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TESIS DOCTORAL

**(Re)Writing the Nation, (Re)Writing the Self: Literary
Representations of Contemporary Nigeria in Selected Novels by
Chinelo Okparanta, Uzodinma Iweala, Chigozie Obioma,
Ayobami Adebayo, Helon Habila and Sefi Atta**

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INTRODUCTION

“The Nigeria I knew is receding, but that Nigeria has also taught me to be unafraid of the Nigeria that is emerging” (Shoneyin, “Nigeria Is an Extreme Sport”)

The (post)colonial African nation has constituted a source of fascination and even obsession for sociologists, anthropologists, ethnographers and writers. From its inception, African nations have been problematised and contested due to their very structural characteristics. As Benedict Anderson posits, nations can be considered “imagined communities” (6), that is, political projections defined by a number of external and internal factors that make them recognisable and unique. However, while Anderson proposes a suitable definition of the nation, this definition is essentially created with the European nation in mind; sovereign countries, we should remember, that were self-conformed, not imposed by external powers. In this light, when it comes to African countries, they were decidedly imagined and designed by colonial agents in a fierce project whose origin can be traced back to the Berlin Conference in 1884-1885, where the scramble and looting of Africa was planned, removing any form of self-governance and autonomy of colonised territories and peoples. This idea is accurately reflected in Chigozie Obioma’s newspaper article “Africa Has Been Failed by Westernisation. It Must Cast Off its Subservience” (2017), where he claims that African nations should be called “western African nations” as their political, linguistic, ideological and socio-economic structures are of colonial architecture. Therefore, present-day African nations need to be considered part of the paternalistic colonial legacy left behind by European empires, and the subsequent conflicts among ethnic groups in their bid for political and economic superiority, a direct consequence of the colonial project and its policies. Certainly, as contemporary African nations are fundamentally the result of the amalgamation of disparate ethnic groups, this national configuration has given way to scenarios of instability and exacerbated inter-ethnic tensions that have led entire countries (especially in the post-

independence period) to civil wars where thousands, if not millions, of civilians have been massacred. Besides, the imposition of a national identity for Africans that is somehow constructed and artificial has also been problematic, making national identification and belonging almost inviable.

In this dissertation, I centre on the study of the Nigerian nation-state, the so-called “Giant of Africa,” through the literature produced by a selection of third-generation male and female writers. It is relevant to mention that the periodising label “third-generation Nigerian writer,” originally proposed by Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton in two special issues for *Research in African Literatures* (2008) and *English in Africa* (2005), is used to refer to the authors born primarily after 1960, whose works have been published from the mid-1980s onwards (Adesanmi and Dunton, “Nigeria’s Third Generation Writing” 15). This denomination is generally used to debate the literary production of emergent Nigerian writers that “now reside in Euro-America,” and “whose corpus forms part of a borderless, global, textual topography” (Adesanmi and Dunton, “Everything Good is Raining” ix). Furthermore, Hamish Dalley defines “third-generation” as “a more or less thematically and aesthetically unified phase that succeeds earlier stages of literary development” (15), but that is not exempt from further criticism. This label, which was initially received with enthusiasm, also has limitations, particularly in regard to the idea of neat classification.

H. Dalley contends that one of these limitations lies in the “arbitrary” temporal framework or “historical cuts” used to catalogue Nigerian authors and their literary production (16). He argues that the textual imaginaries produced in present-day Nigerian novels that fall under this spatio-temporal label are far “more complex than the national-generational framework” generally used to define them (16). In this sense, the national-generational framework is characterised by two seemingly opposing strands of criticism: the

first is focused on the “narrative[s] of disaffiliation” and “politics of spatial detachment” (17), as predicated on a cosmopolitan ethos that transcends the preoccupation with the nation-state. The second claims that present-day Nigerian authors’ literary imaginaries keep on grappling with what Dalley marks as the “Achebe’s engagement with a primarily local, territorially demarcated political sphere” (17). This suggests an interpenetration of generations or an “entanglement” of several temporalities, if we are to use this model, rather than a well-delimited use of such spatio-temporal framework. However, and taking into consideration the limitations of such a historicising label, I incorporate the use of this generational model for practicality purposes because, as Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton point out: “the generational approach remains one of the cornerstones of literary criticism” (“Nigeria’s Third Generation Writing” 13).

Moreover, I have chosen this West African country as the focus of my analysis for many reasons: Nigeria, a nation of over 60 years (as dating from 1960, when this country gained independence from the British Empire) and over 200 million people, constitutes one of the most economically competitive and salient countries, fundamentally due to its exportations of crude, on the continent nowadays. Besides, Nigeria accounts for a huge ethnic diversity with over 250 ethnic groups forming the country. Finally, it is worth mentioning that Nigerian fiction is now experiencing a “literary boom” or “literary Renaissance” with a huge number of literary works –with a pre-eminence of the novelistic genre¹ published overseas that deal, among many other topics, with the inception and obstacles of this nation-state together with (the trouble with) national affiliation for (cosmopolitan) Nigerian authors.² We

¹ It should be born in mind that the novel is the preferred genre among third-generation Nigerian authors at the moment, but it was not always like that. Poetry inaugurated the beginning of this generation, as Harry Garuba has documented in his article “The Unbearable Lightness of Being: Re-Figuring Trends in Recent Nigerian Poetry” (2005). In his study, he traces the development of Nigerian poetry written in English in the last decades, with a special interest in the ways emergent poets engage with other consolidated voices.

² In this regard, it is interesting to interrogate the target readership when it comes to the dissemination and canonisation of African works. The African literary production readers can access (or consume) is primarily

should take into consideration that the postcolonial novel has always operated as the platform to interrogate the meaning of the nation, especially in the form of the *Bildungsroman*, “a genre closely associated with the emergence of the nation” (Feldner 38), where the protagonist’s fate is inextricably linked to the country’s, thus showing the symbiotic relationship between nation and self (Babkar 2018; Courtois 2019).

In this vein, I centrally address the problematic with the nation as represented in the following third-generation Nigerian novels: Chigozie Obioma’s *The Fishermen* (2015), Ayobami Adebayo’s *Stay with Me* (2017), Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* (2015), Uzodinma Iweala’s *Speak No Evil* (2018), Helon Habila’s *Travellers* (2019) and Sefi Atta’s *The Bad Immigrant* (2021). I chose to explore a selection of Anglo-Igbo and Anglo-Yoruba novels written by three male Nigerian authors (Chigozie Obioma, Uzodinma Iweala and Helon Habila) and three female Nigerian authors (Ayobami Adebayo, Chinelo Okparanta and Sefi Atta) following a principle of parity, where I would analyse similar topics from both perspectives. As I apply the gender perspective to the discussion of the works under analysis, it is important to me that the realities of Nigerian women are equally reflected in this thesis, especially since the postcolonial nation has traditionally been gendered masculine (Yuval-Davis 1997; McLeod 2000; Boehmer 2005), being the trope of Mama Afrika a representative example of the masculinised interpretation of the postcolonial nation, as I argue in the first chapter.

In this vein, contemporary Nigerian literature is characterised by an ever-growing presence of female writers who are creating central and powerful female characters, and who are putting forth alternative ways of signifying Nigerian womanhood (see Hewett 2005; Bryce

published by Euro-American publishing houses, which, among other things, promote certain images of the African experience that potentially exoticise or “Otherise” the continent and its peoples, just as they demand stories that are regarded as “authentic” (i.e. stereotypical stories of poverty, suffering and degradation). It is also relevant to mention how international prizes tend to privilege the stories of authors living in Euro-American locales. For this, Isidore Diala’s article “The Nigeria Prize for Literature and Current Nigerian Writing: Politics, Process, and Price of Literary Legitimation” (2021) is very enlightening.

2008). These writers, belonging to what Pius Adesanmi designates as the “feminist *durée*” (“Of Postcolonial Entanglement” 233; italics in the original), disrupt the patriarchal and stereotypical portrayals their male counterparts have disseminated in the literary arena, where women were portrayed as passive subjects defined by their procreative role, as submissive wives or as dutiful daughters, in a male-dominated literary canon. As Carole Boyce Davies illustrates, women have been depicted as one-dimensional and peripheral individuals who lacked emotional depth/growth, complexity and personal agency since they “function[ed] either as symbols or as instruments for the male hero’s working out of his problems” (*Ngambika* 3). In this dissertation, I prove how third-generation Nigerian authors are exploring new representations of Nigerian womanhood and thus, suggesting other ways of signifying the nation to which they belong.

Additionally, the contemporariness of the chosen pieces is worth acknowledging. Most novels have been published during the 2010s, except for Sefi Atta’s *The Bad Immigrant*, which was published in 2021. During the documentation phase, where I read novels by different Nigerian authors belonging to every single generation, I deliberately decided to discuss novels written and published from the 2010s onwards because I wanted to carry out an analysis of the post-independence nation as delineated in today’s Nigerian fiction. Similarly, and as many of the novels like Habila’s or Atta’s have been published quite recently, I consider that far from being a drawback, the lack of scholarly work on this corpus has proved to be a great opportunity to discuss formal and thematic issues from an original perspective. As shown in this dissertation, this West African nation is portrayed on radically different terms by twenty-first-century writers, who are writing new “Nigerias” into being in their celebrated novels, simultaneously proposing new ways of being Nigerian nowadays.

Furthermore, most authors explored in this dissertation belong to the Igbo ethnic group, except for Ayobami Adebayo and Sefi Atta, who are Yoruba. Igbos and Yorubas are the second and the third main ethnic groups in Nigeria, respectively, which is why I have chosen a number of narratives produced by four Igbo and two Yoruba novelists. Despite being the second ethnic group, the predominance of Igbo writers among this corpus and within the Nigerian canon is worth examining. In his article “Metonymic Eruptions: Igbo Novelists, the Narrative of the Nation, and New Developments in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel” (2008), Obi Nwakanma underlines the overwhelming presence of Anglophone Igbo novelists who have transformed the Nigerian literary canon, and helped shape the Nigerian nation from its very inception. Nwakanma emphasises the prominence of Igbo writers, situating this ethnic group as the most literate one during the colonial period. Besides, the nationalistic inclinations of Igbos in colonial and, especially, postcolonial times, were channelled through the political novel as it became Igbo’s preferred medium to put forth new configurations of the motherland. Nwakanma defines this phenomenon, where Igbo works have been most widely circulated than others produced by Yoruba or Hausa-Fulani writers and where the “Igbo voice” has come to be “the significant voice of Nigerian national literature” nowadays, as the “Igbo extraction” (3). This scenario makes us question who has been more “determining” in the (hegemonic) construction of the coherent meaning of the Nigerian nation as shown in the postcolonial novel. If Igbo novelists are hyper-visible within the Nigerian (and international) literary scene, which authors coming from other ethnic groups have been left outside the national conversation?

Recently, Hausa writer Abubakar Adam Ibrahim discussed the responsibility of writers who come from underrepresented regions within the same national territory but also “within the archive of Anglophone African and world literature” to provide different narratives of the nation and diverse Nigerian experiences (“#WeTurnToBooks”). He

concluded that more critical attention should be paid to writers belonging to socio-cultural contexts that might not be familiar to the readers and to stories that deliberately provide manifold representations of Nigeria and its literatures. I should add that I have deliberately focused on the representations of this nation from the perspective of Igbo and Yoruba authors because I needed to delimit the corpus used for this dissertation. However, I am fully aware that I have excluded the works of other Northern Nigerian authors or the novels of any writer coming from the 250 different ethnic groups that make up Nigeria, and this is an aspect that I will undoubtedly pay more attention to in future research.

Similarly, we should examine the labels “Anglo-Igbo” and “Anglo-Yoruba” that I have used throughout this dissertation to name the authors addressed here in an attempt to highlight the linguistic hybridity found in the novels under scrutiny. In the analysis of the texts, I discuss the use each author makes of Igbo, Yoruba and English, noticing that most writers include terms from their mother tongues without offering a translation or a glossary at the end of the novel. English usually takes the greatest part and is generally used to create distance with other speakers, whereas Igbo and Yoruba are the languages of familiarity, employed to convey emotional meaning. Finally, it seems fitting to remember the (heated) debates on the use of English regarding African writing. Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s seminal text *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1994) is representative of a position where English is regarded as an imposed and alien language unable to convey the African experience. While he defends the use of native African languages (also as part of the anti-imperial struggle), Chinua Achebe in articles such as “The Role of the Writer in a New Nation” (1964) or “The African Writer and the English Language” (1997) opts for pushing the limits of English only to accommodate the African experience. From an Achebian perspective, English can be re-appropriated by Africans to successfully represent their realities.

Third-generation Nigerian authors, most of whom are multi-lingual and lead transnational existences, have actually re-appropriated English to the point of “Africanising” this Western language (where native languages influence English and vice versa), and adapted it to fit their own creative drive.³ For instance, in Sefi Atta’ *The Bad Immigrant*, the protagonist asserts that he is no “Ngugi-ist” because he speaks “English with Yoruba in mind” and that his “fluency in Yoruba taught [him] how to break grammar rules in English” (43 and 44), suggesting that he employs a Nigerianised version of English. Similarly, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie mentions in her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) that “[i]t was Igbo coloured by the sliding sounds of English, the Igbo of one who spoke English often” (4), once again stressing the mutual influence of European and African languages.

Before debating the Nigerian authors selected for this dissertation, I must add that the interest in the postcolonial nation, paradigmatic of the (new) Nigerian novel, is also central to other African writers. If we have a look at some of the main international prizes, we find, on the one hand, a growing presence of African (or of African origin) authors recently awarded and, on the other, an emergent body of works, especially novels, dealing with the politics and predicaments of the African nation nowadays. For instance, Zimbabwean NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* (2013), a novel that centres on the life of a Zimbabwean girl whose house is bulldozed by President Robert G. Mugabe’s paramilitary force and who later relocates to the US, was shortlisted for the 2013 edition of the Man Booker Prize for Fiction. Nigerian Chigozie Obioma’s *The Fishermen* (2015) was shortlisted for the 2015 edition of the same prize and later for his second novel *An Orchestra of Minorities* (2019).

³ For a more detailed analysis of this topic, see Elena Rodríguez-Murphy’s exploration of the coexistence of European and African languages among the works of prominent Nigerian authors (2012, 2015). Mukoma Wa Ngugi has also addressed the relevance of the English language in the shaping of the African novel since the Makerere Conference in 1962 in his monograph *The Rise of the African Novel: Politics of Language, Identity and Ownership* (2018).

Both novels explore the disillusionment with the post-independence Nigerian nation from the point of view of four brothers and of a poultry farmer, respectively.

Zimbabwean Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body* (2018), the third novel in the *Nervous Conditions* trilogy, was shortlisted together with Ethiopian Maaza Mengiste's *The Shadow King* (2020) in the 2020 edition. Dangarembga's narrative constitutes a piercing critique of the state of the Zimbabwean nation as recounted by her anti-heroine Tambudzai; as for Mengiste's story, this takes place in 1930s Ethiopia during the second Italo-Ethiopian war (1935-1937), and the subsequent invasion of Ethiopia by fascist B. Mussolini. South African Damon Galgut's *The Promise* (2021) won the 2021 Booker Prize with a novel that recounts the disintegration of a white South African family. This novel has been read as an allegory of post-Apartheid South Africa and the debt white South Africans still have with their black counterpart. Finally, NoViolet Bulawayo's second novel *Glory* (2022), which was shortlisted for the 2022 edition of the same prize, constitutes a political satire of 2010s Zimbabwe. Inspired by George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), the author chronicles the 2017 *coup d'état* where President Robert G. Mugabe was removed. This outpouring of novels coming from the African continent has helped further the national conversations of their respective countries while proving that the idea of the African nation is not at all *passé*.⁴

Moreover, it seems worth underlining that a recent body of critical works has been produced in order to make sense of the Nigerian nation. We could emphasise the following: *The Pan-African Nation Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria* (Andrew H. Apter 2005); *The Infinite Longing for Home: Desire and the Nation in Selected Writings of Ben Okri and K. S. Maniam* (David C. L. Lim 2005); *Nigeria and the Crisis of the Nation-State: Agenda for*

⁴ While choosing the famous Man Booker Prize for Fiction as example, I am exclusively focusing on the role this international prize has played by showing the central presence of the postcolonial nation among the recently-published works by African authors. Yet, it is important to remember the legitimising power of such prizes, which can render visible certain realities and ignore others that are equally relevant.

National Consensus (Emeka Nwosu 2012); *Nigeria Beyond Divorce: Amalgamation in Perspective* (Sam Momah 2013); *Africa in Fragments: Essays on Nigeria, Africa and Global Africanity* (Moses E. Ochonu 2014); *Narrating the Nation-State in the African Novel* (Abdelkader Babkar 2018); *Formation: The Making of Nigeria from Jihad to Amalgamation* (Feyi Fawehinmi and Fola Fagbule 2020), together with other articles that implicitly or explicitly deal with the Nigerian nation such as Obi Nwakanma's already-cited "Metonymic Eruptions: Igbo Novelists, the Narrative of the Nation, and New Developments in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel" (2008); Jane Bryce's "'Half and Half Children': Third Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel" (2008); Anna-Leena Toivanen's "Daddy's Girls?: Father-Daughter Relations and the Failures of the Postcolonial Nation-State in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Véronique Tadjo's *Loin de mon Père*" (2013); Madhu Krishnan's "Introduction: Interrogating the Postnation in African Literary Writing: Localities and Globalities" (2018) and Cédric Courtois' "'Revolutionary Politics' and Poetics in the Nigerian *Bildungsroman*: The Coming-of-Age of the Individual and the Nation in Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen* (2015)" (2019).

In this dissertation, I seek to prove that the interest in the African nation is still very present in the fictional imaginaries of contemporary African, and more specifically, Nigerian authors. I am aware that first- and second-generation Nigerian writers have also grappled with the motherland and tried to bring the nation into being through its narration. First-generation authors such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Amos Tutuola, Mabel Segun or Flora Nwapa, among many others, have nostalgically romanticised a no-longer-existent pre-colonial past while taking part in a "patriotic cultural rebirth through literary language" (Miriam Akinpelu 45). These writers witnessed Nigeria's independence in 1960 and, thus, helped write a recently-independent country into being while denouncing and dismantling colonial and racist conceptions of the African nation and its citizens in a process of "writing back" to the

metropolis. Second-generation writers such as Ben Okri, Isidore Okpewho, Zaynab Alkali, Ken Saro-Wiwa or Buchi Emecheta have focused, although not exclusively, on the lacks of the Nigerian nation, especially after the Nigeria-Biafra civil war (1967-1970). These authors recorded Nigeria when it was going through a period of political, economic and social turmoil due to the recent conflicts. They also wrote about the reconstruction of a country profoundly divided across religious, ethnic and linguistic lines and about the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta. Oluwafunmilayo Miriam Akinpelu underlines that a nascent “sense of [postcolonial] disillusionment about the possibility to acquire sustained freedom from western domination, political corruption and oppressive national governments” can be found among the authors of this generation (57).

Regarding third-generation writers, some scholars contend that the literary works created by these (transcultural) authors are mainly “governed by the thematics of home and exile, deterritorialization and deracination, of diasporic subjecthood and identity” (Adesanmi, “Of Postcolonial Entanglement” 237), and have left behind the previous generations’ fixation with the Nigerian nation-state (Jones 2011; Dalley 2013). Other scholars also add that this new generation is not as interested in “the tragedy of Africa’s colonial past and the imperfect modernity of the nation-state it engendered” (Adesanmi, “Of Postcolonial Entanglement” 227) or in “the anticolonial defense of national culture” (Dalley 17). James Hoddap, for instance, holds that “what it means to be African [nowadays] has outstripped the nation” (4), and for theorists like Rebecca Jones or Pius Adesanmi, the dysfunctionality and even failure of the Nigerian nation-state, as approached from an Afropessimist stance, is no longer central to the literary projects of twenty-first century Nigerian authors.

Certainly, the interest contemporary authors have in the Nigerian nation is not comparable to previous generations, but it cannot be affirmed that this interest has been left

aside or that “a politics of spatial detachment” has promoted “a narrative of disaffiliation” from the national (Dalley 17). In this same vein, Anna-Leena Toivanen states that recent postcolonial discourses have incorporated postnationalism as central to its theorisations, while “declaring the obsolescence of the nation and treating dislocation as the paradigmatic condition” (“Daddy’s Girls?” 99). For example, Helon Habila is one of the advocates for postnationalism, as I discuss in section 3.1.2. “Transcending the ‘Almost Obligatory Obsession of the African Writer with the Nation’? Revisiting Home in the Post-National Context.” However, Toivanen aptly reminds us that postnationalist claims may be premature and that “the nation-state persists in the African literary agenda” (“Daddy’s Girls?” 99). Even though motivated by the realities of cosmopolitanism, diaspora and deracination, the literary engagement of present-day Nigerian writers with the postcolonial nation has not been surpassed or brought to an end. This new generation of (mostly internationally based) writers keeps on discussing “specific local and national conditions in their works” (Toivanen, “Daddy’s Girls?” 100), accentuating the interpenetration of the national/local and the global. Therefore, these writers might have actually outstripped the geographical boundaries of the nation, but they have not certainly left behind its imagined projections.

Third-generation authors such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chika Unigwe, Helon Habila, Helen Oyeyemi, Chigozie Obioma or Sefi Atta keep on interrogating the Nigerian nation-state due to a number of reasons. The most obvious one to me is that, like their literary predecessors, they try to write the nation into being in their works and, I argue, propose alternative conceptions of the self and of what it means to be Nigerian in the twenty-first century in their stories. Stories that, Elleke Boehmer contends, have the potential to “embody nations” as they “allow emergent national identities to be performed” (*Stories of Women*). I consider these writers are still trying to make sense of a country where heterogeneous ethnic and religious “consciousnesses” coexist, which is the main reason why Nigeria, as Uzodinma

Iweala recently stated in an article, “has always seemed like an impossibility” (“Nigeria’s Second Independence” 145). It seems worth pointing out that Nigeria was also regarded with international scepticism once it gained independence in 1960, and it was justified to some extent by the subsequent civil war that tore the newly born country apart in 1967. Thus, Nigeria’s presumed “impossibility” and the (intergenerational) trauma caused by this inter-ethnic war reasonably explain why Nigerian authors are still trying to make sense of the country and to offer alternative ways to achieve and defend a sustainable national unity.

In this same light, it is important to emphasise that Nigeria has also been regarded as a stagnant country due to the sucession of kleptocratic governments, the poor life conditions and professional prospects, the rampant violation of human rights, the lack of a robust education system or the scarcity of infrastructures.⁵ Hence, Nigeria remains an “atrophic” country in many senses: politically, socially, educationally and even economically. Tellingly, Chigozie Obioma defines Nigeria as “the land of the lack” in his second novel *An Orchestra of Minorities* (2019). He bitingly criticises his birth country when defining it as

the land in which a man’s greatest enemies are members of his household; a land of kidnappers, of ritual killers, of policemen who bully those they encounter on the road and shoot those who don’t bribe them, of leaders who treat those they lead with contempt and rob them of the Commonwealth, of frequent riots and crisis, of long strikes, of petrol shortages, of joblessness, of clogged gutters, of potholed roads, of bridges that collapse at will, of littered streets and trashy neighbourhoods, and of constant power outrages. (Obioma, *Orchestra of Minorities*)

⁵ I use the expression “kleptocratic governments” to refer to those rulers in power who have misappropriated the resources of the people they are expected to govern. Nigeria has a long history of governments led by corrupt politicians who have committed illegal acts that have gone unpunished.

Even though this passage pertains to the realm of fiction and we ought to analyse it under its own parameters, Obioma explicitly exposes the raw frustration and disillusionment with the (failed) postcolonial Nigerian nation. It also focuses on the lack, perhaps even the impossibility, of belonging to such an unstable and ravaged place. David C. L. Lim posits regarding Ben Okri's and K. S. Manian's central characters that they "all long to belong, to find that 'elusive' home in themselves and the fractured country into which they have been thrown" (xii). This idea exemplifies Nigerians' ambivalence towards their home country and proposes literature as the space where Nigerian authors can process the negative and traumatic experiences with their home(land), and come to terms with its failures, hence suggesting alternative forms of national affiliation and identification. In a recent newspaper article titled "My Nigeria: Five Writers and Artists Reflect on the Place They Call Home" (2021), Abubakar Adam Ibrahim recounts a past experience where he got stuck in a train bound for Kaduna and uses that experience as a metaphor of his Nigeria: "This was my country [Nigeria]. This train. These coaches filled with anxiety and frightened people, caught halfway between a dream and a promise, waiting to be led to a promised destination. A terrorised people who have stubbornly refused to surrender their laughter."

Abubakar Adam Ibrahim and Chigozie Obioma not only underline the interpenetration between personal identity and the pathological situation of their birth country, but they also attempt to invent in their fictions more hospitable and optimistic national horizons, where Nigeria (and Nigerians as well) can achieve its/their whole potential. We can find other examples that highlight the ambivalent relationship Nigerians have with their homeland. For instance, in the collection of essays *Of This Our Country: Acclaimed Nigerian Writers on the Home, Identity and Culture They Know* (2021), A. Adam Ibrahim also compares his love-hate relationship with Nigeria to an abusive partner, "one who bites and punches you," but also "one who . . . reaches for you" not sure if wanting "to hug or hit you" ("One Season, Many

Decades”), whereas Chigozie Obioma admits in his essay “Pride and Punishment” that he admires the “earthiness of [Nigerians’] cultures and histories” together with their resilience, but that “the lack of development” heavily weighs Nigeria(ns) down.

Furthermore, numerous third-generation authors are exploring their relationship with the Nigerian nation as apprehended from a transnational and Afro/cosmopolitan locus. Many contemporary Nigerian novelists are multi-passport holders, that is, they were born in Nigeria but are now permanently based in another Euro-American country (or countries). These authors on the move embody what it means to be at home in the world and to belong in other places, apart from their birth countries, without being physically or psychologically limited by national boundaries. Helon Habila is a case in point: he considers himself a “post-national” writer who has transcended “the often predictable, almost obligatory obsession of the African writer with the nation and with national politics” (“Introduction” viii). In his article “The Future of African Literature” (2019), he holds that, since Africa “has become these diasporic [and] online communities,” then there is no sense in keeping on approaching the nation in the same ways previous nationalist writers have done (158). Drawing on some of the postulates Wole Soyinka proposed in his own body of work, Habila concludes that African writers should overcome the “state of disillusionment” through which their “growth” becomes “permanently truncated by the traumas of the failed nation building,” preventing them from “achiev[ing] great[er] potential” (156). To him, African writers should not be regarded as “appendage[s]” or as “conscience[s] of the nation,” but rather as autonomous entities “free to develop [themselves] as . . . individual[s]” (158), uncircumscribed by their origins because, as Habila points out, “[t]he worst thing for a writer to be is provincial” (159).

Sefi Atta is another example of the ideas Habila discusses in his article. She presents herself as a Nigerian author that goes beyond ethnic identities because she regards them as

parochial and somewhat limiting. In her interview with Eva Rask Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek for the monograph *In Search of the Afropolitan: Encounters, Conversations, and Contemporary Diasporic African Literature* (2016), Atta stated that she regards herself as a Nigerian that “commutes between [Nigeria, England and the US]” (181). Atta further explains that Nigeria is her “home of roots,” that is, her ““real home”” and the one she longs for (184). However, as Nigeria “is a difficult country to live in if [one] do[es] not have the means,” then other homes (note the “s”) inevitably come to the fore (184). For her, America has become “a home of convenience where [she] can function” whereas England is the place she can do things that she does not do in America or Nigeria (184). Atta thus complicates the sense of home while broadening the definition of what it means to be “local.” These are themes that she explores in her novels like, for instance, *A Bit of Difference* (2013) and, the one examined in this dissertation, *The Bad Immigrant* (2021).

At the other end of the spectrum, we find writers that urge readers to acknowledge the colonial component of the nation and to try to recuperate an “uncontaminated” pre-colonial past, particularly in terms of worldviews and belief systems. Chigozie Obioma is representative of this tendency: he imbues his works with a notable Igbo cosmology, while asserting that the ethnic identity is the only authentic identity for Africans because “[their] allegiance is to [their] tribe and their families and their kindred” before their nation (qtd. in Bett, “Chigozie Obioma”). Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie also mentions something similar in a quote from her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), which emphasises the artificiality of the African nation and its peoples: “I am Nigerian because the white man created Nigeria and gave me that identity. I am black because the white man constructed black to be as different as possible from his white. But I was Igbo before the white man came” (20). Back to Obioma, he acknowledged in an interview that he would like to be an “unadulterated” Igbo man “in the 17th century” because Igbos had a far more egalitarian system than Britons (qtd. in Ajibade

262). Obioma rejects the modernity “imposed on [Africans] from foreign ways” that deem them backward and inferior, but clarifies that he is not against material modernity (262).

Regarding the structure of this dissertation, I have divided it into three main chapters where I deal with the post-independence Nigerian nation from three different but interrelated approaches, in an effort to prove how contemporary Nigerian writers are discussing their birth country from innovative and ground-breaking perspectives. The first chapter, “Familial Perspectives, National Allegories,” is devoted to the exploration of 1980s and 1990s Nigeria, with a special emphasis on the Sani Abacha dictatorial regime, from a familial stance. In this chapter, I focus on the novel *The Fishermen* (2015) by Chigozie Obioma and the novel by Ayobami Adebayo *Stay with Me* (2017). The main aim of this chapter is to trace a parallel between the dysfunctionality of two Nigerian families and the course of a country that has been failed by the promises of decolonisation and democratisation, and frustrated the hopes of a generation that is profoundly disenchanted with their home country. In *The Fishermen*, Obioma symbolically explores the colonial encounter as embodied by the local madman in his story –Abulu– and the disintegration of the Agwu family due to this madman’s prophecy. This novel can be read as a metaphor of Nigeria and its composite identity which complicates the creation of a solid sense of nationhood. Furthermore, Obioma’s novel constitutes a tenacious criticism of Nigeria as a construction of colonial design, that is, an artificial idea that preceded Nigerians and that, as a consequence, complicates national identification.

In *Stay with Me*, Adebayo centres her story on a Yoruba woman, Yejide, who is unable to engender and thus considered a barren and unworthy subject within her family and community. Eventually, the protagonist gets pregnant but almost all of her children die at an early age, which automatically transforms her into a “monstrous” mother and her progeny into *abiku* children, precipitating the disintegration of this family. In her symbolic exploration of

the motherland from a feminist point of view, Adebayo de-idealises normative understandings of the nuclear family in order to “uncover the fiction of the nation,” as Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi aptly illustrates (677). Finally, and as drawing on renowned scholars such as Elleke Boehmer (2005), Anne McClintock (1991; 1995) or John McLeod (2000), I aim to present a more inclusive idea to Nigeria and its most recent history, which allows me to advance more viable forms of nationhood, where women are no longer subordinated to patriarchal and colonial prescriptions.

In the second chapter, “Afroqueer Representations of Home,” I tackle the idea of Nigeria from an Afroqueer perspective. This is one of the 54 African countries that has banned same-sex desire and other transgressive gender identities on the basis that homosexuality is a colonial import and therefore deemed un-African. Former Nigeria’s President Goodluck Jonathan passed the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act in 2014, a restrictive law that demonises the subjects who identify under the LGBTQI+ label, and allows the imprisonment of homo-desiring individuals, the corrective rapes against lesbians and even the death by stoning in the northern states. This law is representative of a conception of sexuality and gender that is essentially colonial and that has been incorporated by contemporary politicians, law-makers and a majority of citizens who believe that being Afroqueer is an abomination. Besides, Christianity and Islam also play a pivotal role in the construction of this reductive understanding of human identity and sexual orientation.

In this chapter, I analyse Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* (2015) and Uzodinma Iweala’s *Speak No Evil* (2018). Okparanta’s novel is set in the immediate years after the Nigeria-Biafra civil war (1967-1970) and retells the story of a lesbian woman who grows in post-war Nigeria, a time marked by long-lasting ethnic tensions. I seek to prove that contemporary Nigerian authors are firmly attempting to return dignity to Afroqueer

individuals living in Nigeria and in the diaspora, as these writers overtly depict same-sex relationships in a positive and sympathetic light. This creative effort, I argue, is part of what Brenna M. Munro coins as “the queer project” of African literature; an emergent restorative literary project aiming to transcend “fantasies of purity, whether cultural, national, or sexual” (“Locating ‘Queer’” 123), and to re-inscribe these effaced subjectivities into the postcolonial African nation. I analyse how Okparanta tries to re-inscribe these queer subjectivities in a key moment in Nigerian history in order to claim that Afroqueer subjects existed and loved during these turbulent years, and to prove how Afroqueer subjects have been left outside the democratic transition during the post-war years, evincing the impossibility of creating a strong democratic country if some sectors of its society are excluded from the nation-building project.

In *Speak No Evil*, the second novel under scrutiny in this second chapter, Uzodinma Iweala writes about the ordeal a gay adolescent of Nigerian origin experiences in his process of sexual awakening. The protagonist of this novel has been born and bred in the US, which complicates the many ways he relates to what for his parents is the motherland, how he regards queerness and how he constructs his (fractured) identity as oscillating between sometimes opposing worldviews. I seek to explore *Speak No Evil* as a novel that can be placed under the Black Queer Diaspora field of study that theorists such as Jafari S. Allen (2012) or Meg Wesling (2008) have helped configure. I am particularly interested in the intersections between Afroqueerness and migration and the different configurations of desire and national identity that arise from the coming together of these two realities. I also aim to explore how homophobic attitudes are reproduced in the diaspora and how the rejection of certain sexual identities makes it more difficult the attachment to the (imagined) motherland. I also focus on the father-son relationship to examine the different expressions of masculinity that are explored in the text and to analyse how Iweala proposes new forms of signifying the

Nigerian man. Finally, I tackle the connection between homosexuality and racism in the US since I attempt to analyse the ways Iweala utilises fiction to offer voice to those who are silenced, and to denounce the injustices that US and non-US blacks experience on a daily basis.

In the third chapter, “Transnational Realities, Local Concerns,” I address the Nigerian nation as explored from a diasporic and Afropolitan perspective. In this context, it is worth noting that most third-generation Nigerian writers are conditioned by the very reality of mobility and transculturality. Maximilian Feldner rightly states that most contemporary Nigerian novelists can be seen as active participants of the new African diaspora, caused “as a result of recent African migration to the United States and Europe” (15; see also Falola and Oyebade 2017).⁶ Celebrated African authors such as Chris Abani, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta, Teju Cole, Chinelo Okparanta or Maik Nwosu can be regarded as, Yogita Goyal points out, “belong[ing] to a generation that heralds an African literary renaissance while insisting that new migrations demand new conceptualizations of diaspora” (“We Need New Diasporas” 641). In fact, we could affirm that these new voices in the contemporary African/Nigerian literary landscape are inherently characterised by the very condition of diasporism and its challenges in a twenty-first-century world which defines itself as interconnected, post-racial and embracing of multiculturalism.

⁶ The “new African diaspora,” as opposed to the “old African diaspora” which was defined by the forced migration of black peoples to Europe, Asia and the Americas, refers to those voluntary massive migrations of Africans that started during the twentieth century to Euro-American countries (Falola, *The African Diaspora* 101). According to Maximilian Feldner (2019), there are three waves of contemporary African migration to Western countries: The first one took place from 1950s to 1970s because “African governments sponsored young Africans to get their education abroad;” they were expected “to return and fill the positions of civil servants and skilled workers in the public and private sectors.” The second wave initiated in mid-1970s and largely happened as a response to the failure of the postcolonial nation and the internal conflicts that occurred as a consequence (e.g. the civil war). The third wave “commenced shortly after the turn of the twenty-first century, with skilled and unskilled migrants attempting to improve their economic lot” in their massive relocation to Western locales (15). More information regarding this new diaspora will be provided in Chapter 3.

In the special issue Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton (2008) co-edited for the prestigious journal *Research in African Literatures*, they debate the main aspects of the third-generation Nigerian writing against the backdrop of a very successful upsurge of Nigerian literary works and, particularly, of a buoyant revival of the (new) Nigerian novel (the preferred genre among third-generation Nigerian authors).⁷ One of the key aspects that are overtly highlighted in the volume is the idea of deterritorialisation of twenty-first-century Nigerian authors, who have mostly relocated to several Western countries and enjoy wide critical acclaim outside their birth country. Besides, their literary production evinces the inherent afrosporic/cosmopolitan status many Nigerian authors hold nowadays, together with their interest in themes such as migration, mobility or Afro/cosmopolitanism in relation to the idea of the nation-space in their narratives.⁸ This scenario grants their literary pieces to be part of the so-called “Nigerian diaspora literature,” or, as Adesanmi and Dunton designate it, the “transnationalist trend” (“Nigeria’s Third Generation Writing” 16) in contemporary Nigerian fiction. These scholars further recognise the pre-eminence of what they refer to as the “transnational idiom,” which “stems from the tropes of nomadism, exile, displacement, and deracination” and have come to be representative features of “global postmodernity and postcoloniality” in this new wave of Nigerian writing (16).

Considering this promising scenario, in this final chapter, I examine, on the one hand, how migrants are regarded in Western societies as based on their ethnic and national origins,

⁷ In their article “An Afropolitan Literary Aesthetics? Afropolitan Style and Tropes in Recent Diasporic African Fiction,” Eva Rask Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek (2019) point to the pre-eminence of novels among third-generation writers. Francis Abiola Irele had previously referred to the privileged status of this genre in *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel* (2009).

⁸ In regard to the fact that these novels, categorised as “Nigerian diaspora literature” (Feldner 2019), have been published first in the US or UK and later in Nigeria is worth mentioning. A substantial number of scholars (Tveit 2013; Bwesigye 2013; Dabiri 2014 and 2017; Ede 2017; Gerhmann 2017; Toivanen 2019; Feldner 2019) have pointed out the fact that these (hyper-visible) mobile authors write about certain themes (i.e. diaspora, displacement, globalisation, political activism, post-nationalism, etc.) as they are more profitable in the literary global market, while others have interrogated (and problematised) the adherence of these works to the so-called African literature label since they have been published overseas. This is truly a very effervescent debate that is still going on but which, unfortunately, needs to be left out of the purview of this dissertation.

gender, socio-economic status and way of entry into Euro-American countries and, on the other, I seek to explore how Nigerian migrants relate to the motherland while abroad and to the (sometimes hostile) host land. For this chapter, I have selected two novels that have been recently published: Helon Habila's *Travellers* (2019) and Sefi Atta's *The Bad Immigrant* (2021). I have chosen these two novels because I consider they explore migrancy from two antagonistic perspectives, which help theorise the migrant experience as part of what I call a "diasporic continuum" that gathers the myriad circumstances of African translocated individuals. My intention is to delve into the migrant experience of mostly undocumented and subaltern travellers –usually refugees and asylum-seekers– who flee their countries in search of better life conditions in countries of the Global North, as shown in Habila's *Travellers*.⁹ Moreover, I aim to delve into the migrant experience from the perspective of a well-off Nigerian family in the US, as in Atta's *The Bad Immigrant*. In the section 3.2.3. "Are We (Still) Interested in 'Stories about Borders'? Debating *The Bad Immigrant* through the Lens of Afropolitanism," I tackle the debates on Afropolitanism to prove its validity and limitations.

At the end of this dissertation, I present the conclusions drawn from the analysis of the aforementioned novels, where I essentially try to prove that the interest with the post-independence Nigerian nation is still a central topic for third-generation Nigerian authors. There is also the Appendix section that gathers two of the illustrations present in the novels by Chigozie Obioma (Chapter 1) and Chinelo Okparanta (Chapter 2). Finally, it is worth mentioning that, for this dissertation, I have relied on a wide array of theoretical disciplines such as Postcolonial Studies, Diaspora Studies, Nigerian History, Critical Race Studies, Migration Studies, Gender and Queer Studies, Masculinity Studies and Anthropology. The use of these complementary disciplines throughout the three chapters that comprise this

⁹ The term "subaltern" was coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her seminal article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). I mostly use the term "subaltern" in relation to the discussion of the Afroqueer subject (Chapter 2) and the impoverished migrant (Chapter 3), who do not comply with hegemonic representations of desire, intimacy, mobility and citizenship.

research project has allowed me to understand the diachronic development of the Nigerian nation, and to theorise it from fields of study that might result in original interpretations of the contemporary postcolonial nation.

CHAPTER 1
FAMILIAL PERSPECTIVES, NATIONAL
ALLEGORIES

“The colonized man who writes for his people ought to use the past with the intention of opening the future, as an invitation to action and a basis for hope” (Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* 231)

“It’s one thing to know the history of your home country. It’s another thing to know your home’s history of your home country” (Femi 15)

In this chapter, I carry out the analysis of the debut novel by Anglo-Igbo author Chigozie Obioma, *The Fishermen* (2015), and the novel by Anglo-Yoruba writer Ayobami Adebayo, *Stay with Me* (2017). Both texts can be considered allegorical narratives where the nation is assessed from the familial perspective and, in the case of Adebayo’s novel, it incorporates the feminist lens. Both authors discuss the post-independence Nigerian nation from two very different perspectives by showing the “home’s history of [their] home country,” as stated in the opening quote by Caleb Femi (15). It is particularly useful to analyse the (fictional) testimonies that the authors under scrutiny in this chapter provide regarding their own home countries; testimonies that sometimes offer an unofficial version of key historical moments for their nation and their authorial relation to them. These unofficial versions –or the home’s histories of one’s home country– are extremely valuable inasmuch as they allow readers to apprehend this country from angles that might have been overlooked or deliberately ignored.

In *The Fishermen*, C. Obioma delves into 1990s Nigeria from the perspective of a dysfunctional family of four brothers who kill each other as a result of the self-fulfilled prophecy that Abulu “the madman” tells them at the beginning of this story. I claim these brothers can be successfully read as an allegory of Nigeria as a diverse nation where ethnic frictions are still part of its current national scenario. It is important to remember that these ethnic tensions led to the Nigeria-Biafra civil war in 1967; a historical event that was notable

for the murdering of thousands, if not millions, of civilians and that still constitutes a national trauma. In his exploration of an Igbo family where siblings end up murdering each other, Obioma symbolically comments upon the reasons and circumstances that gave way to this fratricidal war, which fractured even more a country that was strongly divided, and offers a tenacious criticism of (a failed) Nigeria as it is configured nowadays.

Similarly, *The Fishermen* is representative of “a strange [and nostalgic] longing and sadness” for a “national home” (Lim xii) that can be understood in a transnational key, as Obioma is a translocated author who considers himself a “reluctant immigrant” or an “exile writer” living in the US for emotional and psychological reasons (Obioma qtd. in Mallika Datta 58), which emphasises, once again, Nigerians’ ambivalent attitude towards the motherland. In addition, this longing for home can also be most specifically understood as a longing for a pre-colonial Igbo home, that is, for a mythic homeland unadulterated by external and colonial influences, which Obioma has made clear in some of his interviews and newspaper articles (Ajibade 2019; Obioma, “Africa Has Been Failed”). In this light, I argue Obioma’s orientation towards Nigeria’s pre-colonial past is very much connected with the literary and thematic interests of first-generation authors who engaged in discussing the foundational circumstances and shortcomings of the colonial nation. In this line, Obioma has actually been defined as the literary heir of Chinua Achebe (Rocco, “The Fishermen”), whose debut novel can be regarded as engaging in an intergenerational dialogue with this foundational figure in Nigerian literature and with his seminal novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Finally, many of the themes central to the novels by second-generation authors can also be found in Obioma’s political text: for instance, his interrogation of the democratic principles in the postcolonial nation or the exploration of the impact of the oil extraction in the Niger Delta in ecological and economic terms. This makes me read *The Fishermen* as

“petro-magical realism” (Miriam Akinpelu 2021; Wenzel 2006) or as a “petro-fictional novel” (Harlin 2019; Ghosh 1992), as I explain further on.

A. Adebayo’s *Stay with Me* also constitutes an allegorical exploration of 1980s and 1990s Nigeria that centres on the implosion and subsequent destruction of a Yoruba family. Whereas Obioma’s story is mostly set in 1990s Nigeria, specifically during the military regime of Sani Abacha, Adebayo explores the relationship between the devastation of a Yoruba family during the 1980s and early 1990s, when Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida was Head of State. Babangida remained in power from 1985 to 1993 and was followed by Ernest Shonekan, who only spent a few months in office, and then by Sani Abacha (1993-1998). In Adebayo’s novel, there is also reference to a pivotal moment in Nigerian history: the 1993 democratic election where M.K.O. Abiola was elected president but that was later annulled by Babangida, ending any possibility for a democratic transition. In this chapter, I will elaborate on how *Stay with Me* explores the symbolic connection between the falling apart of the protagonists’ marriage and the turbulent political landscape of 1980s Nigeria. Additionally, while Obioma focuses on the fratricidal relationship among the Agwu brothers, Adebayo centres on the experiences of Yejide, a woman who is unable to engender and the social and familial pressures she is subject to. In her exploration of traditional representations of Yoruba womanhood, Adebayo proposes a transgressive and de-romanticised interpretation of motherhood that is not influenced by patriarchal conceptions. Furthermore, by entangling the history of Nigeria with the personal history of a presumably barren woman, Adebayo offers a feminine and intimate testimony of the nation that highly contrasts with masculinised versions of it.

In her article “‘Half and Half Children’: Third-Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel” (2008), Jane Bryce concludes that a new cohort of women writers (e.g.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta, Chinelo Okparanta, Chika Unigwe, Imbolo Mbue, Nnedi Okorafor, Unoma Azuah and Helen Oyeyemi, only to name a few) are discussing “new identities” and “revision[ing] old ones” (56). For instance, the authors previously mentioned examine other conceptions of African femininity that are not exclusively “centered on motherhood, wifehood, and self-sacrifice,” while coming up with new forms of representing the contemporary African woman (Pucherova, “What Is African Woman?” 110). By offering modern ways of reading motherhood, female sexuality and even heterosexual relationships, together with an implicit critique of the general situation of post-war Nigeria, Ayobami Adebayo can be regarded as belonging to this ensemble of feminist authors who are developing new ways of understanding womanhood in a Nigerian-Yoruba context.¹⁰ Likewise, this process of rooting the novel in a specific historical and political moment for Nigeria is also mentioned in Bryce’s article, who argues that the literary texts produced by these female writers can be seen as “predominantly historical” since their stories “self-consciously recreat[e] specific moments in Nigeria’s recent or pre-Independence past” (54). In this vein, the growing presence of celebrated female writers in the contemporary Nigerian literary scene makes possible to “feminise” the story of this West African country through its texts.

Furthermore, I mentioned earlier that *The Fishermen* can be analysed as a contemporary novel in conversation with another canonical piece, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), and as part of a literary tradition where fiction operates as a form of political protest against (post/neo)colonial power. In this chapter, I also argue that *Stay with*

¹⁰ Feminism has traditionally been a contested movement in the African contexts. Nigerian authors Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa are two examples of the rejection of this term because it is regarded as “divisive and too European in its application” (Mears 23). Feminism has been conceived as an exclusive movement that universalises certain aspects of the female experience, disregarding the particularities and preoccupations of African women (see Arndt 2002). However, contemporary African authors offer a more welcoming interpretation of feminism. For instance, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s famous TED talk “We Should All Be Feminists” (2012) is representative of this “new turn toward feminism interpreted as universal human rights” (Pucherova, “What Is African Woman?” 118).

Me (2017) can be read as in dialogue with the works of some of her literary predecessors: Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) or *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) or *Idu* (1970). Adebayo draws on her literary foremothers, who have also tackled the question of Nigerian motherhood, just as she relies on other Western feminist works and writers, as I prove further on.¹¹ I deem relevant to mention that I have chosen these two Igbo female writers for several reasons: first, Emecheta and Nwapa are considered canonical Igbo authors within Nigerian literary tradition; second, their novels discussed motherhood and womanhood in a really original light; and third, there does not seem to be a remarkable presence of Yoruba authors, female authors to be precise, in the so-called Nigerian canon. Either because Yoruba authors "did not emerge until the late 1970s," as Toyin Falola and Akintunde Akinyemi contend (210), which could explain the scarcity of female literary referents at the time and the hegemony of Igbo ones, or because some of these authors chose to write in their vernacular language (Yoruba), and so their works were not as widely disseminated, the presence of Yoruba writers in the contemporary Nigerian literary cannon is not precisely abundant. We can mention Dele Agegbemi, Oluyemisi Adebawale or Simi Bedford; to this group of literary foremothers could be added some twenty-first-century female Yoruba writers such as Olufunlayo Akinode, Nike Adesanya, Adunola Amoo, Mubo Aderibigbe, Sefi Atta, and now, Ayobami Adebayo.

¹¹ It is fitting to remember that these two Nigerian female authors are not the only Africans who have delved into the questions of motherhood and womanhood as experienced in Africa. Among them, we can find Guinean Camara Laye's *The African Child* (1953), Kenyan Grace Ogot's *The Promised Land* (1966), Ghanaian Ama Ata Aidoo's *No Sweetness Here and Other Stories* (1970) and *Our Sister Killjoy or Reflections from a Black-Eyed Squint* (1977), Egyptian Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1975), South African Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (1974) or Senegalese Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1979). Motherhood, as shown in the high number of literary pieces dealing with this topic, is a central trope in African literature.

1.1. Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen* (2015)

1.1.1. Preliminary Remarks on Chigozie Obioma and his Novel

Chigozie Obioma (1986, Akure) is a contemporary Nigerian writer of Igbo descent currently based in the US, where he graduated with an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Michigan. He now works as an Assistant Professor of Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. This Anglo-Igbo author has published two celebrated novels: *The Fishermen* (2015) and *An Orchestra of Minorities* (2019), which have been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize (2015 and 2019 editions, respectively). His forthcoming third novel *The Road to the Country* will be published in 2023 and constitutes Obioma's first attempt at exploring the Nigeria-Biafra civil war (1967-1970). This author has also published numerous short stories like "The Great Convert" (2014) in *Transition Magazine*, "The Strange Story of the World" (2019) in *Granta.com* or "Midnight Sun" (2016) in the *NewStatesman*. To these fictional works can be added a number of newspaper articles such as "Finding the Light under the Bushel: How One Writer Came to Love Books" (2018) for the *New York Times* and "Africa Has Been Failed by Westernisation" (2017) or "Toni Morrison: Farewell to America's Greatest Writer" (2019) for *The Guardian*, among many others. His debut novel to be explored in this dissertation, *The Fishermen*, was awarded with the inaugural FT/Oppenheimer Award for Fiction, the NAACP Image Awards for Debut Literary Work, the Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction (Los Angeles Times Book Prizes) and the GOG Bookclub Best New Author of the Year. It was also longlisted for the Dylan Thomas first book prize and shortlisted for the Edinburgh Festival First Book Award, The Guardian First Book Award, the Hurston Wright Legacy Awards 2016, the Prix du Roman (France), the best Translated Fiction for Winter 2020 in France or the best book of the decade

by Radio National Australia. It is worth mentioning that *The Fishermen* has been translated into more than 20 languages and even adapted for stage.¹²

The Fishermen was first published in 2011 as a short story in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Obioma explains in an interview to Nigerian writer Helon Habila (“Chigozie Obioma whose Debut Novel” 45). It has been categorised as a Greek tragedy “grounded in the Aristotelian concept of tragedy” (Habila, “The Fishermen by Chigozie Obioma Review”) and mixing in elements from African folklore. However, Chigozie Obioma has asserted that for him, *The Fishermen* is a different type of tragedy: an “Igbo tragedy” that “[does not work] in the same way the Shakespearian or Grecian tragedy [does]” (“Chigozie Obioma’s ‘The Fishermen’ – A Deadly Game”). Additionally, the idea behind the writing of this African *Bildungsroman* lies mainly in Obioma’s own personal experiences (e.g. he grew up in a large, tight-knit Igbo family speaking Igbo and Yoruba, with a disciplined father and surrounded by numerous siblings). The author wrote part of this political novel when he was completing his bachelor’s degree at Cyprus International University so this academic stay and being away from home gave him the original material to start writing this literary piece (Obioma, “Chigozie Obioma whose Debut Novel” 45). As he underlines, the germ behind the writing of this novel was his personal interest in exploring sibling relationships (Ajibabe 256). In fact, this novel can be seen as a tribute to the author’s siblings, to whom the novel is dedicated. In addition, the second catalyst for the writing of this story was a statement from Will and Ariel Durant’s *The Story of Civilization* (1935-1975) that essentially claimed that a civilisation can only be conquered when it has been destroyed from within (Obioma, “Chigozie Obioma

¹² Obioma’s *The Fishermen* (2015) theatrical adaptation was written by Gbolahan Obisesan and directed by Jack McNamara in 2018. This 70-minutes theatrical piece was featured by actors David Alade (as Benjamin) and Valentine Olukoga (as Obembe). Moreover, it was first performed in HOME, Manchester before it started touring throughout different English and South African theatres, with runs at Edinburgh Festival Fringe, Derby Theatre, London West End’s Trafalgar studios, and Market Theatre in South Africa among various others.

whose Debut Novel” 45). This assertion made him question the destabilising element that could break a close family and extrapolated it to his home country (45).

This family drama centres on the fatal events the upper-middle class Agwu brothers – Ikenna (15), Boja (14), Obembe (11), and Benjamin (9)– experience when their father gets transferred to another city for work, and they are left alone with their mother and with other two little siblings (three year-old David and one year-old Nkem). One day, the four elder brothers decide to go to the river Omi-Ala to fish and, in one of these fishing adventures, Ikenna, the eldest, meets Abulu, the local “madman,” who prophesises his death at the hands of another fisherman, and then things start to “fall apart.”¹³ It should be mentioned that the figure of the madman, as the external destabilising element, is firstly presented as part of the introductory poem titled “Progress” written by South African, Zulu poet Mazisi Kunene. The poem goes as follows:

The madman has entered our house with violence –

Defiling our sacred grounds

Claiming the single truth of the universe

Bending down our high priests with iron

Ah! Yes the children,

Who walked on our Forefathers’ graves

Shall be stricken with madness.

They shall grow the fangs of the lizard

¹³ This expression echoes the title of a foundational novel within the Nigerian literary canon: Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958).

They shall devour each other before our eyes

And by ancient command

It is forbidden to stop them! (Kunene, *The Ancestors* 69-70 qtd. in Obioma, *The Fishermen*; italics in the original)

There are a number of key elements worth exploring in this poem: the figure of the madman who “has entered our house with violence” and “claim[ed] the single truth of the universe” can be easily assimilated to the figure of the coloniser in a South African or any other African context. Furthermore, the image of Africa as “sacred grounds” defiled by alien forces is clear enough in this poem to bear in mind the impact of colonisation. In fact, Obioma also uses this reference to a corrupted Africa with the image of “a cradle besmeared” later in his novel (*The Fishermen* 27). The reference to the “children stricken with madness” who “shall grow the fangs of the lizard” and start “devour[ing] each other” may symbolise the pervading consequences of colonialism, especially in a post/neocolonial context, and, most importantly, the destruction from within of African societies/civilisation Obioma referred to earlier. In *The Fishermen*, we find an example of this “madness” in the symbolic allusion to the civil war between Nigeria and Biafra (1967-1970). In this story, the Agwu children are stricken by the words of the local madman Abulu who, through his dreadful prophecy, propels the destruction of their family.

Once the encounter between Abulu the madman and the Agwu children takes place, a chain of negative events is triggered and Ikenna ends up being stabbed to death by Boja, and the latter subsequently killing himself after realising what he has done. When Obembe and Benjamin discover what has happened to their brothers, they decide to look for Abulu with the sole purpose of avenging Ikenna and Boja. Obembe and Benjamin eventually find Abulu and they murder him. Then, Obembe decides to run away for fear of being caught while

Benjamin is detained and imprisoned until he reaches adulthood. Mr. Agwu loses his job, his three eldest sons die or disappear, the fourth son is incarcerated and his wife ends up needing psychological care in a psychiatrist healthcare centre. Benjamin is forced to confess all the events in front of a jury and expected to spend eight years in prison. It is relevant to mention that the mother is presented as a woman that works in the local market and that subscribes to everything her husband says, particularly in terms of education. I would argue this female character conforms with the traditional roles attributed to women.

This circular and deterministic story is narrated retrospectively as a form of confession in the trial where Benjamin, the narrator, is accused of killing Abulu. In this line, this coming-of-age story retrospectively explores issues concerning national identity, brotherhood and family dynamics in a rather fragmented and non-linear way, thus lining up with the common structure of many trauma narratives. In this novel, the label *Bildungsroman*, which was initially proposed by Cédric Courtois (““Revolutionary Politics”” 1), has been understood in relation to the protagonist’s development, Benjamin, as moving on from childhood/innocence to adulthood/experience and, metaphorically, to Nigeria as a nation and its development in a postcolonial context. According to Cédric Courtois (2019), *The Fishermen* centres on “the development of the individual but also on that of the nation” (2), linking “individual emergence and historical emergence,” which results in “a powerful instrument for political criticism” (4). Thematically, this novel is a rather intricate text which, on the surface level, mainly deals with sibling relationships but, on a deeper level, addresses key political events in 1980s and 1990s Nigeria. As Kate Harlin (2019) proposes, *The Fishermen* can be regarded as a “national allegory of Nigeria” (685), and as a “small, domestic African novel” that has been written “at a time when much African fiction is broadening to take on narratives with multigenerational, transnational scope” (685). Indeed, even though there has been a rise in novels addressing themes such as “deracination, displacement, and disarticulated identities”

(Adesanmi, “Of Postcolonial Entanglement” 230), as emphasised in the Introduction to this dissertation, Chigozie Obioma stands out as a third-generation Nigerian writer who, being a translocated author himself, is interested in discussing the “national question” (Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* 158) as approached from an ethnic perspective.

In addition, there is another central topic discussed in this novel apart from the failure of the Nigerian national project but intersecting with it: Oil extraction in the Niger Delta region. The exploitation of resources, especially of petroleum and gas, and the consequent deterioration of the Niger Delta region is one of the themes Obioma engages with, which allows the labelling of *The Fishermen* as “petro-magical realism” (Miriam Akinpelu 59), as a petrofictional text (Ghosh, “Petrofiction” 31) or as a “Nigerian Oil Novel” (Harlin 687).¹⁴ In Obioma’s text, the once-flourishing river Omi-Ala that criss-crosses the city of Akure is now portrayed as a “dreadful river” (*The Fishermen* 27), polluted by the massive waste generated by the profitable exploitation of crude, which turned the river into “the source of dark rumours” (27). From an animist perspective, this river was characterised by its erstwhile magical powers: “[l]ike many such rivers in Africa, Omi-Ala was once believed to be a god [and] people worshipped it” (27). However, after colonialists set foot in Nigeria, the river Omi-Ala started to be regarded “as an evil place” and as “[a] cradle besmeared” (27). It is important to consider the Yoruba meaning of Omi-Ala: Omi stands for “water” while Ala stands for “dream.” This is all the more accurate in this novel because the river is perceived as a supernatural space where Abulu first tells his deadly prophecy to Ikenna. Moreover, it is

¹⁴ Jennifer Wenzel originally proposed the term “petro-magic-realism” in her 2006 article “Petro-Magic-Realism: Toward a Political Ecology of Nigerian Literature” to discuss the Nigerian works characterised by a relationship between the fantastic and the real or the material, thus connecting socio-economic and other formal concerns with “questions of political ecology” (450). Besides, this author points out that “petro-magic-realism” is a term that best accounts for the events and experiences narrated in some renown Anglophone African novels because, unlike in the “magical realism” produced in other contexts, the “magical” or the fantastic is not presented as “unfamiliar” (456).

also relevant to analyse this river as a metaphor of Nigeria, that is, as a nation of broken dreams unable to thrive.

The river Omi-Ala lost its spiritual/animated status before being appropriated and commodified by colonialists. Amitav Ghosh explains that nature was deprived of its supernatural status and agency for its resources to be conquered, exploited and extracted in a colonialist-capitalist mentality that lies at the heart of the formation of African nations. Both the river Omi-Ala and the Niger Delta region are only meaningful if they are conceived as “resources [i.e. fossil fuels] that could be harnessed to generate profit,” no matter if an environmental disaster is the consequence of such extractive mentality (a disaster that was denounced by environmentalists such as Ken Saro-Wiwa) (*The Nutmeg’s Curse*).¹⁵ Donald O. Omagu contends that the oil industry is ultimately responsible for the destruction of the biodiversity of the Niger Delta region, where multinational corporations such as Royal Dutch Shell, Total, Azienda Generale Italiana Petroli, Exxon Mobil and Chevron have especially benefited from this “environmental pillage,” transforming this area into “an ecological disaster zone” (108 and 110). However, and despite being a “major oil producer,” Nigeria “is still lacking in almost everything,” as Obioma denounces (“Chigozie Obioma whose Debut Novel” 47). In other words, Nigeria is still a stagnant country despite participating in a “petro-modernity” that far from enhancing this West African nation, further degrades it (Wenzel 456).

Besides, the river Omi-Ala is mainly associated with the presence of “corpses,” “animal carcasses,” “ritualistic materials” and “mutilated bodies” (Obioma, *The Fishermen* 28), which creates an aura of corruption, putrefaction and stagnation. This description

¹⁵ Environmental activist and writer Ken Saro-Wiwa fought for the rights of the Ogoni people, whose land suffered the environmental consequences of the massive crude oil extraction. Saro-Wiwa led a campaign to stop the degradation of their land caused by international companies, and criticised the Nigerian government for its inaction. For this, he was unfairly tried and executed in 1995.

symbolically invokes the consequences of the oil industry, but it also alludes to the Nigerian nation (and, by the same token, to almost every African nation) as being politically atrophic or stagnant as a consequence of the colonial encounter. The river can signify a haunted and “fluid ‘spectral space’” (Harlin 689) where different worlds collide; a line of demarcation, even an intermediary and archival place/presence in which past and present, old and new, richness and poverty, (pre-)colonial and postcolonial converge, and whose fluidity is also shared with Abulu. In this regard, Cédric Courtois contends that “this river carries in its name the very concept of transition” but also of separation, because Omi-Ala is a “geographical boundary” that divides Akure in two but whose “border cannot be seen as fixated, but as fluid and shape-shifting” (“Revolutionary Politics” 5), as observed in the map of Akure Obioma inserts at the beginning of the novel.¹⁶ Thus, the connection between the river Omi-Ala and the river Niger, after which Nigeria was named, is more than evident. As the narrator in the novel asserts, “[f]or it was here that time began to mater, at that river where we became fishermen” (Obioma, *The Fishermen* 26). Drawing on Courtois’ theorisation of the Omi-Ala, Nigeria is symbolically represented in Obioma’s novel as a space where different temporalities come together; a space of protean borders that were artificially created, and a space of transition that embraces the possibility of change.

Besides, the river is also a natural space where everything starts to change for the Agwu brothers. It is in the banks of this “filthy swamp” (Obioma, *The Fishermen* 58) where Ikenna, Boja, Obembe and Benjamin became fishermen. This is how Benjamin recounts it:

We did not mind the smell of the bracken waters, the winged insects that gathered in blobs around the banks every evening and the nauseating sight of algae and leaves that formed the shape of a map of troubled nations at the far end of the riverbank where varicose trees dipped into the waters . . . For we derived great joy from this fishing,

¹⁶ A reproduction of the map of Akure city has been included in the Appendix 1.

despite the difficulties and meagre returns . . . I realize that it was during one of these trips to the river that our lives and our world changed. (26)

It is interesting to pay attention to the descriptive elements used to characterise this river. The Omi-Ala is connected to “a map of troubled nations” (26), stressing the symbolic allusion to Africa as a troubled continent. Similarly, the river, which was once “a pure river that supplied the earliest settlers with fish and clean drinking water” (27), is now presented as one that only returns “meagre” from its “nauseating” waters (26), which makes me read this part as an allusion to Nigeria as a country full of resources but yet, unable to cater for its very citizens. I argue Obioma is urging readers to consider alternative ways of managing their homeland’s resources so that Nigeria can become a wealthy nation whose inhabitants are no longer doomed to live an impoverished existence.

Similarly, this re-conceptualisation of Nigeria entails a revision of the very foundations of this West African nation and of the idea of national/ethnic allegiance. As Obioma further posits in the aforementioned interview: “we had Nigeria before we became Nigeria” (Obioma, “Chigozie Obioma whose Debut Novel” 47). He also adds that “[a] Yoruba man is a Yoruba man first” because “his allegiance is to his tribe, before his nation” and this is mainly due to the fact that “Nigeria was a [British] imposition” (47). In his allegorical novel, Abulu’s prophecy can stand for the British power as imposing a nation out of an amalgamation of heterogeneous ethnic groups that, as illustrated in the Nigeria-Biafra civil war, do not always wish to be part of the same territory. Similarly, the Agwu brothers can symbolically stand for the diverse ethnic groups that were forced to co-exist and that proved Nigeria, as it is currently designed, hardly holds together.

In this line, the problem does not exclusively stem from Nigeria’s foundations, but it also lies in their inhabitants’ (plural) ethnic association. Panashe Chigumadzi aptly contends

that for most Nigerians, “their first consciousness might be as Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa or any of the other ethnic groups” and that other specific “[a]spects such as religion, class and gender further shape the contours of this [tribal/ethnic] consciousness” (25). Chigumadzi further argues that this scenario can generate frictions between the different ethnic groups or between what this scholar calls “the many Nigerian *national consciousnesses*” (25; emphasis added). Hence, Nigerian identity can be approached as based on a preeminent ethnic consciousness, but it can also be regarded as intersecting with other foundational aspects such as gender, age, religion, language, or class that further configure national identity, as Chigumadzi highlights. This complex system of identification(s) inevitably complicates the creation of a somewhat cohesive national identity since Nigerian citizens, depending on their personal and contextual circumstances, access disparate experiences of their birth country; a reality that easily problematises national belonging.

In this light, it is useful to analyse how this Anglo-Igbo novel reflects this cultural multiplicity in the linguistic arena, exemplified in the coexistence of the English and Igbo languages. This text is mostly written in English, but a number of Igbo expressions, proverbs, sayings and songs are dispersed throughout the text. At the same time, there are also minor Yoruba expressions in this Igbo tragedy. This has to do with the context of the Agwu family: they are Igbo but live in the Western part of Nigeria (in Akure), where Yoruba is spoken, so the Agwu children mostly use English (or, most specifically, a Nigerianised version of English), then Igbo with their parents and Yoruba with their friends and classmates. Nigerian authors are mostly multilingual speakers who are fluent in their autochthonous languages and in English (official language), and this linguistic diversity informs their own writing. Certainly, this reality coincides with Chigozie Obioma’s own personal background where he can navigate multiple languages, as each of them assigns a unique “flavour” to the conveyed message (see Obioma qtd. in Go, “Of Animal Metaphors”). Regarding his novel, Obioma

claims that “English is the language in which [the characters] converse with foreigners” due to the fact that “it’s not a language of geniality” but “when the parents of these boys become angry with them, they switch from Igbo to English” (“Chigozie Obioma Interview”). It is interesting to address the different uses of English and Igbo according to the context and the emotional dimension of the message the characters want to convey: English is used in formal contexts, especially to talk to foreigners with whom a certain distance is presumed, but also to reprimand the children, while Igbo is reserved to relatives with whom there is no emotional distance, because this is the language of familiarity.

Additionally, Obioma holds that he associates each character with a language to illustrate this linguistically-rich context and the ways these characters code-switch according to the circumstances and intentions: “[t]he Father, a lover of Western culture, is always speaking in formal English. The Mother, being more traditional, always speaks Igbo. The Children, being playmates with other local kids, speak Yoruba. So English, when used, creates craters between family and friends . . . When the Mother or Father is angry, he or she switches to English” (Obioma qtd. in Go, “Of Animal Metaphors”). We find an example of this idea at the beginning of the novel, when the mother discovers their sons had been fishing in the river Omi-Ala despite being told not to. She reproduces in Igbo a proverb from the Bible, “imbuing the words with venom,” which made it even more “damning:” “*Anyá nke na’ akwa nna ya emo, nke neleda ina nne y anti, ugulu-oma nke ndagwurugwu ga’ghuputa ya, umu-ogo ga’eri kwa ya*—The eye that mocks a father, that scorns an aged mother, will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley, will be eaten by the vultures.” (Obioma, *The Fishermen* 39; italics in the original). Interestingly, this proverb somehow foreshadows the fatal ending the Agwu brothers experience.

It is also worth acknowledging that, in the novel, there is normally a process of translation of these Igbo and Yoruba expressions into English. The author inserts various Igbo and Yoruba words, expressions, songs and traditional sayings or proverbs throughout the novel along with its translation in English. This idea is also exemplified in the following song that the Agwu brothers and other friends who fished with them in the river had invented:

<i>Bi otiwu o ki o Jo</i>	Dance all you want,
<i>ki o ja,</i>	fight all you will,
<i>Ati mu o,</i>	We've caught you,
<i>o male lo mo.</i>	you cannot escape.
<i>She bi ati mu o?</i>	Haven't we caught you?
<i>O male le lo mo o.</i>	You certainly can't escape.
<i>Awa, Apeja, ti mu o.</i>	We, the fishermen, have caught
<i>Awa, Apeja,</i>	you.
<i>ti mu o, o ma le lo mo o</i>	We, the fishermen,
	have caught you, you can't escape!
	(Obioma, <i>The Fishermen</i> 29;
	italics in the original)

This deliberate use of Igbo and Yoruba languages not only attests to the linguistic hybridity that characterises Nigerians' everyday life, but it also emphasises the multiple worldviews that they acquire from a very early age.

To conclude this sub-section, I briefly tackle how *The Fishermen* draws on previous works to discuss themes that have been central to canonised writers like Chinua Achebe. Undeniably, Chigozie Obioma can be regarded as engaged in an intergenerational dialogue

with his literary predecessor Chinua Achebe, and *The Fishermen* (2015) in conversation with *Things Fall Apart* (1958). As Obioma holds, “Achebe . . . is someone whose work is in conversation with mine since he was very attuned to Igbo culture in his novels, especially *Arrow of God* and *Things Fall Apart*” (Obioma qtd. in Mallika Datta 59; italics in the original). For this reason, *The Fishermen* constitutes a “continuation of where *Things Fall Apart* left of” (“Meet Nigeria’s Latest Literary Star;” italics in the original). Besides, Benjamin Klaniecki (2020) claims that both novels are “textually” entangled, since Okonkwo constitutes “the direct source of inspiration for the brothers’ revenge,” as I prove in the following sub-sections, and both novels “metaphysically” interact as shown in “the Achebian haunting sense of doom looming over *The Fishermen*” (2). However, it should be born in mind that Chinua Achebe’s work operates as a counter-response against Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) aiming at “writ[ing] against, and decentr[ing]” its colonial discourse (Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe* 6), but also at looking for the “validation of the African culture” that colonial powers denied to Africans (7). For Obioma’s part, he is not that interested in “writing back” to the centre, as Achebe was, but he is more concerned with the pervasive consequences of colonialism in a postcolonial context. This is why he writes about a postcolonial country that has failed its own citizens while discussing the problems with the articulation of a solid Nigerian identity and national consciousnesses.

1.1.2. Fusing the Imaginary and the Mundane: Animalisation, Magic Realism and “Organic Fantasy”

In this sub-section, I focus on the animalisation of the characters in this fable-like novel. Chigozie Obioma, through the narrator Benjamin Agwu, incorporates the use of animal imagery, for he associates each character with an animal as based on certain aspects or personal qualities shared by person and animal. We should remember that, from a

postcolonial stance, the deliberate animalisation of human beings can be held as a form of “human Othering” in an African context, where animals have symbolically stood for the colonised, the postcolonial subject, and the subaltern.¹⁷ On the other hand, I analyse this novel as magic realism or as “organic fantasy,” following Nnedi Okorafor’s analysis of the realist African novel that incorporates fantastic elements (275). Although the designation “magic realism” will prove useful in the analysis of this novel, the label is generally applied to works written by Latin American authors, which is why I discuss Obioma’s narrative as most accurately subscribing to what Nnedi Okorafor refers to as “organic fantasy” (275). When dealing with fantastic and whimsical stories that “bloom directly from the soil of the real” (278), Okorafor uses this term because, for her, it most precisely captures the tropes, themes and style employed in these African works (281). She also proposes Ben Okri and Ngugi wa Thiong’o as the authors who firstly incorporated and developed this narrative strategy within African fiction.

Zoomorphism, Roman Bartosch states, “has been a powerful tool to degrade the colonised,” flagrantly employed to remove their humanity as predicated on racist “claims of ‘bestiality’” (189). The degrading and de-humanising practice of animalising Africans in Western intellectual tradition and in racist anthropological-sociological discourses has always been used to evince the inferiority of the colonised, to “primitivise” and “decivilise” them (Fanon, *Black Skin* 32) in order to justify their domination and subjugation (Bleakley 2000; DeLoughrey and Handley 2011; Hutchings Westling 2014; Kiran 2016). The use of animal imagery obeys a very specific literary purpose in this novel, but it incisively urges the reader to ponder on the traditional conceptualisation of the colonised by the West.

¹⁷ For the discursive theorisation of Africans as psychic and physical “beasts,” as “monstrous” or “strange,” see Achille Mbembe’s *On the Postcolony* (2001).

In *The Fishermen*, Benjamin Agwu recounts the past experiences he went through from two different perspectives: the child and the adult. This narrator resorts to the child perspective when he is willing to create mystery and when retelling the experiences he and his brothers had after becoming fishermen. On the contrary, this narrator resorts to the adult's perspective when he wants to instil his confession with authority and veracity but also when he is describing painful events and needs to gain some distance from the facts. Following this recollection of past events, Benjamin starts animalising the people that surround him, which confers the text a fable-like structure, particularly common within African writing and mythology. In this context, fables and folktales constitute one of the most ancient forms of (oral) storytelling that still occupy a pre-eminent position in Nigerian and Igbo writing as they help understand African worldviews.

Within this framework, Helon Habila has asserted that *The Fishermen* “mixes the traditional English novel form with the oral storytelling tradition” (2015), stressing the formal hybridity of the text under scrutiny. Obioma also holds that his novel “is a kind of tragic form of fiction that is both European and African at the same time” (“Chigozie Obioma Interview”). Similarly, this form of fiction initiated by Chinua Achebe where “folklore and popular discourses” are transcoded “from their everyday idiom to that of novelistic introspection” (George, “The Oral-Literate” 20) can be seen as what Francis Abiola Irele has come to name “a textualized orality” (*The Cambridge Companion* 2). Among the oral elements that we find in this story, we can identify the use of songs (as the aforementioned one) and traditional proverbs, the presence of a prophet (i.e. Abulu “the madman”) and other fantastic allusions, such as the supernatural nature of the river Omi-Ala or the animalisation of characters.

In *The Fishermen*, the animalisation of characters derives, as Chigozie Obioma asserts in an interview, from the fascination that Benjamin feels with animals, which is something the narrator shares with Obioma himself (Obioma, “Chigozie Obioma whose Debut Novel” 47). We cannot forget that the use of African folktales where animals are the protagonists of these stories are central to teach African children basic concepts. An example of a traditional Nigerian folktale that will be analysed in this dissertation can be found in Ayobami Adebayo’s *Stay with Me* (2017) under the title “Oluronbi and the Iroko tree.” Moreover, the incorporation of animalised characters functions as a coping mechanism to overcome the traumatic experiences the protagonist has been through. Obioma states that “by equating [the protagonist’s] brother [Ikenna] who has died to a sparrow, he is able to actually make sense of the tragedy” and “to understand it in a way that is manageable to him” (Obioma, “Chigozie Obioma whose Debut Novel” 47). This process allows Benjamin to rationalise the world around him, to work through the painful events he has been involved in, and to come to terms with them. In Obioma’s novel, Benjamin equates each member of his family with a different animal depending on the behavioural traits they display. His father was an eagle, her mother a falconer and a wet mouse, Ikenna was a python and a sparrow, Boja was a fungus, David and Nkem were egrets, Obembe was a search dog but also a rooster and the protagonist was a moth.

Ikenna is characterised as a python prior to his death as a way of stressing the metamorphosis he went through due to Abulu’s prophecy. Benjamin saw Ikenna as “[a] wild snake that became a monstrous serpent living on trees, on plains above other snakes” (Obioma, *The Fishermen* 63). After Ikenna’s death at the hands of Obembe, the former metamorphosed into a sparrow, “a fragile thing who did not design his own fate [because] [i]t was designed for him” (208). Obioma further adds that Ikenna could not choose his own fate because “[h]is *chi*, the personal god the Igbos believe everyone had, was weak” (208; italics

in the original). This idea is worth exploring because it deals with the idea of agency. As Obioma points out, “in the Igbo worldview . . . agency is fluid,” which is why “[w]hen someone does something, the outcome . . . is often attributed to the weak nature of the person’s chi” (Obioma qtd. in Ajibade 258). The author goes on clarifying that the concept of agency needs to be regarded as “dualized between the physical efforts of the human being and the metaphysical efforts of his chi” (258). Thus, full agency cannot be attributed to the characters of this Igbo tragedy, but understood within the framework of Igbo worldview and, especially, in relation to the figure of the *chi*. Besides, Benjamin concludes that Ikenna was a sparrow because these animals are believed to “ha[ve] no homes” and thus, “Ikenna’s heart had no home, no fixed allegiances. He loved the far and the near, the small and the big, the strange and the familiar” (Obioma, *The Fishermen* 217). This excerpt shows, on the one hand, a character that cannot or does not belong to his original home. In the novel, once Ikenna hears the prophecy, he starts taking distance from his brothers, perhaps in an effort not to harm them, as the prophecy sentenced. On the other hand, the idea of not having “fixed allegiances” and of pivoting between seemingly opposite poles can be read from a diasporic perspective, particularly regarding the realities of many Nigerian writers nowadays.

The second brother, Boja, is regarded as a “self-destructive” fungus (238) that “lived on unseen in [their] compound for four days after Ikenna’s death, without knowing it” (220; italics in the original). Boja “was there –silent, hidden away, refusing to speak, while the entire district and even the town desperately searched for him” (220). He is also described as someone who has infested the water that the family later drank until his decomposing body was discovered. The water contaminated with Boja’s blood and other effluvia reminisces about the polluted waters of the river Omi-Ala due to the oil industry, which has also caused

the death of people who have drunk it.¹⁸ In the novel, after stabbing Ikenna to death, Boja commits suicide throwing himself into the compound's well, where he lived until he was discovered some days later. When Ikenna got obsessed with Abulu's prophecy, he firmly believed some of his brothers would kill him. The prophecy went as follows:

'Ikenna, you will be bound like a bird on the day you shall die.' . . . *'Ikenna, you will be mute'* . . . *'Ikenna, you will be crippled'* . . . *'Your tongue will stick out of your mouth like a hungry beast, and will not return back into your mouth'* . . . *'Ikenna, you shall lift your hands to grasp air, but you will not be able to. Ikenna, you shall open your mouth to speak on that day . . . but words will freeze in your mouth'* . . . *'Ikenna, you will swim in a river of red but shall never rise from it again. Your life—'* . . . *'Ikenna, you shall die like a cock dies'* . . . He [Abulu] said *'Ikenna, you shall die by the hands of a fisherman.'* (Obioma, *The Fishermen* 121-122 and 126; italics in the original)

Eventually, Boja murders Ikenna, confirming Abulu's prophecy and triggering a series of regretful events that will end up destroying the Agwu family. Similarly, Obembe is presented as a search dog and as a rooster.

As Benjamin asserts, Obembe's mind was "a searchdog's: a restless mind that was always engaged in the search for knowledge" (274). After Ikenna and Boja's death, Obembe "began to read as if his life depended on it" and then, "he passed it on to me in the form of stories he told me every night before we slept" (274). Obembe is the one who tries to dissect reality so as to rationalise what has happened to his family, and he is also the one who comes with a plan to murder Abulu and avenge his brothers. This plan is named the "Okonkwo plan"

¹⁸ In the novel, Akure citizens do not dare to drink the polluted waters of the Omi-Ala, what reminds us of the same reality in Ogoniland nowadays. The situation in Ogoniland is a case in point of the destruction of natural areas in the Niger Delta region due to the oil extraction industry and the health issues that contaminated water and other gas-associated pollutants have caused to the Ogoni communities. According to the 2011 report released by the UN Environment Programme, the fishing industry has been diminished, farmlands and crops made useless due to the contaminated water and people are dying for drinking this same water that causes critical health affections. Strikingly, the multinational enterprises like Shell responsible for this ecocide have not even taking care of this area's clean-up.

(293), as drawing inspiration from Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Obembe reasoned that Abulu, as the white men conquering Nigeria, was responsible for the death of their eldest brothers because his prophecy propelled the tragic events that would end up with the final destruction of his family. In the novel, Okonkwo becomes the source of inspiration for Obembe and Benjamin when coming with a plan to kill Abulu and avenge their dead brothers.

Benjamin is also self-portrayed as a rooster, like Obembe, and as a moth. Benjamin sees himself as similar to “[t]he creatures that crow to wake people, announcing the end of nights like natural alarm clocks, but who, in return for their services, must be slain for man’s consumption” (352). This excerpt makes reference to Benjamin’s fate once he is caught and found guilty of murdering Abulu. Benjamin, with Obembe’s wit, avenges his brothers, which gives peace to his parents but, in turn, he is forced to serve an eight-years sentence. Once in prison, Benjamin starts perceiving himself as a moth: “[t]he fragile thing with wings, who basks in light, but who soon loses its wings to the ground” (380). As he further adds after losing his eldest brothers, he felt “like a moth whose wings were plucked off its body while in flight” that eventually “became a being that could no longer fly but crawl” (380). These two pessimistic quotes informed by “sentiments of despair and hopelessness” (Adesanmi, “Of Postcolonial Entanglement” 227) can best be interpreted in reference to two historical moments for Nigeria. First, when Nigeria became independent in 1960 and second, when the self-proclaimed state of Biafra seceded from Nigeria in 1966-1967.

Nigeria’s independence came to be seen as fragile because the country was “unified under a federal constitution in which politically conscious ethnic groups vied for control of the central government” (Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* 137). As a direct consequence of this situation, ethnic tensions among the three major groups in Nigeria

(Hausa-Fulanis in the Norther region, Yorubas in the Western region and Igbos in the Eastern region) that fought for power escalated. The result was the interethnic civil war that broke out in 1967 between Nigeria and the secessionist state of Biafra, causing millions of casualties. Additionally, Biafra was regarded as a nation fully designed outside colonial rule, but failed as Biafrans lost the civil war and were forced to reabsorb into a country that was politically, economically and socially unstable. In this sense, the civil war “did more to exemplify the problems associated with the national question than to solve them” (Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* 160). But, it also showed that there was a possibility of creating a self-proclaimed nation designed by Biafrans outside colonial power structures, and this hope for a more optimistic future –as materialised in the creation of an alternative state like Biafra or in another viable solution for Nigeria as it is constituted nowadays– is illustrated by the Agwu younger brothers: David and Nkem, who are seen in the novel as egrets: “The wool-white birds that appear in flocks after a storm, their wings unspotted, their lives unscathed. Although they became egrets in the midst of the storm, they emerged, wings afloat in the air, at the end of it, when everything as I knew it had changed” (Obioma, *The Fishermen* 394).

There is hope in the way Nkem and David are characterised as egrets. Obioma, in depicting them like “birds which appear after a storm” (407), puts an end to the novel in a positive, perhaps utopian, note. He mentions that egrets “present a shift in atmosphere” when the storm has passed as “they can face the future with hope that things – new things – and perhaps symbolically new people and new generations of people can rise and fix what has never truly worked in the first place” (Obioma qtd. in Mallika Datta 62). Perhaps this new generation of egrets will be able to dismantle Nigeria as a colonial imposition and allow Nigerians to “decide for [themselves] on what terms [modern] Nigeria should exist” (Obioma, “Chigozie Obioma whose Debut Novel” 47). Finally, Mr. Agwu, the father, is seen as an eagle: “The mighty bird that planted his nest high above the rest of his peers, hovering and

watching over his young eagles, the way a king guards his throne” (Obioma, *The Fishermen* 41). It is interesting to see how, despite the fact Mr. Agwu is portrayed as a controlling figure in the novel, once he is transferred to another city due to his job, his reality starts to fall apart. Similarly, Mrs. Agwu is presented not as an animal but as a falconer: “The one who stood on the hills and watched, trying to stave off whatever ill she perceived was coming to her children” (Obioma, *The Fishermen* 139). Mrs. Agwu’s description as a falconer is inspired by a quote from the poem “The Second Coming” by W. B. Yeats. The lines “*Turning and turning in the widening gyre,/ the falcon cannot hear the falconer*” (Yeats, lines 1.2, qtd. in Obioma, *The Fishermen* 139; italics in the original) appear at the beginning of the chapter devoted to the mother. However, and analysing the representation of the maternal figure in relation to Yeats’ lines, Mrs. Agwu can be read as a careful watcher who, despite her unending efforts, eventually loses control of the situation, giving way to the collapse of her family. This happens because she is not aware, at the beginning, of Ikenna and Abulu’s encounter or of his prophecy, preventing her from correctly addressing the conflicts generated among her children.¹⁹

Finally, when asked about this novel transgressing the limits of realism, Obioma stated to this respect that “almost every African would read [*The Fishermen*] as a huge possibility, as pure realism” (“Entrevista a Chigozie Obioma”). However, how can this novel be read as a “pure realist” text? Can this novel be considered “realist” in an African context, or is it best described as “something else” where fantasy is part of the everyday in the African imagination? In order to answer these questions, I draw on scholars such as Brendan Cooper, Victor C. Uchendu, A. G. Stock and Nnedi Okorafor to analyse *The Fishermen* as oscillating between magic realism, plain realism, petro-magic realism or perhaps this novel is just a

¹⁹ “The Second Coming” was written in 1919 and originally published in 1920. Besides, these opening lines from W. B. Yeats’ poem are also present at the beginning of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), which reinforces the idea that Obioma’s and Achebe’s novels are in constant conversation.

realist text that follows a type of realism “that bears the trace of pre-existing non-realist modes of expression and belief” (Bryce 49) and thus, most exactly theorised as “organic fantasy” (Okorafor 275).

If understood as a novel that “contests polarities such as history versus magic, the precolonial past versus the post-industrial present and life versus death” (B. Cooper 1), but also European modernity versus the “multifarious [indigenous] worldviews” (Wenzel 457), *The Fishermen* could successfully be defined as “magic realism” or as “petro-magic-realism,” as analysed in the previous section when discussing the consequences of the oil industry in the river Omi-Ala. In this light, magic realism bridges the gap between (seemingly) binary oppositions in order to make sense of reality. As Frederick Cooper aptly states, drawing on Homi K. Bhabha, this reality is “to exist in a third space, in the fertile interstices between these extremes of time or space” (1). However, and although this label seems fitting to define Obioma’s novel, this label has been mostly used in the analysis of Latin American literary texts so, perhaps, we should look for a definition that takes into account the African specificities. In this sense, Nnedi Okorafor offers a plausible term that captures the convergence of fantastic and material elements in an African context. In her article, Okorafor proposes the term “organic fantasy,” a form of fantasy that “has the power to make something familiar strange” (278) and vice versa, to make familiar what is considered imaginary. Okorafor also adds that this type of fantasy is part of the African folklore and even everyday life, where fantasy “blooms directly from the soil of the real” (278). It is equally paramount to mention that this form of fantasy, where the modern and the traditional, the technological and the natural or the colonial and the pre-colonial fuse together, can be used to discuss identity issues for those individuals who have mixed heritages, like Okorafor who is Nigerian-American. Hence, “organic fantasy” allows for the examination of questions that are in

perpetual conversation, such as the homeland(s), the multiple cultural and historical backgrounds, and the “fertile interstices” in between, recuperating F. Cooper’s statement.

Having discussed this formal aspect of the novel, I move on to the examination of the cosmological organisation of the world according to Igbo ontology, which also helps further understand the characterisation of Obioma’s novel as “organic fantasy.” I aim to analyse how Igbo cosmology, where the real is part of the non-real, is explored in Obioma’s narrative. In order to do that, I draw on scholar Victor C. Uchendu and the description of the Igbo world he provides:

[t]he Igbo world is a ‘real’ one in every aspect. There is the world of man peopled by all created beings and things, both animate and inanimate. The spirit world is the abode of the creator, the deities, the disembodied and malignant spirits, and the ancestral spirits . . . There is constant interaction between the world of man and the world of the dead; the visible and invisible forces. Existence for the Igbo, therefore, is a dual but interrelated phenomenon involving the interaction between the material and the spiritual, the visible and the invisible, the good and the bad, the living and the dead. (225-226)

This illustrates a conception of reality in which the dead and the living inhabit the same space, creating this dual existence in which the human and the non-human, the material and the spiritual converge in the same terrain. As Mazisi Kunene remarks, “[t]he link between the living and the dead is the most seminal concept in all African belief systems” (“Problems” 17). In this context, Obioma has stated that he follows what he calls “the dualism mode,” which precisely stems from Igbo ontology, where there is constant interaction and almost no distinction between the realm of the dead and the realm of the living. Obioma points out that “there is not much distinction between the realm of the real, [the realm] of the fictional, and [the realm] of the extraordinary” in his works, where they constantly intertwine. Similarly,

this author states when asked about his novel being purely “realist” that there was a clear need “to situate the realist parts of [his novel] in [a] specific historical context,” which anchored the novel historically and politically, but which does not mean that this text is exclusively defined as a “realist” one since it has still been produced within this dualism mode (Obioma qtd. in Ajibade 257).

For instance, we could take the presence of Abulu –perceived no longer as “a mortal man” (Obioma, *The Fishermen* 305) but as “an evil spirit manifesting in bodily form” (303) and as “a Prophet, a scarecrow, a deity, even an oracle” (135)– to evince how this character “embodies familiarity [and] estrangement” both at once (Klaniecki 9). In this sense, Abulu’s existence is inextricably attached to the Agwu brothers’ and vice versa, not only because of the prophecy and its consequences but also because, as Obioma has claimed, Abulu can be analysed as “an avatar of the Agwu boys” since the former “is left to his own devices once the family breaks up and his father is lost the same way as the Agwu boys lose their own father momentarily to a transfer.” Besides, Abulu “drives his weary mother to the edge of insanity as do the Agwu boys; and he commits fratricide as the Agwu boys do” (Obioma qtd. in Mallika Datta 61). Abulu can thus be analysed as the Agwu brothers’ *alter ego*.²⁰

Furthermore, Abulu has come to signify how “the natural world is penetrated by the supernatural” (G. Stock 2009, 261). This is how the adult Benjamin describes him: “[Abulu] never completely left our world; he occupied both – one leg here, one leg there as if he were a mediator between two domains, an *uninvited intermediary* . . . Often, though he *shattered both realms or moved between both as though the partition between them was only hymen-thin*” (Obioma, *The Fishermen* 135; emphasis added). Once again, this archetypal character embodies this intersecting space between the dead and the living, the good and the evil, the

²⁰ I analyse Abulu as the Agwu brothers’ *alter ego* or *Doppelgänger* to underline their complementarity and undeniable interconnection. Abulu is presented as a “dark replica” of these brothers because he too has been through similar vital experiences like the murdering of his own brother or the loss of his father.

natural and the supernatural and the mundane and the spiritual. Similarly, it is interesting to pay attention to the abject and scatological elements used to characterise Abulu. In the novel, he is presented as a character who “fed on filth . . . from dumps” (302) and who dared to rape his own mother (131), and profane the body of a dead woman, “thrusting into her as the mob watched in horror” (298). However, the use of abject elements is most notable in the following depiction by Benjamin before murdering him:

I observed that he carried on his body a variety of odours, the most noticeable of which was a faecal smell that wafted at me like a drone of flies when I drew closer to him. This smell, I thought, might have been the result of his going for long without cleaning his anus after excretion. He reeked of sweat accumulated inside the dense growth of hair around his pubic regions and armpits. He smelt of rotten food, and unhealed wounds and pus, and of bodily fluids and wastes . . . He smelt, too, of leaves, creepers, decaying mangoes by the Omi-Ala, the sand of the riverbank, and even of the water itself. He had the smell . . . of semen from the ejaculations he’d spilled on himself every time he’d masturbated, of vaginal fluids, of dried mucus. (313-314)

This particular use of “bodily abjection” (Elze 180) in Anglophone Nigerian literature, Joshua D. Esty contends, “draws attention to the failures of development [and] to the unkept promises, not only of colonial modernizing regimes, but of post-independence economic policy” (32).²¹ Thus, the use of abject and scatological elements such as faeces, pus, semen, sweat, vomit or rotten food operates as a strategy that appeal to the failure of post-independence Nigeria in the national, political, social and economic arenas, but also, in the terrain of human rights. We should bear in mind that the novel takes place in the 1990s, a decade marked by the military regime of Dictator Sani Abacha and the annulment of the first

²¹ Bodily abjection and the use of excremental images have been primarily employed to symbolically allude to the “colonised Other” as a backward, primitive and even sub/non-human entity excluded from Western modernity. However, in a de-colonial context, the use of scatological and excremental elements functions as “a sign of the actively repudiated ex-colonizer, the alien and unwanted residue of a sometimes violent political expulsion,” as Esty points out (30).

credible and democratic election ever held in Nigeria where M.K.O. Abiola was elected. Hence, the abject and scatological or excremental trope in *The Fishermen* (and in postcolonial literatures in general) is utilised to denounce the corruption in a nation that is considered the “Giant of Africa,” which is a direct consequence of (neo-)colonial legacies, neglectful politicians and crippled policies. As Esty claims, the “excrement serves as a sign of failed development” (32) and as “political failure” (34) that keep on evincing the ambivalence and disenchantment with the project of postcoloniality. It is also useful to highlight the postcolonial disillusionment where European powers were replaced by local elites “unwilling to follow through on the high promises of freedom, equality, stability, and prosperity” (31) for Nigeria and the rest of African nations. If we focus on the time the novel was published, 2015, Nigeria witnessed several bombing attacks especially in the north-eastern regions of the country by the fundamentalist group Boko Haram. Besides, general elections were held in March, where APC candidate Muhammadu Buhari became elected and Nigeria also experienced its first recession due to the negative price of oil.

Additionally, this “uninvited intermediary” who has “shattered these realms” (Obioma, *The Fishermen* 135) constitutes, I claim, a fierce criticism of the destruction of the social, political and philosophical organisation of Africans, and their belief systems, at the hands of European colonisers. However, the destructive potential of Abulu’s (self-fulfilled) prophecy lies in its performative power, that is, in the fact that the Agwu children decide to believe it, the same way that Nigerians “subscrib[e] to the British idea of a nation” (“Chigozie Obioma Interview”). In this line, María J. López relates the performative nature of Abulu’s words with the constructed nature of nations, positing that “this novel is about the power of words and stories to determine our beliefs, our vision of reality and our behaviour in the world” (162). Abulu’s sentencing words were powerful because they were deemed real and so the consequence of this was the disintegration of the Agwu family and the collapse from

within of Nigeria. Here lays, very possibly, the criticism Obioma makes of this fictional figure that has come to embody British influx in Nigeria: If Abulu is finally unmasked or exposed, then, he will lose his power and will stop hurting people. If Africans/Nigerians unite to combat the effects of (neo-)colonialism, then, it will be defeated. Obioma firmly stresses the importance of a collective consciousness and collective action against this external and evil spirit, crying out for the agency of Nigerians in determining their own future.

1.1.3. A Tale of Deadly Prophecies and Broken Dreams: Revisiting Nigeria's Recent Past

The theorisation of the nation, central to this thesis, is a complex idea, particularly in a postcolonial context. In his seminal book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), Benedict Anderson states that the nation is “an imagined political community, and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). The nation constitutes a “cultural artefact” (4) that is essentially performative and that finds its legitimacy in aspects such as traditions, language, religion or even literature. In other words, nations are “the fiction [that] unit[es] a people into a horizontally structured conglomerate into which they imagine themselves,” as Elleke Boehmer contends (*Stories of Women*). Therefore, and since the nation can be regarded as a performative entity that makes use of certain configuring elements, it can be imagined and re-imagined, written and re-written to create a new “geography of the mind,” as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie suggests (“The Role of Literature” 96). But, can these definitions of the (Western) nation be applied onto the African nation? Edmond J. Keller asserts that the African nation highly differs from how it was imagined in Europe when the concept surfaced in the nineteenth century (5). Although African nations can be regarded as “imagined communities” in the sense that they were projected and designed by European colonisers, such nations were not sovereign until colonial powers granted them independence. In the case of Nigeria, this nation was founded in 1914 and resulted from the

amalgamation of specific territories around the Niger Delta and the grouping together of a number of disparate ethnic groups. This idea of Nigeria as a work of colonial architecture and, essentially, a nation of “nations,” captures Nigeria’s “problematic modernity” (Nwakanma 1).

Following the “divide and conquer” strategy, British colonisers divided Nigeria into three main areas or zones whose administration was carried out by the dominant ethnic group of that zone. In broad terms, predominantly Muslim Hausa-Fulanis dominated the North, Yorubas dominated the southwest (where the population are Muslim or Christian) and Christian Igbos, the southeast. Edmond J. Keller explains that the North was indirectly ruled “through traditional centralized rulers;” in the southwest, “a mixed direct and indirect rule strategy” was followed, and in the southeast, “indirect rule” was mainly enacted (52). Nigeria became a federal and “full-fledged colonial state in 1954” with a constitution that sought to “accommodate [the] regional and religious tensions that had [surfaced]” (52). There were also nationalist efforts “aimed to create among what had until then been a multiplicity of parochial communities referred to as ‘tribes,’ a sense of ‘national’ unity” (3-4), which was proved later on to be unviable. Furthermore, Nigerian society and economy were transformed under colonial rule, where the British Empire highly benefited from Nigerian “manual and intellectual” labour. This scenario further alienated Nigerians, who saw how indigenous institutions were slowly modified or even eliminated; this brought about clear forms of “anti-colonial resistance” that were organised around local and regional claims and that were made into political parties in the 1950s (Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* 136-137).

In 1960, Nigeria gained independence but the national situation was rather fragile as the country was politically organised around “conscious ethnic groups that vied for control of the central government through ethnically based political parties” (Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* 137). This tense national situation among the different ethnic groups is

metaphorically represented in *The Fishermen* through the troubled relationship between the Agwu brothers after their anglophile father moved to a different city and the children “broke free” (Obioma, *The Fishermen* 17), stressing the problems with independence and somehow preluding the political chaos and civil war to come.²² Edmond J. Keller posits that inter- and intra-regional tensions intensified after independence which “led to the declaration of Nigeria as a republic in 1963,” but this gesture did not stop ethnic elites to seek power and “assert dominance in national politics” (53) and hence, benefit their own region. Consequently, Nigeria became a fissured country that was clearly lacking in “a strong sense of national unity” (53), which would be decisive in the 1966 military coup, “the collapse of Nigeria’s First Republic” (53) and the outbreak of the civil war between Nigeria and the recently-seceded state of Biafra in 1967. In *The Fishermen*, Nigeria is represented as a “broken and mucky nation” (Obioma, *The Fishermen* 202) precisely due to these inherent fractures that made unviable a successful postcolonial national project. These ethnic divisions that exposed the anxiety of being phagocytosed into “a unitary Nigerian state” (Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* 150) together with the problems of Nigeria to imagine itself as a workable idea are staged in Obioma’s novel through the fratricidal relationship of the Agwu brothers.

Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton posit that during the post-independence period, the Northern region of Nigeria, who followed the Shari’a law and was “behind the south in terms of a European-educated population,” feared that they would be politically and economically controlled by the south (*A History of Nigeria* 150). Igbos “virtually controlled key sectors in the civil service” (Mdika Tembo 178), and this led to the vilification of this ethnic group by the rest (Korieh 734). Similarly, mostly Christian Southerners feared they

²² Even though the father in the Agwu family has been described as an anglophile since he is very much influenced by his Western education, especially in terms of use of language, he should not be identified with the colonial influence. In the novel, he criticises the poor infrastructures of Nigeria, the marginalisation of Igbos under Abacha’s regime, and blames the British for creating a dysfunctional country (Obioma, *The Fishermen* 46).

would become dominated by Muslim Northerners, which turned the Nigerian federation into an exceptionally fragile one. There was also rivalry between the feudal Yoruba in the West and the Republican Igbos in the East (Oguibe 88). Added to this was the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta region in 1958 and the violent competition for scarce resources in this multi-ethnic society. This tense ethnic landscape was behind what Nick Mдика Tembo coins as “Biafranization” or “the fear of the Igbo factor” within the Hausa-Fulani community (179), which caused the mass slaughter of Igbos and other Easterners all over different Northern regions in the years prior to the war (a massive ethnic cleansing that had taken place since the early 1950s and which has come to be known as the “Igbo genocide”).

All these anti-Igbo feelings, tensions and prejudices among ethnic groups fostered that, in May 30th 1967, Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu proclaimed the independence of the South-Eastern Region of the Federation of Nigeria which came to be known as the Republic of Biafra: a self-proclaimed state that existed until January 1970. Previously, in the summer and fall of 1966, the pogrom of Igbos in the North took place and this forced Igbos to return to their homeland from the whole federation. After this declaration, the Federal Military Government (FMG) started a brutal offensive against Biafrans which took the lives of between 500.000 and two million Igbos and other Easterners (Korieh 734). The civil war between Biafran separatists and the FMG broke out on July 6th, 1967 and progressed until January 12th, 1970 with the surrender of Biafra and its final reintegration into Nigerian territory. Internationally, the USSR supported the federal cause led by Yakubu Gowon and supplied the FMG army with aircraft; Biafra was recognised by other African countries such as Zambia or Tanzania, while several international countries such as Israel, China, France or Portugal expressed their solidarity for the Biafran cause.

The civil war exposed the cruel consequences of the “national question” and evinced the disillusionment with the promise of independence; a broken dream in many ways. Post-war Nigeria confirmed itself as a country plagued with political corruption, a succession of undemocratic and parasite governments, further divisions in terms of class, age, religion and gender, but it also experienced an accelerated expansion of the oil sector in the 1970s (Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* 181). As the “Giant of Africa” became the main export of oil, Nigeria became the richest country on the continent. However, the oil industry did not contribute to improve the conditions of the Nigerian people, who still remain in utter poverty, but helped the development of kleptocratic governments that concentrated national wealth on a powerful and corrupt minority. Likewise, this oil expansion accentuated the dependence from the West since national economy was highly reliant on oil exportations. In the political arena, the country witnessed two military governments led by Lieutenant-General Murtala Mohammed and Lieutenant-General Olusegun Obasanjo. The Second Republic was born in 1979 and other military governments followed as consequence of recurrent *coups d'état*: Muhammadu Buhari, Ibrahim Babangida, Sani Abacha and Abdulsalami Abubakar. Nigeria transitioned to democracy in 1999 under the lead of the Head of State Olusegun Obasanjo.

In the novel, it is important to analyse the encounter between the Agwu brothers and the famous politician M.K.O. Abiola, an icon of democracy. Chief Moshood Kashimawo Olawale (M.K.O.) Abiola was the representative of the Social Democratic Party, a popular businessman who ran the presidential election and won against General Sani Abacha. This election is defined as the first democratic and fair election in post-war Nigeria. However, Abiola was not allowed to rule and he remained president elect until his death in 1998 under suspicious circumstances. General Ibrahim Babangida annulled the results of the election and appointed Ernest Shonekan as head of state. Months later, General Sani Abacha seized power in a military *coup d'état* and later imprisoned Abiola. In *The Fishermen*, the Agwu brothers

meet M.K.O. Abiola in 1993, prior to his election as president-to-be of Nigeria. Out of admiration, a photo of Abiola and the boys is taken and they are also given a calendar, which came to be seen by the brothers as “a badge . . . , a testimonial of [their] affiliation with a man almost everyone in the west of Nigeria believed would be Nigeria’s next president” (Obioma, *The Fishermen* 107); that is, a talisman and a promise of a more democratic Nigeria. As drawing from Abiola’s political manifesto titled “Hope ’93,” the boys came to regard themselves as the “children of Hope ’93, [and as] M.K.O.’s allies” (107). However, Ikenna tears apart this calendar, symbolically destroying Nigeria’s possibility of a materialised democratic government. Moreover, M.K.O. Abiola’s death coincides with the beginning of Benjamin’s eight-year confinement, tracing a parallelism between these two characters in the novel and attesting to the idea of an abortive nation that keeps on failing its own citizens and that demands to be re-imagined.

1.2. Ayobami Adebayo’s *Stay with Me* (2017)

1.2.1. Preliminary Remarks on Ayobami Adebayo and her Novel

Ayobami Adebayo (1988) is an Anglo-Yoruba author who was born in Lagos. She holds BA and MA degrees in Literature in English from Obafemi Awolowo University (Ife, Nigeria). In 2014, she earned a MA in Creative Writing from the University of East Anglia and has been tutored by prestigious international writers such as Margaret Atwood or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (see Olatunbosun 2019). This Yoruba author has been the recipient of a large number of fellowships and residencies from Ledig House (USA), Sinthian Cultural Centre (Senegal), Ox-Bow School of Arts (USA), Siena Art Institute (Italy) or Evedi Hills (Nigeria) among others. Adebayo has worked as an editor for *Sabara Magazine* since 2009 and has also written fiction and non-fiction pieces for international newspapers and renowned online platforms such as *BBC*, *LitHub* or *The Guardian*. She has also written

several short stories and poems that have been included in a number of magazines and anthologies such as *Kalahari Review*, *Speaking for the Generations: An Anthology of New African Writing* (2010) edited by Dike Okoro, or the *Anthology of Writing by Women of African Descent* (2019) edited by Margaret Busby. Her debut novel *Stay with Me* was published in 2017 by Canongate Books and soon gained international critical acclaim. In fact, it has been translated into 20 languages. After its publication, *Stay with Me* was shortlisted for the 2017 Bailey's Prize for Women's Fiction and longlisted for the 2018 International Dylan Thomas Prize, among others. Her upcoming novel *A Spell of Good Things* will be published in 2023.

Stay with Me is, at its core, a dramatic portrait of motherhood in modern-day Nigeria; a theme that together with “childbearing, child rearing [and] the power relations between men and women” have been central in the literary production of Yoruba female writers (Falola and Akinyemi 210). Adebayo's novel is articulated around four parts divided into 42 chapters, which span from 1985 until 2008, and recounts the experiences of a childless and motherless Yoruba woman called Yejide Ajayi and her husband Akin Ajayi. It is relevant to analyse the symbolism behind the names of some of the main characters in this narrative. In the Yoruba language, Yejide stands for “image of the mother” which is very appropriate considering the main character's events in life; Akin stands for “brave” or “heroic” which, again, suits the experiences this character goes through in life; Dotun (Akin's brother) stands for “transform” or “be new,” which is equally suitable as he is the one who sets into motion a series of events that will eventually transform Akin's and Yejide's lives forever. Finally, we should pay attention to the proper names of the marriage's progeny: Olamide, Sesan and Rotimi. Olamide stands for “my wealth has come”, Sesan, “gift of God” and Rotimi, the title of the novel: “stay with me.” In the novel, and in a stream of consciousness account, events are retrospectively told from the viewpoints of two different first-person narrators: Yejide and Akin. This dual

perspective enables the reader to understand reality from both positions (the wife/mother's and the husband/father's), creating "a stereoscopic portrait of a marriage" (Kakutani, "Portrait of a Nigerian Marriage"). Additionally, we observe how Adebayo does not recall events following a temporal linearity but rather, several leaps in time are to be found in this story.

Indeed, temporal linearity, mostly associated with the West, is disrupted in this text (and in other texts analysed in this dissertation such as Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen* or Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*) through the overlapping or entanglement of past and present time, interlocking of personal and national histories, and the use of reverse chronologies. Indeed, postcolonial authors have overtly challenged the chrono-normativity imposed by the West on its (former) colonies, associated with notions of temporal linearity, forwardness, progress and modernity (Chakrabarty 2000; Mbembe 2001). As Keya Ganguly contends, "the postcolonial has been taken to an 'other' time whose logic and historical expression have been incommensurable with the normative temporalities of clock and calendar associated with western modernity" (162) or, as Rebecca Fine Romanow puts it, "the postcolonial is . . . a space [that] inhabits a 'queer' nonnormative geography and temporality" (3-4). Thus, the different "forms of temporality identified as specifically European and imperialist" (West-Pavlov 158) characterised by "the forward vector of progress and incremental acquisition of civilization" (159) have been contested by postcolonial writers in an attempt to annul the "imperial time" (158), and to prove that their works are positively cronodissident. Then, and as based on the previous ideas, how does Ayobami Adebayo implement a non-normative use of time in her novel?

As Adebayo's novel is recounted in retrospect from two different perspectives, this dual appraisal of facts is associated with a notable absence of temporal linearity, expressed in this polyphonic story through the "messy" oscillation between the past and the present. The

novel formally alters the “normative temporality of clock and calendar associated with Western modernity” (Ganguly 162), as mentioned earlier, through the entanglement of past and present “function[ing] relationally” (Adesanmi, “Of Postcolonial Entanglement” 229), as facts are recounted from two temporal locations –1985 and 2008– where national and personal events intertwine. As I argue in section 1.2.4. “‘While my Last Child Was Dying, the Country Was Unravelling’: Interrogating Inviolate Nations and Engendering Promising Ones,” there is an interlocking of personal and national times since Yejide’s personal experiences are synchronous with the dramatic events that the post-independence Nigerian nation goes through in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This interconnection between the self and the nation’s histories exposes a heterodox conception of time and evinces the “close relationship between subjectivity and temporality” on the continent (Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* 19). Finally, I discuss how Adebayo’s novel does exemplify the metachronous nature of postcolonial writing that entangles literary pieces from different generations. According to Kinana Hamam, “postcolonial women’s writing emerge as a non-linear or metachronous project which deals with change and empowerment as a movement not only forward but also backward; that is, back to multiple times and locations in which (past) women’s narratives are operative at present and in the future as they teach and inspire us” (22). In this light, I argue that Adebayo’s novel interacts with Emecheta’s and Nwapa’s novels in an effort to acknowledge the literary feminist genealogy that has preceded her and to claim a position within this metachronous project of fictional sorority.

Plot-wise, Ayobami Adebayo’s story revolves around a middle-class Yoruba couple who is struggling to have children, while exploring the familial and social conflicts that arise from Yejide’s alleged inability to get pregnant. Yejide is presented as an independent woman who owns her own hair salon, a safe space where she can share her worries with other women. Her salon can be considered a space of female bonding, empowerment, intimacy and

nurture; a female microcosm of sorority where clients call Yejide “my dear sister” (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 32). Besides, Yejide is presented as a woman whose mother “died seconds after she had pushed [her] out into the world” (36), and as someone who has grown up in a polygamous home where her father’s wives mistreated her. As I prove further on, this conflict with the absence of her own mother and with a strong mothering figure in her life will be decisive to understand her own fragile relationship with her own maternity. Thus, her only remaining family is her father, her husband Akin and her in-laws.

It is important to mention that Akin and Yejide agreed on a monogamous relationship before getting married. However, and as Yejide has not been able to give Akin a child in the four years they have been married, he secretly marries Funmilayo –the beautiful “mango-yellow woman” whose lips are “covered with blood-red lipstick” (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 10)–, who becomes his second wife. Akin’s in-laws pressured him to take on a second wife that could bear him children, and Yejide was forced to become an “*iyale*” or “*first wife*,” a title that “marked [her] as not woman enough for [her] husband” (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 12; italics in the original). This disloyal arrangement brings about the first blow to Akin and Yejide’s relationship, and exposes the social and familial pressures that Yejide experiences on a daily basis. Similarly, the absence of progeny questions the idea of marriage as leading to childbearing, and what is left of that marital relationship when the parties are not able to become parents, thus interrogating at the same time conventional life-scripts that expose a teleological use of time that is not fitting for everyone.

Whereas Akin and Yejide’s marriage starts to seriously erode, Akin decides to get rid of Funmilayo, pushing her down the stairs causing her death (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 255), and resorts to his younger brother Dotun to inseminate Yejide, without her knowing about their agreement. They have sex multiple times and Yejide eventually becomes pregnant. She

then gives birth to two girls called Olamide and Rotimi, and a boy named Sesan. Sadly, Olamide and Sesan die at a very early age due to sickle-cell disease and Rotimi, who also has the disease, manages to survive and reach adolescence. When Yejide finds out Rotimi will undergo the same suffering her siblings did, she decides to abandon Akin and Rotimi for she cannot stand to lose another child and, I argue, be regarded as an agency-less victim. This traumatic experience leads her to admit that “[t]he things that matter are inside [her], locked up below [her] breast as though in a grave, a place of permanence, [her] coffin-like treasure chest” (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 5).

However, her children’s disease is not the only reason why Yejide leaves her family behind. She discovers that Akin and Dotun had agreed on the latter impregnating her because her husband was impotent. In fact, Akin marries Yejide without telling her his secret: he suffers from erectile dysfunction (infertility is thus hinted) that deems unfeasible to get any woman pregnant. Akin not only lied to Yejide and hid relevant information from her, but he accepted being socially perceived as the doomed husband with the barren wife so that he would not have to face ridicule. It is for this reason that Yejide does not show pity or devotion for her husband, but rather, it is her who leaves him behind. At the end of the novel, 15 years have passed before Yejide reunites with Akin and Rotimi, who is still alive. This cathartic experience where mother and child reunite is a central moment in the novel not only because Yejide is finally able to overcome her fears and anxieties about motherhood but, if approached from a political standpoint, this moment allows for an optimistic reading of the Nigerian nation and its citizens.

1.2.2. Monstrous/“Monstrified” Mothers and *Abiku* Children: An Afro-Gothic Analysis of *Stay with Me*

In this section, I analyse *Stay with Me* as a text that can be discussed as a postcolonial Gothic or as an Afro-Gothic text. In her review of the novel, Michiko Kakutani states that this story constitutes a “gothic parable about pride and betrayal” (“Portrait of a Nigerian Marriage”). Similarly, Ayobami Adebayo admitted that the plotting of her novel was particularly twisted and Gothic (“Baileys Longlist Author”). Taking these descriptions of the novel into consideration, I mainly draw on Carol Margaret Davison’s research on the so-called “Postcolonial Female Gothic” (2003) together with the analyses by theorists Ruth Bienstock Anolik (2003), Diana Adesola Mafe (2012), Helen Cousins (2012) and Bernice Borain (2021) to examine how Ayobami Adebayo has re-appropriated this genre from a Yoruba and postcolonial perspective.

Carol Margaret Davison asserts that the Gothic literature that thrived in the nineteenth century “foreground[ed] the interconnectedness of home [Britain] and empire” (137). She goes on to argue that “Gothic-inflected classics” such as Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) or Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations* (1860) with characters like Bertha Mason –the “madwoman in the attic”– or Abel Magwitch expose the “economic anxieties regarding a principal source of British wealth [that] are distilled into dramatic ‘return of the repressed’ episodes featuring such ‘invading’ and uncanny colonial figures” (Margaret Davison 137). These pioneer Gothic works have paved the way for two basic trends: the Imperial Gothic and the Postcolonial Gothic. The Imperial Gothic tackles the “threat of going native [or] the invasion of Britain by colonial forces” while the Postcolonial Gothic taps the “re-animated traumas of a nation’s colonial past” (137). These two trends are part of what Margaret Davison calls the Empire Gothic. In this context, Postcolonial Gothic fiction, Diana Adesola

Mafe writes, “engages with colonial histories through Gothic tropes –the horrific, the supernatural, the sublime, and so on—that originated in eighteenth-century European literatures,” hence, “[t]he postcolonial Gothic text is literally haunted by the colonial experience and its aftermaths” (22-23).

Similarly, the Female Gothic, a term coined by Ellen Moers in 1977, refers to the work done by women writers since the eighteenth century as part of the Gothic tradition (1). Despite the limitations and repeated questioning of this term, the narratives belonging to this genre, Adesola Mafe states, essentially “indict patriarchy, critique the ‘othering’ of women, and represent the suppressed Feminine” (23). Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith also claim that the Female Gothic has to be regarded as a “politically subversive genre,” whose main aim is to “articulat[e] women’s dissatisfactions with patriarchal structures” by providing “a coded expression of their fears of entrapment within the domestic and the female body” (2). To sum up, this genre constitutes the expression of the fears, traumas and anxieties attached to the female experience regarding patriarchal and other oppressive institutions such as marriage, maternity, family or domesticity. These anxieties are explored through the Freudian “return of the repressed” in its use of spectrality, ghosts, women imprisonment or women being buried alive in an effort to denounce the violence that men and the patriarchal society in general exert against women (see Williams 1995).

Therefore, the Postcolonial Female Gothic explores the tensions and anxieties derived from domesticity and imperialism, jointly critiquing patriarchy and other postcolonial priorities. Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) constitutes the example *par excellence* of a narrative belonging to this genre. In the African literary tradition, Helen Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl* (2005) and Ayobami Adebayo’s *Stay with Me* (2017), which can be theorised as Yoruba Gothic texts (see Cousins 2012), can be analysed as belonging to the Postcolonial

Female Gothic genre. In these narratives, both the Western Gothic imagery and the “traditional Yoruba imagery” overlap to create a text full of uncanny elements that enable the discussion of feminist and anti-colonialist tropes (Adesola Mafe 23). Adebayo’s novel explores the anxieties of a Yoruba woman who is oppressed by the institution of motherhood and marriage, which makes me read this text as an obvious critique against oppressive patriarchal institutions. Additionally, this novel discusses the anxieties with the African postcolonial nation, proposing a critique of Nigeria’s military regimes as a direct consequence of colonialism. In this sense, *Stay with Me* not only allows for a “sceptical reading [of] mundane systems of oppression,” but as a text infused with gothic elements and Yoruba traditions that “works in a more active way to resist the [double] structures of oppression [i.e. patriarchy and colonialism]” (Margaret Davison 34).

Since the Afro-Gothic components that can be found in this Yoruba story are multiple, I will analyse them individually. First, the figure of the “monstrous maternal” (Adesola Mafe 27) as represented by Yejide is one of the most notable elements in the Gothic tradition.²³ Yejide is presented as a deviant woman unable to carry out her biological duties, and as a deviant mother who only bears bound-to-die children. As her Yoruba names connotes, the protagonist is not a real mother, but a projected image of one. From a Gothic stance, Yejide can be perceived as the perturbing or sinister, certainly “monstrous,” image of a mother since she only gives birth to terminally-ill children. In this light, I deem interesting to approach the figure of Yejide as a contemporary and Yoruba Medea. Furthermore, the second Gothic element presented in this text is, precisely, Yejide’s progeny, who are perceived as *abiku* children. Although the *abiku*, or the spirit children “who had come into the world intending to die as soon as [they] could” (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 204), is a central motif in the “traditional

²³ This theorisation of the maternal as “monstrous” or “abject” was initially discussed in Julia Kristeva’s seminal work *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982). In her essay, Kristeva argues that abjection stems from a masculine “fear of [women’s] generative power” (77), since it constitutes a site of desire and repulsion, even a liminal entity that threatens the very integrity of the self.

Yoruba imagery” (Adesola Mafe 23), it can be approached from the Gothic perspective due to its inherent characteristics. Traditionally, the *abiku/ogbanje* has been used to make sense of the high rate of infant mortality in Africa and to refer to children that experience significant mental problems (Ogunjuyigbe, “Under-Five Mortality in Nigeria”); however, the figure of the *abiku* in Nigerian literature has been utilised for other purposes.²⁴ For example, the *abiku* trope is very productive to address issues related to motherhood and caretaking, but also to tackle other topics such as migration and the diasporic condition. Finally, the well-known Yoruba folktale “Oluronbi and the Iroko tree,” which Yejide alters before telling their children, constitutes the third Afro-Gothic element in this novel. In this traditional folktale, the presence of the woods is another Gothic element that is explored and that is a central element in Yoruba and Western Gothic imageries.

The first Afro-Gothic element that I have outlined centres on Yejide, a character that I have defined as a Yoruba Medea. Yejide is presented as a motherless woman at the beginning of the novel. When her mother dies in childbirth, Yejide is said to “be descended from anything –even *dogs, witches or strange tribes with bad blood*” (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 36; emphasis added). This lack of maternal roots reinforces the monstrous component of Yejide, who is socially perceived as a woman whose origin is associated with mystery, corruption and evil. Besides, this lack of maternal roots and, more specifically, the absence of a fleshy maternal figure have turned into a traumatic episode for the protagonist. Yejide mentions that “[her] mother had become an *obsession* for [her], a *religion*, and the very thought of referring to another woman as Mother seemed sacrilegious, a betrayal of the woman who had given up her life for [her] to live” (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 45; emphasis added). Therefore, the death of her mother haunts her as she is always reminded the former passed away because of her. If approached from a postcolonial stance, Yejide’s absence of a maternal figure may relate to

²⁴ *Abiku* is the Yoruba term to refer to this type of children, or “evil spirits” that inhabit the world of the living to cause harm and misery, while *ogbanje* is the Igbo designation.

those troubled legacies and truncated belongings, but also with the African roots that were amputated by European colonisers. Thus, the “fantasmagorisation” of the mother entails the intrusion of a disruptive presence from the (colonial) past that always haunts the (postcolonial) present. As posited by Kirsti Bohata, “[t]he manifestation of the past in the present and a sense of inescapability of the past, which is a feature of Gothic writing, is an apt representation of the postcolonial experience of history” (182). Besides, this inescapability of the past in a Nigerian context can be symbolically understood as the still-present consequences of the Nigeria-Biafra civil war (1967-70), as has been addressed in the analysis of Chigozie Obioma’s novel in section 1.1.3. (“A Tale of Deadly Prophecies and Broken Dreams: Revisiting Nigeria’s Recent Past”).

In a similar light, the absence of the maternal has been approached as symbolising “the inability of women to create and to sustain a female tradition within the patriarchy” (Bienstock Anolik 30). I would further argue that Ayobami Adebayo, and other contemporary Nigerian authors, have seen themselves as belonging to a literary canon that has been mainly dominated by male authors, but, I would add that these contemporary female writers have also faced a literary tradition where women were essentialised, thus possibly encountering a limited repertoire of feminist referents. I contend that this lack of referents that propose more diversified female/feminist images is symbolically addressed in this novel with Yejide’s insatiable search for a maternal figure among her stepmothers. However, her stepmothers would not accept her as their daughter, thus becoming a motherless and also an un-mothered child. The following passage exemplifies this idea: “When I was a child, my stepmothers would usher their children into bed to tell them stories. But always, behind closed and bolted doors. I was never invited in to listen, so I lurked around in the corridor, moving from doors to windows as I tried to determine which woman’s voice was loudest each night” (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 130). Yejide “learned to be light-footed to listen for the footfalls of anyone

coming to the door during the tale” and be able “to run to [her] room without making noise” (131), thus growing into a spectral dimension that aligns her with the Gothic realm.

Deprived of any form of affection and openly repudiated by her stepmothers, Yejide develops a pervasive sense of “ghostly unbelonging.” She also recalls that “[i]t was the whips that were not unleashed, the extra chores that were not assigned, the dinners that were not withheld [what] reminded [her] that none of them really cared” (37). Hence, it is of no surprise Yejide “is driven by a [visceral] desire to return to the maternal” (Bienstock Anolik 33), a womb-like place, the site of the abject in Kristeva’s imaginary, but where she is fully loved and accepted. Besides, I argue it is through her own maternity that she tries to achieve this symbolic reunion with the maternal, but also to come to terms with her own sense of unbelonging and rootlessness. Unfortunately, Yejide’s own maternity becomes a nightmarish experience since she was firstly considered a barren woman and demonised for her lack of progeny. Olusegun Adekoya asserts to this regard that in black Africa, a woman who is “barren,” no matter the reasons why she is given this status, “is not only treated with reproach and scorn, [but] she is looked upon as though she were a *witch*, and disinherited” (339; emphasis added). Later on, once she gives birth, her maternal experience becomes a traumatic one as most of her children die to sickle-cell disease, which can also be analysed from a political perspective as symbolic of a corrupt nation unable to prosper, as I discuss further on in section 1.2.4. “‘While my Last Child Was Dying, the Country Was Unravelling’: Interrogating Inviabile Nations and Engendering Promising Ones.”

I have mentioned earlier that Yejide can be symbolically theorised as a Yoruba Medea because of the traumatic experiences she goes through in the novel, largely in relation to her progeny. Even though Adebayo’s story cannot be considered a re-writing of this myth, there

are some parallelisms that can be traced between Yejide and Medea.²⁵ This mythical woman is usually identified as “the socially deviant (m)other of ancient Greece” (Faye Kramer 25); an evil woman who was able to murder her children to take revenge against her adulterous husband. In *Stay with Me*, Yejide does not commit infanticide, but she is somehow held responsible for her children’s death since she is the carrier of the gene that makes her children sick with sickle-cell disease (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 197-198), confirming her as a woman with “bad blood” who cannot give birth to viable human beings. It is when Yejide realises none of her children will survive that she utters the words that I have previously gathered: “The things that matter are inside me, locked up below my breast as though in a grave, a place of permanence, my coffin-like treasure chest” (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 5). In this Gothic quote, Yejide’s own body is symbolically associated with a dead place, both because her body is unable to engender healthy children, and because her failure as a mother entails her metaphorical social death in Yoruba society.

Additionally, Medea shares with Yejide this outsidersness since both are portrayed as women who do not conform to socially-imposed gender norms. In the case of Yejide, she is presented as a woman who opposes the traditional practice of polygamy even when she is “unable” to give sons to her husband. Whereas Medea is discussed as an abject mother, Yejide is also negatively perceived because she decides to abandon her third child, Rotimi, and her husband Akin. Both (anti)heroines are regarded as evil and monstrous not only because they are defined as empowered women, but essentially because they question, even

²⁵ There are a substantial number of academic works that have analysed other adaptations of Euripides’s *Medea* by focusing on the idea of the postcolonial, subaltern heroine whose dissident alterity not only exposes the oppressiveness of hegemonic and heteropatriarchal structures but also contests other imperialist precepts. The following are worth mentioning: “MEDEA adapted: The Subaltern Barbarian Speaks” (2009) written by researcher Olga Kekis where she critically examines Heiner Müller’s *Despoiled Shore: Medea Material Landscapes with Argonauts* (1983), Guy Butler’s *Demea* (1990) and Olga Taxidou’s *Medea: A World Apart* (1995). Another work that explores the subversive potential of a “mad” Medea from a decolonial, intersectional and queer perspective was written by Chloe Hendrickson and titled “The ‘Mad’ Woman in Medea and Decolonial Feminist Revisions: An Intersectional Feminist Analysis of Three Plays” (2007). Hendrickson dexterously carries out an insightful analysis of Cherríe Moraga’s *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* (1995) and Wesley Enoch’s *Black Medea* (2006).

reject, conventional motherhood. In the novel, Yejide becomes the self-effaced “deviant evil mother” (Bienstock Anolik 26), not because she commits filicide, as Medea does, but because she subverts hegemonic conceptions of motherhood (and womanhood) within the Yoruba society when she decides to leave behind her own family. Therefore, both unconventional characters are approached from the realm of the monstrous and thus became “monstrified” for, in the particular case of Yejide, being “unable” to give Akin children, and at last, for engendering sick sons and daughters.²⁶ Women (especially barren women) who contest or transgress normative and patriarchal conceptions of womanhood are thus stigmatised and, consequently, their humanity is flagrantly denied, which is a postulate that can also be applied to colonised peoples. Hence, the “monstrified (m)other” destabilises essentialising notions of womanhood presided by the imperative of motherhood. I conclude that, though using different strategies, both characters rebel against normalised and hegemonic motherhood, exposing its patriarchal component. From a feminist lens, killing and/or abandoning one’s offspring could be interpreted as a symbolic act of rebellion against conventionalisms or traditional social roles attributed to women, and assertion of their identities as free subjects detached from any male figure.

Furthermore, it proves interesting to analyse the figure of the *abiku* as another Afro-Gothic element that can be found in Adebayo’s novel and that allows us to discuss the problems that arise with Yejide’s children and with Nigeria as a dysfunctional country. The *abiku* or “child-spirit” is “a negative icon in Nigerian literature” (Bryce 60) that makes reference to “children who die and are believed to come back again, tormenting their

²⁶ I use the term “monstrified (m)other” as drawing on the ideas proposed by Boaventura De Sousa Santos and Antoni Aguiló in the volume *Aprendizajes Globales: Descolonizar, Desmercantilizar y Despatriarcalizar desde las Epistemologías del Sur* (2019). These scholars assert that societies are divided into what they term as the “metropolitan sociability” and the “colonial sociability” (73). The latter is characterised by exclusion, lack of regulation or emancipation and violence to counteract what is deemed chaotic, inferior and, ultimately, subhuman. They state that the “colonial sociability” ontologically and symbolically destroys the humanity of the Other, turning it into a degraded, objectified and “monstrified” self; a presence that can no longer be theorised as an intelligible human being so their knowledges are judged worthless and hence excluded according to the coloniser’s objectifying logic (74).

mothers” since they are thought “to occupy multiple worlds (the bush, the spirit world, and the earth)” (Ouma, “Reading the Diasporic *Abiku*” 188). These evil spirits are believed to “re-enter its mother’s womb” (Adesola Mafe 24) and “take up residence in the body of a newborn child” (Cousins 51), theorising such motif in Nigerian literature as liminal presences. In the novel, Akin’s mother is the first to assert that her grandchildren are *abiku*, which is the term that she uses to make sense of the genetic disease her grandchildren suffer from. Akin’s mother argues that “these children . . . have made a promise in the spirit world to die young,” and this is the reason why hospitals and medical care cannot cure their disease (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 193). While the *abiku* is defined in the novel as a child born to haunt its caretakers and who will die as soon as s/he can (204), this transgressive figure has also been used in Yoruba mythology to refer to a child whose behaviour is “ambiguous,” “difficult to deal with” or when “there are indications of a dual personality” (Acholonu, “Ogbanje” 103).

Christopher Ouma contends that the *abiku* motif and its “tropological significance in African literature has allowed writers and critics to comment on the complexity of the interfaces of identity” (see, for instance, the 2022 article by Rocío Cobo-Piñero where she discusses the idea of the *abiku* from a transgender perspective in Akwaeke Emezi’s 2018 novel, *Freshwater*) (“Reading the Diasporic *Abiku*” 189). This figure, characterised by its ambiguity, is also explored in Adebayo’s novel, where Rotimi is considered an *abiku* whose name “was given to boys alone” since it was a mutable name that lent itself to a dual interpretation (*Stay with Me* 204). Once again, the *abiku*, as a shape-shifting entity that transcends different realms (i.e. natural and supernatural, but also gender binarisms), can be approached in this novel from an Afroqueer angle, as it is applied to subjects who are not (de-)limited by Western conceptions of gender normativity.

Similarly, Ouma posits that this trope has also been used to discuss “colonial modernity and African tradition in relation to evolving postcolonial African worlds” (“Reading the Diasporic *Abiku*” 188). As Akin’s mother uses of the *abiku* to make sense of sickle-cell disease, it confronts her worldviews, where she privileges African belief systems, and Akin and Yejide’s that use the “white man’s school” and wisdom to make sense of reality (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 193). In this sense, Adebayo re-appropriates the *abiku* motif to symbolically stage the tensions between (post-)colonial modernity and African pre-colonial worldviews and to denounce that Africa is still considered a backward continent because, essentially, it does not follow Western modernity. This idea is also summarised in the following words by Akin’s mother for Yejide: “The whole world knows there are many routes into any marketplace. But the white man has deceived some of you, told you his way is the only way” (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 193-194). The *abiku* can operate here as a strategy to revalidate pre-colonial African traditions and belief systems.

Additionally, the *abiku* motif as referring to a “child who had come into the world intending to die as soon as she could” (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 204) can be analysed in regard to present-day Nigeria and its colonial past. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi posits that “the *abiku* emerges as a perverse, ghostly intimation of a horrendous past, a critique of a tedious present, and a reminder of mortality,” pointing at a certain “social and spiritual unease” (2002, 664). In this light, it can prove fruitful to analyse the *abiku* in relation to the disaffection with Nigeria’s current state of affairs. In her analysis of the trope of the twins in contemporary Nigerian literature, Jane Bryce mentions how in Ben Okri’s *Famished Road* trilogy (1991, 1993 and 1998), the *abiku* “metonymically represents Nigeria itself,” which is defined as the “*abiku* country” (60; italics in the original). This figure can appear in contemporary Nigerian writing to discuss the disenchantment with the postcolonial nation and its failure to culminate the process of de-colonisation. For his part, Christopher Ouma

contends that this versatile literary motif allows the engagement with “a fractious postcolonial national identity” both at home and abroad (“Reading the Diasporic *Abiku*” 190). In other words, its metaphorical analysis makes possible the allusion to a dysfunctional country, demanding other forms of governing Nigeria so that it can thrive as a prosperous nation, but it also explores the “dissatisfaction with the condition of migrancy” as a consequence of a collapsed country that forces people to emigrate.

In her theorisation of the *abiku* in Helen Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl* (2005), Jane Bryce persuasively analyses this figure as symbolically addressing the dissatisfaction with the diasporic condition and other expressions of unhomeliness. In her article, Bryce examines the conflicts and anxieties of being “half-and-half” (60) for those nomadic individuals found in “new transplanted contexts” (Ouma, “Reading the Diasporic *Abiku*” 189), and who are forced to negotiate multiple belongings while learning to navigate sometimes opposing world(view)s. As Ouma summarises, “the diasporic *abiku*” invites “to reframe the discourse on migration and race in relation to a continuously evolving cultural space of the African diaspora” (189; italics in the original). Hence, the *abiku* is centrally used to criticise negative aspects of the homeland and of the diasporic experience, but it can also be useful to debate new representations of nationhood and selfhood.

The last Afro-Gothic element explored in Adebayo’s novel is found in the Yoruba folktale Yejide tells Olamide: “Oluronbi and the Iroko tree.” The traditional version of this folktale tells the story of Oluronbi, a market woman who made the promise to offer her daughter to the Iroko tree if it helped her sell more goods in the local market. The Iroko tree gave her what she demanded and she handed her daughter to the tree. In the novel, Yejide reinvents the tale, creating an alternative version which is, somehow, premonitory of Yejide’s personal story. In this tale, Oluronbi’s family gets lost in the forest next to their farm and she

starts searching for them, but she cannot find them until she decides to enter the forest and ask the Iroko tree if it has seen her family. The Iroko tree accepts telling Oluronbi where her family is hidden if she promises to give it her first child in return. Oluronbi accepts the deal and she sees her family again. Eventually, Oluronbi marries and has a daughter, Aponbiepo, but she is warned not to go to the forest. One day, Aponbiepo goes there with her friends and she disappears forever (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 131-138).

Diana Adesola Mafe affirms that the forest/the bush/the wood is “a treacherous realm that must be carefully navigated” (21), and constitutes an archetypal element in Gothic Yoruba oral tradition charged with symbolism, strange events and supernatural beings that contribute to build an atmosphere of dread and mystery (46). The forest becomes a foreign space of vulnerability; a place devoid of humanity as it erects itself as the antithesis of what is considered civilisation. Thus, the forest is discursively constructed as the realm of outsidership and alterity; a peripheral and sinister space that transcends what is held as human and rational. This landscape could be symbolically compared with the feminine domain and with the sphere of the colonised or the captured. In her exploration of Amos Tutuola’s *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954), Laura Murphy analyses the bush as a space symbolic of the traumatic and cross-generational “impact of the [trans-Atlantic] slave trade” (144), and of the “fear of capture” (147). She asserts that the landscape functions, in the West African (literary) imagination, as a terrifying producer of brutality, violence and enslavement, concluding that “the very landscape itself works as a captor” (148). The bush is thus understood as a liminal territory that keeps on haunting its very inhabitants; a trace of a traumatic past where Africans were de-humanised and denigrated.

In addition, Adesola Mafe also examines the bush motif, depicted as a “haunted forest or wasteland,” as the “symbolic space where solitary male protagonists test their mettle and . .

. masculinity” (21). This symbolic space has been central for Yoruba writers such as Amos Tutuola or D.O. Fagunwa, whose stories have taken place in this off-limits location. Furthermore, in her analysis of Helen Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl* (2005), Adesola Mafe proposes a reading of the bush/forest as a mysterious space where the female protagonist goes to in order to interrogate her own mixed heritage and cultural hybridity. This scholar points to a re-appropriation of the bush motif by female Yoruba authors such as Oyeyemi or Adebayo, who enter this haunted space aiming to explore notions of (normative) femininity and identity. In this light, the forest where the Iroko tree dwells in the tale told by Yejide in *Stay with Me* becomes a symbolic space that hides the repressed or suppressed feminine and, as mentioned above, one of the multiple places *abikus* inhabit. Indeed, the inherent marginality of the forest is shared with Yejide, which allows Adebayo to explore the protagonist’s anxieties and frustrations regarding her own mothering experience and, most centrally, her own status as dissident and eccentric woman. Thus, I argue that, in the Gothic fiction produced by Yoruba women, the forest/bush is theorised as a space of dissidence and as a space also associated with the feminine, essentially used to reclaim alternative forms of female identity.

1.2.3. “Mother Is Gold, Father Is Glass”: Transgressive Motherhood and other Forms of Reclaiming Women’s Agency

In her book *Mother Is Gold, Father Is Glass: Gender and Colonialism in a Yoruba Town* (2011), Lorelle D. Semley theorises about the current conception of mothers in Nigeria, and more specifically, within the Yoruba community, to which Yejide belongs. As shown in the famous Yoruba saying “mother is gold, father is glass,” Semley exposes the relevance of mothers, who are regarded as enduring, selfless and powerful presences in the lives of their children and within their communities. On the contrary, and exemplified by the part “father is glass,” Semley underlines the fragility and, somehow, the limitations of the paternal

experience in the Yoruba society (1). Remi Akujobi also notes the quasi-sacred status that mothers enjoy in this society, where they are “revered as creators, as providers, cradle rockers, nurturers, and goddesses” (2). Thus, women’s status in society, their “place or *placelessness*” as Hilary Chala Kowino underlines, depends on their biological capacities and on the realisation of such capacities (25). In *Stay with Me*, Yejide is clearly imbued with these conceptions of motherhood, which might be considered as essentialising from a Western feminist viewpoint, when she utters the following Yoruba words that deeply resonate with her: “*Iya ni wura, iya ni wura iyebiye ti a ko le f’owo ra,*” that is, “*Mother is gold, Mother is treasured gold that cannot be bought with money*” (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 45; italics in the original). These words become exceptionally hurtful for a woman who has gone through three pregnancies, which most of them have ended up with the death of the infant.

Similarly, motherhood is understood as determining female subjectivity and even humanity in a Nigerian context. A woman is given such status if she is able to engender a healthy progeny (preferably sons). Contrastingly, if a woman is unable or fails to procreate, she is considered “adulterous or cursed,” “her femininity is questioned” and her marriage could dissolve (Zulfiqar 69). If the very femininity and even identity of a woman is conditioned by her status as mother, then, a woman who deviates from this patriarchal (and capitalist) mandate would be considered unwomanly, but also non-human, as suggested through the above discussion on the Gothic. This idea is made clear by Yejide’s mother-in-law, who tells her that “[w]omen manufacture children” and if she cannot do what is expected of her, then she is “just a man” and “[n]obody should call [her] a woman” (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 47). In this sense, it is also worth remembering what Hilary Chala Kowino declares when referring to the relationship between the procreative capacity of women and their belonging to the postcolonial nation: “women’s inability to reproduce almost always costs them their membership in the nation” (25). Therefore, if women’s allegiance to the nation is

based on their ability to have children or nationalist sons, as Elleke Boehmer (2005) claims, then their national belonging and even nationhood would be granted (or not) on the basis of their biology. As based on this idea, Yejide could be read as extra-national or, at best, as a second-class citizen.

In the literary arena, many first- and second-generation male Nigerian writers have contributed to the perpetuation of these colonial and patriarchal ideals, as literature was traditionally a male domain. C. H. B. Mary Monica points out that most male African writers have traditionally tended to “mythologize women as ‘Mother’ or ‘Earth’,” while others have deliberately “presented a distorted and stereotyped image of women” (3). Generally, canonical writers such as Chinua Achebe or Cyprian Ekwensi have characterised women as “complacent individuals, cheerfully accepting their inferior status . . . in a male dominated society” (3). They have also put forth monolithic images of the female experience, where women were always signified in relation to the masculine, and whose realities were not seen as central or relevant (see Zulfiqar 2016). However, prominent female writers such as Buchi Emecheta or Flora Nwapa, together with the new generation of Nigerian women writers, have contested these simplistic images and proposed alternative female portrayals. These counter-representations present female subjects who are not constricted by traditional gender roles like the caretaker or the dutiful wife, and who “seek something more than marriage and children in the quest for fulfilment” (Salami-Boukari 144). Moreover, it was not until the post-independence period when Nigerian women writers started to deconstruct hegemonic images distributed by their male counterparts. These female writers aimed to “problematize . . . the tradition of canonical African male writing” (Mary Monica 57), to reclaim their bodies and voices, and to present Nigerian women in a new light, exploring their “struggles and triumphs” (Hamam 22).

In her seminal article “The Female Writer and her Commitment” (1987), Molaria Ogundipe Leslie contends that feminist women writers must perform two main roles: first, “to tell about being a woman,” and second, “to describe reality from a woman’s view,” which allows the writer to delve into the nature of womanhood and the diverse interpretations of the category woman across the multiple temporal and geographical positionings (5). Furthermore, Ogundipe Leslie provides a list of stereotypical features attributed to the female body, namely “formlessness, passivity, instability, confinement, piety, materiality, spirituality, irrationality, [and] compliancy” (5). This list of seemingly intrinsic elements reinforces the stereotypical vision of women as passive and dis-empowered, who are signified in relation to their male relatives and whose experiences are deemed unimportant. Likewise, this scholar also points out that women are represented following binary oppositions. For instance, we find the “figure of the ‘sweet mother’, the all-accepting creature of fecundity and self-sacrifice, [associated] with Mother Africa”; an image that highly contrasts with the hyper-sexualised figure of the beautiful, passionate and erotic woman, who is conceived “as [a] phallic receptacle” (6). Thus, Ogundipe Leslie contends that one of the central commitments of the female writer should be oriented towards “the correction of these false [and dichotomic] images” (8), but also, towards incorporating nuanced representations of African women. For her, female writers ought to seek justice for these women and simultaneously work towards their liberation from patriarchal control (10-11).

In this line, Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa constitute two representative examples of the commitments proposed by Molaria Ogundipe Leslie. These two canonical female writers in the Nigerian literary tradition have come up with new representations of the feminine experiences while defining the “New African Woman” in their “valiant stories” (Mary Monica 5). Like Ayobami Adebayo, these two foundational authors poignantly explore how traditional African culture and society subject women to “oppression, depression,

suppression, rejection, segregation, and unfair victimization,” critically exposing at the same time “how women are impacted on by economic deprivation, illiteracy, and social discrimination” (4-5). And all these realities, which clearly devalue and diminish women, are fully explored through “issues of gender bias, marriage, motherhood, barrenness, polygamy, social injustice and sexual exploitation” (5).

Like Emecheta in her foundational novel *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and Nwapa in her novels *Efuru* (1966) and *Idu* (1970), Adebayo also delves into the societal and social dynamics African women are subject to when it comes to delimiting their role as mothers in her already mentioned representation of a Yoruba woman who is ostracised and demonised due to her presumed barrenness. However, there is a fundamental difference between Adebayo’s novel and the ones produced by these two foremothers. In Adebayo’s story, motherhood is detached from womanhood, that is, motherhood is not theorised as womanhood’s defining element. When first- and second-generation Nigerian authors have narrated motherhood from a critical perspective where this was perceived as inevitable and, hence, mothers were depicted as unconditional givers, Adebayo deliberately rejects the idea of a woman being imposed this status. This third-generation author does not portray motherhood as an idealised state of being, but rather, she de-essentialises it while rejecting the pre-conception that women are only valuable and socially recognised if they become mothers. In this regard, Adebayo exposes the patriarchal component of motherhood, detaching it from womanhood, which is why I analyse her as a “transformative” author, following Susan Arndt’s description (86).

In her classification of the works produced by African female authors, Arndt identifies three general currents into which African feminist literature can be divided: reformist, transformative and radical. Reformist writers criticise men’s attitudes and behaviour as

individuals, but never as part of an oppressive and hierarchical system. Consequently, women keep on “play[ing] a subordinate role” (83). According to Arndt, Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* and *Idu* can be inserted within this reformist literary current, which might indicate the early stage of an African feminist consciousness. On the contrary, transformative and radical writers do question the male-centred system while criticising the patriarchal structures existent in African societies. In this vein, transformative writing “imply that men are (at least potentially) allies in the fight against these forms of discrimination, inequality and oppression” (84-85). Authors such as Mariama Bâ, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Buchi Emecheta or Wanjira Muthoni can be seen as representatives of this current.

Finally, radical female writers hold the idea that, due to either biological or constructivist reasons, “men (as a social group) inevitably . . . discriminate against, oppress and mistreat women” so that the possibility of them becoming allies is not possible (85-86). Usually, radical feminist texts tend to portray the emotional and physical violence women experience at the hands of their husbands, brothers or sons and typically end up with the woman murdering men or being killed by them (86). Writers such as Elizabeth Akinyi Nzioki, Wanjiku Mukabi Kabira or Nawal El Saadawi accord with this definition. I argue that Adebayo’s novel is best defined as a transformative novel considering that Yejide definitely refuses to play the role of second fiddle and subdued wife, whereas Akin is portrayed as a man who implicitly rejects traditional patriarchal practices and institutions (e.g. polygamy). Arndt also asserts that “[n]o author of a *reformist* or *transformative* African-feminist text –and certainly no non-feminist author– has so far broken the unwritten law that motherhood defines womanhood” (86; italics in the original). In this regard, I contend Adebayo has broken this law, making clear that “wifehood and motherhood” do not constitute “the core of a woman’s life mission” or “the essence of a true womanhood” (Uko, “Womahood” 2). It is for this reason that Adebayo has widen the definition of what it means to be a transformative

African/Nigerian writer by suggesting transgressive representations of African womanhood and motherhood.

Furthermore, the exploration of female erotic desire and new Nigerian masculinities Adebayo carries out in her novel also constitutes a point of departure from previous feminist and transformative novels. Certainly, third-generation Nigerian female authors are sensuously “voicing the body” (Hewett 81) by focusing on female erotic desire from a liberating perspective. In this light, Adebayo presents a vision of lovemaking that, even though it is procreation-oriented, is overtly depicted as a source of bodily pleasure for the female protagonist. Sex is no longer represented as a source of indecency or as a covert, filthy act, but as a deeply pleasurable and enjoyable experience, also for women, who are no longer pushed into the “object-position” or used “for sexual gratification” (Adekoya 335). This idea of sexuality as a space of mutual pleasure and agency constitutes a notable point of departure from first-generation writers’ approach to sexual intercourse and intimacy. According to Olusegun Adekoya, the literary works produced by third-generation Nigerian writers “are filled with what their first-generation counterparts would label as indecent, immoral, obscene, prurient, and plainly pornographic” (344). As I will demonstrate through the analysis of this theme in Adebayo’s novel, the subversive potential of sex and, particularly, of female sexual pleasure is more than evident in Yejide’s extra-marital relationship with his brother-in-law, Dotun, with whom she starts a sexual relationship in order to get pregnant. Thus, adultery is “consciously committed in order to realize a dream of procreation” because Akin is infertile, albeit he hides this information from Yejide at first (Adekoya 333).

In *Stay with Me*, there is a contrast between the romantic relationship Akin and Yejide have and the sexual relationship she has with Dotun. While listening to the sexual experiences of other women in her hair salon, Yejide starts questioning her sexual life with Akin not only

because she does not get pregnant, but because she realises that there might be a problem with “a soft pestle [that] cannot pound yam” (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 165). As Akin was Yejide’s only sexual partner, she never realised her husband was impotent, and it was not until she had sex with her brother-in-law that she started to suspect Akin had deceived her. In this light, Dotun is presented as the antithesis of Akin; even though Dotun is married and has a family, he is depicted as an unfaithful husband who has multiple sexual encounters outside marriage. While Akin is portrayed as a successful but impotent man, Dotun is presented as sexually active but bankrupt. As Yejide asserts, “[t]here was something different about being with him, *something fuller*” (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 111; emphasis added). To which she adds: “I wanted to try it again. My first instinct was to tell Akin, but how does one tell one’s husband: *I want you to fuck me the way your brother did?*” (111; italics in the original). After Dotun and Yejide’s first sexual encounter takes place, Yejide questions again her own sexual experiences with Akin, which come to be regarded as unsatisfactory: “He moved to my neck and I shut my eyes. This time, I could not drown in the tingly sensations his tongue and fingers gave” (112).

Yejide’s erotic autonomy allows her to feel sexually fulfilled, on a physical level, and emotionally acknowledged since Dotun sympathises with her anxieties about her own motherhood. Unlike Akin, who sees their sexual arrangement as an “investment” (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 57) that hides the control over her wife’s chances of becoming a mother, Dotun agrees to have sex with Yejide because he has feelings for her. In this context, it is interesting to mention what Jacob Allen Crystal asserts regarding the control Akin exerts over her wife’s sexuality and fertility: “Akin’s ownership of Yejide’s body justifies asking Dotun to get her pregnant” because “[t]he shift of motherhood causes him to see her body as a site of colonization, something to be enslaved” (19). Once again, there are certain patriarchal dynamics that take place when it comes to women’s sexuality and bodily autonomy. For

instance, Akin controlling Yejide's fertility, but also Akin accusing Yejide of cheating on him with Dotun while Akin married Funmilayo in the first place without telling Yejide. Besides, even though Dotun initially thinks this arrangement is an "abomination" (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 187), he accepts being instrumentalised because Akin assured him Yejide knew it all, and because Dotun "had always wanted her" (188).

However, Dotun is also instrumentalised by Yejide because the latter knows he can actually make her pregnant. In fact, Yejide tries to regard their relationship as a "business transaction" in order to create distance between them and "doused the fire that was smouldering in the pit of [her] belly, and stemmed the wetness gathering between [her] legs" (156). Hence, whereas there is an imbalance of power between Akin and Yejide in the sexual arena, Dotun and Yejide's sexual relationship is characterised by certain horizontality and mutual understanding. This idea is especially notorious when Dotun decides to take side with Yejide when she proclaims she is pregnant (she was later discovered to have a false pregnancy): "He believed me. There was no mockery, no doubt in his eyes. They met mine evenly. His eyes held something I hadn't seen in Akin's eyes for so long, for far too long. Faith in me, in my words, in my sanity (110). And when he tries to comfort her after discovering Sesan has sickle-cell disease: "Then I wanted more, needed more, craved more, feverishly. More. More. More. His tongue, his hands, his hardness deep inside me again" (171). As I have proved, the representation Adebayo carries out of the sexual experiences of the female protagonist in her novel does not constitute a pornographic or an indecent account of a natural human experience but rather, it originally shows sex and female pleasure in a new light. Although sex for women is presented in this novel as leading to childbirth, largely as a result of the encounter with Dotun, it is also depicted as a pleasurable experience for all the parties involved and, perhaps more originally, it is portrayed as an experience where women

can unapologetically and unashamedly take ownership of their bodies, presented as a site of pleasure, and of their sexualit(ies) (see Reddy 2004; Azuah 2005; Osha 2011; Marais 2019).

Similarly, the discussion of sexual and romantic relationships in the novel paves the way for the exploration of other seminal issues such as (new) masculinities, paternal affiliation or ma/paternity. Although it transcends the scope of this dissertation, new masculinities are addressed in *Stay with Me*, where Adebayo portrays men as controlling, successful and complying with patriarchal expectations, but she also introduces men who are vulnerable, economically unsuccessful, understanding, infertile, etc. By redirecting the attention towards Akin's impotency (and not towards Yejide's presumed barrenness), Adebayo explicitly questions those dynamics and conceptions that certainly oppress women, but that take a heavy toll on Nigerian men too. Finally, it is also relevant to explore how Adebayo challenges paternity and paternal affiliation. In the novel, Yejide abandons Rotimi and Akin when she realises he has betrayed her and when she understands her remaining daughter will die the same way her siblings did. At this point, Akin manages to keep Rotimi alive and takes care of her until she reaches adulthood, when she reunites with her mother. In fact, Adebayo revises masculinity models and paternal affiliation when she presents a character that, even though cannot procreate, considers himself the true father of Olamide, Sesan and Rotimi. This is how Akin recounts the experience of being told he was not Sesan's biological father:

There are things scientific tests cannot show, things like the fact that paternity is more than sperm donation. I knew Sesan was my son. There was no test result that could change that. Besides, I already knew that Dotun was the sperm donor. That was how I thought about what he did for me – sperm donation. I knew Dotun would never claim he was Sesan's father, which is the reason I went to him when I eventually accepted

the fact that I needed someone else to get my wife pregnant. (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 186)

Similarly, when Yejide decides to leave her husband and daughter behind, Akin becomes Rotimi's main caretaker, which also defies traditional conceptions of masculinity and fatherhood.

1.2.4. “While my Last Child Was Dying, the Country Was Unravelling”: Interrogating Inviabile Nations and Engendering Promising Ones

In the section devoted to the analysis of Chigozie Obioma's debut novel, I traced a parallelism between 1990s Nigeria and the destruction of the Agwu family. The fractured relationship among the Igbo brothers is symbolic of a Nigeria that is essentially divided along ethnic, religious and socio-economic lines, and hence unable to carry out a sustained national project. In Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay with Me*, a parallelism between a convulsive 1990s Nigeria, particularly during the military *coup d'état* orchestrated by Gideon Gwaza Orkar in 1990 and the riots that erupted as consequence of the annulment of the 1993 election, and the death of Yejide and Akin's progeny can also be established. Both in Obioma's and in Adebayo's debut novels, the narration of an “unstable” nation, to echo Homi Bhabha's words, finds its correlate in the disintegration of an Igbo and a Yoruba family: in this case, as centred on an inviable offspring. Thus, in this section I focus on the metaphorical representation of the dead progeny as symbolising the failure of the Nigerian national project. In addition, I delve into the Mother Africa trope in order to explore its connections with motherhood/womanhood in African literature, ending this sub-section with a reference to Nigeria as an *abiku* nation.

Remi Akujobi asserts that “[t]he way societies conceptualize motherhood . . . has come to command popular appeal because it is seen as a symbol of the nation-state,” where

(male) nationalists have “deploy[ed] the nation-as-mothers” in order to “mobilize patriotic sentiments” (2). The trope of Mama Afrika or Mother Africa has been “at the heart of the anti-colonial nationalist struggles in Africa in the 1950s and early 1960s up to the point of independence” (2). However, other scholars warn us about the use of women as “icons of the nation,” as John McLeod asserts, because this nationalist usage can perpetuate a vision of “the passive female who depends upon active males to defend her honour,” and solidify the misleading belief that “national liberation” is “an exclusively male endeavour” (*Beginning Postcolonialism*). African women have mobilised, rioted and even fought to defeat colonial invasion and overthrow its power only to realise “the decolonised nation is hardly interested in female liberation” (McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*). In this vein, Akujobi brilliantly summarises the biases of the anti-colonial project in the following claim: “‘Mother Africa’ may have been declared free, but the mothers of Africa remained manifestly oppressed” (3).

Other theorists such as Elleke Boehmer in her ground-breaking *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (2005), Nira Yuval-Davis in her *Gender & Nation* (1997) or Anne McClintock in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995), among many others, have explored “the interrelationship of gender and nationalism . . . within the ambit of postcolonial critique” along with those “gendered configuration of the postcolonial nation” and “the nation embodied *as woman by* male leaders, artists and writers” (Boehmer, *Stories of Women*; italics in the original). Women have been represented as “idealised *carrier[s]* of nationalist sons,” and as the “*bearers* of national culture” and tradition in nationalist discourses that “reify traditional gender differences” (Boehmer, *Stories of Women*; italics in the original). Indeed, this theorist posits that the postcolonial nation is essentially a male enterprise or “a male-constructed space narrated into modern self-consciousness by male leaders” (Boehmer, *Stories of Women*). In this male-designed space, men (husbands, fathers, uncles and sons) narrate the postcolonial nation into

being, while women are automatically considered the (passive) symbols of the *motherland* or the “bearers of tradition” (Boehmer, *Stories of Women*), but are, nonetheless, excluded from the nation-building project (McClintock 1991).

Hence, this interrelation between postcolonial nation and woman risks glorifying a hegemonic image of the African woman that, on the one hand, perpetuates certain phallogocentric conceptions of African womanhood (compulsory heterosexuality, submissiveness, self-sacrifice, etc.), and excludes other forms of female signification and identification.²⁷ Elleke Boehmer further highlights that “postcolonial women writers have questioned, cut across, upended or refused entirely the dominant if not dominatory narrative of the independent nation. They have placed their own subjectivities, sexualities, maternal duties, private stories and intimate pleasures in tension with conventional roles transmitted by national and other traditional narratives” (*Stories of Women*). In this sense, I argue Adebayo contests “the dominatory narrative” of the Nigerian postcolonial nation in two different ways by disputing conventional marriage, on the one hand, and by rejecting her maternal duties, on the other.

Symbolically, if we approach the Nigerian nation from the perspective of Akin and Yejide’s dysfunctional marriage, there is a subversion of the gender roles attributed to women within the domestic sphere. Yejide is not presented as a devoted, submissive and conformist wife because she rebels against the farce of her marriage when she leaves Akin. She also rebels against Akin marrying another woman without telling her and having agreed they would only do monogamy. Moreover, Yejide dismantles traditional motherhood in an effort to de-romanticise and de-patriarchalise her maternal duties, especially when motherhood has

²⁷ This idea will be further tackled in the chapter devoted to the analysis of Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* (2015), where I explore the figure of the lesbian woman as part of a nation that can be reconfigured as queer and as accepting of other female paradigms. Likewise, Okparanta presents transgressive conceptions of womanhood, motherhood and family in her depiction of a lesbian woman who raises her daughter on her own, while having a covert relationship with another woman.

come to define female subjectivity in Nigerian society. Hence, in her contestation of conventional motherhood and of Yoruba womanhood, she defies the patriarchal endeavour of the post-independence Nigerian nation, which, as discussed above, has granted Africans independence from colonial oppression, but it has not liberated women from gender subordination. I also contend that, in her decision to abandon her husband and her third daughter, Yejide breaks with phallogentric national culture and grapples with “national self-assertion,” thus offering alternative ways of engendering the (feminist) motherland (Boehmer, *Stories of Women*).

Additionally, it is worth exploring in this narrative the interpenetration between the destruction of the Ajayi family and the political instability of 1990s Nigeria, where Adebayo not only interrogates nationalistic tropes and ideals that eulogise traditional female representations, but also comments upon the state of affairs of her home country, weaving together the personal experiences of this Yoruba family with the course of the country. This parallelism between domesticity and nationality is staged through the violent coup organised by Gideon Gwaza Orkar in 1990 to overthrow Ibrahim Babangida’s government. “The Orkar coup,” as it came to be known, ended with the execution of the plotters and with the restitution of Babangida, who remained in power until 1993. This historical event is recounted by Yejide, who, at that time in the novel, is taking care of her second child, Sesan: “The more I thought about it, the more I hoped Babangida would manage to hold on to power, not because I liked the way he was running the country, but because the status quo was the devil we knew” (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 161-162). To which she added that “[i]f the new officers took over and really expelled the northern states, the situation would probably devolve into another civil war within a few weeks” (162).

There are also some references to the 1993 elections M.K.O. Abiola won and that were later annulled by Babangida. As happened in Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen*, a patina of disillusionment and hopelessness regarding Nigeria's transition towards democracy characterises this historical moment. As Yejide states: "This election story is another fraud" (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 235), renouncing to the possibility of a democratic future for this country. Interestingly, the 1993 election coincides in the novel with the confrontation between Yejide and Akin and their abrupt separation. When Yejide discovers Akin has deliberately lied to her, she realises their whole marriage is a fraud, and it is then when she decides to leave him, renouncing to the possibility of a life together. The unexpected annulment of the 1993 election after weeks of delaying the results is addressed in the novel through Akin's words: "I don't think I'd heard the word 'annul' used except in reference to marriage before that day" (275); a quote that preludes the disintegration of his own marriage.

As a consequence of this annulment, people started an armed mobilisation, which coincides with Rotimi's first attack due to her disease. Once again, the parallelism between a or convulsive Nigeria and a disintegrating family is clearly exemplified in the crisis Rotimi suffers where she lost consciousness all of a sudden and the decision Yejide makes of abandoning her, confirming Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi's words: "women writers critique the idealization of the family in order to uncover the fiction of the nation" (677). Hence, the (fictional) "idealization of the family" also evinces the problematisation of and disenchantment with a nation that has failed its own citizens. Once the riots begin and Rotimi loses consciousness, Yejide tells Akin that she is not coming back to her or to Rotimi, who she thought was about to pass away soon due to her disease, and that she is moving to another city to start anew. However, Adebayo's story ends in a more positive note with the reunion of an adult Rotimi and Yejide in the funeral of Akin's father, after Yejide had moved to Jos, established a hair salon and a jewellery shop and started several relationships with other men

(3-4). If we read this final encounter as the cathartic moment for the Ajayi family, perhaps Adebayo is suggesting a more optimistic and promising future for a country that has been marked by several military regimes, *coups d'état* and dubious political practices. As Yejide admits after seeing Rotimi for the very first time in years and realising she survived: “Inside me something unfurls, joy spreads through my being, unfamiliar yet unquestioned, and I know that this too is a *beginning, a promise of wonders to come*” (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 296; emphasis added). Perhaps, this ending indicates that Nigeria, in its current (neocolonial) configuration, is not viable because it does not reflect Nigerians’ interests since it keeps on oppressing Nigerian women and perpetuating monolithic and essentialising female images that are being counteracted by third-generation Nigerian authors. Taking this challenging scenario into consideration, I argue Ayobami Adebayo also presents more promising national horizons that are certainly more democratic and where women have a say in familial, national and political matters.

CHAPTER 2
AFROQUEER REPRESENTATIONS OF HOME

“I’ve never quite felt like I belonged where I am from, with the strict norms and values. I don’t know if *cultural dysphoria* is an actual concept, but that’s what I would call it. My free-thought & the calm wildness that I have, those have always been interpreted as white sensibilities, and this perception is further propagated by the fact that I am a light-skinned African. But I constantly reject that notion, spit it out & press my foot against it when it hits the ground. I am not white. I am as African the people with darker skin and more normative sensibilities. But right now, Africa does not want me” (February, “Name Tags #10”; emphasis added)

“As Africans, we all have infinite potential. We stand for an African revolution which encompasses the demand for a re-imagination of our lives outside neo-colonial categories of identity and power” (*African LGBTI Manifesto/Declaration*, in Ekine and Abbas 52)

In this chapter, I delve into the realities of fictional black queer subjects as depicted by Anglo-Igbo author Chinelo Okparanta in her debut novel *Under the Udala Trees* (2015) and by Nigerian-American writer Uzodinma Iweala in his second novel *Speak No Evil* (2018). In an attempt to explore the relationship between (afro)queerness and nationhood, I focus on how queerness is expressed in Nigeria and in the (black queer) diaspora as experienced by homo-desiring subjects. These two *Bildungsromans* try to, firstly, make visible a reality that is deemed “un-African” and thus negated, and secondly, to encourage a positive, tolerant move towards the acceptance and normalisation of subversive and vulnerable subjectivities on the continent and in the African diaspora. Finally, it is worth emphasising that these novels stand out by their representational capacity since they have the potential to put forth new identity manifestations and encourage non-normative individuals to see themselves in a different, more accepting light. There is an evident need for referents and the fictional arena is the perfect breeding soil to create and set a precedent for other writers and readers to positively identify in them.

Undeniably, the idea of re-inscribing these individuals within the postcolonial nation-building project makes possible the creation of new forms of self-signification and determination for Nigerians and, consequently, more diversified understandings of this country. As I discuss further on, these two novels can be considered part of a restorative project where queerness purposefully allows the discussion of African existence “outside neo-colonial categories of identity and power” (Ekine and Abbas 52), as stated in the *African LGBTI Manifesto/Declaration* that opens this chapter. Perhaps, reclaiming the validity and legitimacy of these black bodies that populate contemporary Nigerian literature and reimagining them within the post-independence nation, especially in the context of the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act, not only will reinforce the ethical role of literature, but it will also pave the way for a national scenario where excluded citizens are granted the integrity they have always deserved in a context, hopefully, more accepting of every/body.

Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* (2015) can be regarded as a paradigmatic example of a new trend in Anglophone Sub-Saharan literature that represents Afroqueer characters that are defined by its complexity and psychological depth.²⁸ Okparanta’s and other novels belonging to this emerging trend are part of a restorative project that aims to re-inscribe these subjectivities into the postcolonial African nation and to propose brighter futurities for this community. I also discuss how Okparanta’s novel actively queers the Nigerian nation, suggesting a queer genealogy that goes back to the Nigeria-Biafra civil war, where the testimonies of the LGBTQI+ community during the domestic conflict are not precisely abundant. I argue Okparanta puts forth very specific lesbian reconfigurations of Nigeria and of Nigerian womanhood, proposing other ways of being a woman and Nigerian, together with alternative forms of affect that can be interpreted in a national key.

²⁸ I use the term “Afroqueer” to refer to those individuals who challenge conventional notions of gender, sexuality or desire, but also question hegemonic social and cultural norms (which includes a revision of normative familial order, customs, traditions, political order, etc.) in Africa and the diaspora.

Furthermore, I explore the figure of the Afroqueer subject as portrayed by Nigerian-American author Uzodinma Iweala in his novel *Speak No Evil* (2018). Iweala became an internationally acclaimed writer with his debut novel *Beasts of No Nation* (2005), which deals with the figure of the child soldier in an African context. Both novels, characterised by their ethical response to critical injustices, are dedicated to those who have suffered, been silenced or abused on the basis of domestic conflict and sexual orientation. In this sense, Brenna M. Munro contends that the figures of “[t]he child soldier and the gay or lesbian may indeed also be a means of working through the global nature of contemporary Nigerian life and literature” (“Locating ‘Queer’” 123). Precisely, this is an idea that can be fully applied to Iweala as a hyphenated author who keeps ties with Nigeria –his parents’ home–, and the US, where he is originally from.²⁹ Furthermore, Munro goes on to claim that certain “anxieties about the nation, its integrity, its fragmentation, and its dispersal get mapped onto these figures [i.e. the child soldier and the Afroqueer subject], who are coded in different ways as transnational, moving across or destroying national borders as well as bodily boundaries” (123). Actually, *Beasts of No Nation* tackles the brutal destruction of territories and people as consequences of an unknown war that takes place in African soil, but it also addresses the fragmentation of the self, which is another key idea closely linked to the globality of African writers and their texts. This idea is exemplified in this novel via the blurring of the lines between (and the overlapping of) victim and perpetrator. Iweala’s second novel, *Speak No Evil*, also tackles this fragmented nature of the African nation but from a different perspective.

In this coming-out novel, the writer recounts the experiences of a Nigerian-American homosexual in a transnational context, where same-sex desire is simultaneously explored

²⁹ I use the term “hyphenated” to refer to those writers or characters in this dissertation who present two or more cultural origins. For instance, U. Iweala was born in the US but his parents are Nigerian so his reality is characterised by this mixture of cultural influences. The characters Bashira and Taslim from Sefi Atta’s *The Bad Immigrant* (2021) are another example of hyphenated identities. These characters are of Nigerian origin but moved to the US in their teens and resided there for a long period of time, integrating into the host society and acquiring new customs, inflections, preferences, etc.

along specific racial tensions. In this vein, I am interested in the ways Iweala utilises fiction to voice the precarity that US-born and non-US blacks experience daily, and to humanise the statistics of those black subjects who are murdered on the basis of their sexual orientation or phenotype. Moreover, I demonstrate how the Afrodiasporic queer subject that features *Speak No Evil* is most accurately described as belonging to what scholars like Meg Wesling (2008) or Jafari S. Allen (2012) have called the “Black Queer Diaspora.” Additionally, I focus on the new configurations of Nigerian manhood and masculinity as exposed by the homosexual protagonist. As with Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees*, where I delve into the new representations of Nigerian womanhood proposed by this (also transnational) author, I attempt to prove how Iweala’s novel presents new readings of Nigerian manhood from a gay and diasporic position. As focused on the troubled father-son relationship, I interrogate the impact these new interpretations of Nigerian manhood and masculinity have in a country where men adhere to widely-spread hegemonic forms of masculinity. In the novel, the protagonist Niru is portrayed as a gay, vulnerable and cosmopolitan young adult who is successful in negotiating home as multiple, whereas his father is presented as a strict and intransigent man who is “unable to accept the idea that a true home might exist outside of [his] birth country [i.e. Nigeria]” (Iweala, *Speak* 52).

Before analysing Okparanta and Iweala’s novels, I deem necessary to clarify the use of the term “queer” in an African, postcolonial context, and to provide a brief re-mapping of same-sex desire in Africa, and most specifically in Nigeria. In his theorisation of the postmodern re-appropriation of the term “queer,” Elondust Patrick Johnson contends that “[t]o embrace ‘queer’ is to resist or elide categorization, to disavow binaries (that is, gay versus straight, black versus white) and to proffer potentially productive modes of resistance against hegemonic structures of power” (“Queer Theory” 166). He further contends that in an academic context, the term “queer has become a catalyst for theorizing not only gender and

sexuality . . . but also a way to discuss race and class in antiessentialist ways” (166). In this vein, “queer” is not only seen as “the deviation of normalcy” (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 176), but as a productive space to transcend (neo- and post)colonial categories and to advance new personal and national horizons outside colonial, Western mandates.

In order to situate the use of this term in a postcolonial context, it is important to remember Rebecca Fine Romanow’s theorising of the notion of “postcolonial” as, indeed, a “queer-imbricated” identity when arguing that “the postcolonial is . . . a space [that] inhabits a ‘queer’ non-normative geography and temporality, constructed by the history of colonization, the process of Othering, and the pressures and realities of the diaspora and the emerging global community” (3-4). Following these precepts, the postcolonial subject is inevitably signified in relation to unorthodox conceptions of the self together with dissident temporalities. This idea has already been insightfully explored by theorists such as Oyeronke Oyewumi, who reminds us that the West imposed its own normative categorisations –or, to quote Judith Butler, its own “regulatory ideal[s]” (*Bodies that Matter* 1)– onto non-Western peoples, who, in turn, project(ed) such binary and straitjacketed categories as natural (Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women* 11).

Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas, commenting on the versatility of the term “queer,” state that it “denote[s] a political frame rather than a gender identity or sexual behaviour.” In other words, “gender and sexual plurality” are inherently represented within this concept that openly seeks “to transform, overhaul and revolutionise African order” (3), while denouncing the oppressiveness of heterocisnormativity, compulsory heterosexuality or Western belief systems. Although this term is not fully widespread in Africa (not even among the LGBTQI+ African communities), Lindsey Green-Simms comments that it can be used “both as a critique of heteronormativity and as an expression of same-sex desire that is not necessarily

hitched to a particular identity like gay, lesbian, or bisexual” (“The Emergent Queer” 143). Hence, even when the terms “queer” or “LGBTQI+” risk being regarded as “an unfortunate adoption” from the West (Sandfort et al. 2), it is nonetheless a denomination that emphasises the radical versatility of a term that could be accurately applied to a multiplicity of non-prescriptive personal, gender, sexual and national identities. However, despite its theoretical potential, the truth is that homosexuality is still illegal in 38 out of the 54 existing African countries, being Botswana the last one in turning down criminalising laws, according to International Amnesty.³⁰

In the post-independence period, many African countries went through a phase of national readjustments and transitioned into a state of democratisation which, Lyn Ossewa posits, “creat[ed] visibility around queer activism and class[,] facilitat[ing] a ‘coming out’ of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) rights” (32). However, this new scenario was also characterised by “a wave of competing fundamentalist and moralistic claims” against queer African subjects (32). According to Adriaan van Klinken, Pentecostalism has become in Africa “a major factor in the spread of homophobia and the recent politicisation of homosexuality” (65). This Christian movement considers same-sex desire as an obvious “form of Western imperialism” (66), while asserting that this constitutes an overt “threat to the moral purity of the nation” (71). These conceptions mobilise patriotic and anti-imperialist (political) feelings that lead Africans to identify homosexuality as the antithesis of a national ethos, since these non-procreative bodies subsequently reject what M. Jacqui Alexander designates as “the heterosexual imperative of citizenship” (“Not just [Any]Body” 7). But homosexuality is also considered another un-African evil that needs to be fought against to “preserve” Africanness.

³⁰ This report has been last checked on September 6th, 2022.

Bisi Alimi –a fierce advocate for the rights of the LGBTQI+ collective in Africa and abroad– has always tried to debunk this mythic conception of queer love contending that it was not homosexuality what was introduced into Africa by colonial forces but rather, homophobia, which has been recurrently stated to be the true Western import (Azuah 2005; Hoad 2006; Epprecht 2008; Blessol 2013; Ndashe 2013; Zabus 2013; Sogunro 2018). One of the reasons provided to support this theory was the mass conversion to Christianity which displaced and delegitimised particular (pre-colonial) conceptions of African intimacies. Alimi contends that “[w]hile Africans argued that homosexuality was a western import, they in turn used a western religion as the basis for their argument,” and used the Bible as a moralising benchmark that is not part of their history or culture (“If You Say Being Gay Is not African”). However, and as Adriaan van Klinken aptly points out, since “Christianity originally came from the West, it cannot function as a source of moral authority in Africa” (72). Alimi also adds that pre-colonial queer practices were truncated by the gross indecency laws enforced in colonial times by the European potencies, based on religious precepts that imposed a vision of homosexuality as sinful. Alimi goes on to emphasise that homo-/bi-/transphobia are considered means to distance oneself from (internalised) Western dominance, where queerness equates “national otherness.” Neville Hoad states to this respect that “[t]he difference between ‘here’ and ‘there’ suggests that tolerance of homosexuality is becoming . . . a strategy for marking national and civilizational specificity” (xi-xii). When queerness is associated with colonial influx, negative connotations attributed to these transgressive identities make those precarious bodies liable to become alienated from their sexualities and gender identities, since queerness is associated with exploitation, oppression, subjugation and unequal power relationships.

In this vein, the so-called heterosexualisation of African nations was “[c]entral to post-independence nation-building projects,” as Edward Ou Jin Lee asserts (66). As a matter of

fact, “the maintenance of a heterosexual, cissexual, and patriarchal social order/agenda, through discourses of ‘family values,’ the promotion of heterosexual monogamous marriage, and continued criminalization of sexual and gender transgressions” (66) operated as imperialist mandates that laid the foundations of the African nation. This also contributed to circumscribe and control the colonised Other via very specific gross indecency laws such as “sodomy, ‘eunuchs’ [or] vagrancy” (65). Besides, it perpetuated a binary relationship between “the civilized (heterosexual/cissexual) white/Western subject” and “the uncivilized perverse Other” (65; see also Olausen and Angelfors 2009). This unequal binary relationship has also been reported by Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, who account this division on the basis of “normal and abnormal, healthy and unhealthy [or] self and other,” which are ideas that have perpetuated a “master trope of moral and immoral” (10) found in Judeo-Christian, Victorian rhetoric.

Similarly, it is compelling to explore the conception Nigerians had of “sex” and “gender” in indigenous times. Even though I will be approaching these two realities from a contemporary lens which, as Chantal Zabus points out, can complicate the full understanding of such concepts (“Out in Africa”), it will prove equally fruitful to mention them. There is a clear contrast between pre-colonial worldviews where gender was de-emphasised at the expense of communal status and age and, therefore, organised in a way that highly contrasted with binary and dichotomist conceptualisations and constructions of gender systems in Western societies. In her path-breaking volume *Male Daughters and Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (1987), Nigerian scholar Ifi Amadiume carried out an ethnographic study of the Nnobi people, and more specifically of Nnobi women who were organised into a matricentric and matrifocal community.³¹ The Nnobi clan showcases the flexibility of gender in Western African indigenous societies, which allows the appearance of

³¹ The community of women that Amadiume incorporates for her study belongs to the Nnobi town, situated in the Anambra State of Nigeria (southeastern region of the country).

what the author coins as “male daughters” or women who have “the status of a son and [are] able to inherit [their] father’s property” due to the absence of closer male lineage members (32). This flexible gender system “affected women’s access to economic resources and positions of authority and power through the institutions of ‘male daughters’ and ‘female husbands,’” resulting in role and status ambiguity (51). Furthermore, women-to-women marriage in this society was a rather usual practice and it was carried out as a means or strategy to free women of “domestic service” and, thus, achieving power and economical success (70).

However, the practice of “female husbandry” does not involve, presumably, same-sex desire between women. Kenneth Chukwuemeka Nwoko contends that female husbandry never involved “sexual relationship between the couple” (74), as women to women marriages were not actually contracted in response to the sexual emotions or attractions between the couples, but simply as an instrument for the preservation and extension of patriarchy and its traditions (78). However, and even though gender bending and the flexibility of gender roles are explicit in Amadiume’s seminal anthropological work, we should be wary of the inference that homosexuality, especially lesbianism, was non-existent in pre-colonial Africa. Indeed, authors such as Saskia Wieringa (2006), Dobrota Pucherova (2019), Chantal Zabus (2011; 2014), Marc Epprecht (2008; 2013) or Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe (1998) have openly reassessed and contested those postulates that reinforce the belief that homosexuality constitutes an alien reality in Africa, while documenting fairly detailed accounts of pre-colonial communities where homosexuality was a rather common and culturally acceptable practice throughout the continent.

The post-1900 period saw the invasion of Igbo hinterlands by the British, which was followed by the violent suppression of indigenous institutions, the imposition of Christianity

and Western education, and the introduction of a new economy and local government administration through the warrant chief system. These new institutions greatly affected the structural position of women in modern Nnobi society. Whereas gender in indigenous times was considered a flexible construction in terms of access to power and authority, the new Western conception of gender and sexuality carried strong sex and class inequalities supported by rigid gender ideology and constructions: a woman was always female regardless of her social achievements or status (Amadiume, *Male Daughters* 119). In a similar vein, political and social institutions “were abandoned or reinterpreted to the detriment of women,” which brought about changes in gender relations, marriage practices and education (123). Hence, a sexist ideology –based on clear-cut Victorian values– was imposed upon the colonies under British control. Regarding same-sex desire and other sexual and gender transgressions, a number of laws that criminalised homosexuality were enforced by British colonial rule. The “erasure of Indigenous sexualities and genders” only “served as key mechanisms through which many Indigenous societies were reorganised,” while heterocisnormativity operated as a form of demarcating who was about to live or die (Ou Jin Lee 65). Nowadays, non-conventional gender and sexual identities are punished in most African countries by imprisonment (up to fourteen years) of Afroqueer individuals, corrective rape, lynching, flagellation, murder or even death penalty (in the northern provinces of Nigeria, which are under Islamic Shari’a law, sexualised Others are punished by stoning and/or lashes).

In Nigeria, the homophobic and transphobic law called Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA) –commonly called “jail de gays” or “anti-gay bill”– was passed and enforced in 2014 by the then-president Goodluck Jonathan, which can be considered a distinctive feature of repressive political regimes. This law is based on previously sketched legislations (i.e. the 2006 Same Sex [Prohibition] Bill and the 2008 Same Gender Marriage

Prohibition Bill) which were never passed but constituted the prelude of the current SSMPA. This undemocratic law finally prohibited those “deviant unions” –typified as sodomy, abomination or perversion according to the Nigerian government– arresting, imprisoning or even executing people who dare to come out and express their homo-/transsexuality, but most importantly, it entails a violation of fundamental human rights for Nigerian citizens.

These laws and policies against the LGBTQI+ collective not only manifest an institutionalised homo- and transphobia, but it also fuels hatred, indiscriminate persecution and hunger for execution of innocent people. According to Chiedu Chike Ifeakandu, queer Nigerians are facing more politically-legitimated “brawls and violence.” Thus, there are increasing numbers of people being reported, arrested and sentenced to death penalty or to death by stoning; neighbourhoods being “cleansed” of gays; police violence asserted towards vulnerable people and the “deteriorating health care” for this collective. As the same author posits, “[t]hree months after the signing of the law, the few concerted efforts that have been made to curb the HIV pandemic among men who have sex with men [MSM] in Nigeria have been crippled” (Chike Ifeakandu 83; Zabus 2013). Furthermore, LGBTI hotspots like “bars, nightclub[s], healthcare facilities and non-governmental organisations to residential homes” (84) have disappeared, while the Internet and the blogosphere have turned into “[t]he new safe spaces” for Afroqueer citizens (85).

This conception of queerness in Africa has generated the stigmatisation, discrimination, demonisation and abuse against black queer bodies on a daily basis. According to the executive summary and main report presented by the Bisi Alimi Foundation, “‘Not Dancing to their Music’: The Effects of Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia on the Lives of LGBTQ[I+] People in Nigeria” (2017):

Stigma, family rejection, community exclusion and isolation are common while the stress of hiding one's sexuality cannot be underestimated. Unsurprisingly, alongside poor mental health and lack of social support for physical and mental health problems, risk-taking behaviour, substance abuse, selfharm and suicide is higher in Nigerian LGBT populations, particularly for those who are HIV positive . . . Selling sex may be a means of supporting oneself, but brings with it additional risks of internalised homophobia, violence, abuse, coercion and exposure to STIs with transgender people particularly vulnerable to associated harms. (9)

Being socially perceived as a member of the LGBTQI+ community is a complex reality where aspects of nationality, location, economic and social status, religion, ethnicity or access to formal education have a great impact on the processes of sexual and gender identity formation. Likewise, the physical and mental consequences of outing oneself or being perceived as a person whose sexual orientation or gender identity is considered “aberrant” or “unacceptable” are life-threatening in this context. It is due to these conceptions of homosexuality and queerness as national/cultural betrayal that a vast majority of queer relationships in Africa are lived in secrecy or in exile.

2.1. Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015)

2.1.1. Afroqueer Nigerian Literature as Restorative Project: Cementing a Literary Counter-Archive

Contemporary queer fiction can be theorised as an emerging trend that is slowly consolidating within Anglophone Nigerian writing. In her article “States of Emergence: Writing African Female Same-Sex Sexuality” (2017), Brenna M. Munro argues that even though “[t]he figure of the homosexual has long been deployed to stand for colonial penetration of Africa and cultural inauthenticity,” third-generation African writers have

started to deliberately “remake this trope to address the globalized nature of contemporary life, with the woman who desires women as a sympathetic point of identification for the reader and a symbol of human vulnerability, resilience, and complexity” (187). Twenty-first-century African and Afrodiasporic authors have started depicting queer characters that are no longer associated with certain illegal practices such as paedophilia or rape (Dunton 125), despised or deemed un-African. In her discussion of contemporary queer Nigerian fiction, Lindsey Green-Simms asserts that Joe Golder –the protagonist in Wole Soyinka’s *The Interpreters* (1965)– can be stated as “arguably the first recognizably gay character in Nigerian and Anglophone African literature” who, nonetheless, participated in a literary moment characterised by “silence and opacity” regarding same-sex desire (140). This has been analysed as a novel that openly joined in that silence and negation that surrounded gay characters at the time and that “loudly and forcefully neglected to tell the stories about the love, joy, and heartbreak of African men who love men and women who love women” (141).

Brenna M. Munro emphasises as well the fact that “contemporary Anglophone African authors are writing the figure of the same-sex loving African into imaginative existence with a new openness and assertiveness” (“States of Emergence” 186). These contemporary authors deal with queerness in an African “with a new level of frankness and fearlessness” (Green-Simms and Munro, “The Coming-Out”), and are generating their own “poetics of queerness” (Courtois, “‘Thou Shall not Lie’” 128), which presents common elements such as silences, textual digressions, fragmentations or absences. In this context, there is a clear evolution in African literature at the hands of those writers born after independence who have started “to tackle themes previously taboo in African literature” while “critiqu[ing] discourses of homophobia and explor[ing] the everyday fears, desires, pleasures, and anxieties of those who experience same-sex desire” (Green-Simms 141; see also Phiri and Cobo-Piñero 2020). John C. Hawley adds to this respect that this evolution is undeniable but that we cannot forget its

unevenness in terms of its expansion and distribution among the continent and the diaspora, especially in those countries where anti-gay legislations are on the rise. He also contends that “while some countries or voices within particular nations enable such evolution, others (and sometimes within the same nation) seek actively to erase these emerging] narratives and self-expressions” (“In Transition” 121), so that usually contradictory dynamics take up common space.

Green-Simms has also echoed this recent trend in contemporary Anglophone and Sub-Saharan literature when claiming that twenty-first-century Nigerian writers “resist the dominant in ways not previously done before” by “tell[ing] diverse stories about same-sex desire that are neither monothematic nor moralistic” (142). In his pioneering article “‘Wheytin Be Dat?’ The Treatment of Homosexuality in African Literature” (1989), Chris Dunton already contends that earlier African literary texts (implicitly) dealing with homosexuality stereotypically portrayed homosexuality as a Western perversion, and showed a story fairly monothematic and predictable (102). Chantal Zabus thus points out to a collapse of “the ‘sexual initiation’ model of the 1970s,” where homosexuality was represented “as resulting from an encounter between a Nigerian youth and a Western priest” (*Out in Africa* 95) aiming to “straighten” the deviated homosexual. This scholar argues how Jude Dibia’s *Walking with Shadows* (2005) can be seen as one of the initial novels that contributed to this paradigm shift in queer (West) African literature (*Out in Africa* 95).

Furthermore, in delineating a genealogy of African authors dealing with queer protagonists in their works, Green-Simms acknowledges the fact that not only queerness is in the spotlight but adjacent themes such as “women’s struggles, sexism, imposed gender normativity, violence, corruption, religion, and immigration” (143) are concurrently addressed. Thus, queer narratives not only inform about the myriad scenarios of these subjectivities but they also “bring the future into existence for the LGBTIQ community by

voicing what has (intentionally) remained unheard, silenced, erased, and forgotten” (Hawley, “In Transition” 121). Therefore, queer writing in Africa can function as an archival-restorative project where old and new readings of reality are brought to the fore from a queer perspective. For instance, in Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees*, the Nigeria-Biafra civil war is revisited from the perspective of a lesbian, Igbo woman which becomes an evident historicising, even archiving, effort to reinsert this collective within the Nigerian nation-building project in a rather convulsive historical period. Moreover, this conflict has allowed Anglo-Igbo writers “to examine all manners of marginalization and disaffections created by political authority and its dissemination into private lives” (Adetunji Osinubi 676). Hence, revisiting the civil war in the literary arena can function as a coping strategy to work through its very national and psychological consequences, and as the metafictional space that allows writers to hold meaningful conversations about precarious Others in present-day Nigeria. This reparative project allows the creation of what Hawley names as “queer futurities” or, “a ‘coming out’ by means of a literary archive” (“In Transition” 122). Literature becomes a site with an ethical potential for representation and identification, no longer functioning as a didactic platform instructing Africans against the evils of homosexuality.

As part of this project, we could mention the following authors, whose works constitute a clear form of pro-queer artistic activism: the aforementioned Nigerian Wole Soyinka’s *The Interpreters* (1965), Ghanaian Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977), Senegalese Mariama Bâ’s *Scarlet Song* (1981), Sierra Leonean Yulisa Amadu Pat Maddy’s *No Past, No Present, No Future* (1997), South African K. Sello Duiker’s *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* (2001), Nigerian Chris Abani’s *Graceland* (2004), Unoma N. Azuah’s *Sky-High Flames* (2005), Jude Dibia’s *Walking with Shadows* (2005), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie with her short story collection *The Thing around your Neck* (2009), Zimbabwean Tendai Huchu’s *The Hairdresser of Harare* (2010), Somali Diriye Osman’s *Fairytales for Lost Children*

(2013), South African Nakhane Toure's *Piggy Boy's Blues* (2015), Nigerian Chike Frankie Edozien's *Lives of Great Men: Living and Loving as an African Gay Man* (2017), Azeenarh Mohammed/ Chitra Nagarajan/ Rafeeat Aliyu (editors)'s *She Called me Woman: Nigeria's Queer Women Speak* (2018) and Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018) and *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020), among many others that have been recently published. Closely observing this growing repertoire of (pioneering) literary pieces, novels and short stories are the preferred modes when it comes to portraying coming-out stories. In fact, Munro concludes that, while novels have been generally chosen by authors dealing with male homoerotic desire, "[t]he Anglophone writing of African women who desire women, meanwhile, is primarily unfolding in the short story" ("States of Emergence" 186-187). As based on the corpus of Anglophone literary texts dealing with Afroqueer desire, the short story is also starting to be employed by male authors to portray relationships where men desire men.

In this line, the author under scrutiny, Chinelo Okparanta, has explored both genres with her short story collection *Happiness, like Water* (2013) and her debut novel *Under the Udala Trees* (2015). In *Happiness, like Water*, Okparanta discusses the politics of homosexuality in Nigeria and in the diaspora. In this collection, there are two stories worth mentioning, "America" and "Grace," as they specifically deal with lesbian characters both in Nigeria and in the US. Both "Grace" and *Under the Udala Trees* can be described as coming-of-age stories inasmuch as they deal with the lives of two young Nigerian women who are starting to explore their lesbianism in a challenging social and familiar environment. They explore as well themes such as sexual awakening, the damaging impact of Western religion on homosexuality, the influence of a homophobic family in the delineation of the female psyche and issues regarding female empowerment, independence and agency. In any case, *Happiness, like Water* and *Under the Udala Trees* belong to a tradition of exceptional female writers who have addressed the trope of the lesbian woman from a humanising standpoint.

As with gay fiction written by male African authors, lesbian fiction was too “essentialized by first-generation African academic feminists” (“What Is African Woman?” 107), as Dobrota Pucherova asserts. On the one hand, lesbian fiction published before the 2000s negatively portrayed female homoerotic desire while perpetuating the image of the damaged, pathological and even degenerated women-desiring woman. Pucherova further emphasises that lesbianism in African fiction, more specifically fiction created by first and second-generations women writers, “typically stands for a woman’s corruption, moral depravity, and even madness” (108). The novels by Kenyan Rebecka Njau’s *Ripples in the Pool* (1975) and Ghanaian Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977) are representative of these essentialising and reductionist portrayals. On the other hand, same-sex relationships between women before 2000s can also be regarded as “positively charged” when “expressed as platonic desire, intimate friendship, or nurturing mother-daughter relationships” (109). In any case, lesbian desire or relationships were not accepted, but rather presented as something intolerable that was intentionally obscured.

In her article “The Emerging Lesbian Voice in Nigerian Feminist Literature,” Unoma N. Azuah discusses as well the early stage of emergence of “the lesbian voice in Nigerian feminist writing” (129), but, unlike Pucherova, Azuah explores this new voice in Nigerian literature as “emerging” at the hands of four contemporary authors: Lola Shoneyin, Promise Okekwe, Temilola Abioye and herself. She argues that “[t]hese new voices portray female characters in sexual/emotional relationships with women” what, for the author, constitutes “a trend hitherto absent from Nigerian feminist literature” (130). However, and taking into account Azuah’s article was written in 2005, we can agree that this trend Azuah defines as “absent” can now be best analysed as “present.” I agree with Elleke Boehmer that lesbian feminist writing was initially depicted as “a *virtual non-presence*, or at least a *covert silencing*, an ‘*unsaying*’” (*Stories of Women*; emphasis added), but currently, the silences,

stigmatisation, or even censoring that used to surround these relations are deliberately left outside the narratives proposed by new literary voices. Lesbianism is now positively charged and employed to revisit as well gender (roles), female identity, family relationships, religious beliefs, Africanness and national belonging. Moreover, and as aptly emphasised by Lindsey Green-Simms, “these stories are also beginning to provide readers with portraits of everyday life and love, with struggles that are just as much about being gay and African as they are about being a woman and African, an immigrant and African, effeminate and African, or poor and African” (144). In other words, they are creating ordinary stories not necessarily afro-pessimistic but with a clear intention of normalising queer desire and transcending reductionist images of the continent and its citizens.

For instance, in the works by Nigerians Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* (2010), Promise Okeke’s *Women from the Crystal Deep* (2002), Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* (2015) and Ugandan Monica Arac de Nywko’s “Jambula Tree” (2006), we identify a rejection of the idea that “lesbianism is foreign to Africa,” together with a questioning of “the definition of African femininity as centered around motherhood, wifhood, and self-sacrifice” (Pucherova, “What Is African Woman?” 110). Therefore, current portrayals of lesbian subjectivities defy traditional notions of African womanhood, where “motherhood, wifhood, and self-sacrifice” might not be part of their priorities as women, but also of African feminisms which have not been especially accepting of lesbianism. In this sense, Pucherova contends that the consideration of lesbianism among African feminists as “both foreign and alien to African women” has conventionally worked as “one of the defining aspects of African feminism” (“What Is African Woman?” 105-106).

In this regard, Naomi Nkealah contends that “[l]esbian, bisexual and transsexual women tend to be completely effaced” since “sexual orientation tends to be suppressed” (65) from (West) African feminisms and their feminist agendas. Hence, the demands of lesbian

women, despite the fact that they are more liable to experience corrective rape, ostracism and even psychological traumas, are not taken into consideration. In this light, Ashley Currier and Thérèse Migraine-George (2017) have claimed regarding the “punitive quality” that African lesbians have acquired in the literary domain that they “have been accused of betraying their traditional roles as bearers and reproducers of cultural traditions in countries . . . heavily gendered by postcolonial nationalist agenda and rhetorics” (143). Thus, black lesbians on the continent are regarded as traitors to their gender and as national outlaws since many of them do not accept the heteronationalist-patriarchal mandates of the postcolonial nation. However, this presumed impossibility of coexistence between feminism and lesbianism is being overcome by present-day Nigerian writers, whose stories are creating counter-discourses that normalise other forms of desire in Nigeria. These contemporary authors unashamedly portray African individuals that exit the heterocisnormative matrix and defy heteropatriarchal mandates in a way that facilitates the proliferation of new female identities.

2.1.2. Preliminary Remarks on Chinelo Okparanta and her Novel

Chinelo Okparanta (1981) was born in Port Harcourt and later relocated to the US, where she grew up. She graduated from Pennsylvania State University, gained her MA from Rutgers University and her MFA from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. She has been the recipient of numerous fellowships such as the University of Iowa’s Provost’s Postgraduate Fellowship in Fiction and was also nominated for a US Artists Fellowship in 2012. This novelist has also been awarded residencies by the Hermitage Foundation or the Jentel Foundation or the Lannan Foundation (Marfa) among others. She is currently an Assistant Professor of English and Creative Writing at Bucknell University where she is also a Faculty Research Fellow. She has equally been nominated, shortlisted and awarded with several distinctions such as the 2014 and 2016 Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian General Fiction

for her short story collection *Happiness, like Water* and her debut novel *Under the Udala Trees*, and the 2014 O. Henry Prize or the 2016 Jessie Redmon Fauset Book Award in Fiction. She made her appearance as a young Nigerian writer in 2013 with her widely-acclaimed short story collection *Happiness, like Water*. She has recently published her second novel *Harry Sylvester Bird* (2022).

Under the Udala Trees, a novel that was published a year after the passing of the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act, constitutes a rethinking of the lesbian woman in 1970s Nigeria beyond hegemonic notions of gender and sexual normativity, but fundamentally, it is a quest for personal identity in a hostile environment. This Anglo-Igbo *Bildungsroman* is divided into five sections subsequently divided into 77 chapters, together with an Epilogue and the Author's Note, where English and Igbo "choreograph a happy dance" (Okparanta, "Let No One Be Fooled" 80). Its linguistic hybridity is best exemplified in the italicised passages where Igbo makes its appearance. In this case, Okparanta adds the subsequent translation after the Igbo word, proverb, song or chant that appear throughout the text. There are some examples worth exploring as they mark the beginning of the civil war: "So, the story begins even before the story, on June 23, 1968. *Ubosi chi ji ehihe jie*: the day night fell in the afternoon, as the saying goes" (Okparanta, *Under* 5; italics in the original). The other remarkable instance shows the protagonist's father's death: "She [Mama] stayed bent over his body [Papa's], the cloth of her wrapper soaking up his blood. '*Uzo, biko, mepe anya gi! Ana m ayo gi!*' I'm begging you, Uzo. Please open your eyes for me!" (19; italics in the original). In addition, Okparanta introduces too chants and songs by Biafran soldiers (48), passages from the Bible in Igbo (66 and 72) and other examples of Pidgin English (30).

Furthermore, and grappling with the idea of this novel as a *Bildungsroman*, it is important to mention that *Under the Udala Trees* has been one of the first novels to deal with

female same-sex desire. As mentioned earlier, the short story has traditionally been “the dominant vehicle for the representation of women’s same-sex desire” (Adetunji Osinubi 675) and Okparanta, along with other women authors such as Unoma Azuah, Lola Shoneyin or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, is one of the pioneers in “queering” the Nigerian novel. As part of this “overall trend in much of anglophone [sic] sub-Saharan Africa, where anti-gay legislation and rhetoric is on the rise” (Green-Simms 141), these writers have discussed the female same-sex experience using the coming-out novel as their preferred literary mode in order to challenge “reconfigurations of national realities in which the feminine is neither essentialized and mythologized nor marginalized, but unapologetically central to the realist representation of a recognizable social world” (Bryce 49).

Certainly, Okparanta has mastered the coming-out novel by providing a rather complex exploration of the leading character’s emotional landscape and inner world, which evinces a level “of detail and intimacy previously unseen” in the coming-out novel, according to Green-Simms (144). Furthermore, it is important to mention how this lesbian *Bildungsroman* outs the protagonist without censoring her homo-desiring tendencies. Ijeoma’s orientation is always veiled, as she cannot afford the privilege to out herself publicly in a heterosexist Nigeria, but her inner thoughts and actions somewhat voice it. This exhibits the tensions and contradictions in contemporary coming-out narratives that arise from “those modes of privacy and publicness that are more complex than ‘out’ or ‘closeted’, but that are unavailable to these characters,” as Lindsey Green-Simms and Brenna M. Munro claim. Additionally, this novel can be seen as part of an exceptional collection of queer works that belong to what Brenna M. Munro calls “the queer project” of African literature; a restorative literary project aiming to transcend “fantasies of purity, whether cultural, national, or sexual” (“Locating ‘Queer’” 123). As I discuss in this section and in the following one, Okparanta centrally interrogates pre-made conceptions of same-sex love that deem it un-African, but also

addresses questions of inter-ethnic relations and of national purity, particularly as approached from a queer and transnational position.

In this light, the activist role Okparanta plays regarding the LGBTQI+ community in Nigeria is worth acknowledging. According to Cédric Courtois, “[t]hrough the character of Ijeoma, Okparanta ventriloquizes a message which targets Nigerian readers, and she gives a voice to those who have always been ostracized, relegated to the margins, in sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, and in Nigeria in particular” (2018, 122). In this regard, the Author’s Note placed at the very end of the novel becomes an explicit declaration for the rights of this community in Nigeria and an open refusal of Goodluck Jonathan’s Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act. The following excerpt summarises Okparanta’s intentions: “This novel attempts to give Nigeria’s marginalized LGBTQ citizens a more powerful voice, and a place in our nation’s history” (*Under* 325). As she explains in an interview: “I wanted we as Nigerians to have this conversation on our own, because there is sometimes too much Western influence or Western pressure trying to tell Africans ‘what to do’ and ‘how to be’ and how to run our countries . . . I feel that we have, at least in Nigeria, for too long worshipped the West, allowed them in and adopted what came in too quickly” (qtd. in Lombardi 19-20). Certainly, Okparanta’s novel operates as a platform to reclaim the rights long denied to Afroqueer individuals in Nigeria, and as a space to challenge the belief systems imported from and imposed by the West.

Similarly, Okparanta’s exploration of Afroqueer subjectivities can be said to be an implicit meditation on her own afrosporic status, very much in line with Brenna M. Munro’s conception of queer literature as a productive space that enables to work through certain “anxieties about the nation, its integrity, its fragmentation, and its dispersal” (“Locating ‘Queer’” 123). By exploring liminal and unorthodox female characters, Okparanta is

fundamentally trying to legitimate LGBTQI+ identities in this West African country, and simultaneously, assert cultural belonging. As I have argued elsewhere (see Serón-Navas 2021), Okparanta can be regarded as a mediator between different cultures so that, in *Under the Udala Trees*, she is not only able to negotiate the protagonist's subaltern position in post-war Nigeria, but also to touch upon the author's own role as peripheral author. In this line, Okparanta is symbolically queering the Nigerian postcolonial nation while vindicating a new sensitivity for the Other in queer and transnational terms.

Under the Udala Trees has been defined as a lesbian *Bildungsroman* as it recalls the trial and tribulations of Ijeoma, an Igbo and queer girl living in Ojoto (a town in Southeast Nigeria) mainly during the Nigeria-Biafra civil war period (1967-1970) until 2014. It has also been defined as a "Biafran novel" by scholars such as Stephen Temitope David precisely due to the "vivid description of Ojoto, a Biafran village" together with the "insertion of key dates which signify key moments of the war in a realist mode" (148-149).³² From an ethnographical and sociological perspective, it is worth noting that scientific accounts dealing with the Nigeria-Biafra civil war ignored or omitted the very testimonies of queer people during this historical period. This is partly due to the fact that the "term *homosexuality* had all but disappeared in Africanist ethnography by the 1960s" (Epprecht, *Heterosexual Africa?* 56; italics in the original). In fact, there is not much scholarship about the war and queer people due to the denial of such supposedly "aberrant" and un-African sexualities.

Likewise, this effacement has to do with the fact that the very postcolonial conditions "added pressures to corral Africans into a reassuring nationalist allegory of exclusive heterosexuality" (59), which cemented the idea of the inherently heterosexual postcolonial nation. Therefore, *Under the Udala Trees* can be regarded as a novel that revisits the civil war and offers a complex cartography of the conflict in order to provide a more accurate narrative

³² A map of Ojoto city is inserted at the beginning of the novel, whose reproduction has been included in the Appendix 2.

of the war and to insert the queer story into the annals of the conception of Nigeria as an independent nation, emphasising on the one hand the fact that queer people have always existed and loved in the history of this West African country and denouncing, on the other, the homogenising endeavour of the postcolonial nation (see Carter Wood 2016).

Besides, Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton argue that one of the central concerns of the new Nigerian novel consists in the “urge to re-narrativize Biafra” and the civil war (“Everything Good” x; see also Hawley 2008). This is predominantly due to the fact that there is a transgenerational trauma caused by this inter-ethnic conflict that has not yet been resolved, and it is shown in the novel via the “unconscious” parallel Ijeoma makes between the persecution of Biafrans and Igbos during the war and Afroqueer subjects nowadays. In the quote below, Ijeoma recounts how she and other lesbian friends had to hide in the bunker of the remodelled and abandoned church they usually gather. Ijeoma, Ndidi and their lesbian friends celebrate various meetings in this sacred space until they are ambushed by a mob of angry citizens who decide to set the church on fire and a woman is burnt alive as if she were a witch (Okparanta, *Under* 208-209). This traumatic episode brings to the fore the idea that “same-sex desiring people are in a perpetual state of war in Africa” (Temitope David 145), clearly reflected on the witch-hunt Ijeoma and her lesbian friends experience. Similarly, this experience constitutes a defining moment for the protagonist because it becomes “the beginning of her witch-hunt against [herself]” (Okparanta, *Under* 196). The following excerpt recounts this event:

We packed the bunker tightly like stacked-up tubers of yam. Chichi pulled the wooden slab back over the entrance of the pit. We stood quietly, our breaths hushed, *the way we used to do those days during the war*. Above us, but a little distance away, we heard a scream, and then another. Then there were the sounds of men’s and women’s

voices, talking, shouting, and then another scream. (Okparanta, *Under* 207; emphasis added)

The aural map of this passage is worth analysing. The “sounds of men’s and women’s voices, talking, shouting, and then another scream” reminds us of the screams, voices, breaths and sounds of the civil war; somewhat a spectral reminiscence of another traumatic event that persists on haunting Nigerians. In this sense, not only the bunker constitutes a physical symbol of the conflict but sounds also echo the utmost atrocities that are now part of Nigeria’s traumatic past. Additionally, the bunker constitutes a symbolic reminder of the (ever-present) conflict, functioning as the liminal space between life and death and between past and present; a fluid zone, almost a trench, where different temporalities juxtapose. Indeed, its presence evokes a “precarity of belonging” (Temitope David 145) for both Igbos and homosexuals and the genocide they were subjected to. In this regard, and as Stephen Temitope David rightly puts it, “[t]he continuous need to hide –from Nigerians during the war and from fellow Igbo kin after the war– indicates the ever-elusive search for belonging for queers” in a rather unhomely territory (162).

In addition, Biafra was seen as the promise for national self-determination which was a rather meaningful move to build a nation outside colonial architecture. Hence, the re-narrativisation of the civil war from a queer perspective in Okparanta’s novel can be regarded as a ground-breaking account of a life-changing event in Nigerian history. In her depiction of homoerotic desire as embodied by an Igbo, lesbian woman, Okparanta masterfully intertwines the process of personal and sexual identity formation of a women-desiring woman and the process of national (re-)formation in Nigeria. Therefore, I argue this is done in an effort to, on the one hand, show Okparanta’s discontent with a nation that excludes certain citizens and, on

the other, to historicise queer desire so that these individuals are no longer excluded from national belonging.

In the novel, the story starts right before the breakout of the war, where Ijeoma loses her father in a bombing attack and relocates with her mother to another city. Once Ijeoma reaches adolescence, she is sent away to live with the “grammar school teacher” and his wife so she could receive a Christian formal education while working as their house girl. In her stay with that family, Ijeoma –who belongs to the Christian Igbo ethnic group– meets Amina, a Muslim Hausa and they become sexually and emotionally involved. In this vein, religion and cultural background add conflict to their relationship, more specifically because of the previous tensions between Hausas and Igbos which led to the civil war. During those two years of companionship under the grammar school teacher’s roof, they have their first sexual encounter where they are able to discover and explore their (homo)sexuality. Eventually, they are caught and both are forced to continue their education in a Catholic boarding school. The boarding school and the grammar-school teacher’s house operate in this novel as spaces of sexual self-discovery and pleasure. These two queered spaces propitiate the awakening of Ijeoma’s lesbian desire through its exploration with Amina in a furtive way. However, their sexual encounters are also endowed with secrecy, silence and punishment once they are discovered. Later on, Amina starts meeting boys and finally decides to marry a Hausa man, while Ijeoma finishes her education and moves back with her mother to help her with her small business. Ijeoma will then meet Chibundu, her future husband, and Ndidi (the “woman apart” as she is described in the novel [Okparanta, *Under* 221]), her secret lover. Once she marries Chibundu, Ijeoma decides to stop seeing Ndidi, and moves in with her husband with whom she has a daughter, Chidinma. The novel ends with the collapse of the marriage and Ijeoma and Chidinma moving back with her mother. Ijeoma eventually renews contact with her ex-lover Ndidi and they resume their romantic relationship in a covert way.

In this coming-of-age novel, we can see many traits of the *Bildungsroman* genre. On the one hand, Ijeoma's self-construction as a woman and in the sexual arena is problematised by a society that explicitly positions itself against "gender (and sexual) outlaws," to borrow Kate Bornstein's expression (1994). This is what Cédric Courtois refers to as "the limitations of [the protagonist's] self-construction" ("Thou Shall not Lie" 122); such limitations complicate the protagonist's sense of subjecthood and her own process of identity formation outside normative categories of the self. However, Elleke Boehmer posits in this sense that "[t]he passion for the female other is the dialectical ground on which identity is sought and achieved" (*Stories of Women*). Thus, if analysed from Boehmer's perspective, the relationship between Ijeoma and Ndidi but also the more sexual relationship between Amina and Ijeoma makes possible for the protagonist to achieve subjecthood and to construct (and re-construct) her own sense of self. In other words, Ijeoma becomes empowered in their consensual relationship first with Amina and then with Ndidi.

Similarly, there is also an evolution in terms of how relationships and desire are conceptualised. At first, Ijeoma's conception of love and of homoerotic relationships is portrayed as dependent and religious-informed, where lesbianism is clearly treated as pathology and whose solution presumably comes with heterosexual marriage. Later on, Ijeoma shows a more democratic and autonomous, certainly a more organic, conception of love, exemplified by her unconventional relationship with her former lover, Ndidi. This unconventionality, shown in their covert relationship, is somehow imposed because they are not granted the privilege of being open about their love because they could end up being murdered, as happened to some of their lesbian friends. Likewise, their relationship also "rewrite[s] the pattern of the genre which classically ends with a marriage" (Courtois, "Thou Shall not Lie" 127). In this sense, and as Courtois further contends, Okparanta vocally criticises "the heteronormative discourse that lies at the very foundation of the *Bildungsroman*

genre” (127; italics in the original), and lays bare how Afroqueer subjects are denied certain life-scripts and rites of passage that have been traditionally assigned to heteronormativity.

Another way *Under the Udala Trees* queers the Anglo-Igbo novel can be more specifically seen in the insightful exploration of queer intimacies or what Elleke Boehmer designates as an “epistemology of African queerness” that extensively provides “an elaborately detailed or . . . experimental and poetic voicing of [queer] relations, even if these are not in any obvious way sexual” (*Stories of Women*). In the novel, after Ijeoma’s father’s death, her mother Adaora sends her off to the grammar-school teacher’s house where the protagonist meets Amina, which becomes “the first time that [Ijeoma] befriend[s] a Hausa person” during the war and her first time “getting to know one in an intimate way” (Okparanta, *Under* 108), signalling to that unprecedented inter-ethnic queer desire in Nigerian literature. It is in this intimate encounter with the Other (excerpt shown below) that a process of mutual recognition takes place, symbolically heralding the ethical potential of lesbian desire to propose new ways of national reconciliation between ethnic groups and a new national paradigm for Nigeria as an inclusive nation:

Slowly she [Amina] made her way to my chest . . . She cupped her hands around my breasts, took turns with them, fondling and stroking and caressing them with her tongue. I felt the soft tug of her feet on the peaks of my chest. Euphoria washed over me. She continued along, leaving a trail of kisses on her way down to my belly. She travelled farther, beyond the belly, farther than we had ever gone. I moaned and surrendered myself to her. I did not until then know that a mouth could make me feel that way when placed in that part of the body where I had never imagined a mouth to belong. (Okparanta, *Under* 123-124)

In this passage, ethnic disagreements dissolve as these Igbo and Hausa women sexually interact in what for them constitutes a rather fulfilling experience. Hence, I argue this example shows the homo-desiring body as metonymic of the Nigerian nation and, more specifically, of a nation that is predicated on the “euphoric” and “ecstatic” relation among citizens coming from different backgrounds. By representing a number of sexually-explicit passages between women from opposed ethnic groups, I contend Okparanta suggests a national model where people act on the basis of mutual love, respect and recognition rather than on the basis of hatred, envy, resentment or even guilt. Unfortunately, the lovers are caught in the act and forced to separate, so that they can be “straightened out” by their respective families (Okparanta, *Under* 129). Nonetheless, this process of sexual recognition and interconnectedness may have induced what Obioma Nnaemeka calls as “reconfigurations of ethnic allegiances and alignment” (*The Politics of [M]Othering* 246). In this fashion, the sexual encounter with the (queer) Other, in ethnic terms, may suggest a way of reformulating strained interethnic relations.

We also find similitudes between Ijeoma’s first sexual experiences with Amina and with her second lover, Ndidi.

I moved to her [Ndidi’s] front, knelt before her. I pressed her wet flesh firmly with the tips of my fingers, then my fingers found themselves inside, enveloped her warmth . . . She let out a cry, and I found myself overcome by emotion . . . It was as if her pleasure was in that moment my own, ours, a shared fulfilment . . . If I could have stayed forever this way with her, there would have been no greater gift. (Okparanta, *Under* 200)

As we can see in these sexually-explicit passages, both Ijeoma and Ndidi not only depict a clear “sexual agency and erotic autonomy” (Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing* 22)

but they also “achieve subjecthood through same-sex relationships” (Courtois, ““Thou Shall not Lie”” 129) which can be seen as a form of female empowerment. This sensuous exploration of the body and the subsequent creation of “an aesthetic of lesbian pleasure,” Courtois finds, proposes a strong criticism against heteronormativity, while asserting that women can derive pleasure from other women with whom they engage in non-procreative sex (““Thou Shall not Lie”” 127). Similarly, Dobrota Pucherova (2019) argues that this portrayal of lesbian sexual pleasure can be read as “an experience of freedom, power, and agency” (111) that entails an ethical way of “reimagin[ing] the entire society” (115), proposing “a new model of the nation that is nonviolent” where “love is allowed to be love, between men and women, and men and men, and women and women, just as between Yoruba and Igbo and Hausa and Fulani” (Okparanta, *Under* 321).

2.1.3. Queering the Post-Independence Nation: Towards a More Inclusive Paradigm of Nigeria

In this section, I explore how Okparanta contributes to the interrogation of modern Nigeria by incorporating queer representations of different women as legitimate parts of Nigeria’s national project. This author not only questions traditional gender roles for women together with normative conceptions of desire, but she also aims to widen previous representations of Nigeria so that it becomes a fully democratic country that welcomes all types of gender and sexual identities. In this light, it is fitting to analyse what Benita de Robillard postulates regarding the figure of the black lesbian in literary and national discourses: “‘the black lesbian’ is both instituted and undermined at the point at which the nation becomes vexed by its own limits,” and so their citizenship and national belonging are automatically denied because they are regarded as “extra-national” (21). If we interrogate who is made to belong and who is excluded from the postcolonial nation, we see that those who do

not accord with the exceptional, and in this case colonial, mandates of the African nation are not considered citizens. If the nation constitutes itself by excluding certain Others, then lesbians, gays and queers cannot but be held as stateless subjects (this same idea of statelessness is also shared with other migrants and refugees, as I analyse in Chapter 3). As M. Jacqui Alexander rightly points out reflecting on this situation, “I am an outlaw in my country of birth: a national; but not a citizen” (“Not just [Any]Body” 5). Indeed, if a person is a “national” but is not considered a citizen, where does that person belong to? How would they identify with their birth country if national belonging has been automatically denied to them? In the novel, the lesbian protagonist, who can be regarded as a character that “challenge[s] the prevailing gender regime and heteronationalist order” (Robillard 23), constitutes a figure who lays the foundations for a different imagining of Nigeria where non-hegemonic forms of desire and gender are part of this national project. Furthermore, *Under the Udala Trees* provides new forms of envisioning Nigeria where belonging and citizenship are not undermined, that is, where queer people can be signified as nationals and citizens.

Similarly, if the traditional, nuclear family in nationalist discourses has become the “vehicle of social organisation and a primary carrier of the gendered ideology” (Boehmer, *Stories of Women*), Okparanta reformulates this conception proposing a more fluid idea of family and, therefore, an unconventional form of national affiliation. I more specifically address the familial relationships that populate this novel in order to prove Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi’s assertion that “[African] women writers [have] critiqued the idealization of the family in order to uncover the fiction of the nation” (677). In this novel, the protagonist loses her father in the Nigeria-Biafra civil war in 1968, just when “the country was falling apart” (Okparanta, *Under* 5), and it is from that moment onwards that her life and her mother’s change forever. Ijeoma is relocated to another home –the grammar-school teacher’s house– and starts her own process of self-discovery away from her remaining family. At this point,

we should point out that Okparanta intentionally interpenetrates the processes of personal and sexual identity formation (selfhood) and the process of national reformation (nationhood) in Nigeria. As the author affirms: “Both the girl [Ijeoma] and the country are children. She embarks on her journey of self-discovery just as the nation also does. It is a journey filled with many missteps and lots of pain. In this way, the life of the girl essentially becomes synonymous with the life of the country” (Okparanta qtd. in Rose Quinn, “Chinelo Okparanta”).

The novel intentionally juxtaposes the coming of age of a lesbian woman and the coming of age of a recently-independent African nation, exposing the “disappointment with the African postcolonial nation that has not served its citizens,” especially those who have been “excluded from equal citizenship” (Pucherova, “What Is African Woman?” 110). In this sense, the premature absence of the father in this story may symbolise the failure of Biafra’s plea for self-determination. Ijeoma’s father willingly decides not to use the bunker when the bombings of his town started to take place because he did not want to live in a country where he would be considered a “lesser citizen” or even a “slave” (Okparanta, *Under 9*), as he was Igbo and pro-Biafra. The removal of the paternal figure early in the story dramatises the very consequences of this conflict, and metaphorically precludes the defeat of Biafra as a self-determined state, but, most centrally, it undermines the hopes of a nation no longer oppressed by colonial forces where Igbos/Biafrans are not persecuted and murdered. Bearing the Biafran cause in mind, we can trace a parallel between the situation of Biafrans as subjects who yearn to live in a self-proclaimed country outside colonial understandings of the nation and queer subjects, who are willing to exist in a country that does not conceive them as based on old-fashioned, colonial conceptions of the self. Both Biafrans and Afroqueer individuals fight for (personal and national) survival in very extreme circumstances and in very different temporal settings.

Simultaneously, the author delves into Ijeoma's negotiation of her own daughterhood and womanhood in post-war Nigeria. The figure of the daughter is no longer "subordinate, peripheral and quiet [or] virtually invisible," as in other nation-shaping narratives, but Ijeoma explicitly becomes the heiress of the post-independence nation in position to re-shape it (Boehmer, *Stories of Women*). According to the same theorist, "the daughters of the nation have generally not been in a position to shape the nation by means of their own self-generated narratives," concluding that Ijeoma is no longer conceived as the "recipient of national definitions" but, conversely, the "originator" of a new anti-colonial and decidedly pro-queer national narrative (Boehmer, *Stories of Women*), that is, a narrative that includes empowered, free women who are allowed to desire other women and who are no longer subordinate to their husbands or perceived in relation to their partners or offspring. As a matter of fact, Ijeoma displays a new form of womanhood, which can metaphorically exemplify a new form of Nigerian nationhood.

Moreover, it is my interest to explore the relationship between Ijeoma's heterosexual mother and her lesbian daughter, and between Ijeoma as a lesbian mother and Chidinma as a heterosexual daughter and discuss how this applies to the national narrative. In these two opposing mother-to-child relationships, Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi contends, "one mother's formation obstructs a transgenerational conversation about same-sex desire while one daughter's formation points to a radical recognition of same-sex love in the future," which "underscores the novel's investment in feminist genealogies" (681). Certainly, we can find some excerpts in the text that evince the perception of motherhood for these two women, namely Adaora (Ijeoma's mother) and Ijeoma herself. In the following scene, Ijeoma is being lectured by her mother after she is caught *in flagrante* having sex with Amina, so she is sent back to her mother's home to be taught in the Christian faith before going to a boarding

school for girls. This is the exchange between Ijeoma and her mother, which can be seen as a form of exorcising Ijeoma's demon of homosexuality:

What is the meaning of 'abomination'? I [Ijeoma] asked.

Simple: something disgusting, disgraceful, a scandal.

But what exactly is disgusting or disgraceful or scandalous about lying with mankind as with womankind? Does the Bible explain?

The fact that the Bible says it's bad is all the reason you need', Mama said. 'Besides, how can people be fruitful and multiply if they carry on in that way? Even *that* is scandal enough – the fact that it does not allow for procreation? . . .

But even with a man and a woman, procreation is not always possible. Is that an abomination too? I asked. 'What if there's nothing they can do about it? (Okparanta, *Under 75*; italics in the original)

From this exchange between Ijeoma and her mother, we clearly see the dreadful conception many Africans have of queerness and same-sex relationships, but we also infer the straitjacketed gender roles women are expected to comply with, being procreation one of the most important mandates for women worldwide. In this fashion, Ashley Currier and Thérèse Migraine-George also argue that lesbian women are reductively "equated not only with an anti-nationalist agenda but also with the prospect of national corruption and collapse [and] ethnic extinction" ("Lesbian'/Female" 143), as non-procreative homosexuality is fundamentally regarded as "a space of death: national, cultural, racial, or literal" (Hoad xvi). This very argument can also be found in Lee Edelman's notion of "reproductive futurism" (3). For him, the queer identity is essentially built upon the "resistance to the viability of the social" (3), opposing the very realisation of the nuclear family and hence disturbing the

established (heteronormative) social order. This idea is best described in the following quote from the novel: “Man must not lie with man, and if man does, man will be destroyed. Which is why God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah” (Okparanta, *Under* 74). In this text, the idea of a mainstream family, in line with the so-called “reproductive futurism,” is imposed upon Ijeoma mainly by her mother and by certain belief systems that take for granted the constitutive reproductive role of women and praise the centrality of the nuclear family (see also Ekine 2013).

In this vein, Ijeoma disrupts a social order based on the narrative of the family by divorcing her husband and establishing a covert relationship with a woman. Indeed, Mama also perpetuates these ideas sentencing, repetitively: “Marriage is for everyone! Remember, a *woman without a man is hardly a woman at all*. Besides, good men are rare these days. Now that you’ve found one [Chibundu], you must do what you can to keep him” (Okparanta, *Under* 223; emphasis added). And then, her mother further develops this maxim when claiming that “sooner or later [women] would each become somebody’s wife, and as wives, it would be *our obligation to be fertile, to bear children for our husbands*, sons especially, to carry on the family name” (310; emphasis added). This conception of motherhood as inherent to womanhood is also heavily influenced by religious mandates, as we can see in the following passage uttered by Ijeoma’s mother: “God intended for it to be a man and a woman. And God intended also for man and woman to bear children. It is the way it should be, so yes, it is an abomination if it is not a man and a woman. And it is an abomination if man and woman cannot bear a child” (75-76).

Mama constantly stresses that female subjectivity has to be understood relationally, that is, in relation to husbands and offspring.³³ Likewise, Asante Lucy Mtenje argues that

³³ The idea of female identity as “collective” or “relational” has been extensively explored by Spanish archaeologist and researcher Almudena Hernando Gonzalo (2000; 2002; 2012). In general terms, patriarchal

“disciplining female bodies and positively channelling their sexual energies towards home and family and away from desire and bodily pleasure sets the foundations for the (re)productive project of building the nation” (192). Women are, thus, conceptualised and treated like (affectionate and exploitable) “means,” while men are treated like “ends” and this is exactly what Ijeoma’s mother demands from her daughter: finding a man, loving him, bearing him sons, and caring for the family just for the sake of perpetuating “tradition,” which reinforces a very specific normative-family-oriented sense of nationhood and Nigerianness. An expression of womanhood that fulfils what Jacqui Alexander coins as the “heterosexual imperative” (“Not just [Any]Body” 7) or what Adrienne Rich coined as “compulsory heterosexuality” (1993).

In fact, Mama’s delimiting conceptions sharply contrast with Ijeoma’s own notions of womanhood and motherhood. For the lesbian daughter, Chibundu’s marriage proposal “felt preordained, as if there were no way out” (Okparanta, *Under* 220), but Mama’s ideas of becoming a wife as a sign of respectability and as a way of turning into a socially-accepted woman also constitutes an added pressure. According to Unoma N. Azuah (2005), homo-desiring women, as depicted by postcolonial women authors, usually face “a sense of intense conflict within the characters, a need for the characters to find an alternative to their suppression, and the choice of bisexuality” (138). In a male-dominated society, this intense conflict translates into queer individuals distancing from themselves and from their own sexual orientations (in a process of self-estrangement) and, consequently, accepting a heterosexual marriage in order to lead a life in line with accepted social conventions.

societies are characterised by a clear-cut division of gender roles, where “affective” gender roles are automatically assigned to women and “instrumental” ones to men (Hernando Gonzalo 2000). This idea can be easily applied to Ijeoma’s mother, who deems a woman incomplete/failed without a proper husband and children, which entails the giving up of any form of female agency, individuality and autonomy.

It is through these restricted patterns of interaction and socialisation that women acquire very specific formulations of womanhood that imply submissiveness, dependence and lack of sexual agency. As I have discussed in relation to Ayobami Adebayo's novel, and drawing on Remi Akujobi's ideas, this situation also reflects on this when stating that "[i]t is no longer a secret that the Nigerian woman considers herself [and is also socially considered] a real woman only when she has proved herself to be fertile and the 'halo of maternity' shines over her" (4). Okparanta also mentions in an interview:

'it seems to me that in too many societies, people are obsessed with telling women how to be women. Men tell women how to be. Women tell other women how to be. Womanity is often being defined in relation to men or in relation to other women or in relation to children. I wanted to write this novel about a woman who goes on a personal journey at the end of which she comes to terms with herself and with her own personal beliefs; a novel about a woman who succeeds in defining herself outside of those restrictive societal constructs.' (Okparanta qtd. in Ramakrishnan, "'Queerness'")

The lesbian character questions the viability of the normative family by destabilising the traditional conception of womanhood, especially their roles as nation-building figures. Currier and Migraine-George stress this idea in their article "'Lesbian'/Female Same-Sex Sexualities in Africa" (2017): "for decades, 'lesbian' women have been accused of betraying their traditional roles as bearers and reproducers of cultural traditions in countries that have been heavily gendered by postcolonial nationalist agenda and rhetorics. In this light, Afroqueer women are doubly "subalternised" because of their status as woman and lesbian, even more so if the queer individual is a divorced, single mother, as Ijeoma eventually becomes. Ijeoma, with her questioning of prescriptive gender norms, actively demands to enact her agency so as to seek a life of her own choice; a life unbound by her gender and

certain deterministic ideological preconceptions attained to her being born a woman. In this novel, the maternal experience is being re-examined in order to provide multifaceted forms of motherhood, womanhood and femininity. Hence, it can be useful to analyse Ijeoma's experience as a lesbian mother that engenders a heterosexual daughter who, in contrast to her grandmother, is accepting of all sexualities and subjectivities. This deliberate choice emphasises one of the purposes of the novel, investing in the formation of feminist genealogies in Nigerian literature. In this vein, motherhood for Ijeoma can be regarded as a form of escapism and as a form of feeling more invested in her own marriage with Chibundu: "I knew full well that he [Ijeoma's husband] also held the key to my only imaginable escape: Perhaps by making me a mother, he would save me. Maybe motherhood would make me feel more invested in the marriage" (Okparanta, *Under* 242).

Nonetheless, this investment will eventually prove to be unachievable, especially as being part of an oppressive marriage where she and her daughter cannot thrive: "Chidinma and I were both choking under the weight of something larger than us, something heavy and weighty, the weight of tradition and superstition and of all our legends" (Okparanta, *Under* 312). This passage is the result of a series of dreams where the udala tree appears as a symbolic presence that warns Ijeoma of the consequences of remaining in an abusive marriage and, by extension, in a society that criminalises and punishes unconventional understandings of motherhood, womanhood and desire. The udala tree is defined in the novel as a symbol of fertility and happiness for women but, in Ijeoma's oneiric world, this very symbol becomes dark and deadly: "I saw, dangling from the udala tree, a wiry rope leading to the wiry noose that was tied around Chidinma's neck" (Okparanta, *Under* 311). This scene is followed by images of Ijeoma's papa's Bible, of war sounds and of another baby who is on the verge of dying (311-312).

All these ominous images show the traumatic effects of the war, of the indoctrinating lessons preached by Ijeoma's Mama condemning homosexuality and of the choking consequences for queer subjects of complying with tradition and with social mandates when they no longer conform to their emotional and personal needs. Customs and societal norms negatively impact on (lesbian) women and on their offspring, since females are expected to accord with fixed, imposed roles that hardly ever fulfil them. It seems Okparanta is trying to give some hope to new generations of Nigerian women who might not want to buy into that one-single story of how to be a woman but, on the contrary, the author is trying to legitimate more diverse forms of Nigerian womanhood, of desire, of family and of ma/paternity.

Under the Udala Trees therefore becomes a testimony of the possibilities for re-invention for Nigerian women and, by extension, for the (queered) Nigerian nation. Females are not represented as "recipient[s] of national [and patriarchal] definitions" (Boehmer, *Stories of Women*) but, quite the opposite, as active entities wanting to re-signify themselves and their own familial-national realities on their own terms. This idea of self-determination is embodied by Ijeoma who, although she leaves her husband and goes back to Ndidi, she has no other alternative than living her love in a covert way, since their "visibility [can very likely] acquire a punitive quality" (Currier and Migraine-George, "'Lesbian'/Female" 143). However, her daughter Chidinma, even though "she herself is not of [her mother's] orientation, [it] does not make her look upon gays and lesbians with the kind of fear that leads to hate" (Okparanta, *Under* 317-318). Thus, Okparanta exposes a generational change, evincing that the daughters of the Nigerian nation are more sympathetic with and open about diverse forms of love and desire. This portrayal of diverse women, especially of women who love women and heterosexual women who accept lesbian women, symbolically suggests a sisterly re-invention of the Nigerian nation as an independent, de-colonised and inclusive territory.

2.2. Uzodinma Iweala's *Speak No Evil* (2018)

2.2.1. Preliminary Remarks on Uzodinma Iweala and his Novel

Uzodinma Iweala (1982, Washington D.C.) is a Nigerian-American writer, filmmaker and medical doctor. As mentioned above, he has written two novels, *Beasts of No Nation* (2005), which was made into a Netflix movie in 2015, and *Speak No Evil* (2018), together with a non-fiction work titled *Our Kind of People: Thoughts on the HIV/AIDS Epidemic* (2012). This author studied at Harvard University and at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons and has been the recipient of numerous awards like the 2006 John Llewellyn Rhys Prize for his first novel or the 2006 New York Public Library's Young Lions Fiction Award. He currently divides his time between New York City (US) and Lagos (Nigeria), where he works as the CEO of The African Center. He is also a visiting professor and writer in residence at New York University. As mentioned in the Introduction, this US writer of Nigerian descent can be unequivocally considered a member of the contemporary African diaspora. In this sense, Iweala has not claimed any ethnic allegiance, as for instance, Chigozie Obioma has done with his notable connection to an Igbo identity, therefore Iweala can be described as transcendental of ethnic categories in favour of a hyphenated status (Nigerian-American).

Speak No Evil is a coming-of-age novel that tells the story of a well-off Nigerian-Igbo family who migrates to the US and resettles in Washington D.C. As an African coming-of-age narrative, this novel does not quite follow the Western *Bildungsroman* pattern. While the conventional coming-of-age story “emphasize[s] self-realization and the harmonious reconciliation between the protagonist and his or her society,” this story focuses on those “forces that inhibit or prevent the protagonist from achieving self-realization” (Okuyade, “Introduction” xxi). Iweala's novel centres on the youngest son in the family, Gwamniru

(Niru) Ikemadu, an 18-year-old Harvard-bound athletics star who, as Iweala himself, was born and bred in the US. Queerness is explored in this narrative from the perspective of Niru, a closed-off homosexual teenager whose Christian parents reject his homosexuality. They argue, especially Niru's father, that the US has corrupted their son, since this is a place where "this demon of homosexuality has become so entrenched . . . that you can't really fight it there" (87). This is the main reason why Niru is taken back to Nigeria so that the "demon of homosexuality" can be exorcised in a traumatising "sexual re-orientation therapy." Thus, questions of dislocation, resettlement, religion, ethnicity and sexuality are tackled in this novel of concurrences: "Americans and Africans, white and black, gay and straight, devout and skeptic, [or] the black immigrant and the black American" (Alam, "Black, Gay and Losing Faith").

Perhaps, the concept "cultural dysphoria" ("Name Tags #10"; emphasis added), proposed by Logan February and reflected in the opening lines of this chapter, could capture the reality that Niru embodies, especially as someone whose very name implies duality and nonconformism. Interestingly, Gwamniru is an African name given to females and meaning "water" while some state that Gwamniru makes reference to a very spiritual, intuitive and non-conventional person. In the novel, Niru's father reproached his mother to use a female name for their youngest son ("I told her, we don't give men that kind of name, but she insisted that it had to be this name. The disgrace" [Iweala, *Speak* 37]), and his father thinks this is the reason why Niru is gay; also because homosexuality has generally been associated with effeminate men. Additionally, the inherent idea of water is worth exploring. In fact, Niru becomes the very embodiment of this fluidity as he is a young adult who is constantly navigating several interpretations of what it means to be Nigerian, American, black, homosexual and male in a diasporic context.

In this light, Niru is presented as a young adult who is permanently negotiating his own liminal position due to the dualities and contradictions that he embodies. Delphine Fongang has discussed the experiences of younger generations of immigrants concluding that “[t]hey identify themselves as citizens of two worlds, with a transitional, bifurcated identity. . . . The younger generation demonstrates that although the diasporic experience might be pathetic and gloomy, they represent the optimistic and successful stories of the diaspora, as individuals balancing the challenges of being a dual citizen” (“Introduction” 3). Fongang’s idea of inhabiting two worlds and developing a transitional identity is very much in line with the concept of “cultural dysphoria” previously mentioned. Logan February uses this concept – which reminds us of the similar term “gender dysphoria”– to underline the dis-identification with one’s culture, norms, traditions, worldviews, etc., but also to suggest that other forms of cultural identification might be possible in a different geographic context. In *Speak No Evil*, while homosexuality is not rejected in the US, Nigeria criminalises same-sex desire, as I have demonstrated in the analysis of Okparanta’s novel. In fact, Niru experiences the tensions of thriving in a hostile familiar environment, where he cannot out himself, and the social sphere where homosexuality is not demonised but other racial issues come to the fore. If being heterosexual is perceived as a way of asserting one’s Nigerianness, a topic that is even more crucial for diasporic subjects, then Niru is depicted as unable to claim his Nigerian heritage on the basis of his non-normative sexual orientation. This position towards homosexuality as experienced by a diasporic Nigerian subject confirms what Brenna M. Munro asserts when arguing that the prototypical homosexual man has been traditionally conceived as representative of “colonial penetration of Africa and cultural inauthenticity” (“States of Emergence” 187). Thus, in his exploration of hyphenated subjects who happen to be gay, Iweala refutes the idea of homosexuality as un-African while proving that being a transnational subject does not makes one less African, or less Nigerian in this case.

Similarly, this book is dedicated to “those who lack voice” (Iweala, *Speak*). If we pay attention to the title, it reflects a Japanese proverb that bears many parallelisms with the plot and fatal ending of this narrative. The three wise monkeys constitutes a pictorial proverb that says “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil” represented by three monkeys covering their eyes, ears and mouth respectively. The monkeys’ names are Mizaru, Kikazaru and Iwazaru which is very coincidental with the protagonist’s name (Gwamniru), especially Iwazaru, the monkey that is represented as covering its mouth to show the maxim “speak no evil.” There are many interpretations of this maxim but, in Western societies, it is generally understood as acting and speaking truthfully and not turning a blind eye to injustices. It also warns against the code of silence that appears after committing a crime. Moreover, the passages that open the book: a fragment from Samuel Beckett’s *Ohio Impromptu* (1981) and the line “No it ain’t nothing left to say” from the song “Tomorrow Today” by rap band Oddisee (2013), are also focused on the idea of the “unspoken.”³⁴

Structurally, this text is divided into two main parts further divided into nine and five untitled chapters, respectively. In the first part, we access Niru’s perspective, where he recounts his experiences with his parents and with his elder brother OJ, with special emphasis on his frustrating relationship with his father. Niru also tackles the question of homosexuality and his attempt to meet other gay men through well-known phone apps for homosexuals. In the second part, we access Meredith’s testimony about the murder of Niru six years later. Meredith is presented as Niru’s best (white American) friend and a central figure in his coming-out process. However, she is also responsible for Niru’s murder and for being silent about what happened the night Niru was shot dead by a white policeman. As Meredith

³⁴ The “unspoken” in Iweala’s latest novel, as exemplified in the quotes from Beckett and Oddisee, essentially refers to the traumatic experiences of homophobia and racism. The hatred, persecution and oppression against those who are Othered, as based on class, racial and sexual differences, force individuals to operate in the margins, producing subjects who do not lack a voice, as I prove in the analysis of Iweala’s novel, but whose voices are denied (or silenced).

decides not to clear the reasons why Niru was murdered, this novel also becomes a platform to denounce how “WHITE LIES COST BLACK LIVES” (Iweala, *Speak* 236; capital letters in the original), together with the police brutality that African Americans and other black citizens experience on a daily basis in the US, being George Floyd with his “I can’t breathe” plea one of the most recent and painful examples of this brutality.

Likewise, it is worth exploring the combination of two first-person narrators. While Iweala provides readers with two testimonies about shared events, I think it is questionable how Meredith’s narrative voice complements Niru’s story or helps Iweala reclaim new horizons for blacks in the US and, more specifically, for Nigerian-American queer males. Even though Meredith’s part can be of aid to understand the emotional turmoil she is in after Niru’s death, her testimony rather than working as a tool to denounce white on black crimes, “interrupts” Niru’s coming-out process. As Lindsey Green-Simms and Brenna M. Munro state in their online article “The Coming-Out of the African Same-Sex Novel:” “[w]hile the first two thirds of the novel deftly and compellingly follow the ups and downs of Niru’s coming out, the last section [Meredith’s part] cuts this narrative short, turning away from questions of sexuality, and focusing instead on race politics in the United States.” This “cutting short of the coming-out narrative” in order to re-direct readers’ attention onto racial questions is one of the reasons that makes Green-Simms and Munro read *Speak No Evil* as a novel that intentionally complicates the (traditional) coming-out model. Another reason why Iweala’s text challenges this genre has to do with the “modes of privacy and publicness” that end up being “more complex than ‘out’ or ‘closeted’” (Green-Simms and Munro, “The Coming-Out”).

When Ryan contacts Niru in one of these apps, the latter is discovered by his father, accused of “gallivanting with the gays” (Iweala, *Speak* 39) and reprimanded because of this

“A BOMI NATION” (Iweala, *Speak* 38; capital letters in the original). Later, Niru is taken back to Nigeria to “undo this psychological and spiritual corruption” (Iweala, *Speak* 57). Upon his arrival to the US, Niru ends up meeting Damien, an African American gay dancer, but the latter rejects him because he is not “nobody’s sickness” (151), as Niru is not prepared to come out to his family and friends. It is at this point that Niru goes to a party with Meredith and they end up having a fight, which a police officer misread and shot him four times. Thus, Niru is permanently negotiating the tensions between “out” and “closeted.” Whereas the story makes us believe that Niru will eventually come to terms with this tension that mainly arises due to the fact that his parents openly reject his sexual orientation forcing him to remain a closeted man, he is shot dead and Meredith takes over the narrative voice. In the second part, Meredith meets Niru’s father and the former offers to tell the truth about Niru’s death, which implies “outing” Niru—a revelation Niru’s father is not ready to make public. Consequently, the idea of “out” and “closeted” is fluid, changeable and, oftentimes, “unavailable” to Niru (Green-Simms and Munro, “The Coming-Out”), as he is denied the agency to decide his own position regarding his homosexual status.

2.2.2. Black Queer Diaspora and Afrodiasporic Conceptions of Home

In this section, I analyse *Speak No Evil* as a diasporic novel belonging to the field of Black Queer Diaspora that explores sometimes opposing conceptions of home as approached by Niru and his family. It is necessary to distinguish between Niru’s parents –Ify and Obi–, who legally migrated in their adult years and Niru and his elder brother OJ, who were born in the US. In the novel, Niru’s parents, especially his father Obi, are depicted as apprehensive migrants who, despite “all the years they’ve lived abroad, they are still so very Nigerian” (Iweala, *Speak* 23). Indeed, Iweala does not reveal under which circumstances Niru’s parents decided to leave Nigeria (voluntarily or involuntarily); he only mentions that Nigeria is “a

country that [Niru's] father loves so deeply he had to run away from it" (Iweala, *Speak* 63). In this light, Nigeria is held as this family's "real home," which they periodically visit, while the US is perceived as this family's "second home" characterised by a palpable hostility towards black individuals.

Delphine Fongang claims that African emigrées may "find themselves in racially charged environments, coupled with hegemonic ideologies and structural inequities," which, as a consequence, can "thwart attempts at self-definition" and force diasporans "to redefine their positionality as migrants in unsettling environments" ("Introduction" 1). Indeed, this is the oppressive atmosphere experienced by Niru's parents, particularly by his father, who "thinks the safest place for a [black] man to be, especially in the US, is inside his own house" (Iweala, *Speak* 24). It is not clear if Niru's father is unable (or reluctant) to renegotiate his own identity and other forms of identification in the new environment because of the US's inherent racism or because he negatively associates integration with national assimilation or acculturation. His own reluctance to belong to his "new home" could explain why he is always trying so hard to protect their children against the US, instilling a marked Nigerian and Igbo identity in them. This Nigerian/Igbo identity is, in the case of Niru, painfully associated with heterosexuality and not with other transgressive forms of desire, which is why Niru is constantly in the process of disidentifying from colonial notions of the self and of desire (see Esteban Muñoz 1999; Hayes 2000; 2011; Hirsch and K. Miller 2011).

In this novel, heterosexuality works as a strategy to realise and activate a very specific form of Nigerianness (and even Igboness) so that heterosexual desire is used as a way of retaining their Nigerian identity and, consequently, of "remain[ing] connected to their ancestral roots" (Onuzulike 31). However, the revealing of Niru's homosexuality not only disrupts the familial order but it also shatters Nigerian "heteronormative national narrative"

(Wesling 31). Therefore, anxieties about the loss of the offspring's ethnic and national loyalties, about their being devoured by the country of residence (Americanisation) and hence permanently losing the connection with the (parents') motherland together with certain homophobic/heterosexist views that are reproduced in the African diaspora lie at the heart of Niru's parents' crusade against same-sex desire: "I [the father] told your mother, I told that woman that we should have sent you to school in Nigeria, not this useless place [The United States]" that is "living under the shadow of that abomination, homosexuality" (Iweala, *Speak* 38 and 19). This evinces the parents' conception of same-sex love as "Western corruption" or even as a "colonial import."

However, it is important to emphasise that, in the novel, OJ and Niru never identify as exclusively Igbo or Nigerian, but instead, they have developed "bicultural identities and loyalties" (Onuzulike 30) that are not exempt from inherent tensions and contradictions. As promoted by this bicultural and hybrid identity, Niru attempts to reconcile his Nigerian and queer identities. In fact, there are some instances that exemplify Niru's opposition against the conception of homoerotic desire as "a product of Westernization" (Currier and Migraine-George, "'Lesbian'/Female" 195). Before meeting Ryan, he tells Meredith that he is not "unclean" for liking men (Iweala, *Speak* 28) and, once he is back from his trip to Nigeria to "cure" his "malady," he asserts that maybe he is wrong for being naturally attracted to men, but that this is not the result of Americanisation ("Maybe I have spent too much time in the United States soaking up ungodly values and satanic sentiments" [Iweala, *Speak* 68]), but of his own natural tendencies ("Or maybe I'm just me" [68]). Then, it is at the crossroads of homoerotic desire, hybridity and transnationality that I situate this novel and its protagonist as belonging to the field of Black Queer Diaspora.

In her article “Why Queer Diaspora? (2008)” Meg Wesling explores the intersections between queer theory and diaspora studies in an attempt to unearth the effects globalisation can produce on these diasporic queer selves. She claims that Queer Diaspora explores “the diasporic queer as the exemplary subject of globalization, in order to posit an analogy between queerness as that which subverts gender normativity, and diaspora as that which troubles geographic and national stability” (31). African American scholar Jafari S. Allen (2012) lays bare in his seminal study several innovative visions of what he conceptualises as Black Queer Diaspora: “[this] is at once about particular locations (actual and imagined); roots/uprooting (principally understood as from Africa, but just as much to and within Africa, in other cases); and routes that bodies, ideas, and texts travel. By diaspora, we refer to these conditions of movement and emplacement, and to processes of (dis)identification, but also to relationality” (216). In this vein, scholar Eithne Luibhéid posits as well that the black diasporic subject participates in “the decentering of nationalist frameworks premised on space-time binaries, developmental narratives, and static models of culture, community, nation, race, gender, identity, and settlement” (173; see also Ncube 2018). Therefore, and as queer afrosporic subjects thwart national coherence and gender normativity, they must be read “extra-nationally” (Wesling 31) or even “post-nationally,” as they propose “new modes of postnational citizenship” (Mirzoeff 1).

This idea is even more disruptive in a contemporary scenario where there is an ongoing “call for a retreat, back, into the comfort of ‘the family’ and ‘the nation’ and ‘traditional values’ at a time when all seem under threat” (Gevisser 14). In this context, the proliferation of extra-national identities is partly an effect of the breaking with the homo-hetero binary logic of the nation as much as with nationalist, uni-/patrilineal conceptions of modern societies. In the novel, Niru, as a second-generation migrant, decentres a heteronormative conception of Nigeria and, even though Niru does not claim national belonging to Nigeria

since, for him, the US constitutes his primary place of identification, their parents take him back to Nigeria “for spiritual revival” (Iweala, *Speak* 40). As Niru’s mother states: “I’m sending you back to Nigeria, no more of this rubbish, no more. I will clean you up. I will clean you – Obi, *chelu*, my mother says as she holds me up” (Iweala, *Speak* 41-42; italics in the original), because “God said man is for woman and woman is for man. That’s how it’s supposed to be. And God was always right” (20). These negative conceptions of homosexuality are responsible for Niru’s being disciplined by their parents (as with Mama in *Under the Udala Trees*) with the blatant objective of “straightening” his “deviant” desires and adopting a “right” sense of Nigerianness. It is ironic that, Nigerians, in following what they believe to be truly African paradigms, are actually perpetuating Western dictates of the African self. Furthermore, it is worth highlighting the use of pidgin or African languages in this novel. Iweala writes mainly in English and adds scattered Igbo expressions throughout the text. Although I offer a translation of some of these words and expressions, they are not translated into English right after the Igbo expression in the novel, or gathered at the end in a glossary. Both languages cohabit but each one is employed to convey different meanings. English is seen as the language to convey vehicular meaning while Igbo adds an emotional layer to the message. The characters use Igbo expressions (e.g. *Tufiakwa*, [p. 37; “God forbid”], *kwusi* [p. 41; “stop it”], *mba* [p. 41; “no”], *chelu* [p. 42; “sweetheart”], etc.) to show anger or disappointment, as previously exemplified, and they revert to English when dealing with everyday issues.

Moreover, Niru is very much constructed as based on their parents’ conceptions of desire, which are highly influenced by pervasive Christian beliefs and other colonial legacies: “No, you are going back to Nigeria. I [Niru’s father] will personally escort you to Holy Spirit Chapel or Mountain of Fire or whichever one so we can burn this sinful nonsense from your body” (Iweala, *Speak* 39), to get rid of “this satanic rubbish” (37), of “such abominable evil”

(41). Like in Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*, Christian religious beliefs and the Bible are used as powerful tools to discredit other dissident sexualities and to define them as un-African and un-Christian practices. Thus, it is not Niru whose "ungodly values and satanic sentiments . . . has created a confusion only the motherland can cure" (Iweala, *Speak* 68), but Nigeria which is still subject to the legacy of colonial impositions, since homosexuality was not regarded as deviation from the norm in pre-colonial times, as I have proved in Okparanta's section. Consequently, Iweala challenges the misleading idea that queerness equates Americanisation or Westernisation writ large, while laying bare the fact that Nigerians are using Western belief systems (i.e. Christianity) as the theoretical or moral basis to justify heterosexuality and to "combat" homosexuality. Moreover, this author insists that more inclusive readings of Africanness/Nigerianness must be incorporated within African/Nigerian nationalist projects so that queer citizens are not left out of the African/Nigerian nation, but rather, positively represented and included.

Additionally, the previous ideas are closely related to the meanings attributed to the abstraction of home. In this sense, I will now centre on how Niru negotiates home, knowing that his homosexual status is debated in the novel as a way of disidentifying from fixed and outmoded notions of Nigerianness, from queer and diasporic perspectives. Besides, I compare Niru's sense of home and belonging with his father's in an attempt to trace a parallelism between the turbulent father-son relationship and the troubled connection with the "fatherland" (Nigeria). I will not focus on Niru's relationship with his mother because, even though Ify is portrayed as a middle-class and educated woman (Iweala, *Speak* 46), she tends to align with her husband's decisions and opinions, and thus, she eventually "dissolve[s] into the background" (Miller, "Speak No Evil"). Similarly, I centre on the bond between father and son because it is portrayed as central to Niru's own process of identity formation in the novel.

Despite the fact that Niru's father belongs to the new African diaspora and he is a naturalised American citizen who has worked as the CEO of a company for many years, he is representative of a conception of home as monolithic and parochial. A case in point is provided when Niru's father is said to suffer from "a bad case of *Nigeriatoma*, an acute swelling of ego and pride that affects diaspora Nigerian men, rendering them unable to accept the idea that *a true home might exist outside their birth country*" (Iweala, *Speak* 62; emphasis added). This statement can be partly explained by what Margaret Homans defines as an "antiquated binary logics of home and away, foreign and familiar, even of self and other" (187). Delphine Fongang also contributes to this debate when stating that "[f]irst-generation émigrés find it difficult to navigate two worlds [since] they struggle to maintain their authentic self as Africans while seemingly negotiating the racial boundaries that impede full cultural inclusion in mainstream society" ("Introduction" 2). In this light, Niru's father's refusal to call the US home can be theorised through this straitjacketed binary logic of home, which accurately exposes why he is not successful in "navigating worlds," but it also explains why he behaves differently upon his arrival to the motherland. *Nigeriatoma* –as a made-up condition– exemplifies the psychological and even physical need to assert national belonging to the birth country for diasporans who conceive home in the singular. In contrast, for Niru, Washington D.C. is the place he calls home. As Niru adds, "I've always felt weird about coming to Nigeria" because, for him, Nigeria "was not home . . . even if [he] secretly loved the thunderstorms and the smell of wet red earth after the rains" (Iweala, *Speak* 65).

I argue Niru and his brother OJ are much more successful in negotiating notions of home and belonging –conceived as fluid, multiple and malleable– than her parents are. However, Nigeria is still regarded from an ambivalent position, very possibly because it is imposed upon them, especially by their rigid father Obi: "Each summer my father's momentum *dragged us all home*" (Iweala, *Speak* 64; emphasis added) because the US, to

Obi's eyes, "is not your [Niru's] home not now, not ever" (64); but also because of Nigeria's lacks: "I [Niru] wanted to ask how I should really feel about streets packed with potholes and gutters full to the brim with trash and sludge. I wanted to know how to relax when the cars beside you drove so close that you could see the red veins in the driver's eyes because everyone treated the lane dividers as suggestions" (65). We also need to bear in mind that after Niru's "sexual re-orientation therapy," he starts regarding Nigeria as a traumatic place because it is in this country where Niru's exorcising of "the demon of homosexuality" occurs. As a consequence, Niru does not develop (and is also denied) a sense of national belonging to a country where queer bodies and non-normative sexualities stand "as a threat to national integrity . . . perpetually outside the boundaries of nation, home and family" (Gopinath, "Nostalgia" 138).

In her thought-provoking article "Making Home: Queer Migrations and Motions of Attachment" (2003), Anne-Marie Fortier aptly investigates the reconstructed nature of home in coming-out narratives in which she conceives home as a "'moving-out' of the childhood 'home' and relocating oneself elsewhere, in another 'home' . . . differently figured and refigured" (115). In the same article, this scholar tries to "decentre the heterosexual, familial 'home' as the emblematic model of comfort, care and belonging [and] offer a re-reading of the trope of 'coming out' of the childhood home" (115). In doing so, Fortier speaks about "migrant belongings" and "queer belongings" as she tries to unfix or destabilise the notion of "home as familiarity" (116) that does not adhere to the idea of queerness (in a broader sense), assuming a sort of "unhomeliness." She argues that queer migrations "reprocess the childhood home differently" (116), postulating a re-imagining of home (also approached from the lens of the nation) no longer understood as a locus of heterosexualised, normative familial connections but as a re-processing of belonging and family ties from a queer prism.

This moving-out of the heteropatriarchal childhood/familial home, as Fortier holds, is a way of finding a more hospitable place to belong and thrive for queer subjects. In the case of Niru, this idea can be debated from different perspectives: If we conceive Nigeria as the original familial home (the parents' homeland), then voluntarily relocating to the US must be regarded as a means to find a habitable and secure place for queer citizens, and more specifically for homosexual Niru. As discussed in the section devoted to Okparanta's novel, Nigeria holds a severe homophobic legislation together with discriminatory attitudes against LGBTQI+ people, which makes it an alien place for Niru, not only in terms of geography and cultural belonging, but also in terms of sexuality. Besides, if we approach the familial home from a US position (Niru's homeland), then Niru disturbs his childhood heterosexual home when he is caught chatting with other African American gay men, decentring the patriarchal familial order. This decentring of the patriarchal familial order is most notably evinced through the strained relationship between father and son, as Niru feels rejected by his father due to his sexual orientation: "but now that I see myself I know what that means and I can't look any longer. Idiot. Abomination. Not myself. *Not my father's son*. Nothing. *Nobody to no one*. Nonce" (Iweala, *Speak* 123; emphasis added). This excerpt also touches upon the lack of belonging, understood in familial terms, as Niru's sexuality is never accepted by his father, which is why he feels an outsider all the time.

Likewise, if we identify Niru's childhood home with Washington D.C., then he decentres the familial-national home as he is a second-generation Nigerian in a country highly charged with racial tensions. In this sense, the US is not generally regarded as an unwelcoming place for homosexuals but, it is considered an adverse country for black subjects if home is read through the lens of white supremacy and racial violence (the consequence being the murder of Niru at the hands of a white policeman). The following passage where Meredith asks Niru to stay at her place instead of going back to Nigeria to

solve “his sexual confusion” exemplifies this idea: “The thought of perpetual self-consciousness, of walking from an unfamiliar bedroom to an unfamiliar bathroom in the mornings, of eating salmon and steak tartare instead of jollof rice and egusi soup with *okporopo* –even though I don’t like really *okporopo*– didn’t feel like home either. Your house is too cold, I told Meredith” (Iweala, *Speak* 67-68; italics in the original). “Your house is too cold” can be a metaphor of the United States, where the protagonist feels “perpetually self-conscious” of his ethnicity and Nigerian origins together with his racialised status. In this light, Niru disrupts the idea of (conventional) home as a place of comfort and belonging previously mentioned, which is, perhaps, most notably identified in Niru’s passion: athletics. After coming out to Meredith, Niru reflects on his career as a professional sprinter: “I want so many things, so many competing things. I want to run to win, to run away from myself, to run away from home” (Iweala, *Speak* 53-54). If we conceive Niru’s running as a “belabored metaphor for an intermittent longing to escape” (Miller, ““Speak No Evil””), this excerpt allows us a “competing” reading of home as a place to “run away from” or to “escape from,” but also as a place to (re)connect with one’s roots. In this sense, Niru precludes a queer interpretation of home and of belonging as complex concepts that are always in the process of (re)negotiation.

2.2.3. Queer Transnational Masculinities and Racism in the United States

Niru’s traumatising experience regarding the “exorcism” of his homosexual inclinations in Nigeria results in the adoption of certain heterosexual attitudes and other behaviours attributed to hyper-masculine men upon his return to the US: “I laugh and talk about fucking her [his high-school teacher] too because that is what Revered Olumide says I should do” (Iweala, *Speak* 99-100). Reverend Olumide also tells him: “Don’t be afraid to be a man he says, and to do manly things, but he doesn’t say what those are” (100). Reading these

excerpts, we may ask: what does Reverend Olumide mean with “manly things”? What does it mean to be a black, African man living in the US? Does the diasporic condition have any impact on the shaping of black masculinities? How does homosexuality impact the so-called black, transnational masculinities? And, is there any specific form of masculinity attached to the idea of the Nigerian nation?

In this section, I try to give a plausible answer to the previous questions, as I focus on the relationship between African masculinity and the diasporic condition, and between African masculinity and homosexuality together with their intersections with racism. Black men in the US context have been culturally and historically signified as “a threat to social hierarchy from the minute they are born,” which is why they are criminalised and brutalised, Martenzie Johnson explains (“Being Black”). This statement connects with the idea of the “destructible”/“destroyable” black body that Ta-Nehisi Coates (103) develops in his essay *Between the World and Me* (2015). In the novel, Meredith witnesses how Niru is “destroyed” by a white policeman because the latter “saw a young [white] woman being assaulted and [he] intervened to stop it using what the department has deemed appropriate force” (Iweala, *Speak* 228). These lines provide a critical example of unpunished police violence, but it also exemplifies how the decision of “destroying” black people, that is, of deciding who deserves to live and who deserves to die, constitutes “the superlative form of dominion” (Coates 9; see also Mbembe 2019).³⁵ This idea of the “destroyable” black body in the US, signified as a site of pain and death, is shared with the queer body in a Nigerian context, which allows me to trace parallelisms between both realities of oppression and targeted violence that expose the de-humanisation of the black, queer body.

³⁵ It should be added that police brutality is a recurrent topic in African American activism. The following volumes are of special interest: Angela Davies’ *Policing the Black Man: Arrest, Prosecution, and Imprisonment* (2017), Andrea Ritchie’s *Invisible No More: Police Violence against Black Women and Women of Color* (2017), bell hooks’ *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (1996) and Cornel West’s *Race Matters* (1993).

As mentioned earlier, living as a black, diasporic man in the US comes with its own peculiarities. In the case of Niru's father, he is depicted as a man who feels more relaxed and safer within the domestic sphere, but anxious and tense in the social sphere (e.g. workplace). This anxiety and fear is also experienced by his sons: OJ, Niru's eldest brother, constantly warns Niru not to get drunk in somebody else's house (Iweala, *Speak* 9) or not to take the hands off the wheel when he is stopped by the police (32), which is too risky for a young black man. Another example can be found in the almost intimate encounter between Niru and Meredith: when he is in Meredith's house, they have an argument because he does not want to have sex with her and he fears her parents will find him "half-naked" and accuse him of rape "no matter how innocent" (18). OJ's and Niru's racist experiences (for instance, Niru being called "Velcro Head" in school [17]) somehow reinforce their father's vision, and expose the pervasiveness of racism in an allegedly post-racial society, where any quotidian situation is exponentially life-threatening for black individuals.

On the one hand, Niru's father can be analysed as representative of someone who is decidedly endogamous and even reticent to get involved with other white citizens, to the point that he is only comfortable amongst his own kith and kin: "That's why you don't marry these white girls, my father always says to OJ, . . . they will take your children and then your kids end up all over the place" (Iweala, *Speak* 49). In his study, Craig A. Smith uses the trope of melancholia to explain the condition of postcoloniality in a selection of male characters from the novels of Afro-Caribbean author Caryl Phillips. Smith posits that postcolonial men are defined by a form of melancholia that results from the reality of migration and that "is compounded by the loss of racial identity and patriarchal privilege" (28). These melancholic subjects are always trapped in metanarratives of home, loss (of the childhood home and of patriarchal power), (un)belonging and return, and are unable to adapt to the variegated realities of the diaspora. Obi, Niru's father, can be read through the lens of melancholia that

Smith proposes in his article, but I would add the idea of a sense of dispossession as shown in the novel under scrutiny. Thus, the diasporic condition and the racially-charged context Niru's father is now living in negatively affect his sense of self, which becomes severely fractured, and, most notably, his masculinity. He becomes more irritable and even violent with his family when he is at home, which is a direct consequence of the discomfort he experiences in the social sphere. However, when he deals with other (white) people, he somewhat poses as a successful and ambitious African man.

On the other hand, this contrast between domestic space (safe) and social space (life-threatening) is also accentuated when approached from the idea of respectability. As Niru evinces, "Appearances matter to him. That's why we live in Avenel instead of Prince George's County. That's why he drives a Range Rover and wears a Rolex with his tailored suits and Ferragamos. You have to pay attention to these things, my father says, don't give the world any reason to doubt you" (Iweala, *Speak* 71). Respectability, in the previous excerpt, is regarded from a racial perspective, which is very much related to Obi's feelings of anxiety and stress when inhabiting the public space. Obi "relishes coming home" so that he can feel protected and "calm" (Iweala, *Speak* 24). "Home" is understood here not as Nigeria, but as the private comfort of his US home. Moreover, this character might have renegotiated domestic manifestations of manhood, expressed in his adopting of a "guise" that includes the driving of a Range Rover or the wearing of a Rolex and Ferragamos, so that he can fit in in a society that mostly criminalises blacks to be seen as "respectable" and avoid discrimination or persecution. Ironically, this "strategy of survival" can also be somewhat appreciated in Nigeria when queer subjects decide to enter a heterosexual relationship, like Ijeoma in *Under the Udala Trees*, in order not to be ostracised, persecuted or even murdered.

In fact, this *mise en scène* touches upon certain anxieties about black, African manhood as expressed in the US. Dominic Pasura and Anastasia Christou contend that African men have been signified in Western societies following the colonial and “orientalizing gaze,” where they are portrayed as “violent, patriarchal, and oppressive” (527). Riché Richardson and Jon Smith further argue that black men in the US have been constructed upon certain mythic and stereotypical images that go back to the slavery period and that deemed African American men as “sexually pathological” and as “inherently lustful and primitive” (4). Such stereotypical and racist constructions of black men have forced them to develop what Richard Majors and Janet Mancini denominate a “cool pose” (1992).³⁶ This whole rationale is behind the murder of Niru for interacting with a white woman and behind the hundreds of murders of African American men at the hands of white police officers around the country, being the killing of George Floyd one of the most recent and painful examples. Therefore, Obi’s obsession with appearances can be understood, perhaps, as a strategy (or a “cool pose”) to “claim positive recognition” in a Western country cemented in ideas of “[racial] ‘otherness’ and neoliberal economy” (Pasura and Christou 523).

Nigerian scholar Paul Obiyo Mbanaso Njemanze has explored as well the impact colonialism and slavery have historically had on black African masculinities, and the subsequent inability for black men to define themselves as opposed to receiving pre-imposed, Western conceptions of black manhood: “African slaves could not come into the picture in Euro-American definitions of manhood. . . . Thus, as a system of political, economic, and social emasculation, the American slavery occasioned structural damage to the masculinity of Africans in the era of slavery” (224). These emasculating processes have resulted in the

³⁶ In their ground-breaking book *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (1992), Richard Majors and Janet Mancini define “cool pose” as a “coping mechanism that serves to counter, at least in part, the dangers that black males encounter on a daily basis” (5). This strategy was created to grant black men visibility and empowerment and to ease the anxiety produced by being conceived as second-class citizens. Majors and Mancini hold that this pose “provides a mask that suggests competence, high self-esteem, control, and inner strength,” and that “hides self-doubt, insecurity, and inner turmoil” (5).

metaphorical castration of black males, who have been “rendered impotent in the economic, political, and social arenas that whites have historically dominated” (Majors and Mancini 1). Obiyo Mbanaso Njemanze also argues that black males “have been portrayed as dope addicts, punks, troublemakers, lazy, gang-bangers, hostile, deprived, dumb, dangerous, deviant, and disturbed”; but they have also been signified from the familial lens and depicted as “predominantly useless, unfit, powerless, burdensome to their spouses and children, and irresponsible husbands/fathers” (224; see also Creese 2014). In America, for instance, Ravon D. Keith notes in relation to Obiyo Mbanaso Njemanze’s statements that “[t]he social construction of black manhood in mainstream American culture is rooted in the idea of the black man as savage, untamed, and incapable of learning,” disseminating certain “images of black manhood [that are] one dimensional, and tend to focus on the inadequacies of African American males’ gender role performance” (Keith 7). Black masculinity is, thus, highly connoted with negative ideas resulting from pre-conceived and racist conceptions of blackness. Therefore, by showing differing manifestations of African masculinit(ies) as situated in the US, Iweala illustrates how reductive notions of blackness still operate in present-day Western societies, urging us to consider that these biased notions cost black lives.

In the novel, Niru’s father also regards himself as the family’s breadwinner, though Niru’s mother is economically self-reliant, and he takes pride in the fact that their children can be who they are because of the means he has provided them with. Obi states that Niru “can’t do anything without [his father]” (Iweala, *Speak* 59) because “if not for [his] sperm, [his] food, and the school fees that [he] pay[s] on [his son’s] behalf, then who and where would [he] be?” (40). This instance demonstrates an overprotective, possessive and even infantilising relationship with his 18-year old son, who, to Obi’s eyes, is unable to make the right decisions, especially when it comes to sexual matters: “My father says, nobody asked you because you’re still a child and you don’t know what you are doing to your life . . . You

clearly don't have the judgement to make the right decisions . . . So I am making them for you, as your father, under the guidance of the pastor here" (59). In fact, Obi is portrayed as a rigid and authoritarian man who resorts to violence against their children if he is disturbed, depicting a very evident form of toxic masculinity. An example can be found when Obi discovers his younger son has been chatting with other gay men on the popular internet applications Grindr and Tinder. His violent reaction, which is materialised in a very specific form of inflected physical punishment, is described in detail in the following quote: "He grabs my ear. Daddy, I yelp as he twists and pulls me forward . . . He pushes my face down into the kitchen table. A salty warmth fills my cheek. My tongue burns . . . The pain spreads from my cheek up to my eyes and into my forehead" (38-39). To which Niru adds: "Then his hands are around my neck pushing and shaking me" (40) until "[m]y father bangs my head against the wall and the room vibrates. He slaps me once and then again" (41).

Obi's authoritarianism and rigidity is also represented in the way his wife behaves when she is in her husband's company. As Niru mentions, "Sometimes I wonder who my mother might be if she weren't married to my father. Everyone around him seems that much less free-spirited, that much less open to possibility, so much more controlled. At her office, she is loud and filled with infectious laughter. Here she is more quiet and deferential" (Iweala, *Speak* 154). In this excerpt, it is interesting to see the contrast between here (home) and there (the office); home is, for Niru's mother, a place of restraint, whereas the workplace, contrarily to what happens to Niru's father, is the space where her mother feels more relaxed and "free-spirited." This makes me read Obi as a violent man due to racial constraints in the US, but who has also forged his aggressiveness before coming to the US, as evidenced by his abusive behaviour towards his wife and youngest son. Additionally, if we read Obi's violence and authoritarianism in national key, it will prove useful to make reference to Uzodinma Iweala's latest article on Nigeria's current political challenges, where he states that Nigeria is a "quasi-

authoritarian state, with the roots of repression deeply embedded in its history of British colonial control” (“Nigeria’s Second Independence” 146). Hence, I argue Obi’s repression of his youngest son’s homosexuality can be read as metonymic of a “quasi-authoritarian” Nigeria that unquestioningly follows British colonial dictates of the self and of sexual orientation, while Niru is representative of a Nigeria that is more open, international, diverse and whose strength lies in its untangling from colonial influence.

Niru’s father, as in Okparanta’s novel with the figure of Mama and its portrayal of a traditional form of femininity, presents a type of masculinity that can be deemed hegemonic, while Niru depicts a dissident masculinity genuinely opposed to his father’s. In the novel, acceptable forms of masculinity are clearly associated with procreation and with heterosexuality. From a religious point of view, the command “go forth and multiply [with] one woman at a time” uttered by Reverend Olumide (Iweala, *Speak* 100) sustains a form of masculinity as based on heterosexuality and on the perpetuation of the normative family. This constrained manifestation of “acceptable” masculinity excludes “‘lesser’ forms of masculinities” (Pasura and Christou 524), such as Niru’s, who understands the idea of “do[ing] manly things” (Iweala, *Speak* 100) as erotically interacting with other men. In this sense, hegemonic masculinity operates upon the exclusion of other interpretations of manhood that do not accord with (imposed) heterosexuality. R. W. Connell notes in this regard that “[g]ayness, in patriarchal ideology, is the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity,” which is the reason why “gayness is easily assimilated to femininity” (78-79), as mentioned earlier. This association between a queer masculinity and effeminacy, Connell goes on to claim, “has involved the criminalization of male-to-male sex, as well as intimidation and violence outside the law” (155). The criminalisation of homoerotic desire in Nigeria materialises through the Same-Sex Marriage

Prohibition Act (2014) and, in the US, through the beating that Niru receives at the hands of his own father.

In this context, Niru's impossibility of identifying with his father's authoritarian masculinity (and, thus, with his straitjacketed conception of desire and of nationhood) is also worth delving into. The following passage exemplifies this idea:

The self in the mirror, his red eyes swim in liquid and they bulge from his face. What a horribly ugly face. What a stupid simple face, with its open mouth and big lazy lips shining with drool. Close your mouth, don't be gollywog, my father used to say, don't be a big-lipped gollywog, but I didn't know what that was. It sounded sweet and friendly, but now *I see myself* I know what that means and I can't look any longer. Idiot. Abomination. *Not myself*. Not my father's son. Nothing. *Nobody to no one. Nonce*. (Iweala, *Speak* 122-123; emphasis added)

If analysed from a Lacanian perspective, the Father is a foundational figure in the psychosexual development of the son, and the representative/enforcer of social order (see Lacan 1987). In Iweala's novel, Niru's father constitutes a seminal force in Niru's own personal and sexual development for many reasons. Since the father embodies an understanding of Nigerianness that is somehow parochial and does not contemplate homosexuality, we can theorise the paternal figure as an agent of castration or emasculation. The Father disciplines his son's body and mind (through therapies and other forms of violence) to instil him an acceptable form of masculinity and to prevent Niru from becoming an "abomination." As a consequence, Niru results in a young adult that cannot identify with the paternal figure or with the *fatherland* ("Not my father's son"), and who is presented as a self-estranged man because, precisely, Niru does not conform to his father's notion of (heterosexual) manhood. Moreover, there is another key element in the previous passage

worth discussing from the Lacanian perspective: the mirror (see Lacan 2006). At the beginning of the quote, Niru defines himself as “[t]he self in the mirror” and Iweala resorts to the third-person narrator to keep on talking about Niru, but also to create a sense of disassociation. Niru turns himself into an object that is viewed from the outside; an object that is rejected by Niru’s father and despised by Niru himself as what he sees does not accord with his father’s requirements, proposing a reading of the self as fragmented or even as Other (“I see myself” [but I am] “Not myself”), and generating feelings of self-hatred. Thus, Niru’s traumatic relationship with his father negatively affects his sense of selfhood, which becomes a permanent source of instability and fracture.

Similarly, the question of queer sex is worth exploring as this type of sexual encounters are regarded in the novel as filthy and abject acts, from Niru’s parents’ perspective; but portrayed as joyful, pleasurable encounters from Niru’s perspective. As mentioned earlier, queer sexualities are negatively conceived by Niru’s parents but widely accepted in the US so that sex, in this sense, is clearly subject to very specific “inequities” and “modes of oppression” (Rubin 4). In this line, Niru’s father utilises a rhetoric of dirt and hate to refer to Niru’s encounters with other homosexual men. For instance, when Obi discovers his son has been chatting with Ryan, he asks if his mother “know[s] about this filth” (Iweala, *Speak* 36), and urges Niru to provide an explanation about the “despicable, filthy, unnatural and unclean things” he has been presumably doing with other gay men (Iweala, *Speak* 39). These heterosexist comments expose a rhetoric of filth, even disgust, where queerness is unfairly portrayed as “something that arouses loathing” and is thus “deemed filthy and therefore rejected” (Wasshede 30). This rhetoric of the abject has been traditionally found in earlier

discussions about HIV and AIDS, where queer sex connoted infection, death and stigmatisation.³⁷

In *Speak No Evil*, Niru pivots between an internalised “sense of self-loathing” (Wasshede 30) because he wants “to be normal” so that his father can “look at [him] without disgust” (Iweala, *Speak* 96), and a conviction that he is neither “unclean” (28) nor deviant for being sexually aroused by other men. This painful ambiguity is vividly captured in the following excerpt that recounts the second time Niru meets Damien, an African American dancer he encountered in a party and with whom he gets involved:

I freeze like I have just stepped on a glass shard. He is shorter than me and he has a fresh shape-up, well-oiled so the sharp line of brushed-forward hair contrasts sharply with his brown skin. I swallow at his confused smile. Focus. But that smile. But those eyes. Focus. He has seen me, really seen me and still his gaze is insistent. Do I smell, yes I smell, but he has already smelled the worst of me. This is torture. What beauty, a solid frame of sculpted arms and broad chest made all the more broad by his fitted black golf shirt, collar popped. Focus. On what –straight ahead to his face? But those lips. Say a prayer to slow this fast-beating heart? But his strong, delicate hands. To wet this dry mouth? But the soft slope of his nose. For deliverance? You’re back, he says now settled fully into his smile and this secret familiarity. Feeling better? (Iweala, *Speak* 132-133)

These lines full of contrasts and confusion dramatically exposes the inner conflict Niru is experiencing when attempting to repress his homosexuality and at the same time being intensely drawn to it. By intimately focusing on the body, Niru further reflects upon his attraction towards Damien, emphasising not the disgust of the action but the potential pleasure

³⁷ Uzodinma Iweala has tackled this topic in his previous non-fictional work *Our Kind of People: Thoughts on the HIV/AIDS Epidemic* (2012).

he can derive from it: “I want to touch him, to sneak my fingers toward his fingers, out my hands on his hands and let my skin rub his skin. I want to put my lips to his lips, but my only experience with that is Meredith and I am still scared by the idea of being completely connected to something so separate, so much a part of something that is completely me and also not me” (Iweala, *Speak* 145).

This conflicted reading of the homosexual body and of desire is a common theme in present-day queer Nigerian literature. For instance, Arinze Ifeakandu, well-known for his short story “God’s Children Are Little Broken Things” (2018), has delved into “the particular anguish of the body tensed, even trapped, at a wounded crossroads between desire and violence” (Gleibermann, “Queer Nigerians”).³⁸ The Nigerian homosexual body in Ifeakandu’s piece is framed within a homophobic national context where, like Niru, queer bodies are seen as “destroyable” bodies, to recuperate Ta-Nehisi Coates’s idea (103). Romeo Oriogun is another Nigerian poet who has extensively narrated the (vulnerable) black, queer body, defined by its internal contradictions where pleasure and pain are part of the same experience. Oriogun is mostly known by his acclaimed poetry collections *Sacrament of Bodies* (2020) and *Nomad* (2021).

To conclude this section, I delve into Meredith and Niru’s unsuccessful attempt at having sex because “talking about sex is another way to talk about race” (Natasha Tinsley 196), and I finally centre on Niru’s death and its implications. At the beginning of the novel, Niru finds himself in Meredith’s bedroom and they try to have sex, but the sexual encounter does not go as planned and ends abruptly with Niru admitting he is gay. The episode goes as follows: “Meredith, I whisper. I step back but her hands follow me, still working against my belt buckle. I grab her wrists and pull them away. No. Something’s not okay, I say. She falls

³⁸ Arinze Ifeakandu’s short story “God’s Children Are Little Broken Things,” originally released in 2018, was published as a short story collection under the same title in June 2022.

back onto the bed with her legs firmly pressed together. No, she says, this is not happening. Then she is no longer in the room. I wrap my arms around my body. It is suddenly unbearably cold” (Iweala, *Speak* 16). This passage evinces what for Niru constituted a traumatic experience, not only because he felt trapped when Meredith started to sexually interact with him, but also because of the subsequent recalling of a racist, traumatic event he experienced when he was younger: “The white kids used to touch me all the time when I was younger, like they owned me. They’d call me Velcro Head and press things to my hair to see what would stick . . . Then there was that time one of the girls came up to me after school and asked if she could look down my pants” (Iweala, *Speak* 16-17).

This association between Niru’s first sexual encounter with a woman and another racist episode brings to light the trespassing of personal boundaries of a black individual who is touched unwillingly in both situations and left to his own devices “because [he] will not give her what she wants” (Iweala, *Speak* 17). I contend this event, where Niru is eroticised and sexually objectified, is relevant for Niru’s process of sexual awakening but it is also symbolically interpreted as a form of racial oppression first, as he is not willing to give Meredith what she is demanding from him and second, as he does not accord with Meredith’s heterosexual projection of him. There is also a third dimension that is connected to a sense of entitlement or even ownership over Niru’s body, which is made obvious through the association with a past racist experience, and also in Niru’s murder at the end of the novel.

When Niru is murdered, Meredith’s voice takes over the narration of the events and this is what she recalls from the night Niru was shot: “You’re safe [to Meredith], a voice tells me. He can’t hurt you. Don’t look, it’s all over, it says. Shots fired, shots fired, requesting ambulance to alley between S and T Streets for suspect down. I feel cold. I become a series of shivers . . . I have no words now, only piercing sounds” (Iweala, *Speak* 196). This passage

shows the disorientation of a character that has caused and witnessed her best friend's death, but it also shows a dichotomy victim-perpetrator that is erroneous. Niru and Meredith starts to discuss outside the club she was partying in when Niru is seen by a police officer who infers this black man is assaulting a white Meredith, and he decides to shot him four times, killing him instantly. Previously, in the club, Meredith "shout[s] his name," "push[es] him from behind," "tr[ies] to scratch him" and "to slap him" (195) because Niru, to Meredith's eyes, "seems indifferent to [her]," "unaffected by [her] naked body, unmoved by [her] years of silent longing" and "so unconcerned with [her] well-being that he would leave [her] here with these wolf packs young men" (194). Niru is killed because Meredith cannot accept the fact that he is gay and will never be attracted to her. Presenting her as "the victim" in the police report only reinforces the idea that "WHITE LIES COST BLACK LIVES" (236; capital letters in the original); a central theme in present-day Black Lives Matter movement and protests. Similarly, it is interesting to pay attention to the policeman's testimony to the press:

I saw what I saw. I saw a man attacking a young woman and I took appropriate action. She says, actually, this is a boy we are talking about, a teenager, a Harvard-bound black boy. She says, witnesses saw her run after him, that he left the venue before her. He says, I saw a young woman being assaulted and I intervened to stop it using what the department has deemed appropriate force. And you feel no remorse? A child is dead! But I'm not a monster, I'm not a monster, I'm just a police officer and a former veteran trying to do my best to keep our streets safe. (228)

Clearly, there is no remorse or questioning of the brutal actions he took whatsoever; on the contrary, there is an unscrupulous self-justification of a white person who feels entitled to kill a black person on the basis of his own prejudiced and biased analysis of a situation.

Furthermore, it is also interesting to see how Meredith is automatically granted credibility, together with the police officer, who is not perceived as a murderer because he was just “do[ing] his best to keep [their] streets safe” (228), and so their versions remain as reliable and truthful accounts of what happened that night. There are also other vested interests to perpetuate Meredith’s version. Her father is postulating to be a Supreme Court Justice and then to work for the Justice Department (215). Hence, Meredith is advised to keep a low profile because “[r]ight now at least fifty percent of America thinks you were assaulted [and therefore] their sympathies lie with you” (230-231), which will be advantageous for her father’s career in politics. But even when Iweala explores to a certain extent Meredith’s sense of guilt and remorse for what she did, her version remains. Niru’s father comes to her house to beg her to tell the truth, “[t]ell them [his] son is not a rapist” (242), and have some justice and peace at last. The novel ends with Niru’s words to Meredith: “go on now, speak” (250). This final command refers to the title, speak no evil, and that demands some form of reparation not just for Niru, but for the numberless black individuals who have been vilified, humiliated and even murdered.

CHAPTER 3
TRANSNATIONAL REALITIES, LOCAL
CONCERNS

“Tell your friends from me, Iris said, what it’s like there. Tell them people are in a very bad way. Tell them about people who’ve got nothing. Tell them about people risking their lives, about people whose lives are all they’ve got left. Tell them about what torture does to a life, what it does to a language, how it makes people unable to dare to explain to themselves, never mind to other people, what’s happened to them. Tell them what loss is. Tell them, especially, about the small children who arrive there. I mean small. I mean hundreds of children. Five and six and seven years old” (A. Smith 233)

“[W]hat you’re returning to can never be the same as what you left”
(Mengestu 174)

“Nigeria is my beloved when I am away from it” (Unigwe qtd. in “My Nigeria”)

“The nation is a specter that always returns, haunting the global with images of bounded space and historical times of origins and becoming, unsettling the desire to imagine a world only of flow” (Dalley 32)

In this chapter, I analyse Helon Habila’s *Travellers* (2019), where he meticulously portrays the migrant experience in ambivalent and non-prescriptive terms, providing readers with nuanced and diversified conceptions of diaspora and of modern migration. The widely acclaimed Anglo-Igbo author explores a tapestry of African travellers journeying Europe and their odyssey to reach this continent in search of better living conditions for them and their relatives. Besides, Habila has been described as “a literary chronicler of post-independence Nigeria” (Feldner 85) because his novels fundamentally pivot around socio-political issues in this West African country. However, and against Maximillian Feldner’s belief that “Helon Habila is an exception among the novelists of the Nigerian diaspora [because] his writings include hardly any accounts of diasporic experiences” (85), *Travellers* thus constitutes Habila’s first attempt at dealing with the realities of transnationalism. I also analyse Sefi Atta’s *The Bad Immigrant* (2021), where this prominent Anglo-Yoruba author approaches the migrant experience from the perspective of a documented Nigerian family that has relocated

to the US. In this vein, Atta satirises what it means to be an African *émigré* nowadays and probes the migrant experience, not for the very first time in her literary career, but originally from the perspective of a male Nigerian migrant. In previous works such as *A Bit of Difference* (2013), Atta also delved into similar themes like the question of migrancy, assimilation, or the construction of a fractured sense of selfhood but from the perspective of a female narrator.

It is worth highlighting that Habila and Atta can be regarded as active components of the new African diaspora, whose participants are conditioned by the very realities of nomadism, displacement and transculturality, also central (but not exclusive) themes in many African narratives nowadays. These two writers are part of the new wave of Nigerian authors who have migrated to Euro-American countries. However, Atta's migration occurred in the second half of the twentieth century (and not at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as happens with most authors discussed here). Both writers are mainly based in the United States, but they also divide their time between England and Nigeria, thus, their diasporic personal experiences generally inform their literary production, which seeks to provide more nuanced and de-essentialised portrayals of the modern African experience. As Atta argues in an interview: "My writing mirrors who I am" (Atta qtd. in Nzegwu 82), which is why some of her writing is said to be autobiographical to a certain extent (Kotzin, "The Per Contra Interview"). Furthermore, the works of these two leading voices among third-generation Nigerian authors (Rodríguez Murphy 2012; Collins 2015) have been extensively disseminated and translated worldwide, enjoying "enthusiastic recognition outside Nigeria" (Adesanmi and Dunton, "Everything Good is Raining" vii), and generated a substantial corpus of scholarly secondary criticism.

In the previous chapters, I have approached Nigeria from the familial and Afroqueer perspectives; in this final chapter, I examine the idea of home and of nation as explored by fictional African nomadic subjects thriving in a globalised world highly influenced by nationalist and xenophobic agendas. Even though some of the ideas discussed in this chapter have been previously outlined in the section devoted to the analysis of Uzodinma Iweala's novel, I most specifically attempt to debate how the nation (both the Nigerian and the European ones) is clearly problematised by the migratory flows against the backdrop of the refugee crisis in Europe. Furthermore, I seek to explore the figure of the (modern) African migrant (the refugee, the asylum seeker, the nomad, the tourist, the Other, the sojourner, the *émigré* or the Afropolitan), and how this figure can become an element that destabilises the very uniformity of Western nation-states, while "aching for self-definition within fragmented identities and discourses" (Cruz Pereira 54).

Travellers and *The Bad Immigrant* can be held as examples of transnational writing, together with novels such as Brian Chikwava's *Harare North* (2009), Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2007), Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* (2007), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) or Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011), among others. These novelists are part of what Pius Adesanmi, drawing on Achille Mbembe, denominates the "diasporic *durée*," because they are African writers who "have thematized identity and otherness as conditioned by their location in the diasporic and/or exilic space" ("Of Postcolonial Entanglement" 236).³⁹ Some of these African deracinated authors are more or less successfully surpassing the Afropessimist or victimising representations of the continent "underpinned by sentiments of despair and hopelessness" (Adesanmi, "Of Postcolonial Entanglement" 227); representations that have been traditionally marketed as

³⁹ Adesanmi clarifies that African authors have always dealt with themes of "home and exile, of deterritorialization and deracination, of diasporic subjecthood and identity" (237) but the mushrooming of contemporary works thematising these very same topics needs be understood as emerging in a new global and geopolitical context so that the "migrancy" and "refugeeism motif" acquire new meanings and connotations.

“authentic” African literature. In this vein, Jane Bryce contends that there is a “shifting of the ground of identity-construction in Nigerian fiction” that is materialised in a “notion of selfhood as split or multiple” (50). This trope of mobility and cosmopolitanism is extremely productive as it allows third-generation Nigerian writers to put forth more diverse (and equally authentic) representations of African individuals and of Africanness that certainly go beyond the perpetuation of an aesthetic of pain and suffering, and that present the self as belonging to several locales.

3.1. Helon Habila’s *Travellers* (2019)

3.1.1. Preliminary Remarks on Helon Habila and his Novel

Helon Habila (1967, Kaltungo) is an acclaimed Nigerian author who has worked as a journalist, literary editor and as a writer, spanning different genres (non-fiction, poetry, short stories and, the most salient one, the novel). He is also a diasporic author who lives between Virginia (USA), where he is based with his family, and Lagos. He has published several ground-breaking novels such as *Waiting for an Angel* (2002), which won the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for Best First Book. The year after he won the Caine Prize for African Fiction (2001), he was invited to fill the position of African Writing Fellow at the University of East Anglia where he completed his PhD in 2007. He has also spent a year teaching at Bard College as a Chinua Achebe Fellow and he currently teaches Creative Writing at George Mason University (Florida). His second novel, *Measuring Time*, came out in 2007 and was nominated for the DUBLIN Impact Prize or the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award among others. In 2010, he published *Oil on Water*, an environmental political thriller that was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Prize for Best Book, Africa Region (2012). His fifth non-fiction book, *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings & Islamic Militancy in Nigeria* (2016) narrates the kidnapping of 276 girls from a secondary school in Chibok (Borno) in April 2014

by the jihadist group Boko Haram. Habila's writing is thus characterised by his political engagement in discussing neocolonial issues affecting post-independence Nigeria and the lives of its citizens. Habila has also edited multiple anthologies (e.g. *The Granta Book of the African Short Story* published in 2011), worked as a contributing editor to the "Virginia Quarterly Review" and coordinated the Fidelity Bank Writers Workshop in Nigeria.

Travellers (2019) was conceived during his stay in Germany as resulting from the winning of a DAAD Fellowship (2013-2014), but it was also made possible thanks to the interviews this author carried out with several migrants while living in Berlin. The novel was tentatively titled "The Fortress" to symbolically address Europe ("Fortress Europe") as a continent that continuously enforces exclusionary immigration policies and laws to keep certain "travellers" away from its borders. *Travellers* explores the "migrant motif" from a positive light via the stream of consciousness and internal monologue. It is worth remembering that the idea of critically engaging with the African mobile subject experience in Europe coincides with the tragic Lampedusa shipwreck in 2013 where more than 300 Africans drowned in the Mediterranean Sea in a shipwreck. This devastating event was very significant in Europe as it marked the beginning of a new migrant crisis in this continent and prompted "an outcry in Italy and calls for urgent action by the international community" (L. Davies, "Lampedusa Boat Tragedy"). Now, the ongoing wave of resurgent nationalisms and "right-wing hysteria" against migrants throughout Europe (and the world) have stigmatised the arrival of Africans while building an image of them that pivots around ideas of invasion, organised crime, terrorism, religious fundamentalism and even opportunism.

Displaced people started to be regarded as "real or potential terrorists, sexual assailants, unemployed welfare recipients, religious maniacs, and cultural others" that with their presence challenge "the norms and cohesion of the receiving societies" (Abdelhady et al.

12).⁴⁰ In this regard, it is paramount to remember what Stuart Hall asserted when discussing how the colonised Other was/is ontologically represented and discursively constructed by the “English [and the Euro-American] eye” (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 21). For Hall, “the colonized Other was constituted within the regimes of representation of such metropolitan center”; a regime that placed them “in their otherness, in their marginality, by the nature of the ‘English eye’” (21). This binary logic where the “I/self” is always defined in opposition to the “Other” is still enforced nowadays from a neocolonial and neo-imperialist position. As represented in Habila’s *Travellers*, these tropes keep on Othering those who are associated with aspects such as dirt, lack of personal hygiene, sexual deviancy or religious fanaticism, and deem unfeasible to get away from that feared and stereotyped caricature of the illegal foreigner.

Besides, a few European countries, especially from 2015 onwards, adopted an “open-door approach” and accepted many irregular migrants “as part of a ‘culture of welcoming’” (Mouan et al., “After the ‘Migration Crisis’”). Nonetheless, this approach was soon regarded with suspicion and the arrival of undocumented newcomers started to be approached as a real crisis with the subsequent re-bordering of EU countries and the implementation of strict immigration control/surveillance (see Abdelhady et al. 2020). In addition, the rise of far-right parties and anti-immigrant rhetoric throughout most welfare European countries is generating politico-institutional mobilisation in the form of the enactment of policies and laws to manage the “problem of excess of presence” (Mbembe, *Necropolitics* 43), that is, the arrival of unauthorised peoples and the securitisation of borders (Siegfried, “The Refugee Brief”). These panoptic methods of securitising and “securing” European borders evince what Brinda Mehta refers to as “the violence of coloniality” which is particularly “represented by Europe’s border

⁴⁰ Interestingly enough, while migrants are mediatically depicted as religious fanatics, some fictional characters in Habila’s novel are recruited by a group of Jehovah’s Witnesses while living in Bulgaria (*Travellers* 186), so this author ironically dismantles many prejudiced thesis on migrants, while exposing how they are mediatically constructed in negative terms.

ethnic” (44). Likewise, these neo-imperial practices that criminalise migrants constitute, first of all, a violation of human rights; second, a serious attempt to de-legitimise and vilify powerless and vulnerable ethnic groups; third, to clarify that free movement throughout Europe will only be granted to white tourists but highly restricted for impoverished African migrants; and fourth, that Europe is actually a securitised fortress (as the tentative title of this novel claimed); a “militarised” fortress “ready for the enemy to emerge, spectral, from the sea mist” (Habila, *Travellers* 223).

In this sense, Habila has declared that *Travellers*, as a political novel, attempts “to humanise the statistics and headlines” about (dead) Africans in Europe (“Helon Habila, ‘Travelers’”), while working as a text that sets out to counter-act “the implementation of ever stricter, ever more rigorous measures of exclusion by . . . governments under the pretext of protecting citizens and refugees alike from the hazards of uncontrolled migration” (Ramsey-Kurz 169).⁴¹ Additionally, this novel can be said to work as “an exercise against forgetfulness, indifference and apathy” (Mehta 47) towards unwanted Others. In fact, this book lays bare the immunisation of the West against the thousands of migrants that do not make it to European shores and that are constantly made invisible by European governments; a memento of those who perish and of those who are overtly unwelcome. If we pay attention to Helon Habila’s novels, we clearly see his engagement with political problems that affect Nigerians in the twenty-first century. As he asserts, “I am a strong believer in instrumental aesthetics” and African writers should be able to use their work “to intervene at the most

⁴¹ It is worth analysing the statistics of deceased migrants in the Mediterranean Sea. According to the Missing Migrants Project, although fatalities cannot be ascertained, 955 migrants are estimated to have drowned on Mediterranean maritime routes in 2021 (last checked on July 21st, 2021). Since 2014, more than 22.000 migrants have died in an attempt to reach European shores, being the Central Mediterranean route the deadliest of the three (Western, Eastern and Central Mediterranean routes). As Simona Varrella points out, most refugees who perished in this inhospitable sea could not be identified and their country of origin became untraceable, what reinforces the anonymity of this collective and the continuous invisibilisation of this historical tragedy (2021).

serious challenges facing his [or her] community,” be it Africa or elsewhere, and generate responses of empathy and solidarity (“The Future of African Literature” 159).⁴²

Formally, *Travellers* is divided into six books, each titled “One Year in Belin,” “Checkpoint Charlie,” “Basel,” “The Interpreters,” “The Sea” and “Hunger,” which deal with the experiences of a cohort of diverse African migrants who have crossed the Mediterranean Sea in search of a better life for themselves and their families in Europe, which they regard as Eldorado. The stories of these travellers are recounted by an unnamed first-person narrator who happens to be a Nigerian-born PhD student. He has temporarily moved to Berlin with his wife Gina, a US painter and recipient of the Berlin Zimmer Fellowship for the Arts, whose portraits of “real” African migrants coincide with the title of the novel (Habla, *Travellers* 4). Curiously, even though the series of portraits called *Travellers* features migrants that accord Gina’s own (white) gaze, the paintings are neither motivated by Gina’s political engagement nor by her true conviction to denounce the harsh conditions clandestine migrants go through every day while reaching and once in Europe. Gina’s underlying motivation is more closely connected to her own need to overcome her traumatic miscarriage. Since her art is exclusively directed towards her own psychological needs, it cannot be taken as an altruistic move to contribute to the migrant’s cause but as a commodification of its very protagonists. Furthermore, the main character’s dissertation is titled ““The Berlin Conference: Imaginary Borders and the Scramble for Africa”” (Habla, *Travellers* 124), a research project that explores the pervading effects of the Berlin conference (1884-1885), particularly regarding the borders established upon the African continent, and the intra- and inter-national conflicts

⁴² In his first novel, *Waiting for an Angel* (2002), the protagonist decides to denounce some of the most unbearable injustices and crimes committed by a corrupt and oppressive dictatorship. *Measuring Time* (2007) recounts the story of the twin brothers Mamo and LaMamo living in Keti. While LaMamo escapes home to become a mercenary in the war of Liberia, his brother Mamo remains home and become a historian trying to narrate the story of his village, which is also the story of Nigeria as a country. *Oil on Water* (2010) is a novel that denounces the exploitation and ecocide of the oil-rich regions of the Niger Delta. Finally, *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings & Islamic Militancy in Nigeria* (2016) constitutes Habla’s attempt to denounce the atrocities committed by the fundamentalist terror group Boko Haram to the girls from the community of Chibok.

such a scramble generated. Besides, *Travellers* can be divided into three life-changing moments in the life of the protagonist-narrator: 1. Living in the US and moving to Berlin (documented migrant), 2. Being deported to Italy and return to Nigeria, his homecountry (undocumented migrant), and 3. Going back to America and later to Europe, precisely to pre-Brexit London (documented migrant). This circular structure makes me read this novel as a “cyclical travel narrative” (Kah Jick and Ngong Toh 13).

While in Europe in the 2010s, the nameless, anonymous narrator encounters diverse African travellers such as Mark, a Malawian transgender man and anti-establishment squatter; Manu, a Libyan surgeon-turned-bouncer; Portia, a Zambian teacher and SOAS student; Karim Al-Bashir, a Somali trader and Juma, a Nigerian fellow countryman on hunger strike.⁴³ All of them recount their experiences to the anonymous Nigerian narrator-*observateur*, whose encounters with other migrants suggest a sort of transnational, or even Pan-African, solidarity. Additionally, this is a novel full of intertextual references to other canonical texts such as the Bible (Habla, *Travellers* 20), Dante’s *Inferno* (60), William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (62-63), John Milton’s poem “Lycidas” (111), Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* (283) and T.S. Eliot’s poem “The Waste Land” (234). These intertextual references help build up the mood of the scene so that, for instance, Dante’s *Inferno* is used to accentuate the layeriness of German detention centres; a passage from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* was uttered between the protagonist and Mark before Mark was murdered in a *heim* or Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* is the text Juma is reading in his detention centre in London and is a source of identification for this immigrant, now a lonely “Londoner” himself, who empathises with the West Indies immigrants that arrived in this city in the 1950s. I argue Habla uses these intertextual references to confer depth to the current migrant crisis, and to situate this novel

⁴³ It is rather telling that most Africans the protagonist encounters are male. I am aware that it would also be necessary to portray the experiences of male and female migrants to analyse how the condition of migrancy affects both groups. I am convinced many differences would arise, as the gender dimension is essential to fully understand this experience.

within a tradition of canonical texts that, above all, debate issues common to any human being.

Travellers can be best characterised as a mosaic of interconnected short stories which show in detail the multidimensionality and internal contradictions of the refugee experience, reflected in the dispersed and fragmented quality of the text.. This narrative crosses boundaries thematically, but also formally as it can be best described as a hybrid cross between novel and short story collection. It is also necessary to mention the polyvocality of the novel, organised around the myriad voices of a number of travellers in Europe. This structure reflects the migrant experience as an international problem that affects us all and as a reality that is hydra-headed and very often portrayed in reductionist terms. This polyphony and multiperspectivity is also found in *Waiting for an Angel*, a novel where “the chapters are connected and interlinked” and some “share the same characters and spatial setting, and thematically form a unity” (Feldner 86-87). Additionally, this polyvocal narrative attempts to dismantle the representation of Europe as the Promised Land by African travellers who idealise this continent prior to their arrival only to find repudiation, institutional violence, xenophobic attitudes and even actions and policies that further de-humanise them.

It is also worth noting that the decision of naming the African protagonists “travellers,” and not “aliens,” “Others,” “migrants” or “refugees,” is a provocative and political act. Habila wanted to use a more neutral term for various reasons: to emphasise the idea that we all are, one way or another, “travellers” because mobility is an intrinsic part of human existence, though strongly conditioned by a matrix of oppressions and privileges. As he states in an interview, he wanted readers to consider “what does travel mean? Why do people travel in different ways? Why do some people travel in first class and why do some people travel by boat? Are they less human for traveling one way? Is there a reason why

people are traveling that way?” (Habla qtd. in Randol, “Helon Habla Is Okay”). In a somewhat ethical exercise, Habla urges readers to fully examine the complexity of this global event so that migrants, discursively constructed by dominant Western discourses, are no longer stigmatised, criminalised and inhumanly depicted. Furthermore, Habla chose to use a more positive-charged term since “migrant,” “refugee” or “asylum seeker” otherwise bear negative and pejorative connotations (“Helon Habla on Naming Travellers”). From this decision, it is also evident the interest of the author in making visible those wandering Africans who might be labelled as members of the “illegitimate diasporas” (Omuteche 293).⁴⁴

Similarly, empathy and compassion for this community is at the core of this politically-engaged narrative which overtly interpellates the readers regarding the horrors of migration and our efforts to negate certain mobile populations a decent life in Europe. Helga Ramsey-Kurz (2020) maintains that “[t]he continued *spectral presence[s]* of unmourned Others” that populate *Travellers* “works as a nagging reminder of our implication in their suffering and of *our failure* to fully apprehend *their vulnerability*” (170; emphasis added), declaring that storytelling works as a tool to generate a much-needed ethical response regarding vulnerable travellers. This ethical response does not only entail a specific recognition of the vulnerability of this exposed collective, but a more serious acknowledgement of their humanity. Several sectors of society, including Western governments, have demonised and de-humanised precarious migrants whose lives have never counted as lives at all and that, once gone, are never mourned, which is why Judith Butler conceives them as ungrievable lives (*Precarious Life* 34-35). The unnamed African bodies drowning in the Mediterranean Sea cannot be mourned because their bodies are held as expendable and their lives as other than human, therefore not counting them as losses worth

⁴⁴ Jairus Omuteche defines “illegitimate diasporas” as those diasporas “mostly made up of groups from impoverished/excluded segments of society/countries caught up in regions/countries that form the core of global economic networks” (293).

grieving. In this, storytelling can work as a form of protest against inhuman conceptions of Others, “resurrecting” them as a way of reclaiming them, but it can also function as a coping strategy for those who make it to work through traumatic experiences.

Aesthetically, this novel can be defined as a “border narrative” since it presents characteristics such as “journeying and problematic adaptation, problematization of home, trauma and recuperation, limited subjectivity and lack of agency” (Nyman, *Displacement* 12). According to Maximilian Feldner, this type of “mobile narrative” shows “characters that move back and forth between different places,” which can be seen as “an oscillatory movement that . . . vitally shapes in various ways the literature of the Nigerian diaspora” (Feldner 124). The pendulum-like existence of the characters that populate Habila’s novel are defined by the loss of their homes, nostalgia, sacrifice of their past, social degradation upon their arrival to the destination country –oftentimes perceived as the Promised Land– and suffering. For example, the protagonist geographically rotates between the US, Europe and Africa; Mark also leads a “peripatetic life” between Stockholm, Stuttgart, Potsdam, and Berlin (Habila, *Travellers* 18); Karim and Manu also move across several African countries to reach Europe, where they lived in Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria and eventually Germany. This pendulum-like existence is not exempt from certain vital and existential anxieties induced by the very reality of mobility.

3.1.1.1. An Exploration of the New African Diaspora as Experienced by a Tapestry of Diverse Travellers Journeying Europe

Travellers deliberately depicts communities or subjects that can be defined as belonging to the African diaspora but that mainly move within European migrant circuits so that they can be more accurately analysed as part of the Mediterranean or European-African diaspora. Unlike other literary works dealing with African diasporic subjects whose focus lays

on the Atlantic, Habila's redirects this centrality onto the Mediterranean flows and, more specifically, he draws critical attention to the European refugee crisis we are still bearing witness to. Toyin Falola distinguishes those new manifestations from the Old African diaspora, deeply rooted in notions of slavery, and connected to the black Atlantic trade and forced migration. We should not forget that forcing Africans to travel to the Americas or Europe over three centuries was essential for the industrialisation of European cities and the plantation system in the Americas (Falola, *The African Diaspora* 5). In other words, the transatlantic slave trade was fuelled by African peoples who were used as commodities for capitalist interests in countries from the Global North. On the other hand, the New African diaspora –or what Falola calls the “contemporary transnationalists” or the “recent migrants”– is constituted by members of contemporary waves of African *émigrés* (2).

In this vein, Paul Tiyambe Zeleza underlines the need for reconfigured readings of diaspora in “Rewriting the African Diaspora: Beyond the Black Atlantic” (2005). In this article, he proposes to enlarge and pluralise the idea of “African diaspora” arguing that the term diaspora, along with other narratives such as transnationalism or globalisation, “seek[s] to contest the old settled identities of nation and race and even of class and gender and celebrate the energies of multiple subjectivities” (35). In other words, the new African diaspora is able to accommodate mobile subjects who keep no direct ties with the black Atlantic or the slave trade from previous centuries. Indeed, when we discuss the “New Diaspora,” we mainly refer to the Africans “who migrated after the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade and most especially those who did so in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries” (11). However, as Falola rightly claims, both diasporas, the old and the new, are inextricably linked: “powerlessness in the past led to population loss; and underdevelopment in the present triggers large-scale migrations” (15), which has also led to population loss, as

will be analysed regarding the push and pull factors that force African migrants to leave their home countries in search for better opportunities for them and their families.

The “Old African diaspora,” or the “diaspora of slavery” as Falola points out, consolidated the presence of black peoples throughout Europe, Asia and the Americas (*The African Diaspora* 6). This first wave of African bodies being forced into slavery en route to foreign places mostly took place through the Atlantic Ocean which is why it has also come to be known as the Black Atlantic or the Atlantic World. In this light, Paul Gilroy has proposed and closely examined the idea of the Black Atlantic in his seminal text *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993). For Gilroy, the Black Atlantic constitutes a counterculture of Western modernity where the black subject, conceived in terms of hybridity, métissage and intermixture, was excluded as based on nationalist and ethnocentric discourses. His proposal attempts to locate the black political subject into its own genealogy, while laying bare the limitations and omissions of Western modernity. Nonetheless, Gilroy’s theorisation of the Black Atlantic also has notable limitations in terms of gender, geography and the narrow and static representation of Africa (see, for instance, Evans 2009; Ledent and Cuder-Domínguez 2012; Durán-Almarza and Álvarez-López 2014; Goyal 2014; Cobo-Piñero 2022).

The “New African Diaspora” constitutes an attempt to make the distinction between the forced migratory flows through the Black Atlantic during the fifteenth century onwards and the voluntary massive migrations that started during the twentieth century (especially during the 1950s-1960s and the 1980s decades) of Africans coming from postcolonial countries. This new wave of African migrants decided to travel to Western territories principally “instigated by declining economies and political instability” in their home countries and in order to get a higher education (Falola, *The African Diaspora* 101). As Falola further argues, this new wave of African migratory flows to Western countries (more

specifically to Europe and North America) was also made possible by the “post-civil rights era in the United States” and the possibility of return-migrating to their home countries once they had acquired the necessary skills to find a better-off occupation (255). Indeed, this is the key feature of this new African diaspora, the possibility for diasporans of returning to their homeland(s), which is no longer an irretrievable place. The members of this contemporary diaspora who possess “long-term visas or even citizenships of their host countries” can actually move freely from the host land to the homeland, which allows them to remain connected to their roots (Feldner 16-17). Contrastingly, for members of the old African diaspora “home” eventually became a mere illusion that “exist[ed] in a fractured, discontinuous relationship with the present, forever just out of reach and impossible to restore” (McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*). Besides, it is also relevant to mention the creation of new transnational identities defined by their dual or multiple citizenship and the real chance to negotiate identities and “scattered belongings” (Ifekwunigwe 62). This is what Falola names as “a nonterritorialized identity based on connections with Africa” (*The African Diaspora* 241). The connection with Africa for these migrants is now more feasible than ever, partly due to the presence of the cyberspace that can instantly connects communities and to the availability of faster means of transport.

Now that I have briefly touched upon “the grand diasporic narratives of transatlantic slavery and/or (post)-colonialism(s)” (Ifekwunigwe 56), it is necessary to analyse how this new conception of the African diaspora has been concretised by contemporary Nigerian writers. Indeed, Helon Habila is an active participant of this new diasporic reality, who attempts to resignify concepts such as (the relationship with the) homeland, exile, belonging, identity, co-ethnicity or transnationalism. I thus deem crucial to delve into the many ways the mobile subjects that populate Habila’s latest novel navigate what I call a “diasporic continuum” and how they interpret (sometimes even transcend) key concepts connected to the

diasporic experience. This continuum comprises myriad diasporic experiences, intersectional aspects of ethnicity, gender, religion, class or language that must be taken into account to fully apprehend the diasporic or migrant experience. Furthermore, in the current scenario of (irregular or dispossessed) massive circulation of (subaltern) bodies, European refugee crisis and (hyper-)nationalisms, the need to provide alternative readings of the concepts of traveller, homeland and the nation becomes even more pertinent.

Since the very beginning of the novel, Habila intentionally emphasises the need to travel human beings have felt since the dawn of times. This is reflected on the introductory quotes: “I cannot rest from travel...” (Alfred, Lord Tennyson, ‘Ulysses’) and “It is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home” (Theodore Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*). On the one hand, the line coming from Lord Tennyson’s poem titled “Ulysses” which, in turn, is an intertextual reference to Homer’s *Odyssey*, gives prominence to the idea of a nomadic life. On the other, if the previous line is read alongside Adorno’s, the idea of an exilic and homeless existence is compared with those who travel from one territory to another. Both lines introduce some of the main existential topics that will be explored in the novel and, I would argue, suggest the ambivalent nature of the exilic experience. In this light, not being at home in one’s home can potentially indicate a sense of unbelonging and rootlessness, loss and vital angst. Notwithstanding, if approached from a more positive/globalised lens, it can suggest a way of “inhabiting” the world, that is, a mindset that allows individuals to be comfortable calling home several spatial locations at the same time.

In the novel, we can identify six main “transnationalists” (Falola, *The African Diaspora* 255) and how they are depicted from an African and from a Western perspective. At the beginning of the novel, which is set in 2012, we are told the Nigerian unnamed protagonist has arrived in Berlin with his wife, Gina. This German city becomes the point of

convergence of various forms of African diaspora in different historical moments. This is most clearly exemplified when the narrator visits an exhibition titled “*Apartheid, Exile and Proletarian Internationalism*” that gathers the photographs of “South African exiles in East and West Berlin in the 1970s and 1980s” who fled South Africa to find “succour” in Berlin and “escap[e] persecution and apartheid” in a place that, ironically, “a few decades earlier had been roiling with its own brand of persecution under the Nazis” (Habla, *Travellers* 15-16; italics in the original). The exhibition evinces “a problematic relationship with the past” from an European perspective, while “activat[ing] a link with the memory of empire” (Toivanen, “AfroEuropean Peripheral Mobilities” 362). Likewise, the interpenetration of different waves of African migration in this European country is emphasised and several parallels could be established between the apartheid in South Africa and Nazism in Germany. Finally, it binds together the destinies of Africa and Europe as continents that have always been connected for many reasons.

In *Travellers*, the protagonist is part of what Stephen F. Wolfe calls the “seen migrants” (2021), because Europe is an accessible space where he can be more or less visible, as he is a documented traveller. He holds a dual passport (Nigerian and American), which is why he is allowed to access many places and spaces while travelling in Europe. He is thus considered a legal traveller/upwardly mobile subject not because he is African but because he holds legal documents like a visa or the US passport. However, his privileges in Europe are a mere illusion for various reasons: he is considered an “acceptable” traveller (even a tourist) because he has a green card, and is signified as the husband of a successful US white woman. Free mobility and even humanity are not to be taken for granted as, it appears, are reliant on the nationality of the passport held. This idea is overtly criticised in the novel along with the view that one’s origin and nationality can determine the humanity given to that person. In this sense, Noo Saro-Wiwa’s sentence is all the more appropriate to understand the previous idea:

“[T]he world judges me based on Nigeria’s state of affairs” (Saro-Wiwa qtd. in “My Nigeria”).

Unfortunately, the protagonist’s situation drastically changes when he loses his green card in a train bound for Berlin and his “clandestine” or “arrested odyssey” starts (Toivanen, “Failing Cosmopolitanism” 366). He is relocated to an Italian refugee camp and later deported to Nigeria, becoming an “unseen migrant,” to recuperate Wolfe’s expression.⁴⁵ It is then when he realises he has always been subject to the Western and racist/patronising gaze. This idea is encapsulated in the following question Mark poses to the narrator: “‘Why,’ . . . ‘do white people always assume every black person travelling is a refugee?’” (Habila, *Travellers* 42). Mark, for instance, cannot be considered a refugee, because he is a Malawian film student with a legal visa. Besides, he is also an anti-establishment squatter living in an abandoned church with other migrants, later unveiled as a transgender man (originally Mary Chinomba). Hence, Mark is best defined as a border transgressor/crosser –in gender and geographic terms–, who is always denouncing the status quo and living an activist life against hegemonic power structures that oppress minorities.

Gina, for instance, shows her presumably “artistic activism” with the portraits of the “real and ordinary” migrants she tries to paint. She is also artistically documenting the migrant experience from her own US perspective and thus dictates who can account for a real and authentic idea of migrant and who cannot. For example, when Mark comes to Gina’s flat to be painted, she turns him down because for her, “he wasn’t right [as] his face was too smooth and lacking the character only time and experience brings” (Habila, *Travellers* 4-5). Curiously enough, the very same feature that led Gina to reject Mark as a plausible candidate

⁴⁵ The protagonist is an “unseen migrant” in literal and figurative terms. He is made invisible while relocated to the Italian refugee camp, a non-place or a place of non-existence detached from the city centre, where migrants are basically made obvious. Figuratively, the protagonist is made into an unseen migrant as he is not legally part of any European country. He is now a non-citizen, a pariah waiting to be deported.

attracted the protagonist's attention, who decided to take Mark to the bus stop and get to know him better. It is actually from the protagonist's probably unconscious need to connect with other migrants that he is able to help Mark in an act of black solidarity or even "cosmopolitan camaraderie" (Fongang, "Cosmopolitan Dilemma" 144). For Gina, unsuitable migrants (due to their roots, experiences or age) become dispensable models, but for the protagonist, they become a form of belonging and of rootedness. As depicted in the novel, he is able to reconnect with himself only when he is accompanied by other travellers. However, when Manu –the Libyan traveller– appeared, Gina accepted him because, as the narrator points out, "[h]is face was lined, prematurely old, and I knew Gina would love those lines, each one of them an eloquent testimony to what he had left behind, to the borders and rivers and deserts he had crossed to get to Berlin" (Habila, *Travellers* 5). The same happened to another woman who turned in with her daughter and who was accepted this time because her hands "were dry and scaly, the nails chipped, no doubt ruined while working in some hotel laundry room, or as a scullery maid" (Habila, *Travellers* 5). These passages make us question the discourses, images and representations which present (good/conventional and bad/unconventional) travellers in a simplistic manner and from a pessimist point of view, while actively ignoring that "diasporic continuum" travellers inhabit and their very specific and diverse vital experiences.

Helon Habila addresses the complexities of the concept of "traveller" when delineating the contours of the Nigerian main character. In fact, the protagonist's anonymity (his name is never revealed in the novel) grants him the possibility of being an active participant of the migrant experience (insider position), but also to observe it from the perspective of the migrants he encounters along the journey (outsider position). Formally, this duality (i.e. insider-outsider; actor-spectator) allows Habila to ventriloquise his experience as a translocated author and to present this reality from a vantage position and from a more

unfortunate one. Thematically, this ambivalence allows the protagonist to interrogate the discourses that construct the image of the contemporary migrant(s) but also, to address notions of (un)belonging and of authenticity. Undeniably, the protagonist's encounters with other "underground migrants" (Omuteche 263) during his stays in cosmopolitan countries like Germany, Italy and England make him question his "degree of authenticity" and identity as a traveller: "Whenever I stood in front of the expectant young faces *I felt like a fraud*. Would they take everything I told them as the gospel truth, and *what right did I have*, what knowledge, what experience, *to place myself before them as an authority?* I was only thirty-five; perhaps if I were fifty, *if I had travelled a little more*, live a little more..." (Habila, *Travellers* 10-11; emphasis added). Possibly, this excerpt metaphorically exposes Habila's refusal to present himself as the "authentic" paradigmatic example of the contemporary African traveller because it risks homogenising the migrant experience and obviating other realities characterised by precarity, vulnerability, discrimination or hopelessness. As Stephen F. Wolfe states to this regard, "[t]he system places them [migrants] into categories –refugee or economic migrant, legal or illegal, deserving or undeserving– and these distinctions do not always fit the reality of their lives" (179). Therefore, the diversity that Habila includes in his novel through the tapestry of interconnected migrant experiences constitutes an "act of debordering" (Nyman, "Borderscapes of Calais" 196) which, on the one hand, challenges the very (Western) categories migrants are boxed in and, on the other, aims to reclaim new narratives for African travellers.

3.1.1.2. Afromobilities in Contemporary Europe: Discussing the Role of Buses, Trains, *Heims*, and Deportation/Refugee Camps

In Book 1 ("One Year in Berlin"), the protagonist relocates to Berlin with his wife where he meets several mobile subjects and gets confronted with his privileges as an

“authorised” migrant. I will discuss each single one of the travellers the protagonist encounters but first, I will fully analyse the diasporic trajectory of the main character. It is towards the end of Gina’s stay in Berlin that they break up and the protagonist remains in Berlin and then meets Portia, a Zambian SOAS student who has lived in London and is travelling in Berlin to meet his brother’s German ex-wife. In Book 4 (“The Interpreters”), the protagonist is in a train presumably bound for Zurich where he meets a Somali man called Karim Al-Bashir and his son Mahmoud. Once they arrive in Frankfurt, the protagonist gets out of the train to get the one to Berlin and realises he has lost his bag with his passport and visa so he is taken to another train, bound for the German border, and then relocated to an Italian refugee camp.⁴⁶ In the novel, the train works as a recurrent motif that basically determines the movement of citizens and non-citizens. In the train, the protagonist goes from being a Nigerian and US citizen to being an illegal migrant who does not belong to any Western or non-Western nation. This transition not only entails a “lack of state” and human rights but, as discussed earlier, a progressive de-humanisation.

Trains (and buses too) can also function as the connective tissue among German cities and European countries, but also as microcosms –spaces of human interaction where people get entangled and separated. Ironically, railroads are generally located in the periphery of cities; an element of marginality and eccentricity which is explicitly shared with the travellers that take them. For instance, the Libyan bouncer Manu takes the train from the *heim* with his daughter Rachida to Checkpoint Charlie every Sunday since they arrived in Germany with the hope of meeting his wife Basma and baby son (Habla, *Travellers* 78). The train is not only a

⁴⁶ There is a stark contrast between the hypermobility of Gina, the protagonist’s American ex-wife (Berlin, Virginia, Venice, Dresden and even Rome) and the protagonist’s restricted mobility, which eventually leads him to the Italian refugee camp and later gets him deported to Nigeria. Paradoxically, the former is presented as a tourist throughout the novel while the latter is always defined as a migrant, deportee or refugee. Anna-Leena Toivanen asserts to this respect that “[r]acialised subjects have frequently been excluded from different categories of travel and mobility” so that the idea of travelling as characterised by “affluence, ease, and leisure” do not come to be associated with African mobile subjects, especially if they are underprivileged or impoverished (*Mobilities and Cosmopolitanisms* 47).

means of transport but an element that keeps Manu and Rachida's hope alive and a link with their past when they were all together. For the protagonist, the train bears positive and negative connotations. It allows him to explore freely the new country he is now a citizen of, but it also takes that right away when he loses his documents; a point in the narrative where he becomes a "trespasser" (see McLeod 2020). For him, the train (as with the sea) must be regarded as a rite of passage, as his deportation to Italy happens in between trains, but it also marks the divide between voluntary migration, meaning free mobility (US and Germany) and forced deportation, often related to criminalisation (Italy and Nigeria). Anna-Leena Toivanen reads trucks and boats as metonymies of travel and as "symbolic of [travellers'] arrested mobility" ("The Unattainable Mediterranean" 142).⁴⁷ In this vein, trains can be analysed as governmental instruments to expel illegal newcomers from the respective visiting country: "migrants rounded up and dumped into trains and sent back to their first European country of entry, usually Italy or Greece" and then, they are expected to be "sen[t] back to their countries, or at least Libya or Egypt" but they are left to their own devices in the refugee camps (Habila, *Travellers* 204).

Buses too are elements that relocate subjects with their consent or against their will. In the novel, buses are the desired means of transport to resettle migrants (or "inmates" [Habila, *Travellers* 64]) from one *heim* to another. When neighbours felt "threatened" because refugees presumably "sold drugs and got drunk and fought," turning streets and even entire neighbourhoods into "a dumpster," they filed a complaint to the council and the police was told to go to the *heim* and ordered inmates to "pack their belongings and vacate the building" (64-65). Buses then would relocate them to another *heim*. As Lorelle (Mark's friend) answered to the protagonist when asked what happened to Mark, who lived inside one of

⁴⁷ This ambivalence in terms of mobility is also found in the sailing ship that works as a chronotope (following Mikhail Bakhtin's theorisations) in Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993).

these *heims*, they are taken nowhere or even die. In the specific case of Mark, he arrives in Germany as a legal migrant with a student visa, but he dies in a *heim*, as he is supposedly pushed from the rooftop. Migrants are piled into long double-decker buses with the sentence “*Fahren macht Spass*” (which translates into “Riding is fun”), “accompanied by images of happy families holding hands,” and later “dumped . . . outside the city, in the middle of nowhere” (65; italics in the original). But buses are also regarded as one of the safest places in the novel. Juma, a Nigerian refugee seeker whose application has been turned down and is escaping the authorities, asserts that he used to take the bus on a daily basis when he first came to England, especially at night, and also because “in winter it was the warmest and safest place he could be” until a driver reported him (Habila, *Travellers* 274). In this light, trains and buses become uncanny elements that can legally transport expellees from one place to another, but they can also function as a tool to voluntarily get lost when you have nowhere to go.

Heims are also worth examining. *Heim* translates into “home,” but also into “country” or “nation” in German, which is a rather ironic name since *heims* are, mainly, refugee camps where migrants are interned before being notified their (non-)acceptance as a legal refugee, but they also constitute a miniature Africa in this novel. In *Travellers*, Mark is taken to the *Flüchtlingsheim* (Habila, *Travellers* 35), an “un-homely” place characterised by the “fetid and moist and revolting” smell of unhealthy cooking and “unwashed bodies,” where shoes and mattresses are all scattered on the floor “cluttering the passage between the beds” (57 and 58). Mark’s *heim* “was an abandoned school building, most of its windows had no panes, and its yard was overgrown with grass and trash” (57). Also, the four-storey building was organised according to gender and nationality factors as if it were a small-scale Africa where people are

separated according to their country of origin. *Heims* are thus portrayed as temporary “contact zones” between cultures and ethnicities, where transnational alliances are forged.⁴⁸

Moreover, there is a trans-historical resemblance between the German refugee camps and the Nazi concentration camps. The legacy of the Holocaust is symbolically perceived via the confined spaces devoted to those subjects who were despised for one reason or another, and in the form of trauma generated as a consequence of the displacement and massacre of entire families based on their ethnicity (see Mirmotahari 2020). As shown in the novel, the barbarities committed against the Jews by the Nazi regime can be easily compared with the atrocities against Africans by the neo-Nazis in present-day Western societies. Both groups, illegal migrants and Jews, share the traumatic component of their specific circumstances. In fact, there are several instances of neo-Nazi attacks to two of the migrants that the protagonist encounters: Manu and Juma. For Manu, he was working on “the strawberry and grape fields of Greece where he spent last season picking fruit, sleeping on hard floors” and, Habila adds, “escaping the police and the neo-Nazis” (Habila, *Travellers* 75). Whereas for Juma, he also worked picking strawberries in a Greek farm but, when he was denied his monthly income, he complained and was persecuted for days by skinheads (276-277). The worrying resurgence of neo-Nazi and far-right ideologies throughout Europe is very obvious in this fiction (and in real life too), which exemplifies the violent reaction against irregular migrants, together with the contemporary forms of slavery in this continent, which confirms that “colonialism persists under metamorphosed forms” (Sánchez-Palencia Carazo, “Cosmopolitan [Dis]Encounters” 113). In the novel, Manu and Juma are treated as unskilled labour while working in Greece (being this Mediterranean country a paradigmatic example of this situation in most, if not all,

⁴⁸ In 1991, Mary Louise Pratt introduced the expression “contact zone” in her article “Arts of the Contact Zone” to refer to the “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (34).

European countries) which exhibits the exploitation of people who might actually be highly specialised workers (as Manu who is a surgeon in Libya) and the hypocrisy of capitalist European economies, which are largely dependent on migrant workforce but unashamedly spread hate against minority subjects.⁴⁹

In Book 5 (“The Sea”), once the protagonist arrives in the Italian deportation or refugee centre, he desperately tries to recover his legal status, but he fails and is forced to remain there until his final deportation, becoming part of what Peter Nyers addresses as “abject diaspora [or] *deportspora*” (1070; italics in the original). For Victoria Canning, enclosed spaces such as detention or deportation centres, which deliberately erode migrants’ autonomy “through spatial isolation” and “informal confinement,” are regarded as “micro-level, everyday forms of bordering” and as “bureaucratic violence” (210). Canning contends that the main purpose of these isolating spaces is “the removal of unwanted migrant bodies,” since “out of sight becomes out of mind for the majority society” (221). In the novel, the refugee centre is described as a “red-brick structure” with rusted iron roofs covered by thousands white tents and characterised by the “unbearable smell” (Habila, *Travellers* 199). The camp is later associated with a “prisoner-of-war camp in WWII” whose “smell of misery and despair” that resulted from “human effluence and trash” made the place unmistakable and uninhabitable (200).

Migrants were brought to this falling-apart structure “as soon as they arrived in their boats, to be examined by the doctors, to be deloused, to be registered, and *officially welcomed to Europe*” (Habila, *Travellers* 200; emphasis added). Indeed, the underfunded, overcrowded

⁴⁹ As Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt asseverate, “[m]ass migrations have become necessary for [capitalist] production” since the production in dominant regions of the Global North “is utterly dependent on the influx of workers from the subordinate regions” of the Global South (398 and 400; see also Umo Ette 2012). Aihwa Ong argues to this respect that, as a consequence of this situation, exploited migrants are thus assimilated into a sort of “universalized lower-class subjects” (9), where social mobility is deliberately denied.

and fenced centre had a sign that prayed “*Welcome Centre*” (200), which, together with the *heims* and other detention centres, not only constitute a symbol of the “new migration” (Wolfe 178), but also attest to the ironic perversity of such spaces and the abandonment and uncertainty newcomers face when they arrive after their “long ordeal on the sea” (Habila, *Travellers* 201). Although the director claims the centre is not a prison and migrants “are free to go if they want” (201), this ghettoised place is under strict surveillance. As the centre is next to the Mediterranean Sea, coast guards are on patrol around it and a Frontex helicopter controls the waters (203).

Most people living there are traumatised because of their extremely harsh experiences when trying to reach the Italian coasts through those “clandestine flows” (Omuteche 292). Physically, migrants arrive in rather inhuman conditions: some had “feet rotting in their wet shoes,” “shit and vomit caked to their skin,” others were delirious and pregnant women were forced to have emergency caesareans if their foetuses were dead (Habila, *Travellers* 201-202).⁵⁰ These abject and eschatological descriptions that have become central in the account of precarious and less successful migratory experiences suggest the presence of stagnant migrants. Precarious travellers, whose lives are characterised by stagnation and parallel lack of agency, cannot move on geographically, physically or mentally with absolute freedom because they seem to be forever “trapped in spaces supposed to be only temporary, intermediate stopping points” (Toivanen, “The Unattainable Mediterranean” 135) such as refugee camps, detention centres or even *heims*. These places have thus become a painful borderscape or a “limboscape” (Nyman, “Borderscapes of Calais” 203), where border-crossers and refugee seekers are existentially confined while “awaiting to be processed” (Habila, *Travellers*, 202). As with *heims*, refugee camps can be regarded as “sites of

⁵⁰ These abject descriptions make me read migrants through a Kristevan lens and theorise their bodies in transit as threatening entities that need to be rejected and expelled outside European limits as excreta of the “old continent’s” orderly system (see Kristeva 1982).

pathological regimes of ‘in/visibility’ in which people are made ‘publicly invisible’ and excluded from politics at the same time as they are made ‘publicly visible’ as ethnicised or racialised others” (Schimanski and Nyman 4).⁵¹

During his stay here, the unnamed protagonist meets Matteo, a volunteering doctor in the camp who is able to help him get out from there as he is not a real refuge seeker. The protagonist, nonetheless, appears apathetic and with no will to continue living as a result of his being stuck in a deadly place with no way out and the killing frustration of not being able to move: “Who is to say *if I am not dead already*, the people around me could be shadows, wraiths like me. If I am alive, then I am *barely alive. Barely walking, mostly standing* and staring at the water” (Habla, *Travellers* 208; emphasis added). This description can be best connected to Anna-Leena Toivanen’s theorisation of “zombified mobilities” (“Zombified Mobilities” 120). For her, “zombified migrants” are a metaphorical image that best describes the reality of these stuck and stagnant travellers, since the zombie-migrant is presented as “a threatening alterity” that comes to invade Europe, thus revealing a visceral fear of being invaded or displaced by those who were formerly colonised, but also “as a victim of unending abjection, alienation, and dehumanization” (122). In this sense, the protagonist, while in Italy, can accurately be defined as a “zombified migrant” due to his decaying physical state but also because he is constructed as part of a discourse that conceptualises (poor/undocumented) migrants as outsiders, ready to trespass national boundaries and that need to be kept away from European citizens. Eventually, Matteo takes the protagonist to the Tunisian coast so that he can go back to Nigeria, his home country, and try to recover his legal status as a traveller.

⁵¹ In the *heims*, the borderscape is internally and externally enacted. Internally, the borderscape operates between genders (the floors are segregated into the “women and children’s section” and the “men section,” which is a problem for the transgender character, Mark, who destabilises such divisions), languages, ethnicities or nationalities (Nigerians, Asians, Libyans, etc.), cultural practices (religion, food, attire, etc.), classes (traders, doctors, students, etc.). Externally, the borderscape constitutes the liminal space between the city centre, where authorised citizens live, and the outskirts, where presumed illegal aliens reside.

After arriving in Nigeria, the protagonist decides to go back to the US and finish his PhD and, after doing it, he relocates to London to reunite with Portia.

Portia is the daughter of James Kariku, a Zambian exiled poet who mostly lived in European countries. This “professional” exile, as he is described by Portia, belonged to the “nationalist era in African politics that produced young idealistic men” (Habla, *Travellers* 132 and 134), forced to relocate because the national government would imprison or kill them straightaway. He was able to escape and exile became his new reality, thus spending the rest of his life in a perpetual state of limbo (132). Exile proved a very fruitful experience for Portia’s father, as it gave him the possibility of “becom[ing] an international celebrity” (133) thanks to his own diasporic situation. Her father was granted several positions and fellowships in England, America and Denmark, so he “developed a taste for exile” (134). After decades trotting the world, Portia’s father came back home and became “irreparably damaged by exile” (126). He felt disoriented at home, “unsure where he was, or what day it was” (137), and died soon after his return.

As aforementioned, the protagonist reunites with Portia in London after finishing his PhD in the US. It is in London where he encounters another Nigerian migrant called Juma, a young displaced man on hunger strike. In Book 6 (“Hunger”), the protagonist recounts his experience while arriving in London, a city highly influenced by the Brexit dream. Once there, he finds a demonstration against foreigners, where people shouting “‘Go back!’ and ‘Where is he?’ and ‘Fucking illegals!’ (270) were gathered in front of a bus with the words: “*Foreigners Out!*” (254; italics in the original). Juma was supposed to be an asylum seeker who was about to be deported and, in order to avoid that, he asked for help to the members of a humanitarian organisation. They hid him in the flat the protagonist was sharing with Portia, where Juma “sat hunched forwards, hands clasped between his knees, his eyes looking out at

me, waiting, unsure of his welcome. It was a face used to be turned away, kicked out, *a pariah dog*” (271; emphasis added). Juma is presented as an individual who is mentally absent and physically damaged by his self-imposed fasting. Eventually, his deportation is not effected and he remains captive in a cell, in a removal centre in Harmondsworth, until he is unable to eat or drink anything else, “he shrinks [and] regresses, back to childhood, curled up in a corner foetus-like, his flesh withers, his bones become as frail as twigs” and eventually, “the guards open the door and he is not there, only a pile of twigs on the floor” that the cleaner will later sweep, bag and throw away in the dumpster” (295).

3.1.1.3. Into the Deep Blue Sea: Analysing the Mediterranean Sea as a Site of Pain, Trauma and Shame

It is also worth examining the relevance of the Mediterranean Sea as another recurrent motif in Habila’s novel and in other diasporic texts. The Mediterranean Sea becomes a sort of spectral and traumatic presence, which keeps on haunting the bodies who have traversed it and survived. Stephen F. Wolfe affirms that the tragic episode off the island of Lampedusa in 2013 changed forever the image of this sea and came to be associated with the so-called migrant crisis. As Wolfe further contends, this event turned “the Mediterranean Sea into another version of the Black Atlantic where the sea has again become haunted by the Middle Passage and death” for those migrants trying “to escape poverty, disease, dehumanisation and religious oppression in their home countries” (181). This “seascape of pain” (Mehta 46) has become the umbilical cord between Africa and Europe and eventually turned into the very reason of Africans’ trauma in Habila’s text.

Most characters in the novel are overwhelmed by the spectral presences of the dead bodies drowned in this “bottomless” sea, while its very presence is known to be a foundational aspect of the diasporic experience. The Mediterranean Sea is ambivalently

portrayed as a “postcard-idyllic” view of its “endless blue” (Habila, *Travellers* 199) and as a terrifying and uncertain body of “inky black [water] with silent ghostly eyes like lamps” (234). Furthermore, this sea is depicted as a sort of palimpsest that harbours myriad stories, and as the intersection of multiple temporalities (past, present and future), vital moments (dead or alive) and emotions (joy, love, courage, despair, hope, nostalgia). For the protagonist, the image of the sea is accompanied with a sense of disorientation or rather, his disorientation has triggered the traumatic memory of this “inky black” sea: “I stood there, disoriented by the teargas, my eyes and nostrils streaming freely. I was alone on a tiny island, and all around me the sea was roiling and crashing with nameless rage” (Habila, *Travellers* 26). Later on in the novel, when he is safely taken by boat to the Tunisian coast, the sea acquires a more baptistic dimension, as it constitutes a decisive moment in the protagonist’s journey that is now free from the Italian detention camp and able to go back to his home country, Nigeria. For him, this quasi-oneiric episode brings him closer to his own death and to the demise of thousands of migrants who have already perished in this new “21st-century Mediterranean holocaust” (Mehta 56) trying to do the journey he is now reverse-following:

I close my eyes but I can’t sleep, under the engine sound I hear the susurrations of the wind on the water, and soon I am on the deck, standing by the rail watching the water. It is dark, the fog lies thickly over the water and there is nothing to be seen but the inky black. I feel as if there is no deck under me – I am standing over the water, and when I bend down I see my reflection glowing up at me, my forehead glistens with sweat. I am ... I look terrified. A restless, writhing motion fills the water. Fish. A school of them in a feeding frenzy, but when I bend closer, my face almost touching the water, I see they are not fish, they are human. *Bodies floating face-up, limbs thrashing, tiny hands reaching up to me. Hundreds of tiny hands, thousands of faces, until the surface of the water is filled with silent ghostly eyes like lamps shining at me,*

and arms reaching up to be grasped; they float amidst a debris of personal belongings, toys, shoes, shirts, and family pictures all slowly sinking into a bottomless Mediterranean. (Habila, *Travellers* 234; emphasis added)

This quote reinforces the transhistorical “parallel between contemporary clandestine migration and slavery” (Toivanen, “The Unattainable Mediterranean” 145), while giving centrality to those sedimented human traces –in the form of spectral presences– that signal to an unresolved traumatic past and present for (clandestine) African mobile subjects.⁵²

Likewise, for Manu, the water entails the only solution to the problems in his home country and the permanent separation with his wife Basma and baby son when the boat they were using sank. For Portia, the image of a river in Basel is able to evoke the same traumatic response: “She imagined drowned bodies floating in the water” (Habila, *Travellers* 112). For the woman in the Italian refugee centre, the sea becomes the place where her children drowned, which is why she always faces the fence of the camp that looks at the sea, so that she can listen to the voices of her deceased offspring. For Matteo, the Italian doctor, the water brought him Basma and her baby son, who he tricked into believing they were his own family. For Basma, the sea only led to the separation of her family and her further rootlessness (which is also emphasised by her husband Manu when he says: “I have no country” [Habila, *Travellers* 87]): “*We saw them bring up the bodies and throw them in the water. Our engine was on fire, the captain wanted to turn back, but we begged him to go on. We would rather die in the water than go back. There was nothing to go back to*” (229-230;

⁵² In a similar light, these sedimented traces can also be subtly perceived as embedded within the urban space (or urbanscape). In the novel, the most current stratum, being the “migrant crisis,” is trans-historically intertwined with another stratum: the Nazi regime. This connection is made evident in the passage where the protagonist fantasises with having a conversation with a German passer-by in which they would discuss the square where they are seated, named after the political figure George Grosz, “a painter, intellectual, rebel, who survived the First World War, and defied the Nazis in the Second, and fled to America only to be driven back to Berlin by nostalgia” (Habila, *Travellers* 8). In the juxtaposition of past and present, the Nigerian migrant and the German painter imaginarily coincide in this urban meeting point where identification, in terms of exile, nostalgia and suffering, is made possible.

italics in the original). Once again, Habila brings our attention to the brutality of the voyage when exploring the many ways unspeakable trauma is articulated by these individuals. In each case, the sea becomes an absent presence in the lives of traumatised subjects who have lost their beloved ones in some shipwreck.

3.1.2. Transcending the “Almost Obligatory Obsession of the African Writer with the Nation”?: Revisiting Home in the Post-National Context

In an interview, Helon Habila pointed out *Travellers* is a novel that “re-examine[s] the whole idea of borders and the nation-state and how these [African] nations were created by the colonial powers.” He highlighted that Nigerian writers are still attempting to “re-imagine what it means to be a Nigerian” within and outside the boundaries of the colonial nation-state, which “were never meant to work” (“Helon Habila on Travelling and Borders”). Nigerian writers from Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka to Chigozie Obioma or Helon Habila have overtly addressed “the politics of affiliation” (Dalley 16) to the Nigerian (post-)colonial nation from different perspectives in an attempt to “grapple with the search for a coherent meaning of the idea of nation and national belonging” (Nwakanma 3). Likewise, notable female exponents in Nigerian literature, such as Buchi Emecheta or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, have also counter-discursively touched upon the often debated (masculinised) configurations of the nation. In this sense, I argue that the Nigerian novel cannot but be conceptualised as “the product of an intense interrogation of its social and mythical meanings, as well as the attempt to apprehend the historical forces that have confluenced to shape . . . the idea of Nigeria as a product of modernity, and its inheritance of the conditions of postcoloniality” (Nwakanma 2).

Thus, it is paramount to analyse how contemporary Nigerian novels revisit different politics of affiliation and also examine how twenty-first-century writers conceptualise Nigeria

as a “product of [post]modernity,” to use Nwakanma’s words (2). This innovative formal and thematic relationship with the postcolonial nation is directly related to “a new politics of spatial detachment and displacement” (17), most clearly represented by an “emergent Cosmopolitan [or Afropolitan] awareness” (16), embodied by highly mobile authors. It is of no surprise that the new “transnational” novel has come to be recognised as the postmodern “product of the dispersal or migration of memory” and the reconfiguration of the idea of home and national (dis-)affiliation by those “travelling identities” (2).

Furthermore, it is pertinent to analyse Helon Habila’s notion of “post-nationalist” African writer. As Habila emphasises in the Introduction of the *The Granta Book of the African Short Story* (2011), the new post-nationalist generation of African authors has the potential to “liberate itself from the often predictable, almost obligatory obsession of the African writer with the nation and with national politics” which can be sometimes “restrictive and confining to the African writer’s ambition” (“Introduction” viii). Similarly, Habila further delineates the contours of what for him anticipates a paradigm shift in African literature in his article “The Future of African Literature” (2019). He asserts that the idea of the African nation and the loyalty to this (constructed) idea is being reshaped by third-generation writers who understand Africa as “these diasporic communities in which [African authors] live, or the online communities to which [they] belong” (158). Habila emphasises the need to rethink the African nation in order to overcome the chronic and pathological dependency of an “imagined community” that is of colonial architecture. In order to do this, he puts forth the idea of the “post-nationalist” writer: a figure “unfettered by tradition or national expectation” who is able to show “new potentials for African writing” (158). For him, this paradigm-shift is more evidently appreciated in contemporary novels such as

Brian Chikwava's *Harare North* [2009], about Zimbabweans in London; Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* [2007], about African prostitutes in Belgium; Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* [2007], about Ethiopians in Washington, DC; E. C. Osondu's collection of stories, *Voice of America* [2011], about Nigerians in America; Teju Cole's *Open City* [2011], set in New York; [or] Uwem Akpan's collection, *Say You Are One of Them* [2008], set in different African cities. (Habila, "Introduction" viii; italics in the original)

This new wave of deracinated writers are able, in Habila's opinion, to provide "a way forward for African literature in general . . . out of the endless loop of nationalism and anti-colonialism" (Habila, "The Future" 159; see also Habila 2014). In other words, this post-nationalist position would allow African writers to introduce more up-to-date conceptions of what it means to be African.⁵³ Finally, these diasporic authors –a group closely related to Taiye Selasi's *Afropolitans*, as I will discuss further on– have been born in Africa but "live and work outside Africa for so long that the meaning of home has become complicated," and come to be conceived in pluralistic terms (158). Indeed, signifying home as multiple or collective, never a fixed location, and a sense of belonging as fluid is very much in line with the characters of the novel under scrutiny.

Ironically, Habila's novels prior to *Travellers* have all dealt, to a greater or lesser extent, with the dysfunctionality of the Nigerian nation and its turbulent political situation,

⁵³ These postulates on the limiting categories of African writing/writer have been previously outlined by other renowned authors such as Ben Okri, Aminatta Forna, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie or Chris Abani. In the article in the 2014 edition of the *Caine Prize for African Writing*, Habila already discussed these arguments about the need to re-examine what we call "African writing" in less restrictive ways. Habila proposes what he actually achieves in his latest novel, the crossing of (national and canonical) boundaries, so that African authors are no longer circumscribed by the "pass-laws that sought to restrict where African literature can go" (2014) or what can account as "truly" and "authentically" African (see Habila 2013; Ngozi Adichie 2008) in a diversified way. Aminatta Forna (2015), for instance, overtly rejects the label "African writer" who can be inaccurate and somehow reductionist, unable to account for the complex experience of writers like her, whose identity is rooted/routed in different continents and nationalities. In this light, being categorised as an "African writer" not only ignores her mixed heritage but renders unviable the universalist potential of literature pinning writers down under essentialising labels (see also Okri 2014; Goyal 2014; Selasi 2015).

which have allowed some critics to even define him as “a literary chronicler of post-independence Nigeria” (Feldner 85). This apparent contradiction leads me to pose the following questions: Are we dealing with a writer who overtly rejects the limiting definitions of the postcolonial nation to discuss, from a peripheral position, the role of the African nation in today’s African literature and its impact on the way Africans regard themselves? Or are we in front of a paradox? In this regard, Madhu Krishnan points out that “it would be a mistake to view this seemingly incompatibility between Habila the critic and Habila the author as the sign of a contradiction” (“Introduction” ix). Habila’s theorisations about the post-national African writer do not indicate “a turn away from the local” (Goyal, “Interview” 230), but “a multiplicity of affiliations, scales of engagement, and modalities of address” (Krishnan, “Introduction” ix).

In addition, it is paramount to remember that the post-national is also anchored in notions of postcolonialism and nationalism. As Bwesigye Bwa Mwesigire reminds us, “[p]ostnationalism is not necessarily anti-nationalist writing nor is anti-postcolonial. The postnational generation are at once postcolonial, nationalist, transnational, Afropolitan, and other labels” (113). Then, we can conclude that, in order to fully apprehend the post-national, we need to pay attention to the national. Delphine Fongang posits too that this interest with the African nation has not been ignored or surpassed by afrosporic authors, but rather “pushed to the back burner,” while being represented “with new creative ways” from a more global position (“Introduction” 6). This, she argues, results from a change in the focus of these writers towards “global issues of migration, citizenship, identity, racial hierarchies, and cultural dilemma in transnational spaces” (6). Fongang highlights that these new diasporic narratives must be read as “fluid texts that capture global concerns in geographically varied spaces in a postmodern environment” and not solely “emerging from specific national, cultural or geographical origin” (6). In this vein, I argue Habila’s latest “post-nationalist”

novel operates within this theorisation of the “post-national” as simultaneously addressing the national/local and the global.

Starting with Habila’s suggestive words in the Acknowledgements section: “In your travels, may you find the home you look for” (*Travellers*), they actually subscribe Habila’s conceptions in his previous articles and initiate a conversation on the nuanced forms home is navigated. Later in the novel, we can find other examples of the challenging, certainly more fractured, conceptions of home for migrants. In this sense, one should make a distinction between the travellers who have voluntarily migrated to Europe and the ones forced to leave their countries due to civil wars, political unrest or religious persecution. The former group (more affluent and mobile) –namely the protagonist, Portia and Mark– have all successfully flown from their home countries (Nigeria, Zambia and Malawi, respectively) to Germany with their legal documents, and might find easier to be at home anywhere, depicting a privileged cosmopolitanism. Conversely, the rest of migrants featuring the novel –namely Manu, Karim and Juma (Lybian, Somalian and Nigerian, respectively)– have all precariously migrated to Europe by boat and ended up interned in different refugee camps. This second group of (lower-class) travellers reveals a “condition of statelessness, a tenuous *entre-deux* positionality characterized by flux, precariousness, and errancy” (Mehta 49; italics in the original). Such assortment of characters draws attention to, firstly, the differing ways migrants, according to their status, “dwell” the hostland (usually developing a contradictory relationship with the receiving country) and, secondly, how they relate to the motherland they have voluntarily or involuntarily left behind.

The protagonist in Habila’s novel travels from Nigeria to the US in order to pursue a PhD and it is during this period that he meets Gina. The protagonist travels with a scholarship and later receives the US nationality once he marries a US woman. As he affirms, “during his

early months in the US, he missed his mother so much he felt embarrassed by how much he missed her, but after a while he got over that. Gina had replaced his family, and he was not lonely any more” (Habila, *Travellers* 219). At this stage, the protagonist is clearly not in a state of homelessness or even statelessness. He now belongs to the US society, partly because he is in love with Gina. For him, the connection with one city or another relies on the personal liaisons he establishes with certain people attached to those places, as it will happen again when he meets Portia. At this point, the protagonist’s story distances from “the suffered tone of the typical immigrant story” (Obi-Young, “Cover Story”) by showing successful forms of migration, more in line with a cosmopolitan or Afropolitan aesthetics. However, it is when he and Gina travel to Berlin that his ordeal begins. When the protagonist loses his green card, he becomes a homeless and even stateless traveller, who is now located in a peripheral territory away from the city centre.

For Portia, home becomes a faraway place where her family lives, especially her mother. She lives in London where she is doing her MA at SOAS and, at some point, she decides to travel to Basel, Switzerland, to visit Katharina, his brother’s ex-wife, and finds out why she murdered him. It is on her way to Basel that she spends some days in Berlin, where she is couchsurfing, and meets the protagonist with whom she becomes infatuated. For Portia, being a Zambian traveller with a student visa, travelling Europe freely without the fear of being detained and deported is a reality. However, London, her current place of residence, is not a welcoming city for her. As mentioned in the novel, “[s]he fell ill constantly, she was sick for home, sick for something she didn’t know” (Habila, *Travellers* 245). Home is a place in Zambia, where her mother lives and returning home becomes not only a possibility for her but a form of ensuring her own wellbeing.

When introducing Mark in the novel –the Malawian student–, we find that he earned a student visa and moved to Berlin for two reasons: pursuing a BA in Drama Studies and being able to live according to his felt gender identity. For Mark, home is no longer his birth country, Malawi, but Germany, where he is surrounded by a community of supportive African and German fellows who accept his transgender identity, and he no longer feels like a foreigner in his own body. In this sense, the possibility of return is not available for him, and certainly not desired as his family does not know (and would not accept) his gender identity. In fact, this traveller prefers to live a transitional existence and die in Europe, rather than returning to his motherland and be oppressed by traditional notions of the self, in terms of gender and sexuality. Then, I would argue that home, in the same vein as identity and the body, is also performed. If we theorise home, like gender, as a fluid concept always in the making, it is not difficult to contend that home, especially for displaced and de-territorialised sojourners, is not so much related to a fixed territory but to the circumstances that make a place welcoming and familiar. It is for this reason that, while Malawi is signified as a place where Mark no longer belongs to, Berlin is regarded as a homely place where he can eventually re-connect with his identity and thrive as a (transgender) man.

I will hereafter analyse how home is interpreted from the perspective of Manu, Karim and Juma. All of them can be labelled as precarious and undocumented migrants, who have run away from their African countries due to different reasons: Manu gets to escape from war-torn Lybia with his children and wife on a boat; Karim reaches European soil with his large family illegally crossing different African and European borders to escape religious persecution; while Juma also escapes Nigeria because his village was being attacked by religious extremists. All these examples of nomadic, precarious bodies do accord with “the suffered tone of the typical immigrant story” (Obi-Young, “Cover Story”), and put forth traumatic conceptions of home (and of diaspora), where return is out of reach. In this sense,

home is represented as a place that is retrieved only through memory (“If they keep their memories alive, then nothing has to die” [Habila, *Travellers* 97]), depicted as a sort of “phantasmatic” entity (Goyal, *Romance* 8). Besides, it is crucial to analyse how these travellers relate to Europe and the unethical European response to their presence.

One common feature of these three forced *émigrés* is that they all regard themselves as stateless and homeless Africans for whom home is an unattainable place. Manu tells Angela, a German client from the club where he works as a bouncer, that he has no country (Habila, *Travellers* 87). Ironically, even though he lives a detached existence in the *heim* with her daughter Rachida, he is clearly a rootless and dislocated man who no longer belongs to his home country, because it has been destroyed by war and he cannot belong to his country of settlement as he is regarded as a “non-national Other” (Lentin 38), and thus denied any form of national affiliation with the adopted country. This outsidership is also reinforced by the personal relationships and encounters he experiences with several German people. For instance, when he meets Angela, she offers him money to take her home and then to have sex with him. From that first night onwards, Manu has a number of sexual encounters with Angela and she offers him food regularly. One day, Manu comes with Rachida to Angela’s house and he is introduced to Angela’s ex-husband, whose reaction is overtly hostile, forcing the outsiders to leave. This incident and other everyday practices exemplify how migrants are forced to assert themselves in inhospitable places that marginalise them, constantly reminding them they are not welcome.

Karim is another example of forced migration due to religious conflicts, because his country of origin, Somalia, “descended into political chaos” once the then-president died and “[f]actions organized around family ties and tribal loyalty divid[ing] the country into fiefs overseen by tribal warlords” (Habila, *Travellers* 168). He and his family were forced to leave

Somalia, as the son of one of these warlords became obsessed with Karim's youngest daughter and threatened to destroy their shop and harm the whole family if they did not allow the marriage. They all left Mogadishu to arrive to Yemen; from there, they went to Syria until war broke out and they were forced to relocate to Turkey. There, they decided to cross the border until they reached Bulgaria and then travelled again to Germany (Habla, *Travellers* 168-189). Karim and his family cannot go back to their country, since home has now become a dangerous place, and they cannot certainly lead a stable existence in Europe as they do not have the required legal documents. Once they reach Europe, Karim and his family, as undocumented migrants, lead an existence characterised by forced "uncertainty, unknowing, unbelonging, and unpredictability" (Fongang, "Inescapable Predicament" 29), which is clearly exemplified in the mistreatment they receive upon their arrival to Bulgaria. Even though they carry the "refugee protection paper from UNHCR" they received in Yemen, they are told they "have no right here" since they have "enter[ed] this country illegally," and they are considered criminals or "illegal alien[s]" and therefore placed in a prison-turned-refugee camp (Habla, *Travellers* 181-182). This "permanent state of physical and psychological homelessness" (Mehta 49) is fundamentally motivated by hypocritical notions of hospitality in Europe, which are directly based on the conception of refugees/migrants as "inhuman" or, as Brinda Mehta aptly affirms, on an "unacceptable humanity created by the politics of alterity" (44).

Finally, it is worth discussing Juma, a Nigerian escapee and undocumented refugee, whose personal story is obtained through his self-penned memoir before being deported. As mentioned earlier, he is a displaced subject because he left his home country due to the attack of religious extremists, leaving behind his own parents. After leaving Nigeria, he spent six months in the Federal Republic of Niger, living in a ramshackle settlement with other refugees, then, he left for Lybia where he was arrested by the border police and spent months

in prison. He escaped and crossed the Mediterranean Sea with other migrants arriving in Greece. He was attacked by neo-Nazis when he complained he had not been paid for his services working the land and he escaped again to arrive to what he calls the “*Calais Jungle*” (Habila, *Travellers* 291; italics in the original). From Calais, he was smuggled by truck to Dover Beach, England, which is the place where he meets the protagonist. For him, as with other previously-discussed travellers, home is an irretrievable place, as it has been turned into a brutal caliphate, but also because he had very possibly lost his family at the hands of fanatics: “*my eyes were always turned toward home, I dreamt every day of my father and my mother, and I wondered what had happened to them that day I left*” (286; italics in the original).

Additionally, and as this character decides to start a hunger strike upon his arrival in England, it is interesting to analyse voluntary starvation as a political tool used to denounce the institutional violence faced by migrants when they enter Fortress Europe under rather adverse circumstances, but also significantly as a form of psychosomatising the traumatic loss of home, even as a form of mourning such personal and national losses. Juma admits at the end of his memoir:

I want the perfect food. I tell them [the guards who keep an eye on him at Harmondsworth Removal Centre] I want manna, or ambrosia, the food of the gods themselves, and they thought I was joking, but I am serious. I want the perfect food, but where can I find it here on earth? I want my mother’s food, the one I grew up eating. I want the first food I ever ate in this world. I want my mother’s milk, but by now I am sure my mother is dead. (Habila, *Travellers* 293; italics in the original)

While “he regresses back to childhood” before dying, he keeps on “thirsting for [his] mother’s milk” (295), as the only form of nourishment, which is regarded as the remaining nexus with

his home and family. As Juma admits, he is fasting, but also lacking appetite, because the food he desperately wants and needs is no longer available, just like home. For Juma, hunger strike becomes the only physical and psychic form of processing, and perhaps coming to terms with, an irretrievable past and an impossible future.

Hunger is also examined in this novel as a subversive tool to rebel against highly punitive migrant policies –exemplified in the proliferation of refugee camps, detention centres and the reinforcement of external European borders– directed towards the control and repression of “abject cosmopolitans” (Nyers 1071).⁵⁴ This group of de-humanised and rejected travellers is characterised by an unstable affiliation to the hostland. As Nyers further argues, this assortment of cosmopolitans are regarded as victims, “*de-connected*” and “subjected to often *violent detachment*,” but also denied national belonging in a place other than the motherland (1072; italics in the original). In this light, I consider the term “cosmopolitanism” can be successfully applied to this group of abject migrants, such as Juma and the rest, when emphasising the agency-less of the displaced subjects who aim to belong and be “connected” to the hostland but that such options are externally denied to them. Back to the idea of hunger, it operates here as a useful tool to symbolically interpellate Western nations about the embodied violence they exert on certain foreigners that are considered illegal and undeserving, together with their immunisation “toward the pain and suffering of others” (Mehta 48). In this vein, self-imposed deprivation is used in the novel to bring attention to this urgent problem: “*they will continue to detain people, long after I am gone and forgotten*” (Habla, *Travellers* 293; italics in the original). Thus, this self-inflicted

⁵⁴ In his attempt to pluralise (but also to problematise) the term “cosmopolitan” in order to probe its validity in the discussion of a segment of undocumented and impoverished migrants, Peter Nyers has also acknowledged the seeming discrepancy between these two terms (i.e. “abject” and “cosmopolitan”). He points out that this “revolutionary” association can prove useful as it may, in fact, focus on the mutual dichotomy “abject-subject” which, according to this author, “has an important role in self/other encounters and relationships” (1073), hence contributing to provide more nuanced and updated manifestations of twenty-first-century cosmopolitanism(s).

violence is employed to generate a sympathetic response and stop mistreatment but, most importantly, it is utilised as the ultimate form of regaining control over this migrant's destiny. Hunger thus becomes "an act of heroism, [even] an act of defiance" that is able to "challeng[e] the whole notion of who decides where [and if] we live" ("Helon Habila on Travelling and Borders").

All these experiences not only show the multiple conceptions of home for migrants and their very reasons to travel, many times risking their lives, to European soil. These experiences exhibit myriad representations of European peripheries, while depicting the European nation-state as an exclusionary entity (Lentin 2004; De Genova et al. 2018; Kastoryano 2018). As a matter of fact, current essentialising and xenophobic nationalist agendas, which centre the debates about migration on the purity and authenticity of the nation, oftentimes argue that diaspora people cannot be part of a common nation-building project and are, therefore, nationally excluded from sharing a common identity. This is most clearly perceived in the novel through the neo-Nazi attacks Manu and Juma suffered while working as temporary labourers in Greece (Habila, *Travellers* 75 and 277). Neo-Nazis relentlessly brutalise and chase migrants out in an attempt to preserve such purity within their own societies; a practice that finds its parallel among European governments that seek to secure the "authenticity" of the nation by infamously expelling migrants via institutional action. Toni Morrison has eloquently tackled this issue in relation to the construction of the "Other" by arguing that governments who "seek . . . legitimacy and identity" are more than "able and determined to shape themselves by the destruction of a collective 'other'" (20).

3.1.3. “Hesitant Locals” and Impoverished Migrants: Debating *Travellers* through the Lens of Afropolitanism

Afropolitanism –this contested and celebrated cultural phenomenon– has revolutionised how scholars and other members of society perceive Africans in the twenty-first century, particularly in the literary arena. In her 2005 article “Bye-Bye Babar (or What Is an Afropolitan?),” Taiye Selasi popularised the term and Achille Mbembe later conferred its theoretical depth in his 2007 piece “Afropolitanism” for the volume *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*.⁵⁵ Since then, this concept, originally proposed to describe certain identities and experiences of deterritorialised African subjects (Selasi, “From that Stranded Place 158), has been used as a marketable term, but it has also been proposed as an ethico-political stance or even as “a philosophical position about the world” (Salami, “My Views on Afropolitanism”), inevitably generating heated debates about its validity and legitimacy, which also confirmed it as one of the most “elastic terms” (Rask Knudsen and Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan* 6) ever proposed, at least regarding previous intellectual movements such as the Black Atlantic, black socialism, *Négritude* or Pan-Africanism.⁵⁶ The relevance of this term as a useful framework from which to approach contemporary African works can be appreciated in the proliferation of ground-breaking volumes that seek to further define Afropolitanism and confer more theoretical depth to the term. Among these volumes, we can highlight the following ones: *Negotiating Afropolitanism: Essays on Borders and Spaces in Contemporary African Literature and Folklore* (Jennifer Wawrzinek 2011); *In Search of the Afropolitan: Encounters, Conversations and Contemporary Diasporic African Literature* (Eva Rask Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek 2016); *Afropolitanism: Reboot* (Carli

⁵⁵ This article had been previously published in French in 2005 in *Africultures* magazine. Likewise, since the inception of the term, the aesthetic component has been central in its theorisation.

⁵⁶ For an insightful analysis of Afropolitanism as apprehended in relation to previous cultural and theoretical movements such as the ones mentioned earlier, read Stephanie Bosch Santana’s “Exorcizing the Future: Afropolitanism’s Spectral Origins” (2017).

Coetzee 2017); *Debating the Afropolitan* (Emilia María Durán-Almarza, Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Carla Rodríguez González 2019); *Afropolitanism and the Novel: De-Realizing Africa* (Ashleigh Harries 2020); *Afropolitan Literature as World Literature* (James Hodapp 2020) or *Making Black History: Diasporic Fiction in the Moment of Afropolitanism* (Dominique Haensell 2021), together with a significant number of scientific articles and blog posts, most of which I cite below. In this section, I try to elucidate if *Travellers*, specifically its protagonist-unnamed narrator, can actually be read through the lens of Afropolitanism. This critical framework has been harshly criticised for its “elitism/class bias,” perhaps because, as Minna Salami asserts, this term has been “largely shaped by people who have time for ideological ruminations and cultural expression” (“My Views on Afropolitanism”); but also for its “a-politicalness” and its “commodification” (Gehrmann 19). Considering these limitations, I will interrogate if the migrants the protagonist encounters (Mark, Manu, Karim and Juma) can “qualify” as Afropolitans, since most of them are non-affluent Africans who lack a European passport and, thus, the privilege of free mobility.

In this light, it is worth remembering that Helon Habila –a Western-educated cosmopolitan author, who has gained international acclaim– supports this cultural current in his 2019 article, but he positions himself as a post-national writer (without, perhaps strategically, labelling himself as an Afropolitan). For him, contemporary African writers should be able to transcend the constraints of the postcolonial nation and expand its conceptual scope. In his article “The Future of African Literature” (2019), he addresses Africa as “these diasporic communities in which [Africans] live, or the online communities to which [Africans] belong” (158), hence, it is not surprising that he conceives modern Africans as essentially nomads that need to re-negotiate the (mental) boundaries of the nation-state and revise their allegiance to a space of colonial design, together with the re-signification of the idea of home. For Habila, these “new” Africans were born in the continent but have “live[d]

and work[ed] outside Africa for so long that the meaning of home has become complicated” (158); very much in line with Selasi’s conceptualisation of Afropolitans who “belong to no single geography, but feel at home in many” (“Bye-Bye Babar”).

Indeed, Habila’s post-nationalism and Selasi’s Afropolitanism foreground an inherent “wordliness” found in both theoretical approaches that are no longer fixated on the nation. In the previous section (3.1.2. “Transcending the ‘Almost Obligatory Obsession of the African Writer with the Nation’?: Revisiting Home in the Post-National Context”), I analysed the applicability of the term post-nationalism as exemplified in Habila’s latest novel, with a special emphasis on how the African and European nations were conceived. In the current section, I will explore Afropolitanism, as read from a post-nationalist lens, to test its applicability in *Travellers*’ articulation of a new African identity. It is worth remembering that even when Habila may qualify as an Afropolitan, his fiction, particularly his most recent novel, does not necessarily need to fit within this label. Finally, it should be added that, even though Afropolitanism is built upon “thematic, geographical, aesthetic, class, and material markers,” as pointed out by Bwesigye Bwa Mwesigire (107), this section concerns itself with the thematic, geographical and class dimensions.⁵⁷

In order to question the presence of an Afropolitan *ethos* in *Travellers*, once more I create a distinction between the protagonist and the rest of the migrants he encounters during his stay in Berlin and London. I will analyse them as “failed Afropolitans,” to borrow Bwesigye Bwa Mwesigire’s expression that is used in the literary arena to refer to a character who “fails to fit the upper- and middle-class requirement” and is thus defined by his or her “lack of transnationalism” (112). A priori, although the main character may in fact qualify as

⁵⁷ I want to clarify that I follow an intersectional approach of Afropolitanism where different identity categories and oppression criteria such as race, class, education, nationality, civil status or linguistic competence overlap. I will prove how these categories and criteria shape and re-shape the protagonist’s personal status: he is alternately signified as a legal and illegal migrant, but also as a privileged and as a subaltern African.

an Afropolitan, particularly at the beginning of the novel, I claim that he is most accurately defined as a “hesitant local” (El Mekkwawi 203), as I will explain next. Habila’s main character goes through three stages of mobility in the course of the novel: He starts being a middle-class, Nigerian migrant who is doing his PhD in the United States but decides to travel to Berlin with his American wife. Then, he loses his passport and green card in one of the trains bound to Berlin, and he is deported to a refugee camp in Italy, now becoming part of the “*deportspora*” (Nyers 1070; italics in the original). It is at this point that he is deprived of free mobility throughout Europe, as he is interned in a refugee camp and so the privilege of an Afropolitan status is temporarily denied to him. Eventually, he manages to escape this camp, goes back to Nigeria and then to the US, where he finishes his PhD, until he later relocates to London with her new lover, Portia.

According to the Selasian version of Afropolitanism, the protagonist is not the result of an “ethnic mix,” he is not a “cultural mutt,” and he is certainly not a multilingual character, because he continues speaking English with a Nigerian accent (no African language is shown in the novel) but is unable (or reluctant) to learn German or Italian. Furthermore, his sense of self is not tied to “at least one place on The African Continent” nor he knows some G8 cities “like the backs of [his] hands” (Selasi, “Bye-Bye Babar”). In fact, his sense of self is tied to people not to places, as he feels connected to certain territories because he has a relationship to someone who lives in that country or city, thus exposing the creation of affective (rather than territorial) bonds; for instance, her mother in Nigeria, Gina in the US, Mark in Berlin, and Portia in London. He gets that sense of kinship while abroad and away from people, as he perceives places are alien, sometimes uncanny, spaces where he does not quite fit in or belong to. Habila’s protagonist does not feel at home anywhere, in fact, he feels unsure even restless when he moves to a different location, which makes him disoriented and uncomfortable. This idea is depicted in the following passage: “Still I *hesitated* because I knew every *departure* is

a *death*, every return a rebirth” (Habla, *Travellers* 12; emphasis added). This hesitancy and unease before moving abroad, also shared with other precarious travellers, invites an interpretation of this character not through the figure of the Afropolitan but through the figure of the “hesitant local” proposed by scholar Lara El Mekkawi (2020).⁵⁸

According to this theorist, a hesitant local is a mobile African “unsure of how to function within the world” (206). In *Travellers*, the protagonist is not comfortable living in Berlin; he is always trying to make himself familiar with the new city through endless walks, but there is still an insidious sense of unhomeliness and (self-)estrangement. This is exemplified when he is observing some Berliners pass by at George-Grosz-Platz, where he is made aware of his alienation: “But as I watched her [a female Berliner] go, I felt the already unbridgeable gap between me and this city widen. Even if I spoke her language, the language the city spoke, would she understand me?” (Habla, *Travellers* 8). It is as if the protagonist were “out of place” in some cities that could not accommodate his experience as an African traveller in the West. In all likelihood, to make up for this alienation and lack of understanding, he is desperately trying to connect with other migrants who potentially share his diasporic, vital anxieties. Possibly, feeling at home while abroad depends on his strategic and affective alliances with the community of other African migrants.

Unlike Afropolitans, for hesitant locals, “forming new localities remains an apprehensive act” that makes them feel “unsure of their allegiance” and even detached or unattached (El Mekkawi 206). This idea is materialised when Gina asks him to travel to Berlin with her and the protagonist-unnamed narrator remains undecided about what to do: “it was only my immigrant’s temperament, hoping for home and permanence in this new world,

⁵⁸ In her contribution to the volume edited by James Hodapp *Afropolitan Literature as World Literature* (2020), Lara El Mekkawi interrogates the idea of the “hesitant local” in Teju Cole’s *Open City* (2011), specifically in the character of Julius, and in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013) in the characters of Ifemelu and Obinze.

at the same time fearful of long-term entanglements and always hatching an exit plan” (Habiba, *Travellers* 11). His anxious relation with the foreign land (“would the new city *understand* me?”), with fixed settlements (evidenced by his fear of “long-term entanglements”), together with his need to be always in touch with non-local migrants would rightly portray him as someone who is in transit, without a strong sense of permanence or belonging. In addition, it is very complicated for the protagonist to identify as a local and feel at home in those strange cities because he relates to new places on the basis of affect (i.e. meaningful interpersonal relations) rather than on spatiality. As Sara Ahmed rightly puts it, “being-at-home is a matter of *how one feels or how one might fail to feel*” (*Strange Encounters* 89; italics in the original). This idea is exemplified in the novel when Gina asks for divorce while living in Berlin and this episode coincides with Mark’s death; here the narrator does not show a connection with Berlin until Portia accidentally appears in his life. Formally, the novel deliberately omits the period of time between the separation with Gina and the encounter with Portia and recounts Manu’s experience in the meanwhile.

Likewise, in their theorisation of the Afropolitan in relation to contemporary Afrodiasporic novels, Eva Rask Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek have identified the “trope of a mobility-induced anxiety” (“An Afropolitan Literary Aesthetics?” 9). This anxiety, they inform, “seems to emerge, not from a sense of loss, but from being in transit, and multi-local, while commuting across geographical locations, and feeling a sense of belonging to all or none of the places involved” (12). This psychological/ontological condition was firstly proposed by Simon Gikandi in an interview to the aforementioned scholars. Gikandi claims that the “elite group of Afro-cosmopolitans has adopted Afropolitanism, not as a celebration of living a global life, but as an anxiety” (Gikandi qtd. in Rask Knudsen and Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan* 49). This anxiety is the product of “the difficulties of being African and cosmopolitan,” which is also “connected to mobility and travel and to location and

belonging” (49); a form of existential unease resulting from being lost between the homeland and the host-land(s), as Yogita Goyal contends (“When Was the Afropolitan?” 781). From this point of view, the protagonist in *Travellers* could be considered an Afropolitan as he exhibits quite clearly this mobility-induced anxiety that makes him feel uncomfortable with his multi-local status, while showing a “recurring sense of unease about belonging” (Rask Knudsen and Rahbek, “An Afropolitan Literary Aesthetics?” 12).

As shown in the quote above, the protagonist is caught up between his need for “home and permanence” and his apprehension of “long-term entanglements” (Habla, *Travellers* 11), which points to a deeply-felt need for a permanent home outside Africa, as “a close affiliation with a specific African origin or location is often unstable” (Rask Knudsen and Rahbek, “An Afropolitan Literary Aesthetics?” 12), while being routed. According to Gikandi, as Afropolitans do not show “a very powerful connection to locality,” they cannot feel “at home in the world” (Gikandi qtd. in Rask Knudsen and Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan* 50), and this ends up creating a “diasporic feeling of not being seen as genuinely, i.e. authentically, of Africa if one is mobile across continents” (Rask Knudsen and Rahbek, “An Afropolitan Literary Aesthetics?” 12). This idea is also discussed in the novel when the protagonist seems to be affected by a sort of impostor syndrome as he asserts that “[w]henever [he] stood in front of the expectant young faces [of his ESL Korean students] [he] felt like a *fraud*” (Habla, *Travellers* 10; emphasis added). Likewise, this mobility-induced anxiety is associated with a frequent journeying across geographical locations, while, as illustrated in this same quote, his anxiety is the consequence of not travelling enough: “perhaps if I were fifty, *if I had travelled a little more*, live a little more...” (11; emphasis added).

On the other hand, the rest of (mostly male) travellers (i.e. Mark, Manu, Karim and Juma) the protagonist encounters are defined by a certain type of coerced or restrained mobility, since they lack the legal documentation and economic resources to travel Europe at will, and are thus cast away by European institutions which generally confine them to detention centres. For these vulnerable travellers, “*to stay alive,*” they need “*to keep moving*” (Habla, *Travellers* 287; italics in the original). However, challenging simplistic notions of mobility and paralysis, they do not move at will, but are forced to move as not moving equates death. Eva Rask Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek identify these non-affluent migrants as “less-fortunate Afropolitans” (*In Search of the Afropolitan* 54), which is a definition whose validity can be easily questioned. These “less-fortunate Afropolitans” present a different relation and anxiety with their home country, where they are strongly rooted, but home is no longer existent; they do not hold the same conceptions and concerns of cosmopolitan travellers; they do not travel at will but are forced to move and once they reach their target country, they cannot claim any viable allegiance to it since they are interned in detention camps and denied basic freedom of movement. Similarly, it is important to understand that, even though these characters have physically migrated, their minds have not –they are home-oriented. In this sense, there is also a shared sense of nostalgia or homesickness, but as the return is, in most cases, unviable, home becomes a lost object beyond their reach. This anxiety is best captured in the following quote from the novel: “every departure is a death, every return a rebirth” (Habla, *Travellers* 12). In this context, can these precarious travellers be conceptualised as Afropolitans, or, as Eva Rask Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek refers to them, “less-fortunate Afropolitans” (*In Search of the Afropolitan* 111)? If they are forced to relocate to another European city in a clandestine manner, but they are denied the possibility of freely transiting the world, how can they be regarded as true African cosmopolitans?

Afropolitanism has been defined as a new ontology where “the massive migration of Africans to other continents and countries” is not conceived as “a loss” but where their dispersal is regarded as the “possibility of an African way of being” worldwide (Gikandi, “Forward” 10). Additionally, Afropolitanism is essentially characterised by leaving behind an Afro-pessimist or “victim identity” (Mbembe, “Afropolitanism” 29) and thus, rejecting what Simon Gikandi names as “the old story of African pathology and failure” implicit in the “trope of crisis” (“Afterword” 243; “Foreword” 10).⁵⁹ However, as has been noted by several scholars, if we give prominence to certain celebratory discourses of privileged Africans, we will be imposing a new single story of the continent, a “reductive narrative of Africa and the African” (Tveit, “The Afropolitan Must Go”), and ignoring the stories of thousands of dispossessed migrants most of whom cannot claim world citizenship despite being in a different continent. As Emma Dabiri contends, “[m]igrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea share chilling parallels with the Afropolitan: like the Afropolitan, these Africans, too, cross-continents, but in contrast to the Afropolitan narrative centred on Africa *rising*, these African’s are drowning. Meanwhile, the Afropolitan comes and goes, continent hopping at leisure” (“Why I’m [still] Not an Afropolitan” 67; italics in the original). Afropolitanism has, therefore, been criticised for its elitism (Tveit 2013; Bwa Mwesigire 2018); for commoditising African identity (Bosch Santana 2017); for “den[ying] the poor any voice” (Dabiri, “Why I’m Not an Afropolitan”), and for being cosmopolitanism with African roots (Toivanen 2015; Gehrman 2017; Eze 2017; Musila 2017). In this light, I analyse the other non-affluent migrants or, as Anna-Leena Toivanen names them: the “[u]nderprivileged

⁵⁹ It is rather ironic how Helon Habila tries to discredit Afropessimist discourses to the point of accusing NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* (2013) of “poverty porn” or even of perpetuating a clear “African aesthetic of suffering” (Habila, “We Need New Names”), when this is exactly what he is exploring in his latest novel by depicting the “ugly face” of the refugee crisis. Perhaps, he has realised that far from advocating for “poverty porn” or perpetuating a “single story” of Africa, it means voicing the rawness of many Africans’ realities nowadays.

postcolonial cosmopolitans” (“Not at Home in the World” 1), to prove why they do not quite fit into the Afropolitan discourse.⁶⁰

As discussed in the previous section, the protagonist meets Mark, Manu and Karim Al-Bashir while in Berlin, and Juma while in London. All these travellers are undocumented, some of them have crossed the Mediterranean Sea to reach European land (Manu and Juma), others have been smuggled to Europe through non-EU countries (Karim and his family) and others have reached the continent by plane but now find themselves in a situation of illegality (Mark). While these characters might have belonged to a middle-class in their home-countries, they are now part of a mass of lower-class migrants who are not always granted European citizenship.⁶¹ While in Europe, they are painfully repudiated, marginalised, and deprived of the possibility of successfully relocating to another country or continent without being deported; besides, they lack agency and they are always (self-)regarded as outsiders in the target country. Taking these ideas into account, these travellers cannot be accurately labelled as Afropolitans, in Selasian terms, but rather as “abject cosmopolitans” who “have been jettisoned, [and] forced out into a life of displacement” and marginalisation (Nyers 1073). It is worth comparing how the triumphant and affluent Afropolitan is described as “a confident, often spectacularly attractive, worldly, and profoundly itinerant African or person of African descent” (Rusk Knudsen and Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan* 1), while most African migrants in this novel, especially those interned in detention camps who are denied the possibility of moving freely, are portrayed as stagnant and rotting in the realm of the Kristevan abject. Then, it would be difficult to theorise Habila’s migrants as Afropolitans because, as Anna-Leena Toivanen aptly contends regarding Afropolitanism’s elitist bias, “being an Afropolitan is a stance enabled by socio-economic privilege” (“Cosmopolitanism’s

⁶⁰ Renowned authors such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Yewande Omotoso or Binyavanga Wainaina, among others, have also rejected this label.

⁶¹ The idea of citizenship is implicit in Afropolitan and cosmopolitan discourses, but flagrantly denied when it comes to lower-class or underprivileged Africans such as the ones that I have previously analysed.

New Clothes?” 85). This is something that we certainly do not identify in this group of mostly underprivileged travellers that, as mentioned earlier, are automatically absorbed into a “universalized lower-class” upon their arrival to the host country (Ong 9).

In the case of Mark, he is described at the beginning of the novel as a nomad living a “peripatetic life, moving from Stockholm, to Stuttgart, to Potsdam, and now Berlin” (Habila, *Travellers* 18), until his scholarship was denied, dropped out of college and became a squatter. Mark, being a transgender man, finds some comfort in Berlin precisely because he is able to explore his creativity at university and, most centrally, because he is not rejected by his non-normative identity. Indeed, his personal situation makes him define himself not as a refugee or an asylum seeker but as a “foundling” (Habila, *Travellers* 36). This self-denomination entails feelings of anxiety and rootlessness for a person who, as with Ijeoma in Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* or as Niru in Uzodinma Iweala’s *Speak No Evil*, has been expelled from home on the basis of gender identity. It is a home he can no longer return to, because Nigeria is a homo-/transphobic country but also due to the fact that he is eventually interned in a *heim* and dies shortly after. Mark is illegal in Nigeria on the grounds of his transness and deemed illegal in Germany because he is undocumented, so he is positioned in a condition of statelessness. Similarly, in the case of Karim, Manu and Juma, the three have been displaced due to civil war and religious fundamentalism. Juma, for example, left Nigeria without knowing he had made it into Cameroon and then into the Federal Republic of Niger (Habila, *Travellers* 285). As he admits, he sees himself as a disoriented refugee whose family and friends have been annihilated by terrorism (286).

The realities of these subaltern travellers are essentially conditioned by unspeakable traumas, exile, nostalgia and the irretrievability of home, together with a situation of hatred and discrimination in the host country. Therefore, Afropolitanism, materialised in a successful

existence “divided across cultures, languages and states” that “embrace[s] and celebrate[s] a state of cultural hybridity” (Gikandi, “Foreword” 9), cannot be seen as representing the experiences of the migrants analysed above, thus evincing the limitations of a term that risks homogenising the diasporic experience(s) of African subjects. But most importantly, we need to be careful with Afropolitanism becoming a new narrative that downplays the vital experiences and stories of less successful mobile Africans, only to impose a more “palatable” version of the African experience (which should be portrayed as highly diverse and with nuances). As Emma Dabiri critically contends, “[t]he problem is not that Afropolitans are privileged per se — rather it is that at a time when poverty remains endemic for millions, the narratives of a privileged few telling us how great everything is, how much opportunity and potential is available may drown out the voices of a majority who remain denied basic life chances” (“Why I’m Not an Afropolitan”). At this point, writing about the realities “of a majority who remain denied basic life chances” is not carrying on with a reductive aesthetic of pain and suffering, but as a vehicle to remind all audiences that there is a refugee crisis and other endemic problems in Africa that cannot be obviated. Grace A. Musila aptly observes that “at the core of the term Afropolitanism are particular anxieties about Africa and perceptions of the continent” (71) that are “smoothed out” with a new triumphalist term and its “strategic exoticism and marketability” (72). It is legitimate to say that the Afropolitan narrative attempts to move away from victim perceptions of Africanness, but in so doing, other bleaker realities experienced by Africans in the twenty-first century might be erased and, in consequence, the discussion of much needed solutions, neglected.

3.2. Sefi Atta's *The Bad Immigrant* (2021)

3.2.1. Preliminary Remarks on Sefi Atta and her Novel

Sefi Atta was born in 1964 in Lagos, Nigeria and later educated in England and the United States. This highly praised cosmopolitan Nigerian author originally qualified as a Chartered Accountant in England and as a Certified Public Accountant in the United States. She holds a MA in Creative Writing from Antioch University in Los Angeles (2001). Her debut novel, *Everything Good Will Come* (2005), is set in the post-civil war years and deals with the lives and experiences of two young girls, Enitan Taiwo and Sheri Bakare, who continue their friendship until reaching adulthood. Both women represent opposite views of reality, of traditions, of gender roles and expectations, of family relations, etc. Above all, the story centrally explores the effort of a woman, Enitan, to confront and defy the practices and attitudes that insist on perpetuating the submissiveness of women. Rebecca Jones affirms to this respect that this novel aptly “comes to new ways of thinking about being a woman and being Nigerian” (41). Her second novel, *Swallow* (2010), narrates the journey of self-discovery the protagonist, Tolani, goes through. She considers drug trafficking and is eventually faced with serious moral issues that will make her reconsider other personal and familial aspects. In 2013, Atta published *A Bit of Difference*, a novel that, thematically, is particularly close to *The Bad Immigrant*. Deola, the main character, is a London-based auditor working for an international charity foundation. The novel recounts her life experiences in London and in other countries, and documents her encounters with other Nigerian *émigrés* living in London. Her following novel, *The Bead Collector* (2019), recounts the friendship of a Nigerian seller, Remi Lawal, and an enigmatic American art-dealer, Frances Cooke. This story tackles issues spanning from espionage, patriotism, international relations and national

politics. Her latest work, *The Bad Immigrant* was published in 2021, and is discussed in this section.

In addition to the previous list of novels, her production includes the short story collection *News from Home* (2010); the children's book *Drama Queen* (2018); the collection of plays *Sefi Atta; Selected Plays* (2019) and the radio plays *The Engagement* (2002), *Makinwa's Miracle* (2004) and *A Free Day* (2007), all broadcasted by BBC Radio. Her plays take an active part in the Yoruba tradition of Nigerian playwrights such as JP Clark, Wole Soyinka or Ola Rotimi ("Channels Book Club"). Moreover, she is currently co-writing the script for the Netflix adaptation of her novel *Swallow* with Kunle Afolayan. Atta has also contributed to the collection of essays *Of this Our Country: Acclaimed Nigerian Writers on the Home, Identity and Culture They Know* (2021) with her piece "Renewal." Finally, it is worth mentioning that she has won several awards such as the PEN International David TK Wong Prize (2005), the Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa (2006) or the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa (2009) among many others.

If compared to Ayobami Adebayo, the Anglo-Yoruba author previously discussed in this dissertation, Sefi Atta is of Yoruba ascendancy too. As Atta mentions in an interview regarding her own roots: "My mother is a southerner, Yoruba and Christian [and] my father was a northerner, Igbirra and Muslim" (Atta and Collins 123). However, she openly declares that she does not feel Yoruba or Igbirra but Nigerian, and a true "citizen of the world" (Nzegwu 81). In fact, she maintains that she does not speak Yoruba or Igbirra since she grew up speaking English at home, but with a clear Nigerian influence (see Collins 2015). She adds that she considers Nigeria, England and the United States her home and, nowadays, she freely divides her time among the three countries. This cosmopolitanism (or Afropolitanism) also shows in her novels: *A Bit of Difference* (2013) and *The Bad Immigrant* (2021), which are

tangible examples of this reality. In fact, Atta goes on to affirm that she deliberately writes about “people who don’t have any strong ethnic allegiance or people who are in mixed marriages” (Atta and Collins 123).

Deola, the protagonist in *A Bit of Difference*, happens to be a Nigerian *émigré* in London who works as “the director of international audit at the London office” of LINK, “an international charity foundation” (Atta, *A Bit* 4). Deola lives in pre-Brexit London permanently but visits Nigeria and the US frequently for family and work-related reasons. As a matter of fact, the protagonist reinforces the idea of an identity in transit, non-permanent and highly mutable, evidenced in her self-perception as a “[r]esident alien,” or “a Nigerian expatriate living in London” (Atta, *A Bit* 7). In *The Bad Immigrant*, the protagonist, Lukmon Ahmed-Karim is a Muslim Yoruba migrant who has resided in London for his MA studies at SOAS, later worked in Lagos and eventually moved to the US with his wife Moriam and his children Bashira and Taslim after winning the visa lottery competition organised by the “Diversity Immigrant Visa Program” (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 1). This middle-class family relocates to the US in 1999 motivated by the elusive American Dream, which the protagonist somehow regards with suspicion.⁶² In this sense, the main character in Atta’s novel embodies what the writer calls a “tri-continental experience” (D. Chukwuemeka, “Racism in the Diasporic African Novel”), which is a foundational aspect of this novel, as I discuss further on. These two novels dig into the personal anxieties Nigerian subjects experience when arriving at a new destination and the difficulties that arise when they try to assert themselves in societies that automatically marginalise or reject them. This is most evidently tackled in

⁶² Other contemporary African novels, characterised as Afropolitan narratives, offer a critical reading of the American Dream. Among them, we could mention Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go* (2013), NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* (2013), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013) or Imbolo Mbue’s *Behold the Dreamers* (2016).

The Bad Immigrant, where Atta interpellates mainstream American society for not being able to accommodate certain (foreign) groups.⁶³

In terms of structure, *The Bad Immigrant* is divided into seven chapters with a title related to the familial or social aspect the protagonist and first-person narrator deals with (i.e. “Dreams,” “Relatives,” “Friends,” “Daughters,” “Wives,” “Sons” and “Hopes”). This novel follows a linear narrative structure where characters are developed during a period of a few years, namely from 1999 to 2001. Moreover, this text has been written in the form of a stream of consciousness as resulting from Lukmon’s unique capacity for introspection and social observation. In this regard, Atta states that “[t]he novel is driven by dialogue –Lukmon’s internal dialogue, in particular– and [her] readers are eavesdroppers” since the author “wanted to create a fly-on-the-wall experience” (D. Chukwuemeka, “Racism in the Diasporic African Novel”). Lukmon thus becomes the quasi-clinical observer-commentator who dissects every aspect of his reality in a topographic exploration where “spatial mobility informs . . . inner mobility” (Eze, “We, Afropolitans” 76). Indeed, the protagonist’s position as an insider and outsider allows him to have a 360° vision of what is going on in his life and in the lives of those that accompany him. As with Habila’s *Travellers*, Atta introduces to her readership an assortment of travellers mostly coming from West African countries, so as to discuss the dynamics of racism and race relations, capitalism, tribalism, assimilation and migration, thus creating a polyvocal effect.

⁶³ It is fitting to mention that these two novels, namely *A Bit of Difference* and *The Bad Immigrant*, bear several parallelisms not only because they somehow reflect some of the main personal events in Atta’s life but because they recount the migrant experience from similar perspectives. Both novels tackle race relations, acculturation and assimilation, black-transnational solidarity, (un)belonging or the workings of globalisation, while discussing the impact diaspora and cosmopolitanism have on present-day Nigerian migrants.

3.2.1.1. What Makes a “Bad” and a “Good” Immigrant? Exploring the African Experience(s) in the United States

This discussion of diverse diasporic experiences also facilitates a debate of who accounts for a “good” migrant and who accounts for a “bad” one, as the title of the novel suggests. Atta notes in an interview that the novel was originally to be titled *Made in Nigeria*, but that she had to modify this initial title because the “phrase became overused after it was announced as a Nigerian government slogan” (D. Chukwuemeka, “Racism in the Diasporic African Novel”). Nonetheless, a number of questions arise: who does Atta refer to with the label “bad immigrant”? Is a clandestine migrant, belonging to what Jairus Omuteche designates “illegitimate diasporas” (293), considered the paradigmatic example of a “bad” immigrant, a “failed” one? Are “bad” immigrants those capable of giving up their roots and national identity to fit in the host society, or the ones who are not willing to conform to the new location’s cultural and social mandates? If we delimit what a “bad” immigrant is, how would we characterise a “good” immigrant, a well-off traveller?

As I try to give a plausible answer to these questions, I start by discussing the variegated travellers the protagonist encounters upon his arrival in the US. Atta exposes readers to a great group of documented and undocumented, pauperised and class-privileged, highly mobile and “inert” African travellers in order to show that the migrant experience should not be reductively portrayed. In *The Bad Immigrant*, most characters are documented visitors in the US except for the protagonist’s cousin Ismail –a “financial planner in New York” (3) who happens to be an irregular resident. Atta presents a satirical portrait of Ismail by describing him as a person with an affected American accent and mannerisms and characterised by a markedly conservative outlook. As Ismail posits, “[i]n America . . . every opportunity is given to immigrants to make it, wherever they are from. Those who don’t take

advantage of the opportunities are not meant to be here. They might as well get in their banana boats and paddle back home. They're *failed immigrants*. Now, those who persist and succeed are *true Americans*. But! But! They were born in the wrong countries" (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 3; emphasis added).

This character, which confers exaggerated praise to the American Dream, sees himself as a "true American" as he has a job in business, an affair with a white American woman and is a true supporter of Donald Trump. However, he still lacks the necessary documents (i.e. green card) to not be considered a "failed immigrant." His devotion to Uncle Tom somehow evokes Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1986), as he is clearly a black person who has internalised racist postulates and attitudes. Ismail argues as well that there will never be a black American president as "[t]he American dream has to end somewhere for everyone" (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 6). Additionally, he goes on to criticise his home country (Nigeria) stating that it is a useless and corrupt country and that his cousin Lukmon "look[s] fresh for someone who has come straight from the jungle" (7), and his compatriots as "[b]lack people [who] are lazy by nature" since "[i]t's in their DNA" (39). As inferred from his vilification of Africans and African Americans, it is obvious that he has constructed an American persona in opposition to a Nigerian-immigrant and an African American identity, since he does not want to be assimilated into these two "minority" groups. He clearly detaches himself from his minority status so that he can class-climb in the US and become a wealthy US citizen. Ironically, if Ismail had not migrated to the US, "[h]e would own properties in Nigeria and England," and "America would be his third choice" (41), as the narrator tells us.

Another Nigerian Lukmon contacts during his stay in the United States is Osaro, who did his PhD with Lukmon and served as a lecturer before leaving the country. In the US, he is "a published author" (2) because, unlike Ismail, he opportunistically takes advantage of his

minority status to carve a niche for himself as he presents himself as a political exile, which is clearly exemplified in the autobiographical novel he has published, *Last Word*.⁶⁴ In an article, Atta denounces how there are still African writers who keep on perpetuating one-dimensional and Afropessimist images of Africa because, as she highlights, “[i]t seems as if the more African writers suffer their characters, the more attention and recognition [African authors] get” (Atta and Collins 127). Osaro’s minority status of someone who was forced to leave Nigeria (and his supposed need to be connected to the motherland) is also reinforced via his attire and musical taste: “Osaro wore a dashiki with a *kente*-print trim that was more Afrocentric than African” and played Fela CDs (88; italics in the original). He is interested as well in being regarded as a liberal and progressive black subject who supports feminism and LGBTQI+ rights so that he can be accepted by a certain segment of the American society, and especially within academia, where he works. Atta alludes to this fact: “If Osaro is a liberal hypocrite, Ismail is certainly a conservative one because their career ambitions determine the postures they assume” (D. Chukwuemeka, “Racism in the Diasporic African Novel”). Besides, Lukmon encounters other Nigerian diasporans such as Bisi the Gossip, one of Moriam’s co-workers, or Dr. Aderemi, together with other African migrants who are mostly part of American academia. This mosaic of travellers shows the complexity of the migratory experience and opens up the conversation for us to enquire what makes a “failed immigrant” (a bad immigrant?) or a successful one (a good immigrant?), and if that binary is still accurate to describe the experiences of the twenty-first century African *émigré*.

In the following section, I delve into the idea of the new African diaspora as represented in the novel under study. The duality of the contemporary African diaspora cannot be ignored and while Sefi Atta presents us with well-off characters who eventually succeed in the US, most migrants nowadays cannot even make it to the mainland, as

⁶⁴ Osaro is a character akin to Portia’s father, James Kariku in Habila’s *Travellers*, with whom he shares the same literary trajectory but, unlike Kariku, Osaro’s account of his life back in Nigeria is a total farce.

exemplified in Helon Habila's *Travellers* whose characters perished trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Furthermore, I advance the discussion of "bad immigrant" versus "good immigrant" and focus on those who seek the American Dream and manage to travel to the US. In this light, I am highly interested in analysing the particularities of the twenty-first-century diasporic Africans who live in the United States in the time of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

3.2.1.2. Probing the American Dream: Discussing the New African Diaspora in the United States

An insightful analysis of the concept of diaspora was provided in section 3.1.1.1. "An Exploration of the New African Diaspora as Experienced by a Tapestry of Diverse African Travellers Journeying Europe," devoted to the analysis of Helon Habila's *Travellers*. In that section, I mainly focus on the most dramatic face of the current African diaspora as I delve into the lives of some African travellers (refugees and asylum seekers predominantly), who are forced to cross the Mediterranean Sea in search of a better life in Europe. As I argue, most characters in Habila's novel belong, first of all, to the new African diaspora and, particularly to what Jairus Omuteche calls "illegitimate diasporas," made up by underprivileged nomads. Conversely, Sefi Atta's novel digs into the more optimistic face of the contemporary African diaspora and, more specifically, the Nigerian-Yoruba diaspora in the US (Falola and Childs 2005; Imoagene 2022), as the immigrants she portrays are mostly successful subjects who have voluntarily resettled in wealthier Western loci. As the protagonist of the novel asserts when discussing the reasons why he and his family decided to flee Nigeria: "[We] were not refugees. We didn't have to flee Nigeria because of a war or political persecution. We came to America to work. We were not descendants of Africans who were forced to come over and work. We'd never had to live with the consequences of that" (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 131-132).

This character is tracing the line between the postcolonial diaspora he and his family belong to and the colonial or Afro-Atlantic diaspora –defined by the slave trade and the Middle Passage– other Africans were forced to endure. Besides, he is also distinguishing between those travellers who, belonging as well to the new African diaspora, are obliged to flee their countries and those who leave willingly. Once again, the US remains the physical point of convergence between the new and the old newcomers, the descendants of former African slaves and the new international Africans.

In this vein, I draw on Delphine Fongang about the need “to show the diaspora as both loss and self-realization; capturing both narratives of unsettled alienation and cultural integration” so as to “project a holistic representation of the diasporic experience” (“Cosmopolitan Dilemma” 155). For this reason, the complexities of the African diaspora cannot be understood in monolithic terms, that is, the diasporic experience cannot always be approached from a melancholic and traumatic stance nor should it exclusively be apprehended from a more celebratory or idealised and Afro/cosmopolitan position. This experience varies from one “transnationalist” (Falola, *The African Diaspora 2*) to another and thus, it cannot be homogenised. There are subjects who suffer from “untold political injustices, economic hardships, [and] gender/racial hierarchies,” as the precarious travellers that inhabit Habila’s fictive world, and subjects who are defined by “self-realization” and “cultural integration” (Fongang, “Cosmopolitan Dilemma” 155), as the affluent migrants in Atta’s piece.

Atta’s novel starts with a quote from the poem “As Clouds Pass above Our Heads” by acclaimed Nigerian author Ben Okri. It reads as follows: “If there is one secret I’d like to share / It’s that we are what we dream / Or what we fear” (Okri, “As Clouds,” lines 31-33). These verses related to the power of dreams (and of nightmares) are directly linked to the content of the first chapter of the novel, also titled “Dreams,” which makes reference to the

reasons why the Ahmed-Karim family decided to enter the visa lottery. As Karim and his wife Moriam's professional prospects in Nigeria were quite daunting (despite the fact that they were qualified workers), they decided to emigrate, considering also that the education of their children would be difficult to afford with the working conditions both parents had. As Lukmon states: "We'd been working for years and were barely getting by" and still, "[Lukmon] was guaranteed to lose [his] job once [he] reached a certain age" (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 1 and 2).

Lukmon and his family decide to migrate because they fear not having a future in Nigeria as their home country was going through a number of crises: the Naira was devalued lower as a result of the implementation of the Structural Adjustment Program (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 27); their job prospects were not especially promising and, politically, the Nigeria was covertly under military rule despite having "transitioned" to democracy. Hence, the profound disillusionment with the Nigerian nation propels this family to leave home. Lukmon mentions to this respect:

We'd recently held our general elections after fifteen years of military regimes and who had we elected as president? A former head of state, a soldier in mufti, under the watch of UN inspectors, as the rest of the world congratulated us on our peaceful transition to democracy. I decided that Nigeria's return to democracy only meant that any corrupt, incompetent individual could legitimately run the country from then on, so perhaps it was time for us to leave. (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 2)

As the story starts in 1999, which is the year this family moves to the US, Lukmon is referring to some of the most representative military regimes led by autocrats Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993), Sani Abacha (1993-1998) and Abdulsalami Abubakar (1998-1999), whose

military dictatorships paralysed the transition to a democratic Nigeria.⁶⁵ Likewise, the Ahmed-Karim family is also motivated by the dream to succeed overseas, where there are presumably more opportunities for newcomers. This family is thus driven by the promises of the American Dream as they envision themselves as prosperous immigrants, who can access a proper job and get good education for their children.

Michael Stasik et al. (2020) posit that Africans have traditionally been “[d]riven by normative temporal narratives of modernity and development” before migrating to wealthier countries in the Global North, which inevitably creates “a stark divide between expectation and reality” (1). As explored in the section devoted to Adebayo’s novel, it is interesting to pay attention to this “temporal turn” explored by postcolonial authors, where they confront and resist universal and hegemonic conceptions of time. Atta’s characters have been driven by these teleological narratives of progress and national superiority that characterise linear, Western time only to discover that the US, a “forward-looking country” (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 6), does not always meet the expectations of its African visitors, rendering them as lacking power and agency. Moriam needs to re-certificate to work as a nurse in the US (more specifically as a nurse in New Jersey) and Lukmon, despite being more educated than the average US citizen, as he holds a PhD in English Literature, experiences labour market discrimination and ends up accepting a menial job. Consequently, though both Lukmon and Moriam manage to rent a house and start to integrate in the American society and within its chrononormative life-scripts, still, racialised migrants, they are affected by what Elizabeth Freeman calls “temporal drag,” with all the negative connotations that the term “drag” evokes: “retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past in the present” (62).

⁶⁵ For a more detailed account of the practices that took place during the military regimes that existed between 1985 to 1999, see the chapter “Dictatorship and Democracy in Nigeria, 1966-1999” written by Eghosa E. Osaghae as part of the volume *The Oxford Handbook of Nigerian History* (2022) edited by Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton.

In opposition to what happens to the refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants that appear in Habila's text, who find extremely difficult (if not impossible) to be part of the host society where they are physically relocated into *heims* in the outskirts of Berlin, Atta's migrants do not present this overtly traumatic relationship with the host land. As they are "[l]awfully admitted immigrants" (Umo Ette 14) and have voluntarily resettled, they are able to progressively adjust to the new society and enjoy some of the comforts it has to offer. Both sets of migrants show differing diasporic identities: Habila's unauthorised travellers expose an "exilic identity," characterised by the trauma of leaving their homeland forcibly and of not being able to return, together with the impossibility of belonging basically because they are conceptualised as non-citizens and thus, automatically excluded. These mobile subjects are forced to become invisible within the receiving society as they lack a visa and can be deported anytime if noticed by the pertinent authorities, whereas Atta's lawful migrants show a more "transnational identity," defined by the prospect of free mobility, the possibility of integrating within the host society and the opportunity of returning home if desired. As they hold legal documents that grant their stay in the US, these mobile subjects automatically become "seen migrants" (Wolfe 168) since they have no need whatsoever to lead a clandestine existence.

Diasporas are made by complex webs of migrants that create and re-create communities abroad, while consolidating wide-ranging forms of affiliation and identity (see Tiyambe Zeleza 2009), but we should not be driven by reductionist notions of migrancy. In Atta's novel, Ismail –Lukmon's chameleonic cousin– is a paradigmatic example of this idea since he considers himself a "good immigrant," even a "true American" because he works as a financial planner in New York and has married an African American with whom he has a child (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 3). Firstly, we need to bear in mind that Ismail very likely married an African American woman to change his legal status, from irregular to a regular permanent

visitor in the US, but the marriage ended in divorce. Secondly, he was not always a financial planner; when he first arrived, “[h]e’d washed plates in restaurants and driven a taxicab in New York,” and he had even “sold real estate for a while in New Jersey . . . to pay for his undergraduate business degree and part-time MBA” (30).

Despite his seemingly successful existence in the US, he still lacks a green card and therefore, the American Dream he so venerates cannot fully apply to him nor the status of “good immigrant” for that matter. The disproportionate and sometimes pathetic admiration Ismail confers to the US is especially motivated by his hatred against his own family and the lack of opportunities that awaits him in Nigeria. This challenging situation leads him to uncritically praise the US and inordinately resent his home country and his compatriots. Moreover, Ismail does not hesitate to call “failed immigrants” (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 3) those underprivileged (“bad”?) travellers who have not “taken enough advantage” of the opportunities the US society presumably provides because, according to his reasoning, “[t]he American dream has to end somewhere for everyone” (6). Perhaps, in Ismail’s (short-sighted) view, a representative example of the “bad immigrant” could be found among the Latin American travellers who risk their lives to reach US soil, oftentimes dying when crossing the Mexico-US border or suffocating in the back of a lorry while being smuggled to the US, or those who make it and are condemned to live an underground existence defined by poverty, lack of education and job opportunities, lack of social and health coverage or discrimination. For Ismail, a “good immigrant” is a person who is able to leave behind his/her ethnicity, to assimilate into mainstream America (“his acquired American accent and mannerisms” [Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 3]) even if this means to blindly adhere to contradictory traditions and

practices (for instance, eating pork being a Muslim), and to make a lot of money to access material possessions.⁶⁶

This polarised vision of mobile subjects, which deliberately ignores the circumstances and motivations of the diasporic experience and, consequently, ends up categorising migrants into “good” or “bad” according to simplistic notions has recently been legitimised by former Republican US president, Donald Trump. The 45th US president’s own “war on immigration” was central to his 2016 campaign and, once elected, solidified into the enforcement of three main immigration laws (Executive Orders on Border Security, Interior Enforcement and Refugee and Visa Holders from Designated Nations) aimed at reducing illegal immigration most especially from Central and Latin American countries and from Muslim-majority countries.⁶⁷ Trump’s xenophobic and hyper-nationalistic/nativist political agenda is behind the reform of the immigration system which has demonised, scapegoated and dehumanised immigrants with infamous initiatives such as his attempt to terminate the TPS (Temporary Protected Status) or the DACA programs (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals).

Additionally, the colossal impact of the 9/11 terrorist attacks must be acknowledged because these attacks had already created a fertile breeding ground for paranoid and xenophobic prejudice against migrant, especially Muslim, population in the US. Certainly, the last chapter of the novel (“Hopes”) ends with the impact of the 2001 attacks on this Nigerian family and on US society. Lukmon notes that September 11th was “the day that changed how [he] would see America” (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 356). Prior to these attacks, the US society he had encountered seemed divided against black and minority peoples but the attacks brought

⁶⁶ It is noteworthy how the American Dream, Michael C. Kimmage foregrounds, is intrinsically rooted in the material component, with “citizenship shading into ownership” (27). As Kimmage contends, “[o]ne steps closer to the American Dream by buying a house or owning a car,” and this prospect of acquiring material possessions is very attractive for immigrants as it is directly associated with class mobility and personal progress in the host land (27). This conception is also present in the character of Moriam who starts buying expensive lingerie and cashmere sweaters as soon as she starts earning some money.

⁶⁷ More information on this topic can be found in the “President Trump’s Executive Orders on Migration and Refugees” by the Centre for Migration Studies.

about solidarity and compassion among the citizens in Middlesex (the place where Lukmon lectured). At first, he recalls a “compassionate kind of unity” that brought people together but later, he also recalls other negative consequences of this event: “Following September 11, Muslims in Middlesex were singled out for reprisals. An Indian dry-cleaner in town had a fake bomb delivered to his door” (357). The 9/11 attacks helped to cement a rhetoric based on a disproportionate hatred against immigrants, especially of Muslim origin, like the Ahmed-Karim family in the novel under discussion, that has contributed to the border hyper-securitisation accentuated during the Trump Administration. In the novel, Bashira started a blog titled “One Muslim Girl” where “she often raged against Islamophobia” (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 357) in a hopeful attempt to dismantle certain prejudiced and stereotyped visions of the Muslim community in 2000s United States.⁶⁸

3.2.2. “The Local in the Global”: Theorising Home(s) in the “Afropolitan Time”

The idea of home differs from one individual to another and from one generation to another. In the case of third-generation Nigerian authors, most of whom live a transnational and hypermobile existence, we need to differentiate between the personal notions of home these authors hold, and the conceptions of home their characters show in their novels. In this section, I delve into Sefi Atta’s articulations of home(s), which can be approached from an Afropolitan point of view, and analyse how this idea is depicted in her novel *The Bad Immigrant* (2021). In order to do this, I focus on Lukmon and Moriam as upwardly-mobile travellers who have migrated to the West in their adult years and, on the other hand, I concentrate on their offspring –Taslim and Bashira– who have migrated in their teens developing a hyphenated (and perhaps Afropolitan) identity. I should mention that I approach home as the presence of the local or the regional in the global, that is, I explore how Nigeria is

⁶⁸ The protagonist in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*, Ifemelu, is also known for her blog “Raceceenth, or Various Observations about American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black,” where she discusses race issues in the US.

“transplanted” into the US context and theorise this idea as part of what I have called the “Afropolitan time.” First, I delve into this notion of a historical moment that can actually be defined in regard to the Afropolitan philosophy. Second, I tackle the different conceptions of home Sefi Atta discusses in an interview with Eva Rask Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek to later examine how this Nigerian author addresses this complex idea in *The Bad Immigrant*.

The “Afropolitan time,” which I regard as a key cultural and historical moment for the African subject inasmuch African identity and culture are being re-assessed in an attempt at self-signification, is most notably known for the idea of the “Africans of the world” (Selasi, “Bye-Bye Babar”) as the new political subject in recent debates about contemporary African subjectivity. This new “worldly” class of Africans is not presented as African cosmopolitans (even though cosmopolitanism is also part of its DNA) or even as African citizens (problematizing the African nation as the only locus of national affiliation), but an altogether revolutionary identity category that features hybridity, multi-locality, scattered belongings and an explicit disavowal of the nativist, the local or the national in favour of a more global (even post-national) outlook.⁶⁹ In this vein, the “Afropolitan time” is marked by a conception of African Identity that is fluid, performative and somewhat delocalised, since these identities are “shaped by elective affinities due to cultural and racial intermixing” (Eze, “Rethinking African Culture” 5). Chielozona Eze contends that Afropolitans are “not half this or half that; [they] are this *and* that” (“We, Afropolitans” 78; italics in the original), foregrounding the idea of synthesis, rather than of in-betweenness. Hence, the “Afropolitan time” is marked by the recurrent interrogation of the “Afro-” prefix, which goes beyond simplistic categories, and by the need to create a sustainable African identity in the twenty-first century.

⁶⁹ The idea of a “new” class of transnational Africans (or Afropolitans) can be argued since, as Simon Gikandi posits, Afropolitanism, regarded as “an [inherently] African way of being” (“Foreword” 10), already existed in pre-colonial Africa (see also Minna Salami’s blog “Ms. Afropolitan”). However, and as I am essentially drawing on modern theorisations of the contemporary African experience, I approach Afropolitanism as “a wholly twenty-first-century creature emerging in the wake of postcolonial failure,” not as a pre-colonial reality (Goyal, “When Was the Afropolitan?” 780).

Furthermore, this “global moment,” as Simon Gikandi defines it (qtd. in Rask Knudsen and Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan* 46), has transformed how Africa is being conceived. The continent has been generally apprehended from an Afro-pessimist angle, defining it as a site of pathology (Gikandi, “Afterword” 243; Mbembe 2001), even as a space signified in relation to a very specific trope of crisis, tragedy and failure (Gikandi, “Foreword” 10). Therefore, and as Afropolitanism has become “a *space* of critical inquiry” (Rask Knudsen and Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan* 3; italics in the original) where long-established concepts are being “defamiliaris[ed]” (7), the “Afropolitan time” becomes a moment of positive ontological and cultural expansion, characterised by a revision (and complication) of the signifiers Africa, home, class, mobility and even gender. Besides, the “Afropolitan time” is characterised by a relatively successful surpassing of previous (and arguably obsolete) theoretical models like Pan-Africanism, *Négritude* or decolonisation and of socio-political movements like black socialism and African Marxism.

Regarding the different conceptions of home that we find in this novel, I start by analysing the upbringing of the author under analysis, which is defined by her contact with members from different ethnic groups. In fact, Atta is a Yoruba-Igberira whose mother was a Christian southerner and her father a Muslim northerner (Atta and Collins 123). Atta self-identifies as Nigerian and this shows in her stories, where she mostly writes about “people who don’t have any strong ethnic allegiance or people who are in mixed marriages” (123), as I mentioned above. In an interview with Eva Rask Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek, Sefi Atta claims that she “commutes” between Lagos (Nigeria), Surrey (London, UK) and Mississippi (the US), where she has “homes in each of these countries” (Atta qtd. in Rask Knudsen and Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan* 186). Interestingly, Nigeria is her “home of roots” (183), her “‘real home’,” while the US is her “home of convenience where [she] can function” (184). This pluralisation of home allows Atta to see herself as firmly rooted in Nigeria, but she is

also able to belong to different countries, hence she could be theorised as a “rooted cosmopolitan,” to use Kwame Anthony Appiah’s famous expression (*Ethics*, 213). In this line, being a Nigerian overseas has allowed her to use what is familiar to her as the material for her novels, and present a conception of home and of national belonging that extends beyond fixed and unitary territoriality.

While *Swallow* (2008), *Everything Good Will Come* (2005) and *The Bead Collector* (2018) were all set in Lagos, Nigeria, her most recent novels, *A Bit of Difference* (2013) and *The Bad Immigrant* (2021), are set in the UK and the US respectively. However, the presence of a “home of roots” (Nigeria) that Atta mentioned earlier is unequivocally central in both novels, as it is brought to the new location through the preparation and consumption of traditional Nigerian food, Afrobeat music, religious practices, regular phone calls to relatives or meetings with other Nigerian expatriates, as in *The Bad Immigrant*. In this novel, the author writes about a family that successfully navigates different locations, and is able to feel at home while abroad despite the overtly racist atmosphere. This is one of the core differences between Habila’s and Atta’s novel, as the latter explores successful forms of mobility and of belonging.

In the first place, the Ahmed-Karim family’s resettlement in New Jersey (the US) results from the failure of the process of decolonisation and the consequent collapse of the post-independence nation which, as Simon Gikandi observes, “promised modernization outside the tutelage of colonialism” and failed (“Globalization” 630). This unfulfilled promise lies at the heart of the haunting spectral presence of the nation-state even in a globalised scenario or, put it differently, the characters in this novel are “caught in the cracks of the failed state” and its consequences (Gikandi, “Between Roots and Routes” 23), which is why they decide to migrate. In this light, the persistent disillusionment with Nigeria is rooted in

endemic problems such as corruption, poverty, religious fundamentalism, the succession of autocratic and military governments, a high dependency on the oil industry together with ethnic partisanship. Such a pessimist scenario even propels Bashira to claim that “[n]owhere is worse than Nigeria” (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 21). I agree with Toivanen’s words when stating that “the link between migrancy and the postcolony’s lack of viable socioeconomic prospects” confers these types of transnational novels “a cosmopolitan vision that intertwines the local and the national with global concerns” (Toivanen, “Daddy’s Girls?” 103). Certainly, most problems Nigeria currently experiences, such as the enmities between ethnic groups or the perpetuation of kleptocratic governments, are firmly rooted in the British colonial project and some others, such as the reliance on fossil fuels and its environmental impact, obey neocolonial and capitalist logics.

Furthermore, the interweaving between the local/regional and the global/transnational is most strikingly discussed at the very end of the novel when Taslim, the eldest son of the family, is discouraged to join the United States Army Reserve just before the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent war in Iraq. As Lukmon reflects: “If [Taslim] had joined the Reserve and been called to serve in Iraq, would he be alive today? That is a reasonable question. You could say my fears were irrational, and that what mattered in the end was what was going on within my family, not outside it, but we can no longer sit in our small corners and assume that events in other parts of the world will have no impact on us” (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 355). The last part of this excerpt highlights the interconnected nature of our world, but it also entails a harsh criticism against the dynamics of the globalising project that certainly benefits some at the expense of Others.

In another attempt to re-inscribe the local into the global, which is symptomatic of what Achille Mbembe refers to as the “interweaving of the here and there [or] the presence of

the elsewhere in the here” (“Afropolitanism” 28), Atta tackles the issue of tribalism “on a diasporic level” (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 104), and compares it with the issue of racism in the US. Moriam’s friend, Bisi, is the first to bring to the table the danger of the “‘tribe’ mentality” (73), where people in Nigeria would “support a presidential candidate from their state, regardless of his mandate or reputation” (74). Moriam was born in the northern part of Nigeria surrounded by Hausa children, her father “grumbled that Northern leaders in general were responsible for ruining Nigeria,” blamed Igbos “for the Civil War” and for being “materialistic,” and criticised Hausas for being “sly” and Yorubas for being “quarrelsome” (73). Lukmon, on the contrary, regards tribalism as “the most objectionable form of parochialism” by considering it the main reason behind the lack of unity in Nigeria (74). Tribalism is also compared with racism in the US, though the class component is somehow missing, in *The Bad Immigrant*. As Lukmon notices, “Nigeria was essentially the United States with a minority of rich people in place of white people,” because Nigeria “didn’t have enough to offer [them], and [they] no longer wanted to contribute to it.” However, Lukmon realises that once in the US, “African Americans were in a situation similar to [his] in Nigeria” (315-316).

While in Nigeria people’s access to power is mainly based on ethnic and class markers, African Americans are prevented from accessing power on the grounds of skin colour and socioeconomic status. However, African Americans also need to deal with “competition over scarce jobs, housing, healthcare, and education” due to the increasing arrival of legal and illegal immigrants to the US (Arthur et al. 150). This scenario propitiates a context of hostility, tensions and frictions between Black Americans and non-American Blacks (to borrow Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s denomination as suggested in her novel *Americanah* [2013]) “since blacks perceive that centuries of economic racism, coupled with institutionalized denial of access to opportunities, further aggravates their economic

disadvantages in the United States” (Arthur et al. 151). These tensions are materialised in the novel when Lukmon is called a “goddamned African” by an African American attorney that was unjustly detained in the shop Lukmon worked as a security guard (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 115).

This experience made Lukmon want to leave the US as he was not prepared to cope with the prejudices and hatred coming from both sides of the racial spectrum. As he later tells his wife, “I was prepared for what racist white people could do, not for what black people could do because of what racist white people had done to them” (117). He also believed that “[b]lack people were supposed to be on [their] side” (117). Perhaps, Lukmon expected a sort of black or Pan-African solidarity in the diaspora but he encountered the opposite. However, Atta makes clear that the unviability of this solidarity in the US as presented in her novel is not due to the alleged animosity between native-born blacks and black immigrants but rather, it stems from the historical, political and economic processes that have traditionally framed and shaped the relationship between these two social segments in a heavily racialised environment.

In any case, the strained relationship between African immigrants and African Americans are momentarily set aside when it comes to the process of racial identification for the Ahmed-Karim children. During Black History Month in school, Lukmon reminds his daughter Bashira that “being black didn’t make [them] African American, anymore than it would make [them] Hausa, Kenyan or West Indian,” and that they must acknowledge their “separate histories and cultures” (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 132). The following exchange between Lukmon and Bashira contributes to the discussion of the latter’s hybrid identity (and global citizenship):

Would you call yourself African in Nigeria? [Lukmon] asked.

No.

But what am I here?

What passport do you have?

A Nigerian one.

Therefore you're Nigerian until you get an American one.

But there's no box for Nigerian here. There's no box for Nigerian American either . . .

Tick the 'Other' box, [Lukmon] said. (132-133)

From this excerpt, we can see how Bashira is still negotiating her identity in a racially-charged context that easily assimilates her into rigid categories that do not consider her diasporic identity, always forcing her (and her brother Taslim) into an *entre deux* position or into a position that erases her own African identity and heritage, without taking into consideration the entanglement of identities found in this new generation of African descendants. It is also interesting to see how her father wants her to be connected to Nigeria, which is reflected in the sentence “you're Nigerian until you get an American [passport].” In this sense, comparing how Lukmon and Bashira self-identify will prove useful since they exhibit different alliances to home: while for Lukmon Nigeria is his primary home, Bashira regards this West African country as just “another” home.

While Lukmon is a “product of [his] country, designed by tradition, packaged by hardship and stamped by military rule” (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 51), Bashira and her brother Taslim are the products of displacement, relocation, transculturality and racialisation in the US. Lukmon's identity has been fundamentally configured by his vital experiences within the geographical and mental boundaries of the Nigerian nation-state, but his offspring presents an

identity on the move clearly defined by the balanced overlapping of local and international influences. Maximilian Feldner (2019) contends to this respect that twenty-first century African fiction also deals with “stories of migration [that] offer a conceptualization of identity as fluid,” and as “constantly in the process of being made” and re-made (107). These identities that appear in the “Afropolitan time” unsettle rigid “national or ethnic categories” (Goyal, “We Need New Diasporas” 642; see also Tiyaambe Zeleza 2009), and put forth complex forms of home and belonging that, as mentioned above, thrive beyond fixed territorialities. For this, I believe that the term “scattered belongings” coined by Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe is very suitable when discussing the characters of Bashira and Taslim because it puts forward a notion of home conceptualised as mutable and volatile, “both multi-sited imagined but not imaginary and territorialized as well as de-territorialized and thus portable” (56).

3.2.3. Are We (Still) Interested in “Stories about Borders”? Debating *The Bad Immigrant* through the Lens of Afropolitanism

In the first half of this chapter, I delved into the life experiences of the migrants that appear in Helon Habila’s *Travellers* (2019) to interrogate the validity of Afropolitanism as an adequate lens through which to read his novel concluding that, even though *Travellers* contributes to the discussion of nuanced forms of mobility, the label Afropolitan is not completely accurate in that narrative. In the final part of this chapter, I also attempt to elucidate if this theoretical framework can be successfully applied to Sefi Atta’s *The Bad Immigrant* (2021). We should bear in mind that, although Atta could qualify as an Afropolitan author, she has never identified herself as such. Some of her novels have been categorised as displaying an emergent Afropolitan (literary) aesthetics, most notably her fourth novel *A Bit of Difference* (2013) (see Pucherova 2018; Rask Knudsen and Rahbek 2016 and 2019), but

also as representative of other forms of failed cosmopolitanism with novels such as *Swallow* (2010) (see Toivanen 2016). In this chapter, I interrogate if *The Bad Immigrant* can be identified as an Afropolitan novel or, at least, as depicting some of the main motifs and tropes found in this trend.

Even admitting that she does “not mind [her] novel [i.e. *A Bit of Difference*] being classified as Afropolitan” since it portrays “the challenges of having a cosmopolitan lifestyle” (Atta qtd. in Knudsen and Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan* 184), she later adds that it disturbs her “when other stories are negated because of a definition [i.e. Afropolitan]” (184). Behind such claim, there is the underlying criticism against the Euro-American publishing industry, which has lately taken special interest in the stories dealing with African cosmopolitans in the West. This idea is tackled in *The Bad Immigrant* when Lukmon reflects on the “authenticity” of Osaro’s testimony, which the former knows is a made-up version of his PhD colleague’s life: “So what if African writers wrote under the Western gaze? . . . Osaro had written purely for Western consumption . . . but he would only end up alienating African readers” (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 213). This fragment touches upon what Dominique Haensell defines as “the Americanization of African fiction,” which could include as well this Afropolitan hype (5). However, I find it very useful to take into consideration that this process of literary Americanisation cannot be understood without the “Africanization of (African) American fiction” (5-6). Hence, it can be argued that, although there is still the question of marketability and potential alienation, a dialogical relationship between both literary canons has been established, reasonably influencing each other.

In this context, Atta holds that writers should provide “realistic portrayal[s] of how Africans live” which can contain “the negative aspects of our lives” (qtd. in Knudsen and Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan* 188). And, if such “negative aspects” are representative

of the “ordinary moments” Africans experience on a daily basis (179), will these experiences be erased as they are not as much marketable? Atta is very accurate here: “If stories without borders are preferred, will stories about borders end up being redundant?” (187). The answer has to be negative as we have analysed in the novels by Chigozie Obioma, *The Fishermen* (2015) and Ayobami Adebayo, *Stay with Me* (2017) or even in other prominent African novels listed in the Introduction. Even in the “Afropolitan time,” novels “about borders,” which actually question and revise those borders, prove that there is still an interest in and literary engagement with the nation, and, I argue, even a more urgent need to debate alternative national horizons.

In *The Bad Immigrant*, Lukmon and Moriam can be easily identified as Afropolitans since both are middle-class Nigerians who have transited the most famous European metropolises before resettling in the United States. Analysing the main character in this novel, we find how Lukmon is still deeply attached to his Nigeria, which, as with Sefi Atta, can be conceived as this character’s “home of roots,” and he is simultaneously making himself at home in the US (first in New Jersey and then in Mississippi and Massachusetts). Despite the racial tensions that Lukmon experiences upon his arrival, he is not presented as a migrant who feels displaced or unable to belong to the new society, but rather, as a traveller who constantly negotiates his own position as a Nigerian in the US. There is, then, a “dual attachment to the (Western) world [i.e. the US] and to the African continent,” which portrays him as both outsider and insider while in the new location (Rask Knudsen and Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan* 10). There is also the idea of global citizenship: Lukmon is, from the very beginning, a documented migrant, which grants him free mobility and makes easier his integration in the new society since he is not forced to lead an underground existence, as the travellers in Habila’s novel. In terms of socioeconomic status, Lukmon starts working as a security guard in a beauty shop in New York getting used to “being invisible at work” (Atta,

Bad Immigrant 51) and being subject to several race-related disagreements. Eventually, his personal and professional situation changes when he manages to work as an associate professor of Anglophone literature at Middlesex University.

At the beginning of the novel, he is portrayed as someone who “was never keen on the idea of coming to America” (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 1), but decided to move via the green card lottery because his professional situation in Nigeria was not very promising. Once there, he becomes a meticulous dissector of US society, like the protagonist in *Travellers*, an ability that makes him trace parallels between Nigeria and the different US cities he lives in. This attitude towards the receiving country makes him feel homesick for a home that is truly dysfunctional (Nigeria) and excluded at times because he does not always feel he fits in due to endemic racial conflicts (in the US). As Simon Gikandi notes, Africans who have recently migrated to the US show a “connection through memories” to their home country and a “continuous attachment which is sometimes almost sentimental” (qtd. in Rask Knudsen and Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan* 45).

Lukmon tries to keep that connection to Nigeria alive in two ways: first, comparing Nigerian and American traditions and second, juxtaposing Nigerian tribalism and racism in the United States. As he states: “[w]hat I missed most about Nigeria at that time of the year was the spectacle of drunken people dancing in bars. Even if you didn’t participate in the merrymaking, you couldn’t help but get caught up. It was the same in America. There was a festive spirit I couldn’t ignore” (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 112). In this passage imbued with nostalgia, contemplating these two celebrations allows Lukmon to remember Nigeria and feel attached to the homeland, but it also authorises him to progressively accept the US as his new home. Although Lukmon needs to learn how to navigate a multiracial US society, which is not an easy task at the beginning, the US eventually becomes for him a space of dialogue he

“didn’t always join in or listen, but the right to free speech was defended,” and a place “to which [he] was now formally invited” (255).

Additionally, and as discussed in section 3.2.2., that connection with home is presented through the juxtaposition of Nigerian tribalism and racism in the US. Even though racism is not exclusive of the US, as scholar Panashe Chigumadzi argues in her path-breaking essay “*Why I’m No Longer Talking to Nigerians about Race: On Writers, Empathy and (Black) Solidarity Politics*” (2019), Atta’s novel explores the nuances of tribalism, classism and racism on a diasporic level. I argue this endeavour to bridge the gap between home and abroad allows the protagonist to negotiate his status as a transnational subject. In this sense, this process does not involve a vital anxiety “about Africa and perceptions of the continent” (Musila 71). This is so, perhaps, because Lukmon feels a strong sense of belonging to Nigeria and he has started to develop a long-lasting attachment to the US, where he is reasonably integrated overtime. Then, very likely, it will be more accurate to approach Lukmon from the figure of the “African cosmopolitan” that Simon Gikandi proposes (qtd. in Rask Knudsen and Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan* 50). This scholar differentiates between Afropolitans and African cosmopolitans, who “are defined by certain privileges, of education, of being able to travel and having choices and options” but who do not present such existential anxieties because “they have a very powerful connection to locality” and “they take belonging for granted” (50). As mentioned earlier, Lukmon is fully rooted in Nigeria, a place he can go back to at will, while being geographically and mentally attached to other Western locales.

Additionally, Dominique Haensell warns us that Afropolitan writing that is “engaged in US-American racial discourses and championing a Black subjectivity that forgoes the formative trauma of slavery” can be interpreted as opposed to “African American subjectivity or as stand-in or proof of a post-racial paradigm” (7). This idea is explored in the novel when

Lukmon returns some chin lifts in New York in an attempt to connect with people of African heritage. However, he soon realises that, even though he sympathises with African American struggles (“I was relieved, rather than proud, to be black. Who wanted to be on the side with a history of destruction? [Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 53]), there is neither (Pan-African) sense of community or identification among blacks in the US, nor the possibility of (re-)forming such alliance. As Lukmon holds: “If there was anywhere in the world that pan-Africanism stood a chance, it would be America . . . But would we actually come together and work for the benefit of one another? I doubted it. Tribalism and nationalism would get in the way. Money, too, as it always did. Add ego to the mix and we would end up fighting each other” (105).

Certainly, what Lukmon tries to emphasise is that the historical, cultural and socio-economic experiences of people of African heritage that happen to converge in Western metropolises, such as New York or London, are totally different and sometimes even opposed (“We had to honor our separate histories and cultures” [132]). While African Americans are marked by the “formative trauma of slavery” but represented as “the favored black” (104), Africans have been constructed in the shadow of (neo-)colonialism and oppression, and these experiences that are seemingly unreconciled stand in the way of any possible black solidarity or unity.⁷⁰ As Lukmon concludes: “[e]xpecting pan-Africanism to lead to black unity was as unrealistic as expecting federalism to unite Nigerians” (105). Nonetheless, even when the possibility of black unity is regarded as unachievable, Lukmon admits that African Americans know how to cope in a society that systematically excludes them (“African immigrants hadn’t had a long history with America. We had not been tested generation after generation” [106]),

⁷⁰ Panashe Chigumadzi has also tackled the question of racial solidarity and black empathy in the aforementioned seminal essay.

and that African immigrants should “stand by them” against “*oyinbo*” people (“It was an insult to be preferred by white Americans” [106; italics in the original]).⁷¹

Moreover, James Hodapp stresses that Afropolitanism has been mostly criticised for the lack of political angle or engagement. As Hodapp posits, “[u]nlike previous generations who focused on anti-colonialism, independence, post-independence disillusionment, poor state governance, civil unrest, neocolonialism, and a host of other issues facing Africa, Afropolitanism seems to lack a political angle” (5). This a-politicalness of Afropolitanism that Susanne Gehrman also mentions in her article “Cosmopolitanism with African Roots: Afropolitanism’s Ambivalent Mobilities” (2017) does not necessarily apply to *The Bad Immigrant*. As seen in the excerpts analysed, Atta constructs a character, Lukmon, who is highly engaged with Nigerian and American politics because he has a great grasp of inter/national cultural and historical issues. Lukmon, as I have outlined above, criticises the scarcity of professional and educational opportunities in Nigeria, the tribal mentality, the political chaos and corruption or their failed economy, claiming at the end of the novel that he “[had] always seen Nigeria as a great big dysfunctional polygamous family, with mothers from different parts of the country and of different religious persuasions, and children all over the place” (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 359-360). This quote centres our attention on a country that, due to its colonial, religious and ethnic configurations, makes it difficult for Nigerians to thrive, forcing them to relocate elsewhere.

Thus, I contend that *The Bad Immigrant*, as exemplified by the character of Lukmon, is a politically-engaged Afropolitan novel that has not “move[d] beyond the nation and the continent in terms of geography and ideology for liberation” or deliberately left behind an interest in “national, ethnic, or religious questions” (Hodapp 5). As with other novels like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013) that has been recurrently catalogued as

⁷¹ *Oyinbo* is the Yoruba term for “stranger,” “white person” or even a person of European descent.

Afropolitan, when the main character in Atta's novel sets foot in America, he starts analysing the new context and focusing on racial politics, partly due to his (dis)encounters with African American people. In this light, Atta does try to discuss racism from a Nigerian perspective and simultaneously "normalizing the worldliness of Africans" (Hodapp 4), much in line with scholars such as Rocío Cobo-Piñero who, in her analysis of Noo Saro-Wiwa's *Looking for Transwonderland: Travels in Nigeria* (2012) as an Afropolitan travelogue, regards Afropolitanism as a political and instrumental tool that "seek[s] to confront and complicate hegemonic structures within and outside Africa" ("Part-Returnee and Part-Tourist" 167). Therefore, this framework is useful inasmuch as it confronts conceptions of the African continent as backward and primitive that has been excluded from the modernist project, and proposes productive anti-essentialist readings of this place and its inhabitants. As debated above, the relationship between Africans and African Americans complicated with the entanglements of black solidarity or even Pan-Africanism is something that Atta brings to the fore for readers to critically engage in these discussions.

When it comes to Moriam, Lukmon's wife, she is the main nexus with Nigeria while abroad via the Nigerian food she cooks, the use of Yoruba language at home, the worldviews she shares and the community of Nigerians she contacts in America. Moriam is perhaps more realistic and pragmatic than Lukmon ("America, to her, was a giant workplace and mall" [Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 255]) as she is not interested in American politics or racism since "[h]er approach was to focus on [her] family and deal with the ways in which living in America affected [them] as they occurred" (119). Moriam is not as politically-engaged as Lukmon and tends to be oblivious to certain structural issues such as racism or xenophobia, which makes her get in trouble: "Moriam said racism was a sign of stupidity. Nia said racism was a sign of moral depravity. Moriam said the only way to handle racism was to disregard it, to which Nia replied that it would behoove Moriam to educate herself about civil rights history" (109).

While Lukmon tries to decipher his new environment, Moriam is more interested in learning how to thrive in the United States and create her own community of Nigerian expatriates and African American women. Thus, while Lukmon gives up a potential black unity between black peoples, Moriam is the proof of a possible black sorority/solidarity. This is shown in the novel through Moriam's friendship with Nia, an African American neighbour who becomes friends with Moriam when the latter offers to braid Nia's hair. Despite their different backgrounds and cultural experiences, they are the example of black unity.

I now focus on the analysis of Lukmon and Moriam's offspring, Taslim and Bashira, who resettled in the US in their teens. These African-descendants are successfully described following the Selasian version of Afropolitanism: They are "the newest generation of African emigrants" who are multi-lingual "cultural mutts" and who have "at least one place on The African Continent" to which [they] tie "their sense of self" (Selasi, "Bye-Bye Babar"). Furthermore, they are multi-local and multi-rooted as home for them remains both in Nigeria and in the US, where they grow up and create their own families. As Nigerian-American, these hyphenated children (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 132-133) are more apt than their parents in navigating diaspora and present a number of influences from all the cultures they are in contact with. Delphine Fongang states in this regard that the "younger generation of immigrants . . . easily assimilate into the new culture" but they keep "a keen affinity with their roots and origin" ("Introduction" 3). Fongang further contends that these Afropolitans "have the ability to successfully navigate multiple worlds as hybrid, transitional subjects; crisscrossing borders and successfully interacting with multiple cultures without fear of losing oneself; or being pinned down by fixed notions of geographically and nationally bound categories of identity" (3). It is true that they retain that sense of Nigerianness, especially through their parents, but interaction with US culture is not always successful. For instance, Bashira is bullied in school due to her looks, and Taslim is motivated to think he will be more

needed in the Reserve fighting in Iraq, so there is always a bit of concern about “how Americanized [Lukmon and Moriam’s] children were” (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 328).

This process of Americanisation is also discussed in Uzodinma Iweala’s *Speak No Evil* (2018) when the protagonist Niru comes out as a homosexual teenager and his parents think the United States has “corrupted him” and he is sent back to Nigeria to “cure” what for his parents is a Western malady (Iweala, *Speak* 87). At the bottom of these experiences lurks a profound anxiety, on the part of their parents, for their children not to be connected enough with their homeland, with Nigeria. However, we need to bear in mind that while first-generation migrants are rooted in Africa, second-generation has the ability to feel at home in Africa and elsewhere. And this is something positive because these hyphenated children have perfected the “capacity for transcultural manoeuvrability and negotiation” (Rask Knudsen and Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan* 18-19). Indeed, Bashira is able to manoeuvre and negotiate cultures through literature; it is her avidness as a reader of US, immigrant, Nigerian or feminist literatures what allows her to understand disparate cultures. Actually, Bashira ends up creating her own blog –“One Muslim Girl”– after the 9/11 terrorist attacks to discuss Islamophobia (Atta, *Bad Immigrant* 357). This constitutes a far-reaching tool to debate transcendental issues and to open up necessary conversations that involve people from all over the world, as Lukmon says: to “listen and meditate” (361).

CONCLUSIONS

In this dissertation, I have discussed the centrality of the post-independence Nigerian nation through the textual analysis of a selection of contemporary Anglo-Igbo and Anglo-Yoruba novels written by Chigozie Obioma, Ayobami Adebayo, Chinelo Okparanta, Uzodinma Iweala, Helon Habila and Sefi Atta. I set out to prove that the thesis that present-day African writing has “outstripped” or even outgrown the nation (Hodapp 2020; Jones 2011; Adesanmi 2004) is not completely accurate. These theorists contend that the literary pieces created by Nigerian (transcultural) authors have left behind the first and second generations’ fixation with the nation (Jones 40). Others argue that this new generation is not as interested in “the tragedy of Africa’s colonial past and the imperfect modernity of the nation-state it engendered” (Adesanmi, “Of Postcolonial Entanglement” 227) or even in “the anticolonial defense of national culture” (Dalley 17). In a similar vein, Anna-Leena Toivanen aptly states that recent postcolonial discourses have incorporated postnationalism as central to its theorisations, while “declaring the obsolescence of the nation and treating dislocation as the paradigmatic condition” (“Daddy’s Girls?” 99). However, narratives that revolve around the realities of dislocation, displacement, transculturality and cosmopolitanism, which essentially centre on the global or the elsewhere, also incorporate the national/local, which allows authors to signify the homeland “within and outside [their own geographical and mental] margins” (Nwakanma 8).

Certainly, the interest contemporary authors have in the Nigerian nation is not comparable to previous generations, but it cannot be affirmed that this interest has been left aside or even superseded because, as I have proved with the analysis of the novels discussed, the questions of home and of national affiliation are central to the literary projects of prominent twenty-first century Nigerian authors, and they are addressed as intersectionally entangled with identity politics based on sex, class, religion, race, age or education. This interest, I argue, takes centre stage in these novels for two reasons: first, the dysfunctionality

and even failure of the Nigerian nation-state is recurrently discussed together with the circumstances that have led this country to become a place where most of its citizens would rather leave; second, and from a more utopian perspective, these authors criticise what weighs Nigeria(ns) down (e.g. the intolerance against LGBTQI+ subjects, patriarchal interpretations of womanhood and manhood, high reliance on the oil industry, religious extremism or lack of democratic practices in the political arena), but also explore alternative national horizons.

In this study, I have addressed the Nigerian homeland following three distinctive approaches: family, Afroqueerness and migration/Afropolitanism. These approaches have helped me critically theorise Nigeria from diverse angles, which enables a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of this country, and also allows for an examination of the new Nigerias (note the “s”) that are slowly emerging in the literary works analysed here. Similarly, adopting a gender perspective has allowed me to articulate topics and themes that have been traditionally apprehended from a masculine (and patriarchal) lens. For instance, in the first chapter, I have claimed that Ayobami Adebayo’s *Stay with Me* (2017) en-genders feminine Nigeria in her allegorical discussion of this country from the position of a mother who cannot engender viable children, and originally, through the incorporation of a series of Gothic elements, as shown in section 1.2.2. “Monstrous/‘Monstrificated’ Mothers and *Abiku* Children: An Afro-Gothic Analysis of *Stay with Me*.” Besides, Adebayo’s debut novel constitutes an innovative attempt at de-romanticising and de-patriarchalising motherhood that deliberately breaks with the traditional depictions of conventional and “acceptable” Nigerian womanhood. In the second chapter, I have contended that Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* (2015) “queers” the Nigerian nation in its exploration of same-sex desire as experienced by a lesbian woman. I have also argued that, even though the protagonist of this novel is (still) forced to live her relationships with other women in a covert way, Okparanta exposes the potential to create

inter-ethnic alliances as forged in the romantic relationship of two lesbian women belonging to different ethnic groups. Finally, Sefi Atta's *The Bad Immigrant* (2021) originally addresses the diasporic experience from the perspective of a male narrator while discussing national affiliation as experienced by a Nigerian family living in the US, a country marked by exacerbated (intra- and inter-)racial tensions. I have delved into how this writer introduces new ways of characterising the migrant experience in her novel, thus contributing to advance the debates on Afropolitanism.

In the first chapter, "Familial Perspectives, National Allegories," I have carried out the analysis of the Nigerian nation as approached from the familial perspective in the works of Chigozie Obioma, *The Fishermen* (2015), and Ayobami Adebayo, *Stay with Me* (2017), which I have analysed as "national allegor[ies] of Nigeria" (Harlin 685). These texts, which draw on literary predecessors like Chinua Achebe, Flora Nwapa or Buchi Emecheta, deal with the struggles of two Igbo and Yoruba families whose vital experiences are synchronous with the dramatic events that the post-independence Nigerian nation went through in the late 1980s and early 1990s, particularly during Sani Abacha's military regime (1993-1998) and the previous annulment of the first democratic elections ever held in Nigeria where M.K.O. Abiola was elected (1993). In addition, these novels are characterised by a persistent sense of disillusionment with the motherland, which evinces a clear dissatisfaction with Nigeria's present state of affairs.

Thematically, the "falling apart" of the families featured in Obioma and Adebayo's novels metaphorically exemplify the atrophy of the postcolonial nation, the impracticality of the nation-building project as based on this country's multi-ethnic and multi-religious status (exemplified in Yejide and Akin's dead progeny), together with the pervading consequences of the civil war between Nigeria and Biafra that took place between 1967 and 1970 (most

clearly captured in the fratricidal relationship among the Agwu brothers). I contend that this domestic episode still constitutes a source of national and inter-generational trauma that has not been overcome and that is frequently (implicitly or explicitly) explored in the works of third-generation Nigerian authors when discussing Nigerians' plea for national self-determination. In this fashion, I argue Obioma's "invoking" of key events in Nigerian history may function as a plausible way of concealing his "exilic" or migrant status and, most centrally, of asserting cultural belonging. However, this ongoing allusion to the homeland is not exempt from criticism, especially when he has repeatedly stated in a number of interviews cited above that he would like to be an Igbo man unadulterated by colonial conceptions of home and of the self. Finally, it is worth emphasising how Obioma and Adebayo end their novels in an optimistic note when talking about the remaining Agwu brothers as "egrets" that "appear in flocks after a storm . . . when everything as [we] knew it had changed" (Obioma, *The Fishermen* 394); or when Yejide reunites with her surviving daughter Rotimi and that becomes too "a beginning [and] a promise of wonders to come" (Adebayo, *Stay with Me* 296). I read these hopeful passages as symbolically proposing a more promising national scenario for a shaken Nigeria, thus imagining the homeland as a full democratic country where gender equality is common practice.

In the second chapter, "Afroqueer Representations of Home," I have discussed the Nigerian nation following the Afroqueer perspective in the works of Chinelo Okparanta, *Under the Udala Trees* (2015), and Uzodinma Iweala, *Speak No Evil* (2018). These queer narratives represent a very prominent trend in contemporary Anglophone Nigerian writing because they allow the exploration of correlated realities like gender identities and roles, wo/manhood, ma/paternity, religion or diasporic identities. Drawing on Brenna M. Munro's idea of a "queer project" of African literature ("Locating 'Queer'" 123), I argue that this new trend of Afroqueer fiction can be best described as a restorative project where queer

individuals are no longer demonised or deemed un-African, but depicted in a positive and sympathetic light. Thus, I contend that the literary works belonging to this trend attempt to reinscribe the Afroqueer subject into the Nigerian national project but, as the queer subject necessarily deconstructs normative notions of identity (sexual, racial, familial), such reinscriptions involve a critical questioning of the master narratives upon which the nation is erected. For instance, *Under the Udala Trees* revisits the Nigeria-Biafra civil war from the perspective of a lesbian, Igbo woman in a historicising effort to, on the one hand, reinsert the LGBTQI+ collective within the nation-building project in a rather convulsive and decisive historical moment for this country, and on the other, to examine certain forms of marginalisation experienced by precarious Others in ethnic and sexual terms then and now.

In *Speak No Evil*, a novel that can be related to the corpus of “Black Queer Diaspora,” Uzodinma Iweala addresses the queer dimension of the Afrodiasporic experience as fluid and unfinished, by focusing on the events that a gay Nigerian-American young adult goes through in the US, thus emphasising other intersecting factors such as religion, familial pressures or even racism that prevents the protagonist from being accepted or tolerated. Unlike the novels examined in the first chapter, none of the protagonists discussed in this chapter achieve such “harmonious reconciliation” with their respective societies (Okuyade, “Introduction” xxi), perhaps in response to queerness’ alleged inconclusiveness, elusiveness and indeterminacy. The protagonist in Iweala’s novel is prematurely murdered by a white police officer whereas the main character in Okparanta’s novel is married to an abusive husband and later forced to have a covert relationship with the woman she is in love with. I consider these stories try to faithfully reflect the life-threatening circumstances that characterise Afroqueer people’s realities, but they also create stories of courage and resistance because they denounce the abuses against a collective that is forced to exist underground, but who fosters its own hopes and utopias beyond homophobia. Granting voice to this community is a rather powerful act of

literary “artivism” that brings to the fore positive representations of certain realities that have been traditionally silenced or neglected, and creates referents for those who are in a similar position.

Furthermore, these novels enable the expansion of the very definition of the place adjectives African and Nigerian, while proposing transgressive ways of signifying the contemporary Nigerian nation. In this light, *Speak No Evil* portrays different, and sometimes conflicting, understandings of home. For instance, for the Afroqueer and diasporic protagonist, home is interpreted as multiple, inhospitable and as life-threatening all at once, whereas for Niru’s father, his apprehension of home is somewhat parochial and simplistic; one in which home is only conceptualised in the singular. This opposition between father and son in terms of how home is signified is also perceived in the contrasting masculinities that these two characters display. Whereas Niru’s father is representative of a toxic form of masculinity characterised by violence, authoritarian attitudes and intransigence, Niru shows a queer and transnational masculinity defined by the explicit manifestation of positive feelings like vulnerability or tenderness and by the attraction for the Other not only in sexual terms, but in relationships based on mutual recognition and respect. This also applies to *Under the Udala Trees*, where Okparanta shows two distinctive forms of femininity as embodied by Ijeoma, the protagonist, and her mother. Thus, I conclude that these two narratives interrogate intergenerational hegemonic forms of masculinity and femininity in an effort to present plausible ways of being a man and a woman as explored through the queer representations of Nigerian manhood and womanhood.

In the third chapter, “Transnational Realities, Local Concerns,” I focus on the exploration of the Nigerian nation, and most particularly on the idea of (multiple) home(s), as approached from a transnational position in the works of Helon Habila, *Travellers* (2019) and

Sefi Atta, *The Bad Immigrant* (2021). Both Habila and Atta are prominent authors defined by the contemporary realities of global mobility, as they both reside in the US but keep ties with their Nigerian and UK homes, and their most recent works can be regarded as belonging to what Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton define as the “transnationalist trend” (“Nigeria’s Third Generation Writing” 16). For this chapter, I have incorporated the Afropolitan perspective in an effort to prove both its validity and its limitations in regard to the present-day Nigerian diasporic experience. By choosing the aforementioned novels, I have actively sought to underline how migrant experiences are portrayed in these novels in non-prescriptive terms and as part of a “diasporic continuum” where intersecting factors (i.e. socio-economic status, gender, age, country of origin, sexuality or legal status) have to be born in mind to understand the myriad realities travellers coming from Africa go through. Likewise, these foundational factors determine the level of acceptance (or non-acceptance) African mobile subjects encounter upon their arrival in the host country. The travellers that populate Habila’s novel are mostly impoverished and stagnant African subjects harshly discriminated while in Europe. In fact, I have theorised this group as “zombified migrants” (Toivanen 2019), as non-citizens (Arendt 2007), as ungrievable bodies (Butler 2004; 2012) and, drawing on J. Kristeva’s notion of the abject (1982), as “abject cosmopolitans” (Nyers 2003).

In this regard, *Travellers* challenges as well the single story of the migrant experience in Europe, while interrogating at the same time the mythic conception of Europe as Eldorado. It is via the revision of Europe as the Promised Land that Habila’s novel debunks the dominant colonial idea of Western (moral) superiority (see Sieber et al. 2015). In this sense, this narrative constitutes as well a symbolic lamentation for the brain drain and the loss of African human capital, because of this biased conception of the countries from the Global North. Thus, I have approached this text as a clear criticism against the failure of postcolonial states that are not making the most of their human and material potential, which is one of the

reasons why African countries are unable to erect themselves as competitive and self-sufficient nations. Furthermore, the privileged characters in Atta's *The Bad Immigrant* encounter a more promising future in the United States, where free mobility is a given, but contrastingly, they also experience intra-/inter-racial frictions, discrimination and other xenophobic attitudes. Even though the characters of both novels face multiple challenges in their respective target countries, their diasporic experiences are characterised by an obvious interweaving of the "here" (the local/the regional) and the "elsewhere" (the global/the transnational), which makes me believe that readers are equally interested in "stories about borders" as in stories about the lack or trespassing of them. It is also worth acknowledging that both texts challenge simplistic notions of diaspora and migrancy, complicating what it means to be an African migrant in the twenty-first century and evidencing the need to adopt context-specific and geopolitically-situated approaches.

Besides, I have analysed these two novels from the perspective of Afropolitanism. In *Travellers*, I distinguish between the protagonist-narrator, whom I theorise as a "hesitant local," following Lara El Mekkawi's designation (203), and the other non-affluent migrants he encounters in Berlin, whom I analyse as "failed Afropolitans" (Bwa Mwesigire 112). Unlike Afropolitans, hesitant locals find it difficult to "form new localities" (El Mekkawi 206) and lead an existence characterised by apprehension, restlessness and other vital anxieties resulting from being in transit. On the contrary, the failed Afropolitans that appear in this novel are characterised by a certain type of coerced or restrained mobility, since they lack the legal documentation and economic resources to journey Europe at will. The latter group is forced to move and is denied the possibility of freely travelling the world. Regarding the upwardly-mobile characters featured in *The Bad Immigrant*, I also distinguish between first-generation migrants, who I theorise as "African cosmopolitans" (Gikandi qtd. in Rask Knudsen and Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan* 50), and second-generation migrants, who

have the ability to feel at home in Africa and elsewhere, to prove the applicability of the term Afropolitan and to question the thesis that holds Afropolitanism “lack[s] a political angle” (Hodapp 5). I have also focused on the interweaving of the local and the global in what I have come to call the “Afropolitan time,” which I regard as a key cultural and historical moment for the African subject inasmuch African identity and culture are being re-assessed in order to propose alternative definitions of African subjectivity.

Nonetheless, and even though I acknowledge the potential of the term Afropolitan as a productive framework that allows scholars and writers to approach the continent and its inhabitants from an anti-essentialising stance that deliberately rejects what Simon Gikandi calls “the old story of African pathology and failure” (“Afterword” 243), Achille Mbembe the “victim identity” (“Afropolitanism” 29), or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “the single story” (Ngozi Adichie, “Danger”). I also believe that Afropolitanism has important limitations that should not be overlooked. As exemplified by the dispossessed migrants that appear in Habila’s *Travellers*, they cannot see themselves as representative of an Afropolitan aesthetic or lifestyle, mostly because they do not have the privilege to travel at will, they lack agency and do present a notion of home in the singular and frequently as an irretrievable place. I conclude that we should be alert about the risk of Afropolitanism becoming a new narrative of success that downplays the vital experiences of many Africans and their stories of precarious or failed mobility. As proved in *Travellers*, it is crucial not to minimise the representations of less fortunate migrants and thus, deny them the possibility of providing a more ethical and dignifying response from the (inhospitable) countries that receive them.

Every single novel examined in this dissertation can be regarded as politically-engaged, because each comments upon the main challenges Nigeria and Nigerians have to face nowadays. Additionally, these texts propose diversified portrayals of the Nigerian

experiences and of the Nigerian nation within and outside its very geographical borders, updating the very notions of Nigeria and of the Nigerian identity. Furthermore, they underline the idea that the interest with the homeland is not outstripped but rather, metamorphosed so as to adapt to the new and more complex historical circumstances that characterise the twenty-first-century Nigerian experiences. I believe apprehending the “Giant of Africa” as explored in the literary arena from three equally relevant perspectives (i.e. family, Afroqueerness and migration/Afropolitanism) contributes to the debates regarding the prevalence of this country within the narratives of contemporary Nigerian writers, and to suggest productive forms of (re)signifying Nigeria so that it can eventually turn into a place of “wonders to come,” as Ayobami Adebayo envisages in her novel.

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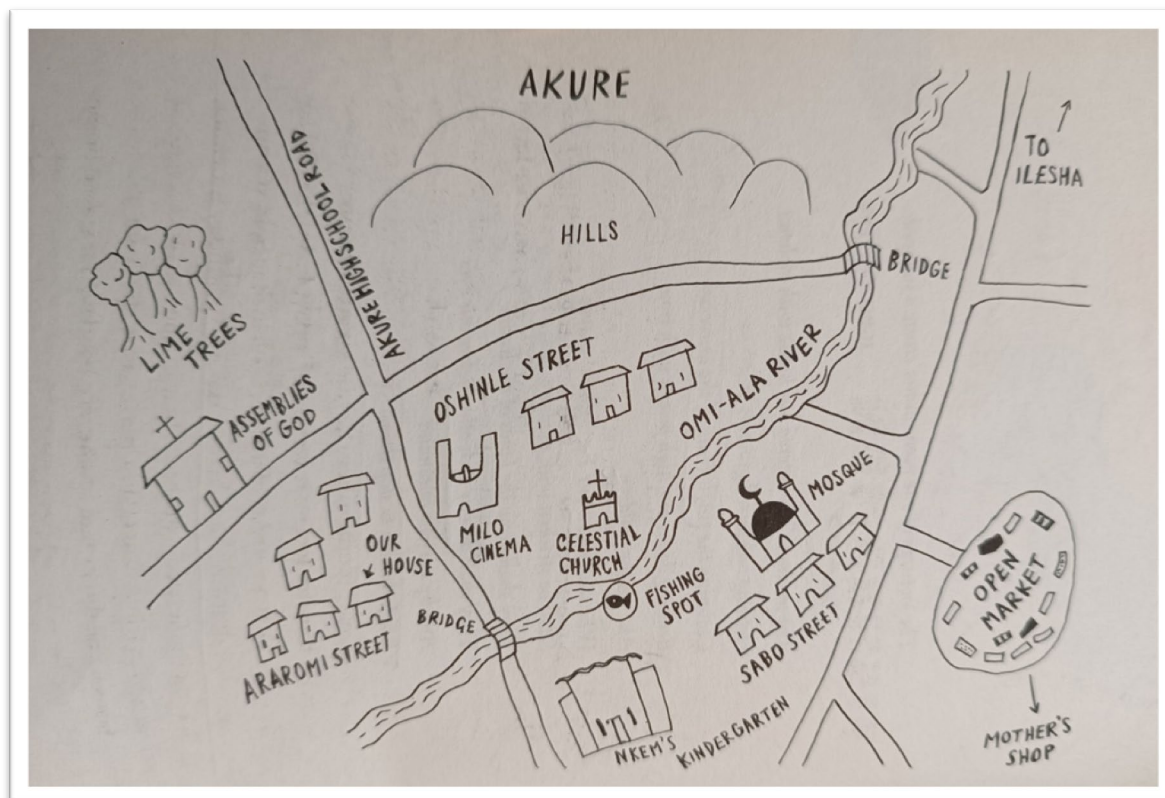
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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1. Map of Akure city from *The Fishermen* (2015).

APPENDIX 2. Map of Ojoto city from *Under the Udala Trees* (2015)

