

The Nigerian Diaspora in the United States and Afropolitanism in Sarah Ladipo Manyika's *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun*

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Abstract: This essay explores Sarah Ladipo Manyika's *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun* (2016), one of the most innovative novels of the Nigerian U.S. diaspora, from the perspective of "Afropolitanism." Occupying a unique place within African writing and African diasporic writing, the novel does not conform to the traditional understanding of Afropolitanism as the celebration of cultural hybridity and transnationalism. Insofar as its portrayals focus on the individual identities and lives of its African and other non-Western characters and their families, the novel further departs from the conventions of earlier Afropolitan narratives, which tendentially center the whole national or racial community. Because *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun* rejects the kind of caricature that passes for life in many works of African diasporic literature, it avoids the Afro-pessimism of previous Afropolitan novels, in which the transnational movement of characters occurs as a result of precarious conditions in the home countries, and which forms part of the search for a dream that could be fulfilled by the modernity and the advancements of technology to be found in the host western country. Instead, Manyika's novel asks readers to dissect meanings between the lines and peel off dense layers of signification. The narrative achieves this nuanced communication of Afropolitanism through its main character, Morayo Da Silva, whose representation extends the cultural politics of Afropolitanism to include subjective politics in the analysis of how we exist in the world. In this way, *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun* highlights Morayo's affirmation of the value of diasporic life over and against the ironic posture of black self-negation that can result from the diasporic experience.

Keywords: Nigerian diaspora; Afropolitanism; diasporic experience; cultural and subjective politics

Introduction

In a 2018 article in the international online magazine *Ozy*, Molly Fosco reports on the successes and achievements of Nigerian-Americans in the United States: "Nigerians are entering the medical field in the U.S. at an increased rate, leaving their home country to work in American hospitals, where they can earn more and work in better facilities. A growing number of Nigerian-Americans are becoming entrepreneurs and

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CEOs, building tech companies in the U.S. to help people back home.”¹ Even though racism is still prevalent in the country, this hasn’t stopped Nigerian-Americans from creating jobs, treating patients, teaching students and contributing to local communities in their new home, all while confidently emerging as one of the country’s most successful immigrant communities, with a median household income of \$62,351, compared to \$57,617 nationally, as of 2015.²

Nonetheless, voluntary migration from Africa is a relatively new trend and one that seems to be growing, according to the Pew Research Center’s analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data. According to Monica Anderson, compared with other recent arrivals, Africans had the fastest growth rate from 2000 to 2013, increasing by 41 percentage.³ The reasons that lead Africans to migrate vary: “socio-economic issues such as political discontent, wars, the quest for economic empowerment and so on...environmental factors such as drought, flood, famine, volcanic eruptions...spiritual and other diverse reasons.”⁴

In this general picture, the Nigerian diaspora in the United States is the largest among the African population. According to a 2015 study prepared by the Migration Policy Institute for the Rockefeller Foundation-Aspen Institute Diaspora Program (RAD):

Approximately 376,000 Nigerian immigrants and their children (the first and second generations) live in the United States, and Nigeria is the largest source of African immigration to the United States. The size of the Nigeria-born population in the United States has grown from a small base since 1980, when an estimated 25,000 Nigerian immigrants were U.S. residents. Today, Nigerian immigrants account for about 0.6 percent of the United States’ overall foreign-born population, about half of whom arrived before 2000. A similar proportion of Nigerian immigrants are naturalized U.S. citizens.⁵

According to Ajima, the main reasons why Nigerians leave their country is to search for a better education, commerce, and political asylum along with other socio-economic factors.⁶ Given its large numbers in the U.S. and some of its demographics—such as figuring among the best educated—the Nigerian diaspora is thus one of deep interest, and particularly through literature.⁷ As social scientist Karen Amaka Okigbo put it:

As social scientists, we endeavor to explain some truths about the social world through the use of empirical data. In a similar manner, novelists endeavor to explain some truths about the social world but do so through the use of creative writing. While we often fail to concede the similarities between both fields, the mutual aim of uncovering social truths ensures that as social scientists, we are in an often unacknowledged conversation with the world of fiction. I believe that there is an undercurrent of truth in all great works of fiction. In fact, it seems that great works of fiction tend to traverse the same intellectual terrain as scholarly writings by social scientists. But because novelists are not restricted with charges of generalizability, reliability, and representability, they are free to present critical examinations of the social world in the most provoking and provocative manner

possible...Therefore, these two fields are quite complementary, particularly when investigating complex topics such as international migration and the assimilation experiences of immigrants.⁸

Works of fiction can thus be a valuable resource for understanding and augmenting the perception of past and contemporary issues that populations face in their daily lives. As for the concept of “truth” mentioned in the passage by Okigbo, it brings to mind the epigraph by Brazilian author João Ubaldo Ribeiro in his famous novel *An Invincible Memory*: “o segredo da Verdade é o seguinte: não existem factos, só existem histórias” (“the secret of the Truth is the following: there are no facts, just stories”). Ribeiro’s epigraph signals the precariousness and subjectivity of “truth.” We can only aim for approximations, and each story told conveys its own truth. He calls into question, therefore, the very classification between social scientific “truth” and fiction by eliding (as it does) the distinction between the two fields (social sciences and fiction). Both rely on narrative; both are selective in their portrayal of events; and in both events are inevitably portrayed from a particular perspective.

One of the most recent novels of the Nigerian U.S. diaspora, Sarah Ladipo Manyika’s *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun*, certainly does not count, in the words of Ikheloa R. Ikheloa, as “your traditional fare from the dusty shelves of orthodox African literature.”⁹ Manyika is a Nigerian born writer who is also part of the diaspora in the United States. Specifically, she resides in San Francisco and has formerly lived in Kenya and in the UK. She published *In Dependence* in 2009, and *Like a Mule* in 2016. In a 2016 interview, Manyika was asked if she considered herself an African writer. Her answer can help shed light on the way in which she has construed the main character of her main character: “Yes I’m an African writer and a British writer and an American writer and a global writer and a female writer and a black writer and a serious writer and a silly writer and...All this to say that my being African is a salient part of my identity but only one part.”¹⁰

In her review of the *Like a Mule*, Ikheloa states that it “harkens to a time when African writers were not so consumed by superciliousness, a time when the dialogue was respectful and deeply insightful, a time when African characters were not Stepin Fetchit stick figures mumbling in the dark, caricatures hastily erected by African writers for the poverty porn single story that sells in the West.”¹¹ In this sense we are faced here with a unique and innovative novel, one that is deceptive because of its short length, but richer since it requires the reader to dissect meanings between the lines and peel off dense layers of signification.

The main goal of this study is to analyze how this new piece of fiction by a Nigerian diaspora writer fits into the typical of the concept that links Afropolitanism to consumerism and commodification, one that has been challenged by critiques of the term. Does *Like a Mule* portray a negative diaspora, a way of living where reality is cruel and obstacles need to be overcome? Is adaptation to the new environment shown as a challenge? Are characters regularly faced with racism and discrimination? Is sexuality a taboo? In a general sense, does the novel challenge and revise the present world order in the way that Walter Dignolo envisages in his concept of “critical” cosmopolitanism? The article contends that Manyika implements Afropolitanism as critical assessment of global culture that defies a reduction of the concept simply to its commercial dimension.

Like a Mule relates the story of Morayo da Silva, a retired literature professor from Nigeria who has worked and lived in San Francisco since divorcing Caesar, a Nigerian ambassador. She is on the verge of her seventy-fifth birthday: "'ancient' by her home country's standards, having 'outfoxed the female life expectancy by nearly two decades.'"¹² Living in the city, "she is surrounded by the debris that you accumulate in an ordinary life: papers, unopened bills, junk mail, books, unfinished mugs of tea. She has no family and likes her freedom. Then an accident at home forces her to spend lonely days in hospital and a nursing home."¹³

The novel is written in the first person, but the narrating "I" is shared by the characters who incidentally touch Morayo's life, for example: a passing homeless woman and a man whom Morayo meets at the nursing home. These characters occupy the same narrative space as the main character's friend, Sunshine, and her ex-husband. But some "of her dearest companions" are books and "literary friends."¹⁴ Morayo is also a deeply sexual character, an old woman with an unusual sense of adventure.

The novel was published with a Nigerian imprint launched in the UK. It won a place on the short list of the Goldsmiths Prize—a prize that sets out to "reward fiction that breaks the mould"—and "as a result, [the Prize] occasionally unearths buried gems."¹⁵ As one of the Goldsmiths Prize judges, Bernardine Evaristo, stated with regard to the novel's publication, "A fiction about a septuagenarian black woman is almost completely uncharted territory in British literature."¹⁶ This "uncharted territory" is also a call for the implementation of Afropolitanism as a form of critical cosmopolitanism which at the same time widens the concept to include the exploration of black female sexual identity, or the category of sexual identity in general. Afropolitanism can both be politically and sexually transformative.

Afropolitanism and the "New African"

Bernardine Evaristo identifies Manyika's novel as British literature and not Nigerian and/or African literature. Some years ago, this comment would have caused some members of the Nigerian literary circuit to smile ironically. According to Nigerian writer and journalist Eytayo Aloh, a singular event in 2004 affected the Nigerian literary circuit, which afterwards "was never the same."¹⁷ In his words,

The Nigerian Liquefied Natural Gas (NLNG) company announced the birth of a new literary prize in Lagos, Nigeria, with the highest prize money in Africa (£20,000). There were mixed reactions amongst the literati as the organization had announced that the prize would be open only to Nigerian writers resident in Nigeria. This they believed would truly make it a 'national' prize. By definition, to be truly classified as 'Nigerian' you have to be living in Nigeria. A writer in a foreign land can no longer be referred to as Nigerian as their 'experience and identity has changed over time.'¹⁸

This decision was contested by Nigerian writers living in the United Kingdom and in the United States of America who felt discriminated, stripped from their citizenship and identity by their contemporaries at home. This produced feelings akin to suffering a blow from a two-edged sword, since abroad they faced the same kind of denial of citizenship and exclusion. Aloh goes on to develop a convincing argument regarding

the identity question insofar as it relates to the works of a writer and his/her heritage. He concludes that:

Migration will continue to influence the path of African literature as writers continue to strive to endogenise what is known as African literature. More stories will be developed and told, more will be disturbing, yet more will soothe. The migration writer may face the crisis of identity and acceptance but in his writings, he can always be assured that his African roots are established.¹⁹

His final words are revealing: “African writers and writings have evolved and embraced the modern developments especially in the digital field and with migration at its epicentre, the voices are being heard in the open square of the world. The new African writer is a world writer and the story told, while inherently African, is universal in nature.”²⁰ From this perspective, Manyika’s novel is mis-classified as “British literature” by Evaristo, just as it would be wrong to consider it an example of “American literature” on the basis that Manyika completed her Ph.D. at the University of California-Berkeley, teaches at San Francisco State University, and has resided in the U.S. for two decades.

Controversies like this echo Nigerian-Ghanaian writer Taiye Selasi 2005 essay “Bye-Bye Babar, or ‘Who is an Afropolitan?’” In this seminal essay she coins the term “Afropolitanism” a term that she defines as “not being citizens but Africans of the world.”²¹ This term came from her own experience and from the sense of helplessness she felt when asked where she was from: born in London, raised in Boston and studied at Yale and Oxford Universities. Africans who emigrated between 1960 and 1975 had children overseas. Selasi, like many others, is a product of that immigration. As she explains,

What distinguishes this lot and its like (in the West and at home) is a willingness to complicate Africa – namely, 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.²²

It is a generation composed of different nationalities, countries, cultures – diasporic individuals who blend “London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes” – or as Selasi parodies in her essay: “aren’t-we-the-coolest-damn-people-on-earth?”²³ Nevertheless, she recognizes that “most Afropolitans could serve Africa better in Africa.” She concludes that:

To be fair, a fair number of African professionals are returning; and there is consciousness among the ones who remain, an acute awareness among this brood of too-cool-for-schools that there’s work to be done. There are those among us who wonder to the point of weeping: where next, Africa? When will the scattered tribes return? When will the talent repatriate? What lifestyles await young professionals at home? How to invest in Africa’s future? The prospects can seem grim at times. The

answers aren't forthcoming. But if there was ever a group who could figure it out, it is this one, unafraid of the questions.²⁴

Selasi thus sees Afropolitans as not possessing a rooted identity, but rather a fluid one. Afropolitans are characterized by careers, fashion, ethnicity, multilingualism, and self-expression as well as by a connection with both Africa and the West.

Other scholars have also attempted to define Afropolitanism from a more cultural or artistic perspective. Mbembe contends that:

Afropolitanism is not the same as Pan-Africanism or *négritude*. Afropolitanism is an aesthetic and a particular poetic of the world. It is a way of being in the world, refusing on principle any form of victim identity—which does not mean that it is not aware of the injustice and violence inflicted on the continent and its people by the law of the world. It is also a political and cultural stance in relation to the nation, to race and to the issue of difference in general.²⁵

On the other hand, Gikandi asserts that, “[t]o be Afropolitan is to be connected to knowable African communities, nations, and traditions...to live a life divided across cultures, languages and states. It is to embrace and celebrate a state of cultural hybridity—to be of Africa and of other worlds at the same time.”²⁶ In this sense, Gikandi considers Afropolitanism “to be a positive mode of intellection and self-apprehension, through which a younger generation of Africans—and scholars of Africa—is beginning to question [the] idiom [of Afro-pessimism] and to recover alternative narratives of African identity in search of a hermeneutics of redemption.”²⁷

Ultimately, Mbembe defines Afropolitanism rather differently from Selasi, since for Mbembe the center of Afropolitan cultures is not the West but Africa. While Selasi implies that Africa experienced cosmopolitanism late—only after colonialism had opened Africa to the culture of the North—Mbembe argues that Africa witnessed cultural contact with European as well as non-European cultures prior to colonialism. African cosmopolitanism was thus shaped long before the timeline set by Selasi, who places the West at the center of cosmopolitanism and modernity. According to Mbembe, it was colonialism and the African nationalist discourses from the 1950s through the 1970s that erased the cosmopolitan past of the continent.²⁸

Despite this fundamental difference—one which raises the obvious issue of how Selasi situates the repetition of Western discourse at the core of her interpretation of Afropolitanism—these three voices together nonetheless contribute to a more precisely defined perspective on Afropolitanism, bringing a better awareness (and greater complexity) to the discussion of the representation of African identities or, even positioning Afropolitanism as a new form of transnational “African modernity.” These views do not sit easily with many scholars and artists. As Sarah Balakrishnan notes, some found the image created by Selasi and Mbembe “alternately provocative and objectionable: an African modernity that seeks to let go of an essential ‘Africaness,’ to dissolve ‘Africa’ into the world.”²⁹ Therefore Afropolitanism is simply a celebratory, apolitical, and commercially-driven phenomenon. Writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, for example, have been recently labeled Afropolitan. as “her public persona and her work have been appropriated by the Afropolitan global community.”³⁰ Nonetheless, as some scholars have implied, the way authors such as Adichie, Teju Cole, and others examine the power differentials of globalization demonstrate that

commercially successful writing can still be critical and transformational. In this manner, the Afropolitan concept is emancipatory.

Without losing sight of these nuances and controversies in the present article, it is important to also stress that Afropolitanism articulates newer representations of identities that counter either colonial or nationalist regimes of representation. Afropolitanism can first of all be described as involving Africans who have lived or are living outside of the African continent, and who can call multiple places “home.” Secondly, Afropolitans embody multiple points of cultural reference and may be considered as “unrooted Africans” despite their geographical movement. Afropolitans identify with Africa, retaining a strong link with their home countries or the countries of their progenitors. A third aspect concerns cultural hybridity, as Afropolitans live their lives across cultures and concomitantly have an inner desire to return or invest in Africa. Hicham Gourgem summarizes, “Afropolitanism is not a homogeneous discourse...Afropolitanism is a narrative of African identities which rejects the systems of representation used by Western imperialism and African nationalism and, instead, conceives of identities as hybrid and relational.”³¹

Within this framework we can place not only Manyika’s life story, but also that of her main character Morayo da Silva in *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun*—a title inspired by Mary Ruefle’s eclectic poem “Donkey On.” As the intertextual reference to Ruefle’s poem intimates, Manyika may fall into the category of Afropolitan writers who show a tendency for transnationalism, but her novel also differs in two main aspects from the majority of Afropolitan writers that depict the experience of migration. Gourgem defines transnationalism as a phenomenon describing, “the connectivity of people, places and cultures across nations” and referring “particularly to the ways in which the main characters in some Afropolitan novels are connected both to the West and to Africa either biologically (through parents and family), physically (through movement) or mentally (through imagining, dreaming and desiring), and the manner in which this connectedness shapes the lives and identities of individuals within and outside country of origin.”³²

Morayo da Silva clearly does not fit the experience of migration among young Africans to the Global North: she did not recently migrate to the U.S. and is also an elderly, retired woman. Morayo’s connection to Africa after twenty years of living in San Francisco is mainly through imagination and, in some sense, dreaming and desiring. Arguably, she is dominated much more by Western influences than African, but her personality may also contradict the relation of power which positions the West as the center of modernization. As we shall see, Morayo da Silva is a character that conforms and disturbs. The fact that Manyika’s novel does not constrain itself to African characters and includes family histories from other non-Western nationalities also disrupts the commonplaces of Afropolitan fiction writing.

Morayo Da Silva: an Afropolitan Woman

Living in the same apartment building in San Francisco for twenty years with a “*magnifique*” view even though the “apartment is nothing spectacular,” Morayo Da Silva is arguably one of the most eclectic characters in modern African fiction.³³ She has entered an elderly stage, she is turning seventy-five soon, but her narrative voice contradicts not only her age— but also the broad and commonly accepted notion of

aging in general. She is a retired English literature teacher, but she conserves a keen mind and a sharp wit that borders on hilarity. There is some edginess to Morayo. She remains a lively woman who is beginning to suffer from poor vision, but still has a positive and careless way of looking at her present situation:

Once upon a time I was diligent, extraordinarily diligent, but life's too short to fuss over such small things. That at least is what I tell myself until the diligence, never truly lost, reappears, and I return to the past.³⁴

Her sense of adventure also belies her years. Every year at her birthday she does something new:

For this is my second tradition, to do something new and daring with each passing year. Last year it was scuba diving, and the year before learning to swim. This year it's the tattoo and it's not just the fact of getting a tattoo but it's where I intend to have it done that thrills me. I'd decided that something on the wrist or ankle would be too ordinary...³⁵

Morayo is also very much attached to her car which she named Buttercup—an old Porsche usually badly parked on the curbs of the city. “But what the hell!” is Morayo’s attitude towards her small infractions of the law in her daily life.³⁶ She is certainly an unconventional woman, and that is the way she is seen by the characters that cross paths with her. Morayo’s best friend, a younger Indian woman who helps her and keeps an eye on her, states at some point: “Morayo was so uninhibited, so open and unconventional in comparison to most old people.”³⁷ That unconventionality probably came from the fact that Morayo was a worldly person, having lived in different places—boarding school in England, residence in India, and so forth—and who left behind a comfortable life on her own as an ambassador’s wife to pursue an academic career in the United States. When she revisits her past memories of the nights she had dinner with ministers, business leaders, and other ambassadors, she is hit with the reality she once escaped from:

And so the evening continues, as such functions did, filled with superficial chit-chat until the men retired to discuss the *important* things and the women were left gossiping and complaining about their servants. Then I would sneak off for a smoke in the gardens or a protracted visit to the powder room where I always kept a book of poetry.³⁸

Nonetheless, she is not immune to the passing of time as she complains that nobody writes letters anymore, and she conserves the habit of hiding money everywhere, in books, in the kitchen—“It’s everywhere” asserts the handyman, Francisco.³⁹

Morayo displays the divided feeling of an Afropolitan: she thinks about returning to her home country, but at the same time feels at home in San Francisco:

I’ve often thought of returning to Lagos and sometimes dream that I’ve already moved back to this big crazy city where everyone calls me ‘Auntie’ or ‘Mama’; the land of constant sunshine and daily theatre. I think of cousins and wonder what it might be like to reconnect with them, to live nearby...But even as I find myself searching the Internet for homes in Ikoyi, I know that I’m not likely to feel at home in such a

crowded city...Deep down, I know that my desire to return comes more from nostalgia than a genuine longing to return. Those days of being able to deal with the daily headaches of Lagos life are gone. In any case it's Jos, the city of my childhood, that I'd most like to return. But this is even more implausible...And now that my parents are gone and school friends have moved away or died, all that really remains are the memories.⁴⁰

The reader knows that she will probably never go back, but her memories are a way of keeping that strong connection. Memories are actually an important part of the narrative. Smells, sounds, mundane activities trigger Morayo's memories: "Today I select a new Ankara in vibrant shades of pink and blue and then bring it to my nose. When I open the folds of cloth I'm delighted to find the smell of Lagos markets still buried in the cotton – diesel fumes, hot palm oil, burning firewood. The smell evokes the flamboyance and craziness of the megacity that once was mine in between my husband's diplomatic postings."⁴¹ Besides Morayo's justification that her old age is an impediment to go back, she later admits that vanity is also a factor. What makes Morayo an interesting old woman is that she "doesn't feel old" –she keeps her pride, independence and, perhaps, "womanhood" alive:

And what's more, here in San Francisco, both men and women seem to admire my sense of style. Whereas if I were back in London or certain parts of New York, where *buba* and *gele* are commonplace, I know that I wouldn't turn heads, not at this age at least. And back in Nigeria, where so many are dressed like me, I wouldn't draw any attention at all. So I treasure this city...But it's the people of San Francisco, so often quirky but always friendly, that makes it feel like home to me.⁴²

At the same time Morayo feels the need to help those who stayed behind and who suffered the dramatic events of September 11, 2001 in Nigeria. At least 165 people were killed over four days of supposedly religious fighting in Jos—events that went largely unnoticed in the United States because of the tragic events in New York City.⁴³ Faced with the news and the pictures of dead bodies as she opens the morning newspaper, Morayo decides to send money back home, "to the orphans, even though I couldn't always be sure whether the money would reach those most affected."⁴⁴ In any case, "It felt better to be doing something rather than nothing."⁴⁵ The reader later finds out that this educated woman was taken by scammers who take advantage of dramatic situations and exploit the vulnerability of those emotionally affected by tragedy to extract money:

It's just that I'm usually so careful, but that particular email just got me. It didn't have any of the usual hallmarks of scam email – no funny spelling errors or formal salutations, so it never crossed my mind this might be another prank. And you know how upset I've been by everything happening in Nigeria recently...I thought the money would go to the victims. But then, of course, when I realized my mistake, well I didn't want to bother you.⁴⁶

In spite of her "flaws," Morayo feels comfortable in her skin and in the place she has chosen to live. She does not conform to Amatoritsero Ede's argument that Afropolitanism's celebration of cultural hybridity and transnationalism mutates "into

an ironic and symbolic collective black self-negation," such that Afropolitanism, "as cultural politics, can be viewed as a coping mechanism against the nausea of history."⁴⁷ Perhaps due to her old age and education, Morayo's character extends the cultural politics of Afropolitanism to include subjective politics in the analysis of how we exist in the world. She does not repeat history by going back, and she has no children who could possibly inherit any sense of a lack of history or their mother's displacement. She does not strive to belong in any of her worlds; she just belongs to both, past and present—one physically, the other in her memory. Morayo's strong sense of identity is also shown when she tells her friend Sunshine that she should not bother with comments about not being "Indian enough" from her in-laws: "There's no such thing, darling, as being 'Indian enough,' no such thing as one Indian culture."⁴⁸ Morayo is thus a woman at peace with herself and the world.

This sense of peace and enjoyment comes also from the way she deals with her sexuality, in a manner opposite to other characters in novels by diaspora writers. For example, in Selasi's *Ghana Must Go*, Sadie suffers from bulimia and hates her body. Her negative preoccupation with her body "is not just the negative articulation of culture; it is symbolic of her intricate and intimate navigation of culture."⁴⁹ Morayo, in contrast, has the confidence that her younger counterpart does not: "He just thinks he's being charming to an old lady. And yet, had he seen me in my youth—even in my middle years, things would have been different. Back then he would have had to work hard to get my attention."⁵⁰ And at the nursing home she feels comfortable enough to flirt with the physical therapist:

It's not as if I'm going to mistake his touch for one of flirtation, or even want to flirt with him in the first place. But the latter isn't true. I *am* flirting when I joke about my creaky knees and stiff joints, all the while hoping he'll compliment me on what good shape I'm in. And whether or not he's aware that I'd like him to congratulate me on my fitness (but who am I kidding, of course he knows), I thrive on his praise, diligently doing all my assigned exercises and more.⁵¹

But this is on the surface, since later Morayo shares her writings with Reggie, who she encounters in the nursing home while visiting his wife—a former colleague at the university—and to whom she reveals the secrets of her body. Morayo was raped: "Your body unsuspecting when opening the door to welcome the neighbor. Your body fighting. Flailing. Being flailed. Your body in hospital, exposed, and shamed. Your body shaking uncontrollable spasms, wracked with memories."⁵² Having gone through such an experience, which she appears to release through writing, Morayo still finds a sense of pride in her body and sexuality. In the end, she is dreaming of a possible future life with Reggie since, after all, he sees better than her.⁵³

While Morayo's rape is left unexplained—the reader does not know if it was due to gender or race—in Reggie's case we come upon the racism faced by the diasporic population in the U.S. In his memories we hear:

Years later, my body with muscle memory reminds me not to fall in love with another white woman. But then I met Pearl, and what do I do? My body should have known better. It should have known that Pearl's children would be suspicious of a black man with little money wanting to marry their mother. I shouldn't have been surprised when the

children disowned their mother on account of me, but I was. And it was this that my body so clearly remembered, the other day, when the old man began to rant. My body knowing that when the man spoke of his fears for his granddaughters, he was speaking of my body in the way that white men have spoken of black men's bodies for millennia. As threats. As rapists.⁵⁴

Reggie is referring here to a verbal attack by an old man during a dinner at the nursing home. The man had shouted:

'What do you see when you see black folks?' the man shouts. 'They are either in prison or they're walking around, pants hanging down their butts. They're loud, they cuss and they're dangerous'

'That's what you see,' Reggie shouts back, 'because you're a racist bigot.'

'I don't give a fuck what you say. All I know is that my granddaughters now can't even play in the park across their street because of all the black thugs who wanna hurt them.'

'You!' Reggie threatens, pushing back his chair. 'You!'⁵⁵

This is, of course, a common stereotype heard and experienced daily by African communities in the U.S. Reggie reacts and gets ready to go punch the man; but Morayo stops Reggie, and he apologizes for his reactions. Morayo's answer signifies her understanding of race politics: "You're not the one who should be apologizing."⁵⁶ She understands that, in the face of ignorance, the best answer is sometimes silence. Nonetheless, with this single episode, the novel underlines and conveys the idea that race and racism are still issues of great relevance in the history of the United States and ones that should not be dismissed. These interactions of Morayo and Reggie demonstrate that to be Black is to be considered an anomaly in America. As Gourgem affirms, "We are reminded of the serious impediment this condition causes to several Blacks and Africans who are reminded on a daily basis of their difference and inferiority in many places and situations."⁵⁷ *Like a Mule* indeed suggests that even though Morayo and Reggie belong to middle to upper social classes, the stigma of their color does not stop them from suffering. In this sense, Manyika's novel uses Western discourse to criticize certain aspects of life in the United States.

Conclusion

In *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun*, we encounter the voice of Morayo, a mature African character, a sage one because of her age and worldly experience, yet one who conserves youth and playfulness. Her life as a member of the Nigerian diaspora intermingles with the lives of others who share the same situation in the U.S. It is interesting to note that none of the other characters in the book—whether they are given a voice or not—are white American citizens, which is a message in and of itself. It also places the novel in a different position within the range of Afropolitan novels, since it speaks less about Africa than about cosmopolitan Africans.

Some scholars might wonder whether Morayo's (and Manyika's) extended residence in America, as well as the novel's hardy Afropolitan focus, disqualifies *Like a Mule* from being considered as an authentic work of the Nigerian/African diaspora.

Despite such concerns, which we have earlier seen to arise from a failure to appreciate the full range and variety of Afropolitan fiction, African diasporic identity undeniably remains one of the novel's primary themes. Is Morayo Nigerian? After living for so long in the U.S., is she American? To these questions the text responds that Morayo is the sum of all the places she has been, her past memories and the ones she is still building while "roaring, we go" in her Buttercup.⁵⁸ In short, Morayo (and Manyika) is an Afropolitan.

The novel is an account of the identities and lives of African and other non-Western individuals and their families a thus a departure from earlier Afropolitan novels which concentrate on the whole national or racial community. The problems of the birth country appear in Manyika's narrative, but are not central to it and do not form its main concern. The construction of African identity occurs in relation to the West. This is strikingly visible in the books that Morayo reads—a variety of authors that expands from Charlotte Brontë, Paul Auster, Émile Zola, Beatrix Potter, Ernest Gaines, e.e. cummings, Gwendolyn Brooks to James Baldwin. In other words, overwhelmingly Western writers. In an interview given to *Vela*, Sarah Ladipo Manyika explains the origin and meaning of her character's name:

The name, Morayo, means "I see joy" in Yoruba, so this already signals to some readers that joy has encircled her from birth. At the same time, Morayo works hard to stay optimistic through the challenges that life brings. She is someone who is interested in narrative and in the same way that she enjoys changing the endings of some of her favorite books, she also tries to embrace narratives that help move her forward rather than getting her stuck or depressed.⁵⁹

Manyika's novel thus does not offer the kind of caricature that passes for life in many works of African diaspora literature. Nor does it reflect the Afro-pessimism of some previous Afropolitan novels, where the transnational movement of characters occurs as a result of precarious conditions in the home countries and forms part of a search for the dream that could be fulfilled by the modernity and the advancements of technology to be found in the host western country. Upon arrival Manyika's characters are not enchanted by the mass-mediated imaginary of the host country and do not find themselves faced with life's harsh and disillusioning realities, at the least in the mundane sense of economic difficulties.

At the same time, however, Manyika's work of fiction transcends disillusionment and brings a new breath to the life of African persons in America. The reader feels and absorbs the joy of Morayo. Even if her life is not easy, and old age may pose impediments, Morayo's wittiness and approach to her surroundings break with all conventions: national, racial, social, and, perhaps most importantly, sexual. She is an Afropolitan, but an unconventional one, i.e, she widens the exploration of black female sexual identity in the concept of Selasi's Afropolitanism (and in this sense, at an older age and differently from Ifemelu in Adichie's *Americanah*, for instance). In this way, *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun* highlights Morayo's affirmation of the value of diasporic life over and against the ironic posture of black self-negation that can result from the diasporic experience. The novel stands out as an Afropolitan novel, one that breaks with the past, and simultaneously establishes itself as a Nigerian novel—but also as much more than that, since it does not run away from a discussion on critical

contemporary issues. Racism, social discrimination, migration are present, but the emphasis is placed on the overcoming of these situations in the foreign country. Like most of the real Nigerian-American accomplishments, Manyika and her character, Morayo, are also migrants, successfully crossing borders, and, as Mbembe theorizes, having the “ability to recognize one’s face in that of a foreigner...to domesticate the unfamiliar.”⁶⁰ Manyika’s novel is thus an example of the diverse layers of Afropolitanism, one that acknowledges migration as a natural human phenomenon and undermines national boundaries.⁶¹

Notes

- 1 Fosco 2018.
- 2 Fosco 2018.
- 3 Anderson 2017.
- 4 Ajima 2015, p. 108.
- 5 Migration Policy Institute 2015, p. 1.
- 6 Ajima 2015, p. 108.
- 7 Migration Policy Institute 2015.
- 8 Okigbo 2107, pp. 444-45.
- 9 Ikheloa 2016.
- 10 Tapureta 2016.
- 11 Ikheloa 2016.
- 12 Leszkiewicz 2017, p. 49.
- 13 Leszkiewicz 2017.
- 14 Leszkiewicz 2017.
- 15 Leszkiewicz 2017, pp. 49-16
- 16 Leszkiewicz 2017, p. 49.
- 17 Aloh 2012.
- 18 Aloh 2012.
- 19 Aloh 2012.
- 20 Aloh 2012.
- 21 Selasi 2005.
- 22 Selasi 2005.
- 23 Selasi 2005.
- 24 Selasi 2005.
- 25 Mbembe 2007, pp. 28-29.
- 26 Cited in Wawrzinek & Makokha, 2011, p. 79.
- 27 Ede 2016, p. 98.
- 28 Mbembe 2007, pp. 26-7.
- 29 Balakrishnan 2017, p. 2.
- 30 Guarracino 2014, p. 11.
- 31 Gourgem 2017, p. 296.
- 32 Gourgem 2017, p. 290.
- 33 Manyika 2016, p. 2.
- 34 Manyika 2016, p. 3.
- 35 Manyika 2016, p. 26
- 36 Manyika 2016, p.10.

- 37 Manyika 2016, p. 37.
 38 Manyika 2016, p. 81.
 39 Manyika 2016, p. 37.
 40 Manyika 2016, pp. 4-5.
 41 Manyika 2016, p. 4.
 42 Manyika 2016, p. 17.
 43 CNN, 2001.
 44 Manyika 2016, p. 49.
 45 Manyika 2016, p. 49.
 46 Manyika 2016, p. 73.
 47 Ede 2016, p. 93.
 48 Manyika 2016, p. 36.
 49 Phiri 2017, p. 151.
 50 Manyika 2016, p. 14.
 51 Manyika 2016, p. 69.
 52 Manyika 2016, p. 108.
 53 Manyika 2016, p. 117.
 54 Manyika 2016, p. 109.
 55 Manyika 2016, p. 102.
 56 Manyika 2016, p. 103.
 57 Gourgem 2017, p. 295.
 58 Manyika 2016, p. 118.
 59 Williams n/y.
 60 Mbembe 2007, p. 28
 61 Mbembe 2007, p. 28.

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