CHAPTER 6

The New African Diaspora and Afropolitanism in the Work of Taiye Selasi

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> Now she is rising
> remember her pain
> remember the losses
> her screams loud and vain
> remember her riches
> her history slain
> now she is striding
> although she has lain.
>
> MAYA ANGELOU, "Africa"

Writer and photographer Taiye Selasi was born in 1979 in London to parents of Ghanaian and Nigerian origin as Taiye Tuakli-Wosornu. The elder of twin daughters, she was raised between Britain and the US, where she moved with her mother and sister after her parents separated. Selasi studied at Yale and Harvard, where she was mentored by Toni Morrison during her first steps as a writer. Today, she is considered one of the exponents of a larger phenomenon of African Black writers, including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chris Abani, NoViolet Bulawayo, Teju Cole, and Yaa Gyasi, among others, who live, teach, and write in the US. They constitute the so-called "new African diaspora," a term aimed to mark a clear distinction between the recent migratory movement from Africa to the US and previous Black diaspora waves.[1] Selasi's family

1 With the term "new African diaspora," I refer to the recent flux of African migrants in the US, which has been increasing since the 1980s. While smaller in terms of people entering the US in comparison to migration from Central and South America or Asia, the new African diaspora is gaining more and more attention for the middle-class status these migrants are able to reach, for how this phenomenon impacts studies on American Blackness, and for the

history, her nomadism in terms of where she has lived (Boston, Berlin, Rome, etc.), comparisons to Zadie Smith and Adichie, and her subsequent inclusion in the 2012 *Granta* selection of "Best Young British Novelists" for the short story "Sex Lives of African Girls" (2011),[2] have all pressed the writer into a hybrid position in terms of literary genealogy and belonging and suspended her between the labels of postcolonial, Black British, Black American, and world literature writer. This hybridity in terms of literary categories is confirmed and elaborated in the works I am going to consider here: the essay "Bye-Bye Babar" (2005) and the novel *Ghana Must Go* (2013). "Bye-Bye Babar" will be analyzed within the debate on Afropolitanism, a notion that Selasi's text popularized. *Ghana Must Go* will be studied as a novel that both represents and articulates the concept of Afropolitanism by touching on discourses of transnationalism, mobility, and migration. While *Ghana Must Go* has occasioned critiques of the concept of Afropolitanism because of its exclusive idea of cultural globalism that many diasporic subjects cannot share, I argue here that the novel provides a complex yet compassionate narration about Afropolitans such as the Sais, the book protagonists, a family of African migrants living and working in the US who return to Ghana to make amends with their familiar ghosts.

1 "Bye-Bye Babar" and Afropolitanism

Among the group of new diasporic African American writers, Selasi distinguishes herself for her explicit interest in cosmopolitan ideas of Blackness, conveyed in her renowned essay "Bye-Bye Babar: Or, What Is an Afropolitan?" originally published in *LIP Magazine*. Since it came out in 2005, the article has solicited discussion for its acknowledgment of a new idea of Africa imbued with cosmopolitanism, which Selasi referred to as "Afropolitanism" and which gained momentum among critics and philosophers when Selasi's article first appeared. Born, according to Simon Gikandi, as a reaction to Afropessimism ("the belief that the continent and its populace is hopelessly imprisoned in its past, trapped in a vicious cycle of underdevelopment and held hostage to corrupt institutions" [Foreword 9]), Afropolitanism is a complex concept aimed at putting some distance between the Africa of today and idealized conceptions

literary echo works by authors belonging to this group are achieving. See Arthur; Kondadu -Agyemang, Tayki and Arthur; Shaw-Taylor and Tuch; Tiyambe Zeleza; Koser; Okpewho and Nzegwu; Halter and Showers Johnson; Falola and Oyebade.

2 The short story was published by the UK literary magazine *Granta* and was later included in 2012 in *Best American Short Stories*.

of the continent, as they have historically developed in the Western world because of the transatlantic slave trade and, more recently, after the failure of the postcolonial states in the second half of the twentieth century.

Selasi's "Bye-Bye Babar" has somehow become a sort of pop manifesto of the concept, which has been differently employed in popular as well as philosophical debates. Using a tone that mixes enthusiasm and irony, Selasi metaphorically says goodbye to Babar, a double reference to the French cartoon series *Babar*, in which the "civilized" elephant Babar is king among his animal friends,[3] and to the famous Eddie Murphy's film *Coming to America* (1988), in which Prince Akeem departs from the African reign of Zamunda to reach the US and says goodbye to his little elephant Babar. Rather than the "goofy" image of the African in America we see in Murphy's movie, Selasi frames a new type of thriving and efficient Africans, "transmorphed … to gorgeous" ("Bye-Bye Babar" 529) and at ease in the globalized world. "What distinguishes this lot," writes the author, is the fact "they belong to no single geography, but feel at home in many," synthetizing thus the concept of "multilocal" Selasi also returns to in her 2014 TEDGlobal talk "Don't Ask Me Where I'm From, Ask Where I'm Local." What she unveils in her essay is "a willingness to complicate Africa" ("Bye-Bye Babar" 528–29), creating a new category for herself and her peers, that of the "Afropolitans": "not citizens, but Africans of the world" (528).

Selasi's new word formation blinks at the idea of cosmopolitanism as in connection, rather than in opposition, to Africanness. Although apparently transparent and of immediate understanding (Afropolitans are people coming from Africa who live in the world transnationally, feel at ease in it, and have rights in it), the word touches on much more thorny issues that are at the basis of the debate which followed Selasi's article and saw among its protagonist leading African intellectuals such as writers Binyawanga Wanaina and Amatoritsero Ede, Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe, as well as scholars such as Chielozona Eze and Grace A. Musila. Among the complexities of what is implicit in the term Afropolitan is the delicate nexus of cosmopolitanism and Africanness. Cosmopolitanism indicates an Enlightenment-derived understanding of the relationship between individuals, their rights, and the nations that grant those rights, an imbrication of notions that have permanently excluded the idea of Africa because of its Western inscription within

3 The cartoon series comes from the books by writers and illustrators Jean and Laurent de Brunoff. The series has been accused of being a controversial depiction of French colonialism: after being civilized in the metropole and going back to his home country, the African Babar can eventually assume a new and central position in his native community as king of Celesteville.

atemporality and, therefore, a-modernity. As such, Afropolitanism presents itself as a revolutionary term. It implies the entrance of Africa into discourses of progress, thus further elaborating previous diasporic understandings of Blackness, such as Paul Gilroy's epoch-making analysis in *The Black Atlantic* (1993).[4]

Selasi's notion of Afropolitanism has thus the merit of particularizing Africa and opposing its vision as the ultimate symbol of Western otherness, claiming agency in opposition to victimhood, success as opposed to chronic economic failure, and mobility as opposed to stasis in space and time. As Kalenda Eaton underlines, this conception is "daring," as "it provides a positive and composite image of Africa, disconnected from ideas of 'darkness' and savagery implicit in the colonial discourse" of the past but also of more recent "images of 'police brutality, poverty, displacement, and pain' that are often broadcast or narrated in the West" (4) and which are, in part, reproduced in some works by new diasporic African writers, such as *GraceLand* by Chris Abani (2004), *We Need New Names* by NoViolet Bulawayo (2013), or *What Is the What*, narrated by Valentino Deng and Dave Eggers (2006). Selasi's desire to complicate Africa by modulating the discourse on the continent through the appraisal of triumphant subcultures and lifestyles has consequently been welcomed as an empowering concept that finally asks for African participation in ideas of modernity.

Despite this innovative potential, Afropolitanism has solicited an ongoing debate with often quite polarized positions.[5] On the one hand, it has been supported by well-known names such as philosopher Achille Mbembe, who conceives Afropolitanism more theoretically than Selasi. In his understanding, Afropolitanism can be assumed to be "a way of being in the world," "an aesthetic and a particular poetic of the world" that refuses nationalism and "any form of victim identity" ("Afropolitanism" 28). According to Maximilian Feldner, Afropolitanism is "an emancipatory and liberating concept" that must be welcomed as a possibility and must consider multiplicity, even in its conception of race (131). On the other side of the debate, Afropolitanism has been amply criticized for its consumeristic references to a "planetary commerce in

4 On the debate about *The Black Atlantic*, its limits, and the exclusion of Africa from its notion of modernity, see the 1996 issue of *Research in African Literatures*, edited by Simon Gikandi, containing his critical introduction and the valuable essays by Barnes and Dayan. Yogita Goyal returned to the topic in 2014, with the edition of another special issue of *Research in African Literatures* entitled "Africa and the Black Atlantic."

5 For a more detailed study on Afropolitanism, the term's history, and its circulation, which cannot be investigated here, see Coetzee; Durán-Almarza, Kabir, and Rodríguez González; Hodapp; Wawrzinke and Makokha.

blackness" (Dabiri) that confuses style with substance and identity with commodified diversity. Critics pointed to its skating over issues of class privilege implicit in the legacy of the concept of cosmopolitanism as well as in the advantaged economic position of the writers who identify as Afropolitan, such as Selasi, Adichie, or Teju Cole. In this understanding, Afropolitanism refers to an "elite identity" (Goyal 15), "a particular kind of affluent mobility in the global north" (Musila 111) that gives a few privileged individuals a form of cultural and geographical mobility many African or diasporic subjects cannot enjoy. There is a striking difference, for example, between Africans who fly to the United States and those who cross deserts and seas to reach the shores of southern Europe. As Eaton summarizes, "What it means to be cosmopolitan in an African continental context … is not much different from what it means to be members of the 1 percent who hold the wealth in many Western countries" (7). In a nutshell, its detractors see Afropolitanism "as a product of kleptocracy, consumerism, globalization, neocolonialism, neoliberalism, and Western capitalism" (Eaton 6).

As this brief survey of the debate highlights, while Afropolitanism is primarily related to the African continent, its meanings are essential also for other parts of the world because the discussion about the possible cosmopolitanism of Africans has an impact on how the West relates to the continent, how it has defined it over the centuries and, in general, how we discuss the Black diaspora today. On the one hand, as Mbembe recalls in *Critique of Black Reason* (2013), in the modern era Africa and Blackness have become overlapping terms, both used almost interchangeably to mark a subject through degradation "as the waste of mankind" because of their skin color (129). Africa is, therefore, not just a geographical reference but has become a referent for Blackness and racial discourses that originated outside it. On the other hand, as Ato Quayson recalls, the different routes that dispersed Africans in the world have created "not just disparate forms of black cultural identity (as opposed to African identity), but also different forms of identification with the African continent itself" (630). The discussion about Afropolitanism has therefore consequences on the global understandings of Blackness and the genealogy of the concept itself because diasporic Blacks conceive Africa as a place of origin but also as an idea and ideal with which they relate differently.

If we consider US Blackness, for example, Africa has often functioned "as a sign and as a place" (Goyal 7): as a geographical reference but also a figuration to address in order to understand the past and to imagine the future. For example, the end of the slave trade at the beginning of the nineteenth century and the abolition of slavery after the Civil War encouraged Black Americans to turn to the African continent, although any direct connection between US

Black diasporic subjects and Africa had been severed by the end of the eighteenth century, as recounted by Olaudah Equiano's failed attempts to return to his homeland or the subsequent unraveling of the Black colonialist project in Liberia. Nevertheless, the idea of a bond between continental Africans and their diaspora became an increasingly desirable option, especially in post-slavery times, as is visible in some works by W.E.B. Du Bois, in Harlem Renaissance writings—think of Alain Locke's call to draw inspiration from African arts in *The New Negro* (1925)—and in Black modernism in general. Also later, in the 1960s, famous African American relocations, real or invoked, such as Nina Simone's African experience or Nation of Islam's leader Elijah Muhammad's discourses on Black separatism, envisaged the continent as a desiderated place of Black communism and decolonization. Developing since the beginning of the twentieth century and inspiring movements such as Garveyism of the 1920s or French Caribbean *Négritude* of the 1930s and 1940s, Pan-Africanism entered its golden age after African countries began to gain independence from colonial powers in the 1950s and 1960s (Mkandawire 58). Its advocates, such as Ghana's first president Kwame Nkrumah, encouraged a feeling of union between "Mother Africa" and her diasporic children, which developed politically when the decolonized continent became a signifier of Black solidarity, even functioning as a laboratory for new ideas of American Black citizenship. For example, Ghana—the first sub-Saharan African country to gain its independence and the place of origin of Selasi's father as well as a central setting in *Ghana Must Go*—attracted a small but significant number of African American intellectual and political elites such as Du Bois, Malcolm X, and Maya Angelou.[6]

Apart from these concrete attempts to live in Ghana, Black Americans have considered Africa a symbolic place to turn to with the hope of understanding the past or imagining their future in the US. As Mbembe, among others, points out, Africa is often perceived as "a transformative force, almost mythic-poetic—a force that referred constantly to a 'time before'" (*Critique of Black Reason* 26); it stands for the time before the Middle Passage and slavery and thus has the power to provide authority and meaning. Its geographical otherness provides an explanation and an answer to US Blackness. How Africa has functioned mythically in the US is proven by the success of Alex Haley's family saga

6 Ghana had a specific impact on the American Black Civil Rights movement, as the nation was perceived, thanks to the governance of its first president Kwame Nkrumah, as an expression of possible transnational Black emancipation. About Maya Angelou's life in Africa, see her *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986). For more general Western interpretations of Africa, see Goyal, Eaton, and Gikandi's "Introduction." On the relation between Afropolitanism and Pan-Africanism, see Bosch Santana.

Roots (1976). While *Roots*, the earlier mentioned Harlem Renaissance writings, or Langston Hughes's poem "Afro-American Fragment" (1959)[7] look at Africa in the past, recent Afrofuturistic works such as the successful comics and movie *Black Panther* (2018) feature Africa as a place of the future.[8] In both cases, for US Blackness, Africa remains often out of the present time.

Yet Africa has been recently integrated into the present debate on Blackness through the voices of new diasporic African writers who now live and work in the United States. In their works, Africa emerges as a place of new complicacies, a place that claims to exist not just as a reservoir for Western projections, as a nostalgic mother for the Black Western tourists flooding its shores,[9] or as a place of impossible return as in Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* (2007), but as a meaningful voice of our contemporary world. In literature, Adichie, Cole, and Selasi are considered the most important representatives of Afropolitanism.[10] Their works offer diverse images of Africa, alternatively portrayed as a place of empowerment, of abuse or poverty, but also of delicate complicacies and very modern notions of the world and the human. What they offer is an image of Africa that is more complex than the Western world often expects.

Despite the potential of such works, which force US Blackness to consider Africa in the present, this literature has been met with the same amount of criticism as Afropolitanism. According to Emma Dabiri, for example, Afropolitan literature is a way to freshen up the archive of Black culture for Western consumers. "It seems as though having consumed so much of Black American culture, there is now a demand for more authentic, virgin, Black culture to consume. Demand turns to the continent where a fresh source is ripe for the picking," writes the intellectual. Similarly, critics such as Musila think of Afropolitan literature just as "Africa-Lite" literature, works that "embrac[e] enough of Africa to retain a certain flavor that sets it apart—presumably from Euro-American—but not so much as to be *too* African" (110). On the contrary, positive interpretations of Afropolitanism read this literary output as an

7 Alain Locke's essay celebrating African art perceives Africans as ancestors only (254-67). Analogously, Africa is positioned in the past in Hughes's later poem: "So long,/So far away/ Is Africa./Not even memories alive/Save those that history books create."

8 The critical discourse on Afrofuturism is larger than I can report here. Eaton, for example, relates Afropolitanism and Afrofuturism in her brief discussion of Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther*, a movie that, in her opinion, portrays African cultural and material richness and can therefore contribute to the debate on Afropolitanism in more popular terms than Selasi's or Cole's works do (see Eaton 11).

9 On African American tourism in Africa, see Ebron or Haile Gerima's film *Sankofa* (1993).

10 For the relation between Afropolitanism and literature, see Rask Knudsen and Rahbek; Hodapp; Ledent and Tunca; and Harris.

occasion to engage with Africa as a proper dialogic member within the Black diasporic community, enlarging the previous understanding of the continent, its inhabitants, and their relations to the world, and thus asking for a new historical and geographical frame to discuss Blackness and modernity. In James Hodapp's reading, for example, Afropolitanism should be considered as a form of world literature, understood not in terms of the initial debate on the category (world literature as a result of the global success of a work, as in Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters*) but as literature that is of the world because it comes from experiencing the world as home. In this sense, according to Hodapp, Afropolitan literature "is truly worldly" (3).

2 *Ghana Must Go*

As stated above, Afropolitanism has been addressed in different ways; among those who use it positively, Mbembe draws attention to the relational aspect of Afropolitanism, to its worldly nature:

> The awareness of this imbrication of here and elsewhere, the presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa, this relativization of roots and primary belongings and a way of embracing, fully cognizant of origins, the foreign, the strange and the distant, this capacity to recognize oneself in the face of another and to value the traces of the distance within the proximate, to domesticate the unfamiliar, to work with all manner of contradictions—it is this cultural sensibility, historical and aesthetic, that suggests the term Afropolitanism. (qtd. in and trans. by Skinner 10)

The awareness of these imbrications, of the constant here and elsewhere, of an Afropolitan emphasis on movement and on the feeling of being in the world is also at the center of Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* and its Afropolitan family, the Sais, suspended between their present life in the US and the haunting presence of their Ghanaian past.

Elegant in language and rich in plot, *Ghana Must Go* was published in 2013, the same year as Adichie's *Americanah*, a book with which Selasi's novel shares themes such as the formation of diasporic subjects, migration to the US, but also return to Africa, and, more generally, a reflection on the limits of the idea of nation to understand the global cultural circulation of the African postcolonial diaspora. Selasi's novel tells of the dispersion on three different continents—Europe, Africa, and America—of the Sais, a family of first- and

second-generation American Ghanaians and Nigerians. The Sai family formed in the United States where, in 1975, Kweku from Ghana and Folasadé (Fola) from Nigeria start a new life with their one-year-old baby boy Olu. There, their subsequent children are also born: the twins Kehinde and Taiwo and little Sadie. Despite the centrality the US has for the protagonists as the place where the Sais have spent the majority of their lives, the narrative starts and ends in Accra, Ghana. There, in the new house where he lives with his second wife Ama, Kweku Sai is about to die. When we meet him at the very beginning of the book, he is in the garden of the Ghanaian house he has projected himself, experiencing an apparent slow heart attack that leaves him time to think about beauty, fragility, his four children, and his ex-wife Fola. His following funeral offers the occasion to reunite his family, eventually solving some of the tensions between them.

The protagonists of *Ghana Must Go* can be easily defined as Afropolitans because of their mobility and economic success. Kweku, an immigrant from Ghana, has become a successful surgeon in a Boston hospital, although he is eventually and unjustly fired—a trauma that leads him to go back to his original home country and to abandon his family. His first wife, Fola, is an orphaned Nigerian woman who manages to flee first to Ghana and then to the United States, where she becomes a devoted mother of four children. Their eldest son, Olu, follows in his father's footsteps and becomes an acclaimed surgeon; he is engaged to a Chinese-American woman, Ling. Taiwo is a pianist and law student, and her twin brother, Kehinde, is an artist. The youngest of the siblings, Sadie, studies at Yale. In line with the cosmopolitan touch of the plot, Selasi's novel engages Afropolitanism as global circulation and successful transculturalization; it mixes references to African beaches and snow-covered Boston, *E.T.* and the African trope of the *ibeji*, mentions of classic Nigerian literature such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) alongside African American canonized books such as Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970).

While the Sais' transnational life translates into an effervescent cultural cross-pollination, the novel as a whole offers an ambivalent and somehow somber reflection on mobility, by combining the Sais' successful immigration to stories of exile and escape and on their connected feelings of dispersal, longing, and desired but impossible returns. The festive tone of the Afropolitan manifesto "Bye-Bye Babar" cannot, in fact, be found in *Ghana Must Go*, although both novel and essay, as Selasi has stated, are produced by the same sentiment: a murky emotional state, a sensation of difference that made her feel stranded in the world (Bady and Selasi 159–61). The emphasis on movement in "Bye-Bye Babar" is complemented in the novel by a sense of emotional precarity that destabilizes positive values linked to mobility. Notwithstanding

the Sais' social and economic progress in the US, and their status as successful and educated immigrants and Black Americans, their lives lack actual emotive development: they all feel stuck in an affective wasteland caused by their inner traumas that make them emotionally hermetic.

The title "Ghana must go" hints at how the novel reflects on movement in less enthusiastic tones in comparison to Selasi's essay on Afropolitanism. A somehow obscure formulation for Western readership, "Ghana must go" is a linguistic expression that started to be used in the 1980s in Nigerian contexts to oppose Ghanaian refugees and, as such, alludes to a more politically informed reflection on mobility in the novel.[11] Yet, because of the visuality of such a migration, the phrasing has become a general reference to the red-and-blue checked plastic bags used during such relocations, bags that eventually turned into an emblem of African fashion. The Ghana-must-go bag, a symbol of traveling market women and of their enterprise, refers to the knotty relations between Nigeria and Ghana, the two African countries which the two protagonists, Fola and Kweku, respectively, come from, but also, in the novel's implicit feminism, to the significance of Fola, the mother figure of the story, and her resourceful womanhood. What she gives birth to, through her personal story and the children she introduces to the world, is a form of cosmopolitanism that is beautiful and resilient at the same time—or better yet, whose beauty comes from Fola's capacity to resist Nigerian war, poverty, migration, and deferred dreams. *Ghana Must Go*'s rendition of Afropolitanism is, in this sense, not just connected to middle-class consumerism, which some opponents of the notion denounce. As the title suggests, the novel offers a broad narration about the complex movements of our contemporary world and different forms of forced or desired transnationalism—of being across nations, voluntarily or not, and of the unexpected whirls of life, which make an image of refugees into an icon of Africa's aesthetics (and ethics) or transform an anonymous African immigrant such as Kweku into a first-rate Boston surgeon, who is eventually fired and ejected from the American dream of wealth and happiness.

The issues of mobility are central in the book in terms of content as well as of narration, whose structure reinforces *Ghana Must Go*'s focus on movement. The novel is divided into three sections, each entitled according to a different declination of the verb "to go." Part I, entitled "Gone," opens with the already mentioned description of Kweku's death. Narrated in a pace that reminds of cinematic slow motion, both as a physical fact and a moment of deep consciousness, the father's departure from this world functions as the

11 As the book reports, in the Winter of 1983 the Nigerian government expelled two million Ghanaians (Selasi, *Ghana Must Go* 237).

central event that forces the family to cross the Atlantic and centripetally meet in Accra. As the starter of all events, Kweku's death solicits physical reunion as well as memorial reconstruction of the moving that has dispersed the Sais in the world and that finds them in different places of the globe. Although she has spent many years in the US, Fola is also in Ghana at the moment of Kweku's passing. Their oldest son, Olu, is in Boston, and their youngest daughter, Sadie, is at Yale. Taiwo lives in New York, and her twin brother, Kehinde, is supposed to be in London. If diegetically the plot covers only the four days comprising Kweku's death and his funeral, this single event starts a series of spatial and memorial movements, with recollections that go back to the 1970s, when the Sai parents were young and made their decision to leave Africa for the United States in order to get a better education. The novel is organized then as a sort of choral enlargement, which starts in Ghana with Kweku but then expands in space and time with each character entering the scene and recreating, through their recollections, the story of the Sais. Kweku's death functions as both an ordering and roughly epiphanic moment, as it allows to bring to the surface memories and emotions of a troubled family dispersed in the world. As with all significant events in life, his death creates the occasion to analyze the Sais' feelings of abandonment and offers new understanding and balance in the family's story. Part II, entitled "Going," narrates how they move from their different locations in the world to Ghana in order to get ready for the funeral, which eventually concludes Part III of the novel, entitled "Go." The title of the last section can be alternatively understood as an imperative, which solicits the novel's character to let go and finally overcome the initial familiar trauma of being abandoned by their father and husband, or as a simple present that alludes to the openness of the novel's ending: the family is reunited in Ghana, they manage to face their tensions and can move forward.

Because of the centrality of the parents' characters and of their traditional story of dislocation from a poor to a rich country, *Ghana Must Go* has been read as literature of immigration, with which the novel shares some features but from which it also differs for its novelty in terms of the migrant group it depicts and the story of success and return it narrates.[12] African migration to the United States is, in fact, a relatively new phenomenon that has only recently started to be narrated in literature. The growing significance of this body of writing only began to be visible in the twenty-first century after the release of Dinaw

12 Selasi has confirmed such an interpretation. As she states in an interview to Brittingham Furlonge: "They do not do that much moving. What they both do is leave where they were born, Fola and Kweku, for education. This is the classic immigrant movement, and I would call that *going*" (535).

Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007), Cole's *Open City* (2011), Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013), and Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016), among others. The new African diaspora distinguishes itself from other Black migratory waves to the US because of its high levels of education and the fast achievement of a middle-class status, which has prompted some to talk of recent African migrants as the new model minority, a vision shared and expressed in *Ghana Must Go* by Olu's father-in-law, a Chinese American mathematician at MIT.

In immigrant literature, movement traditionally coincides with a dream of success, both personal and economic. This is well illustrated by early classics of the genre, such as Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) or John Fante's *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* (1938), but also by more recent examples like Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1983). Analogously, in *Ghana Must Go*, the United States becomes the setting of Kweku's personal and public achievements: besides the financial security it provides, the country represents the possibility of expanding his "single story," that is, the idea of a pre-narrated, stereotypical story, which Adichie popularized in her famous 2009 TEDTalk. This is what Kweku wants to escape when he leaves Ghana. To him, migration means the possibility of self-determination, of dreaming differently in spite of his past as a poor African boy from Kokrobité. However, the depiction of America as a place of happiness, often implicit in immigrant tales of success, is shattered when Kweku loses his job as a surgeon: in need of a scapegoat for the unexpected death of a wealthy patient, the African surgeon is fired. Ashamed and shocked, he goes back to Ghana and leaves his family behind, thus transforming the traditional immigrant story from rags to riches into a story of affective chaos and of a troubled return, which point out how African migrants' dreams of serenity may be cracked by American systemic racism.

While Africa predominates at least as one of the principal settings of the novel, the US constitutes an important reservoir for the understanding of the protagonists' conflicts, especially in the case of the Sais' second generation, the one born and raised in the US. Olu, for example, shares a typically American standpoint on his father, an African man who is unable to take care of his family. Kweku's children share their father's sense of fragmentation and exile, as they are torn between feelings of continuity and discontinuity in a whirl of constant negotiations and conflicts. Rather than the hip "newest generations of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you" and fiercely belonging "to no single geography" Selasi referred to in "Bye-Bye Babar" (528), the Sai children are "lost in transnations" (Selasi, Interview): "*Why do we live here*," asks Kehinde, "*in grayness*, like shadows, like things made of ash, with their frail dreams of wealth overwhelmed by

faint dread that the whole thing might one day just up and collapse?" (*Ghana Must Go*, 221; emphasis in original). He reflects that, despite their "intelligence and all their hard work," they still feel in limbo: they are neither rich nor poor, neither inside American culture and society nor entirely outside it. Instead of the incredible allure of being in between multiple nations, cultures, and economic classes about which we read in "Bye-Bye Babar," in *Ghana Must Go* such crossing has left them "ashamed and afraid" (221). Their transnational and hybrid identities make them feel stranded. Like rhizomes suspended in too-liquid cultures, they have difficulty holding onto the routes their family has drawn across the Atlantic.

Because she was born in the US and her father left when she was a baby, Sadie is the daughter who is more firmly set in the US and whose connection to Africa seems even more feeble than in the case of her siblings. Sadie's perception of her body and her feeling of inadequacy, for example, which explode in the Ivy League mecca of Yale, where she studies, are determined by the tormented relationship between US notions of beauty and Blackness. As Aretha Phiri states, because of her uncanny desire for her White Yale friend Philae, Sadie reminds the character of Pecola Breedlove in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (161). While minor in the economy of the novel, this topic is central to Sadie's characterization. It indicates not just a desire to pay homage to Morrison, who was Selasi's mentor, but also a readiness to engage with the issues of Black womanhood transnationally and globally.[13] Sadie's feelings of inadequacy are, in fact, "cured" by her travel back to Africa, where she more easily finds women she can connect with and whose examples instill new faith about her body in the young Ghanaian-Nigerian-American woman.[14]

While for Sadie, the movement from the US to Africa coincides with a discovery of a new sense of self, with Africa symbolizing a "healing mother"—in line with the African American tradition I discussed in the previous section—the same is not the case for Kweku Sai, the original economic immigrant, whose return to Ghana marks the collapse of any sense of meaning in his life. If his transatlantic passage cannot produce economic and professional progress, traveling back to Africa cannot grant cultural or emotional pacification either: Kweku remains "a stranger in Accra as in Boston" (*Ghana Must Go*, 248), a man suspended between places, times, even between wives (Folasadé or Ama?).

13 See, for example, bell hooks's and Audre Lorde's work on hair and beauty.

14 On Selasi's work on issues of Black beauty, see her article (*Elle* 2015) and a collection of poems, *Love Your Curls* (2015), published with the personal care brand Dove with the aim to foster new self-appreciation in Black women.

Caught in-between spaces, times and people, cultural and spatial contamination, the diasporic Black family in *Ghana Must Go* is then trapped in a web of "horizontal entanglements," a notion I borrow from Michelle Wright, who, reflecting on the question of time and Blackness, underscores the impossibility of linear history in order to understand the complexities of human lives and their contaminations ("Diasporic Entanglements"). Historical verticality, that is, an ordered idea of before and after, here and there, Wright writes, is often typical of diasporic family sagas, from 1970s Alex Haley's *Roots* to very recent examples such as Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016), another novel about the new Africa diaspora in the US, which is set, as Selasi's, in Ghana. The linearity of movements and time—in which Africa always comes before the US, both spatially and chronologically—creates a progression that provides a sense of order and of meaning. Yet, diasporic subjects are much more often "poli-positioned" (Wright 221), and their movement is not necessarily from Africa to the US. Wright maintains that this dynamic is exemplified by Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's novel *Kintu* (2014), and, I argue, it is also central in Selasi's *Ghana Must Go*. The idea of horizontal entanglements is helpful in my analysis of *Ghana Must Go* because it explains how the novel is narratively built—if one considers its horizontal expansion from Accra to the Western world and *vice versa*—but also because it explains the absence of meaning such spatial entanglements provide. Wright's notion of "horizontal entanglements" can explain the Sais' "impossibility of coming full circle, much less finding and following a through line when it comes to identity and belonging across generations" (231). Everything moves and scatters without directionality, without genuine reasons. The Sais, to use the words of Sadie in *Ghana Must Go*, are:

> [A] family without gravity, completely unbound. With nothing as heavy as money beneath them, all pulling them down, to the same piece of earth, a vertical axis, nor roots spreading out underneath them, with no living grandparent, no history, a horizontal—they've floated, have scattered, drifting outward, or inward, barely noticing when someone has slipped off the grid. (146–47)

As this quotation suggests, the spatial dimension is a crucial category to tackle *Ghana Must Go*, as the perception of constant cultural and geographical limits is both what regulates the Sais and what they try to overcome, yet not what gives their lives meaning.

The Sais' journey to Ghana, where the children, Olu apart, are for the first time and which takes place thanks to their father's death, confirms the drifting

and ambivalent quality of their lives, gravitating across geography and tenuously holding together by their family story. In this sense, *Ghana Must Go* "simultaneously and similarly re-reads and revises (an abstract, idealist) Afropolitanism" (Phiri 160). The novel's Afropolitanism stems from the characterization of the Sais, a fictional counterpart of the recent new African diaspora in the US, but also, and more significantly, from the cosmic routes the characters draw on obsolete maps, whose oceans and nations are unable to grasp the affective, cultural, and historical knots making up their complexities. The Sais are modified by their spatial relocations; they are hybridized by them and by the mayhem of history lived in different places. However, they are equally detached from the places they inhabit: despite the meanings we apply to space, we are much more and, at the same time, less than that. It is because of this sense of horizontal multilocality, which informs the characters but never limits them as human beings that *Ghana Must Go* can be considered an Afropolitan text: not for being a superficial rendition of euphoric newness, as "Bye-Bye Babar" envisaged, but for depicting space as a dimension of its characters' existence yet not of their humanity.

In contrast to a cosmopolitan emphasis, Selasi describes the Sais as torn between the idea of the globe as an ample space where movement is possible and the extreme localities of their perceptions and existential entanglements. So extreme are such localities that the novel definitely goes "micro" in some of its more significant passages, focusing on the dimension of the body as the only place that can give a true meaning to our sense of the self, as in the trope of Kweku's slippers or the description of Fola's abdomen.

Kweku's slippers make their appearance in the novel's very first line: "Kweku dies barefoot before sunrise, his slippers by the doorway to the bedroom like dogs" (3). Although Kweku has covered an extensive planetary distance in his life, the opening passage focuses on the highly micro dimension of his feet and the domesticity signified by the slippers. Yet, this focus on microlocality gestures towards the protagonist's mobility. His house shoes function as a file rouge connecting the different phases and places of his life: in Ghana, they are an unimportant yet registered aspect of his death; in the United States, they refer to his life as a young doctor and a new father, whose pantoffles his baby daughter plays with; after his death, they are the final gift Ama, Kweku's second wife, gives to Fola, Kweku's first wife, as a symbolic final return home. Despite their connection to his feet and to the act of walking, and hence to mobility, Kweku's slippers are only partially a symbol of movement; rather, they call our attention towards something small, the micro dimension of one's house and one's body as opposed to the world. In Phiri's reading, slippers signify "Yearning for belonging and rootedness" as they are a symbol of "the warmth, familiarity, and

permanence typically associated with domicile" (159). Yet in *Ghana Must Go*, they also function as a symbol of our horizontal entanglements, as a trope that connects Boston to Accra, Sadie to Kweku, and Folasadé to Ama. The slippers, abandoned on the threshold between inside and outside, passed between second and first wives, are the symbol of Kweku's and his family's horizontal multilocality, as they signify home *and* distance by their being, at least in Kweku's perception, a constant reminder of an elsewhere. As the imagined dialogue between Fola and Kweku at the conclusion of the novel suggests, the slippers request a reflection on what it means quitting previous versions of ourselves, the bottlenecks of history, or too demanding families. The Sais' going should thus be interpreted as a perpetual leaving, a drifting motion whose meaning is slippery and evasive. The global movement of Kweku's slippers, apparently the only constant in a life of desired or forced uprooting, reveals a life in transit, upon which the author suspends any judgment.

As the trope of the slippers demonstrates, Selasi is interested in setting the macro dimension of the global movement and history processes against the micro dimension of one's own body: it is in the disequilibrium of these two scales that the author positions meaning and beauty. This is also illustrated by the portrayal of Fola's womb, which opposes the grand narration of transoceanic travels and death. Divided into four points, as the four cardinal points of the world, each part of Fola's abdomen is related to one of her children. Their spatial diffusion in the world is reduced to her body, which they literally inhabit:

> She touches her stomach in the four different places, the quadrants of her torso between waist and chest: first the upper right (Olu) beneath her right breast, then the lower right (Taiwo) where she has the small scar, then the lower left (Kehinde) adjacent to Taiwo, then the upper left (Sadie), the baby, her heart. Stopping briefly at each to observe the sensation, the movement or stillness beneath the one palm. (Sensing 99)

Fola's body maps the world in entirely new forms in comparison to abstract ideas of the globe. Her abdomen mirrors the geography of a cosmopolitan family in a painful and personal way. Analogously, the cracks on Kweku's heart reproduce the fracturing routes of his life: "It is broken in four places … His mother in Kokrobité, Olu in Boston, Kofi in Jamestown, Folasadé all over" (90). The embodiment of the macro/micro relations talks of our fragile position in the world, of our microscopic perception of it and the vulnerability of our bodies when they have to face the enormity of the globe. Yet it also constitutes a

magic link between dimensions, between the smallness and extreme locality of anatomies, the ultimate repository of knowledge, and the vastness of the geography we claim to inhabit.

In her desire to go micro resides Selasi's most original contribution to Afropolitanism:[15] not of just "going" in the world, to use the verb that is incessantly repeated in the novel, but already being in the world and thus avoiding expectancies due to national or continental origins. This is the freedom Kweku demands in the novel, and which Selasi similarly asserts as a writer (and as an Afropolitan writer) in dialogue with but free from both postcolonial literary traditions and American ideologies of Blackness.[16] *Ghana Must Go* is, therefore, beyond binary positions, not within or outside US or African culture and literature. Selasi's novel deterritorializes African literature in English (usually a subject of postcolonial studies) because she moves her characters' formation from the African continent to the US and engages central topics in African American tradition. In this regard, *Ghana Must Go* could be classified as what Stephanie Li calls "panafricanist literature" (2018), that is, a type of literature produced by writers of African origin whose personal and professional lives are in the United States and whose work "signify," in Henry Louis Gates's use of the term, on African American literary tradition. These works, Li maintains, cut through some established tropes and discourses, as *Ghana Must Go* does by referring to Morrison and to discourses on Black beauty, which they revise through a new transatlantic perspective. In this way, they solicit a more comparative understanding of American Blackness, a socio-historical category that is imposing itself as a reference also outside the US, especially in Africa. While such texts as *Ghana Must Go* make explicit references to African American traditions, they often refuse Blackness as a limiting category, which they try to exceed through literary forms. Selasi's endeavor to obliterate "macro" categories, such as nation or race, with a "micro" dimension is a case in point.

15 The author declared in an interview with Brittingham Furlonge: "I think what I was struggling with was the fact that I wanted to ask really small questions. I knew that I wanted to go really, really micro with my lens, and I wanted to be really inside the lives of just a few people speaking really lightly, if at all, to these broader concerns of history and its horrors" (534).

16 *Ghana Must Go*, for example, despite its reference to American structural racism in the characterization of Kweku and Sadie Sai, does not touch directly on macro themes that have marked the Western discussion on Blackness, such as the issue of slavery, which has been dominant in Black diasporic production since the 1980s. Yet "[r]ethinking diaspora by unmooring the past from slavery alone," Goyal writes, "does not mean returning to a historical amnesia about slavery"; rather, it means "recognizing that no 'single story' … can capture the heterogeneity of the diaspora" (xvi).

Labels such as "diaspora" and "cosmopolitanism," "world literature," "American literature," and "African literature" are all helpful in the discussion of *Ghana Must Go*, yet never sufficient. The novel's contents, literary references, and movements describe instead geographical and cultural hybridity that makes national and literary labels challenging to apply, just as other Afropolitan works by writers such as Abani, Cole, or Adichie do by escaping easy categorizations and refusing to adjust to literary expectations. Afropolitanism and *Ghana Must Go* may, in this regard, be rather in line with specific literary and critical trends, such as American post-soul and post-Black literature, which calls for a more complex conceptualization of Blackness, free to move beyond issues of national and racial identity and formation, outside the "aesthetic and political strictures" (Edwards 670) that have become consolidated within canonical African American literature.[17] I think that the difficulty of pigeonholing *Ghana Must Go* within a single literary category, as simply postcolonial or Black literature, reflects how, in Hodapp's reading, "Afropolitan literature engages the larger world," surfing it, talking about it, always with an eye to our micro dimension as human beings and beyond fixed categories. Ours is a life made of small knots, Selasi suggests in *Ghana Must Go*, of torn slippers, fractured bellies, cracked hearts functioning as sites of our smallness in comparison to grand narratives. This is, *Ghana Must Go* suggests, the repository of fragile human beauty.

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17 About the critical revisionism African American literature is undergoing see Best, Warren, and Wright, *Physics of Blackness*.

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