

# **Imagining the Homeland: Myth, Movement, and Migration in Three Novels by Women from the African Diaspora**

By

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For immigrant authors of African descent, the impact of postnationalism and the continued subjugation of their native cultures through neocolonialism focuses the writers' pens on subjects of dispersal, either forced or voluntary. In their description of this diasporic movement, these authors write of a desire to re-create an image of the homeland in a hostile hostland. They describe a need to maintain a cultural identity based on a memory of "home" while adapting to a foreign social structure. These opposing desires impede the assimilation process. As opposed to men, women, who fill the traditional role of home-building in their homeland, face greater barriers to the creation of a place of both physical and mental belonging outside of their native cultures. Using Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*, and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*, this thesis examines how contemporary literature written by women from African diasporic communities resists assimilation and acculturation and tells, instead, of the desires for a home and a culture that have been left behind through the process of movement.



**Imagining the Homeland: Myth, Movement, and Migration in  
Three Novels by Women from the African Diaspora**

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By

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Dedication

To "Uncle" Ray

You were right. I just had to keep at it.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### **Just Keep Moving, There's Nothing to See Here**

In 2011, the novelist Bharati Mukherjee challenged the academic community to recognize a new genre in literary fiction. She describes this genre as “Literature of the New Arrival.” In her article, Mukherjee argues that today’s immigrant literature no longer has a focus on assimilation but instead addresses the immigrant’s “loss of community, of language and of extended family” and “the nuanced process of rehousement after the trauma of forced or voluntary unhousement” (683). She goes on to criticize the academy for failing to separate today’s “literature of the immigrant experience” from “literature of globalization, or diasporic literature” (683). However, Mukherjee’s attempt to separate “Literature of the New Arrival” from theories of globalization and dispersal fails to account for the works emanating from immigrant writers of African descent. Like other “New Arrival” authors, the diasporic author also focuses on themes of lost community; however, the postnational condition of their homelands serves as a barrier to the separation of concepts of globalization and dispersal within their work. Using Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Chimamanda Adichie’s *Americanah*, and NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*, this work examines how contemporary literature written by women from African diasporic communities resists assimilation and acculturation and tells, instead, of the longings for a home and a culture that have been left behind through the process of movement. This discussion of the desire for home will focus on three areas: (1) how popular understanding of the immigrant experience differs from the immigrant experience expressed in literature of the African diaspora; (2) how interactions between the African immigrant and Americans in the three novels affects

rehousement; and (3) how attempts at assimilation creates a duality, or double-consciousness, in the protagonists' identification of national belonging.

Mukherjee describes unhousement as “the breaking away from the culture into which one was born, and in which one’s place in society was assured” whereas rehousement is “the rerooting of oneself in a new culture. This requires transformations of the self” (Mukherjee and Edwards 19). In the three novels, the process of unhousement is well defined while the process of rehousement remains in question. The numerous immigrant characters in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* resist rehousement by moving with little physical restriction between Haiti, the country they escaped, and the United States, their host country. In *Americanah*, the protagonist’s struggle with a sense of belonging limits her ability to assimilate into American culture, leading her to return to Nigeria. Darling, the protagonist in *We Need New Names*, desires this same return to the familiarity of her native country but is forced to accept her new home in America when her movement is restricted by the expiration of her visa. The immigrant characters in each book struggle to define their place of belonging as they move away, and sometimes toward, their birthplace, their family, and their center of cultural identity. Because of the difficulties of rehousement as illustrated in these novels, Mukherjee’s re-categorization of immigrant literature into a new genre separate from theories of postnationalism and neocolonialism fails to incorporate the “New Arrival” works of the African diaspora.

While this thesis focuses on the physical space and mental image of home, to define home within the context of the three novels requires a discussion of how diasporic movement connects the themes of the novels. The nation-states which represent the homeland in each book are related by their postnational conditions. While each country has a unique national identity and postcolonial history, the effects of globalization since the establishment of an independent

state has produced widespread dispersal. The rural population of Haitians in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* has suffered for decades under the dictatorship of “Papa Doc” Duvalier. The institutional policy of governance through violence has forced the general population to seek exile outside of its homeland. In *Americanah*, young students, including those of the middle-class, must either accept and take part in the corruption that permeates local and national government or seek better opportunity in countries that contributed to that corruption through the process of decolonization. The population of Paradise in *We Need New Names* was forced out of their homes and into a shantytown by their own government. Although no specific country is named in the novel, because of the inclusion of a fixed election, the forced removal of people from their homes for openly opposing the government, and the killing of government protestors, it can be assumed that the story takes place in the author’s home country of Zimbabwe. The governance of Robert Mugabe since 1980 in Zimbabwe has led to the dispersal of Zimbabweans across Africa and the West. The physical abandonment of the postnational state coupled with the maintenance of a nationalist identity by the female protagonist represents diasporic movement.

Through the 1990s, as people fled from these types of postnational governments, scholars began to redefine the concept of diaspora. This occurred due to the growth in the use of the term in the 1980’s (Butler 189). During this period, “diaspora” was no longer limited to references to Jewish dispersal or the African slave trade. In his 1991 article “Diaspora in Modern Society: Myths of Homeland and Return,” William Safran reconsiders the definition of diaspora as a means to contrast the migratory movements of people from Poland, Turkey, Armenia, Portugal, Palestine, India, and other global communities (84-8). In consideration of the widening use of the term, Safran bases his new definition on the common characteristics of the groups of people being described as diasporic. His list of common characteristics includes: (1) dispersion “from a

specific ‘center’ to two or more . . . regions”, (2) the retention of a “collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland”, (3) the belief “that they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host society”; (4) the feeling of “their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return”; (5) the belief “that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of the original homeland”; and (6) they have a relation “to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship” (83-4).

Safran’s extensive use of the term “homeland” signifies a historical looking back, a notion of home defined by memories – not an occupied physical space – that is either personal or ancestral. In contrast, Safran refers to the present physical space occupied by the diasporic immigrant as a “host society,” implying a temporary locale and positioning. The use of “host” signifies the immigrants’ status as visitor in someone else’s home who is “by turns mistreated by the host country as ‘strangers within the gates’ or welcomed or exploited for the sake of the domestic and diplomatic interests of the host country” (91).

In a 1999 panel discussion at Sydney University, Jacques Derrida explained the significance of the term “host” as it pertains to the visitor. In his discussion he delineated between the invited and uninvited guest and the role of the host in each situation. Derrida defined the host as the “master of the house” and recognizes this master as being male. The invited guest was welcomed into the house “where the master remains master . . . and the guest remains guest.” The roles of master/guest remain intact with the shared knowledge that the visitor will soon be leaving. For the uninvited guest, the question of when and if the visitor will leave is unanswered. In order to maintain the position of “master of the house” the host must ask “who

are you? what are you coming for? will you work with us? do you have a passport? do you have a visa?" (Derrida n. pag).

Applying Derrida's notion of invited/uninvited visitor to the nation-state, national borders serve as the proverbial doors. These border-doors are locked and unlocked at the will of the master of the house. In order for the host to have an appearance of hospitality, he must, at some point, open the doors and welcome the invited guest. However, the invitation to enter is conditional. According to Derrida, the guest, or "the Other is welcome to the extent that he adjusts to the *chez soi*, to the home, that he speaks the language or that he learns the language, that he respects the order of the house, the order of the nation-state" (n. pag.).

While the United States proclaims an open door policy, with exceptions of course, the welcome mat is often used to hide a trapdoor on the stoop of the home. While the host extends one welcoming hand, the other hand is poised over a lever, ready to spring the trapdoor beneath the feet of the uninvited guest. Allowing entry to the uninvited limits the master's ability to control "the order of the house." With the uninvited visitor, the host must ask himself "What does this guest want? will this guest contribute to society as I define it? when will this guest leave? will this guest leave?"

Since the immigrant guest, whether invited or uninvited, must constantly answer the questions of the host and, if she is going to stay, must maintain some appearance of following the order of the house, the recreation of an image of the homeland in the hostland becomes difficult if not impossible, especially for the first generation immigrant. This fact is a major difficulty in applying Mukherjee's notion of "Literature of the New Arrival" to the diasporic immigrant whose unhousement, whether voluntary or forced, is without question, but whose rehousement

seems unattainable. As long as the visitor is forced to fill the role of guest, home, and homeland remains something remembered and longed for.

Ayo A. Coly, in her book *The Pull of Postcolonial Nationhood: Gender and Migration in Francophone African Literatures*, blurs the host/guest line in her discussion of diasporic, postnationalist women. Coly contends that the male postcolonial subject in Africa played the role of nation-builder, creating an image of nation-state outside the home. It therefore stands to reason that the female postcolonial subject was responsible for creating and maintaining a national image, free of colonial subjugation, within the home. As the women move away from their postnational states they carry with them the collective cultural knowledge and memory of “home” as well as the burden of maintaining that idea of “home” in a host country. This is doubly difficult when “the hostland is the former colonizing force” (Coly xvi). The female’s responsibility for maintaining cultural identity conflicts with the desire of the host that his guest conform to the “order of the house.” The host/guest conflict is demonstrated through the women’s choice of dress, speech, hair style, and food as well as any number of other cultural signifiers carried from the homeland.

The women’s desire to re-create “home” in the colonial hostland leads to what Coly describes as a “counter-hegemonic appropriation of space” (83). Since the master of the nation-door, whom Derrida refers to as male, is the holder of the key and responsible for maintaining established order, any effort by the female guest to create an image of her postcolonial home through language, clothing, food choice, and other external signifiers is seen as a challenge to the host’s position as master. If the immigrant successfully creates a home defined by a foreign cultural identity then she also creates the ability to welcome guests who may not meet the standards of the colonial host.

This constant conflict between male master of the house and female immigrant guest permeates the diasporic theme of the novels discussed here. As long as the protagonist is forced to resist the re-creation of home in the hostland, the homeland remains something looked back on. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the main character, Sophie, comes to the United States at the age of 12 to be reunited with her mother. On her first full day in the U.S. Sophie reflects that “The streets along Flatbush Avenue reminded [her] of home” (50). At Haiti Express, where Sophie’s mother sends packages to her mother and sister in Haiti, Sophie watches as dozens of people “squeeze all their love into small packages to send back home” as she longs for the power “to shrink [herself] and slip into the envelop” (50). In Adichie’s *Americanah*, Ifemelu begins to plan her return to her native Nigeria when she realizes “there was cement in her soul . . . an early morning disease of fatigue, a bleakness and borderlessness. It brought with it amorphous longings, shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives she could be living, that over the months melded into a piercing homesickness” (6). For Darling in *We Need New Names*, home becomes a place she wants to “visit just for a little while, to see how [her] friends and Mother and Mother of Bones and people and things are” (187). The house where she lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan is wood and brick; her home is the thing remembered and the thing she longs to return to, even if for a short time.

Since, for each protagonist, the homeland is something looked back on and longed for, the majority of Safran’s characteristics of diaspora readily apply. However, his idea that to be diasporic the original dispersion had “to occur from a specific original ‘center’” proves more difficult (Clifford 305; Alpers 17). Many of today’s diasporic communities are so far removed from their original center that they no longer possess a collective memory of the “homeland.” Critics have pointed to several Jewish communities dispersed throughout the globe and to

African descendants living in the Americas and the Caribbean islands as examples. Even though these communities of people may feel a relation to an “original center,” their generations of separation from that center has blurred or even erased their cultural memory of that center. To expand on this point, Kim Butler uses the example of a Jamaican, considered a part of the African diaspora, who moves to England as part of the Jamaican diaspora. She wonders how this person of Jamaican background can relate culturally to those from the African continent residing in England since both are part of the African diaspora but with memories of Africa separated by generations. Butler concedes that “Conceptualizations of diaspora must be able to accommodate the reality of multiple identities and phases of diasporization over time” (193).

Safran himself is critical of his attempt to categorize diasporic communities as he compares a variety of cultures and how they relate to the definition. In the third section of his article, where he examines the “homeland myth,” Safran recognizes that:

Some diasporas persist – and their members do not go “home” – because there is no homeland to which to return; because, although a homeland may exist, it is not a welcoming place with which they can identify politically, ideologically, or socially; or because it would be too inconvenient and disruptive, if not traumatic, to leave the diaspora. In the meantime, the myth of return serves to solidify ethnic consciousness and solidarity when religion can no longer do so, when the cohesiveness of the local community is loosened, and when the family is threatened with disintegration. (91)

As technology moves forward, Safran’s concepts of “original center” and “mythical homeland” deserve a new focus. In his article “Diasporas,” James Clifford writes that:



dispersed peoples . . . increasingly find themselves in border relations with the old country thanks to a to-and-fro made possible by modern technologies of transport, communication, and labor migration. Airplanes, telephones, tape cassettes, camcorders, and mobile job markets reduce distances and facilitate two-way traffic, legal and illegal, between the world's places. (304)

Just two decades later, Clifford's comments on technology seem archaic. Today's immigrant abroad no longer must communicate with the homeland via land based telephone or tape cassettes sent through snail mail, as does Sophie and her mother in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Instead, communication is instantaneous and often face to face through the internet, webcams and video chatting software such as Skype and FaceTime; news from around the world can be gathered as it happens on a multitude of websites; military coups or popular uprisings can be started via Twitter and viewed on YouTube; first generation immigrants can take their children on a virtual tour of the "homeland" via Google Earth without ever leaving their living room.

In defining the African diaspora, the majority of critical focus has centered on western Africa and the dispersal of Africans to the West as part of the slave trade, but it must be recognized that for centuries the people of Africa have been dispersed across the globe from all regions of the continent as a function of colonialism, postnationalism and, most recently, neocolonialism. What results from this history of removal and exile is a series of diasporas that continue today with no single defining moment of dispersal (Alpers 2).

It stands to reason that if the global movement of Africans makes it difficult to define what constitutes the African diaspora then defining African diasporic literature also has its hurdles. Should the works of Edwidge Danticat with a focus on movement between Haiti and the United States be considered Haitian, American, or Caribbean? The answer is "yes." The fact that

her work fits into several cultural categories places her novels within the genre of diasporic literature. But are they African?

Like many of the islands of the Caribbean, Haiti is a former slave colony controlled by France; unlike any other slave colony, a slave revolt led to independence from the colonial power and the establishment of a free nation (*Create Dangerously* 66). As a former slave colony, Haiti's historical memory centers itself in Africa as Stuart Hall alludes to in his discussion of the Caribbean people in their entirety. The postnational trauma faced by the Haitian people results from historical periods of colonialism, forced slavery, depletion of its natural resources by Western powers, and its own inability to establish an affective form of governance. Haitians are connected to Africa not only through ancestry but also by a shared history of postcolonial trauma and the resultant failure of the nation-state.

*Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Edwidge Danticat's first novel, was originally published in 1994 as interest in the study of diasporic communities grew. Throughout the novel, Danticat recognizes the difficulties of relating to, or the memory of, an original center for members of the African diaspora. When Sophie first introduces her mother, Martine, to her husband, Joseph, a black American, a discussion of their original roots ensues. When asked where he was from Joseph answers that he was "born in the South Louisiana," where they speak a creole similar to Haitians. When Martine replies that she could have been "Southern," her boyfriend, Marc, also a native of Haiti living in New York, replies, "We're all African" (214). The characters in this scene struggle to find a communal root, an original center that will bind them together. They are at once African, Southern, and Creole. Their collective bond is loosely tied and eventually becomes unraveled.

Both *Americanah* and *We Need New Names* were published in 2013. Unlike Sophie who marries an American, both Ifemelu in Adichie's novel and Darling in Bulawayo's struggle to bond with Americans whether black or white. For both characters, their memory of a homeland on the African continent is much closer. This connection results not only from the fact that they are first generation visitors to America but also because of their ability to instantly communicate with the family and friends they have left behind. For Ifemelu, this results in her reconnection with her first love interest in Nigeria and her eventual return to the homeland. For Darling, the instant communication results in a growing disillusionment with the hostland and a realization that she may never see her homeland again.

Sophie, Ifemelu, and Darling originate their dispersal from different countries and different periods of time. The reasons they leave; their experiences in the hostland; the way they communicate with the homeland; and their memories of that homeland all differ. So, using Safran's characteristics, can the three protagonist be connected by a common diasporic condition?

As mentioned earlier, Kim Butler significantly uses the example of a Jamaican living in England as an example of differing diasporas despite a common original center. In her article she cites two works by cultural theorist Stuart Hall who was, in fact, a Jamaican who immigrated to England. In his seminal 1990 article "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Hall writes:

Our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people,' with the stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. This 'oneness,' underlying all the other, more superficial differences, is the truth, the essence, of 'Caribbeanness,' of the black

experience. It is this identity which a Caribbean or black diaspora must discover.  
(223)

Although Hall's article focuses on black Caribbean identities, he uses the atrocities of colonialization and the "traumatic ruptures" of forced dispersal from Africa as the common bond of the black, global community (227). Hall credits photographic images taken by Arnet Francis in what is termed "The Black Triangle" of Africa, the Caribbean, the USA, and the UK, as attempting to visually reconstruct "the underlying unity of the black people whom colonization and slavery distributed across the African diaspora. They do this by representing or 'figuring' Africa as the mother of these different civilisations" (224). While others were attempting to categorize communities of the African diaspora based on their differing experiences and locales, Hall attempts to unite them through the common theme of colonial trauma, postnational decay, and a recognition of belonging "to the marginal, the underdeveloped, the periphery, the 'Other'" (228). Africa is not a homeland; it is a mother, the womb of black identity.

That is not to say that Hall does not also recognize difference, especially across the many peoples and countries that form the Caribbean islands. The people of the African diaspora are centered by the memory of an ancestral homeland but possess cultural identities mutated by movement and contact. This same but different concept leads Hall to define the diaspora experience as:

The recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite difference; by *hybridity*.  
Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (235)

For Hall it is not the “original center” or the “mythical homeland” that unites the African diaspora; it is, instead, the remembered trauma of dispersal from Africa, the root causes of movement, and the creation of hybridity through cultural contact with host countries. This concept of diaspora unites not only Sophie, Ifemelu, and Darling but also the authors who imagined their stories.

Danticat, Adichie, and Bulawayo each maintain residences in the United States; each have earned master’s degrees from American universities; and, their novels were written in English and published by American publishing houses. The writing of the three women from different African diasporic communities reflects both a longing for a remembered homeland and a disdain for the conditions that precipitated their removal from that homeland. They are connected by a trauma of dispersal created through postnationalism and neocolonialism. The three women are also bound by gender, which magnifies the trauma of cultural contact and hybridity. Like the authors, the diasporic characters in their novels are visitors in a host country. Their memory of and desire for the homeland blocks their ability to create an image of “home” away from their native cultures. The hope and desire for belonging is best reflected in the movements of the protagonist.

Because of the ease of movement in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie’s loss of community and language is minimized and her familial ties remain strong. However, because she moves easily between cultures, the historical trauma she tries to escape with immigration remains a part of her life no matter the location of her physical body. Chapter one of this thesis, “Open Ended Travel,” considers how constant physical movement affects the immigrants’ ability to move beyond the violence that forced their original upheaval.

Because of the difficulties associated with assimilation, many migrants become disillusioned with the United States once they arrive. Their struggle to succeed, their marginalized status, and their forced denial of cultural practices magnify the desire to return “home.” In *Americanah*, the protagonist, Ifemelu, faces such a situation. After residing in the United States for several years, Ifemelu returns to her native Nigeria where she once again faces barriers to assimilation because of the way she has been changed by her experiences, and, also, the changes her friends and family have been through during her absence. Chapter Two, “The Round Trip,” examines the immigrants’ return to their native society once they have been exposed to life in the United States.

While Danticat’s and Adichie’s protagonists move with physical ease, this ease of movement is an impossibility for many new arrivals in the United States. For these immigrants a temporary visa is the only method of entering the United States legally. Once that visa expires and the immigrant status is no longer legal, movement outside of the hostland means a denial of reentry. The trip to America is a one-way ticket. Assimilation is no longer a choice but a necessity.

In *We Need New Names*, the 10-year-old protagonist, Darling, brags to her friends in Paradise that she will one day move to America and away from the poverty, sickness, and political corruption of her homeland. Once this dream comes true, the reality that she will most likely never see her family, her friends, or her birthplace again hinders her ability to assimilate into American culture. The Americanization of her aunt’s family and the relationships she develops with black American schoolmates further restrict her acceptance of American culture. Chapter Three, “A One-Way Ticket,” examines the diasporic experience of the undocumented immigrant.

The three novels are connected by a common theme of dispersal from a nation struggling to establish stability in a postcolonial state. Immigrant movement is at the same time necessary and undesired. While abroad in a form of voluntary exile, the diasporic immigrant in each book longs to return home despite the political conditions that create the necessity of movement. Coly writes that “the sense of detachment and disengagement from the postcolonial nation in African immigrant writings since the 1980s aligns with the disenchantment with the postcolonial state but does not necessarily entail a repudiation of home.” Instead, “this resistance to nationalism, incorrectly misinterpreted for postnationalism, stems from a commitment and sense of responsibility to the nation” (xvii). If, as Coly posits, contemporary diasporic women are the carriers and guardians of cultural identity in their hostland, then their literature must be analyzed not only from a standpoint of resistance to assimilation but also their connection to the homeland and the causes of exile.

Despite her attempt to separate “Literature of the New Arrival” from theories of globalization and dispersal, Mukherjee writes that “Danticat’s concept of migrant-memory includes both the lingering residue of personal experience and the orally transmitted communal and familial remembrances of the homeland especially of historical incidences of brutal repression” (682). Mukherjee recognizes the importance of “an original center” in the writing of Edwidge Danticat but desires to separate her work from the concept of diaspora in order to place Danticat’s novels into her new genre. When read in context with other works by women emanating from postnational African countries, the analysis of Danticat’s novels must include the consideration of postcolonialism. The following chapters will demonstrate how contemporary fiction by “New Arrival” women from differing African diasporic communities

resists acceptance in Mukherjee's new genre because of the barriers in separating them from concepts of globalization and dispersal.



## CHAPTER TWO

### Open Ended Travel: *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

Despite their historical and geographical separation, many Haitian traditions are rooted in an African past. Likewise, Edwidge Danticat's books often, although subtly, refer to African folklore and religious practices. For the author, Haiti represents the "homeland" while the African continent serves as a distant foundation for the production of cultural identity. Hall refers to this practice an "imaginative rediscovery" (224) which connects Haiti to the concept of African diaspora.

One of the ways Danticat invokes African traditions in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is with the concept of the doubling, the Marassas. According to the *Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora: Origins, Experience, and Culture*, Marassas are twins, either living, dead, or ancestral. The word originates from the term *mabassa* which means "those who come divided." It was brought to Haiti by African captives in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. In Haitian voodoo tradition, Marassas are considered the most powerful spirits (654).

Marassas first appear in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* as Sophie's mom, Martine, performs a virginity test on Sophie. She distracts Sophie by telling her the story of the Marassas, who "were two inseparable lovers . . . the same person, duplicated in two." Martine tells Sophie that when she does fall in love "you want him to be closer to you than your Marassa. Closer than your shadow. You want him to be closer than your soul" (84). Martine represents Marassas as lovers rather than twins. The fact that Martine tells this story to Sophie, changing the meaning to fit her needs, while her finger is inserted into Sophie's "very private parts", a form of incestuous rape, is of particular significance (60). Martine performs this test because she fears Sophie has had sex with their next door neighbor, Joseph, whom Sophie eventually marries. For Sophie to have sex

prior to marriage and without her mother's approval would signal Martine's cultural failure since by Haitian tradition mothers are expected to protect their daughter's virginity. As Martine finishes the test she tells Sophie "You and I we could be like *Marassas*. You are giving up a lifetime with me" (84). For Martine, the testing ensures that she fulfills her maternal role of protector.

Critical attention on this concept of doubling has reduced the practice to a pathological need to disassociate the physical body from the psychological, a means for the female to escape the trauma of sexual assault. According to Clare Counihan, doubling in the novel can be read as an untenable, pathological sexual desire both homoerotic, in Martine's wish to twin with Sophie, and heterosexual, in Sophie's inability to achieve physical pleasure from sexual activity with her husband later in the novel. This pathology stems from the trauma of sexual assault in the form of Martine's rape as a young girl in Haiti and maternal virginity testing. Counihan posits that "the tangle of the characters' impossible desires are finally a manifestation of the novel's more diffuse crisis of desire centered in its attempt to imagine an idealized relationship between home and diaspora" (48-9). However, if the process of doubling is a form of escape, where the metaphysic twin travels to remove itself from the physical twin should be considered.

Following her mother's guidance, during subsequent tests, Sophie learns to double as a means of escaping the trauma. While doubling, she would "imagine all the pleasant things [she] had known. The lukewarm noon breeze through our bougainvillea. Tanta Atie's gentle voice blowing over a field of daffodils" (*Breath* 155). Sophie also escapes from the physical act of intercourse with her husband by doubling. As he took off her clothes she "was somewhere else" protecting her mother from rape, telling her it was not a demon in her stomach and keeping her from a mental hospital. In her doubling, Sophie tells her mom she "would look after her and

wake her up as soon as the nightmare started. Just like I did when I was home” (200). In these instances of doubling, the metaphysical twin travels first to her Aunt’s home in Haiti and then to a home with her mother in New York. Sophie’s “relationship between home and diaspora” is far from idealized. Her original homeland, Haiti, is also the site of Sophie’s original trauma, the tradition of virginity testing; her hostland, the United States, is a place where this trauma not only continues but is magnified. Diasporic movement was not an escape from trauma but instead a movement toward it.

The testing further traumatizes Sophie’s journey as she becomes an invited guest in the hostile hostland of Martine’s apartment. Martine initiates her position as host when she directs Tante Atie to send Sophie to the United States. With the arrival of Sophie, Martine, for the first time, has the opportunity to be master of the house. The car she drives and the apartment in which lives represent a space she has appropriated from the host country. Following Derrida’s notion of hospitality, Sophie assumes the role of “invited” guest who must follow the order of the house that Martine controls. Martine has located a domestic space within the hostland marking the “move from the position of guest to that of hostess” (Coly 87). With Sophie’s arrival, Martine becomes both host and guest, a *marassas*.

Sophie also recognizes a doubling in Martine’s cultural identity when Sophie firsts sees her in the airport. Prior to this meeting, Sophie “only knew her mother from the picture on the night table by Tante Atie’s pillow” (8). In that picture Sophie was smiling, living happily in Haiti. In America, Martine’s face had become “long and hollow. Her hair had a blunt cut and she had long spindly legs . . . Her fingers were scarred and sunburned. It was as though she had never stopped working in the cane fields after all” (42). Despite Martine’s eight years in America, the labor required of maintaining a physical space in the hostland while supporting her

family in the homeland limits her ability to assimilate or Americanize. For Sophie, Martine is neither the American she expects nor the Haitian she remembers but rather a hybrid, a person in-between and homeless.

Danticat further invokes African traditions in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* when the women speak of Guinea “A place where all the women in [their] family hoped to eventually meet one another, at the very end of each of [their] journeys” (174). According to Masoumeh Mehni, in Haitian spiritual beliefs, Guinea refers to a “final home in Africa, which equates with the mythical land of the dead” (86). The belief in Guinea as a final “home” further situates the women in a mythical Africa. These Haitian women not only look back on Africa as the “original center” but also long to return to Africa in death where they will reunite. Spiritually, Haiti does not serve as a proper home and only death can return them to the place of their origination, pre-colonial Africa.

The Marassas, Guinea, and virginity testing show how cultural traditions are passed through diasporic movement connecting Haitians to both the United States as visitors and Africa as their mythical home. For Sophie, doubling does not serve as a means of escape since her twin is unable to travel to a location free from the trauma that created the original movement. Instead, the twin must idealize the concept of home as a place of comforting as is seen in the above examples. Her true home remains a place in Africa that can only be reached by death.

The inclusion of virginity testing in this novel led Haitian Americans to label Danticat a liar who dishonored Haiti. During a fund raiser where Danticat was receiving an award for the novel she overheard a man ask “Why was she taught to read and write? That is not us. The things she writes, they are not us” (*Create Dangerously* 32-3). The author was surprised at the backlash.

In response to the criticism, Danticat wrote a note to Sophie as a means of apologizing to Haitians “for airing, or appearing to air, dirty laundry.” In her book of essays, *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*, Danticat dedicates several pages to discussing *Breath, Eyes, Memory* in an effort to explain that no work of fiction is meant to be an all-encompassing story representative of an entire culture. Danticat opens her note to Sophie with:

Dear Sophie,

I am writing this note while standing on the edge of my great-grandmother’s grave, an elevated tombstone in the high mountains of Léogâne, overlooking a majestic lime-colored mountain range. Suspended as I am here, far from terra firma and close to the clouds. I feel that this is the only place in the world where I truly belong. This is the place that I most wished as a home for you too, the place I had in mind when I had Tante Atie stand with you in the middle of a cemetery plot and pronounce, “Walk straight, you are in the presence of family.” (33)

The author artfully invokes visions of her homeland to affirm her Haitian identity to the critics who question her use of virginity testing and representation of Haitian traditions. Although her letter is a form of apology, it is important to Danticat that she establishes her knowledge of the reality of Haiti despite her exilic life in the United States

Like the other two novels discussed in this thesis, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* in many ways reflects the story of its author. And, while Danticat says she never experienced virginity testing herself, she knows Haitian women who have. Virginity testing is a part of Haitian history and, like all histories, it traverses international borders not only via the physical body but also through a person’s memories. Sophie inherits her generational memories from her mother, aunt, and grandmother. Counihan writes that “*Breath, Eyes, Memory* attempts to sustain what I name the

logic of memorialization” in order to preserve Haitian history against trauma and dislocation. This memorialization “positions the Caco women’s bodies as the sites of memory that encode and testify to the history of the nation, embodying what the nation must both remember *and* forget” (37). Virginity testing is a re-memory passed from mother to daughter. It serves as a traumatic connection between the women of the family. Importantly, the trauma belongs only to the women and exists only because of the women. The testing could have ended at any point of time. Instead, the mothers make the choice to continue the cycle of trauma because of the cultural obligation to protect their daughters’ virginity.

Danticat’s use of virginity testing as a literary element has been examined and re-examined. Every aspect of the practice as written in the novel has received microscopic attention from the academic community. Rather than repeat what has already been written, I use the practice as an example of cultural trauma that ties not only generations together but also homeland and hostland.

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat uses the concept of generational trauma as a metaphoric tool that joins family trauma passed from mother to daughter to the history of trauma within Haiti. By doing this, the postnational decay of Haiti is shown to be a factor of historical tradition passed from generation to generation. Cherie Meacham notes in her article “Traumatic Realism in the Fiction of Edwidge Danticat” that in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* “institutionalized violence serves as the backdrop for the intimately personal experience of sexual trauma” (125). The rape of Martine, possibly by one of “Papa Doc” Duvalier’s secret policeman, results in Grandmé Ifé stopping virginity testing on Martine, the conception of Sophie, the abandonment of Sophie to the care of Tante Atie, the departure of Martine from Haiti to the United States and, eventually, Martine’s suicide. This demonstrates how sexual violence in the lives of women is

“the gendered correlative of the ubiquitous and collective trauma experienced by the broader population” (Meacham 125). The sponsorship of violence by Papa Doc’s regime had a cascading, catastrophic effect on the people of Haiti much in the same way it effects each of the woman of the Caco family, not just Martine. Although virginity testing was itself a trauma to the daughters, stopping the testing affects Grandmé Ifé’s cultural identity since she was unable to protect her daughter’s virginity; it further cleaves the mother/daughter relationship not only for Grandmé Ifé to Martine but also to Tante Atie as well as Martine to Sophie. Unable to deal with the trauma of the rape, Martine flees to a hostile hostland leaving Tante Atie the responsibility of raising Sophie; so that Sophie may attend school, Tante Atie is unable to remain with her mother in her ancestral home in Dame Marie. The original trauma of the rape continues to cycle through the generations as Sophie is forced to leave her Aunt and Haiti at the age of twelve to join her mother in America. There she must deal with her mother’s continued nightmares of the rape.

The act of violence that precipitates movement in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is defined by patriarchal power. Martine is raped at the age of sixteen as she walks home from school. She tells Sophie that “I did not know this man. I never saw his face. He had it covered when he did this to me.” The man who raped Martine was a faceless everyman who exercised his power over women with a sense of entitlement. Martine also seems to accept her subjugated, feminine position in Haitian culture as she tells Sophie the story and does not “sound hurt or angry, just like someone who was stating a fact. Like naming a color or calling a name” (*Breath* 61). Sophie describes the rape in greater detail saying that the man may have been one of “Papa Doc” Duvalier’s *Tonton Macoute*, a metaphoric bogeyman in Haitian mythology. In reality, a *Macoute* was a man who entered a home “asked to be fed, demanded the woman of the house, and forced her into her own bedroom. Then all you heard was screams until it was her daughter’s turn.” The

man who raped her mother “dragged her into the cane fields . . . He kept pounding her until she was too stunned to make a sound. When he was done, he made her keep her face in the dirt” (139).

Martine carries with her to the United States the memories and the scars of her life in Haiti. Sophie first learns of her mother’s secrets when she comes to America. In Haiti, Tante Atie had protected Sophie from the story of her mother’s rape, suicide attempts and eventual abandonment. Sophie learns of her mother’s continued terror on the first night in Martine’s apartment when Sophie hears her mother scream “as though someone was trying to kill her” (48). For Sophie, the trauma of movement occurs not only in her physical displacement from what she recognizes as home but also in the sudden awareness of what drove her mother into exile.

In her letter of apology in *Creating Dangerously* Danticat continues:

I write this to you now, Sophie, because your secrets, like you, like me, have traveled far from this place. Your experiences in the night, your grandmother’s obsessions, your mother’s ‘tests’ have taken on a larger meaning and your body is now being asked to represent a larger space than your flesh. (34)

The secrets Danticat refers to are the traumas that have been passed down from mother to daughter through generations of Haitian women, not just the women in Sophie’s family. While Danticat asks readers to understand the singularity of Sophie’s experiences, she must also accept that her novel represents a larger story. Although the novel is centered in Haitian identity, the movement of women escaping subjugation by the postcolonial male is endemic to the genre of diasporic literature written by the postnational female. Movement by the Caco women in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is a method of escape from patriarchal trauma both institutional and individual. In



“Challenging Internal Colonialism: Edwidge Danticat’s Feminist Emancipatory Enterprise,” Newtona Johnson writes that “*Breath, Eyes, Memory* clearly suggests that for women experiencing dis/ease associated with the oppressiveness of patriarchal hegemony, displacement can be a site of emancipatory possibilities” (150). Johnson posits that for Danticat movement is a way to heal and transform the postnational women; that Danticat uses “the concept of territorial displacement to form a vision of (Haitian) women’s liberation from the crushing weight of patriarchal hegemony” (151). For this liberation to occur, a transformation of self-identity must also take place.

Johnson alludes to several examples of metaphoric female transformations which occur in the novel including women who choose to become butterflies to end their suffering, Martine’s suicide and even Sophie’s breaking of her hymen with her mother’s pestle as a means of ending the virginity testing (162). In each of these instances a transformation and a type of liberation, albeit not an ideal one, does occur. But the question remains whether or not displacement as it is used in the novel results in a liberating transformation.

After Martine escapes to the United States she must work two jobs to maintain her residence and aid her mother, sister, and daughter in Haiti. Martine also is unable to escape the trauma of her rape which haunts her dreams. Sophie’s arrival in the United States marks the end of her happiness living with Tante Atie in Haiti. On her first night with her mother she is awakened by Martine’s screams caused by nightmares. Later, Sophie learns that she was a product of her mother’s rape and that her father was a nameless, faceless man. Sophie’s trauma continues with the ongoing virginity tests, the estrangement from her mother, and her inability to enjoy sexual relations with her husband. These events culminate in her return visit to Haiti.

Tante Atie also undergoes a displacement as she relocates to her ancestral home, Dame Marie, to help her aging mother, Grandmé Ifé. Tante Atie leaves her comfortable home to live in the country, often quarrels with her mother, and loses her only friend Louise, whom she hides her true feelings from, when Louise leaves in the night on a boat for the United States and is never seen again. Atie remains in Dame Marie out of a feeling of obligation towards her mother and eventually resents her life there.

Given the above examples it is difficult to find a liberating displacement within the pages of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Rather than freedom, as Johnson sees it, the Caco women find further misery as they move away from their original centers. The only female character in the novel comfortable in their place is Grandmé Ifé who has remained rooted in her home and homeland despite the traumas of the patriarchal institution governing her country. So steadfast is she in maintaining her family roots in Dame Marie she added Sophie and her daughter, Brigitte, to the deed to her lands, proclaiming “We all now own part of La Nouvelle Dame Marie” (166).

Grandmé Ifé’s proclamation symbolizes the importance of “homeland” to Danticat. When Sophie returns from Haiti to Joseph in the United States, he is surprised when she refers to Haiti as home. He tells her “You have never called it that since we’ve been together. Home has always been your mother’s house, that you could never go back to” (195). For Joseph, who represents both a colonial and patriarchal male, Martine’s “house” was the physical space she occupied in New York and the place Sophie grew up. For Sophie, Martine’s “house” was the family land in Haiti. After Martine’s suicide, Grandmé Ifé tells the family “Let us take her home” which, in death, means Guinea now serves as Martine’s “house” (231).

The fact that Joseph ties Sophie’s definition of home to Martine’s “house” shows how Hall’s notion of an original center for the diasporic immigrant removed from the mythical

homeland by generations remains elusive. The proximity of Haiti to the United States allows the members of Haiti's "tenth estate," the diasporic immigrant, the opportunity to move with relative ease between the homeland and hostland. The freedom of movement blurs the borderlands and allows the Haitian to interact with both the native culture and traditions while continuing to witness the effects of postcolonial trauma. This also results in the easy transfer of that trauma from their homeland, which, in turn, impedes the liberating aspect of displacement.

The liberation of Sophie is much contested. In the novel's closing scene, Sophie runs into the cane field where her mother was raped and tears out a cane stalk after beating it with her shoe. Grandmé Ifé and Tante Atie ask her "'ou libéré!' Are you free, my daughter?" (234). Critics argue that this scene symbolizes Sophie's liberation, that the death of her mother frees her from her mother's secrets. As Sophie struggles to speak, her grandmother places her fingers over Sophie's lips and tells her "Now, you will know how to answer" (234). However, the question remains unanswered leaving the reader to decide on their own if Sophie finds her freedom. In this scene, Sophie is silenced by both her grandmother and aunt symbolizing the continuance of generational trauma for the subjugated postnational female. By silencing Sophie, Grandmé Ifé, and Tante Atie remind Sophie that even with liberation she must not speak of the family secrets.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **The Round Trip: *Americanah***

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory* both Martine and Sophie show signs of acculturation but are impeded from assimilation by the ease of movement between Haiti and the United States. Martine, who has spent the most time in the U.S. without return to Haiti, adopts an American appearance and bleaches the skin on her face to appear more white. Sophie marries an American, moves to a predominately white area in Providence, Rhode Island and attempts to distance herself from her mother's "secrets." Both women's effort to assimilate fails when they travel back to Haiti, are immersed in Haitian culture and are reminded of the cultural practices that define their identities. They recognize in Haiti a place that they cannot separate themselves from. Martine's suicide demonstrates the ultimate resistance to assimilation by expediting her permanent return to the physical homeland of Haiti and the mythical homeland of Guinea. But what of the immigrant whose travel is restricted by distance. How is her identity marked by acculturation? Can they resist assimilation given their lack of contact with the homeland?

As exemplified by *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, a discussion of diasporic literatures must include consideration of the permanent effects on cultural identity of both acculturation and assimilation. Mukherjee's concept of "Literature of the New Arrival" centers on the concept of a resistance to assimilation in order to maintain feelings of self and home. However, despite the New Arrival's resistance to assimilation, some form of acculturation must occur as a means of survival in a hostile hostland. Mary Louise Pratt describes the theoretical spaces of interaction between native majority and foreign minority as "contact zones" where "cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contests of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism,

slavery, or their aftermath” (34). Here, in our discussion of dispersal from the postnational nation-state, the aftermath is our focus.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* focuses on movement both from and towards her native Nigeria which is mired in a post-colonial state of political turmoil. The book can be separated into five sections based on this movement. In the first section, the protagonist, Ifemelu, has decided to return to Nigeria from the United States despite her success as a blogger and public speaker on issues of racism. The second section looks back on Ifemelu’s life in Nigeria prior to her relocation to America and explains her reasons for leaving. In this section, the reader also learns more details about Ifemelu’s main love interest, Obinze, who is a significant factor in her decision to return to the homeland. The third section describes Ifemelu’s initial arrival in the U.S. and gives the greatest detail on her difficulties adapting to American life and Americans. Obinze is the focus of the fourth section when he immigrates to London, loses his legal status with the expiration of his visa and struggles to regain that status. In the final section, the couple re-unites in Nigeria as Ifemelu attempts to integrate back into her native culture recognizing changes not only in her home city of Lagos but also changes that she has undergone while in America.

This non-linear structure of the book is itself allegorical of movement for the diasporic immigrant, particularly the postnational female. According to Coly, postcolonial narratives by female authors possess “nonlinear, convoluted, and often duplicitous characteristics.” These patterns are the result of an ideological concept of home despite “the evidence in their texts that the gender politics of postcolonial nationhood have fostered a vexed relationship between the women writers and the postcolonial nation” (xvii). In *Americanah*, Ifemelu exhibits both a longing for an ideological home in Nigeria and a resentment for the politics, often gendered,

which created her self-imposed exile. Ifemelu sees postcolonial Nigeria as a place where college students are unable to finish degrees with the endless strikes by university lecturers due to “agreements that were trampled in the dust by government men whose own children were schooling abroad” (Adichie 98). As the professors refuse to teach, thousands of students “all bristling with their own American ambitions” (99) sit for the SATs. In another example of female subjugation in Nigeria, Obinze’s mother, a college professor, is slapped by a male colleague after she accuses him of misusing funds. The man strikes her not because of the accusation she makes but because “he could not take a woman talking to him like that” (59). She responds to those who say the slapping was unnecessary because she is a widow by telling them being slapped was wrong because “she is a full human being, not because she doesn’t have a husband to speak for her” (59). Ifemelu justifies her move to the United States, her voluntary exile, as a means of completing her college education. Her frustration with the gender politics of Nigeria punctuates her decision. In America, Ifemelu hopes to distance herself from the failed patriarchal politics of her homeland. However, her “sense of detachment and disengagement from the postcolonial state” while she is in America “does not necessarily entail a repudiation of home” (Coly xxii). As Ifemelu’s disillusionment with life in the United States grows, she develops a more idealistic view of Nigeria.

After spending 13 years in America, developing a successful blog and building a relationship with Blaine, a black American professor at Yale, Ifemelu would scour

Nigerian websites, Nigerian profiles on Facebook, Nigerian blogs, and each click brought yet another story of a young person who had recently moved back home, clothed in American or British degrees, to start an investment company, a music production business, a fashion label, a magazine, a fast-food franchise. She

looked at photographs of these men and women and felt the dull ache of loss, as though they had pried open her hand and taken something of hers. They were living her life. Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil. (6)

For Ifemelu, Nigeria, when viewed from a distant shore, replaces America as the proverbial “land of opportunity.” Ifemelu’s absence and, more significantly, her distance from the homeland, mutates her perspective of the homeland. She idealizes her life in Nigeria, much like she had idealized her life in America, in order to justify the abandonment of what she has obtained in the United States. Much like the structure of the novel and Coly’s description of contemporary West African diasporic literature, Ifemelu’s life is both cyclic and dualistic. She exists with her feet in two countries separated not only by geography but also politics.

By examining each of the five sections individually, the remainder of this chapter will discuss the dualistic characteristics of maneuvers in and around the contact zone. Important considerations include Ifemelu’s reasons for movement away from the homeland; her attempts at acculturation; her resistance to assimilation; her sense of hybridity; and, her difficulty integrating back into society in Lagos upon return.

*Americanah* opens towards the end of Ifemelu’s diasporic journey as she travels, symbolically, by train from Princeton to Trenton in search of an African salon where she can have her hair braided prior to returning to Lagos. Ifemelu likes Princeton because “she could pretend to be someone else, someone specially admitted into a hallowed American club, someone adorned with certainty” (3). Once in Trenton she could no longer pretend to belong to the elite club of Princeton where “the few black locals she had seen were so light-skinned and

lank-haired she could not imagine them wearing braids” (3). The train platform in Trenton “was crowded with black people, many of them fat, in short, flimsy clothes” (5). Ifemelu’s short train ride reminds her of what she had become in America and the reason she was leaving. She had never been “black” in Nigeria; she also had never been fat. She was being propelled to Nigeria because “layer after layer of discontent had settled in her” (7).

During this first section, Adichie moves the reader back and forth between Ifemelu in America and Obinze in Lagos. The omniscient narrator describes the Nigeria Ifemelu longs for contrasted against the reality of the Nigeria Obinze lives in. In the same manner that both Ifemelu and Obinze, as college students caught in political turmoil, sought an idealistic experience in the United States, Ifemelu, living in the reality of the hostland, forms an idealistic concept of Nigeria including a life with Obinze who has married and had children since Ifemelu’s departure. Ifemelu’s desire to reconnect with Obinze symbolizes the impracticality of her desire to reconnect with Nigeria. Despite her knowledge that life in Nigeria has fundamentally changed in the years she has been away – Obinze’s marriage and sprawling shopping malls – Ifemelu visualizes herself returning to the life she left behind.

Much of Ifemelu’s optimism about life in Nigeria relates to her ability to freely return to the United States. Since she has earned American citizenship, travel between the homeland and hostland is restricted only by distance. Ifemelu’s “blue American passport . . . shielded her from choicelessness. She could always leave [Nigeria]; she did not have to stay” (390). Because of her American passport, Ifemelu has the ability to move freely not only between Nigeria and the United States but also around the world. During her relationship with Curt, Ifemelu often travels out of the country “her passport filled with visa stamps” (200). But this movement is controlled by Curt, a wealthy white American who represents not only a gendered hegemony but also a



neocolonial master who contrasts sharply against the original white master of Africans in American. Ifemelu is not a slave to Curt, instead she finds herself overwhelmed with “this gift of contentment” as she travels in first class; lives in an apartment on the Inner Harbor in Baltimore; and enjoys the feathery bed linens in the hotels they stay in (200). With Curt, Ifemelu takes on a colonized persona with a false sense of a raised standard of living. However, Ifemelu must rely on the white male neocolonial figure to maintain this lifestyle in her host country. Ifemelu begins to come to the realization of her situation with Curt when her memories of Nigeria take on a “sepia tone” (200). Despite her newly discovered freedom of travel, Ifemelu chooses not to return to Nigeria to visit friends and family. Her memories of the homeland are “mildewed by thirteen years” in the United States (40).

This first section of the novel reverses the normalized view of diasporic movement. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Martine’s and Sophie’s sharing of secrets and their ability to travel between the United States and Haiti allows them to maintain an image of the homeland in its postnationalist state with no blurring of the traumatic experiences that create movement. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu’s ability to travel, unwillingness to assimilate, and inability to develop lasting relationships all help her create an idealized image of Nigeria. She views the homeland rather than the hostland as the “land of opportunity.” In her introduction to a special issue of “Research in African Literatures: Africa and the Black Atlantic,” Yogita Goyal praises Adichie and *Americanah* for offering “a fresh conception of diaspora and the politics of comparison” (xi). Goyal writes that the novel’s familiarity to the American reader reverses “the heart of darkness narrative” in which the European looks at Africa as the exotic and instead the African sees America as the exotic. Ifemelu’s choice to leave America for Africa to seek better opportunity is as foreign to the Western reader as racism in America has been to Ifemelu. Where the European

finds darkness in Africa, “an African character travels to the heart of the West, only to find darkness there” (Goyal xii). Adichie reverses the concept of darkness to America by at first placing the reader in America but then returning Ifemelu to Nigeria prior to her displacement.

In the second section of the novel the reasons for Ifemelu’s voluntary exile are learned. When contrasted against Ifemelu’s rationalization for leaving the United States, her reasons for leaving Nigeria seem minor. In fact, outside of her difficulties finishing her education, Ifemelu’s life in Nigeria appears comfortable. Her movement is created more by a sense of peer pressure rather than a specific occurrence or trauma. In her pre-America life, Ifemelu witnesses her friends’ desire for life outside Nigeria in either Britain or the United States. Those peers who are able to travel freely due to their parent’s wealth are envied for the stamps in their passports. Those peers who are unable to travel make plans for how they will escape Nigeria after finishing primary school. Ifemelu, on the other hand, appears to have no desire to travel. She does not participate in her friends’ conversation about the value of an American passport; she shies away from telling Obinze, her new boyfriend, that “she didn’t know what it meant to ‘be on your mother’s passport’” since her family could not afford to travel (Adichie 66).

Ifemelu’s relationship with Obinze, who is obsessed with everything American, sparks her interest in movement to the United States. Ifemelu remembers that “You look like a black American” was his ultimate compliment (66). Obinze spoke fondly of Manhattan, watched the Cosby Show and was familiar with Will Smith’s career; he read only American novels and ridiculed Ifemelu for not reading real literature. Without Obinze’s urging, her Aunt Uju’s invitation to join her in America would have been left as “a formless idea floated but allowed to sink again.” Ifemelu “did not quite grasp what it all meant, but it sounded correct because it

came from him, the American expert” (99). She did not necessarily desire a move away from Nigeria but instead accepted it as a cultural norm.

The difficulty determining an exact cause for Ifemelu’s movement away helps justify her movement back. If she never really wanted to leave, then returning is not such an issue. Her image of America was constructed by Obinze and not based on her own experiences or understanding of life outside of Nigeria. The story of Ifemelu is “a new kind of black novel, an exploration of blackness that does not highlight injury or trauma” (Goyal xiv). In Nigeria, Ifemelu was a witness to the trauma of those around her like her father “a man full of blanched longings, a middlebrow civil servant who wanted a cliché life different from what he had, who had longed for more education than he was able to get” (47) and her Aunt Uju, a doctor who “never wanted to leave” who “dreamed of owning a private clinic, and she held that dream in a tight clasp” (46) but is forced to suddenly flee from Nigeria when the General whom she has been a mistress to dies in a plane crash and his family threatens Uju’s life. As a witness to trauma rather than the victim of trauma, the issues plaguing others in Nigeria is depersonalized for Ifemelu. Her exile to the United States is voluntary, setting the stage for her disillusionment with America, idealization of Nigeria and eventual return to the homeland.

The third section of the novel’s diasporic movements takes Ifemelu to the United States where she first lives with her Aunt Uju and cousin Dike. On the first day of her arrival, a heatwave signals the beginning of her disillusionment. She had always “thought of ‘overseas’ as a cold place of wool coats and snow, and because America was ‘overseas,’ and her illusions so strong they could not be fended off by reason” (103). Then, as they drive from the airport, she sees a teenage boy peeing against a brick wall. She tells her aunt “I didn’t know people do things like this in America.” Her Aunt asks “You didn’t know people pee in America?” Ifemelu replies

“I mean I didn’t know they do it outside.” Aunty Uju explains that not everyone in America pees outside but they are in a bad neighborhood where that sort of thing may happen. Ifemelu’s first impressions of America remind her of Nigeria. Her first experiences in the hostland signal both a physical and a mental change in her idealistic image of the United States. She had envisioned that even “the mundane things in America were covered in a high-shine gloss” rather than the “disappointingly matte” buildings, cars, and signs she sees (104).

Ifemelu’s encounters with race play an important, albeit drawn out, role in *Americanah*; however, for this discussion, it is her overall interactions within the contact zone that define her immigrant experience. In her discussion of contact zones, Pratt uses theories of transculturation and imagined communities to describe how the marginalized person both interacts with the center by appropriating their cultural practices as a means of belonging and communicating, and protects their cultural identity from the center by selecting only those practices that best serve their needs. In the novel, Adichie relates Ifemelu’s interactions with differing ethnic groups while in the United States to demonstrate her inability and even unwillingness to develop a sense of community created by her desire to distance herself from those she comes in contact with. Her acculturation but eventual resistance to assimilation, as Pratt discusses, are best illustrated by her relationships with Curt and Blaine.

Her relationship with Curt develops while in college working as a nanny for a philanthropic white couple. With Curt “she became, in her mind, a woman free of knots and cares, a woman running in the rain with the taste of sun-warmed strawberries in her mouth.” For the first time since coming to America, Ifemelu is developing a feeling of belonging outside of her friendships with other Africans in America and her relationship with her Aunt and cousin. Curt “was upbeat, relentlessly so . . . and there was an infantile quality to this that she found

admirable and repulsive” (196). Ifemelu imagined herself married to Curt living a “life engraved in comfort” (199). He lavished her in gifts, helped her get visas for travel and took her on spontaneous trips around the world. When nobody would hire her because of her immigration status, Curt arranges an interview for her with people he knows. But there is a price to pay for this comfort.

She is told that to get ahead in America you must look American. The first thing she attempts to change is her hair. While having her hair straightened she had the sense “of something organic dying which should not have died” (203). She feels a closeness with Curt, who laments her hair change, as she explains to him that “professional means straight is best but if it’s going to be curly then it has to be the white kind of curly” (204). Later she would write in her blog “So whiteness is the thing to aspire to. Not everyone does, of course (please commenters, don’t state the obvious) but many minorities have a conflicted longing for WASP [White Anglo-Saxon Protestant] whiteness or, more accurately, for the privileges of WASP whiteness” (205).

Ifemelu’s relationship with Curt marked both a beginning and an end to the Americanization of her physical appearance. Once she became aware of how relaxing her hair “is like being in a prison” (208), she makes the decision to go natural, a rebellion against the popular American image of the beautiful woman and a form of resisting assimilation. Ifemelu’s new sense of independence begins to create a distance in her relationship with Curt. As she begins to feel something is missing in her connection with him, she confesses to cheating with a man in her building which ends their relationship. A friend tells Ifemelu that she is a “self-sabotager” (287).

In the years following her relationship with Curt, Ifemelu opens her blog about her experiences as a non-American black in America. The blog posts in the novel focus mostly on racism and her interactions on the margins of white society. The popularity of her blog leads to invitations for her to speak at diversity workshops where she learns that “The point of diversity workshops, or multicultural talks, was not to inspire any real change but to leave people feeling good about themselves . . . they wanted the gesture of her presence . . . so she began to say what they wanted to hear” (305). Ifemelu’s willingness to adjust the tone of her speeches demonstrates a certain transculturation, a willingness to accept portions of the host society as a means of survival on the fringes. Her blog also results in a reconnection with Blaine whom Ifemelu had met briefly on a train a few years earlier. Blaine quickly becomes another significant, romantic relationship that creates greater disillusionment with America and longing for Nigeria.

Only a month after reuniting with Blaine at a “Blogging While Brown” convention, Ifemelu informs her parents that she will be moving in with the black American much to her father’s chagrin. Living “with a man to whom she was not married, was something she could do only because she lived in America. Rules had shifted, fallen into the cracks of distance and foreignness” (314). Her mother wants to know when he will come to Nigeria “so that we can do everything at the same time – door-knocking, bride price, and wine-carrying” so that he does not have to come more than once since America is far” (314). Ifemelu’s relationship with Blaine marks how much she has adopted to American culture over the years despite the discontent she writes of in her blog. She gives little consideration to the breaking of homeland traditions and her parent’s feelings, something she would not have considered possible while in Nigeria. She ends her conversation with her mom with amusement, telling her that “we are taking things slowly for now” (315).

The interaction with Blaine's friends from Yale and his sister, Shan, who is in the process of publishing a book, pushes the limits of Ifemelu's acculturation. Their "academic" conversations, in which she attempts to participate, makes her uncomfortable because of her efforts to agree when she does not, and her hesitation to make a counter-point for fear of not fitting in. These conversations generally center on points of racism. During one group encounter where Shan is discussing her book and her frustration with the editor, she tells the room that "You can't write an honest novel about race in this country. If you write about how people are really affected by race, it'll be too obvious" (335). She points out how Ifemelu can get away with talking openly about race on her blog only because she is an African, "She's writing from the outside. She doesn't really feel all the stuff she's writing about. It's all quaint and curious to her . . . If she were African American, she'd just be labeled angry and shunned" (336). In the presence of Blaine and his friends, Ifemelu agrees with Shan bending to her spell because racism "had not been etched on her soul" but she is left "with an embittered knot, like bereavement, in her chest" (337). Despite her attempts at belonging, Ifemelu's Africanness positions her as a stranger, a visitor, in the homeland of the black American.

The relationship between Ifemelu and Blaine begins to deteriorate when she develops a friendship with Boubacar, "a Senegalese professor who had just moved to the U.S. to teach at Yale. He was blistering in his intelligence and blistering in his self-regard" (339). Blaine is threatened by Boubacar's intelligence and Africanness that attracts Ifemelu. She has a comfort with him that she cannot find with Blaine's black American friends. Blaine, as an American, felt excluded from the connection Boubacar and Ifemelu share as Africans. As opposed to Blaine "her feelings for Boubacar were fraternal, free of desire" (340).

Ifemelu's connectedness with Africans in the United States leads her to once again self-sabotage her relationship with an American. Rather than attend a protest against racism, which Blaine organizes, she chooses to attend a going-away lunch for a colleague of Boubacar. She lies to Blaine telling him she missed the protest because she was napping (344). When he learns that Ifemelu had attended the lunch instead of the protest he accuses her of playing a game with her blog since she would not actively participate in an anti-racism rally. For Ifemelu, Blaine's reaction was not just about her "lack of zeal and conviction, but also about her Africanness; she was not sufficiently furious because she was African, not African American" (345).

Through her relationship with Blaine, Ifemelu attempts to accept her life in America. In the same that she fails to connect with white America while with Curt, she also learns that she cannot connect with black America through Blaine. Ifemelu recognizes that her inability to disconnect from Nigeria results in an inability to connect with America. Her feelings of not belonging in the host country allows Ifemelu to create a Utopian view of her return to Nigeria despite her knowledge that both Obinze and Lagos have evolved during the years of her absence. The fourth section of the novel focuses on how Obinze has been changed by his own diasporic movement from and back to Nigeria.

The placement of Obinze's story while in London adds to the non-linearity and disjointedness of the plot line. Adichie inserts his time outside of Lagos into the storyline of Ifemelu's relationships with Curt and Blaine – a type of play within the play. This serves as a method for the author to not only continue her dissertation on race relations outside of Nigeria, but also contrasts the experiences of the male versus female immigrant.

As discussed earlier, Obinze had long desired to do his post-graduate work in America. However, once he graduated from university in Nigeria, he was unable to get the necessary



student visa to move to America. Because of his inability to find work in Nigeria, his mother lists him as her research assistant for a project she has in the U.K. so that he can obtain a temporary visa. He remains in Britain despite the expiration of his visa. His attempt at a sham marriage to regain his documented status leads to his deportation.

Upon returning to Lagos, “A new sadness blanketed” Obinze when he met his mother in the arrival area of the airport (285). However, as he soon discovers, his time abroad has elevated his potential in the eyes of the Lagos male, socio-economic elite. The patriarchal society views the returning male migrant with “dignity and authority” (Coly 103), whereas the female returnee is viewed as a deserter of the homeland soiled by their time abroad. Obinze quickly reintegrates into the patriarchy, establishes himself as a “go getter,” marries the proper Nigerian woman, hires a white manager and succeeds at accumulating wealth and high socio-economic status.

In contrast, Ifemelu, as the returning female body, struggles to reintegrate. She complains about rude shopkeepers, the decay of the buildings, and the endless traffic, the opposite of what she had experienced living in Princeton. To avoid interaction with the male patriarchy she finds a job with a small women’s magazine as a “features editor, with a car and a driver and the spirit of America hanging over her head” (401). Free from male influence, Ifemelu’s time abroad lends her a sense of authority over her female co-workers. However, Ifemelu’s interaction with the continued patriarchal aspects of Nigerian society impedes her complete adjustment to her new home.

Rather than contacting Obinze upon her return to Nigeria, Ifemelu feels the necessity of re-establishing herself. Her hesitancy to contact him shows her determination to define her success at reintegration on her own terms. Ifemelu wants to establish an identity of Nigerian nationalism free from the defining masculine. She views “the postcolonial nation as a site of

redemption despite its gender politics” (Coly 30). Adichie contrasts Ifemelu’s independence against that of her friend Ranyinudo who defines her identity by the men she chooses to date and her ultimate need to marry as a means of establishing a home. While interacting with her old friends there was “a strained nostalgia” as she “struggled to find, in these adult women, some remnants from her past that were often no longer there” (398). In the men she meets and shows interest in she finds a certain commonness in their sense of patriarchal control, in their need to define the terms of their relationship and her identity as a woman. Even as she reconnects with Obinze she resents the need to define the terms of their relationship by his marriage to Kosi, a model of the submissive Nigerian wife.

Discontent with her position as mistress, Ifemelu ends their relationship and refuses to speak with Obinze as long as he remains with Kosi. Only when Obinze leaves his marriage and seeks out Ifemelu does she know that she can define their relationship on her terms, or on mutual terms, as she desires.

Ifemelu discovers a sense of home and belonging only by returning to the homeland she imagined while abroad on her terms as opposed to Obinze who only begins to develop a sense of home through his reconnection with Ifemelu despite his economic success in Nigeria. Ifemelu’s return to the homeland is voluntary. She is secure in the knowledge that she can return to America if she fails to find her place in Nigeria. Although she does establish this feeling of home and self-identity, her success is contingent on the security of an American passport. Despite Ifemelu’s success at defining her identity by defying the postcolonial, patriarchal society of Nigeria, Ifemelu’s story reflects the author’s own view of the impact of globalization and dispersal on the Nigerian sense of neocolonial nationalism.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **A One Way Ticket: *We Need New Names***

In the preceding chapters, the ability of the protagonists to travel freely allowed them to maintain a connection with their homeland that was more than a memory or imagining. For Sophie and Martine, the closeness of Haiti made travel a simple matter; for Ifemelu, travel was complicated by distance but her American passport made her confident that movement back and forth across the Atlantic would not be restricted. This chapter examines the undocumented immigrant who faces the inability to move between homeland and hostland and how the restriction of movement alters the image of and longing for home.

In *We Need New Names*, the ten-year-old protagonist, Darling, travels on a visitor's visa from her shanty town home in an unnamed African country, presumably Zimbabwe, to her Aunt Fostalina's home in Destroyedmichygen. For the young girl, movement away from her grandmother, mother and friends fulfills her desire to leave behind a life of corruption and poverty for what she believes will be a life of comfort in the United States. As opposed to Ifemelu in *Americanah*, Darling's image of the homeland fades as she learns that returning to Zimbabwe means permanent expulsion from the United States.

Bulawayo separates the book into two parts. The first part focuses on Darling's life in Paradise, an unfavorable homeland, and the second on her life in the United States, an unfavorable hostland. The sections are evenly divided showing the emphasis the author places on establishing Darling's connection to the homeland and how that influences her connection to the hostland.

In this first section, Bulawayo portrays Zimbabwe as a stereotypical African country in the mind of the Western reader. The overall image of life for the population of Paradise –

shoeless, starved, sick, and dependent on handouts from an NGO for survival – represents an Africa commonly portrayed in popular media. However, Bulawayo counters that image by writing Darling and her friends as happy-go-lucky, free to roam in a Mark Twain fashion. The author uses this counter-narrative of third-world life to establish that, no matter how bad the rest of the world may think it is, Zimbabwe is home for these children.

The construction of an image of home in Zimbabwe is vital to the diasporic story. In this Novel Bulawayo tells the story of what has happened in her home country under the rule of Robert Mugabe since independence from Britain in 1980 and, specifically, following the contested 2008 elections. *We Need New Names* openly displays postcolonialism/postnationalism as the root cause of movement. In a profile of Bulawayo, Judith Rosen writes that Zimbabwe has an “80% unemployment rate and inflation rate that hit 6.5 sextillion percent in 2008.” Bulawayo asks Rosen “Can you imagine calling home and hearing all this desperation, horrors we couldn’t do anything about? I wrote about it.” The article goes on to note that Bulawayo has lost a brother and sister to AIDS (36). Alois S. Mlambo blames not only Mugabe for the state of Zimbabwe but also “the colonial legacy of racism” and “a racialized, unequal socio-economic regime.” He posits that “the challenges facing Zimbabwe in its postcolonial nation-building and state-formation efforts . . . emerged from a contested past of racial domination and armed conflict” (52). The racially marginalized population disperses as a means of escape.

Bulawayo’s choice to use a young girl as her protagonist presents a number of issues when considering the effects of dispersal from a homeland. In Zimbabwe Darling faced any number of issues as a matter of daily life that most Western readers could not imagine a young child experiencing much less accepting as routine. Some of these issues include a friend raped by her grandfather and pregnant at the age of 11; stealing guavas from a nearby town to avoid

starvation; discovering a woman who hung herself from a tree because she has AIDS – Darling and her friends take the woman’s shoes as a matter of necessity; and, Darling’s father, whom she has not heard from in years, returning home from South Africa with his body decimated by AIDS. For Darling, the postcolonial nation-state represents both an unfavorable homeland and a longed for home; home is inseparable from homeland. Bulawayo writes Darling as a character who is both happy and comfortable in her life in Zimbabwe even though she has been taught that a better life exists in countries like the United States, Australia, the U.K, and South Africa.

The novel’s first chapter “Hitting Budapest,” which is based on Bulawayo’s Caine Prize winning short story of the same name, shows how, even decades after independence, race, and socio-economic class separate Zimbabwe. The opening pages of the book establish the image of movement by the racialized third-world person to an area of white economic privilege as a means of survival. Reminiscent of a refugee crossing international borders, Darling and her friends, Bastard, Chipso, Godknows, Sbhoo, and Stina, cross Mzilikazi Road “even though we are not allowed to” (3). The children are traveling to nearby Budapest with its big houses and manicured lawns. Darling justifies their movement across the border because it is the thought of food that “gives us courage, otherwise we wouldn’t dare be here.” The street, as a border, signifies something better on the other side. Once there, Darling expects “the clean streets to spit and tell us to go back where we came from” (6). As they move through the streets searching for guava they encounter a white woman eating a piece of bread. The children stop at the sight of food. They watch the woman eat and toss a scrap at a trash bin. They have never seen “anyone throw food away, even if it’s a thing” (9). For the woman, the children are an oddity even though they live within walking distance of her community. She gives no thought to their appearance,

accepts it as normal, as she asks the children if she can take their picture. The woman represents a colonial mindset of privilege over the “native” inhabitants of an independent Zimbabwe.

In search of food the children must move away from their family and travel to a “white” neighborhood where Darling first experiences the wasteful attitudes of the privileged. This is an image Darling also focuses on when she moves to America where her cousin, “fat boy TK” eats in one day what Darling, “Mother and Mother of Bones would eat in maybe two or three days” (158). Bulawayo’s use of a young, female narrator allows her to utilize the naïveté of youth as a means of creating a Zimbabwe that reflects the life Darling will have in America. The similarity of her life at home and her life abroad along with the malleability of youth blurs the line between homeland and hostland.

Throughout the book the protagonist faces some challenge to her concept of home and belonging whether it is displaying the proper image for the NGO people in Zimbabwe or stealing a car belonging to her friend’s mother to spend a day at the mall in America. The way Darling reacts to the circumstances she faces in Zimbabwe is a factor of survival while in America it is a factor of assimilation. The fact that these situations end with little resolution symbolizes the uncertainty of the young girl’s future no matter her geographic location.

Throughout this first part the gang of children speak of one day leaving Zimbabwe. They often play “country-game” which begins with the children fighting over the name of the country they want to be. There are “country-countries” like the United States, Britain, and Canada. Then there are “countries” like Dubai and South Africa and then there are “rags of countries” like Congo, Somalia, and Iraq. It is important who wins this fight because “who wants to be a terrible place of hunger and things falling apart?” (50). Bulawayo played this game growing up in Zimbabwe (Rosen 36).

Part two begins with Darling staring out of her aunt's window in "Destroyedmichygen." The play on names used by Bulawayo reinforces her counter-narrative of the popular immigrant story. Darling calls her home in Zimbabwe Paradise despite its impoverished state whereas her home in the proverbial "Land of Opportunity" is "Destroyed." The fact that the book's publication coincided with Detroit's filing of Chapter 9 bankruptcy adds to the irony of the names and the immigrants' image of opportunity in America.

While looking out the window onto the snow covered yard, Darling recognizes that "this here is not my country; I don't know whose it is" (149). The strangeness of her new home is symbolized by the whiteness of the snow; a whiteness that "has covered everything" and tells you "that you should go back to where you came from" much like the streets in Budapest (150). The use of "white" in the scene is significant. It indicates that Darling's movement has not removed her from the racial and socio-economic separation that occurred in Zimbabwe. In fact, in America, she will be immersed in the dominance of the white majority in contrast to Zimbabwe where the privileged white class was a minority also facing persecution from Mugabe's regime.

This opening chapter to part two moves back and forth between images of Zimbabwe and images of America. In her first days in America, Darling is in a constant state of imagining as she struggles with acculturation. The snow colored sky in Detroit is not the same blue sky in Paradise; her aunt, who has established a Western image of body style, is not as pretty as Mother even though they are twins; her Uncle Kojo tells Aunt Fostalina that "there is nothing African about a woman with no thighs, no hips, no belly, no behind" and accuses TK of wanting "to be like these raggedy boys standing around corners and smoking things and talking profanity because they are too stupid to realize how easy they have it?" (154). At night Darling dreams that

tokoloshes come out of the snow and tempt her with Americanization (153). The contrast of Darling's mental imaging of both the homeland and hostland illustrates her struggle with acculturation and her desire to find a sense of comfort in a strange land.

Like Ifemelu, Darling's disillusionment with her host country, and even her host family, begins upon arrival. If someone had properly explained the coldness of America to her she doesn't know if she could have gotten on the plane to come (156). Then again, if she had not gotten on the plane, she would still be in a place without enough to eat (155). The symbolism of food, both having it and not having it, plays a key role in Darling's imagining of home. In America, food signifies a fulfillment of her longings for something she could not get in Zimbabwe. Her fond recollections of the homeland are interrupted by images of starvation. However, what she sees as gluttony in Americans adds to her feelings of not belonging in the hostland. She also does not understand the American desire not to eat in order to obtain the proper body image. A few years after arriving in America, Darling has a job cleaning the house of a wealthy white family. She wonders how the owner's bulimic daughter "deals with the hunger, those long, terrible claws, that dig and dig in your stomach until you can barely see, barely walk upright, barely think, and you would do anything, anything for even just a crumb" (267). Darling laughs out loud at the girl who has a "fridge bloated with food" so that she will "never know real hunger" (269). For Darling, because of her memories of starvation in Paradise, the access to food in America does not serve to comfort her nor give her a feeling of home. Instead, she views her easy access to food as a reminder of her friends and family.

After nearly a decade in America Darling's desire to return to Zimbabwe does not subside despite the fact that, unlike Ifemelu, Darling's imagining of home does not become idealized. Darling's vision of the homeland is a place to go and visit her grandmother, mother



and friends. Even at her young age she has no disillusionment about the political condition that precipitates her migration. However, the turmoil in Zimbabwe is not her only barrier to travel.

At the age of fourteen, Darling realizes that she has allowed herself to lose contact with her friends when Messenger comes to America seeking asylum. He brings with him a surprise care package of guavas from Budapest. As she eats the guavas she asks Aunt Fostalina if she can visit her friends “maybe for two weeks” and then come back. Her aunt reminds her that because her visitor’s visa has expired “you get out, you kiss this America bye-bye” (191). The expiration of Darling’s visitor’s visa established her identity as a guest in the country. Her desire to return to Zimbabwe to visit rather than stay shows how the years in America also make her a visitor in what was once her homeland. However, in her youthful naïveté, Darling sees herself as being dual homed. For herself she describes “two homes in her head: home before Paradise, and home in Paradise; home one and home two. Home one was best.” Her mother and Aunt Fostalina have three homes: one before independence, one after independence and “then the home of things falling apart.” For Mother of Bones there are four homes: home before white people, home when white people came to steal the country, home when black people got the country back, and the home of now. “When someone talks about home, you have to listen carefully so you know exactly which one the person is referring to” (193). Darling’s understanding of home as described above is significant not only in its reference to many historical “homes” but also because of its exclusion of America both for herself and for her Aunt despite her aunt’s attempts at Americanization. This example best shows how home for the diasporic migrant is a looking back, a memory.

Despite her attempts at assimilation, Darling cannot distance herself from the image of Africa the Americans she interacts with have of her. She gets irritated at the way her boss at a

grocery store, Jim, refers to Africa as if it's a country; her co-worker, Megan, says Darling is different, "not full of shit" and asks "It's an African thing, ain't it?" (259); the owner of the home she cleans, Eliot, asks her "So how is it going back there?" referring to Zimbabwe. Darling hates "the way he says it, as if my country is a place where the sun never rises" (267). The use of the term "back there" by Darling's wealthy, white boss illustrates both his view of Africa and the status of the relationship between him and Darling. He positions Africa as a place he sees as being behind; he re-confirms Africa as "The Dark Continent;" and, places himself in a colonizing position over Darling. In Darling's daily interactions with Americans she is reminded of her place as both a visitor and as an exotic other despite her acceptance of life in America, her distancing from Zimbabwe, and her attempts at assimilation all of which are a result of barriers to movement between the hostland and homeland.

Bulawayo confirms Darling's homelessness in a conversation she has with Chipu during a Skype call to Zimbabwe. In this conversation Darling learns that "Bastard finally went to South Africa. Godknows is in Dubai" and Sbho has joined a traveling theater group. Only Chipu, who was raped by her grandfather, has stayed in Paradise with the child she named after Darling. Darling feels sorry for Chipu because of her life in Paradise; she feels disappointed and angry with "our leaders for making it all happen, for ruining everything" (287). Despite her experiences in the United States, Darling still sees dispersal as the only answer to Zimbabwe's postnational issues that she now learns about on BBC rather than experiencing herself. Chipu reminds Darling of her homelessness when she asks:

What are you doing *not* in your country right now? Why did you run off to America, Darling Nonkululeko Nkala, huh? Why did you just leave? If it's your country, you have to love it to live in it and not leave it. You have to fight for it no

matter what, to make it right. Tell me, do you abandon your house because it's burning or do you find water to put out the fire? . . . You left it, Darling, my dear, you left the house burning and you have the guts to tell me, in that stupid accent that you were not even born with, that doesn't even suit you, that this is your country? (268).

Chipo positions Darling in a place between homes. Darling physically exists in a place where she is othered by those around her while she longs for a place where her cultural identity is rooted but her long absence, seen as abandonment, has made her a stranger. She has become Derrida's uninvited guest with two hostile hosts.

Although Bulawayo structures the book into two parts, there also are three distinct chapters that further segment the novel. The narrative in these chapters switches from Darling's immature, first-person recounting to a third-person, omniscient narrator in the first two of the distinct chapters, and a first-person plural in the third. The narrative voice in these three chapters also possesses more maturity than Darling's. The first of these chapters, "How They Appeared," demonstrates how the failed postcolonial state remains in power through the oppression of the general population. "How They Left," the second of these chapters, demonstrates how the inability of the people to effect change within their own country creates the need for diasporic movement. The third, "How They Lived," tells of the secret lives undocumented immigrants are forced to live while abroad; the displeasure they have with their hostland; and the way they "[weep] for our blessed, wretched country" left behind." This chapter copies nearly word-for-word Bulawayo's short story "In America," published two years before the novel, and can be read as a reflection of the author's own experience in the United States. While the change of

voice in these three chapters is clumsy, their inclusion is significant for the consideration of movement within the novel.

Bulawayo uses these three chapters to further establish Paradise as the unfavorable homeland and the United States as the unfavorable hostland. In “How They Appeared,” people arrive in what will become Paradise with nothing, draw lines in the dirt with a stick, and, in so doing, define a physical space of belonging. The appropriation of this space is vital to the establishment of “home” in an unfamiliar land (Coly 83). The significance of this appropriation of space is that the population of Paradise did not choose to originate movement; rather, they were forced into movement by a corrupt government. Paradise represents an exilic condition within the homeland. The stick and tin buildings they erect are temporary. Their continued occupation is subject to the whim of the postnational government further defining the “homeland” as untenable and hostile.

In contrast to the forced movement in “How They Appeared,” in “How They Left” the people of Paradise are “Moving, running, emigrating, going, deserting . . . They are leaving in droves” (147). The movement in this chapter is voluntary, a conscious decision in reaction to their mental imaging of “home” in a foreign land. This choice of movement illustrates the emigrant’s idealized concept of home in a hostland. However, the appropriation of space, and, by relation, the establishment of a home, proves more difficult than it did in the homeland. This tension between the reality of the homeland and the idealized notion of the hostland creates a sense of homelessness.

Bulawayo describes this homeless condition in “How They Lived.” In this chapter, the unwelcomed guest whose travel is restricted by law has no choice but to remain hidden. Their illegal status renders them unable to get the education they desired, to get good paying jobs, to

provide for their families back home, or to even speak out against the hostile nature of the laws that impedes their notion of developing a sense of belonging. Darling matures into the image of the illegal immigrant described in “How They Lived.” Her procession from appearing in Paradise, leaving the homeland, and living in the hostland are all defined by a restriction of movement. She had choice but to seek refuge in Paradise, an area that was defined for her; she was forced to America by her family; she remains in America because of her illegal status. Because of her of her inability to define the parameters of her own movement, Darling’s desire to establish a sense of home remains unresolved.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Round and Round They Go

When considering the contemporary immigrant's ability to accomplish rehousement, restrictions to movement, interaction within the native society of the hostland and the ability to communicate with and the memories of the homeland all affect the process of acculturation and assimilation. For immigrants from the African diaspora, careful consideration must also be given to the postcolonial/postnational condition of their homeland that creates the migratory mindset. In Sophie's Haiti, the institutionalized violence of "Papa Doc" Duvalier's government results in the raping of Martine and the process of movement away from the homeland. In Nigeria, government corruption and instability drives Ifemelu to seek her education and better opportunity outside of the country. For ten-year-old Darling, her mother and grandmother see no choice but to send her to live with her aunt in America after the population of Zimbabwe is unable to oust, through a democratic election, the brutal regime of Robert Mugabe.

Of all these diasporic characters only two, Martine and Ifemelu, gain some sense of home or at least go through a process of rehousement. The journey home for Martine was a mythical return to Guinea following her suicide. Ifemelu's physical and mental rehousement required her to return to Nigeria. Ifemelu began her journey home with the security of an American passport and the knowledge that her move toward home had no permanence if rehousement in Nigeria was not possible. As a result of her time in America, Ifemelu struggled to reintegrate into Lagos society. Her experiences in "the contact zone" changed her understanding of the patriarchal hegemony of her native country. Her rehousement began only after she resisted assimilation into the cultural norms of Lagos.

For Darling and Sophie, the question of rehousement remains unresolved. *We Need New Names* ends with no resolution to Darling's rehousement. After her conversation with Chip, Darling throws her iPad across the room. As she roams around her aunt's house she recalls Bornfree's dog, Ncuncu, who had decided one day to stop being Bornfree's dog. Ncuncu roamed around Paradise, homeless, scavenging for food. One day Darling and her friends watch as a lorry runs over Ncuncu and pulls away. Darling's memory of the dog reflects the life of the diasporic immigrant who makes the choice to roam and not return.

Similar to Darling, the question of Sophie's rehousement goes unanswered. *Breath, Eyes, Memory* ends in the same Haitian cane field where Martine was raped. Sophie's freedom of movement has returned her to the place of her original trauma. When her grandmother and aunt ask her if she is free, Sophie remains immobile and unable to speak. She cannot answer the question of freedom when she lives in a hostland and is shackled by the memories of a homeland.

Interactions with native cultural practices further inhibit each character's attempt to define a feeling of home in the hostland. Martine attempts assimilation but remains close to the Haitian community living in New York. Sophie rebels against her mother by marrying a black American musician and distancing herself from the Haitian American culture. Ifemelu attempts to assimilate through her romantic relationships with a white American and a black American. In both relationships, she allows the male subject to influence her cultural identity through a process of patriarchal control that she eventually resists. Darling's young age when she arrives in America impacts the effects of peer pressure on her process of assimilation. As she ages and begins working, she sees in her interactions with Americans a type of "othering" that places her on the margins of both a black culture and a white, male hegemony.

This thesis has focused on both the postnational condition of a homeland and the hostility of the hostland as barriers to the process of home building for the diasporic immigrant. Although I have used some examples of the effects of gender inequality on the processes of unhousement and rehousement, a more thorough examination of the roles of gender in the novels would reveal even greater barriers to the creation of “home.”

As Mukherjee posits in her call for a new genre of contemporary immigrant literature, the authors of these three novels focus on “loss of community, of language and of extended family.” Considering this, their inclusion in Mukherjee’s genre of “Literature of the New Arrival” seems fitting. However, because of the exilic nature of these novels, they cannot be separated from “literature of globalization or diasporic literature” as Mukherjee asks the academic community to do. As such, for her new genre to be more inclusive of contemporary immigrant work by women from African diasporic communities, concepts of postnationalism, postcolonialism, neocolonialism, and diaspora must be included.



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