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# New Homes and New Names: The African Migrant Novel in the Digital Age

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## Abstract

In this thesis, I attempt to explore the development of migrant literature in an era of digital communication. The latest developments in communication technology have certainly destabilized patterns of content creation and dissemination. While many use it uncritically, mostly as a means of information and keeping in contact, there are new avenues open for those who wish to engage actively and create a space for new dialogue. And though these online platforms have not completely overturned hierarchies between literatures from the West versus the global South, they have certainly altered both the content and form of work originating from African countries. By doing so, digital technology has boosted the creation of an African identity that moves away from victimhood by reimagining ideas of what it means to be and write from an African perspective where a multiplicity and hybridity of voices exist. I have chosen three “digital migrant novels” (Caren Irr’s term): Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*, NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*, and *Open City* by Teju Cole. I begin by situating these novels in a technologically sophisticated, media oriented space, where the geography of nations is challenged by overlapping spaces of digital communication. My aim is threefold – to identify new patterns in migrant identity and to see how they are affected by technology use; to see whether these patterns correspond to the emergence of an Afropolitan identity (and to understand what permutations this Afropolitan identity can take on). And finally, to analyse how digital media communication shapes a migrant’s relationship to homeland and language.

**Keywords:** Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Teju Cole, NoViolet Bulawayo, migrant, digital, digital migrant novel, African, Afropolitan, home, identity, language

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## Introduction

This aim of this thesis is to explore the questions of evolving identities in contemporary migrant fiction; particularly to see how they have developed with the advent of digital technology and increased connectivity. I have chosen three novels, written post-2010, by migrant writers that have moved from African countries to the United States: Teju Cole's *Open City*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, and *We Need New Names* by NoViolet Bulawayo. Although the books vary significantly in how characters actually approach and use technology, we can see in each text the all-pervading presence of digital technology and global media systems. The spread of pop culture and world news, the knowledge of and access to cultural symbols from faraway places, and the ease of virtual communication and access, are present in all the texts and form an important part of the worldviews they convey. Caren Irr refers to such texts as "digital migrant novels." While media systems have been a popular theme in works in the past, the significant difference, Irr believes, is that newer novels, such as the ones I have chosen, "rely on the premise of dispersed, peer-to-peer media systems" (28) that are no longer confined by national boundaries. Of course, the importance of borders and nations remains significant, but online spaces go a long way in breaking their all-powerful hold, and identities, rather than being strictly defined by country, draw influences from multiple sources. Irr uses the metaphor of the router, explaining that

the new migration fiction positions the narrator as a router, filtering and processing an overwhelming multisensory system. The narrator as router is distributed across the system rather than looking inward or backward in the romantic sense. Whether or not they directly take digital media as a topic, the new works borrow the organizational logic of digital-media systems and, in so doing, reformulate the basic premises of migrant fiction. (28)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As we will see in the next section, in *We Need New Names*, the narrator function works more like a hard-drive than a router.

In a situation of “disembodied placelessness” – wherein the organization of time and space are no longer linear, historical and geographically bound – the traditional omniscient narrator is replaced with a character that records elements derived from diverse, time-and-space-unbound sources. But this digital analogy, the router, does not indicate passivity, because “the new migrant heroes”, Irr states, “are less often psychologically rounded recipients of demoralizing messages and more often mobile subjects who receive and interpret cultural codes while actively transmitting and translating their own information” (29). Irr herself uses Julius from *Open City* as an example of such a hero. She describes the protagonist’s rejection of “personal, face-to-face experiences of solidarity [in favour of] aesthetic and intellectual identifications, [such as] finding echoes of himself in photographs of three African boys running into the surf in Liberia... and news stories about the discovery of the African Burial Ground lying beneath the financial district near Wall Street” (56). When we look at Julius’ meandering walks across New York and Brussels, and his musing on the history and significance of spaces and places from the very beginning of the book, we can recognize Irr’s narrator-as-router:

That night I took the subway home, and instead of falling asleep immediately, I lay in bed, too tired to release myself from wakefulness, and I rehearsed in the dark the numerous incidents and signs I had encountered while roaming, sorting each encounter like a child playing with wooden blocks, trying to figure out which belonged where, which responded to which. Each neighbourhood of the city appeared to be made of a different substance, each seemed to have a different air pressure, a different psychic weight: the bright lights and shuttered shops, the housing projects and luxury hotels, the fire escapes and city parks. My futile task of sorting went on until the forms began to morph into each other and assume abstract shapes unrelated to the real city, and only then did my hectic mind finally show some pity and still itself, only then did dreamless sleep arrive. (6-7)

Here, and in many other places in the novel, Julius’s thoughts jump from one subject to another, linked, often only tenuously, by geographical or historical association. And as personal ideologies and thoughts determine the outside world and what he makes of it, Julius emerges as an example of character who is a chronicler of past and present events, linking unrelated events to create his own story. Thus, even though Julius does not engage with

communication technology in any meaningful way, we can see in him, what Irr describes as a “networked sensibility” (32).

Adichie’s *Americanah* is more obviously a digital migrant novel, in that the protagonist, Ifemelu, writes a blog about life as a “non-American Black” in the United States, creating an online space for herself and others to express their preoccupations. The novel contains several blog entries with titles such as “To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You Are Black, Baby” and “Why Dark-Skinned Women – Both American and Non-American – Love Barack Obama.” Ifemelu, while retaining her national, continental, and racial identity, moves beyond the trauma of geographical displacement. It is not that Ifemelu and other migrants in the book do not experience the trauma of physical migration, but rather that, as Irr explains, these “wounds and scars are modulated by a complex media economy” (57).

Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*, appears, at first glance, to fit into the older style of the traditional migrant trauma narrative, with the protagonist, Darling, constantly comparing “home” (an unnamed version of Zimbabwe) and America. However, a close look reveals the presence of hybrid influences, even in Paradise, the ironically named shanty-town where the protagonist lives, a sense that is only magnified in the second half of the novel when Darling moves to Michigan.

Pier Paolo Frassinelli argues that *We Need New Names* falls into the realm of the digital migrant novel by moving past traditional narratives of trauma and displacement, and focusing instead on transnational spaces that challenge the roles expected to be played by those from one or the other country. This is achieved through the importance of pop culture, thanks to which “America is already fully part of the imaginary of the children we encounter in the first half of the narrative. The transnational cultural and social geographies forged by multiple, mediated encounters that produce new hybrid formations and forms of identification, also come to the fore in the chapters that portray Darling’s interactions with her closest American friends and their consumerist, digitally mediated life in suburban America” (718-719). We can thus read *We Need New Names* as a novel which, instead of focusing on “absorption by the historical wound ... elects to map the restless psychology of the newly mobile contemporary global subjects” (Irr, 54).

The stories in these three books are of particular people, with specific experiences, and certainly do not provide an exhaustive overview of migrant experience, or even the African migrant experience. However, I do believe that migrant writing, from anywhere, offers insight, not just into the lives of other migrants, but into the ways people and societies

look at themselves. Edward Said, in his essay “Overlapping Histories, Intertwined Territories”, writes in favour of such an approach:

Let us begin by accepting the notion that although there is an irreducible subjective core to human experience, this experience is also historical and secular, it is accessible to analysis and interpretation, and – centrally important – it is not exhausted by totalizing theories, not marked and limited by doctrinal or national constructs ... The difficulty with theories of essentialism and exclusiveness, or with barriers and sides, is that they give rise to polarizations that absolve and forgive ignorance and demagoguery more than they enable knowledge. (Said, 35).

Said’s words explain not just why studying even a single work (or three) is important, but also why migrant literature forms an interesting and important branch of study. Migrants, almost by definition, occupy a space between two cultures, between past and present, thus naturally complicating ideas of barriers and sides, and speak from a place of multiplicity. In his essay, “Imaginary Homelands”, Salman Rushdie states that

the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity. ... I suggest that the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form. ... This may enable him to speak properly and concretely on a subject of universal significance and appeal. (12)

Rushdie wrote this in the 1980s prior to the incredible spread of digital technology, but it still rings true in that the migrant continues to be uniquely placed to talk about subjects related to home and loss that are of special importance to her but also ring true, in some form or the other, for the general population.

Following a persistent recurrence of questions of identity formation in contemporary migrant novels, the purpose of this thesis is to see how digital technology complicates this mix of multiple cultures and languages by allowing not just the virtual crossing of borders but also creating a world where physical geographies are layered with and challenged by digital ones. I map out this process by looking first at how characters in these novels interact with technology and how it reflects and shapes their identities. Next, I look at migrant identity through the Afropolitan lens, to understand how this term has been understood (and misunderstood). I use the texts to try and illustrate the complexity of the term, as well as to

demonstrate the relationship between an Afropolitan identity and increased digital connectivity. Finally, I turn to the question of how technology changes the migrant's perception of home, how technology blurs the lines between the idea of a pure, untouched homeland, and a new completely alien space. I also analyse the importance of language and the politics and creation of a voice of one's own.

## Technology use and identity

While each of the chosen texts fits into the category of the digital migrant novel, actual use of technology by the characters in the books differs greatly. In this section, I look at the three protagonists from the books as well as some minor characters, in order to see how their interaction with technology reflects and shapes their identities. In *Americanah* we see in Ifemelu a contributor, who engages, questions and creates her own online identity. In contrast, Darling, in *We Need New Names* is classified as a receiver – someone who relies heavily on the Internet and social media for information and communication, but does not contribute to the online community or question the cultural cues it provides. At the other end of the spectrum is *Open City*'s Julius, who we see as an active avoider, which can be said both of his online and real-world interactions. These varied uses of digital technology demonstrate that the presence of the Internet does not, in itself, lead to a more layered migrant identity. While it does provide a platform for new voices and opinions, how meaningfully this platform is used determines the effect it has.

### *Americanah* – The Contributor

*Americanah* primarily follows the life of Ifemelu, through her youth in Nigeria, her move to the United States to live and study, to her eventual return to Lagos. As a student in the US, Ifemelu faces struggles familiar to readers of migrant literature, regarding race, identity and homesickness. She does, however, eventually find a place for herself, especially once she starts writing her blog – *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*. Eventually, she decides to move back to Nigeria, where, after a disappointing stint at a lifestyle magazine, she starts a new blog about life in Lagos, which helps her articulate her concerns.

Ifemelu first turns to an online community after a disastrous hair-do, which serves to bring attention to the question of racial identity, something she never had to deal with in Nigeria. Ifemelu is told to take her braids out in order to look professional for a job interview,



i.e., closer to a typical white aesthetic. She chemically relaxes (straightens) her hair, which ends up burning her scalp and causing her hair to fall. She cuts it off but is left feeling uncomfortable and ugly, which leads her towards Happilykinkynappy.com, a website for black women who choose to let their hair free. Happy to find a “virtual world where their coily, kinky, nappy, woolly hair was normal” Ifemelu finds solace in the positive affirmation, compliments and virtual hugs, and after a near relapse when she heads to a store to buy a weave, posts her belief to “remember that there is nothing more beautiful than what God gave me”. The instant gratification begins Ifemelu’s love for online communities: “Others wrote responses, posting thumbs-up signs, telling her how much they liked the photo she had put up. She had never talked about God so much. Posting on the website was like giving testimony in church; the echoing roar of approval revived her” (212-213).

Her own blog begins to take shape soon afterwards, full of observations about race, sometimes disguised as tongue-in-cheek advice. An interesting example of the style and features of the blog can be seen in the post “To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America You Are Black, Baby”. The Blog begins with the observation of “becoming black” in America; being forced to be cognizant of your race, which is all encompassing and blurs all regional distinctions: “Dear non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing, Stop saying I’m Jamaican or I’m Ghanaian. America doesn’t care. So what if you weren’t “black” in your country? You’re in America now.” (220) It then goes on to list what one “must” do as a “good” black person in order to fit in:

And here’s the deal with being black: You must show that you are offended when words such as “watermelon” or “tar-baby” are used in jokes, even if you don’t know what the hell is being talked about... You must nod back when a black person nods at you in a heavily white area. It’s called the black nod. It is a way for black people to say “You are not alone, I am here too.” In describing black women you admire, always use the word “STRONG”, because that is what black women are supposed to be in America... If you are a man, be hyper-mellow, never get too excited, or somebody will worry that you’re about to pull a gun...If a black cashier gives poor service to the non-black person in front of you, compliment that person’s shoes or something, to make up for the bad service, because you’re just as guilty for the cashier’s crimes...If you’re telling a non-black person about something racist that happened to you, make sure you are not bitter. Don’t complain. Be forgiving. If

possible, make it funny. Most of all, do not be angry. Black people are not supposed to be angry about racism. Otherwise you get no sympathy. This applies only for white liberals, by the way. Don't even bother telling a white conservative about anything racist that happened to you. Because the conservative will tell you that YOU are the real racist and your mouth will hang open in confusion. (220-221)

The blog post tackles daily incidents that reflect what it means for Ifemelu and other people she knows to be black in America. Race, which was not an issue when Ifemelu was growing up in Nigeria, suddenly becomes the prism through which she sees nearly everything around her, and that major shift is reflected in her writing. Her instructions, to never be angry and to be funny when talking about racism, are ironic, because she herself uses these same tactics when writing – deflecting her rage about these daily slights into amusing blog posts. As Ifemelu tells her boyfriend Blaine, her desire is to “observe, not explain,” and the blog targets black readers who may identify certain things that hold true for them, and though there are posts addressing white people directly, (“Friendly Tips for the American Non-Black: How to React to an American Black Talking about Blackness”), they are still posts meant for black people to identify with, but refracted through a white lens.

Ifemelu's blog is not just a place for her to vent her frustrations, though she does plenty of that. She invites comments and poses questions, allowing for a community to build around her, united by common issues. For example, there's a post called “What's the Deal” which asks questions about race as a genetic construct:

They tell us race is an invention, that there is more genetic variation between two black people than there is between a black person and a white person. Then they tell us black people have a worse kind of breast cancer and get more fibroids. And white folk get cystic fibrosis and osteoporosis. So what's the deal, doctors in the house? Is race an invention or not? (302)

Another post is an open thread for “For All The Zipped Up Negroes: This is for all the Zipped-Up Negroes, the upwardly mobile American and Non-American Blacks who do not talk about Life Experiences That Have to Do Exclusively with Being Black. Because they want to keep everyone comfortable. Tell your story here. Unzip yourself. This is a safe place” (307). Through the blog, Ifemelu is able to reach a wide audience, those in similar situations but beyond her social circle. The blog, as a medium, works similarly in the book (we can date

this period in the book to pre-2008, shortly before Barack Obama became president of the United States) to how Twitter functions today in creating a public dialogue. Unlike Twitter though, Ifemelu is not bound in the blog by a 140-character limit, and is able to express herself at some length. Furthermore, the blog allows for a casual tone, public access, and the unlimited space of the blogosphere, which create the perfect setting for an exchange of ideas, something that would have been nigh impossible in traditional modes of print journalism and op-eds. In other words, we see a digital platform which allows for greater individual freedom.

Though Ifemelu's online presence is seen as a mostly positive thing, helping her make sense of how racial identity is suddenly affecting her life, it is often overwhelming, and at odds with her non-virtual life. After gaining a following, Ifemelu is invited to speak at offices and workshops, where she soon realizes that people want the "gesture of her presence" to make them feel good about themselves, rather than to actually listen to what it is she has to say. After one such session, she receives hate mail that says: "YOUR TALK WAS BALONEY. YOU ARE A RACIST. YOU SHOULD BE GRATEFUL WE LET YOU INTO THIS COUNTRY (305)." There are also times when she is overwhelmed by the blog's surprising popularity and sees it "even more apart from her, a separate entity that could thrive or not, sometimes without her and sometimes with her" (303). Subsumed and overwhelmed, she thinks of her readers as a "judgmental angry mob waiting for her, biding their time until they could attack her, unmask her" (303). This small section touches upon one of the significant problems faced by those who give their opinions online. The vitriol and hate speech bred and spurred on by the anonymity of the World Wide Web can deter many from speaking their mind. Though Ifemelu is known online simply as "the blogger", she fears being unmasked, and having the repercussions spill over into her non-virtual life.

Katherine Hallemeier makes the case that "*Americanah* does not so much speak to the US of the present reality of African lives as it speaks of the US in order to better articulate a desirable Nigerian future" (235). Similarly, in addressing a black population and talking about black issues, Ifemelu's blog uses communication technology as a means to create a space where white America is not at the centre of the conversation, but a tool of comparison when talking about black issues. In a real world, where *good blacks* must not be angry about racism, the virtual world provides, to some extent, this alternate space.

In actively engaging with social media and online spaces, and choosing how to interact with it, Ifemelu is able to mould the virtual sphere around her in a way that works for her and learn from it. It allows her to articulate her thoughts, and gives her the confidence to express them publicly. This creates an interesting contrast to the next text, where the

protagonist is unable to thoughtfully examine what elements she would like accept and reject from the online sphere, and instead, uncritically imbibes whatever social media and popular culture have to offer.

### ***We Need New Names* – The Receiver**

*We Need New Names*, the story of a young girl named Darling, begins in a shanty-town called Paradise in a fictionalized (unnamed) version of Zimbabwe. Uprooted from their homes, Darling, Chipso, Bastard, Godknows and other friends find ways to amuse themselves, making up games and heading to the nearby rich part of town, named Budapest, to steal guavas. They dream of leaving, and of prosperity and big cars and fancy houses, but it's largely seen as a game, a pipe dream. Then, in a sudden shift, Darling is whisked away to America by her Aunt Fostalina, and the second half of the book follows her life there, as she grapples with an America that is much more complex and less inviting than she had imagined.

Even though she was influenced by pop-culture in Paradise, from Lady Gaga and house music to make-believe games involving killing Osama Bin Laden, Darling's direct access to digital technology begins when she moves to Michigan. Television and the Internet, become her primary source of information, helping her fit in, especially since her Aunt and Uncle, immigrants themselves, are unable to provide roadmaps. Darling soaks up whatever American culture she can get her hands on, even if she doesn't quite believe in its superiority. Early on in the move, she says that she has

decided the best way to deal with it all is to sound American, and the TV has taught me just how to do it. It's pretty easy; all you have to do is watch *Dora the Explorer*, *The Simpsons*, *SpongeBob*, *Scooby-Doo*, and then move on to *That's So Raven*, *Glee*, *Friends*, *Golden Girls*, and so on, just listening and imitating the accents...I also have my list of American words that I keep under my tongue like talismans, ready to use: *pretty good, pain in the ass, for real, awesome, totally, skinny, dude, freaking, bizarre, psyched, messed up, like, tripping, motherfucker, clearance, allowance, douche bag, you're welcome, acting up, yikes*. The TV has also taught me that if I'm talking to someone, I have to look him in the eye, even if it is an adult, even if it's rude. (194)

Though Darling imbibes this form of popular culture, she does it superficially. She uses these Americanisms like talismans, but American culture remains incomprehensible to her.

Nowhere does she challenge or deeply question her place in American society, constantly seeing herself as someone outside it, trying to fit in. She fails, because her aim is to be as American as possible, rather than create an identity for herself. Her relationship with digital technology, though informative, is nonetheless passive, or unquestioning. Unsure of what to look for online, she plays the role of the random surfer, clicking one link after another. The idea exemplifies itself when Darling describes how she and two other friends, in search of some form of sex education, turn to porn sites:

We've been watching the flicks in alphabetic order so we're not all over the place. So far, we've seen amateur, we've seen anal, which was plain disgusting; we've seen Asian, which was respectful; we've seen big tits and blond and blow job; we've seen bondage, which was creepy; we've seen creampie and cumshot, which were both nasty; we've seen double penetration which was scary; we've seen ebony, which made us embarrassed; we've seen facials, which was dirty, we've seen fetish, which was strange; we've seen gangbang, which was like a crime; we haven't seen gay, since we were afraid of it, so we skipped it; we've seen group, which was nasty, we've seen hentai, which was exciting, we've seen Japanese, which was quiet, and we've seen lesbian, which was interesting. (200)

Lost in a sea of information, the three girls have almost no basis for filtering the categories. Thus bondage, creampie and cumshot make it onto their list, even though they are creepy and nasty. Interestingly, "gay" gets dismissed straight off, signalling perhaps, that this mostly unfamiliar territory is not completely alien, and inherited stereotypes are at play and carried forward even here. In any case, the Internet and popular culture are seen as tools of indoctrination, a parallel education, or even a parallel parenting of sorts. In Darling's case, the presence of digital technology does not help her become American. However, the book does describe cases where this transition occurs. In these situations the Internet becomes absorbing enough to remove the need for actual communication or parenting:

When our children were old enough and we told them about our country, they did not beg us for stories of the land we had left behind. They went to their computers and Googled and Googled and Googled. When they got off, they looked at us with something between pity and horror and said, Jeez, you really come from there? (249).

The result, in either case of passive receiver, is tragic. While aiding them with information necessary to flourish in the new country, increased access and connectivity do not provide the migrants a way to stay truly connected to their homeland. Rather, they appear to do the opposite. Aunt Fostalina and Uncle Kojo both find solace in meeting friends from their home countries, but this contact is sporadic and limited, and does not transcend to the online sphere. Instead, calls from home bring demands and admonitions, but no respite, and television and social media provide little direction. As for the second generation migrant children (described in the quote above) who have naturally absorbed American ways, social media and the internet appear to have captivated them entirely, leaving them unable or unwilling to connect with their parents or past. To stretch Irr's earlier metaphor, whereas *Americanah's* Ifemelu can be seen as a true router, sorting and transmitting information, Darling is something like an empty hard-drive; a receiver of multiple sources of information, but someone who is unable to filter and process these signals. In comparison, *Open City's* Julius appears to be a deeply contemplative *avoider*. While Darling's inability to differentiate between the cultural material and online information she has access to leads to blind acceptance, Julius, in a case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, rejects *all* attempts at engaged, sentimental interaction.

### ***Open City – The Avoider***

*Open City* is rather an unusual migrant story. Julius, the protagonist of the novel, is a long-time resident of New York and intimately familiar with the city. Rather than follow a concrete set of events, the book is a roadmap through Julius's mind, loosely connected to people, places and events. A physician specializing in psychiatry, Julius takes to walking aimlessly through the city, musing on whatever it is that catches his fancy. Though he is estranged from his parents, he decides, on a whim, to go look for his maternal grandmother, who, last he knew, lived in Brussels. However, once in Belgium, his search is cursory at best, and though he looks for her face in crowds, spends most of his time walking around and talking to Farouq, the manager of an Internet café. His return stateside is followed by his meeting Moji, the sister of one of his friends from Nigeria. It is here that Julius's carefully constructed persona begins to come undone, and he finally reveals himself to be unreliable, his memory shaky, and what appeared at first to be quiet self-assurance reveals itself to be a façade. In the final pages, Julius reveals that Moji has accused him of sexually assaulting her in their teenage years, at which point Julius, who claims he has no recollection of the event, left her house without saying a word.

While *Americanah* and *We Need New Names* have immigrants in search of connection, Julius appears to back away from it, or at least from emotional or sentimental connection, selecting for himself instead, a few carefully crafted purely intellectual pursuits in order to connect. Pieter Vermeulen believes that “[w]hile these historical connections may seem to underwrite an ethic of cosmopolitan ‘hyperlinking,’ they are delivered in an insipid tone ... that is inevitably reminiscent of a Wikipedia page” (50). Through the course of the novel it becomes evident that this insipid hyperlinking is the result of a dogged desire to be academic rather than engaged, free-association.

Julius’s identity is a complicated thing. Though self-assured on the surface, he speaks, on occasion, of being “opaque to oneself”, and describes his memory as being filled with blank spaces:

We experience life as a continuity, and only after it falls away, after it becomes the past, do we see its discontinuities. The past, if ever there is such a thing, is mostly empty space, great expanses of nothing, in which significant persons and events float. Nigeria was like that for me: mostly forgotten, except for those few things that I remembered with an outsize intensity. These were the things that had been solidified in my mind by reiteration, that recurred in dreams and daily thoughts: certain faces, certain conversations, which taken a group, represented a secure version of the past that I had been constructing since 1992. But there was another, irruptive sense of things past. The sudden reencounter, in the present, of something or someone long forgotten, some part of myself I had relegated to childhood and to Africa. (155-156)

As physicians, I said to my friend, we depend, to a much greater degree than is the case with nonmental conditions, on what the patient tells us. But what are we to do when the lens through which the symptoms are viewed is often, itself, symptomatic: the mind is opaque to itself, and it’s hard to tell where, precisely, these areas of opacity are. (238)

Julius speaks of his past and his own mind as being unreachable and unknown, yet his memory remains clear, except for the one incident of Moji’s rape (or so he says). Even were the reader to take him at his word that he has no recollection of the incident, this unknowability reads suspiciously, making one wonder whether this opaqueness has to do with Julius’s reluctance to examine his life rather than an inability to do so. Yet, on the

surface, Julius appears to be functioning normally, if solitarily. We can see in him, a version of the flaneur, the “leisurely wanderer who was acutely attentive to the spectacle provided by the processes of commodification and urbanization that surrounded him” (Vermulen, 41). However, as Vermulen argues, while

[t]he novel strings together numerous accounts of human rights abuses and testimonies of culturally very diverse experiences ... these fail to register in even a minimally transformative way in the narrator’s fatefully dissociated mind. When read closely, we can see that Julius’s posture as a cosmopolitan *flâneur* is shadowed by the contours of more sinister, and mostly forgotten, nineteenth-century figure of restless mobility: the *fugueur*. (42)

In Julius the *fugueur* we see no lightness, no happiness, not even sadness. The normal range of emotions is replaced with a constant one-tone heaviness that shrouds the text in an unspecific melancholy. Examples of this fugue state abound in the text. In one instance, sitting in the metro, Julius observes himself in an almost dissociative state:

The car moved past my stop, and momentarily I tried to figure out what had happened. I hadn’t been asleep. My staying on, I finally decided, was intentional, if not conscious. This was confirmed at the next stop, when I again failed to exit and instead sat there, with the feeling that I was watching myself, waiting to see what would happen next. (44)

More than this daze, we can identify the *fugueur* in Julius from his inability to be moved, in any meaningful way, even though he appears to be upset, such as when he hears of his old professor having died, or of his neighbour’s wife passing away. The emotions he feels are temporary and appear to have no bearing on his thoughts or actions as he continues onwards.

This fugue state in Julius’s life filters through to his online use. Though at first glance, *Open City* appears to be a strange case to study technological communication and connection, given that Julius’s online use is sporadic and functional, a close look reveals, in this absence, a confirmation of Julius’s state of being and precarious identity. Though some people who have trouble with real-life interactions take to digital forums to form communities, Julius’s isolation is so complete that he finds little joy in online communication. I would even go so far as to say that, given his reluctance to share, he would be unable, just as in his non-virtual



life, to form connections online, to be part of any kind of group. His wistful walks may demonstrate a desire to belong, but such belonging is inconceivable as long as he refuses to reach out, to see in others kindred spirits. When Julius does use the Internet, for example to listen to international radio stations, he is attentive more to the dislocation than connection:

While I waited for the rare squadrons of geese, I would sometimes listen to the radio. I generally avoided American stations, which had too many commercials for my taste – Beethoven followed by ski jackets. Wagner after artisanal cheese – instead tuning to Internet stations from Canada, Germany, or the Netherlands ... I liked the murmur of the announcers, the sounds of those voices speaking calmly from thousands of miles away. I turned the computer's speakers low and looked outside, nestled in the comfort provided by these voices, and it wasn't at all difficult to draw the comparison between myself, in my sparse apartment, and the radio host in his or her booth, during what must have been the middle of the night somewhere in Europe. (4-5)

As we can see here, even when Julius does engage, he focuses not on their link, the common love of music, or the joining of faraway places, but on isolation and dislocation on both ends. Later, at the end of the book, after the revelation of the rape and his leaving the hospital to join private practice, he mentions that he has “bookmarked on the computer one of the New York classical music stations, feeling more tolerant now of the announcers than I used to” (248). One can take the charitable view and think of this as his being genuinely more open to connection, but in light of his retreat from the truth of Moji's accusation, this little gesture seems to be a mere concession.

Expanding on the idea of the fugue state, Vermulen argues that “*Open City* takes on a second line of critique routinely leveled at literary cosmopolitanism. This critique holds that cosmopolitanism is not merely *culturalist* (and to that extent anti-materialist), but also unabashedly *aestheticist*; it not only mistakes cultural solutions for worldly action, but it also privileges a rarefied set of high-cultural gestures at the expense of a more inclusive approach” (41). In light of this, Julius's rejection of modern, accessible technology can be seen as a product of his privileging of more rarefied aesthetic forms. It follows that he would be unwilling to connect, not just to people who demand the likes' and thumbs-up that so gratified *Americanah's* Ifemelu, but in a medium that allows for connections across strata and destabilizes the barriers of privilege.

So far we have seen how all three texts I am analysing illustrate different ways in which technology may be used, and how these three distinct styles are reflective of, and help create, three distinct types of migrant experiences and identities. *Americanah* is the undisputed success story of active engagement that leads to greater fulfilment. *We Need New Names* and *Open City* depict failures of two kinds – passive acceptance of digital media in the former, and passive disengagement in the latter. In the next section I want to further explore a new and fast developing element of this migrant identity – Afropolitanism. Afropolitanism's creation itself has been linked to the burgeoning and spread of the Internet, and it is interesting to analyse how this new avatar has come about and its representation in literature.

### **Afropolitanism, cosmopolitanism and the African migrant identity**

The criticism around contemporary African migrant fiction inevitably comes around to the debate on Afropolitanism. The term gained popularity because of an article titled “Bye-Bye Babar (Or: What is an Afropolitan)”, written in 2005, by novelist Taiye Selasi. For Selasi, Afropolitans are “The newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you”. Equally comfortable in Western and African cities, well-educated, well-off and media savvy, Afropolitans aren't just the cool kids at the latest club, but also a dispersed group willing to

engage with, critique, and celebrate the parts of Africa that mean most to them. Perhaps what most typifies the Afropolitan consciousness is the refusal to oversimplify; the effort to understand what is ailing in Africa alongside the desire to honor what is wonderful, unique. Rather than essentialising the geographical entity, we seek to comprehend the cultural complexity; to honor the intellectual and spiritual legacy; and to sustain our parents' cultures. (1)

Selasi describes Afropolitan identity that is formed along three questions: 1. finding out what home means (which I will deal with in the third section) and defining relationships to the different countries, cities and spaces with which they have a connection. 2. Defining their race – “a question of politics, rather than pigment; not all of us claim to be black”; and 3. Thinking about culture, and “what comprises ‘African culture’ beyond pepper soup and filial piety” (1). These three questions introduce the element of choice, of identity as something that one can define for oneself, instead of it being bestowed by birth or nationality. It also

introduces the element of multiplicity – the possibility of being both black and white, both African and European, rather than just one or the other.

In 2007, Achille Mbembe further defined the term, by linking it to two questions that have the potential to reconfigure questions of identity. The first is asking who is African and who is not. Mbembe talks about dispersion and immersion, about those Africans that have left the continent and moved elsewhere, as well as population groups including Europeans, Arabs, Indians and Chinese, who have lived in Africa for decades, even centuries. This natural mobility, he argues, is what colonisation once “endeavoured to freeze through the modern institution of borders.” Further, he writes:

Awareness of the interweaving of the here and there, the presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa, the relativisation of primary roots and memberships and the way of embracing, with full knowledge of the facts, strangeness, foreignness, and remoteness, the ability to recognise one’s face in that of a foreigner and make the most of the traces of remoteness in closeness, to domesticate the unfamiliar, to work with what seem to be opposites – it is this cultural, historical and aesthetic sensitivity that underlies the term “Afropolitan”. (28)

Unlike pan-Africanism, Mbembe argues, Afropolitanism is an “aesthetic and particular poetic of the world.” Afropolitanism refuses the identity of victim, while being aware that injustice of course exists, and puts individuals, with their multiple, hybrid identities, before states and other pre-determined allegiances. Like Selasi, Mbembe recognizes that the Afropolitans are those who think of themselves, not just in relation to those next door, but to those the world over: these include musicians, artists, composers, writers etc. in centres of creative activity, who work towards reviving African aesthetic and cultural creativity.

As should be evident, the availability of technology and the ease of virtual movement it implies plays a large part in the spread of the Afropolitan identity beyond the upper classes and big cities. In an interview in 2015, titled “Internet is Afropolitan”, Mbembe celebrates the spread of mobile phone and internet technology on the continent as revolutionising the ways in which people relate to themselves. The Internet, for him is an important tool for disseminating ideas, for mobilization, and he believes that Africa is a fertile ground for the growth of these technologies in that “permanent transformation, mutation, conversion and

circulation is an essential part of African culture” and national borders will soon be superseded by virtual ones, leading to the strengthening of the Afropolitan mindset” (1).

However, the value of the term has been called into question by a number of scholars, who have criticized it for its focus on consumerism and glorification of upper class capitalism, which may challenge identities based on victimization, but in doing so ignores the stories of those that are genuinely suffering. Stefanie Bosch Santana, for instance, cites Binyavanga Wainaina’s preference for pan-Africanism over Afropolitanism because the latter stands for little other than style, a cool new brand to sell. While “style, in and of itself, is not really the issue ... it’s the attempt to begin with style, and then infuse it with substantive political consciousness that is problematic” (1). While she acknowledges Mbembe’s critique of pan-Africanism as having become “institutionalized and ossified,” and too close to nativist trends, she sees value in its “longer history of Africa-centered engagement [that] creates a more stable foundation—which, unlike Afropolitanism, is less likely to be used for aesthetic purposes alone” (1). Bosch Santana also discusses the significance of literature in this setting, where texts are seen as products: “Based on the same capitalist fantasy that economic markets are equal, it is assumed that the literary marketplace, too, is unfettered by issues of uneven development or protectionism. Wainaina points to a particular kind of Afropolitan African novel that is frequently produced—one that touches upon social and economic issues, but ultimately is written for an audience of fellow Afropolitans” (1). Instead, Bosch Santana and Wainaina support what is called “digital pulp” – a new avatar of genre-based fiction that breaks conventions and is created and disseminated online and addresses pan-African issues.

This is a serious, and in many ways legitimate charge levelled against the term, and the three novels tackle these issues in different ways. In other words, they seem to rise from an environment where the discourse has pitted pan-Africanism against Afropolitanism, or vice versa. I find that the novels discussed here reject certain aspects of what it means to be Afropolitan in Selasi and Mbembe’s terms. Instead, I believe, they pave the way for a broader, more inclusive Afropolitanism, which is more about ethical implications than style and glamour, while also demonstrating the role of technology in shaping this identity.

### **Afropolitanism and *Americanah***

*Americanah* deals with the question of Afropolitanism in two distinct ways. The first is directly through talking about the Nigerpolitan Club, a select group foreign-returned Nigerians, sophisticated, quirky, and complaining. Ifemelu attends gatherings hosted by the group, and is quickly put off by the

small cluster of people drinking champagne in paper cups, at the poolside of a home in Osborne Estate, chic people, all dripping with savoir faire, each nursing a self-styled quirkiness – a ginger-coloured Afro, a T-shirt with a graphic of Thomas Sankara, oversize handmade earrings that hung like pieces of modern art. Their voices burred with foreign accents. *You can't find a decent smoothie in this city! Oh my God, were you at that conference? What this country needs is an active civil society.* (407)

The cultivated chic of the Nigeropolitans grates Ifemelu, who finds them artificial, stubbornly Westernised, and removed from the daily realities of Nigerian life. A similar reaction to Afropolitanism is echoed by Emma Dabiri in her essay “Why I’m not an Afropolitan”. Dabiri condemns the Afropolitan elites for their consumerism, citing Fanon’s criticism of a dual economy, where wealth exists in pockets and is in the pockets of the Afropolitan class. She is sceptical of writers such as Selasi, who celebrates finding her identity in a glamorous Africa, where versions of American and European experiences can be had with added local colour. For Dabiri, Selasi’s article from *The Guardian* about finding her roots<sup>2</sup> smacks of consumerism, the selling of a new brand. It is not that she objects to these actions as such; it is that she finds them unworthy of celebrating, or as “particularly progressive”. Dabiri challenges a position wherein “defining ourselves as Afropolitan is presented as the only alternative to the Afro-pessimism narrative.” The problem is “that at a time when poverty remains endemic for millions, the narratives of a privileged few telling us ... how much opportunity and potential is available may drown out the voices of a majority who remain denied basic life chances” (1). Furthermore, Dabiri criticizes Afropolitanism’s “commodification of dissent”, finding that “it reeks of sponsorship and big business with all the attendant limitations” (1).

Such disdain is echoed in *Americanah*’s criticism of the Nigeropolitans, a disdain that is soured further for Ifemelu by the realization that she shares some of their concerns. At one

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<sup>2</sup> Selasi describes her experience as follows: “Of course, my deepest aim was personal: not to “find myself” in Africa but to be myself on African soil. This I did. And how. In Ouaga I danced until 5am at Allapalooza, a western-themed club, watched movies at a feminist film festival, wandered a sculpture park in the desert. Adama, our charming host, was an Afropolitan of the highest order: a Muslim musician with a Viennese wife, studying German at the Goethe Institute, uninterested in living anywhere else apart from Burkina Faso. Togo was a seaside treat: like Malibu with *motorini*, miles and miles of white-sand beach and perfect rows of palm trees. Thursday at midnight, we stood on that beach with hundreds of super-cool Togolese hipsters, assembled for the weekly late-night car tricks show and drag race. Cotonou was magic, too: I learned to sail in a hidden lagoon, swilled Eku (Afro-Bavarian beer) at Saloon, a riverfront bar. But the hometown – Accra – was the real revelation, what with its International Salsa Congress, midnight swimming at La Villa Hotel, guitarist Serwaa Okudzeto.”

of the meetings, she hears someone talk about a new Western-style restaurant with a good brunch menu:

*They have the kinds of things we can eat.* An unease crept up on Ifemelu. She was comfortable here, and she wished she were not. She wished, too, that she was not so interested in the new restaurant, did not perk up, imagining fresh green salads and still-firm vegetables... This was what she hoped she had not become but feared she had: a “they have the kinds of food we eat” kind of person. (409)

This creates a dichotomy for Ifemelu, forcing her to confront her own preferences and biases. Ultimately, she befriends some members of the group, who she finds interesting and, like her, are able to look at Nigerian society with the perspective afforded by distance. However, she rejects their constant comparisons to the West, expressing this further in her new blog “The Small Redemptions of Lagos”:

Lagos has never been, will never be, and has never aspired to be like New York, or anywhere else for that matter. Lagos has always been undisputably itself, but you would not know this at the meeting of the Nigerpolitan Club, a group of young returnees who gather every week to moan about the many ways that Lagos is not like New York as though Lagos has ever been close to being like New York. Full disclosure: I am one of them. Most of us have come back to make money in Nigeria, to start businesses, to seek government contracts and contacts. Others have come with dreams in their pockets and a hunger to change the country, but we spend all our time complaining about Nigeria, and even though our complaints are legitimate, I imagine myself as an outsider saying: Go back where you came from! If your cook cannot make the perfect panini, it is not because he is stupid. It is because Nigeria is not a nation of sandwich-eating people and his last oga did not eat bread in the afternoon. So he needs training and practice. And Nigeria is not a nation of people with food allergies, not a nation of picky eaters for whom food is about distinctions and separations. It is a nation of people who eat beef and chicken and cow skin and intestines and dried fish in a single bowl of soup, and it is called assorted, and so get over yourselves and realize that the way of life here is just that, assorted. (421)

While Dabiri finds the term Afropolitan irredeemably tarnished, the discourse in *Americanah* does not seem to reject Afropolitanism outright. In articulating the problems with this Nigeropolitan set, Ifemelu isn't rejecting all the values they embody, only their constant need to compare. It is not just that the comparisons are always unfavourable, but that they pitch the West as some kind of ideal. Not for Ifemelu is there something to celebrate (as Selasi does) in Togo being a worthy equivalent to Malibu. While she has fond recollections of her time in the States, these consumerist comparisons leave her feeling uncomfortable.

Instead, Ifemelu chooses to be the sort of Afropolitan who, with a layered identity, is able to engage meaningfully with cultures both local and foreign. This is the second way in which the book deals with the issue – by shining the light on the Nigerian experience, both in and outside Nigeria, and discussing what it means to be successful and happy and middle-class Nigerian in the digitalized twenty-first century. It presents a new kind of African – one with aspirations and identities that are globally influenced and different from her forebears.

Katherine Hallemeier, talking about the issue, quotes Teju Cole, who tweeted that “People in the richer nations need a more robust sense of lives being lived in the darker nations: connectivity issues on your Blackberry, cost of car repair, how to sync your iPad, what brand of noodles to buy: Third World problems.” (233). This isn't a showing-off about the coolness of the Third World, but rather, an acknowledgment, that even in the Third World, such “problems” exist. Of course, this doesn't take away from the fact that the lives being described are mostly of the elite, but it is interesting to note, nonetheless, the ways in which this new middle class is shaped. As Hallemeier argues, pitting the upper-class Westernised African elites against the languishing poor does not adequately capture the realities of many Africans and is “insufficient for describing shifting and emergent class structures that are themselves informed and shaped by divergent attitudes toward and engagements with so-called Western modernity” (234). *Raceteenth* and *Small Redemptions*, the two blogs, though they are derived from Ifemelu's personal life, do not just talk about upper-middle class experience. The American blog discusses the situation of black students on Ivy League campuses but also of those working minimum paid jobs, as well as a host of issues that are relevant to both. *Small Redemptions* talks about the Nigeropolitans and the rich mistresses of powerful men, but also about the street hawkers and the lower class government employees ordered to destroy their shacks.

Ifemelu and her friends, as a part of this new African identity within and outside the continent, are representative of this shifting middle class reality. Writing about Adichie and Cole's Internet presence, Miriam Pahl echoes this thought, stating that their works “express a

form of critical cosmopolitanism, in that they reintroduce an ambivalence, a multi-layeredness of meanings to the public and online conversations about mobility, globalization and cosmopolitanism from a specifically Afro-centric perspective” (75). Pahl also cites the important role the Internet plays in this: though it by no means means equality of access or a breakdown of class boundaries and may even recreate global inequalities, the Internet is seen as an important tool affecting the daily lives of those who have access to it, and “demonstrates the interconnection and interdependence of global social networks.” (75) Of course Ifemelu’s online presence in *Americanah* is a middle/upper-middle class one, but it is, nonetheless, a creative outlet that challenges old outlooks and structural positions.

### **Afropolitanism and *We Need New Names***

Unlike the characters in *Americanah* and *Open City*, Darling isn’t from the upper-middle class, highly educated set. Her experience of immigrant life is tragic, cut through with longing and unfulfilled dreams. She is of the very class that critics of Afropolitanism believe is ignored in use of the term. Yet, there is the realization, that in this longing, she is not alone.

Breaking up Darling’s story are three interludes in the book: “How They Appeared”, which talks about the people who arrived in Paradise, “How They Left”, about those that moved to other countries, and “How they Lived” which is about the lives of immigrants in the United States. While the first two interludes are written in third person plural, the final one shifts to a first person plural. The “We”, meaning immigrants in Darling’s situation, are a sort of collective. And they meet “others”:

The others spoke languages we didn’t know, worshipped different gods, ate what we would not dare touch. But like us, they had left their homelands behind. They flipped open their wallets to show us faded photographs of mothers whose faces bore the same creases of worry as our very own mothers, siblings bleak-eyed with dreams unfulfilled like those of our own, fathers forlorn and defeated like ours. We had never seen their countries but we knew about everything in those pictures; we were not altogether strangers. (243)

It is in finding these “others”, and in seeing them as “not altogether strangers”, that an Afropolitan identity is formed. It is an Afropolitanism and a cosmopolitanism created out of being in the same boat, out of knowing similar suffering, of coming from “tatters of countries” (242). When the names of the others prove too unfamiliar, they are referred to by



country – Sudan, Sri Lanka, Kazakhstan, the countries no-one wanted to be in the country game in Paradise, the countries of “things falling apart”. Yet in America, a solidarity of experience is created among the members of these countries by their shared dreams and experiences of migration. Rushdie, in “Imaginary Homelands”, writes about Indian writers in England as having

access to a second tradition, quite apart from their own racial history. It is the cultural and political history of the phenomenon of migration, displacement, life in a minority group. We can quite legitimately claim as our ancestors the Huguenots, the Irish, the Jews; the past to which we belong is an English past, the history of immigrant Britain. Swift, Conrad, Marx are as much our literary forebears as Tagore or Ram Mohan Roy. (20)

It is this type of tradition and history that *We Need New Names* taps into. There is a move beyond looking inwards and backwards into one’s own group, and recognizing, as Mbembe puts it, “one’s face in that of a foreigner” (28). This move is not just a privilege of the upper-class well-educated artists, media professionals and scholars of the Afropolitan set, but of all of those who, while remaining rooted within their own community, can look outwards. What we see here is a broadening of the sense of being Afropolitan. Chielozone Eze discusses this phenomenon by distancing Afropolitanism from consumer culture and focusing instead on the creation of a hybrid and layered identity. Moving past nativist trends, Eze welcomes the “calling for a new, more nuanced understanding of identity.” In a hyperlinked and hypercultural world, where most African villages have cell-phone access, and identity and culture are delocalized, Eze finds relief in the fact that “the African is contaminated in the sense that she is not culturally or biologically pure. And this is good. The African is a mutt. To acknowledge her muttness is to concede the presence of the other in her life and to be ready to enter into an I-Thou relationship with this other, to make way for dialogue” (239). In Eze’s view, “Afropolitanism corresponds to what has been called the cultural face of cosmopolitanism; An Afropolitan, in my understanding, is that human being on the African continent or of African descent who has realized that her identity can no longer be explained in purist, essentialist, and oppositional terms or by reference only to Africa” (239). Eze thus links Afropolitanism to cosmopolitanism, which he deems another misunderstood word that has come to refer to “people without roots and to privileged snobs alike” (241). Instead he sees cosmopolitanism as having a spiritual, moral connection to a worldwide community;

“relation rather than opposition” (242). Such a cosmopolitanism does not demand giving up one's roots, but rather, looking at the world with the “empathic imagination”. It is this empathic imagination that we see at play in the interlude in *We Need New Names*. There is a genuine attempt at understanding here, unlike in situations like the wedding scene, where an unknown white lady corners Darling in the bathroom and tells Darling, in glowing terms of her own and her family's good work in helping less fortunate Africans. Where the bathroom-wedding incident reflects the privileged Westerner who wants to ‘help’ without understanding, the kind of Afropolitanism given credit in the book is one that features a willingness to understand, one that breaks down binaries of ‘us’ and ‘them’.

### **Afropolitanism and *Open City***

*Open City* never directly addresses issues of Afropolitan or cosmopolitan identity. Yet, its critique of them can be seen as the most direct. Though he does in many ways identify as a migrant (ruminating on migration patterns in previous centuries, comparing himself to seasonal movements of birds etc.), Julius is completely cut-off from Nigeria and the African continent. This attitude seems to remove the potential for the “Afro” part of the Afropolitan identity. Instead, the focus is on a cosmopolitanism that is unmoored from the continent. However, the cosmopolitanism critiqued in the novel holds true for Afropolitanism as well, which suffers from the same limitations and pitfalls. In fact, one of the criticisms of this kind of cosmopolitanism is exactly that it makes light of regional or historical affiliations, and thus the absence of any hint of African identity, is a further indication to the limits of this kind of affiliation.

By depicting Julius as being in a fugue-like state, the book exposes the inability of his brand of cosmopolitanism to achieve real connection. Madhu Krishnan finds a reference to this in the title of the book itself. Driving into Brussels, Julius muses that “there had been no firebombing of Bruges, or Ghent, or Brussels. Surrender, of course, played a role in this form of survival, as did negotiation with invading powers. Had Brussels's rulers not opted to declare it an open city and thereby exempt it from bombardment during the Second World War, it might have been reduced to rubble.” (97) As Krishnan states, while we may first have seen it as a positive thing, a city open to understanding, to belonging, we now understand it as place that is “open to surrender rather than liberation” (679). In such a space “estrangement takes on the appearance of cosmopolitan sophistication, while entrenching the rigid binaries and categorizations through which power is regulated” (690). The crux of Krishnan's argument is that there is nothing inherently liberating in the creation of postcolonial space. As

*Open City* shows, the postcolonial space is seen to be constructing “a fiction of cosmopolitan freedom and multiplicity which eventually reveals itself as a cover for violence, alienation, and the bondage of postcoloniality in collusion with neoliberalism” (Krishnan, 679). Following Vermeulen’s argument that Julius’s disassociation highlights the “limits of cosmopolitan imagination” (42), I find that Julius’ walking through the city, dishing out bits of information to himself, goes against his own belief that he is a cosmopolitan man-about-town. Instead, this almost obsessive walking and recounting reads more as a desperate attempt by an alienated man to find some meaning in a place where he is unable to connect to anyone or anything in a meaningful way.

There is, however, a fundamental difference between the sort of cosmopolitanism criticized by Krishnan and Vermeulen, and Eze’s broader understanding of the term and its connection to Afropolitanism. Moving away from a discourse of cosmopolitanism that sees it as an unforced appreciation of novelty and a kind of touristic voyeurism, Eze focuses on intellectual openness, and a desire to engage, which does not mean an unthinking acceptance of all aspects of a culture, but rather an acceptance of the humanity of the other. Ultimately, *Open City*’s critique is of an unthinking, universalist cosmopolitanism that a) is deliberately unmoored and b) celebrates an elitist aesthetic instead of understanding and engaging with difference. As such, the novel’s critique of cosmopolitanism aligns with Eze’s form of Afropolitanism, even though the main character seems to want to avoid it. In fact, as mentioned earlier, the same critique of cosmopolitanism applies also to the elite, essentialist, and extreme variant of Afropolitanism, a critique that arises from Julius’s treatment of the African identity as if it were non-existent.

As I have shown, all three texts, in their own way, accept and reject certain aspects of the Afropolitan identity. In all three works we can see a backlash against elitist consumer culture and the notion that cosmopolitan or Afropolitan identities are exclusively upper class and rarefied. Despite their vastly differing styles and content, all three texts seem to agree on the need and the desire to depict African identity as more hybrid and nuanced, which I believe, is at the core of Afropolitan identity.

Yet the debate regarding the term continues. And while Eze’s definition may be more inclusive, with a useful focus on moral and cultural understanding, issues remain, such as the fear of these middle-class-oriented stories obscuring stories of real suffering, and the need for real political and economic solutions. And perhaps in this debate lies one of the other benefits of Afropolitanism: that it allows for discussion around what it means to be African or of

African descent, then, seems as worthwhile as the term itself. As Cole stated in a series of Tweets on his now inactive Twitter account “the discourse around Afropolitanism foregrounds questions of class in ways that the ‘I’m not Afropolitan’ crowd don’t want to deal with (and in ways the ‘I’m Afropolitan crowd’ are often too blithe about.)” (Hallemeier, 233). In debating what the term means, its limitations and strengths, and in choosing what kind of Afropolitanism one wants to adopt or reject, conversations regarding a changing African identity are taking place. Conversations around economic, social and cultural developments beyond the continent, and Africa and Africans’ place in them.

The three novels also demonstrate that an Afropolitan identity certainly does not suggest a detachment from roots. Home and language remain central concerns, even in these Afropolitan digital migrant works. In the following section, I will be analysing how these two notions – of homeland and mother tongue – are presented in the books, and the shapes they take with increased digital communication.

## **Home – countries, languages and digital communication**

Home – the longing for it, the distance from it, the inability to be both there and elsewhere at the same time – is one of the central themes of migrant fiction. This section explores the where and what of home, essentially looking to see what home has come to mean in these works, what qualifies as belonging to a place, and how digital communication alters the migrant’s relationship to home.

The migrant novels discussed here appear to have a two-fold idea of home – the personal and the national. The personal involves relationships with family and friends, the national a more abstract sense of the country. Yet, two out of the three books use home and home-country/homeland/nation interchangeably showing that the latter is the more dominant idea, that the nation has greater influence on how home is defined. For instance, though the characters in *Americanah* and *We Need New Names* miss friends and lovers left behind, their longing for home is centred around a more abstract sense of missing the place or country they came from. We can see this early on in *Americanah* as Ifemelu articulates her desire to move back. The Internet and social media propel her further and further into Nigerian life, and the ease of access allows her to be privy to the stories of those that have successfully made the transition:

She scoured Nigerian websites, Nigerian profiles on Facebook, Nigerian blogs, and each click brought her another story of a young person who had recently moved back home, clothed in American or British degrees, to start an investment company, a music production business, a fashion label, a magazine, a fast-food franchise. She looked at photographs of these men and women and felt the dull ache of loss, as though they had prised open her hand and taken something of hers. They were living her life. Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil. (6)

As we can see here, for Ifemelu, the idea of home equals a place where she can settle down and be secure and comfortable, a place that requires no effort to belong to. Not her friends or parents or even Obinze, but Nigeria – the country – as an entity in itself.

Home and the home-country are also interchangeably used in *We Need New Names*:

There are two homes inside my head: home before Paradise, and home in Paradise; home one and home two. Home one was the best. A real house. Father and Mother having good jobs. Plenty of food to eat...And then home two – Paradise, with its tin tin tin.

There are three homes inside Mother's and Aunt Fostalina's heads: home before independence, before I was born, when black people and white people were fighting over the country. Home after independence, when black people won the country. And then the home of things falling apart, which made Aunt Fostalina leave and come here... There are four homes inside Mother of Bones's head: home before the white people came to steal the country, and a king ruled, when the white people came to steal the country and then there was war, home when black people got our stolen country back after independence; and then the home of now... When somebody talks about home, you have to listen carefully so you know exactly which one the person is referring to. (192)

As Darling explains, there are many homes inside people's heads. But in each case, home refers to a different point in the country's history, and all of them are situated in Zimbabwe (or the unnamed version of it in the novel). For Darling, there are a few elements of the personal in her definitions – home-as-Paradise and home with a house and two parents – but

she shifts focus when talking about the others and describes not actual homes, families, or houses, but the home as homeland.

In *Open City*, by contrast, where neither the national nor the personal are looked on with any nostalgia, it is nonetheless the personal that is privileged. Even if Julius does think of his past as mostly “empty space” his entanglements with it involve specifics – his family and definite events. The country and continent as basis for connection is a notion he actively rejects. In one scene, Julius gets into the taxi of an African cabdriver and does not greet him immediately, which makes the man visibly upset. When Julius asks him how he’s doing, the man responds with anger, having expected a connection:

Not good, not good at all, you know, the way you came into my car without saying hello, that was bad. Hey, I’m African just like you, why you do this? He kept me in his sights in the mirror. I was confused. I said, I’m so sorry about it, my mind was elsewhere, don’t be offended, eh, my brother, how are you doing? He said nothing, and faced the road. I wasn’t sorry at all. I was in no mood for people who tried to lay claims on me. (40)

Julius is offended not by the bad behaviour, but by the laying of claims. Unlike the driver, he finds ties based on national or continental ties absurd. We can see here and throughout the course of the book a rejection of this common thread of connection that he does not, cannot, feel. But even this rejection speaks to the powerful pull of the nation. To break from it requires an active effort on his part. Julius cannot feel this connection, but it is nonetheless there and he must assert himself to distance himself from it.

Both the abstract and the specific ties to home are altered by distance. We see this particularly in *Americanah* and *We Need New Names* where being a migrant gives the characters of these books a way of looking at the things that make up the home/nation from a distance, refracted through the gaze of being situated in America. As Hallemeier argues, this does not make the story an explanation of Africa to America, but offers a perspective of what home means while being elsewhere, allowing migrants a second point of reference from which they refract their gaze. This refracted gaze can be seen at play in *Americanah* in the conversations between the members of the African Students Association.

They mimicked what Americans told them: *You speak such good English. How bad is AIDS in your country? It’s so sad that people live on less than a dollar a day in*

*Africa*. And they themselves mocked Africa, trading stories of absurdity, of stupidity, and they felt safe to mock, because it was mockery born of longing, and of the heartbroken desire to see a place made whole again. Here, Ifemelu felt a gentle, swaying sense of renewal. Here, she did not have to explain herself. (139).

Elsewhere, around American locals, she finds herself embarrassed at being from a place that inspires only sympathy in others: “Kimberly’s face had softened, her eyes misted over, and for a moment Ifemelu was sorry to have come from Africa, to be the reason that this beautiful woman, with her bleached teeth and bounteous hair, would have to dig deep to feel such pity, such hopelessness. She smiled brightly, hoping to make Kimberly feel better” (150). While there is a dark humour here, and the joke is at the expense of Ifemelu’s employer Kimberly, it nonetheless reflects her unease. She articulates the same embarrassment and pain she feels when, at a party, people talk about charitable organizations they donate to in African countries: “Ifemelu wanted, suddenly and desperately, to be from the country of people who gave and not those who received, to be one of those who had and could therefore bask in the grace of having given, to be among those who could afford copious pity and empathy” (171). In the presence of charitable Americans, her country becomes a source of shame, and its poverty, politics and social ills are felt more acutely.

In *We Need New Names* too, Zimbabwe and thoughts of home are highlighted through comparisons with America. Every element of American life – the language, body types, the abundance of food – become the basis for contrasting and articulating thoughts of home:

We ate like pigs, like wolves, like dignitaries; we ate like vultures, like stray dogs, like monsters; we ate like kings. We ate for all our past hunger, for our parents and brothers and sisters and relatives and friends who were still back there. We uttered their names between mouthfuls, conjured up their hungry faces and chapped lips – eating for those who could not be with us to eat for themselves. And when we were full we carried our dense bodies with the dignity of elephants – if only our country could see us in America. (239)

In thinking about and telling the stories of home, the presence of digital technology adds a complication, in shrinking the ‘distant’ perspectives of those involved. Digital technology, and the easy back-and-forth access of information in general, dissolves the idea of an untouched homeland, wholly separate from the West. The West is not an unknown entity to

Darling, Ifemelu and their friends living in Africa, and though their ideas of life in the West may be naïve and misguided and leave them unprepared for the real thing, they are nonetheless informed by digital media, pop culture, international news and the spread of mass consumerism. Equally, once in the States, access to digital technology means these migrant characters can keep track of what happens in their home countries, and feel a part of the community.

However, this shrinking distance does not always illuminate or lead to a greater sense of peace or satisfaction. Both Ifemelu and Darling, once they move to the States, struggle with their emotions when talking to their friends and family back home. For Ifemelu, Obinze's constant emails and calls from her parents add to the pressure of her early days in university, and the constant reminder of home fuels rather than puts a stop to her depression. For Darling, the two calls (phone and Skype) described in the story add to her angst. The second one, many years into her stay in the US, when she speaks to her friend Chipó, also depicts another issue both texts deal with:

I know it's bad, Chipó, I'm so sorry. It pains me to think about it, I say.

What is so bad? Why are you feeling pain? She says.

What they have done to our country. All the suffering, I say.

Well, everywhere where people live, there is suffering, she says.

I know. But last week I saw on BBC-

But you are not the one suffering. You think watching on BBC means you know what is going on? ...It's your country, Darling? Really, it's your country, are you sure? She says, and I can feel myself starting to get mad. I hover the mouse cursor over the red phone thingy, wondering if I should just click it and hang up because really, I have no time for this shit...

Just tell me one thing. What are you doing *not* in your country right now? Why did you run off to America? ... You left it, Darling, my dear, you left the house burning and you have the guts to tell me, in that stupid accent that you were not even born with, that doesn't even suit you, that this is your country?

My head is buzzing. I throw the computer, and when I realize what I've done, it is sailing toward the wall (285-286).

What we see here is a question both *Americanah* and *We Need New Names* grapple with: is there a correct way to belong to a country or not? Is there an *accurate, correct* way of



thinking about the home country? *Americanah* offers a scathing attack of Bartholomew, Aunt Uju's boyfriend, who, out of touch with life in Nigeria, berates young migrant Nigerian women for dressing scantily in the States, unaware that those clothes are common at home too. He fights about these and other issues online, which has become his primary connection to his homeland:

He had not been back to Nigeria in years, and perhaps he needed the consolation of those online groups, where small observations flared and blazed into attacks, personal insults flung back and forth. Ifemelu imagined the writers, Nigerians in bleak houses in America, their lives deadened by work, nursing their careful savings throughout the year so that they could visit home in December for a week, when they would arrive bearing suitcases of shoes and clothes and cheap watches, and see, in the eyes of their relatives, brightly burnished images of themselves. Afterwards they would return to America to fight on the Internet over their mythologies of home, because home was now a blurred place between here and there, and at least online they could ignore the awareness of how inconsequential they had become. (117)

This quote clearly implies that Bartholomew's views of Nigeria are inaccurate. In fact, both books (or their implied authors) suggest that there *is* a correct and an incorrect way to think about the home country and belonging. Extended stays abroad appear to dilute both the belongingness and the accurate picture, and it seems, in the end, that both books privilege the view that only returning home or making a conscious decision to stay behind makes one truly belong to that place. Internet and television while they help keep one in contact and know what is going on, are seen as an insufficient tools for actual belonging.

Given that belonging to one's country of origin may be a difficult or even impossible tasks for those that stay away, two questions naturally present themselves: One, what are the possibilities of returning and of returning successfully? And two, for those who stay, what kind of relationship is it possible to have with the new country?

The notion of return, as a longed-for dream and an unsatisfactory reality, has been a common theme in migrant literature. People, cut off from all that is familiar and loved, dream of going back. Home – the people, the country, language, traditions, food, culture – are eulogized, craved. The return in early post-colonial migrant writing often focussed on rewriting, or reverse-writing colonial narratives of white men in the wildernesses. Jopi Nyman states that “in early post-colonial fictions of return in particular, the trope of return to

home and its reconstruction is connected with the reconstruction of national identity after decolonization (39). In *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, Elleke Boehmer explains that “incorporating indigenous cultural material, defiant of western authority, the post-colonial quest seeks mastery not in the first instance over land or other peoples, but of history and self” (192).

Newer works of migrant fiction have focused on the return as a trope to understand the fluidity and dichotomies of changing identities and affiliations. Characters returning home are often unable to fit back in, to seamlessly blend in to the place they had left behind. The past is a different country, and a past in a different country is doubly different. Nyman quotes Fanon who stated that

The native intellectual who comes back to his people by way of cultural achievements behaves in fact like a foreigner. Sometimes he has no hesitation in using a dialect in order to show his will to be as near as possible to the people; but the ideas that he expresses and the preoccupations he is taken up with have no common yardstick to measure the real situation the men and the women of his country know. (49)

Of the three books I am looking at here, only *Americanah* features an actual return to the homeland. However, all three books can be seen as dealing with this question in some capacity or the other.

In *Americanah*, having had a reasonable amount of success, Ifemelu’s decision to move back home is seen as strange and unusual by her family (and her hairdresser, Aisha)

Aisha reminded her of what Auntie Uju had said, when she finally accepted that Ifemelu was serious about moving back – *Will you be able to cope?* – and the suggestion, that she was somehow irrevocably altered by America, had grown thorns on her skin. Her parents, too, seemed to think that she might not be able to “cope” with Nigeria. “At least you are now an American citizen, so you can always return to America,” her father had said. (17)

In many ways *Americanah*’s return can be seen as a reverse-reverse-narrative, in that the protagonist’s return, though slightly bumpy, can definitely be qualified as a success. Boehmer talks about traditional return narratives that feature “a desire to reconnect with the past after a long history of dispossession” (192). Unlike these cases of migrant writing, Ifemelu makes a

conscious decision, both to move to the States and to move back to Nigeria, and having left the home country without anguish, can think of it sentimentally but without unduly rose-tinted glasses and return to it comfortably. Once again, technology, as a means to stay connected, keeps her not just abreast of Nigerian culture, politics and people, but allows her, once she returns to Lagos, to find success with a new blog. Unlike Ifemelu, Obinze, arrested and deported from Britain, comes back to Nigeria bitter, and though he becomes tremendously successful, is unable to make a happy home for himself. It is only when Ifemelu re-enters the picture that he is able, through her, to not just find happiness but enjoy “the small redemptions of Lagos”.

The return is never a far-away theme in *We Need New Names*. Even in Paradise, the children dream of leaving, but also of coming back when things get better, or get worse elsewhere, or when they’re grown up and rich and can afford the lives lived by the ultra-rich. Let us look at two quotes:

“I am blazing out of this kaka country myself. Then I’ll make lots of money and come back and get a house in this very Budapest. Or even better, many houses: one in Budapest, one in Los Angeles, one in Paris. Wherever I feel like,” Bastard says. (13)

“America is too far, you midget, Bastard says. I don’t want to go anywhere where I have to go by air. What if you get there and find it’s a kaka place and get stuck and can’t come back? Me, I’m going to Jo’burg, that way when things get bad, I can just get on the road and roll without talking to anybody; you have to be able to return from wherever you go.” (14)

Of course, things prove to be more difficult than just getting on the road and rolling, especially since Darling is an illegal immigrant. Surprisingly, the idea of returning full-time is never discussed, only temporary holidays that cannot be taken because of visa issues. Even when Aunt Fostalina sends her sister – Darling’s mother – enough money to buy a house, a seemingly good one in Budapest with internet and satellite TV, Darling’s path is determined as being set in the United States. The sacrifices made by her aunt and her family, the struggle, must all lead to something, even if that something is bagging groceries and community college (which Darling thinks of with no enthusiasm whatsoever).

When discussing Caryl Phillips’s *A State of Independence*, Nyman discusses Bertram, the central character’s dream of returning to the country and making peace with it, finding a

place for himself that is useful and helping with the business of nation-building. That his idea of his homeland is based on a past that no longer exists, and that his outlook is colonial and tied to the ways of old British rule, is what prevents him from success. Yet, *New Names* offers no such dream, deluded or otherwise. The people who have left, Aunt Fostalina, Darling, even the tragically cartoonish Tshaka who has not returned for 50 years, do not see themselves as being able to effect change in any possible way. Even with the luxury of a foreign education, and monetary resources, their only viable option is seen as escape, and nation-building of any kind, unlike in *Americanah*, is never seen as a possibility. The only way of connection, of a return, is virtual, and completely inadequate. Tshaka, who names over the phone a litany of grandchildren he has never seen but whose pictures line the walls of his room, exemplifies this inability, to return yes, but also to effect change or be a part of a home country in any meaningful way.

Once again, *Open City* provides a sort of foil to the other two narratives in that Julius has no connections, and no desire to go back to Nigeria. Both personal and national ties are severed and by-and-large forgotten without any real explanation as to the reasons why. Initially it seems like the book shows that breaking sentimental ties to a now-irrelevant past is in fact a positive thing. But the connections he does make are fleeting and impersonal (think of his friend the jazz buff or the Haitian shoe-shine man, or Farouq and Dr Maillotte in Brussels). And so, even as *Open City* abandons, or rather, refuses to admit, the possibility of a return, it does not offer any respite in the form of any other sense of belonging in the present.

Which leads us to the second line of inquiry, i.e. whether “home” could ever be the new country. Despite the abundance of access to information and global trends, the three novels seem to suggest the impossibility of such a notion. In fact, it appears that the cross-cultural communication goes a long way in distorting views of the West, giving those who hope to move there a false sense of familiarity. *Open City*’s Julius meets Saidu, a Liberian refugee, who, in a heart-wrenching scene, talks about America as an idea invested with potential, a sentiment echoed by characters in all three books (in his school and university days Obinze is similarly enchanted with the idea of the place, as are Darling and her friends).

He lowered his voice a bit, leaned toward the glass, and said that America was a name that had never really been far away when he was growing up. In school and at home, he had been taught about the special relationship between Liberia and America, which was like the relationship between an uncle and a favourite nephew. Even the names

bore a family resemblance: Liberia, America: seven letters, four of which were shared. America had sat solidly in his dreams, had been the absolute focus of his dreams, and when the war began and everything started to crumble, he was sure the Americans would come in and solve the whole thing. But it hadn't been like that; the Americans had been reluctant to help, for their own reasons. (64-65)

Those who, unlike Saidu, manage to move successfully, are only slightly less mystified by the place. By and large, all three books depict the new country as a place of instability, where, without roots, the individual remains precarious. There are some instances where people seem to be fitting in, such as Ifemelu's friend Ginika:

Unlike Auntie Uju, Ginika had come to America with the flexibility and fluidity of youth, the cultural cues had seeped into her skin, and now she went bowling, and knew what Tobey Maguire was about, and found double-dipping gross. Bottles and cans of beer were piling up. They all lounged in glamorous lassitude on the sofa, and on the rug, while heavy rock, which Ifemelu thought was unharmonious noise, played on the CD player. Teresa drank fastest, rolling each empty can on beer on the wood floor, while the others laughed with an enthusiasm that puzzled Ifemelu because it really was not that funny. How did they know when to laugh, what to laugh about? (125)

However, this kind of fitting-in, knowing what to say and how, reads as shallow, and one can see in this description, Ifemelu's disdain at what may be read as assimilation or inauthenticity. Similarly, Obinze's friend Emenike in the UK, who waxes eloquent about foreign holidays and handmade crockery inspires pity, even disgust, at what is seen as a desperate attempt to assimilate. Of course, a more pluralist integration is shown as being possible, and Ifemelu herself is an example of this, but even for her, thirteen years after living in the States, home remains, ultimately, the place where she came from. *We Need New Names* answers the question in the same way – as the quote earlier on the “many homes” showed, home can be many different versions of Zimbabwe, but never America.

In *Open City* too, Julius, though he is very familiar with the ins and outs of New York, sees himself as an outsider. Early in the book he describes falling into the habit of watching birds migrate, wondering if it is connected to his walking through the city which started soon afterwards. He marvels at their birds-eye view. At the end of the book, he

describes looking a panoramic view of the city while on a boat ride. In between these two scenes we have been privy to dozens of walks through the city. But ultimately, in the end as in the beginning, Julius remains removed from New York, able to see it from a distance but not to be a part of it, and his explorations into the history and geography of the city have not helped him become any more connected.

The answer then, to what home means in these digital migrant novels, seems rooted in old ideas of belongingness. An increased awareness of global trends and issues, and easy virtual access do not appear to have created an ease of transition. A sense of hybrid, globally-connected Afropolitan identities has not, at least for the first-generation migrants in the *Americanah* and *We Need New Names*, led to an ease in living outside their home countries. And for the protagonist of *Open City*, even a firm break from his past life and home has not helped him fit in any better. During their time in America, Ifemelu and Darling remain always, away from home. Unable to belong either to Nigeria or the United States, Julius, on the other hand, is homeless.

In the following section I will look at the second of two related concerns – language – the implications of choosing a language and an accent with which to speak, and the influence of television, online communication and the cultural cues that come with them.

### **Language – accents, mother-tongues and digital influences**

Much like the construct of nation and homeland, language is a deeply personal and emotional issue in migrant writing in general and its choice and style is rarely arbitrary and devoid of meaning. Even when the migrant is not “out-of-language”, the choice of how to speak remains an important one. This section explores the implications of that choice, and how digital technology provides both influences in creating that voice and a space in which to develop it.

Writing in a ‘European’ language comes with strings attached, and requires mediation and renegotiation, a making of one’s own. It is often not a choice - an unavoidable leftover of colonization (to quote Upamanyu Chatterjee). English in particular has become deeply ingrained in South East Asia, many African countries, and the Caribbean, widely spoken and officially recognized. Yet, in literature, as in life, it remains problematic. Elleke Boehmer discusses this process of mediation, stating that

The option widely favoured by writers is to participate in the processes of indigenization already taking place: to make a virtue of a historical necessity by

manipulating English to suit their own creative needs. Alternatively, writers may justify their choice of language by emphasizing how various conflicts and anomalies of the postcolonial condition are vibrantly displayed within the hybridized medium, itself. But the point on which they agree is the need to dismantle the authority once commanded by English. If a colonial language embodies a colonial vision, then the aim must be to dislodge that vision. To borrow the terminology suggested by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back*, it is important to encourage a situation in which a multiplicity of ‘Englishes’ are able to coexist, as opposed to world in which one metropolitan English is dominant over other ‘deviant’ forms. (200)

While *Open City* adopts English as the language of its protagonist as the obvious choice of a man thoroughly embedded and wedded to a universalist/cosmopolitan world view, both *We Need New Names* and *Americanah* explore the question in some detail.

*Americanah* follows the first model described by Boehmer, where English is moulded with other linguistic and stylistic devices to suit the writer-blogger-speaker. Ifemelu’s English takes on Nigerian inflection and rhythms when spoken in Nigeria, peppered with Lagos slang. The back-and-forth between privileging Nigerian English or American English is mirrored in the story in Ifemelu’s decision over accents. On her first day of university, Ifemelu meets Cristina Tomas, a fellow student handling freshman registration, who speaks to her very slowly because she isn’t sure how well she speaks English, even though Ifemelu has just spoken to her. The experience scares Ifemelu and leaves her feeling vulnerable:

Ifemelu shrank. In that strained, still second when her eyes met Cristina Tomas’s before she took the forms, she shrank. She shrank like a dried leaf. She had spoken English all her life, led the debating society in secondary school, and always thought the American twang inchoate; she should not have cowered and shrunk, but she did. And in the following weeks, as autumn’s coolness descended, she began to practice an American accent. (133-134)

Though she struggles with a couple of phrases and idioms, Ifemelu adapts to the American accent well, with “the blurring of the *t*, the creamy roll of the *r*, the sentences starting with “So”, and the sliding response of “Oh really”.” But a call with a telemarketer, who

congratulates her on her accent after only three years in the country, forces her to rethink, especially after she realizes that she has thanked him for saying so.

Only after she hung up did she begin to feel the stain of a burgeoning shame spreading all over her, for thanking him, for crafting his words “You sound American”, into a garland that she hung around her own neck. Why was it a compliment, an accomplishment, to sound American? She had won; Cristina Tomas, pallid-faced Cristina Tomas under whose gaze she had shrunk like a small, defeated animal, would speak to her normally now. She had won, indeed, but her triumph was full of air. Her fleeting victory had left in its wake a vast, echoing way of being that was not hers. And so she finished eating her eggs and resolved to stop faking the American accent. (175)

While Ifemelu’s decision to speak in a more authentic voice, one that isn’t “an act of will” or “creaking with consciousness”, may be seen as an admirable choice, it is interesting to note that it is a choice she makes once she has already mastered the American accent. With migrant texts, similarly, the decision to write in one language or the other is often one made by those who have the luxury of choice. Would Ifemelu’s decision be as noteworthy had she been unable to fit in, struggling, like Auntie Uju, to make sense of her American surroundings? Would her decision to return to Nigeria be seen less as an achievement, or a returning to a true self, had she not been successful? The book certainly suggests so, as we can see in Obinze’s disgraced return none of the self-fulfilment evident visible in Ifemelu’s. Like the choice to return, the choice of language and voice, while often brave and declaratory, is nonetheless a question that has to be thought through and answered, and one in which privilege and the ability to make a choice play an important role.

The blog, and the online space in general, are central to Ifemelu’s finding of a voice. Of course, her online voice is quite different from her spoken one – more slangy and casual than the one she uses in non-virtual life. “Groupies”, “Zipped Up”, “What’s the deal?” “Professor Hunk” and other bits of Americanisms make their way into her blog, and then from there into her speech. The blog isn’t just a place to experiment with tone though; while she is forced, or at least gently pushed, into toning down her thoughts on race and politics when she gives talks or holds seminars on race relations, she is able to be freer online: “During her talks she said: ‘America has made great progress for which we should be very proud.’ In her blog she wrote: *Racism should never have happened and so you don’t get a*



*cookie for reducing it*” (305). Her blog voice and blog language feed into the other ones around her—of her American friends, and Nigerian ones, of her father’s clipped formal British English and the Mr Agbo Voice from the BBC—and fuse into a language she is comfortable speaking and can modify and play with however she chooses.

Language is more complex and problematic in *We Need New Names* where English comes less easily to Darling and the other characters in the book. It is interesting to note that the first part of the book appears as if it were in translation – the understanding is that the characters are speaking Ndebele, and when someone speaks or says something in English it is pointed out. *We Need New Names* highlights another important issue with migration and language: that of words never adequately representing what they are supposed to mean. The arbitrary relation between signifier and signified is made doubly so in a situation where no words exist in one’s language for the experiences one is dealing with in the present, and words in the new language cannot adequately capture experiences of the past, which remain unspoken.

Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, talks about the inadequacy of representation in old colonial texts. He discusses Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, arguing that the book depicts a shifting state of reality where words never adequately capture reality:

With Conrad, then, we are in a world being made and unmade more or less all the time. What appears stable and secure – the policeman at the corner, for instance – is only slightly more secure than the white man in the jungle, and require the same continuous (but precarious) triumph over an all-pervading darkness, which by the end of the tale is shown to be the same in London and in Africa. (33)

What could be said of the white man in Africa, can also be said today of the African man/woman in the West, whose words can only approximately capture something for which none exist. In *We Need New Names*, Darling, Aunt Fostalina, and Uncle Kojo struggle with the impossibility of complete expression. In one scene, Aunt Fostalina wants to buy a push-up bra from a Victoria’s Secret catalogue and calls the helpline number to place the order, but is unable to do so because the woman on the other end cannot understand what she is saying:

When Aunt Fostalina gets off the phone with the Victoria’s Secret lady, she dials a number that must be busy because she quickly hangs up. She immediately dials another, and she has to hold for a little while before I hear her leave a message, in our

language, for the other person to call her back. I know the reason Aunt Fostalina is calling is that she needs to tell the Victoria's Secret story to someone in our language, because this is what you must do in America whenever something like this happens. You have to tell it to someone who knows what you mean, who will understand exactly what you say, and that it is not your fault but the other person's, someone who knows that English is like a huge iron door and you are always losing the keys. (197)

For Aunt Fostalina, speaking in her own language functions as a refuge, a way to temporarily take herself out of the situation she is in and express herself in the best way she knows. For her, as for Darling, English remains an inadequate outlet. This inadequacy of language is stated more clearly in one of the interludes in the book, which talks about the inability for those struggling with language to say what they really mean:

Because we were not in our country, we could not use our own languages, and so when we spoke our voices came out bruised. When we talked, our tongues thrashed madly in our mouths, staggered like drunken men. Because we were not using our languages we said things we did not mean; what we really wanted to say remained folded inside, trapped. In America we did not always have the words. It was only when we were by ourselves that we spoke in our real voices. When we were alone we summoned the horses of our languages and mounted their backs and galloped past skyscrapers. (240)

English, and true expression, are never quite within grasp in the characters. Frassinelli explains how this causes a psychic disconnection, which manifests in different ways. Aunt Fostalina works out compulsively, turning her African body into the American ideal. Uncle Kojo turns to heavy drinking and driving around aimlessly after his son joins the army and leaves. Tshaka Zulu, nicknamed so because of his love for the eponymous warrior, has gone so far that he lives in a mental institution, wheeled out only to perform songs at ceremonies. Frassinelli also points this trait out in Darling, "who in a fit of anger reacts to her friend Chipo's suggestion that she has abandoned and betrayed her country by throwing her computer against the bedroom wall she had previously smeared with the Ndebele English phrase "iBioiyiribashi" (biology is rubbish)" (718).

The failure to communicate that causes this psychic disconnection is not for the lack of exposure to the language and American influences. As we see in the first half of the book

before Darling's move to America, Paradise is a place of crossing borders and international influences. Cornell, ER and iPhones are part of their daily lexicon. So too are the names of countries, each imbued with special meaning. To pass the time, the children play what is called the 'Country Game'. Each participant must choose to become a country, which brings with it all sorts of connotations:

But first we have to fight over names because everybody wants to be the USA and Britain and Canada and Australia and Switzerland and France... These are country-countries. If you lose the fight, then you just have to settle for countries like Dubai and South Africa... They are not country-countries, but at least life is better than here. Nobody wants to be rags of countries like Congo, like Somalia, like Iraq... and not even the one we live in – who wants to be a place of hunger and things falling apart?" (49)

The children, aged between nine and eleven, do not go to school. Darling alone seems to have a previous educational background. Yet they have, whether by word-of-mouth, or television news, or political activism, an understanding of global politics, which is reflected in the this game and another one called 'Find Bin Laden'. As Frassinelli states, "even before the main character migrates to the United States, the polysemy and multiplicity of borders are brought into view by the repeated crossings and reconfigurations of a social space marked by an accumulation of geopolitical signifiers." (715). Shanghai, Budapest and Paradise, different neighbourhoods in the city, are names acutely embedded with meaning. And with the understanding of this meaning comes the understanding of the loaded value of these words.

That said, the transition into a purely English-speaking world is no easier. And success, or the mastery of the American accent through mimicking American television shows, brings with it no pleasure, no feeling of success. Darling's Ndebelefied English in the phrase iBioiyiribashi is a signal here, of distress and the impossibility of belonging, rather than a successful hybridization. Language remains a struggle, even though Darling, like Ifemelu, eventually masters English and the American accent by adopting phrases from film and television. Instead, belonging to a place and to a language plays out like a zero-sum game, and any incremental increase on one side leads to a decrease on the other. Her mother makes fun of her American accent on the phone, telling Darling that she is "trying to sound white" (204) and her friend Chipu bitterly remarks on "the stupid accent that you were not even born with, which doesn't even suit you" (286).

Homi Bhabha argued that “the migrant’s survival depends, as Rushdie put it, on discovering ‘how newness enters the world’. The focus is on making the linkages through the unstable elements of literature and life – the dangerous tryst with the untranslatable – rather than arriving with ready-made names” (325). *We Need New Names*, while acknowledging in its very title this need to create new linkages, ultimately reveals, not a creation of new names, but the impossibility of doing so. Here language is lost, and accents changed, but it is only another kind of “unavoidable leftover”, a signal of the hegemony of the West – a world order where America and Americanisms, Hollywood and the American accent continue to dominate. Unlike *Americanah*, this is no utopic text of finding voice. Here instead, we are shown the limits: Darling, Fostalina, Tshaka, and others like them, ultimately remain voiceless.

Language functions strangely in *Open City*. The lack of American or Nigerian slang or inflection, the absence of any specific style is noticeable, and points to what we have discussed earlier – the fact that Julius is removed from both his past and present. Also, the book has almost no quotation marks, though it switches at times from Julius’s voice to others. Strangely, these characters then speak in exactly the same voice as him, and appear to be pouring out information almost uninterruptedly. Of course, this is not how these conversations must have taken place, realistically speaking. It is unlikely that Julius, the Liberian refugee Saidu, and the Belgian doctor he meets on the plane, speak in the same style. This incongruity, this discordance in tone, further indicates Julius’s alienation, and his inability, even temporarily, to put himself in the shoes (or voice) of another.

We can see in through these texts that the idea of home and language are inextricably linked. To be without one’s language is to be doubly removed from home, and to be able to speak it provides some solace. While mastery of new languages and accents is certainly doable, it does not take away the sway held by the mother tongue, or speaking in one’s own accent. The choice to speak or write in English, or choose to adopt a certain accent, can reflect then a number of things – a surrender to the ways of the West and a split in identity (Darling), a successful hybridization of English (using American and Nigerian slang and the Nigerian accent; Ifemelu), or a placelessness wherein English is seen as the only choice (Julius).

## Conclusion

Migration involves a separation, a moving away. The Internet and digital technology involve a coming together, an ease of access or at least the possibility of it. The meeting of these two opposing forces has led significant changes in migrant experiences and identity, something that is reflected in the literature from the last decade or so. The three novels discussed here are part of a growing corpus where the interplay between migration and technology is an important theme.

The novels I have analysed show how technological innovation has blurred national boundaries, allowing for the creation of transnational online communities. New forms of cosmopolitanism and Afropolitanism have developed, as identities have become more fluid and more hybrid. These identities have challenged traditional roles based on geography and colonial history. Migrants who have left their country of origin have found new ways, through online access, to feel connected to their homes and pasts, and those rooted in the land of their birth have found new avenues to look outwards and see themselves as members of a larger community.

This development is not a smooth one, nor a complete one. As Mads Rosendahl Thomsen writes in *Mapping World Literature*: “today, societies have evolved far from the pure idea of ‘heimat’ or ‘homeland’. Yet, they are also still far from merging into... [a] utopian ‘noosphere’, in which intensive communication enabled by technology ties us all together in a common global consciousness” (61). In fact, the nation still holds a strong sway. Sometimes even more so for migrants who have moved outside of its boundaries. Belonging, and a sense of incompleteness, become fraught issues, creating rifts and splits in identity that no amount of Skyping and Facebooking back-and-forth can take away.

Language too, as I have shown, is still a contentious issue, an important part of what ties us to a place and people. English and other Western languages have taken a strong hold across the world, with online fora often strengthening colonial entrenchments. Yet the old colonized countries have developed their own iterations, whether in speech, literature or Twitter posts. Nonetheless, English is far from universally spoken, and a move to the US or the UK oftentimes implies learning how to communicate in a completely new language, and lives lived in translation. Once again, digital technology and the spread of popular culture can aid in this process, but there remains an inherent instability in terms of the migrant voice. An instability that can be tragic and difficult, but also exciting, and the very place where these new hybrid identities are created.

Though the protagonists in each the three books reflect a different kind of hybridity and Afropolitanism, with only *Americanah*'s Ifemelu being depicted as successful, all three appear to agree on certain basic tenets: that roots and rootedness remain, and should remain a part of a well-rounded migrant identity; that a move away from victim identity is empowering, but need not imply a break from the country of origin; and that a global consciousness with *empathic imagination* is desirable, but not an essentialist, universalist cosmopolitanism that means the cutting of all ties, and not an upper-class elite cosmopolitanism either, where Third World countries are constantly trying to match up to the West. Of course, there is no consensus on these tenets within the genre, or among the theorists who write about it, which is what keeps the study of it interesting and constantly developing.

The subject is an evolving one, as are cosmopolitan identities and technological innovation and access. While digital technology has provided a new space for expression to some who did not have one before, and has undercut certain traditional hierarchies, it has by no means levelled the playing field entirely. There continue to be significant inequalities in terms of access, which still determine, to a great extent, the voices that get heard and the forums they are heard in. While it was touched upon in the section on Afropolitanism, it would be interesting to study, in further detail, how old and new class structures are reflected in technological use, and how these are represented in contemporary literature. As migrant literature details new kinds of experience and identities, re-examining economic and social patterns such as class and gender will lead to a greater understanding of a mutating migrant reality, and will, I believe, make for exciting new avenues of exploration.

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