room full of ties. There were Chinese too, buttoned up in collared shirts and black suits, their professionalism matching the dark wood flooring" (262). West's clichéd observation of the people staying at this hotel is mediated by his Westernised gaze: white people are identified as affluent tourists whereas the Chinese are represented as hard-working businessmen.

As regards the journalists' use of this hotel, there are interesting observations to make about the racist attitude of one of them. The hotel is the setting where a serious fight for power between them occurs, as it is in this space that Brown defies West's authority on two different occasions. Firstly, Richard Brown starts a meeting with the crew without West having arrived, and secondly, at this same meeting, he sits "in a comfortable armchair" leaving "the high rattan stool with its low back for West" (Onuzo 2017, 263). Brown's bid for authority finds its expression through the use of the hotel furniture, and this defiance continues later on when Brown tries to persuade West that, as a Lagosian, he would be the best person to drive the news van on the pretext that he would blend in better with the local crowd. Thus, their dispute about who should be in charge of the mission continues after they leave the hotel to go to Chief Sandayo's apartment. While Brown is empowered by performing his "manic driving" (Onuzo 2017, 264) through the heavy Lagosian traffic, West's disempowerment is portrayed by means of his status as a passive passenger who has no option but to rely on the driver in order to arrive safe and sound at their destination.

Interestingly enough though, West takes an active position through once again projecting his Westernised gaze while observing the city through the van window. He classifies the Lagos architecture as "Third World concrete, of a style he had seen from

Bangladesh to Burundi, square, heavy-set buildings, made for colder climates, hot as coffins inside” (Onuzo 2017, 264). In his observations, West makes generalisations about the whole country, taking Lagos as a microcosm of the global South. His colonial attitude is made evident through his superficial reflections about the country, highlighting the litter accumulated on the Lagos streets, and the city’s overpopulation and apparently orderless “hodgepodge” character (Simone 2004, 1). West’s attitude is reinforced through the introduction of him taking notes on his observations, just as the early colonial writers used to do: “He wrote down ‘static electricity’ under Ojodo, their destination. It sounded exotic, not to be found in the midst of this squalid city” (Onuzo 2017, 264). West’s racist attitude, which only lets him see the city’s faltering appearance, is an indication of his embodiment of cultural colonialism. West’s discourse is colonial as is suggested in his surname and the name of the BBC programme he fronts, “West Presents”.

Returning to the analysis of the numerous interspaces that appear in the novel, there is one last interspace I would like to focus on, which is the bridge where the protagonists move to on two different occasions. The first time is right after their stay at Tamara Inn. Bridges such as this one can also be classified as interspaces, for they are characterised by travellers’ intermittent movement. It is of note that the gothic description of this particular bridge includes a comparison with a market:

The bridge arched above them all, vaulting as high as the roof of a cathedral, shading them from the sun. Their new home might as well have been a market: hawkers sauntered by, holding their wares to passing traffic while traders sat beside fresh fruit and vegetables, waiting for customers to beckon. Thin, agile conductors hung from moving danfos, calling for passengers. Students in packs of

brown, green and purple uniforms ambled home, buttons undone, shirttails flapping. (Onuzo 2017, 93)

The gothic comparison of the bridge to a cathedral underlines its darkness and its zombified nature. My classification of such a space as an abject *viscous* interspace is motivated by the description of the transactions taking place there, which are similar to those conventionally performed in Western train or bus stations, spaces which Urry (2007) specifically classified as interspaces, where, in addition to trains, buses and travellers, there are also food stalls to facilitate the transit of the people passing through. Unlike stalls in Western stations, which are usually protected by glass to separate food from passers-by, the food stalls under the bridge are improvised and do not have a fixed place assigned to them. The dynamic character of the bridge is emphasised through the description of the mobilities of diverse people and highly mobile subjects, such as street vendors and travellers, underlining the fact that high degrees of mobility do not necessarily imply that the subjects who are moving in fact have a high motility. Actually, street vendors and the inhabitants of the bridge have low degrees of motility in the sense that most of them have no choice but to lead a mobile life. Aside from the variety of peoples and transactions carried out in this space, “[t]he bridge-dwellers spoke different languages, worshipped different gods, supported different premiership teams” (Onuzo 2017, 101). The bridge is portrayed as a space of encounter for peoples from different backgrounds, symbolising a microcosm of West Africa at large, which is “an incredibly diverse region with hundreds of different ethnic groups and religions, different histories of European colonization, and different postcolonial political realities” (Green-Simms 2017, 10). AbdouMaliq Simone remarks that “keeping hundreds of diversities in some



kind of close attachment [is what] gives many African cities their appearance of vitality” (2004, 1).

The zombified character of the bridge becomes observable in the evening, when “cars still clogged the road but the nature of pedestrians had changed. Men, young men, shirtless for the most part with trousers that sagged and showed pelvic contours, strutted about” (Onuzo 2017, 93-94). The bridge’s portrayal at night is thus quite different to its appearance in the daylight hours: changing from its daytime character as a meeting point and an interchange station defined by uninterrupted movement that makes dwelling there “a battle” (119), and almost impossible, to a night-time uncomfortable space populated by sinister, shabby, and zombified subjects, which evinces women’s vulnerability in this environment.

Women’s vulnerability in this particular interspace is emphasised by focusing on the abject experience of the female members of the group, which contributes to highlighting the uninhabitable character of the bridge. Given that “[h]ygiene was not an option” (Onuzo 2017, 119) there, they find it even more challenging than their male companions to live in such a hostile postcolonial interspace, “so close to beggars and open-air defecation” (120), “in plain view of passers-by, like animals in a zoo, their every action on display” (313). The feeling of being exposed to strangers’ gazes reinforces the idea that the space is defined by abjection. The impoverished group undergoes a process of dehumanisation due to the exposure of their daily routines to others, as the following passage makes evident. Chike, who “liked to watch [Oma] in the mornings” (98), observed how

she put the flannel under her clothes, her hands moving vigorously, lingering under her armpits, and then finally she passed a second flannel, reserved especially

for that purpose it seemed, between her legs. Sometimes she would inspect this auxiliary towel, bringing it close to her face. Once it came away with blood and Oma had begun to cry. He had turned away at this inexplicable grief over her menses. (Onuzo 2017, 98)

Abjection manifests itself in this scene that follows the path of Oma's flannel all over her body and ends with a reference to menstruation, which is one aspect of bodily experience that "unsettle[s] bodily integrity" (Tyler 2013, 27); Oma's hygienic routine thus evokes the circulation of the disgust discourse. However, the repulsive nature of blood seems to hold a fascination for Chike in that Oma's menstruation does not prevent her from becoming the object of his voyeurism. Chike's male gaze projects its phantasy onto Oma. Despite being so involved in obtaining visual pleasure from observing the woman's personal hygiene routine, the leader of the group is incapable of inferring the woman's terrible discomfort at having to menstruate before the eyes of strangers. Oma's sense of unease caused by her menstruation while in this place underlines the uninhabitable character of the bridge for female subjects. Feminist psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva defines menstrual blood as abject, as that which is "ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" (1982, 1). Menstruating bodies, which do "not respect borders, positions, rules" (4), help to evince the female characters' disadvantaged position on the mobility ladder, especially when being forced to cohabit with strangers in uncommon places.

In spite of its condition as an uninhabitable space, the bridge, which is governed by "a strange chaotic order" guaranteed by the levy its inhabitants pay in exchange of "security" (Onuzo 2017, 91), eventually comes to constitute a home away from home for

the group. In order to arrive at this point, they have settled on their own “evening ritual” (121): listening to Chike reading some passages from the Bible. According to Taiye Selasi, rituals are key, together with relationships and restrictions, to validate one’s locality. Selasi’s concept of ritual recalls David Bissell’s definition of “habit” (2013), which he describes as “a force that orients all mobile life” and “provides us with the comfort of familiarity” (483). Even though the characters feel unsafe due to being surrounded by strangers, this acquired ritual or habit of reading the Bible contributes to the emergence of a feeling of locality or homeliness that helps them cope with their precarious situation. This “spatial practice” (LeFebvre 1992) constitutes the starting point of a ritual that is going to continue to be performed later in their subterranean apartment and anywhere they reside. In an interview, Chibundu Onuzo explains that in introducing Chike’s connection to the Bible, she was not interested in exploring the Church as an institution, but rather “the individual’s relationship to the text” that “Christians use to assist their faith” (Sahara TV 2018). She assures that Chike only explores the ideas that are in the text, and for this reason, she does not consider him a Christian, but rather an explorer because he explores his faith and his Christianity. Onuzo adds that she wanted to explore this relationship because it is something that is not usually reflected in fiction.

The relationship of the characters with the interspace of the bridge is further explored when they come back to it. After their first stay sleeping under the bridge, the protagonists move into an abandoned “fully furnished two-bedroom basement apartment” (2017, 117), which turns out to be owned by Chief Sandayo. Indeed, the fugitive Minister of Education seeks refuge in his apartment in Lagos on the run while the protagonists are already living there. Although the group and Sandayo reach an agreement to live together in this space, the group is forced to abandon it after the Minister of Education’s arrest.

Chike and his companions have no choice but to return to the bridge, which they now see as “a strange place” (322):

They had lost the rhythms of the space, the art of sleeping amidst the nightly disturbances. They had forgotten the crude privations, the indignities of furtive squatting, the embarrassment of a buttock exposed. They had forgotten that day was always shaded, sunlight blocked out by the bridge, and night was never night, carousing fires burning till the morning. (322)

The description of their second stay at the bridge underlines its abjection through the introduction of the “furtive squatting” (322) as well as the stress on the darkness and dangerous nature of this space. Besides, it shows the evident state of arrhythmia of the group members, not only in relation to the rhythm of the city at large, but also to a space whose “mobile eurhythmia” (Edensor 2013) had previously been overcome by the group. Even though they had once managed to make their movements agree with the dominant spatiotemporal conventions and routines of this interspace, they can no longer do the same, after having enjoyed the privileges of rhythms connected to the more advantaged space of Sandayo’s apartment. The mobile rhythms that flow and constitute the bridge seem to have a destructive effect on the group’s mood, which ultimately leads them to a state of arrhythmia and dislocation.

Their second stay at the bridge is interrupted by a gun attack triggered by a dispute between a group of criminals and some inhabitants of the bridge, led by Chairman, who was the person posing as the president of the bridge, to whom anyone who wanted to sleep there had to pay a fee. As soon as the group realises what is going on, Chike

orders the group to walk away slowly one by one until they reach the main road, but Oma cannot move because she is in a state of panic. This depiction of Oma's state of paralysis can be read as symbolising the group's state of arrhythmia. There is just one way for them to make Oma move; Chike sings a nursery rhyme which evokes her childhood, and she eventually stands "like a toddler, pushing herself up from the ground with her hands" (Onuzo 2017, 325) as she signals to Chike to keep singing. By recalling Oma's habits in the past, she is able to recover from her state of paralysis. Terrified, the group manages to abandon the bridge and reach an "empty road lit by street lamps, standing guard like tall metal sentries. The city was empty, an architect's model of a place, the pavement stretching barren for miles" (326).

Aside from the introduction of disgust-evoking interspaces, imagery that evokes the abjection of abandonment and degradation is also recurrent throughout the novel. As such, abjection not only manifests itself through grotesque imagery linked to interspaces, but also through the description of cars and infrastructures. *Welcome to Lagos* is populated with images of decay related to mobility: abandoned cars, such as the one that "stood rotting in the sun, propped on four cement blocks, its tyres, mirrors and bumpers long gone to a younger model" (Onuzo 2017, 27), buses with "coin-size holes through which you could see the road streaking by" (75), and the poor condition of roads, full of "potholes" and "bump[s]" (65). These images, together with Nigerians' careless driving, makes death a conscious threat present in local travellers' minds before setting out on a journey. Before the driver starts the bus that takes the group of protagonists to Lagos, the passengers decide to pray: "We command that no accident shall befall us"; "We declare that we haven't set out on a night when the road is hungry"; "I wash the wheels of the bus with the blood of Jesus" (36). Their faith is presented as the only tool they have to fight against the poor state of means of transport and infrastructures. Passengers have

infrastructural longing, an evident feeling of being “stuck, night and day, dreaming of infrastructure” (Yaeger 2007, 5).

Lindsey B. Green-Simms observes that “because [Nigerian] roads are often inadequately maintained and are statistically some of the most dangerous in the world [...] and because automobiles are often quite old, car travel in West Africa has a distinct, precarious quality” (2017, 10). The dangerous nature of Nigerian roads is emphasised with the introduction of Chike’s recollections of a bus accident where a “bus hit them from behind and the whole back row died instantly, spines snapped” (Onuzo 2017, 33), as well as of his father’s death at 28 in another bus accident “caused by witchcraft, an evil spell that sent the bus spinning off the road” (128)<sup>8</sup>. As infrastructural elements are metonymical parts of the country, the abject state of roads and infrastructures stresses the various national failures that are part of the reality of independence and the lack of success of the “infrastructural dreams of decolonisation” (Green-Simms 2017, 55).

There is, however, one important construction in Lagos: The Third Mainland Bridge, which is ironically described as “a concrete millipede curving over the lagoon for miles, built by an African government, a feat of engineering unnoticed by the rest of the world” (Onuzo 2017, 247). This comment serves as a critique of the global dynamics that continually ignore Africa and Africans. This bridge has, however, an ambivalent status: in spite of being an impressive modern construction which proves that Africans’ “aspiration to modernity has been an aspiration to rise in the world in economic and political terms; to improve one’s way of life, one’s standing, one’s place-in-the-world” (Ferguson 2006, 32), the Third Mainland Bridge does not prove to be fully useful due to the awful traffic jams that drivers find themselves trapped in on a daily basis. This ambivalence can be read as a metaphor of Africans’ impossibility of achieving “global

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<sup>8</sup> The dangerous nature of West African roads is also addressed in Imbolo Mbue’s *Behold the Dreamers* (2016), where the protagonist’s wife and son stayed in hospital after a bus accident.

modernity”, which Lindsey B. Green-Simms defines as “a paradoxical, sometimes aspirational, and often uneven experience that has much more to do with ‘relations of membership’ [...] than with teleological projects of modernization or with a deterritorialized, new (capitalist) world order” (2017, 21-22). In other words, access to this “global modernity” does not depend exclusively on the level of development of the infrastructural elements of a country, but is already determined by the world geo-economic order, defined by the very poor development, which is nonetheless unequal across regions and countries, which continues to exclude most African countries and their inhabitants.

#### **4.2. The Lagos Precarious Tourist**

The zombified abject nature of mobilities in *Welcome to Lagos* is accentuated with the introduction of the figure of the Lagos tourist and his visit to an unexpected touristic destination. Even though Oma, who acts as the group’s caregiver, cooking and cleaning in Sandayo’s apartment, wishes to be “brave enough to climb into a danfo and discover a destination” (Onuzo 2017, 120), she never dares to become a tourist, given her disadvantaged position in the mobility ladder as a female subject. It is Yemi who embodies the figure of the Lagos tourist in Onuzo’s novel, which serves as a critical comment about the unequal access to tourist mobilities by male and female Nigerians. Whereas Oma is confined to the enclosed basement apartment, discreet Yemi finds a way to escape the domestic sphere and the group’s voluntary occupation as distributors of school equipment and materials by becoming “a tourist in Lagos” (295).

Thanks to Yemi and his savings, and to some money taken from Chief Sandayo's 'stash', "he would enter a bus, not minding the destination the conductor was calling, riding all over the city" (Onuzo 2017, 296). Travelling on the bus, Yemi "had been to beaches, sinking into loose sand, gathering shells into his pockets; drawing near the worshippers in white garments that fluttered like wings; stepping at last into the ocean" (296). Another place that he had been to was "a protected forest", where he had "plung[ed] into the emerald silence of seventy-eight hectares of undisturbed habitat" and had hired a guide to discover "the reserve's animals" (296). Moreover, "[h]e had visited a small village of artists, cane weavers, painters and sculptors, moving through their exhibitions for free" (296). These trips on the bus allow the deserter to enjoy one of the key pleasures of the sightseeing experience, that is, "the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions" (MacCannell 1999, 49).

The first places Yemi chooses to visit as a tourist—the beach, the protected forest and the small village—can be classified as typical tourist destinations, which are configured and reconfigured by the "socially organised and systematised tourist gaze" (Urry and Larsen 2011, 1). According to John Urry and Jonas Larsen, "the concept of gaze highlights that looking is a learned ability and that the pure and innocent eye is a myth" (2011, 1). In spite of "not minding the destination" (Onuzo 2017, 296), Yemi ends up in places which are conventionally conceived as tourist-oriented destinations. His preference for natural, calm, or forbidden spaces as a way to escape the decadence of the big metropolis is "socio-culturally framed" (Urry and Larsen 2011, 2). Given that "acting as a tourist is one of the defining characteristics of being 'modern'" (4), this performance allows Yemi to flirt with "the 'modern' experience" (5), for being a tourist "has become



a marker of status in modern societies and is also thought to be necessary for good health and a cosmopolitan outlook” (5).

Furthermore, the peaceful destinations of Yemi’s trips can be read as a metaphor of his apparent state of arrhythmia, which has demonstrated that “the Lagos Dream of sudden changes in fortune” (Onuzo 2017, 148) is not available to him. Despite having arrived in the city with great aspirations, seeking anonymity as well as professional success, Yemi, like his companions, only achieves anonymity in abject poverty.

The tourist-like mobilities undertaken by Yemi constitute “a limited breaking with established routines and practices of everyday life” (Urry and Larsen 2011, 3). Although his presence in the city, like that of his peers, is defined by invisibility, being reduced to poor and dark areas of the city, such as the shabby hotel they inhabit, the space beneath the bridge and the underground apartment they furtively squat in, his visit to the tourist areas of the city challenges the motility assigned to him as a member of Lagos underclass. Although some members of the group once belonged to the affluent social classes, once they leave their former lives, their motility is clearly impaired. Their high mobility is therefore clearly not a consequence of a high degree of motility. Quite the contrary, their high mobility is not a choice. Their inability to find stable work in the city leads them all to wander through numerous interspaces, adopting them as dwellings. By taking an active position to reclaim the spaces of the city for himself, Yemi’s wanderings as a tourist seem to “challenge the spatial boundaries separating social classes”, which is how Patricia Bastida-Rodríguez (2014, 206) also interprets some of the trips of the prostitute protagonist in Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street* (2009). Yemi’s traversing of distinct spaces in the city helps him fantasise about belonging to the upper social classes. If as Adrian Franklin argues, “to be a tourist (to be mobile, travelled, connected and without overriding ties and commitments to a locale) is how a successful

life is now measured” (2013, 75), Yemi tourist mobility can be read as a way to access “global modernity” (Green-Simms 2017).

One of Yemi’s trips takes him to a very unconventional tourist destination: Makoko-Iwaya Waterfront, which is how the Lagos State Government and NGOs refer to one of the biggest slums in Lagos. Now a huge shantytown defined by its poverty, Makoko was founded as a fishing village in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Ogu Togolese and Beninese fishermen, who were gradually forced to construct homes on the water as land ran out (Ogunlesi 2016). It is estimated that more than one million people reside there under constant threat of eviction, due to a relatively recent massive demolition of shacks that took place in 2012 which left thousands of families without shelter. It has been denounced at international levels but the government has never made any effort to provide its inhabitants with proper infrastructures and healthy living conditions.

Composed of six separate villages that spread across land and water, Makoko is testament to the enduring harsh living conditions of many people in Nigeria, where “[m]ore than half of [its] residents live in slum settlements, according to the 2015/2016 Slum Almanac” (Adeshokan 2020). In Togu Ogunlesi’s view, “Makoko is the perfect nightmare for the Lagos government—a slum in full view, spread out beneath the most travelled bridge in West Africa’s megalopolis” (2016), the Third Mainland Bridge. According to Ogunlesi, Makoko “shares with Lagos the exceptional situational inventiveness that makes the entire city tick” (2016, n. p.). Certainly, its overpopulation is a symptom it shares with urban Lagos, as well as its incredibly vibrant energy, since both adults and children living here have found their own ways of making money from activities such as fishing, building new constructions, and dredging in very adverse and risky conditions. Life in Makoko is portrayed in the second part of the British three-part observational documentary series “Welcome to Lagos” that was broadcasted on BBC2 in

the United Kingdom in 2010, which depicts life in three of the poorest slums in Lagos, and life in the shantytown in Kuramo beach. Apart from Makoko, it also shows the routine of scavengers at the Olusosun rubbish dump, who look for materials that can be recycled and sold. Given that it only focuses on life in slums, highlighting “the squalor and deprivation”, this documentary has been criticised “for being reductive and negatively skewed” (Akpome 2018, 1).

The passage that includes Yemi’s visit to Makoko is relatively short, reduced to a brief four-page chapter. However, the discursive purposes which the representation of the slum serve is worthy of analysis, for Onuzo’s representational strategies of Makoko reveal an undeniable abject condition that aligns with the depiction of the previously addressed interspaces. Aghogho Akpome defines slums as “overcrowded settlements [that] are characterized by ecological pollution, filth, abject poverty and the total lack of social amenities” (2018, 4). Such “postcolonial urban dystopian spaces” (Akpome 2017, 106) are symptomatic of the “out-of-control” (Wollaston 2010, n. p.) urbanisation of Lagos, which is the result of both local and global factors. The main factors, according to Akpome (2018) are: the ever-increasing rural-urban migration, political and administrative failures during the colonial period that caused racial segregation which laid the foundations for the inequality that prevails today, and political instability after independence from British rule. According to Gareth A. Jones and Romola Sanyal (2015), the slum has come to constitute “a popular subject for novelists, journalists and academics” and they “are increasingly also the site and the subject of tourism, art, film and documentary” (434). Yemi’s presence in the Makoko slum as a tourist is significant because the slum “has become the locale through which concerns for the human condition are expressed” (Jones and Sanyal 2015, 434). What is more, the inhabitants of slums

represent “a particular group whose fate stands for the injustice of today’s world” (Žižek 2004, n. p.).

Yemi’s presence as a tourist in Makoko is relevant, given that tourists are not welcome there. Actually, Makoko’s residents have become “wary [...] of the ‘tourists’ [...] who stream past, cameras in hand”. The reason for this is that “there’s a widespread feeling that many of the people who come to Makoko to take photographs do so to make money off it—to raise funds from which the people of Makoko will never benefit” (Ogunlesi 2016, n. p.). Actually, according to Ogunlesi, “in the minds of Makoko’s children, the [...] camera has come to symbolise white privilege” (2016, n. p.). John Urry and Jonas Larsen also remind us that “photography is central within the modern tourist gaze” (2011, 14). The dehumanizing impact of the camera cannot be ignored, given its association with Western superiority towards postcolonial subjects. Cameras are key to what Stuart Hall defines as “the spectacle of the other”(1997), and to the production of a space as a spectacle. Yemi, however, brings no camera to perform his tourist role more credibly. His tourist gaze cannot help but objectify his surroundings though. The people he observes are still subjected to the process of othering which is inherent to the tourist gaze, a “gaze that orders and regulates the relationships between the various sensuous experiences [...] identifying what is visually out-of-ordinary, what are relevant differences and what is ‘other’” (Urry and Larsen 2011, 14). As John Urry and Jonas Larsen observe, “gazing is a performance that orders, shapes and classifies, rather than reflects the world” (2).

In the description of Makoko in the novel, Chibundu Onuzo deploys reiterative imagery of filth and disorder that can ultimately lead to the slum being considered a spectacle for the tourist gaze, and by extension, for the Western reader. Indeed, as Aghogho Akpome argues when considering the portrayal of slums in the BBC

documentary series “Welcome to Lagos”, “the harsh life of Lagos slums may serve as a source of entertainment to some Western audiences, it may also echo stereotypical depictions of Africans as ‘savages’ in colonial narratives” (2018, 3). Given the part it plays, I will now focus on Onuzo’s depiction of the slum, with a particular emphasis on images of abjection that evoke shock and disgust in Yemi’s trip to the slum.

Makoko’s water city, whose houses “stood high on [their] stilts, [their] wooden ankles bathing in salt water” (Onuzo 2017, 297), is described as being characterised by “grey houses and their rusted roofs spread[ing] like a sheet”, “soggy swamp crisscrossed with wooden planks”, as well as “the rubbish drifted together in small islands” (297). By focusing on its vastness, the slum can be read as a representative element of the city of Lagos, constituting a metonym for the whole country. The disorder that prevails in the slum thus extends to the whole city, and the country. Actually, Makoko reminds the protagonist of other slums in the Niger Delta. In spite of Yemi’s familiarity with constructions on the sea, though, he is impressed by the dimensions of this particular place. By highlighting the vast amounts of rubbish in the slum, the emotion of disgust is immediately awoken in the reader. The inherent difficulty of displacements through the soggy swamp points to the impact of friction in Yemi’s mobility. His viscous mobility through the slum finds its reflection in the alternative rhythm of other inhabitants of Makoko: “Lightweight canoes moved between buildings, their owners paddling lightly to steer. They were selling things, drifting from door to door, passing up plates of food and fresh fruit, sliced and wrapped in cellophane” (Onuzo 2017, 297). The water helps to create a viscous atmosphere which contrasts with the frenetic rhythms of the roads in the megacity of Lagos.

Furthermore, the abject nature of the slum is highlighted in a scene where Yemi asks a series of questions to the improvised guides that take him around the slum in a

canoe. Yemi wants to know about the daily routines of Makoko's residents and the subsequent answers evoke the circulation of disgust:

“Where do you go to toilet?”

“In the water”

“Where do you have your bath?”

“In the water. It's enough for everybody.”

“What work do you do here?”

“Many of us are fishermen” (Onuzo 2017, 298)

Yemi then realises that water is the place that the slum inhabitants use as a toilet, as well as a source of food and hygiene. The allusion to the circulation of fluids and objects through human bodies and the unclean water is felt as disgusting, and serves as a critique of the environmental degradation and unhealthy conditions they are forced to live in.

The circulation of disgust that takes place here, together with the slow-motion wanderings of Makoko's inhabitants come to emphasise the zombified, nature of the types of mobilities represented in the novel. The imagery that revolves around deterioration, darkness and death figure prominently throughout the text, as it dominates as well the depiction of Tamara Inn and the space beneath the bridge. These “infrastructures of feeling” (Green-Simms 2017) emerge out of the characters' interactions with the selected interspaces they inhabit and visit, and highlights the powerful dehumanising and alienating effects of mobility injustices in contemporary

global cities. *Welcome to Lagos* shows that there is no place for deserters, reformed embezzler politicians or outcasts like wives who abandon their husbands and orphans in a world of extreme wealth inequalities. The lack of opportunities and extreme precariousness that Yemi, Oma, Chike, Fineboy, and Isoken experience in Lagos finds its reflection in the zombified mobilities and disgusting interspaces they perform and inhabit in their everyday lives.

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**CHAPTER 5**

**LITERARY AEROMOBILITY (IN)JUSTICES:**

**A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**

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This chapter focuses on the production of meanings of aeromobilities and the role of aeromobility scenes in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), and Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016). More specifically, it explores the diverse meanings of aeromobility within the context of two aeromobile identities, that of first-time air travellers and that of migrant returnees, in order to contribute to understanding African experiences of mobility (in)justice. This study of the portrayals of aeromobility challenges the idea that Afropolitan narratives are worldly, positive and have a significant lack of engagement with national, ethnic or religious problems, for they depict aeromobility not as unimpeded but marked by hindrances.

By studying scenes of aeromobility of West African first-time air travellers and migrant returnees in the selected fiction, the aim of this chapter is three-fold: first, to analyse the characters' emotional and physical interaction with space and with other travellers as they transit through the "Airworld" (Durante 2020), in an attempt at shedding light on questions of access and mobility justice; second, to reveal which classification—postcolonial interspaces, heterotopias or non-places—best fit the representation of airports in these novels; and, finally, to discuss the narrative purposes of aeromobility scenes. The study of literary portrayals of aeromobilities in these works builds on Erica Durante's (2020) discussion of the prominent position of representations of aeromobility in contemporary works of fiction. I also follow cultural and literary critic Christopher Schaberg, who claims that "literature offers a critical point of entry for seeing how airports [and air travel] function culturally, socially, psychologically, philosophically" (2013, 2).

In order to study the representation of aeromobility in the selected novels, I will classify air travellers into two different types of identities. Firstly, I will focus on the

experiences of first-time travellers who move from the global South to the global North by paying attention to the narration of the aeromobile displacements of two young African female characters in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*. Secondly, I will analyse the portrayal of aeromobility in cases of forced displacements by "vulnerable passengers" (Durante 2020, xvii). For this, I will focus on the identities of the deportee and the migrant returnee by examining Obinze's experience in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* and of the two main characters in Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*.

Aeromobilities are conceived as being composed of various stages, which start before arriving at the airport terminal. I discuss therefore the portrayal of transfers to the airport, for these moments contextualise the circumstances of departures and sometimes constitute relevant narrative transitions that may be of more relevance than the aeromobility scenes *per se*. My analysis pays particular attention to the emotions and affects that the different events and stages of aeromobility evoke in the selected characters, as these reveal important aspects about the literary representation of mobility justice.

### **5.1. First-time Air Travellers: From Distress to Hope**

The analysis of the depiction of the use of different means of transport to get to airports give us valuable information about the contextual factors of flight experiences. The description of the characters' interaction with the means of transport and the implied circulation of affects can shed light on the (in)voluntary nature of air travel. This is the case in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009), which includes relevant passages depicting two young women's journey to the airport and the circumstances that lead them

to take an international flight. Unigwe's novel presents the story of four West African women—Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce—whose paths cross in Antwerp, where they are forced sex workers and share a flat. The novel draws attention to an often-invisibilised dimension of undocumented migration: that of women trafficked for sex work (Bastida-Rodríguez 2014). The novel alternates chapters that narrate conversations among these sex workers with the narration of each of the character's individual stories.

*On Black Sisters' Street* has received much attention from literary critics, who have focused on the depiction of sexual exploitation (Adeaga 2021; Bastida-Rodríguez 2014; Chukdwudi-Ofoedu 2017; Courtois 2019; Kamalu and Ejezie 2016; Okolo 2019), displacement and diaspora (Ikeagwuonu 2018; Ojiakor and Obika 2021; Omuteche 2014; Uzoh 2020), subjectivity (Tunca 2009), the social construction of Blackness (De Mul 2016) and feminism (Eze 2014)<sup>9</sup>. Of them all, only two articles have engaged with issues of mobility: Patricia Bastida-Rodríguez has classified Sisi's mobilities as "invisible *flâneusism*" (2014), and Danica B. Savonic (2015) has analysed the novel from the perspective of infrastructure and automobility. However, the novel's representation of aeromobilities has, until now, been overlooked. I contend that the depictions of the aeromobilities of Sisi and Efe share similarities as regards the naïve attitude of the two first-time travellers and that their aeromobile experiences start already with their trip to the airport in a taxi, given that "the taxi ride to or from the airport thus comes to represent a protocol forming part of general airport predeparture or postlanding procedures" (Durante 2020, 34).

Chisom/Sisi is a Nigerian graduate who resorts to sex work as a way of escaping unemployment and the lack of prospects in her native country. Disillusioned due to the

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<sup>9</sup> This is not an exhaustive list. To see all the academic work that has dealt with the novel, see the section "Secondary Sources" included in "The Chika Unigwe Bibliography" created by Daria Tunca, member of the postcolonial research group CEREP of the University of Liège: <http://www.cerep.ulg.ac.be/unigwe/cusecond.html>.

lack of possibilities to move up the social ladder, she accepts pimp Oga Dele's proposal to work for him abroad, even though he makes it clear to her from the beginning that she will be engaging in sex work. Her open and positive attitude towards her future makes her believe that this arrangement will be temporary, and that soon she will be able to "go into the business of importing second-hand luxury cars into Nigeria" (Unigwe 2009, 44). Although she makes up a story to tell her family and boyfriend that conceals the truth, their resistance to her leaving results in Sisi having to travel alone to Murtala Muhammed Airport in a taxi.

Peter Adey claims that "for many people, airports and air travel constitute some sort of rite of passage, a journey we must endure if we are to get to our destinations" (2009, 278). Sisi's rite of passage, however, does not begin at the airport, nor when boarding the plane that would take her to the Belgian city of Antwerp. Her transition begins right after Dele's sex work offer. After her talk to him, she decides "to adopt a name that she would wear in her new life" (Unigwe 2009, 44) and changes her name to Sisi, "a stranger yet familiar" name (44), which was what a university classmate used to call her because she reminded him of his sister: "Chisom would be airbrushed out of existence, at least for a while. And once she hit it big she would reincarnate again as Chisom" (44). The character's act of renaming symbolises her acknowledgement of the need to renegotiate her identity once she has firmly decided to enter the world of sex work, which will mark a before and after in her life, although it will turn out to be not exactly the change she had longed for. Daria Tunca highlights that Sisi's renaming is the "result of her own decision" and that through it the character "creates an alter-ego for herself, whose supposed familiarity is suggested in the very meaning of her adopted name" (2009).

Although the rite of passage cannot be claimed to start at the airport, the trip to the airport serves as a confirmation of Sisi's ongoing transformation. Loneliness and anxiety define her ride in the taxi that takes her to the terminal. This solitary trip is depicted as neither smooth nor unemotional. Her unwanted lonely departure from Nigeria at Murtala Muhammed Airport is preceded by a detailed description of the taxi drive, which is defined by:

the anxiety that was making her cling to her handbag tighter than she needed to. She had not realised that leaving would be this brutal. That she would want, almost harbour a wish that a hand would stay her. Lagos was a wicked place to be in at night, her father said. Especially in a taxi. And her mother concurred. (Unigwe 2009, 46-47)

Sisi's ride is characterised by a significant circulation of anxiety, caused by a collision of circumstances: the absence of family members, being alone in a taxi as a young girl at night, and the uncertainty about what her new life abroad will hold for her. Through these lines, Unigwe manages to convey that the taxi is conceived as a dangerous means of transport for young Nigerian women, thus evincing the acknowledgement that gender constitutes a hindrance to women's mobilities. In this sense, Sisi's mobility is restricted not only by her gender but also by the circulation of fear that is imposed on her, in no small part due to her parents' instruction to adopt self-protective and safe mobility tactics and practices.

The protagonist's anxiety is not alleviated by the small talk offered to her by the taxi driver. The male driver's chauvinist attitude as expressed by his assumption that gender differences in matters of education in Nigeria are the norm, only causes Sisi to reject the stranger's invitation to join in this "banal conversation" (Unigwe 2009, 48). What is more relevant is the symbolic description of the climax of the protagonist's rite of passage inside the taxi:

She brought out the letter from Peter [her boyfriend] and crumpled it up. She reached behind her and stuffed it into the wedge between the backrest and the seat. Let it stay there. She was heading into the lights of her future. She pushed the letter deeper in, at the same time feeling a release from Peter, so that while she sat there, in the taxi, her hand digging deeper and deeper, Chisom suddenly felt immortal. The energy she felt oozing from her, enough to defeat love, enough to repel even death. She was ready to set forth bravely into her future. (48)

Unigwe uses a highly symbolic and metaphorical scene with imagery of light and darkness to convey the end of Sisi's life in Lagos. The wedge between the backrest and the seat, defined by darkness, here becomes a "resting place" where she buries the remnants of her past, represented by her boyfriend's letter that she does not even open. Her refusal to engage with her boyfriend's letter, an object that tied her to her past life, is described through this powerful image. The act of burying her past elicits an intense corporeal reaction: an adrenaline rush that makes her feel brave enough to start life anew. The "lights of her future" contrast deeply with the darkness tied to her past. Sisi's anxiety

stops once her wish for freedom finds expression through her physical interaction with the materiality of the car. Erica Durante highlights that “the taxi phase clearly highlights an awareness of non-belonging, of nonattachment” (2020, 33). The representation of Sisi’s acts and thoughts within the taxi does indeed suggest a feeling of nonattachment and non-belonging to her native country, which holds no opportunities for her. Durante has also observed that the taxi ride, which is “the antechamber to air travel” (2020, 37), “has become an evident pattern in airport scenes in literature, film, and advertising” (36), serving the function of gradually “exclud[ing] passengers from the local ‘micro-world’” and “introduc[ing] them into the ‘meta-world’ that awaits them as soon as they pass through the departure gate” (37). Sisi’s transitional phase concludes once she arrives at the airport in Brussels: “When she got off the plane in Brussels, the remnants of her old life folded away in her carry-on luggage, and saw her new life stretching out like a multicoloured vista before her eyes, full of colours and promise, Sisi knew that she would make it here” (Unigwe 2009, 98). On her arrival, then, the remnants of the protagonist’s past have diminished and are now depicted as encapsulated in her suitcase, which implies the option of discarding them all more easily. Her bright future finds expression in all the colour she sees around her at the European airport terminal.

The fact that her anxiety disappears completely and her doubts are dispelled is conveyed by her throwing away something that still connected her to her past life in Nigeria: the pumpkin “the size of a moon” (98) her mother had given her. Throwing the gourd “in one of the huge dustbins outside the washrooms” (98) can be interpreted as a metaphor of her rejecting Lagos, for right after she does this, she thinks about how “Lagos was a city of death and she was escaping it” (98), which at the same time reinforces the depiction of her past life through images of darkness. This affirmation also conveys “the naivety of Sisi’s fantasy” (Savonic 2015, 682) of being able to escape her past.



The depiction of Sisi's aeromobility and the scenes prior to her arrival at the airport constitute a significant narrative transition that serves two major narrative purposes: characterising the protagonist as a naïve first-time air traveller and anticipating her dark destiny. Night-time references recur throughout the description of Sisi's first aeromobile experience. That "the flight landed at night" (98) and "she saw nothing of Belgium but lights" (98) anticipates the protagonist's destiny and her lack of opportunities beyond the world of sex work: she will be murdered after trying to leave her life as a sex worker. The irony of the aeromobility scene lies in the fact that despite all the darkness that defines it, the protagonist only focuses on the colourful landscape of the airport, which suggests that she is utterly incapable of anticipating her dark future.

On arrival, Sisi displays an open attitude that finds expression through her willingness to try new things. Once she throws away the pumpkin, the food that symbolises her past, in the belief that she will learn to like other kinds of food, Sisi is certain that "she w[ill] shed her skin like a snake and emerge completely new" (98). However, her hope for a bright future ends as soon as she has her first sexual encounter with a client, which is depicted as a "degrading moment" in which "the young woman's new persona" (Tunca 2009) is "baptised" (Unigwe 2009, 213) by the man's "splattered sperm that trickled down her legs like mucus" (213).

The portrayal of Sisi's experience of aeromobility, while containing similarities, differs from that of Efe's. Whereas Sisi's aeromobile experience is portrayed through scenes mainly located in a taxi and the airport of her arrival, Efe's aeromobility is centred on her departure from Lagos airport, her experience within the aircraft and her arrival at the Belgian airport. The circumstances of Efe's decision to leave for Europe are different from Sisi's. Efe is a young woman who has a child from an unwanted pregnancy resulting from a relationship with a married man. Due to the impossibility of her father meeting the

basic needs of his children, Efe had consented to have sex with a married man to ensure her siblings' and her own livelihood after her mother's death. Unlike Sisi, who knows that sex work is going to be her job, Efe is not aware of this and goes to Europe in search for a better future for her and her son, which she is unable to find in Nigeria.

The airport of departure is described as a highly emotional space that contradicts Marc Augé's description of airports as non-places which are neither historical nor concerned with identity. Efe's emotional farewell with her son in the airport, which is presented by means of a flashback when she is already alone at the airport terminal, challenges the detached portrayal of these interspaces in Augé's conceptualization. Firstly, Unigwe deploys an ironic portrayal of the preoccupation of affluent air travellers with baggage allowance through Efe's recall as of the pimp's recommendations about the airlines to choose and to avoid on the basis of their checked baggage weigh limit, "as if Efe was thinking of coming home the very next day and the information was pertinent" (Unigwe 2009, 86). After that, the representation of Efe's train of thought focuses on the distress of leaving her son, L.I., behind: "[The baggage allowance] did not make any difference to Efe. All the worldly belongings she was interested in taking along could be contained in a polythene bag, leaving just enough room for the sadness she felt at having to leave L.I. behind" (86). The baggage allowance did not matter to Efe because "the only luggage of worth she carried was in her head. A strong memory of L.I. holding on to Rita [Efe's sister], crying as Efe walked through security at Lagos airport" (87). Lagos airport is portrayed in this way as a generator of sadness and distress for the protagonist:

She wanted her son with her for as long as possible. She wanted to soak in the smell of his skin. And right up until she had to hand him over to Rita she had had

her nose buried in his hair where the scent was the strongest. She wanted to take the smell and store it where she could have easy access to it. (87)

This highly emotional and sensorial scene that describes Efe's leave taking from her son at the airport terminal exemplifies "the strong emotional component of the airport as a threshold that sometimes brings together, and sometimes separates, two people or groups of individuals" (Durante 2020, 161). In this scene, the airport becomes "a demarcation between the one who remains and the one who departs" (167) and in so doing, "the airport belies its conventional image as a cold [...] place" (162). The airport terminal becomes instead a space in which intense emotions "are often uninhibitedly expressed" (162).

The emotionality of this scene is achieved by alluding to the farewell as an experience lived through all the senses, but most intensely as an olfactory experience that can be stored and then "rescued" whenever needed. However, this storing proved impossible, since "before she had been in Belgium three weeks life would take over and she would struggle to remember the smell amid all the other ones that were suffusing the space around her" (Unigwe 2009, 87). The intense circulation of sadness in the airport scene is reproduced once she is on the plane and she "remember[s] the smell and s[ees] her child before her eyes and crie[s] in a way she believe[s] she would never do again" (87). Unlike Sisi, who wants to get rid of everything having to do with her past so she can start a new life in Belgium, Efe tries her best to keep everything about her son in her memory, even if it hurts her soul.

The representation of Efe's distress continues in the depiction of the airplane passage and the landing: "Efe got off the plane feeling older than she was. Her knees hurt and her ears ached. The flight had not been as pleasant as she had thought it would be" (87). Efe's airplane experience is thus portrayed as an ordeal. The hyperbolic description

of the exhaustion which is typical of long-haul flights can be read as an embodied manifestation of her suffering, originally caused by the forced separation from her son. Far from bringing her the peace and freedom she had imagined that people in planes achieve, as if they are “gods who claimed the skies” (88), her flight turn out “anything but” (88). There are many reasons behind her disappointing and unpleasant experience as an air traveller. The main ones are that, on the one hand, “she felt trapped in her seat beside a window that was so small it did not qualify to be called as such”; and, on the other, given that it was a night flight, “she had been unable to see anything but the tail lights of the plane whenever she looked out the window” (88). Efe’s distress thus finds expression through the materiality of the plane: the “irremovable transparent filter” (Durante 2020, 3) of the airplane window is felt as disappointing not just because of its reduced size, but also because it does not give her access to the aeromobile gaze, with its associated privileged position granted by the “bird’s-eye perspective” (Toivanen 2021b, 7). Erica Durante notes that “attention to the aircraft cabin window and aerial views is a recurrent element in many works of fiction and cultural productions, that symbolizes the blooming of an aerial identity and the condition of immateriality in transit through the sky” (2020, 141). This flying into the unknown can be read as a metaphor of Efe’s travel experience into a disturbing state of uncertainty, constituting a powerful image to convey her complete ignorance of the dark destiny that awaits her in Belgium.

Efe’s discomfort during her first aeromobile experience is reinforced by the airplane’s “second-hand air” which makes her “slightly nauseated”; the extremely reduced size of the toilet, which makes her feel “claustrophobic” (Unigwe 2009, 88); the unappetising food served, which “left a lot to be desired” (88); and the fact that she is unable to start a conversation with the passenger travelling next to her. Her first aeromobile experience is thus described as a highly sensorial event. The flight is

perceived and qualified through all of her senses: sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch. While Efe's eyes cannot appreciate any aerial views from the window of the plane, her nose breathes a sickening air that contributes to making the flight an unpleasant experience. She refers to an annoying earache, which is likely caused by air pressure changes during the flight. And her sense of taste cannot contribute to making the flight an even slightly enjoyable experience, for the food she is given, from her perspective, is totally insipid. The words used to express her thoughts about the food are in fact "Sef", which is a Nigerian Pidgin English word used to express one's irritation or impatience, and "wahala", which means trouble or problem. Thus, Efe's thoughts about the food served on the plane highlight her irritation and snobbishness, for she thinks that that food cannot be compared at all favourably with Nigerian food. Besides, her attitude towards the food also displays her naivety as a first-time air traveller. The reference to the cold inside the cabin could be interpreted as related to the sense of touch. As such then, all the physical "contingencies of travel" (Edensor 2013) experienced by Efe during her flight are filtered through and processed by her emotional brain.

The narrative also conveys Efe's comparison of her first experience of aeromobility with her experiences of public transport mobilities back home. The socialising character of mobilities in Nigeria is contrasted with the individualism prevailing in air mobility. Whereas a bus ride in Nigeria is seen by Efe as an occasion to interact with strangers, the same does not happen in a ride or a flight towards the global North. Efe's numerous reflections while waiting to leave the plane, confirm Erica Durante's observation that "waiting opens up space for meditative and silent interstices" (2020, 69). The portrayal of Efe's aeromobile experience serves the narrative purposes of conveying the character's naivety. Unlike Sisi, whose innocence is related to her good vibes about her future, Efe's springs from her being a first-time air traveller, which makes

her imagine air travel as unimpeded jumping through the clouds. Efe's disappointing aeromobile experience contributes to making her distress seem impossible to ease.

The airport of arrival is mentioned almost in passing but, once again, its representation challenges Augé's conception of airports as non-places given that the space of the airport terminal influences Efe's state of mind: "The floors were shiny and the air was purer, so she skipped, skipped, skipped and took in the first sights of her new world. Belgium. Bell. Jyom. Next door to London. Tinkling like a bell" (Unigwe 2009, 88). The description echoes Sisi's positive mood and sense of excitement in this same airport. Efe's distress dissipates as soon as she sets foot in the arrivals terminal, whose shiny floors and clean air completely change her attitude. Like Sisi, Efe displays a positive attitude towards her future in Belgium, almost feeling invincible. This optimistic outlook is represented through her repeated leaps and skips on her way to pick up her suitcases from the conveyor belt. The use of a tinkling bell to put an end to the aeromobility scene is also highly symbolic, for bells symbolise beginnings and endings. Thus, it can be claimed to constitute a narrative transition, for it symbolically suggests Efe's rebirth in the host country. In addition, given that other symbolic meanings of bells can refer to a command, the use of a tinkling bell in this passage can also be read as an anticipation of Efe's job as procurer herself after working many years in a brothel. However, in this respect, Daria Tunca highlights the fact that "Efe's move from exploitee to exploiter perpetuates the subjection of African women in the West" (2009).

Furthermore, the depiction of the arrival airports of both Sisi's and Efe's aeromobile experiences reinforces the idea of Europe "as a clean break from Lagos, though this is precisely the fantasy that *On Black Sisters' Street* undermines" (Savonic 2015, 684). Actually, if we consider the representation of the city of Antwerp throughout the novel, it is more accurately described as being a "botched dream" (Unigwe 2009, 24),

which is how Efe refers to it in her moments of reflection after Sisi's death. Upon their arrival in the city, both Sisi and Efe conceive of it as the promised land, but as time goes by and they see the difficulty of getting out of the sexual exploitation network in which they are involved, those illusory dreams they had as newcomers vanish.

## **5.2. Migrant Returnees: Dehumanisation, Disillusionment and Discomfort**

Unigwe's portrayal of first-time air travellers' positive attitude at the airport of arrival and her depiction of such European airports as spaces that represent all the good things to come differs from the representation of the aeromobile experiences of unsuccessful migrant returnees in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016). Adichie depicts the deportation of Obinze through various scenes of aeromobility located at two different airports in England, the airplane itself, and the local airport of arrival in Lagos, whereas Mbue focuses on the forced return of two migrants who have been unable to succeed in the United States. Although the circumstances of the return flights of these returnees differ as regards the amount of time they have spent in their respective host countries and the voluntary/involuntary nature of their return, it can be argued that all three protagonists share a common aeromobile identity: they are migrant returnees who go back to their native countries after spending some time as undocumented migrants trying their best to regularise their situations and make a living abroad. The aeromobility scenes in Adichie's and Mbue's fictional texts contribute to configuring the figure of the unsuccessful and disillusioned migrant.

*Americanah* tells the story of Ifemelu and Obinze, who migrate to the United States and England, respectively, in search of a better future due to the "lethargy of

choicelessness” (Adichie 2013, 276) they had in Nigeria at a time marked by the Abacha military regime, which ruled Nigeria from 1993 to 1998. Despite the fact that both protagonists belong to the upper-middle class and thus have a relatively privileged life, Nigeria has little to offer them. Bimbola Oluwafunlola Idowu-Faith claims that “the need to flee choicelessness defines *Americanah* as a new kind of migration story” (2014, 3). She argues that Adichie’s preoccupation is “to chart a new migration story, where return migration is the quintessential closure” (1). Indeed, both Ifemelu’s and Obinze’s migrant stories end up with their return to Nigeria, but their migratory experiences and the circumstances of their return differ greatly. Ifemelu’s migrant story is one of success, “having gained the status of a US citizen and embarked on a successful and financially lucrative career” (Feldner 2019, 194), and her return takes place after thirteen years in the United States, and it is the result of a voluntary decision (194). In contrast to this, Obinze, who had always wanted to go to America, leads a life of invisibility as an undocumented migrant in England for three years and “unlike [Ifemelu], he does not have the choice, or the freedom, to move between countries” (195). As Maximilian Feldner highlights, Obinze’s migratory experience confirms that “*Americanah* does not lose sight of less fortunate migratory experiences” (194). Although Obinze had planned “to get a postgraduate degree in America, to work in America, to live in America [...] for a long time” (Adichie 2013, 232), he is not able to go there as he cannot obtain a visa, and so he goes to England instead. After his six-month visa expires, he decides to stay there, “working in menial jobs” (Feldner 2019, 195) under “the constant fear of being discovered” (195).

Unlike Ifemelu’s return to Nigeria, Obinze’s constitutes a forced removal. Apprehended at a civic centre in Newcastle minutes before his marriage-of-convenience ceremony to a British woman, which would lead to his becoming a legal citizen in the



United Kingdom, Obinze is eventually deported after being transferred from one detention centre to another for some time. Following his detention, Obinze ends up in the holding facility at Manchester Airport. Significantly, the scene of his transit through the airport terminal conveys the process of dehumanisation after being singled out as an “illegal” immigrant in England. By focusing on the physical characteristics of the handcuffs—their “cold heaviness” and “the glint of the interlinking circles of metal that robbed him of movement” (Adichie 2013, 280)—, Adichie highlights the involuntary nature of Obinze’s return. Adichie also draws attention to “the mark he imagined [the handcuffs] left on his wrists” (280), which suggests that this traumatic experience will leave not only physical, but also psychological effects on Obinze:

There he was, in handcuffs, being led through the hall of Manchester Airport, and in the coolness and din of that airport, men and women and children, travellers and cleaners and security guards, watched him, wondering what evil he had done. He kept his gaze on a tall white woman hurrying ahead, hair flying behind her, knapsack hunched on her back. She would not understand his story, why he was now walking through the airport with metal clamped around his wrists, because people like her did not approach travel with anxiety about visas. She might worry about money, about a place to stay, about safety, perhaps even about visas, but never with an anxiety that wrenched at her spine. (280)

For Obinze, the airport constitutes a hostile environment whose cold and noise contribute to increasing his state of alienation in England. By highlighting “the coolness

and din of that airport” (280), Manchester Airport is arguably depicted *à l’Augé*, that is, as an airport where everything works as expected. Airport workers and passengers who pass through remain impassive, although they react to Obinze with dirty looks, watching calmly as if it were a spectacle. Unlike Obinze, the rest of the air travellers are anonymised. What is more, Obinze is dehumanised as he is led, handcuffed, through the airport, subjected to travellers’ and workers’ gazes. The ongoing “spectacle of the other” (Hall 1997) prevents the protagonist feeling like a human being, for he becomes someone or something to be looked at, as if he were part of a show. Interestingly enough, it is at the airport where this undocumented migrant becomes hypervisible. By observing Obinze’s walk under the supervision of guards, witnesses not only judge him by his skin colour, but also make inferences about his likely criminal or illegal actions. The airport is depicted as a site where Obinze’s identity and deeds are questioned by strangers’ vigilant eyes.

The contrast of the airport experiences of the transit of an ordinary white female air traveller, which fits with the aeromobile identity of “the fluid passenger” (Durante 2020, 135), with that of Obinze, who embodies “the vulnerable passenger” (140), illustrates the unequal access to mobilities, or what Doreen Massey refers to as “power-geometry” (2013, 154). Unlike vulnerable passengers, fluid passengers are “indifferent and blasé with regard to themselves, others, and the world” (Durante 2020, 139), “allow[ing] themselves to be swept along by the current, without resistance, in perfect harmony with the rhythm demanded by the air voyage” (139). The juxtaposition of Obinze’s forced transit through the airport with the tall white woman’s voluntary walk as a prototype user suggests a comment on the unequal distribution of the privilege of mobility. The white woman and Obinze belong to opposing social spheres; both in the United Kingdom and outside of it, the unnamed Caucasian woman and Obinze,

respectively, are located in what Mimi Sheller and John Urry refer to as “the fast and slow lanes of social life” (2006, 213). Obinze’s involuntary walk through the airport conveys the forced nature of his return, which contradicts Bimbola Oluwafunlola Idowu-Faith’s (2014) affirmation that Adichie portrays the character’s return as a voluntary one, as, according to her, Obinze displays willingness to return to Nigeria in his conversation with a lawyer who had visited him immediately after he was detained. Contrary to Idowu-Faith’s claim that Adichie explicitly uses “literary interventions” (5) “to change this forced return into a voluntary one” (5), I contend that the character does not take action, but that his attitude is rather one of resignation, assuming his imminent deportation.

Obinze’s process of dehumanisation continues with his depiction at the holding facility at Manchester airport, where he is denied the possibility of reading when he asks for a “book or a magazine or a newspaper” (Adichie 2013, 280). He is mocked and invited to go to “the TV room” (280) instead. It is also in this facility where Obinze rejects a call for empathy by another Nigerian detainee, who asks the other undocumented migrants sharing his cell how they have been caught by immigration officials. Obinze resents this “instant familiarity” (280) considering that “there was no need for courtesies simply because they shared a cell” (280). The hidden holding facility at Manchester Airport is presented as an uncomfortable location where various undocumented migrants’ paths collide. Despite the fact that the reduced space favours their interaction, Obinze’s rejection of this invitation to conversation evinces the character’s reassertion of his Nigerian upper-middle class status. As Maximilian Feldner observes, “class makes his situation rather confusing” (2019, 195). While “his middle-class upbringing in Nigeria shows in the way he speaks” (195), as an undocumented immigrant, his social position has worsened significantly in the diaspora. However, Obinze does not stand for being considered as an equal by these other migrants in detention. Obinze’s attitude of

superiority is confirmed through the presentation of his thoughts, marking a clear distinction between him and them: “He didn’t have their *savoir faire*; he was soft, a boy who had grown up eating cornflakes and reading books [...] He was ashamed to be with them, among them” (Adichie 2013, 281). Obinze is uncomfortable being surrounded by people who, he infers, are illiterate migrants who belong to lower social spheres. Sharing space with these subjects not only constitutes a degradation of his status but also of his mobility potential, which also used to be considerably higher in his country of origin.

Through these scenes of aeromobility that reveal “a landscape that often remains hidden from fluid passengers” (Durante 2020, 147), the narrative “paint[s] a grim picture of the airport as an infrastructure of incarceration, of police authority, inquisition, and above all, isolation and degradation” (147). In so doing, the airport is portrayed “as the antithesis of what it usually represents to the blissful travellers of globalization. The terminal loses its luster and fluid appearance” (149).

The narration of Obinze’s aeromobile experience is detailed, as it also includes various aeromobile scenes of the day of his expulsion. The depiction of his transit through Heathrow airport as part of his deportation is rendered very quickly, which conveys the idea that this process comes totally unexpectedly and that things happen rapidly without giving Obinze time to digest the events. Both the air travel passage itself and his arrival in Lagos are portrayed as uncomfortable experiences. The representation of the air travel passage further invokes the involuntary nature of Obinze’s return by focusing on his sitting “unmoving throughout the flight” (283). In addition to this, his situation is contrasted with that of the woman sitting next to him who, unlike him, had “a buoyant, undefeated manner” (283) that would lead her to “get another passport with another name and try again” (283). This narrative technique confirms Obinze’s resistance to being considered as equal to the other undocumented migrants. His low motility is expressed

through the place that he, together with other deportees, occupies inside the aircraft, being “seated at the very back” (283). Further hindrances to his mobility are depicted by the flight attendant telling them in tones of disgust and shame about her country fellows just as the flight begins its descent into Lagos: “You cannot leave. An immigration officer will come to take charge of you” (283). The portrayal of this other side of the airport and air travel and the authoritarian acts being carried out there serves as a comment on the lack of mobility justice for vulnerable African deportees, “who are discriminated against because of racial and national prejudices” (Durante 2020, xvii), being “condemned to prolonged isolation, detention, deportation, and authoritarian acts that transform the Airworld into a sordid infrastructure of human ignominy” (xvii).

The arrival in Lagos is represented as one more unpleasant experience for several reasons. Apart from the bribe required by one of the immigration officers, the weather in Lagos is awfully hot, “it was like breathing steam” (Adichie 2013, 284), and Obinze feels both “light-headed” (284) and extremely unhappy: “A new sadness blanketed him, the sadness of his coming days, when he would feel the world slightly off-kilter, his vision unfocused” (284).<sup>10</sup> This depiction reinforces his failure to feel at home in Nigeria.

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<sup>10</sup> The portrayal of bribery and corruption constitutes a recurrent characterisation of West African airports in contemporary anglophone Afrodiasporic fiction. Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go* (2013), Chibundu Onuzo’s *Welcome to Lagos* (2017), and Imbolo Mbue’s *Behold the Dreamers* (2017) also contain repetitive depictions of bribing at local airports. Although their study on everyday corruption in West Africa focuses on countries with French colonial legacy, Giorgio Blundo and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan confirm that “a widespread system of corruption exists in Africa today [...] [that] is embedded in an equivalent and widespread system of ‘informal functioning’ among administrations” (2006, 70). They point to these countries’ colonial past and their “colonial bureaucracy” (71) as the origin of this system of corruption. According to them, “the colonial bureaucracy was characterized by despotism and arbitrariness, a contempt for users, inordinate privilege and the use of intermediaries, corruption and favours. These ‘administrative habits’ were extended and intensified after independence” (71). Airport scenes where a customs official demands money from travellers is what Blundo and de Sardan name as an “unwarranted fee for public services” and define the proceedings in such cases as follows: “the official forces the user to pay for the implementation of an act associated with his office. In other words, he sells ‘the service’ he is supposed to carry out ‘free of charge’ from the point of view of the user” (2006, 74). In the depicted West African airports, air travellers’ transit from the baggage claim carousel to the arrival hall is interrupted by customs officials that sell a service performed under the authority of the Customs. Contemporary Afrodiasporic fiction portrays a widespread corruption practice in which travellers are billed for the customs officials’ intervention.

Obinze's feeling of unbelonging and the impossibility he finds in identifying with the place of return are emphasised by a critique that generalises that very Nigerian way of being. When the immigration officer welcomes them home in a humorous tone, Obinze is reminded "of that Nigerian ability to laugh, to so easily reach for amusement", of which his mother used to say: "We laugh too much. [...] Maybe we should laugh less and solve our problems more" (283). His mother's disillusion with this *laissez-faire* attitude in her native country does not, however, prevent her from giving her son a warm welcome at the airport, where her presence comes to constitute the only familiarity for Obinze at the airport.

Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2017) also grants space to the depiction of the aeromobile experience of migrant returnees. The homecoming of the Cameroonian couple Jende and Neni Jonga and their child Liomi is forced after Jende decides to give up on his extended legal fight to obtain a Green Card or a Permanent Resident Card, which would enable them to live and work in the United States on a permanent basis. The American Immigration Office is not convinced by Jende's made up story of asylum seeking, which was encouraged by the smooth-talking Nigerian-born immigration lawyer who defended him. Therefore, after five years in the United States working tirelessly believing that this would allow them to make their way into the American Dream, Jende finds no other way out of their precarious and uncertain situation in the United States than to return to Cameroon, "a decision that Neni initially forcefully resists, but acquiesces to in the end" (Toohey 2020, 387).

Given that one of the main themes of the novel is the impossibility of the protagonists of achieving the American dream, some literary critics have classified this novel within the literary tradition of the depiction of the American dream (Toohey 2020; Vieira Braga 2020). In addition, Elizabeth Toohey (2020) classifies *Behold the Dreamers*

as “post-9/11 fiction, a genre centered in but not limited to American literature, and still a bit amorphous” (386). According to Toohey, this type of literature “centers on first- and second-generation immigrants whose decision to leave the West is less an individual choice than a forcible expulsion from it—one that effectively shatters their belief in the American dream” (Toohey 2020, 386). An important characteristic of this type of literary works is, Toohey states, that “the American dream of freedom and meritocracy is shown to be a mythology, one that is crushed by xenophobic laws and state bureaucracies or hemmed in by widespread racism” (386). Imbue’s debut novel portrays the American dream as unattainable for this family of Cameroonian migrants. Despite all the sacrifices made by both Jende, who ends up working endless hours in several jobs at the same time, and Neni, who works as a domestic helper, mothers and also studies at night, they are not able to find economic and financial stability in the host country.

Cláudio Roberto Vieira Braga (2020) argues that *Behold the Dreamers* makes evident “the mismatch between the ideal American Dream that involves sense of community, freedom and equality of opportunity and its objective existence, mostly based on material success” (39). Both Jende and Neni are very much concerned with saving as much money as they can in order to achieve their particular materialist version of the American dream; that is, to buy a house and a car and, in Neni’s case, to get a college degree. Jende in fact states: “I believe I work hard, and one day I will have a good life here” (Mbue 2016a, 46) while Neni, especially, has become very much obsessed with pursuing the material success implied in the contemporary version of the American dream. Initially, both Jende and Neni conceive the United States of America as a land full of opportunities for everyone, encouraged by the appointment of Barak Obama as president. However, the dream gradually proves to be more and more elusive for them. When it seems that the family has found some stability through Jende’s employment as

chauffeur to Clark Edwards, a powerful Lehman Brothers executive, his asylum application is denied, he is fired from his job at the request of the executive's wife, and that is followed by the 2008 economic crisis, which starts precisely with the collapse of Lehman Brothers. Toohey summarises the novel as centring around the "protagonists' journey from an abiding belief in the American dream to a crushing disillusionment with it, a transformation that parallels their migration to and expulsion from the US" (2020, 387).

The main similarities of the circumstances surrounding these migrants' experience with that of Obinze are the reasons that led them to migrate—a lack of opportunities in their home countries—and the circumstances of their return—both become undocumented migrants in their host country. However, while Obinze's return is forced by external authorities, Jende's return gradually becomes voluntary. As Vieira Braga (2020) notes, after a conversation with his cousin Winston, "Jende realizes that the impossibility of succeeding was not simply due to the current crisis that was taking place, as Neni insists on believing; instead, his disadvantage had more profound roots" (44), such as the fact that he does not have a college degree, which would potentially grant him a higher income. As a consequence, Jende makes the decision to return, without taking into account his wife's opinions. Neni, who, according to Jende, "had been sold the stupid nonsense about America being the greatest country in the world" (Mbue 2016a, 332), wants to stay in New York, and keep on trying to achieve her dream of becoming a pharmacist; she "simply cannot accept the end of the dream for herself and her family in the United States, passionately believing they should stay at all costs" (Vieira Braga 2020, 47). After Jende announces their imminent departure, Neni even considers the possibility of marrying a US citizen and putting their child Liomi up for adoption.



The protagonists' aeromobile experience of return portrays the contradictory feelings embodied by the two protagonists. Their actual physical return is narrated in the last chapter, in just four pages where Mbue conveys the protagonists' paradoxical attitude. As happens with the narration of Sisi's and Efe's aeromobile experiences in *On Black Sisters' Street*, these characters' return begins with the narration of the family's taxi ride to the airport:

On the cab ride to the airport, she stared out the window in silence. It was all passing her by. America was passing her by. New York City was passing her by. Bridges and billboards bearing smiling people were passing her by. Skyscrapers and brownstones were rushing by. Fast. Too fast. Forever. (Mbue 2016a, 379)

Through the deployment of a series of parallelisms with sentences containing the expression "passing her by", Neni's departure from New York, her beloved city, which, according to her, "had a world for everyone" (Mbue 2016a, 92) acquires its dramatic tone. The narration goes from the general—America—to the more particular—"Skyscrapers and brownstones"—in an attempt to convey how Neni's line of thought is influenced by what she sees through the window. Interestingly, the last complete sentence deploys the verb "rushing by" instead of "passing by" to reflect the increasing speed at which she sees the different parts of the city fading away before her eyes. That the billboards contained people with smiling faces contributes to emphasising the fallacy of the American dream, which implies that the United States is a country where everyone can live happily if they work hard enough. Mbue's narrative technique of contrasting the protagonist's feelings with people looking happy recurs throughout the novel to reinforce the characters'

impossibility of finding a stable position in the host country, no matter how hard they work, thus revealing a critique “of the Obama-era myth of [a] post-racial society” (Toohey 2020, 393).

The dramatic portrayal of Neni’s departure from New York City contrasts strongly with her departure from Cameroon years before, when she still firmly believed in the American dream. When leaving her native country accompanied by her son Liomi, “she felt nothing” (Mbue 2016a, 13) and believed that “she wouldn’t be missing [the close and distant relatives who had accompanied them to the airport] for too long, wishing them the same happiness she knew she was going to find in America” (13). Mbue portrays the protagonist’s blind faith in America as a place full of possibilities through this cold and distant farewell scene.

Neni’s attitude on the taxi ride towards their return journey is contrasted with that of Jende: “He felt nothing. He forced himself to feel nothing. He sat in the front seat with the seed money for his new life packed in a red JanSport backpack” (379). Neni is deeply saddened because of being forced to abandon her dream of becoming a pharmacist in New York City and as rich as the Edwardses—the well-to-do family for whom both Jende and Neni worked for a while—because coming back to Cameroon implies that she will “have no more possibility of career apart from that of wife-and-mother” (Toohey 2020, 398). In contrast to Neni’s mood, Jende displays a positive attitude, looking forward “to new opportunities upon his return to Limbe because of the wealth he and Neni have acquired” (398). Jende’s confident attitude is conveyed through his thinking about the exact amount of money they are carrying with them, which will enable him to live well in Cameroon:

With the new exchange rate at six hundred CFA francs to a dollar, he would be returning home with close to ten million CFA francs, enough to restart their life in a beautiful rental with a garage for his car and a maid so his wife could feel like a queen. He would have enough to start a business, which would enable him to someday build a spacious brick house and send Liomi to Baptist High School (Mbue 2016a, 352)

The positive or negative attitude of the protagonists about their impending departure is therefore closely linked to the gender dynamics that prevail in their country of origin. For Jende, return means abandoning his precarious situation as an undocumented immigrant in the United States and his exhausting legal battle for permanent residency, taking all kinds of jobs that lead to his physical and mental exhaustion. The return is his only hope of improving his social position and economic situation, to the extent that he imagines he can realise the American dream that has been denied to him in the United States in his home country. However, for Neni, the return implies the deterioration of her personal situation, having to give up a professional life outside the home and away from her role as a mother and wife.

Their experience on arrival at the local airport in Cameroon is depicted as an unwelcoming one, because “as they had been warned, the country was no different from the one they had left” (380). Several elements point to the unwelcoming character of the family’s arrival. Apart from the heat and the airport being “overcrowded” (380), “[the] customs officers there still demanded bribes that weary travelers gave for lack of energy to fight a devious system” (380), and “young boys dressed in rags still lingered around the airport parking lot, seeking gullible arrivals who would believe their claims of hunger

and homelessness and spare them a dollar or euro” (380).<sup>11</sup> In addition to this, “the drive from Douala to Limbe was still arduous, with drivers and pedestrians swearing at each other, young and old alike fighting for space on the dusty and congested streets of Bonaberi” (381). That everything they observe on arrival is presented by means of parallelisms, with sentences containing “still” suggests a contrast with the country they have just left, which constitutes the ultimate symbol of modernity. Cameroon, on the contrary, has not changed at all in the time they have been away, the postcolonial country being portrayed as being in a state of paralysis caused by corruption, lack of infrastructures and social inequalities, which underscore the failure of the decolonisation of the nation-state. This is in line with Anna-Leena Toivanen’s observation that “scenes of aeromobility also attest to the failures of modernisation of African postcolonial nation-states” (2021b, 12).

Amidst this enumeration of things that have not changed in Cameroon, reference is made to an interesting aspect of Cameroonian culture when it comes to airport arrivals:

Men and women in bright African fabrics still crowded the exit from customs, calling out to their recently arrived loved ones, shouting in English, French, pidgin English, and any of the two hundred indigenous languages of the country, saying, I’m over here, we’re all over here. Overjoyed parents, and sometimes what seemed like whole extended families, still waited outside the arrival terminal to welcome sons and daughters who had travelled overseas and returned to bring them pride, pushing and shoving to get to a long-awaited hug. (Mbue 2016a, 380)

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<sup>11</sup> The passage echoes one that describes the risky environment around Lagos bus stations in Chibundu Onuzo’s *Welcome to Lagos*.

The airport is depicted as a microcosm of the varied, multilingual West African cultures where people's interaction is fundamental, an aspect that is used to emphasise their contrast with the American spirit of individualism which, in *Behold the Dreamers*, morphs into selfishness and lack of compassion, as the protagonists' adventures in New York City demonstrate. This scene is in line with Erica Durante's observation that, "the arrival hall is temporarily converted into a venue for family reunions and a place of celebration as relatives finally gather to rejoice over the return of an expatriate" (2020, 163).

Through the introduction of the image of proud relatives waiting for successful returnees, the narrative underscores the protagonists' sense of failure on arrival, given that no one seems to have reasons to be proud of them. While Neni and Liomi were accompanied by numerous members of the whole family, who filled a mini-bus, when they left Cameroon for the United States, upon return they are received only by Moto, Jende's brother. It is not clear whether this is a voluntary decision, but this lack of people waiting for them confirms that their homecoming represents a shameful event not only for Neni, but also, perhaps, for their families. The presence of Jende's brother at the airport nonetheless confirms Anna-Leena Toivanen's observation that "in return narratives, one often finds an allusion to a friend or a family member whom the returnee expects to see in the arrivals hall, as if to ensure immediate reconnection with the place of return" (2021b, 7). Certainly, then, reconnection with the place of return can be established through Jende, but not by Neni.

The family is driven to Limbe by Moto on a borrowed Ford pickup truck, because it "was the only vehicle he could find that could fit the family and their seven suitcases bearing clothes and shoes" (381). After that, an exhaustive enumeration of their

material possessions is detailed, which evinces the influence of American consumerism on the migrant returnees. In fact, on the ride, Neni is planning which clothes she will wear to which event:

Cindy [Clark Edwards's wife]'s things she planned to reserve for special occasions. She would wear them to weddings and anniversaries to show those girls that even though she had returned home and was living among them, she was not one of them—she was now a woman of class, with real designer items, and none of them could compete with her. (Mbue 2016a, 381)

The migrant's return is often conceived as shameful, as the novel's author herself points out in an interview given to Elizabeth Kiefer. What is more, Imbolo Mbue admits that although things were difficult when she arrived in the United States, she “stayed [because] there's a lot of shame in going back home [...]. You went somewhere and you couldn't achieve the dream. I think it's something a lot of immigrants struggle with: that you come here and you don't make it. How are you going to show your face back home?” (2016b, n. p.). To counteract the feeling of shame at having to return to her country of origin, Neni feels the need to boast about her possessions, because they constitute a sort of proof that she has been able to achieve some of the material success implied in the American dream. Anna-Leena Toivanen has noted that, in the francophone African and Afrodiasporic return narratives she analyses, “the returnees [...] are expected to show off their success” (2021b, 8).

The portrayal of the Jonga family's return concludes on a positive note despite all the discouraging symbols on their arrival at the local airport. After a long journey in the Ford pickup driven by Moto, "the red and white sign above the highway that said 'Welcome to Limbe, The Town of Friendship'" (Mbue 2016a, 381) greets them. The "comfort" that that sign had given Jende "in his first days in America" (381) is highlighted. However, Jende's comfort is marred by a sense of shame at having imagined many times that "he would one day be driving toward it in circumstances different from when he'd driven away from it" (381). But the predominant tone in the scene is positive as Jende says to himself "Welcome indeed" (381), and his brother gives him "a congratulatory tap on the shoulder" (381). The idea that the male protagonist is at ease with their return is reinforced when he asks his sleepy son to guess where they are, to which Liomi replies "Home?" (382). Jende's return thus "points to the existence of hopefulness and optimism" (Vieira Braga 2020, 47) as regards the male protagonist, which deeply contrasts with Neni's attitude. All in all, the return symbolically suggests "the renewal of Jende's ability to dream" (45).

The analysis of aeromobility scenes in the selected narratives has shed light on the representation of taxi rides to the airport, airports, air journeys and landings in relation to three distinct aeromobile identities: African first-time travellers, deportees and migrant returnees. The main narrative function of these literary portrayals is helping to configure the identities of these mobile fictional characters. Other secondary narrative purposes include the marking of important narrative transitions. Taxi rides to the airport are depicted as fundamental narrative transitions for first-time travellers. Airports have been highlighted as highly emotional spaces that awaken a variety of emotions in air travellers for various reasons, which contradicts Augé's classification of airports as "non-places" (1995) bereft of identity and history. Airports in the selected narratives are better

conceived as postcolonial interspaces because of their character as in-between spaces or spaces of transit that are “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986, 25). The representations of airports in the selected texts underline their character as spaces of sharp contrasts. By reading airports for their symbolic values, my reading goes beyond their conception as mere narrative settings. The different characters’ physical and emotional interactions with other travellers and spaces of aeromobility have revealed air travel to be a contradictory and paradoxical experience where the circulation of very distinct feelings and affects changes as the journey progresses. There is a clear distinction, however, in the portrayal of airports of departure and arrival airports. Departure airports are depicted as generators of distress, while arrival airports are portrayed in a more positive light as generators of hope.

Although with evident differences in degree, all the characters analysed in these novels embody the figure of the vulnerable passenger. Even though Obinze’s vulnerability as a passenger is the most obvious, the other characters are also vulnerable for different reasons. Sisi’s and Efe’s vulnerability comes from their inexperience as well as their naivety as first-time air travellers who are moving both physically and metaphorically into the unknown. Jende’s and Neni’s vulnerability is intrinsically related to the shame they feel at being forced to return to their country of origin without having succeeded in the promised land. All of these characters’ air travel displacements are arguably forced and come as a result of choicelessness: Sisi and Efe feel this lack of opportunities in their home country, while Obinze and the Jonga family have no opportunities in the country to which they have migrated. Except for Obinze’s aeromobile experience, which concludes with his deep sadness, the other characters’ aeromobilities end up with a degree of hope in their futures. Of all the characters analysed, Obinze is the



only one who has no decision-making power over his actual physical movement in the aeromobility scene. The literary representations of West African migrants' aeromobilities on their outward and return journeys underlines the differential politics of mobility, bringing to the fore "the global inequalities of the colonial aftermath" (Toivanen 2021, 12). The portrayal of Obinze's aeromobility constitutes a powerful reflection on the mobility injustices present in the airworld.

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## **CONCLUSIONS**

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This thesis has shown that mobility constitutes a crucial characteristic of Afropolitan narratives, to the point of being a distinctive feature of the Afropolitan aesthetics. The study of mobilities has demonstrated that Afropolitan literature not only depicts successful stories of highly mobile subjects, Afropolitans in the Selasian sense, but it also focuses on less privileged mobility experiences.

By focusing on mobility practices performed by West African characters and their experiences in the global South, this study contributes to the de-centring of mobilities scholarship, which has mostly studied mobility in global North locations. Studying literary representations of African mobilities both within and outside the African continent constitutes a way of destabilising the Western-centricity of the concept of mobilities. Moreover, this thesis has drawn attention to the fact that the analysis of migrant narratives should not be limited to the outcomes of mobility, but should include critical attention to the social processes and infrastructures that make mobility possible in the first place.

Literary and cultural texts contribute to the creation of certain types of discourses which, in turn, influence the way we perceive and experience mobilities in the material world. This dissertation has approached the literary study of mobility justice from different levels and forms of mobility so as to offer a broad view of African and Afrodiasporic mobilities and mobility justice. I have analysed forms of micro-mobilities, that is, those confined to a small space, such as inside a hotel or a household, to macro- or transnational mobilities, through urban mobilities within a city and intra-country mobilities. With regard to the means of transport used by these characters, trips by car, on foot, by taxi and by plane have been examined.

My literary study of mobilities has successfully put into dialogue mobility studies concepts within literary works to study how these narratives help to specify and

nuance their meanings. To be more specific, when putting the term “interspaces” in dialogue with representations that met the characteristics of the concept in these fictional works, it seemed more appropriate to qualify its meaning through the use of the term “viscous interspaces” as a way of acknowledging that transit through these interspaces by postcolonial African subjects is not fluid, but rather hindered, slowed down, or sometimes completely interrupted. My conceptualisation, which reflects on how different power structures influence the experiences of and interaction with these spaces that different types of mobile subjects have, has been used to analyse numerous types of spaces considered fundamental to the transit of the characters: hotels and other types of, not always typical, accommodation, airports, bus stations and bridges. It is important to clarify that my conceptualisation of “viscous interspaces” is not intended to replace the original term of mobility studies, but to provide nuance.

This dissertation has, therefore, emphasised the importance of studying spaces, despite their apparently immobile nature, as key parts of the study of mobilities, because spaces and mobilities contribute to configuring each other by enforcing prevailing power hierarchies. The study of interspaces has revealed that many postcolonial African characters use these types of spaces differently from what it is expected within the new mobilities paradigm. Although they are designed to facilitate the transit of travellers, some of the characters in such works of fiction use interspaces as dwelling-places, as is the case in Taiye Selasi’s “The Sex Lives of African Girls”, and Chibundu Onuzo’s *Welcome to Lagos*. In order to be able to develop a sense of homeliness, some characters deploy their own strategies, such as introducing the habit, or ritual, of reading the Bible every evening before going to bed. Both Selasi’s and Onuzo’s works contain representations of motels/inns and/or hotels as dwelling places that tend to attract and accommodate deviancy through the depiction of dwelling practices by Nigerians and

Ghanaians that are domestically resistant. In Selasi's story, hotel-dwelling is an option that is chosen by the protagonist's mother and has the narrative purpose of representing the deconstruction of hegemonic mothering. In Onuzo's novel, however, inn-dwelling is induced by the adverse circumstances encountered by the group of protagonists when they arrive in the city of Lagos, a place that does not seem to offer them any chance to realise the Lagosian dream of making their fortune. The comparative analysis of this inn with the hotel inhabited by the group of journalists visiting the city serves to emphasise the unequal distribution of mobility justice. Another concept brought into dialogue with these works was that of "non-place". Augé's notion has been found to be of little use in analysing the representations of airports in these narrative works. Foucault's concept of "heterotopias" has been revealed as more convincing given airports' exceptional and oppositional character as well as their resistance to easy categorisation.

The concept of mobility justice has shown that the lives of hypermobile subjects are maintained by the immobility of many other less advantaged individuals. Moreover, mobility justice highlights the fact that the apparent mobility of many Africans is not voluntary, but instead forced or induced by circumstance and by their lack of the capacity to be mobile from a financial, cultural and social perspective. All the works analysed reflect a clear lack of mobility justice. The female protagonists of chapter 3, who belong to the Nigerian upper class, are limited in their mobility because of their gender. Chapter 4 also reflects another type of mobility injustice, as the mobility of these protagonists, who come from different backgrounds and social classes but can all be considered runaways for various reasons, is irregular and uneven, being motivated and indeed dictated by external factors over which they have almost no control. The last chapter of analysis covers different types of forced or circumstance-induced aeromobilities. The conceptualisation of friction introduced in chapter 1 as being intrinsically related to

mobility justice has also turned out to be a crucial instrument for approaching the study of these contemporary works and explain how power informs Africans' mobilities. My initial hypothesis that the mobilities of African postcolonial subjects would be portrayed as characterised by high degrees of friction and mobility injustice has therefore been confirmed. The analytical chapters 3, 4 and 5 approach the literary study of mobilities and mobility justice in substantially different ways because their different themes and representations of various levels of mobility within and outside Africa require them to do so.

My study has also pointed to a very important distinction in approaching the study of mobility justice: the fact that motility, or mobility potential, does not automatically translate into actual, observable movement. Indeed, my analysis includes examples of characters with high motility but very low mobility, and characters with high mobility but very low motility. An example of the former would be the female protagonists in Selasi's story, who despite belonging to the Ghanaian upper class, find their mobility limited to the confines of the private space of the house they inhabit and their displacements beyond the family home being highly restricted. On the other hand, the protagonists of Onuzo's novel are highly mobile. Firstly, they move from various locations in Nigeria to the city of Lagos, and once inside Lagos, the characters keep moving from one place to another, but their restless condition is not the result of a voluntary choice. However, even within the group of newcomers to Lagos, not all the characters have the same motility. My analysis has shown that gender is a very limiting factor for the female members of the group. What is more, within the group of aeromobile subjectivities analysed in the final chapter, motility and decision-making power are not the same either. Of all the characters analysed in the various aeromobile scenes, Unigwe's Sisi is the character who has the most decision-making power over her mobility when she

takes the plane as a first-time traveller, but this situation soon changes as soon as she sets foot in her destination where she will fall victim to a human trafficking network from which she will not be able to escape. The other aeromobility journeys of returnees and deportees depicted are the visible result of the low motility of their protagonists. Racism because of their skin colour conditions their mobility in the host countries.

Another important contribution of this thesis has been its claim that the study of mobilities and mobility justice cannot be undertaken without paying attention to the emotions and feelings aroused by displacement as well as the characters' interaction with spaces and individuals. To carry out a comprehensive study of mobilities and mobility justice in works of fiction, it is very difficult to limit oneself to approaching the analysis only from the point of view of emotions and subjectivities, or only from the structural point of view, as both aspects feed into each other, making it artificial to analyse mobility justice without paying attention to emotions, and vice versa. Linking mobilities to their emotional components is fundamental to revealing the hidden power hierarchies that rule our contemporary world and that are at work in mobile events and interspaces. The chapters where emotions are at the forefront of the analysis are chapter 4 and chapter 5. The analysis of emotions in my study of Onuzo's novel is motivated by the description of characters' mobilities and the depiction of different interspaces. The use of images of decay, darkness and abjection awakens the circulation of disgust in the reader, creating a general framework that brings together the various descriptions of mobilities and spaces relevant to mobility in the novel. In contrast, chapter 5 focuses on the emotions that provoked by the different events of aeromobility the characters experience. Given that all the aeromobile characters examined are vulnerable passengers, aeromobility causes each of them a greater or lesser degree of distress for a variety of reasons. For Unigwe's young African female protagonists, this anxiety is related to their status as first-time air



travellers. For Mbue's returnees, the distress is caused by the shame of returning to their country of origin. For Adichie's Obinze, the distress stems from the multiple factors that restrict his mobility, which are linked to his deportee status.

Furthermore, the notions of the abject and zombification have been shown as the most appropriate to categorise the type of mobilities that appear in Chibundu Onuzo's *Welcome to Lagos*. One of the main purposes of this thesis was to examine how contemporary African and Afrodiasporic women writers depict specific forms of everyday mobilities and transnational travel. I have noticed that the representations of tangible mobility practices in Onuzo's narrative share an abject, zombified quality that recurs continuously in different scenes depicting mobility passages. Chapter 4 has shown that there are several passages articulated through the imaginary of disgust and the abject. In *Welcome to Lagos*, the imagery used to describe mobilities and mobile spaces also revolves around abandonment, confinement, darkness, images of death, objectification and lack of agency or hope. In spite of the difficulty of attempting to make generalisations with such a vast corpus, the representation of Afrodiasporic and Africans' mobilities in the corpus can be said to be characterised by a general state of paralysis, and slow and wandering rhythms that have unknown real or metaphorical destinations. The concepts of the abject and zombification have facilitated the interpretation of the novel in metaphorical terms by interpreting the mobile African characters as metonymic parts that come to symbolise the failure of the postcolonial state, which is defined by its eternal condition of stagnation.

Another important contribution of my thesis from a mobility studies perspective is that I have considered aeromobility in its entirety, thanks to the inclusion of different aeromobility events and not just the flight passage itself. Precisely because of my concern to include different aeromobile events depicted in several texts, chapter 5 was the most

difficult chapter to write. Despite this, I have successfully been able to read what the meaning of aeromobility passages is in each of these texts, as well as highlight the relevance of aeromobility scenes in the construction of specific subjectivities.

Another main objective of my work was to situate it within contemporary African literature. After analysing the characteristics of different types of classifications, all of which writers themselves tend to reject because of the rigidity of the categories, it seemed appropriate to frame this study within third-generation African fiction and more specifically, Afropolitan literature. One of the strengths of this thesis is that it analyses as Afropolitan a number of works of fiction that have not to date been classified as Afropolitan literature, precisely because they do not portray migration or its outcomes, but focus on stories within the African continent. In my view, Afropolitan literature should not be reduced only to migration narratives, which focus on the experience of those leaving the continent. Instead, it should also include works that tell the story of those who stay on the continent. It is indeed precisely those who remain who contribute to give meaning to Afropolitanism as understood in Mbembe's sense, that is, as "an aesthetic and a particular poetic of the world" (Mbembe 2007, 28), rather than a result of a particularly mobile and privileged lifestyle. Actually, Mbembe's Afropolitanism refers to a way of being in the world and to a way of connecting Africa to the rest of the world.

The results of my research show that attempting to model "Intra-African Afropolitanism" (Neumann 2020) may constitute a new way of approaching a term whose uses had already seemed to be exhausted. My thesis shows that mobilities are not unidirectional, from Africa to the outside, there are also those who return and those who never leave their country but have a broadmindedness that guarantees them the title of Afropolitan. By analysing representations of mobilities within the African continent, this thesis contributes to further modelling Intra-African Afropolitanism, confirming the

continent's prominence in histories of global exchange. Furthermore, my thesis accounts for the pluralities of representations of African mobilities within Afropolitan literature. In so doing, it contradicts one of the main critiques of Afropolitanism and Afropolitan narratives, that is, that they do not pay attention to the immobility experienced by many Africans inside the continent. My dissertation has confirmed the inclusiveness of representations within Afropolitan literature, which does indeed pay attention to varying (im)mobile experiences, thus contributing to the redefinition of mobilities within Afropolitanism, which have hitherto been considered by many critics as uncomplicated narratives of success that reinforce hegemonic conceptions that African progress can only be measured by the extent to which it reproduces Western lifestyles. What is more, my study has shown that focusing on the depiction of specific forms of mobilities within Africa can constitute a way to begin redefining movement within Afropolitanism.

In spite of its many contributions to the literary mobility studies, this dissertation has some limitations that relate to the wide variety of narratives studied, which has prevented many generalisations from being drawn. Nonetheless, this dissertation can be taken as the raw material for opening up new lines of research. For instance, although Lynne Pearce's concept of the driving-event could not be exploited here to any great extent, it does seem an interesting way of approaching the literary study of fictional works where automobility plays a more relevant role than it does in the works of my corpus, because it might prove useful for analysing the structure of fictional works from a literary mobility studies perspective. In addition to this, it could also be interesting to study how specific forms of mobility are represented in other Afropolitan works, especially those written by contemporary male authors in order to compare their representations with those of female authors, to arrive at a broader understanding of representations of mobilities and mobile justice in contemporary Afropolitan narratives. Another limitation of my

study has to do with the fact that my research work has been limited at times by the lack of access to certain resources such as articles or volumes relevant to my field of study. This was due to the fact that many articles and books were being published simultaneously with this thesis being written, which required me to keep up to date with the most current articles, to which I did not always manage to have access. In order to compensate for this, I devoted my two research stays, at the University of Liège and Harvard, to the arduous task of bibliographical compilation.

To sum up, this thesis has identified a new trend that is part of the Afropolitan aesthetics: the representation of mobility and mobility justice. This conclusion is the most visible result of an integrated study of several Afropolitan narratives that transcend the isolated analysis of the individual work of each author. On the whole, a more nuanced understanding has been offered of the ways mobilities are represented and given various meanings in literary texts written by 21<sup>st</sup>-century African and Afrodiasporic women's narratives.



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