The Newly Black Americans

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Source: *Transition*, No. 113, What is Africa to me now? (2014), pp. 52-71

Published by: Indiana University Press on behalf of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/transition.113.52

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The Newly Black Americans

African immigrants and black America

Louis Chude-Sokei

There is a moment in Dinaw Mengestu's well-received novel *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007) where the narrator, Sepha—Ethiopian, refugee, victim of an anomie that is as Naipaulian as it is stereotypically modernist—encounters traces of Pan-Africanism and, what continues to be celebrated in scholarly and cultural circles (often uncritically) as, black *Diaspora*. Walking through neighborhoods in Washington, D.C. convulsed between decline and renaissance, where the domestic migrations of gentrification speak to the displacements of post-Independence Africa, Sepha encounters amongst the abandoned lots and littered condoms, the prostitutes and alcoholics, the memory of black transnational solidarity, or at least its symbols. The memory trigger in question is "a black-owned bookstore called Madame X," where once were Afrocentric poetry readings, shared plates of "yam patties," and no doubt the sound of jazz, reggae, hip-hop, or even Afrobeat.

We are told that now the "black empowerment books gathered dust," overwhelmed by the scents of rotting meat and cheap marijuana, the grunts of low-cost alleyway sex and the screeches of stolen cars. It would be easy to miss this briefest of references to an era and a politics since a good portion of the novel is spent narrating transformation and decline in ways that can make each specific instance of it evaporate in dark moments of our narrator's regret. The shifting architecture of America's capitol city is, in this case, only slightly more overwhelming than the geography of the main character's errantry and loss. But there is a broader sense of loss afoot—a loss that, if not greater than that of a homeland, is at least more meaningful than are these sordid details of urban blight. This sense of loss, of transformation and decline will be argued here to be paradigmatic, not only of contemporary African writing and the waves of immigration that impel it, but for the wider context of the new

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cultural politics of a black America that is deeply in the throes of what theorist Judith Butler would call a "category crisis."

It is difficult to parse out clear moments of political critique in Mengestu's novel due to the violence done the main character and his family because of their class and political affiliations in Ethiopia. As a product of this postcolonial violence, upon arrival in America the protagonist subsequently retreats from the practice of affiliation, political or otherwise. Like so many immigrant and refugee novels before this one, we are given a character whose brokenness is meant to be the world's. What redeems this cliché is Mengestu's commitment to intimacy and its failures as a way of getting at such weighty matters as gentrification, immigration, and the great traumas of continental African freedom. This commitment to intimacy, though effective, can make political statements seem superfluous, or even worse, inelegant. Yet it seems necessary to isolate this moment at what was Madame X, because the absence Mengestu describes palpitates, hence Sepha's lingering over it like an old wound.

This is a literature that finds itself in a context over-determined by multiple demands of affiliation and by the tensions between rival claims of trauma and memory.

We are told he "used to think there was some great metaphor in this," but what that metaphor may have been he does not say or does not remember. Like some migrants, his refusal or inability to make new cultural choices and generate new political meanings and alliances makes arrival a perpetual hovering and an endless deferral. As his father once said to him, "a man stuck between two worlds lives and dies alone," and as he says to himself at the end of the novel and possibly too late, "I have dangled and been suspended long enough." An open metaphor, then, is appropriate for this suspension, as is the relentless drawing of attention to its openness, to the site of wounding.

There are other such moments in the novel, suggesting that the metaphor exists to do work for this novel and for the broader world of new African immigrant writing in America. This is a literature that finds itself in a context overdetermined by multiple demands of affiliation and by the tensions between rival claims of trauma and memory, all within the crowded and obfuscating skin of racial classification. These affiliations hinge not simply on race, but on the choices that make intimacy possible. Another such moment occurs when Sepha encounters the claustrophobia of cultural authenticity in the presence of his exiled people. These are Haile Selassie's people, the Conquering Lion of Judah's people, crammed into a dilapidated apartment building on the outskirts of Washington, D.C. He admits that, since arriving in

America, he avoids other Ethiopians and their "vanishing culture," but also feels the need to declare "the old emperor," the King of Kings, "to have been a tyrant, not a god." This latter phrase is arguably as heretical amongst certain strands of populist Pan-Africanism—particularly of the Caribbean variety—as it is amongst the community Sepha claims to have escaped by purchasing a run down store in a poverty-stricken African American neighborhood.

Such small statements gathered up begin to reveal the shape of that enigmatic "great metaphor." For example, it reveals that Sepha's escape and his tendencies towards impotence and deferral to be at least dually motivated. First, by a primary community now scattered by revolutionary violence (Ethiopia, vanishing yet haunting), and second, a transnational one that once depended on that primary community for its symbols as well as its moral and historical certitude (Pan-Africa, *Diaspora*, also vanishing but even more spectacular in its symbolic demands). This is particularly strong in a novel that is noteworthy for dramatizing the failed interracial romantic relationship between Sepha and the white woman Judith, who buys a home near his store. But if that relationship is read as a sign of a failed trajectory of assimilation against the backdrop of the larger failed intimacies between an African immigrant and the African American community that surrounds him, then the metaphor begins to come to life—not due to its openness, but to its signifying something broken.

The very notion that racism is a suturing factor or a shared catalyzing burden is no longer to be taken for granted.

These palpitating moments of discontinuity and Pan-African brokenness draw attention to the great width and depth of difference, of arguably different diasporas that assume the intimacy of a shared name but which can no longer assume a shared experience, much less shared politics. As will be argued, given the sometimes stark differences between the social performance and cultural positions of African immigrants in the United States and those of black Americans, the very notion that racism is a suturing factor or a shared catalyzing burden is no longer to be taken for granted. African immigrants, as evident in this literature as in the now-growing body of research, do not necessarily experience or respond to racism in the same way or share the same notions of identity or affiliation as African Americans. They also do not imagine themselves "white" or necessarily see whiteness as a position of desirable privilege. Yet they are expected to assimilate into either a white American and/or a 'black' social world that may exhibit its own prejudices against them.

These intra-racial, cross-cultural differences lead to that line of thinking most feared by the American Left, for whom racism is everything,

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but that is increasingly galvanizing to the Right, for whom racism is too much: If racism does not seem detrimental to black immigrant performance in America, then can it truly be called or considered "racism"? If indeed whites prove to be at times more accepting of non-American blacks—as they have long been in relation to many West Indians, for example, often as foils against a native black minority—then are the problems faced by African Americans less about racism than about either specific African American failures in America or America's failures in regards to its most notable involuntary minority?

Mengestu's novel dramatizes this complex position of the African immigrant in American racial politics, as do other works by contemporary African writers in the United States. These texts do not answer the above questions, but they do ask them. Though literary convention and racial cliché may suggest that Sepha and other such characters dangle between Africa and America—the old and the new, tradition and modernity—in truth, the space between nations and continents is rendered secondary in these fictions to the newly discovered racialized spaces *within* the country in which they have arrived. Torn, then, between two Americas—one white, one African American, both with distinct and sometimes irreconcilable demands—Sepha's options are equally impossible.

Much of *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* is about this alienation between these two Americas. Like Naipaul's Indian shopkeeper Selim from *A Bend in the River*, who provides Mengestu's novel with its primary literary and socio-political reference point, Sepha exists on the margins of the primary conflict between black and white. Mengestu could easily have used Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*, another great work of political failure and personal shame. He should have, because in that novel, Indians in Africa are "the intruders, who stood between the mutual and complete comprehension of master and slave." In that precarious position, they, like Sepha, are the ones "who were to suffer."

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Like Naipaul's Indians, Sepha is neither master nor slave, but bound to both through a precarious economic foothold in the backwaters of capital. And like Naipaul's tripartite vision of black, white, and *neither*, violence is rarely far away. When Sepha is chosen by one of those Americas, it is by the very African American community that had previously looked disdainfully on his African heritage and regularly fleeced his store of its goods. But in the wake of escalating racial tensions, he is welcomed with a kiss from the closest thing to an African American friend he has in the novel: Mrs. Davis. Importantly, she has also been the voice for much of the anti-immigrant/anti-African sentiment in that community.

But her kiss comes at the cost of another's. He is *interpellated* as "black," as an African American, which is hardly a sign of community in this elegant novel. Or, if it is, then community—one based on race—does not mean affinity or choice. The African American acceptance of "the African" is only because he is valuable in their war against the very whites with whom Sepha has become intimate: Judith and her daughter Naomi. The novel, after all, works hard to emphasize how much greater is his cultural and intellectual affinity with them, the white woman, the mixed race daughter; their shared interest in modernist art, Russian existentialism, Alexis de Tocqueville.

But blackness—here an American formation, imperial in its expectations—gets in the way. The open metaphor is now clear. It signifies a broken racial ideology or a set of shared political assumptions gathering dust despite the presence of its symbols and the continuing dependence on its gestures. Solidarity in this novel, and diaspora itself, are modes of conscription, not consent.

. . .

Such moments are actually present in a number of contemporary texts by African writers working now in (or around) America. They give credence to Khalid Koser's introduction to the 2003 collection *New African Diasporas* where he makes clear that in the context of the new African migrations, particularly to the United States, there is no evidence whatsoever of a Pan-African movement, ideology, or even sensibility attempting to unite them. Not only does Koser insist on the inevitable plurality of differences at work in the contemporary deployment of black Diaspora; he does so against a largely First-World history of insisting on a singular one even after the publication of what is still the most influential modern scholarly work on the concept, Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993).

That urge for a collective gesture, a singular sentiment or even a "collective policy voice" may have guided generations of black American thought since the grand historical correlations of Civil Rights, Black Power, and decolonization in the years leading up to apartheid's end. However, very few individuals committed to those legacies are cognizant of the changes to black global racial sentiment in the wake of those world-shaking transformations. As has been argued by Zachary R. Williams, despite apartheid there was apparently "no bridge linking the 1960s and 1970s domestic civil rights and black power generation struggles to generations of the 1980s and 1990s actively seeking to end apartheid in South Africa. As a result, such a gulf continues to encourage more pervasive fracturing among groups interested in Africa and Caribbean foreign policy issues."

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This "fracturing" is what many of these contemporary African fictions document, but is quite different than the "rhizomatic" or "fractal" configurations at work in Gilroy, whose work notoriously elides Africa. Ironically, it occurs outside of the world of public/global policy and literary/cultural studies precisely as "Diaspora" and "Black Atlantic" thought begins to emerge in the First World academy, almost in flagrant disavowal of what has been happening to "black politics" and notions of racial or cross-cultural community due to new waves of African immigration. These waves have been made possible by an event that has proven to be as important as decolonization and the Civil Rights Movement, and which was effectively the product of both: the Hart-Cellar Immigration Act of 1965.

Famed as "the most important piece of legislation that no one's ever heard of," it is a crucial factor in the commencement of the new black immigrant cultures and literatures in the United States. In the wake of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Hart-Cellar opened the borders to non-white nations and cleared the way for not only a redefinition of "white" America, but also of "black" America.

This legislation would lead immediately to what is the single most important fact underlying that aforementioned "category crisis." As stated in an oft-cited 2005 *New York Times* article by Sam Roberts, since 1990, more blacks have arrived in America from Africa than did during the slave trade. African immigrants in fact constitute the fastest growing population of immigrants in America. Though one would be hard-pressed to find many "Black Atlantic" or "Diaspora" scholarly or critical texts that have taken on this fact and its staggering implications, it has been galvanizing for those who feel that a "New African Diaspora" interpretive framework is necessary. Necessary not only as a contemporizing of black-on-black cultural and political relationships, but also as a corrective to a "Black Atlantic" framework in which Africa exists only as ghostly evocations of slavery, and to a "Black Diaspora" defined and delimited by the ideological preferences and experiential priorities of African Americans.

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Koser's is just one of many important recent collections with the deliberately disruptive and necessarily critical articulation of "newness" in the title. The most notable is *The New African Diaspora*, edited by Isidore Okpewho and Nkuru Nzegwu in 2009. Instead of the institutionalized interest in products of pre-colonial dispersals—as in the Atlantic Slave Trade—this collection focuses on contemporary "voluntary movements and relocations of peoples of African descent between the home continent and various parts of the western Atlantic." The issue of the "voluntary" will prove to be a decisive factor in both political orientation and patterns of social response; after all, those who have chosen to come here—even as refugees like Mengestu's Sepha—will see America far differently than those whose very being is shaped by an involuntary presence.

There is also Gillian Creese's *The New African Diaspora in Vancouver* (2011); and Kwado Kondadu-Agyemang, Baffour K. Takyi, and John A. Arthur's *The New African Diaspora in North America* (2006). A number of others assume and share the context: John Arthur's earlier *Invisible Sojourners* (2000), and Yoku Shaw-Taylor and Steven A. Tuch's *The Other African-Americans* (2007). There are also those that focus on the children of these immigrants as they integrate and face race and African American blackness in schools—for example, Rosemary Traore and

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Robert J. Lukens's *"This Isn't The America I Thought I'd Find"* (2006), and Randy Capps and Michael Fix's *Young Children of Black Immigrants in America* (2012). Unsurprisingly, given the election of Barack Obama, a part-Kenyan president, there has been much necessary chatter on this topic. Existing in the world of Africans and African immigrants, this chatter remains largely external to the world of black American concerns, in which Obama's relationship to American racial categories has taken center stage. However, Paul Tiyambe Zeleza's *Barack Obama and African Diasporas* (2009) speaks to this other reading of the first "black" president, as does the work of journalists, critics, and scholars

for whom his presidency was as much a product of the "new" diaspora as of the Civil Rights Movement.

Linked to the "brain drain" in postcolonial African nations, these new immigrants tend to be better educated than most native-born Americans of any color. Almost half arrive with bachelor's degrees—while only 26% of Americans have them—making them, according to Howard Dodson, former head of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, "the most highly educated population in the United States." This new *newness* reveals complex insights about how race and racism functions in America, and the asymmetries of skin and history in the broader realm of cultural responses and outcomes. It says much also about class and education, but even more about the relationship between differential racial histories and the effects they have on how racism works. After all, what does it say about racism when Africans, some suggest, seem either impervious or indifferent to it? What does it say about "oppression" when another black group seems far more in tune with classic immigrant outcomes than with conventionally "black" ones?

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Sam Roberts's *New York Times* article also states, "The steady decline in the percentage of African-Americans with ancestors who suffered directly through the middle passage and Jim Crow is also shaping the debate over affirmative action, diversity programs and other initiatives intended to redress the legacy of slavery." Another *Times* article, by Rachel L. Swarns, places these differences in historical context, alongside evolving African American discourses of self-apprehension and naming. In doing so, it reminds us that when epistemological categories are in crisis, material crises—and social tensions—often follow. And vice versa:

> The term African-American has crept steadily into the nation's vocabulary since 1988, when the Rev. Jesse Jackson held a news conference to urge Americans to use it to refer to blacks . . .
>
> Many whites use the term for all blacks. But among blacks there is much less agreement, particularly in places like Silver Spring [MD] where Africans, Haitians and Dominicans mingle in the town's coffee shops, nightclubs and beauty salons, or in neighboring Washington, where the City Council voted this year to include the

> Ethiopian Language Amharic as an official language to accommodate the growing Ethiopian community . . .
>
> Even adherents of African-American acknowledge that shifting demographics have made the term's meaning more ambiguous.

One of the few literary critics to take up these implications, Martyn Bone, puts it this way:

> Native-born descendants of African slaves have exhibited ambivalence about the arrival of another kind of African American. Tension has emerged over issues ranging from jobs (African migrants are often perceived by whites as being more compliant and hard-working than native U.S. blacks) to affirmative action programs in universities (an ongoing Princeton study shows that 40 percent of black students at Ivy League universities are actually immigrants or the children of immigrants).

This shift in numbers has also been identified as key to that shift from "Black" or "African American" Studies in America to "Diaspora" or "Africana" Studies, as the interests and priorities of one black group—and its nationalist tendencies—begin to cede to the interests and priorities of another with more internationalist concerns. That the latter group responds to race and racism in markedly different ways than the former reminds us of the difference between the asymmetrical ethnic visions of the voluntary and the involuntary. Trouble is, those differences can be easily interpreted as collusion with a racist status quo, as well as a trespassing on the "mutual and complete comprehension" of master and slave in America.

Much of this context is academic, which means it is also literary, insofar as these institutional structures remain a crucial space for the reception, dispersion, and analysis of contemporary fiction by Africans in America. Writers like Dinaw Mengestu inevitably function within this still unreconstructed "Diaspora" framework far more than they operate within the conventions of African or African American literature. This framework, however, arguably privileges the critical norms and historical priorities of an "old" black diaspora—or at least one that has yet to engage the quite distinct historical forces and aesthetic and political possibilities at work in these new post-Hart-Cellar (and as such, post-Civil Rights) texts and contexts. Political scientist Yvette

Alex-Assensoh provides even greater detail on the academic aspect of these transformations and the attendant controversies:

> In contrast to the prevailing assumption of black unity, there is increasing evidence of intra-racial contestation between African immigrants and African-Americans over cultural boundaries and race-based resources in higher education and municipal politics. In a recent study, Massey and others reported that the nations' elite colleges and universities are increasing the number of black students by enrolling large numbers of immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean. In response, African-American scholars like Harvard University Professors Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Lani Guinier have argued that enrolling black immigrants, instead of native-born African-Americans, is undermining the long-term mission of U.S. affirmative action policies and institutions to redress historic wrongs against African-Americans. These conflicts reflect a new dimension of black intra-racial conflict over policy benefits, which undermines assumptions about unmitigated racial unity between black newcomers and African-Americans based on a common experience of racial oppression.

The few African Americans that have noted these transformations have in fact done so through the lenses of Affirmative Action and Black Studies. They have openly acknowledged black immigrants as an intra-racial, cross-cultural threat. The loudest should be named first: the frankly quite alarmist screed by the otherwise brilliant novelist Cecil Brown called *Dude, Where's My Black Studies Department* (2007). Praised by writers and critics ranging from Henry Louis Gates, Jr. to Michael Eric Dyson to novelist/poet Ishmael Reed, this book should be remembered for its description of African and Caribbean scholars, writers, and academics as overseers imported from overseas to keep the new plantation in order. Less offensive and more thoughtful is Noliwe Rooks' *White Money/Black Power* (2006). Like Brown's book, the focus is aimed at the "Caribbeanization" of Black Studies (Brown spends much time demonizing "the Caribbean gaze"), but the presence of new generation African scholars is very much a catalyzing problem, as the "old" African diaspora is forced to confront one that has evolved differently from it and dares function without obeisance or permission.

It's worth adding here that the House Committee on Diaspora reported in 2012 that 77% of all members of associations of black medical doctors in the United States are from Nigeria. It was also reported in 2000 that, while the median household income for black Americans was around $30,000, for Nigerian immigrant families it was in excess of $45,000. These material facts suggest that diaspora as a political singularity or sign of continuity or shared affect is, as Mengestu's novel suggests, troublingly anachronistic. It is either in need of tremendous reformulation and political reorganization, or else should be, like the bookshop Madame X, swept away with all traces of spent desire, its embers doused. Because this questioning of race, culture, and solidarity provides the subtext of so many contemporary African immigrant fictions in America, it demands a reckoning beyond the sometimes too comfortable and possibly over-compensatory frameworks of "Diaspora," or as Anthony Appiah would remind us, of even "blackness" itself. In these texts, there exist many such moments in which African Americans, or the cultural politics of Afrocentrism or Pan-Africanism, or diaspora, or "racial pride" are either mocked or pointed to as a "fracturing" chasm between African characters and black Americans. The point is not simply cultural difference or discontinuity. It suggests that what confronts Africans in America is certainly racism but also the expectation that they share a collective response to it. Their response to this situation may therefore be less a refusal of solidarity than resentment at being impelled to submit to its priorities.

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Something as potentially inflammatory as this African immigrant questioning of race and of the implications of racism requires a few more literary examples. Take Ike Oguine's criminally overlooked *A Squatter's Tale* (2000). The book is marked by its curious spectatorship of African American culture in Oakland, California, more so than its view of white America. Notable is its not-so-subtle mockery of Mahamood, the African immigrant seduced (literally) into the militant radicalism of an essentialist Pan-Africanism. Mahamood's political awakening is fueled by an African American woman who claims to have transformed into "a complete African," and was now a "priestess of the gads-af-Africa (he said it like one word)." One is reminded of this very similar process as it actually happened to Afrobeat originator Fela Kuti, a generation or

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so before, when he encountered Sandra Isidore and the Black Panthers on these very streets. It was in Oakland where he was introduced to "his" African culture as well as the rhetoric of anti-colonial, racial protest. For this post-nationalist generation of migrants, Oguine describes the priestess's vision of African pride and cultural renascence as,

> an epic, Arabian Nights kind of quest: over forbidding mountains, past the edges of terrible cliffs, through valleys crawling with serpents and scorpions, to treasures hidden in the nostrils of the gods, but all that the journey had turned up so far were pieces of ancestor-worship, stuff from the Ten Commandments, astral and extra-terrestrial travel, ESP, Progression through Spheres of Righteousness to a Position of Oneness with the Chosen Ones, the gods of Yorubaland and Dahomey as reborn in Haiti and Cuba, UFOs, secret research at NASA on life in outer space, the work of mediums, the existence of evil beings in various parts of the Atlantic and the Pacific, etc. etc. Revealed to me in the numbing

boredom of the guards' room as astonishing, original discoveries.

Anyone who has spent time wandering the incense-riddled Afrocentric world of the Bay Area can easily attest to the accuracy of this representation of a Pan-Africanism that has given way to both the self-righteousness of cultural paranoia and the infinitely recursive promises of a type of Afrofuturism. This brew can be found anywhere, having become a public form of Afro-kitsch.

Oguine's political acumen continues to the other side of the political spectrum in the novel, showing just how complex these intra-racial, cross-cultural aporias might be. With the character Ezendu, he depicts something to which far too few are paying attention. This is the emergence of an African immigrant conservative politics from a global American evangelical movement that has, over the last two generations, superseded—and in some cases replaced—formal aid. This conservatism frames its assimilation and its upward mobility specifically as counter to black Americans, and as an alternative to a mainstream African American political culture that has intertwined "black" and the Democratic Party. As Alex-Assensoh points out, due to the overlooking of "voluntary African immigrants" in American politics, it continues to be "assumed that Black political behavior in America reflects unified, homogenous and distinctive racialized perspectives based on common ancestry, despite the large waves of African immigrants with diverse ethnic, national, cultural, and ideological differences."

Similar to the above moment in Oguine is the one in Teju Cole's much-lauded *Open City* (2011). There, we are presented with a narrator whose anomie and penchant for withdrawal is as strong as Sepha's in Mengestu's novel, but whose deliberate refusal to be interpellated by tropes of racial solidarity or affirmed by gestures of cultural commonality or political affinity is even stronger. For a novel so deliberately worldly in its intellectual explorations and cross-cultural collisions, and so committed to the random interactions of multiple types of individuals emerging from interlacing diasporas, its curiously stand-offish relationship to black Americans is notable. In one instance, the narrator encounters an African American poet who invites him to an event much like that which would have been held in the kind of space that Mengestu narrates as ruin. "'Say brother, where are you from?' the poet asks. ''Cause see, I could tell you were from the Motherland. And you brothers have something that is vital, you understand me. You have something that is vital for the health of those of us raised on this side of the ocean. Let me tell you something: I am raising my daughters as Africans.'" He continues:

> We are the ones who received the boot. We, who are used for loot, trampled underfoot. Unconquered. We, who carry the crosses. Yes, see? Our kith and our kin used like packhorses. We of the countless horrific losses, assailed by the forces, robbed of choices, silenced voices. And still unconquered. You feel me? For four hundred and fifty years. Five centuries of tears, aeons of fears. Yet still we remain, we remain, we remain the unconquered.

Though the words are triumphant, the overall tone is a mixture of the comic and the elegiac. The gesture of forced kinship is enough for the Nigerian narrator to resolve to never return to this place despite his obsessive peregrinations around the entire city of New York. And in a moment akin to that in Mengestu's novel, we are told, "He held the last line in a meaningful pause," another palpitating absence, metaphors without meaning, the space between or amongst dispersals.

There are others. An older black man suddenly compliments the narrator, who is a psychiatrist: "with sudden emotion in his voice, Doctor, I just want to tell you how proud I am to come here, and see a young black man like yourself in that white coat, because things haven't ever been easy for us, and no one has ever given us nothing without a struggle." The fact that the narrator makes absolutely no response to this is secondary to the fact that the author goes out of his way to make clear that the narrator makes no response. A mere two pages later, he is violently mugged by two young African American men: "There had earlier been, it occurred to me, only the most tenuous of connections between us, looks on a street corner by strangers, a gesture of mutual respect based on our being young, black, male; based, in other words, on our being 'brothers.'" The "tenuous of connections" was clear enough; but to put the word "brothers" in scare quotes hammers the point home.

This is the emergence of an African immigrant conservative politics from a global American evangelical movement that has, over the last two generations, superseded—and in some cases replaced—formal aid.

More subtle is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, whose short story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* features many staged moments of incommensurability between Africans and black Americans—between, again, a "new" African diaspora and what then must find itself described, however reluctantly one imagines, as the *"old"* African diaspora. The lesbian-themed short story, "On Monday of Last Week,"

for example, with its dreadlocked black American woman artist whose claim that her work is informed by "The Motherland" means little to the Nigerian nanny she has hired. This nanny is someone for whom "The Motherland" is hardly metaphor, and to whom black Americans are primarily Americans. Adichie alludes further to this differentiation in the collection but makes it the subject of her recently published novel *Americanah* (2013). Most important is how clear the collision between diasporas has become, and how necessary it is for a writer as prominent as Adichie to address it.

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Chris Abani's *The Virgin of the Flames* features some of what can now be called *inter-diasporic signifying*, where the myths and expectations of one group of blacks encounters those of another, but fail to translate or accommodate the other. This is due not only to the vast differences of history and culture, but also to entirely different commitments to race as a mode of identification and a way of self-knowing. African Americans barely figure in *The Virgin of the Flames* as characters, despite its setting in Los Angeles and in the deliberately multi- or poly-cultural and sexual sensibilities that characterize that city. As with the other texts, black Americans merely lurk in the background like expectant ghosts or persons displaced from a narrative of race they used to own.

Abani's novel as well as Cole's, Adichie's, Oguine's, and Mengestu's fictions shows how these writers dramatize a tiptoeing around what is, in fact, a primary concern for African immigrants, and therefore a driving force behind these new fictions: the relationship with black Americans, the most influential representatives of the "old" African diaspora. Not only are the symbols and rhetoric or gestures towards transnational racial solidarity and ethnic pride mocked, stereotyped, or revealed to be meaningless. The very relationship with black America is treated as tense, silent, incomparable, and awkward, more a question than a foregone conclusion. What this suggests is that, more so than whites, it is black America that bears the burden of difference in these texts. *Intra-racial* difference is all the more complex due to the expectation of intimacy generated by race politics and the legacy of discourses and movements ranging from Ethiopianism, to Pan-Africanism, "Black Power," Afrocentrism, and, of course, "Black Atlantic" thought.

This tiptoeing had been narrated as outright confrontation in Dave Eggers and Valentino Deng's well-received 2006 collaboration, *What is the What*. This work structures its narrative through a tense and violent meeting of the black diasporas, old and new. Framed via the

No Instructions for Assembly. Solo Exhibition (Real Art Ways, Hartford CT), Installation Shots. Found photographs, objects and text; original photography and collage. © 2013 Kameelah Janan Rasheed.

victimization of a Sudanese refugee by African Americans, who then become the imagined audience for his story of genocide, forced migration, and displacement, this act of intra-racial violence has been described by Martyn Bone as "the ideal of pan-African brotherhood" now manifest "in grimly debased form." Not an unfair assessment, given that the assailant peppers the robbery and assault with sardonic and disdainful references to him and his victims being "brothers," and to Deng as a "fucking Nigerian."

There are references to other abuses in the novel/memoir, such as black American teenagers blaming Deng for slavery. The ambivalence towards Africa and Africans becomes blended with the resentment towards America: *it's your fault that we are here in the first place,* "you're one of those Africans who sold us out." It is not that different from Cecil Brown's assessment of the role/place of black immigrant academics, writers, and scholars. The narrator of *What is the What* is good enough to follow such events with descriptions of how his elders back in Sudan had equally low opinions of African Americans and had demanded that black Americans be avoided—as if to suggest that they get in the way of America.

But one wonders if the text's overall need to balance troubling representations of African Americans with damning self-referential information about Africans/Sudanese is due to Eggers's awareness of American racial tensions. The same goes for those African Americans in the novel whose "positive" representations seem forced and too self-aware. After all, one wouldn't assume a refugee who knew little about

the world outside of his village before his forced migrations would care much for such hypersensitivity.

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Keeping in mind the ever-growing body of statistics and the social scrutiny in regards to African immigrants in America vis-à-vis black Americans, this overall sense of brokenness or incommensurability, of perhaps failed expectations, intra-racial threat or cross-cultural competition is a thing that matters. The stress on these intra-racial, cross-cultural differences is so widespread in this new literature by Africans in America that it is not too much to declare it paradigmatic of a moment and demanding of major reflection. Call it a wake-up call. To do so is to intervene on behalf of a long history of collusion, collaboration, and some degree of continuity while bringing attention to the problem of lazily assuming ideological solidarity due to race. In fact, for these immigrants, "race"—as Anthony Appiah argued in his now classic *In My Father's House* (1992)—may not be the primary source of their identities.

Admittedly, there is a danger that, due to their increasingly prominent role in American education, letters, and cultural politics, African immigrants could too easily function as an alternative to African Americans and their largely race-based narratives, ideologies, and critical paradigms. For white American readers weary of their historical responsibilities and eager to evade them, black immigrants can easily become proof that racism is a far less significant factor than black Americans insist it is, and that the problems they face are due to *culture*, not color (or in other words, are of their own making). African immigrants can become—as Deng states in *What is the What*—the ultimate "model minority." *Ultimate* here means that one form of blackness can easily be deployed against another, chipping away at its claims. But on the other hand, for African Americans, these immigrants can force a healthy recognition of the chasm contained in their hyphenated identities. These newcomers make material the disjunction between the privileges of the latter term and the mythic memory of the former.

This, too, is what a "new" diaspora must do, not displace the "old" one but differentiate itself from it.

Yet the fact that contemporary African writers in America may relegate African Americans and their histories to the margins of their fictions need not be seen as problematic. Given the realities of an increasingly large-scale cultural emergence of continental Africans within the skin of black American culture and literature, it is more likely the case that this marginalizing is a necessary technique. It is a space-clearing

gesture that prevents them from becoming too easily erased or masked by African American interests, priorities, and narrative conventions. This, too, is what a "new" diaspora must do, not displace the "old" one but differentiate itself from it. This strategy is necessary due to the former's general reluctance to acknowledge a historical context intimate with, but outside of, racial identity and a political context that is either less dependent on blackness or busy reformulating itself around it. Either way, the call to attend to the space of the intra-racial *and* the cross-cultural must be heeded. If not, that space will produce responses far less elegant than fiction and much more worrying than statistics.