BELONGING IN AFROPOLITAN TEXTS FROM GHANA, NIGERIA AND THEIR DIASPORAS

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that the cultural production that has become associated with Afropolitanism since this term was first popularised in the mid-2000s offers an important case study of belonging in the early twenty-first century. This cultural production, the thesis contends, pushes the boundaries for what it means to form attachments across borders by portraying belonging as a multivocal, multi-layered and multi-local concept, but also as a deeply personal and affective affair. Illustrating that Afropolitan cultural production at the same time portrays belonging as a highly differential and intersectional concept which is determined and negotiated in interaction between social actors, the thesis argues that it often becomes full of complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity. By teasing out some of these tensions and contradictions, the cultural production in question thus provides a compelling new perspective on what it means to belong.

Identifying a wider landscape of contemporary Afropolitan cultural production from Ghana, Nigeria and their diasporas and situating this production in the context of the ideas and thematic trajectories that have emerged as part of the ongoing debates on Afropolitanism, the thesis reads belonging across a broad selection of texts – six of which are novels and four of which either consist of other forms of writing or music and TV. Taking a case study approach, the thesis analyses the various formations of belonging in each of the ten texts whilst also discussing any patterns that develop as it moves from text to text.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

At a point in time where belonging is defined in increasingly narrow terms in various spaces, both in Africa and elsewhere, the ideas and thematic trajectories that have materialised in the context of Afropolitanism offer us something different. Scholars have suggested that nativist conceptions of belonging have taken on a prominent role in political and popular discourses in many places in Africa since the 1980s where particular ideas – of roots and origin, for example – help determine whether people belong or do not belong and come to stand for the most 'authentic' and legitimate version of belonging (see Geschiere and Nyamnjoh, 2000). It is further noted that looking beyond the African continent, we find a similar approach, one which has become increasingly dominant since the turn of the century and which is used in the process of closing down borders and drawing up new boundaries, often to limit the possibilities of belonging based on where people are from (Geschiere, 2009). This is evident in the politics of belonging that shape the present moment, too, with the UK's recent exit from the EU, as well as Europe's response to the so-called refugee 'crisis' and former US President Donald Trump's project of building a wall on the US-Mexican border as some of the more recent attempts to impose restrictions on belonging.

This study argues that the cultural production that is associated with Afropolitanism provides a pertinent case study of belonging in our world today, one which speaks to a more 'open' definition of the concept by pushing the boundaries for what it means to form attachments in the early twenty-first century. Afropolitan texts, the study contends, encourage us to consider belonging in broad terms and as a deeply personal and affective affair, showing

that it is a signifier of our personal attachment(s) and that it is up to the individual to decide what it means to belong for them, based on their lived experiences and personal itineraries, what they associate with the term, as well as how they respond to it emotionally. At the same time, the texts recognise that belonging is a highly differential and intersectional concept which is demarcated by specific politics of belonging (like those referred to above) and which takes on meaning in social interaction and in the particular context (social, political, cultural) in which it is used. What is compelling about the various experiences, ideas, representations, conversations and narratives of belonging which we encounter in Afropolitan cultural production is that they bring out these complexities to show that the concept is multivocal, multi-layered and multi-local but also that it is subject to an ongoing definition and negotiation and often becomes full of uncertainty, ambiguity and tension.

There has not, to date, been scholarly recognition of the pivotal role belonging plays in Afropolitan texts: although some literary scholars have acknowledged belonging as a theme in Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013a), Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* (2013) and other contemporary African diaspora novels which they encourage us to read as 'Afropolitan' (Knudsen and Rahbek, 2016, Rushton, 2017), this thesis marks the first extensive and focused reading of the concept in the literary scholarship on Afropolitanism. Furthermore, in this field which tends to focus on the novel, the thesis is original for how it reads across a broad selection of cultural production, insisting on including literary analyses of other creative forms – in this case, a web series, two blogs and a live concert series – and reading them alongside a selection of Afropolitan novels. Drawing on studies of African popular culture and, in particular, the work of Karin Barber (2007) who interprets both written and oral forms as kinds of text, and as sometimes inseparable from non-verbal cultural aspects (e.g., music and clothing, as well as concerts and other types of performance) in creating

meaning, the thesis thus engages with written forms, but explores these together with non-verbal examples of culture.

The study argues that taking a new approach by reading across a diverse body of Afropolitan texts can help illustrate the centrality of belonging in the context of Afropolitanism and bring out some of the many complexities that come with the experience of belonging in the early twenty-first century. What is productive about this method is that it not only gives insight into the different ways in which belonging is imagined in individual texts but allows us to locate and consider its role and meaning in the wider cultural landscape of Afropolitanism. Crucially, avoiding an overly narrow focus on literary texts further allows us to understand the full extent of Afropolitanism's manifestations in contemporary cultural production.

While its main contribution to the field is then its method in reading belonging, the study also makes room for multiple definitions of Afropolitanism to push the boundaries surrounding this new term. Much like some of the literary work that has been published already (e.g., Fasselt, 2015, Knudsen and Rahbek, 2016), I point to alternative examples of the Afropolitan novel and the Afropolitan figure, but I further document how cultural producers who use their creative work to engage directly with Afropolitanism contribute with new ideas and perspectives and, in the process, disseminate new meanings of the term – highlighting, for instance, that some view it as a signifier of urban life in the African continent whereas others see it as speaking to their personal experiences of moving across borders. This is important because it implies that Afropolitanism is still in the process of being defined and not only in the academic realm but elsewhere.

In the introduction below I first consider some of the overall ideas and critiques of Afropolitanism, along with the scholarly work that has played a role in shaping our understanding of the Afropolitan figure in contemporary literature. This is followed by a

discussion of the overall theoretical framework and method for my reading of belonging in Afropolitan texts.

Preliminary Ideas and Critiques of Afropolitan(ism)

In the past two decades, Afropolitanism – a term generally acknowledged as an offshoot of cosmopolitanism which refers to 'Africans of the world' (e.g., Eze, 2014b, Gehrmann, 2016, Knudsen and Rahbek, 2016) – has become a contested term in popular and academic discussions of Africa and the diaspora. A review of the debates emerging in connection with the concept indicates that discussants frequently go back to ideas which were formulated in two texts published in the mid-noughties. Selasi, author of *Ghana Must Go*, is usually credited for having coined the term with her essay, 'Bye-Bye Babar (Or: What is an Afropolitan?)'. This short piece, though largely unnoticed when it first appeared online in *LIP Magazine* in 2005, went viral after being republished (see Coetzee, 2016) and, as the author herself notes, appears to have 'taken on a life of its own', triggering numerous responses and entering inadvertent discourses (Selasi in Knudsen and Rahbek, 2016, 290). Alongside Selasi's essay, academics, in particular, cite scholar Achille Mbembe's 'Afropolitanism' ([2005] 2007), another short text which was first published in French but appeared in English as the foreword to the second edition of *Africa Remix* two years later.[1] Neither Selasi nor Mbembe admits to having invented Afropolitanism, however. Mbembe does not clarify its origins in his work, and Selasi (2015b) explains in somewhat vague terms that she 'heard [the word] somewhere' and then decided to adopt it in 'Bye-Bye Babar'.

With these 'spectral origins' (Santana, 2016, 120), it perhaps makes sense, as Carli Coetzee (2016, 101) writes, to see Selasi and Mbembe as the 'non-originators' of

[1] More recently, both essays have been included as a theoretical framework and introduction to the collection *The Passport That Does Not Pass Ports* (see Balseiro and Rapola (eds.), 2020).

Afropolitanism. Alternatively, one could argue that they share the Foucauldian role of 'founders of discursivity', as Eva Rask Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek (2016, 292) propose; developing some of the 'founding' ideas of Afropolitanism with their respective essays, they 'are not just authors of their own work', but 'have produced something else: the possibilities and the rules for the formation of other texts' (Foucault, 1991, 206). Both suggestions are instructive: while the latter foregrounds the role Selasi and Mbembe have played in popularising Afropolitanism and laying the foundation for the debates with their preliminary ideas, the former is a reminder of the ambiguous and contested nature of the word.

At the heart of the debates is also an ongoing discussion of the meaning(s) of Afropolitan(ism), one which takes different thematic trajectories yet frequently comes back to Selasi's essay. The writer proposes in 'Bye-Bye Babar' that 'Afropolitan' is an identity label and reference to herself and other young, upwardly mobile 'Africans of the world' whose parents left Africa in the 1960s onwards and whose sense of belonging is therefore to multiple locations, both in the continent and the diaspora: 'Like so many African young people working and living in cities around the globe, they belong to no single geography, but feel at home in many. They (read: we) are Afropolitans' (Selasi, 2005). In her view, the Afropolitan term is thus an early twenty-first-century identity marker of young and upwardly mobile individuals of African descent and signifier of an emergent, transcontinental diasporic condition.

Drawing on postcolonial terminology of race theories (Bhabha, 1994), Selasi (2005) suggests that many Afropolitans have gone through the experience of being a 'Cultural Hybrid' and that this has made them feel as if they belong to nowhere because they have been stuck in-between locations and cultures. This is reminiscent of their parents and other people who came before them and who also have moved and lived across borders between Africa and the diaspora. Yet, what is distinct about the Afropolitan generation, according to the writer, is their

insistence on being able to transcend this diasporic condition by articulating an individual sense of belonging structured around the various locations and cultures that make up their itinerant backgrounds. In this process of articulating belonging on their own terms, they also 'redefin[e] what it means to be African' for them: characterised by their 'willingness to complicate' one-dimensional and reductive representations of the continent as stuck in an eternal crisis of poverty, corruption and war, and of Africans as perpetual victims, they see a necessity in 'engag[ing] with, critiqu[ing], and celebrat[ing] the parts of Africa that means the most to them' (ibid.). The connection that the Afropolitan generation conjures up between self and place is therefore directly linked to their lived experiences and personal itineraries.

Despite Selasi's attempt to illustrate the significance of the Afropolitan term by drawing attention to the reconfiguration of belonging that takes place in connection with it, several discussants and readers of her essay question the extent to which the word is useful, arguing, as we shall see below, that it perpetuates a simplistic narrative of Africa and the diaspora. And since 'Bye-Bye Babar' first began circulating in the mid-noughties, the word has taken on new meanings that have added to people's scepticism towards the concept. Most significantly, it has become a label for commodification and global consumerism of African cultures, appearing as a buzzword and 'banner for Brand Africa' in new shops, magazines and other cultural initiatives, both online and offline (Selasi, 2015a, 149). A case in point is 'The Afropolitan Shop', an online boutique which 'aims to celebrate African designers and artisans for their prolific and imaginative handiwork while giving them access to the global market' ('The Afropolitan Shop', no date). Another example is 'MsAfropolitan presents: The Rise of Afropolitan Fashion' which was part of an event titled 'Friday Late Afropolitans' that took place in 2011 at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (see Eze, 2014b). Such initiatives

have been, as Chielozona Eze (2014b, 239) observes of the latter, 'a good means of popularizing the concept of Afropolitanism', yet 'risked reducing it to a mere capitalist stunt'.

The incentive to celebrate the continent through fashion and cultural consumption recalls Selasi's essay which, as we shall see in Chapter Two of this thesis, opens with an urban night club scene to illustrate how a group of young, 'hip' and upwardly mobile Afropolitans have created syncretic styles for themselves to put on display their multi-locality whilst highlighting their connection to Africa. These attachments are signified through the clothes they wear, their dance moves and the music they listen to, all of which make up an eclectic fusion of stylistic features and cultural expressions of belonging to 'here' and 'there'. Selasi gives the impression that culture offers a way for Afropolitans to circumvent the feeling of being in-between places and that mixing different kinds of clothes, music and dance is one of the main avenues for expressing and recognising the individuality and complexity of their belonging:

> The little downstairs dancefloor swells with smiling, sweating men and women fusing hip-hop dance moves with a funky sort of djembe … The whole scene speaks of the Cultural Hybrid: kente cloth worn over low-waisted jeans; "African Lady" over Ludacris bass lines; London meets Lagos meets Durban meets Dakar. (Selasi, 2005)

More will be said about this 'moment' in Chapter Two, but it is worth noting here that this initial portrayal of the Afropolitan figure's personal style can be seen as a precursor to how the term, in the years following the publication of the essay, has become tied up with a twenty-first-century consumerism and is directed at a specific demography: Africans who not only move and live across borders but who, one would assume, have the economic and social capital to purchase the products that are advertised and sold on websites such as 'The Afropolitan Shop'.

It is particularly in response to the Afropolitan figure's association with this cultural commodification and consumerism that many have voiced their concern. In some critics' view, the term does little more than support the twenty-first-century lifestyles of privileged middle-class Africans. One of the early critics is Binyavanga Wainaina. In her rumination of the Kenyan writer's unrecorded ASAUK 2012 talk on the topic, Stephanie Bosch Santana (2013) explains in a blog entry on *Africa in Words* that, to Wainaina, the term has come to stand for 'empty style and culture commodification', which is enfolded with 'substantive political consciousness'. From this perspective, Selasi's description of Afropolitans is problematic because 'style and "worldview" become conflated', and peoples, cultures and identities are 'commoditized' and turned into products (ibid.). Inspired by Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (1963), Emma Dabiri (2014, see also 2016) takes this response further by pointing to what she takes to be an elitist and naïve celebration of twenty-first-century transnational mobility and culture. In her view, this celebration excludes individuals who are denied the same economic, social and cultural capital as the mobile middle-class segment referred to by Wainaina and directly linked to the capitalist structures of the fashion industry which exploits large groups of people and maintains the Westernised and 'compartmentalised societies identified by Fanon' (Dabiri, 2014). The essay is also dismissed by readers who reject the Afropolitan term, either arguing that Selasi perpetuates a single story which ignores (other) 'African realities' since it is really only about an elite group of people living in the diaspora (Bwesigye, 2013), or dismissing her ideas because they speak to a simplistic notion of what it means to be African or of African descent (Tveit, 2013).

Some readers see value in the preliminary ideas found in 'Bye-Bye Babar', however. Simon Gikandi (2011, 9-10) finds the Afropolitan label useful as a reference to Africans who are connected to 'African communities, nations, and traditions' yet live 'a life across cultures,

languages, and states'; the term is a way 'to think of African identities as both rooted in specific local geographies but also transcendental of them'. Reiterating Selasi's proposition that the Afropolitan generation celebrate their connection to the continent, he further considers the concept important for how it has the potential to destabilise the Afro-pessimism that has operated as the dominant 'figure of representing Africa during the political and economic crises of the 1980s and 1990s' (ibid.). He notes that Afropolitans try to move away from such modes of representation by 'recover[ing] alternative narratives of African identity' and thinking 'outside the trope of crises' (ibid.). We should note here that Gikandi has since then revised this perspective. Reflecting on his initial observations in a conversation with Knudsen and Rahbek, he notes that there is also a certain anxiety present in Afropolitans' connection to Africa (and elsewhere) which is triggered as they travel (and live) across borders. In his opinion, this anxiety has to do with their ambiguous experiences of (non-)belonging – of being told that they do not belong when they return home to the continent, for instance (see Knudsen and Rahbek, 2016, 43-62).

We should further note that Mbembe's 'Afropolitanism', the second essay which is said to have popularised the concept, circumvents some of the critique by insisting on a broader scope and diverging from the temporal and spatial dimensions in Selasi's essay. Rather than focusing on an Afropolitan identity, he also sticks with Afropolitan*ism* which, in his view, is valuable for how it not only speaks to but foregrounds a long history of migration, mobility and cultural 'mixing', both in the African diaspora and within the continent. The concept is a response to nativist ideas of belonging which have dominated discourses on Africa in the latter part of the twentieth century and which he finds problematic because of how they have come to hinge on questions of race, nationality and, more generally, a 'distinction between "those who are from here" (autochthons) and "those who came from outside" (nonnatives)' (Mbembe,

2007, 28). Afropolitanism is instructive, according to Mbembe (2007, 27-8), because it diverges from this kind of essentialism, instead acknowledging that 'the cultural history of the continent can hardly be understood outside the paradigm of itinerancy, mobility and displacement' – an overlooked, yet enduring pattern of people moving to, from and across the continent that has paved the way for another 'way of belonging to the world, of being in the world, and of inhabiting the world' which is 'marked if not by cultural mixing, then at least the interweaving of worlds'.

In Mbembe's (2007, 26) view, the kind of belonging envisaged in Afropolitanism comes from a long and complex history of dispersion and immersion: while Africa has witnessed a flow of people migrating to other regions of the world (for work or education, or as a result of colonisation and slavery), people have also travelled across the continent, and population groups from Asia, the Middle East and Europe have immersed themselves in Africa, settling down 'in various parts of the continent in various periods of history, and for various reasons'. Looking at belonging in this broader context indicates that it is not always tied to nationality or race as nativist and other discourses would otherwise have it. Instead, it is a concept which is defined in ongoing motion as people travel across borders. Afropolitanism is a 'cultural, historical and aesthetic sensitivity' to this history of mobility and belonging, one which has shaped (and continues to shape) the continent and the diaspora and which is often expressed as an 'awareness of the interweaving of the here and there, the presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa', and 'the relativization of primary roots and memberships' (Mbembe, 2007, 28). This, Mbembe (2007, 28) claims, is what 'underlies the term "Afropolitanism"', a distinct perspective on the world which is organised around ideas and experiences of migration and other forms of movement, and which brings with it its own distinct take on belonging.

This thesis acknowledges the many flaws and unresolved issues that come with the Afropolitan term. Apart from the ones that have already been raised above, it is relevant here to consider some of the inconsistencies that arise in connection with belonging. First, we should note that even if the promise of Afropolitanism is to depart from essentialist ideas of belonging, using 'Afropolitan' as an identity label runs the risk of doing the opposite, especially when this application is based on little more than the extent to which people's belonging is tied to their heritage and 'a specific locality/territoriality' (Yuval-Davis, 2011, 10). Lumping people together based solely on whether they have 'an African parent or two' (Tveit, 2013) could in itself be said to be essentialist, whilst assigning an identity marker to individuals who may fit Selasi's script but do not recognise themselves in (or, in some cases, simply do not wish to be associated with) the Afropolitan figure is equally problematic. Further, one could ask where Africans who move and live across borders but who otherwise do not match the writer's idea of what it means to be Afropolitan fit into the conversation – say, people who are multi-local but belong to older generations or who travel between locations within the continent itself. And although Mbembe's essay makes room for the latter, the very idea of belonging (as we shall see later in the Introduction) precipitates a drawing up of boundaries which leads to inclusion *and* exclusion. Hence, even as we widen the scope for belonging, there will still be someone who is left out.

Second, I would argue that even if hybridity is envisaged in 'Bye-Bye Babar' as an empowering term by signifying a mix of different cultures, we should keep in mind (as Robert Young (1995) reminds us in a reading of Homi Bhabha's and other postcolonial scholars' work) that this terminology is rooted in imperial theories of race and racial mixing and that the very notion of the term presupposes essentialism in that it relies on the mixing of two 'authentic', or 'pure', entities (see also Bromley, 2000, 96-7). Such connotations contradict the hypothesis that

the Afropolitan figure moves beyond essentialist ideas of belonging. And although 'Bye-Bye Babar' insists that Afropolitans are free to articulate a new sense of belonging based on their individual itineraries, we shall see in this thesis that it is not always the case and that this sense of personal agency is frequently undermined by broader structures and politics of belonging. Over the course of the study, I illustrate that this makes for an underlying tension in Afropolitanism, which indicates that belonging is still subject to ongoing definition and negotiation and which, as we shall see in Chapter Three, continues to cause pain and hurt by triggering anxious feelings of non-belonging. Chapter Three suggests that this complexity can be traced back to the context in which Selasi published her essay, demonstrating that the text was written in response to an unsettling sensation of always being out of place and belonging to nowhere.

The inconsistencies highlighted above point to a need to continue to probe the boundaries of the Afropolitan term and remain critical of what it represents. In what follows, we will come across examples of how literary scholars have taken up this task, adding new meanings and perspectives which, along with Selasi's and Mbembe's preliminary ideas, offer a template for the way in which this thesis reads belonging in the context of Afropolitanism.

The Afropolitan Figure in Literary Studies

Turning to the academic realm, we see that it is especially in literary (and, to some extent, cultural) studies that Afropolitanism has attracted attention.[2] Here, articles, monographs and chapters in edited book collections, as well as special editions of scholarly journals, have been

[2] For discussions of the Afropolitan term in other fields, see, for instance, *Contemporary African Social and Political Philosophy: Trends, Debates and Challenges* by Albert Kasanda (2018), and Adeshina Afolayan's chapter 'African Philosophy, Afropolitanism, and Africa' in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy* (2017; see pp. 371-390).

dedicated to theorising the term and debating its meaning(s).[3] Echoing Wainaina's and others' initial concern over the association with elitism, consumerism and capitalism, several scholars are sceptical of Afropolitanism (e.g., Feldner, 2019, Harris, 2020, Toivanen, 2017) whereas others see the term as an Africa-centred form of cosmopolitanism and a helpful framework for contemplating African experiences of mobility in the early twenty-first century (see Eze, 2014b, 2016, Fasselt, 2015, Gehrmann, 2016, Knudsen and Rahbek, 2016, Pahl, 2016). This has led to a similar tension to the one we saw in the responses quoted earlier, with scholars either declaring that we should dismiss Afropolitanism entirely or highlighting the significance in Mbembe's and Selasi's ideas. Although usually insisting that new perspectives must be found to add further depth and nuance to the term, the latter group is generally more optimistic in their approach.

Knudsen and Rahbek's (2016, 3) *In Search of the Afropolitan*, one of the first monographs dedicated to exploring the concept in literature, encourages us to understand Afropolitanism as a new 'space of critical inquiry' which 'open[s] up a space for conversations and dialogues, for new debates and exchange of ideas' of what it means to be African in the world today. They identify contemporary fiction unfolding in the Anglophone African diaspora (such as Cole's *Open City* and Selasi's *Ghana Must Go*, but also ones written by other authors, including Brian Chikwava's *Harare North* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, for example) which invokes this idea of Afropolitanism as it centres on its characters' movements across borders. Moreover, in their view, this fiction provides a more inclusive idea of the Afropolitan figure. Here, we meet characters who do not all belong to the same demographic

[3] For special issues in scholarly journals, see, for instance, 'Debating the Afropolitan' in *European Journal of English Studies* (Durán-Almarza, Kabir and Rodríguez González (eds.), 2017). See also articles dedicated to discussing the Afropolitan term in 'Afropolitanism Reboot' in *Journal of African Cultural Studies* (Coetzee (ed.), 2016).

but whose ties to the continent and the diaspora are similarly complex and who embody Selasi's Afropolitan figure by being part of Afropolitanism's critical inquiry of what it means to be 'twenty-first-century African in, or of, the world', often 'through a conscious engagement with possibilities *and* obstacles related to [theirs and other Africans'] mobility' (Knudsen and Rahbek, 2016, 292; emphasis in original).

Knudsen and Rahbek (2016, 295) speak of an emerging Afropolitan literary aesthetics which, in their view, pivot on two sets of tropes: 'mobility and return', and 'anxiety and self-understanding'. What is significant about the tropes in the context of this thesis is how they take part in complicating belonging. Knudsen and Rahbek (2016, 92, 114) demonstrate that, in the context of mobility (and return), Afropolitan characters experience how home and belonging come unhinged 'from one another and from national and singular meaning' and are (re)positioned as 'relational' yet 'fluctuating terms' pivoting on each character's multi-local and multi-directional itinerary. Expanding on their conversation with Gikandi, they note that it is the experience of mobility that triggers an anxiety of belonging as well: 'while mobility may provide access and opportunity in global contexts, it also engenders anxieties about belonging' (ibid., 296).

Whereas Knudsen and Rahbek's intervention suggests that Afropolitanism is instructive in readings of new African diaspora fiction that centres on African experiences of migration and other border crossings, many scholars remain sceptical of the term. In a number of articles and a crop of monographs published more recently, some scholars maintain that the Afropolitan, as a conceptual framework and literary figure, is problematic because of the association with elitism, capitalism and consumerism (e.g., Feldner, 2019, Harris, 2020). For Anna-Leena Toivanen (2017, 190), the issue further lies in using Selasi's 'Bye-Bye Babar' as 'a main reference in scientific texts addressing the concept' because it is 'not a theoretical text'

and, in her view, 'lacks conceptual depth and promotes a rather simplistic understanding of … cosmopolitanism'. Quoting Grace Musila (2016, 112) and others who have made a similar point, the scholar structures her critique around the need for Afropolitanism, arguing that cosmopolitanism already 'entails a sense of belonging and responsibility that exceeds the boundaries of region, nation, race and culture' and,

> Given that cosmopolitanism has already gone through [a] sort of critical democratisation which allows for more nuanced interpretations and appropriations, it is somewhat difficult to see what changing … "cosmo" to "Afro" is actually attempting to achieve … One is tempted to ask: why Afropolitanism, why not simply transculturation or hybridity? (Toivanen, 2017, 195-6)

Toivanen (2017, 196) admits that 'the articulated link to the continent can, of course, be understood as a gesture of empowerment', a point which she recognises is made in the debates on Afropolitanism (e.g., Ede, 2016, Eze, 2014b). Still, in her view, highlighting Africa by changing the prefix 'may actually end up neglecting the very *complexity of affiliations* it is supposed to be calling for' (Toivanen, 2017, 196; emphasis in original). She remains unconvinced, insisting that it would be more useful to 'continue revisiting [cosmopolitanism] so that it can accommodate specific African articulations, that is, assuming that for some reason it is currently unable to do so'; as late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century scholarship illustrates, cosmopolitanism already 'starts from the local: it implies a sense of self-awareness concerning one's own positionality in the world' (Toivanen, 2017, 190, 197).

The cosmopolitan term does accommodate African perspectives, and cosmopolitan ideas already exist in the continent, as is evident if we consider contemporary research in African studies such as Stephanie Newell's (2011) work on local cosmopolitans in colonial West Africa and Ato Quayson's (2014) monograph on cosmopolitan self-fashioning in contemporary Accra. So why come up with a new term? This thesis proposes (like Minna

Salami, blog author of *MsAfropolitan*; see Chapter One) that Afropolitanism is not meant to replace cosmopolitanism; rather, adding the prefix 'Afro' is a way to place Africa (and its diasporas) at the centre of the discussion and draw deliberate attention to an African experience of cosmopolitanism whilst showing that this experience is often shaped in specific ways by wider structures and politics of belonging.

The study suggests that Afropolitanism *is* a useful term to investigate despite its contentious nature, and that, instead of dismissing it, we should ask as Bruce Robbins and Paulo Lemos Horta (2017, 1-2) encourage us to do with all of cosmopolitanism's 'many blooming, fleshed-out particulars': 'What is it exactly that makes them interesting, makes them valuable?' Identifying a shift from a singular, normative understanding of cosmopolitanism to a plural and 'descriptive register' of the term, Robbins and Horta (2017, 3) insist that 'there are more kinds of cosmopolitanism out there to be observed and explored'. I consider Afropolitanism to be one of them, proposing that we can see it as a particular form which is problematic in some ways, but which is also valuable, especially for its conceptualisation of belonging.

The ideas we encounter in Afropolitanism echo those found in other forms of cosmopolitanism which articulate their own kind of belonging where 'commitments and loyalties are multiple and overlapping, no one of them necessarily trumping the others' (ibid.). What is instructive about Afropolitanism, however, is that it leaves us with a rich and varied portrayal of belonging which, as I illustrate throughout this study, is compelling and significant for how it adds considerable nuance and depth to the meaning of the word – usually without giving any straightforward answers, instead demonstrating that belonging is an experiential and multivocal concept which is subject to an open-ended process of definition and negotiation. In the context of Afropolitanism, belonging becomes full of complexity, contradiction and tension, often leading to ambiguous and ephemeral experiences of what it means to form new

connections and attachments and sometimes, as seen in Chapter Three, triggering an unsettling and anxious sensation of non-belonging. As such, the thesis agrees with Gikandi's and Knudsen and Rahbek's initial reading of belonging in Afropolitan literature, but it also argues that we can take the discussion further by doing a focused reading of the concept across a broader selection of texts.

Reading Across the Wider Cultural Landscape of Afropolitanism

Most responses to Selasi's and Mbembe's essays suggest that Afropolitanism has either been placed in the context of fashion and consumerism or perceived as a literary phenomenon. And reviewing the work that has been published in literary studies indicates a tendency to focus on the novel. This study identifies a wider landscape of cultural production associated with the term, reading ten different texts in conjunction – six of which are novels and four of which either consist of other forms of writing or take us into the realm of music and TV: Cole's *Open City* (2011), Adichie's *Americanah* (2013a), Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* (2013), and Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009), along with Sarah Ladipo Manyika's *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun* (2016) and Olumide Popoola's *When We Speak of Nothing* (2017), as well as Clarissa Bannor's and Minna Salami's blogs *This Afropolitan Life* and *MsAfropolitan* (created in 2009 and 2010, respectively), Nicole Amarteifio's 2014 web series *An African City* and, finally, Ade Bantu's and Abby Ogunsanya's concert series Afropolitan Vibes (which was first launched in 2013).

Given that Afropolitanism is still being defined and no one can say with absolute certainty what the term stands for, I have picked a diverse selection of texts. This is by no means an exhaustive list but rather one which shows the breadth of Afropolitan cultural production. Most of the novels have already been referred to as 'Afropolitan' by scholars whereas the non-literary texts have been labelled by their creators as such or, as we shall see, engage with the

term in other ways. My own contribution to the body of texts considered Afropolitan is *When We Speak of Nothing*, which, to my knowledge, has not yet appeared in the scholarship on Afropolitan literature. What makes it possible for us to read the texts through the Afropolitan lens is their engagement with contemporary African experiences of movements across borders. And what is intriguing about reading them together is how they push the limits for our understanding of Afropolitanism, for instance by offering an 'alternative' example of the Afropolitan figure or by placing the Afropolitan term in a new setting. More importantly, I contend that reading the texts allows us to tease out the tensions and ambiguities that lie latent in the concept of belonging. Analysing them in conjunction further helps us to get the affective range of belonging: while the novels offer a rich portrayal of their characters' inner lives, they lack the visual dimension of TV that has the potential to capture the anxiety in a character's facial expression or body language, as well as the embodied and audio-visual experience that comes with a live music concert. That is, other modes of representation which can communicate to us, the consumers of the 'texts', what it means and *feels* like to belong.

The thesis takes Barber's approach to text and textuality as a starting point. Since I first started conducting the research for this study, her work, which encourages us to understand 'texts' to include cultural production beyond the literary, has inspired me to be open to the diversity of cultural production in the wider landscape of Afropolitanism. And although her intention is to create space for new ways of working with textual material in the field of anthropology, her ideas provide an instructive framework for a literary reading of the diverse collection of cultural production that has been selected here. Barber argues in *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics* (2007) that we should perceive text and textuality as an extension of their etymological meaning. Both words are derived from the Latin 'texere' which translates 'to weave, join together, plait or braid; and therefore, to construct, fabricate, build or compose'

(Barber, 2007, 1). Text is 'a tissue of words' that is put together while textuality (that is, 'the way [a text] is set up *as* a text' (ibid., 14; emphasis in original)) signals a 'weaving or fabricating with words' (ibid., 1). This means that we can understand both terms in a general sense: 'Writing is not what confers textuality [or text]. Rather, what does is the quality of being joined together and given recognisable existence as a form' (ibid.).

According to Barber (2007, 3), texts represent an important kind of meaning-making: they are 'the hot spots of language', and language is 'the most complex, exact and ambitious system of meaning-making devised by human beings'. We should note, however, that

> Words are not the only form of representation or expression. People establish and convey meaning through clothing, dance, music, gesture, and through complex rituals which often defy verbal exegesis. And verbal texts are often inseparable from these other kinds of meaning-making, so that to tear a poem away from its music or from the dance that it is part of is to remove its point. (ibid.)

Barber's assertion here is that verbal texts can be accompanied by other forms of non-verbal expression, and it is often in conjunction with these other forms that they produce meaning. Drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1986), she also invites us to see some of these other forms of creative expression as non-verbal texts which, like their verbal counterparts, have been woven together or fabricated to create meaning and coherence. She insists that text 'is not reserved for the written or printed document: *it treats oral configurations of words – and indeed visual images and musical sounds – as text just as much as written ones*' (Barber, 2007, 21; emphasis added).

If we return to the cultural landscape of Afropolitanism via Barber's reading, we can see it as a field which is made up of various examples of text, not just novels but other written forms, as well as other kinds of cultural expression. This thesis proposes that they can be studied alongside one another: rather than seeing and treating Afropolitan novels as separate from the

rest of the cultural production associated with the term, we can read them together as Afropolitan texts which, like other texts, are, to quote Barber (2007, 1-2), 'woven together in order to attract attention and to outlast the moment' and which can be 'apprehended and evaluated'. At the same time, I claim that reading these texts can bring forth new perspectives on Afropolitanism and provide a more in-depth understanding of Afropolitanism's conceptualisation of belonging. Of course, we should still consider the singularities of each text and its particular form, but what this framework allows us to do is to be 'attentive to sensory, tactile, aural and visual communication', and this gives us 'a very broad, inclusive field from which to start' in our study of belonging (Barber, 2007, 3, 21).

The thesis thus contributes with a new method and new material to the existing scholarship on Afropolitanism which tends to concentrate on 'literature' as classically defined. Occasionally, some non-literary examples (the web series *An African City*, for instance) are brought up by critics and scholars (e.g., Adeniyi Ogunyankin, 2016, Bawa and Adeniyi Ogunyankin, 2018; see Chapter Three), but these are usually read on their own and as separate from literary readings. The thesis also sets itself apart from critics such as Ashleigh Harris who, in her recent monograph *Afropolitanism and the Novel: De-realizing Africa* (2020), advocates for a move *beyond* studies of the novel, both the Afropolitan novel and the novel form more generally. Harris (2020, 1) sees this departure as necessary because the Afropolitan novel, in her view, is 'detached from African everyday life' and therefore complicit in an ongoing 'de-realization of Africa'; there are other literary aesthetics emerging in the continent and other examples of contemporary novels which do not focus on the figure of 'the African émigré' but instead are fully immersed in African realities and which therefore offer a more in-depth engagement with the continent. At the same time, she notes in her conclusion that 'to prioritize the novel – as [her own book] does – is to enact an erasure', especially of 'the kinds of African

literature that stand at oblique angles to the global market and the book publishing industry' (ibid., 177).

I recognise the significance in scholars making room for literature (and, it would make sense to add here, other forms of culture) which is otherwise overlooked in the global market and by the publishing industry; this is something scholars working on African popular culture, not just anthropologists but literary critics, have made a point of doing for decades (e.g., Barber, 1987, 2007, 2018, Newell and Okome, 2014, Obiechina, 1972). Still, I maintain that there is no need to abandon the crop of novels associated with Afropolitanism: I find them productive – the texts themselves but also how scholars have traced the various ideas, tropes and patterns these texts have in common and which are reflective of the Afropolitan term. What I do think is important, however, is that we now begin to push the boundaries for the kinds of text that are included in the discussion by reading various forms alongside one another; if we wish to make sense of belonging and understand how it is imagined in connection with Afropolitanism, we need to consider how it features in and across a wider range of texts.

Reading belonging across the ten texts that have been selected for this study leaves us with different manifestations of belonging. The extent to which each text focuses on the concept varies, too. In some, it is only in brief 'moments' (a line in a song or the outfit a character finds in her wardrobe) that we get a glimpse of what it means to belong. Other texts are structured more extensively around the concept, with some tracing their characters' individual narratives of belonging or illustrating how a blog can be utilised as a digital space to archive and reflect on personal experiences of belonging across borders.

Although the texts I have selected are thus diverse, not just in their formal characteristics but in their configurations of belonging, they are similar in terms of their temporal scope, emerging in the past two decades and in the wake of (and, in some instances, directly in

response to) the founding essays of Afropolitanism. I also focus on texts that fit within a particular geographical framework centring on four locations: Ghana, Nigeria and their UK and US diasporas. As Stephanie Newell (2006, 21) explains in *West African Cultures: Ways of Reading*, this framework can be considered one of the 'zones of culture' that has emerged from the western region of the continent and which constitutes a large, highly visible and transnational cultural scene: what is distinct about Ghana and Nigeria, according to Newell, is that they are both formerly the main colonies of British West Africa and have become producers of an Anglophone West African network of culture extending beyond their own borders, primarily to the UK but also to other English-speaking countries such as the US. This network is substantiated by Ghana's and Nigeria's historical connection with the UK, but Newell (2006, 22) notes that it is 'reinforced by the ongoing strength of economic and political links between the ex-colonial powers and [the two] West African governments'. This, one could argue, is substantiated further by the ongoing flow of people travelling and living between these locations.

The thesis demonstrates that the texts in question are largely structured around Ghana, Nigeria and their UK and US diasporas, but we shall see that they extend beyond these locations, too, either because the producers or writers have attachments to other places or because their work is set or references somewhere else. One example is *MsAfropolitan*'s Salami who is the daughter of a Nigerian father and Finnish mother and is currently based in London but has lived in Nigeria and Sweden, amongst other places (Chapter One); another is found in Bannor, the creator of *This Afropolitan Life*, who grew up in Ghana and the US, but is further affiliated with Sierra Leone where her mother was raised (Chapter Two). These multi-local perspectives are echoed in many of the novels we also come across in Afropolitanism's cultural

landscape. Note, for instance, that Cole's *Open City* is set in the US but takes its readers to Nigeria and Belgium (see Chapter Two).

While scholars have already addressed how some of the authors whose novels have been classed as 'Afropolitan' have reacted to the term, both in interviews and journal articles (e.g., Selasi, 2015a, Cole, 2015b, Pahl, 2016), this study highlights responses from the creators of *MsAfropolitan*, *This Afropolitan Life*, *An African City* and the concert series Afropolitan Vibes. A review of the debates on Afropolitanism suggests that their perspective (as well as their creative contribution to the term) has generally been overlooked. It is significant to note here that whereas Adichie, Cole and most of the other authors of so-called Afropolitan novels distance themselves from the term, arguing that it does not apply to them, the other cultural producers and writers embrace it, often whilst using their creative work as a platform to share their own ideas and perspectives. Over the course of the thesis, we will also see how some of them take issue with the preliminary ideas discussed earlier, especially those found in Selasi's essay. What is interesting here is that they then use their work to push the boundaries for the meaning(s) of the concept. Chapter Two, for instance, illustrates that Ade Bantu, one of the creators and producers of Afropolitan Vibes, is sceptical of the dominant portrayal of the Afropolitan as an elite diaspora figure and 'product' of the West. Rather than simply dismissing the term, however, he implements it in the production of his music events in Lagos to 'bring it back [to the continent]' and 'dismantle it' so that it can begin to speak to urban life in places like Lagos and no longer only be 'defined according to the terms of the highly privileged few' living elsewhere (Interview with Ade Bantu, 28.09.2018). The producer is of the opinion that the Afropolitan term is inclusive and 'belongs to the people, the people of Lagos Island where there has always been that … confluence of culture', with 'African identity as always kind of negotiating and constantly reinventing itself' (ibid.). What is compelling about this example is

that Ade Bantu not only redefines Afropolitanism as he reflects on how urban spaces in Africa hinge on complex histories of mobility and belonging, but that he asks who belongs in this context and, in turn, implies that the Afropolitan term is intimately tied up with issues of belonging. I will return to this (and other examples) later, but it is useful to mention here, if only in brief terms, because it illustrates both how Afropolitanism has travelled across textual and geographical borders and that it is being defined by cultural producers who, like Selasi and Mbembe, probe questions of belonging.

Theorising Belonging

Before we begin to trace belonging across Afropolitan texts, it is instructive to consider how the concept has been theorised elsewhere. We have already been introduced to the idea that, in the context of movement and migration, it is possible to experience multiple and overlapping belongings – a proposition made by Selasi and Mbembe, as well as Knudsen and Rahbek and other literary scholars working on Afropolitanism. Their view is that belonging is an experiential concept which is determined not so much by national identity or citizenship but by our individual itineraries.

A similar argument is made about belonging in other fields where the concept has been subject to critical examination – directly and indirectly in studies of transnational fiction (e.g., Black, 2010, Bromley, 2000, Jay, 2010), as well as in cultural studies, sociology and anthropology (e.g., Geschiere and Nyamnjoh, 2000, Probyn, 1996, Robbins, 1998, Yuval-Davis, 2011). Some scholars working in these fields – and, in the following example, on cosmopolitanism – invite us to understand belonging in broad terms as the attachment we form to a place: it signifies our connection to that place, as well as our 'commitments and loyalties' (Robbins and Horta, 2017, 3). Frequently, however, using the 'indefinite article is insufficient'

because it leaves us with little more than a 'childish reassurance of belonging to "a" place' and the experience of belonging is often more complex than this:

> Yes, we are connected to the earth – but not to "a" place on it, simple and self-evident as the surroundings we see when we open our eyes. We are connected to all sorts of places, casually if not always consciously, including many that we have never traveled to. (Robbins, 1998, 3)

A related point is made in cultural studies by Paul Gilroy (1999) in his work on the black Atlantic, but also by scholars in anthropology such as Arjun Appadurai (1996) and James Clifford (1997). Here, it is illustrated how new experiences of belonging have been made possible as peoples and cultures have moved between places and new networks have emerged; when we interact with different places through such networks, it is essentially a way for us to connect with an 'elsewhere', even if this is only momentarily and at a distance.

More recently, Mounir Guirat (2018, 3, 1) proposes in his introduction to *Politics and Poetics of Belonging* that it is this 'protean and fluid meaning of belonging … in the postcolonial and postmodern time that informs the new orientations of communities in the twenty-first century as they try to find alternative routes to reposition themselves in the global context' and which is a sign that the term itself has become 'nomadic'. In his view, belonging

> is not about a fixed sense of identity but about the multiple possibilities offered by a nomadic, provisional and shifting subjectivity. It is the site in which individual choices, preferences, ideas, and achievements seem to take precedence over one's pride in a particular community. (Guirat, 2018, 1)

And this (new) take on belonging, in Guirat's (2018, 1) view, forms a contrast to the kind we often see emerging in the formation of nation-states – sites with 'fixed geo-political boundaries'

where it ends up 'conflat[ing] with the nationalistic discourses' and, in the process, 'becomes synonymous with roots'.

To some extent, this is a useful place from which to begin our reading of Afropolitan texts; many of these ideas will be reiterated in the following chapters, each of which will provide examples of how movement and migration – of peoples as well as cultures – open up belonging in a way which suggests that it is a flexible concept. At the same time, I would argue that there are sentiments at play in the texts which indicate that, in Afropolitanism, national belonging is still present and not always in a dichotomous relationship with the kind of belonging that extends beyond the nation-state; in the chapters to follow, we will come across instances where these and other kinds of belonging are at work simultaneously.

We shall further see that Afropolitan texts encourage us to consider belonging from other angles. One idea which we will encounter frequently is that the concept is defined by broader structures and politics which often clash with our own sense of what it means to belong. In this context, it is instructive to look at Nira Yuval-Davis's sociological study *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations*. Yuval-Davis (2011, 200, 10) who claims that 'emotions … are endemic to belonging' notes that the concept often has an affective side to it, pivoting on an 'emotional … attachment, about feeling at "home"'. But her main argument is that belonging is a differential and intersectional concept which is organised around the various 'social locations' (class, sex, gender, race and so on) that inform people's lives and determine which social groups they belong to (ibid.). Often, the concept is also demarcated by collective ideas of what it might mean to identify with, or be part of, different groups of people or be a member of any given 'collectivity' – ideas which, in the formation of each grouping, usually reflect their own specific ethical and political values, defined along 'ethnic, racial, national, cultural, [or] religious' lines (ibid., 14). And within such collectivities, it is not uncommon to

find differences because of the complex ways in which belonging intersects with other social constructs: 'People cannot simply be defined … as either belonging or not belonging … Different people who belong to the same collectivity would feel different degrees and kinds of attachment' because their experiences vary, for example in terms of their gender, class and age (ibid., 200).

Finally, Yuval-Davis (2011, 10) speaks of politics of belonging, a phrase which she uses in reference to 'specific political projects' that are 'aimed at constructing belonging to particular collectivity/ies'. A case in point is nationalism, a project which – say, in the formation of nation-states – usually pivots on a certain set of politics of belonging, for instance, by being structured around a 'specific locality/territoriality', descent and political beliefs. Significantly, in some cases, we also find a deliberate emphasis on ethnic identity in the formation of a nation-state, as seen in Nigeria, a country which is made up of many different ethnic groups and where ethnicity has played a significant factor in its conception (Falola and Heaton, 2008). Politics of belonging are further evident in how some constructions of nation-states include and exclude specific groups of people by insisting on ideas of autochthony as the defining factors of citizenship. In many places in post-colonial Africa, this has followed a 'democratization' process at the turn of the century which, according to Peter Geschiere and Francis Nyamnjoh (2000, 423), is part of globalisation and a neo-liberal turn that has led to 'an intensification of the politics of belonging'. This has resulted in

> Fierce debates on who belongs where, violent exclusion of "strangers" (even if this refers to people with the same nationality who have lived for generations in the area), and a general affirmation of roots and origins as the basic criteria of citizenship and belonging. (ibid.)

What is distinct about the politics of belonging that have played out in this context since the late 1980s is that 'autochthony' and other similar ideas of belonging seem 'to have strengthened a decidedly nonliberal tendency towards closure and exclusion', 'becom[ing] a powerful slogan to exclude the Other, the *allogène,* the stranger' (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh, 2000, 423, see also Geschiere, 2009). As Geschiere and Nyamnjoh (2000, 424) note, such 'emphasis on autochthony and belonging in politics is certainly not special to Africa: everywhere in our globalized world', including Europe and North America, 'the increasing intensity of global flows seems to be accompanied by an affirmation of cultural differences and belonging'. And the ways in which citizenship has been interlocked with ideas of roots, ancestry, origin and other related terms through the notion of autochthony 'to describe the relationship between human beings and place' are, as Bruce Whitehouse (2012, 208) rightly observes, not only 'potent'. They also display very particular 'politics of *non*-belonging' (ibid., 211; emphasis added). In Europe and North America in the 2000s, such politics have become particularly dominant in discourses on 'illicit' border crossings which alert us, to quote John McLeod (2018, loc. 59), to 'the contradictory tendencies that have increasingly come to circumscribe and structure human movement today':

> On the one hand, there are the webbed circuits … that more or less smooth the passage across boundaries of geography and nation, through which goods, finance, persons, cultural products, and ideas are permitted to move with little discernible friction, often to profit the privileged. On the other hand, there are the prohibitive barriers, checkpoints, prejudices, politics and points of view that striate and constrain motion and transport and propel humans precariously in transit toward suspect, securitized selfhoods: racialized others, refugees, *sans papiers*, "illegal" immigrants. (ibid.)

While acknowledging the significance of different attitudes towards belonging and movement in specific regions and nation-states in shaping experiences of belonging, this thesis also applies the phrase 'politics of belonging' in a broader context and as a reference to any structures and

processes (economic, social, cultural) that affect and determine the extent to which an individual belongs somewhere and which form part of the wider social context that makes up that individual's existence and which can roughly be understood as 'those "objective" aspects of anyone's life-situation which appear beyond the individual's control' (see Critcher in Hall and Jefferson, 2006, 140). It is significant to note here (regardless of whether we are talking about a specific political project or politics of belonging in more general terms) that, in both instances, we are dealing with a complex process of border and boundary construction that is organised as an inclusive *and* exclusive exercise during which who belongs and who does not is negotiated. As we shall see in this study, it is such processes of inclusion and exclusion that are exposed and examined in Afropolitan cultural production.

Yuval-Davis's interest in belonging as a social construct reiterates Elspeth Probyn's cultural study, *Outside Belongings*. While Probyn's (1996, 13) interest lies in queer experiences, her assertion is that belonging more generally hinges on 'relationality' and 'the experience of being within and inbetween sets of social relations' and that the concept is 'situated as a threshold: both public and private, personal and common' – it therefore cannot be seen as 'an isolated and individual affair'. What I find particularly intriguing about *Outside Belongings*, however, is its proposition that the concept speaks to a process that is accompanied by a desire, or longing, another idea which we shall see features prominently in Afropolitan texts. Probyn (1996, 6, 19) argues that the concept 'expresses a desire for more than what is', capturing 'the desire for some sort of attachment, be it to other people, places, or modes of being' and the 'ways in which individuals and groups are caught within wanting to belong, wanting to become'. A similar observation has been made by other scholars who note that the word holds different meanings – a longing to be somewhere else, but also different ideas of

ownership, say a person's material possessions or the notion that a person belongs to a nation, or that a nation belongs to its people (e.g., Hedetoft and Hjort, 2002).

What is distinct about the longing that can become part of one's experience of the concept of belonging is the ambiguities and uncertainties that often materialise in connection with it. Quoting Walter Benjamin, Probyn (1996, 19, 8) sees the longing to belong as 'a defining feature of our postmodern, postcolonial times, part of the contemporary "perplexity of living"', a historical context which makes for a 'tenacious and fragile desire' that is 'increasingly performed in the knowledge of the impossibility of ever really and truly belonging' and 'embarrasses [the concept's] taken-for-granted-nature'. In short, 'the processes of belonging are always tainted with deep insecurities about the possibility of truly fitting in' (ibid., 40).

The theories that are included above are not intended to be exhaustive but rather to sketch out some of the overall sentiments of belonging that are at play in Afropolitan texts and as such provide a template from which to begin the discussion. In the chapters to follow, we will come across various ideas, representations, experiences, conversations and narratives which allude to different configurations of belonging and which invite us to understand the concept in broad terms: as a signifier of the various attachments we make, whether it is belonging to a place, a culture, a group or network of people, or to specific individuals in our lives (family and beyond). At times, we shall see that style and material objects also come to represent their own attachments and connections. What is significant to note is that the latter usually stand in place of something else – a specific location or a group of people, for example. The texts thus make room for multiple belongings (some more transient than others yet nevertheless significant) and illustrate that the question of what it means to belong is one which is personal and affective: it rarely depends on our national affiliation alone; instead, it comes to signal the attachments we form to all sorts of places, things and people and which leave us with

meaningful connections, ones that make us feel like we belong and get to define what this means on our own terms.

Finally, we shall see that Afropolitan texts echo another assertion made by Probyn (1996, 8), namely that the very need to think about belonging is perhaps a sign of *not* belonging; usually, it is when belonging becomes a point of contention – when it is questioned whether the Afropolitan figure fits in or is out of place as she or he travels across borders or engages with other people in social interaction – that the concept is brought up and triggers anxieties about what it means to feel connected and at home in the world. This tension between belonging and non-belonging is one of the many questions surrounding the concept that this thesis explores through its discussion of Afropolitan texts.

Chapter Overviews

The discussion above indicates that the theme that has taken on the most prominent role in Afropolitanism is mobility, whilst style is another theme which is scrutinised repeatedly. The trajectories these two themes have taken since Afropolitanism was first popularised have become essential to the term and can be considered its defining features, with readers and discussants leading us back to them again and again. As literary scholars have begun to consider alternative readings of Afropolitanism, a third theme which is beginning to take hold is anxiety. In what follows, I offer a critical exploration of belonging in the context of the different trajectories these three themes have taken. The thesis is divided into three chapters, each of which focuses on one of the trajectories, and the individual chapters contain three or four sections which each concentrate on one of the ten texts that have been selected for the study. This allows me to consider how belonging comes to the surface in the content and form of each text but also to identify and discuss any patterns that develop as I move from section to section and from text to text.

Drawing on existing theories of mobility in literary studies and elsewhere (e.g., Mortimer, 1990), Chapter One explores how different forms of mobility – physical movements but also the journeys that can be taken through the imagination, as well as digital ones – intersect and, in the process, come to shape experiences of belonging in the three following texts: Adichie's and Unigwe's novels *Americanah* and *On Black Sisters' Street* and Salami's blog *MsAfropolitan*. In addition, I consider different ways in which other social constructs such as gender and class form part of these experiences. The chapter argues that belonging becomes multi-layered, multi-vocal and multi-local in the context of Afropolitanism, taking on different meanings for different people, depending on their personal itineraries and lived experiences. Although this opens up the concept of belonging in a way which I maintain is useful – implying not only that it is possible to understand the term in a broad sense but that there is space for personal agency in defining what it means to belong – my analyses of the texts will display the concept as one which is highly ambiguous and full of uncertainty and tension at the same time. One way in which this becomes evident in Afropolitan texts, I propose, is in the contrast that emerges between the idea of agency and the broader structures and politics of belonging that affect (and restrict) the Afropolitan figure's movements.

Chapter Two focuses on Cole's and Manyika's novels *Open City* and *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun*, Bannor's blog *This Afropolitan Life* and Ade Bantu's and Ogunsanya's live concert series Afropolitan Vibes. My interest lies in discussing questions related to style which, I claim, make room for another way to think about belonging in the context of Afropolitanism: in the four texts, the act of creating a style and other forms of (self)fashioning can be a way to signal and embrace the multi-layered, multi-vocal and multi-local characteristics of one's experience of belonging. Over the course of the chapter, I further illustrate that assembling a text or creating a character can be another way to channel specific

ideas or forms of belonging. Building on scholarly works from literary and cultural studies which invite us to think about fashion and style in different ways (e.g., Greenblatt, 1984, Hall and Jefferson, 2006), I thus suggest that Afropolitan texts see style as more than a signifier of capitalism and consumerism as is otherwise argued in the debates on Afropolitanism. While this leaves us with the impression that personal agency, once again, plays a key role in the formation of belonging, what is interesting is how this continues to be interrupted by wider structures and politics of belonging. As such, Afropolitan cultural production implies that the concept is subject to ongoing negotiation and, more often than not, makes for a fleeting and ephemeral experience of being connected to places, peoples and cultures.

Chapter Three turns to the remaining three texts – Amarteifio's web series *An African City* and Selasi's and Popoola's novels *Ghana Must Go* and *When We Speak of Nothing* – to explore the affective characteristics of belonging. Whereas the previous chapters hint at the ambiguous feelings of belonging that underpin the Afropolitan term, my analyses here offer an in-depth discussion of what it means to *not* belong. Expanding on the current scholarship of Afropolitanism in which anxiety is viewed as key (Knudsen and Rahbek, 2016, Rushton, 2017), I recognise that this emotion plays an important role, but I am also of the opinion that other emotions come to the surface. My contention is that the experience of non-belonging is precipitated by wider structures and politics which often trigger a haunting sensation of being out of place or not fitting in, leading to various yet related emotions such as anxiety, fear, shame and anger, for instance. I further rely on recent studies of affect to argue that anxiety has a distinct form that becomes dominant in the texts themselves, not just in their content but in their form (Ahmed, 2014, Brinkema, 2014), and which leaves a lasting impression of what non-belonging feels like for the Afropolitan figure. I claim that my readings in this study speak to the many differential and nomadic characteristics of the concept, as well as the complexities,

tensions and ambiguities that shape (Afropolitan) experiences of belonging in the present moment.

CHAPTER ONE

Mobility and the Concept of Belonging

The debates on Afropolitanism echo late twentieth-century discussions of cosmopolitanism in which Bruce Robbins (1998, 1, 3) puts forward the idea that belonging can be understood as a 'reality of (re)attachment, multiple attachment, or attachment at a distance' – a definition which, as noted in the Introduction, makes room for the various and often obscure connections we make to 'all sorts of places, casually if not always consciously, including many that we have never traveled to' or 'that we have perhaps only seen on television'. In other words, the connections we form to 'here', 'there' and 'elsewhere' are often precipitated by different kinds of movement. New scholarship on cosmopolitanism echoes these sentiments of mobility (Toivanen, 2021). In a recent discussion of diaspora literature, John McLeod (2018, loc. 71) notes that 'diasporic life can involve frequent traveling between here and there or can pivot on a single seminal movement of leave-taking or can involve no physical travel at all'. In his work on Afropolitanism, Chielozona Eze (2016, 116-7) makes a similar point, namely that the way we form attachments depends on more than 'spatial mobility' – often, it also hinges on our 'interior mobility'. And other scholars have noted in their work on the Afropolitan term that the invention of the Internet has brought with it a new kind of mobility – one which makes it possible for us to articulate new connections and keep alive old ones without having to rely on physical travel (Mbembe, 2015, see also Gehrmann, 2016). These latter forms of movement are, according to Arjun Appadurai (1996, 2010) and Simon Gikandi (in Knudsen and Rahbek, 2016, 43-62), often influenced by global flows of culture that have allowed for productions of literature, music, TV and other creative forms from elsewhere to feed into our ideas of what it

is like to belong to places and cultures beyond the immediate location in which we find ourselves.

The chapter explores this wider context of mobility. Focusing on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, Minna Salami's *MsAfropolitan* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, I am interested in how characters in Afropolitan novels and creators of other Afropolitan texts opt for different kinds of movement and the ways in which these movements affect their individual experiences and ways of imagining belonging. Overall, the chapter is structured around two arguments. Afropolitan texts pivot on different kinds of mobility – migration and other examples of material travel in 'real' life, but also the journeys that are taken through the imagination and through culture (TV, literature and so on), as well as those that have been made possible by the advent of the Internet. Like the scholars cited above, I argue that belonging becomes 'open' and multi-local in this context – as a signifier of the various networks and connections the Afropolitan figure forms to, and across, different locations. Yet, I further suggest that the same context makes for highly ambiguous and uncertain experiences of belonging; we shall see that the different kinds of mobility and the complex ways in which they intersect can muddle what it means for the Afropolitan figure to belong in the present moment. Finally, we shall see that the broader politics of belonging that the characters in Afropolitan novels and the producers of other Afropolitan texts encounter on their (physical) journeys across borders collide with the ideas of belonging they conjure up on other journeys. This indicates that the concept of belonging is subject to ongoing definition and negotiation and that Afropolitan texts add a layer of tension to the assumption that the early twenty-first century brings with it unrestricted and unlimited possibilities for belonging.

The first section of the chapter discusses *Americanah*, a novel which illustrates how its characters' connections to different places and cultures are made uncertain and ambiguous, not

only as they travel between Nigeria and the diaspora but as these journeys feed into or collide with the ideas of belonging they conjure up either in their mind or on their journeys in the digital realm. This becomes evident in my reading of both Ifemelu's and Obinze's stories – each of which shows how the characters' limited access to physical mobility keeps them from making their personal ideas and desires for belonging part of their lived reality. And when they finally do get to travel abroad to the US and the UK, they are unable to pursue these aspirations because of the wider structures and politics that shape their existence – it is only on Obinze's journey inward and in Ifemelu's digital movements that they get to hold on to an unambiguous sense of belonging, and even here we shall see that this feeling is undermined repeatedly. By teasing out the complexities and contradictions that come with belonging in the early twenty-first century for Africans who move and live across borders, *Americanah* thus draws attention to the concept's 'taken-for-granted nature' (Probyn, 1996, 8).

To elaborate on the ideas of belonging encountered in *Americanah*, the following section turns to Salami's blog *MsAfropolitan*. I demonstrate in my reading of this text how its author creates her own (digital) space of belonging on her blog – a space which forms a contrast to the sensation of non-belonging she has experienced offline, often as a result of being marginalised because she is a woman. The blog is rooted in ideas of ownership, agency and critical inquiry which operate as metaphors for how the author comes to belong on her own terms: *MsAfropolitan* constitutes a place which belongs to her and enables her to think and write freely and share critical reflections on the world around her. At the same time, we will come across other metaphors of belonging which speak to *MsAfropolitan* as a place where multiple voices and perspectives are valued and where there is room for different kinds of attachment.

The last part of the chapter discusses another novel, Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* which offers a critical exploration of belonging in the context of a global trafficking network

as it follows the trajectory of four African women whose aspirations of belonging take them from their homes on the continent to the red-light district in a European city. *On Black Sisters' Street* complicates belonging in a way which echoes the other texts in the chapter, and my discussion of the novel is, to a great extent, an extension of the previous ones. Like Salami's *MsAfropolitan*, Unigwe's novel draws attention to the role of gender in its female characters' lived experience of belonging. At the same time, we will see that the text mirrors *Americanah*'s tension between its characters' inward and outward journeys: here, we also meet characters whose interior mobility allows them to form a connection across borders but whose limited access to physical (and social) mobility presents an obstacle and who are unable to pursue their aspirations of belonging when they finally get to travel abroad.

(Be)longing Across Borders in *Americanah*

Adichie's novel *Americanah* follows the trajectories of Ifemelu and Obinze, two characters whose existence unfolds in a transnational context and is shaped in the meeting of different kinds of mobility. It is in Ifemelu's and Obinze's individual experiences of this meeting that their sense of belonging takes form as *Americanah* emphasises how broader structures and politics impact their journeys, and, in the process, end up clashing with each character's own ideas of what it means to (be)long across borders. Structured as a dual narrative, the novel follows their coming of age in Nigeria amongst the middle-class segments of Nsukka and Lagos when the country is under military rule in the last decades of the twentieth century and 'everyone [is] talking about leaving', dreaming of opportunities available outside the country (Adichie, 2013a, 98). Affected by political instability and corruption, the characters' existence is permeated by a haunting feeling of 'choicelessness' (Adichie, 2013a, 276, see also Adichie,

2013b). At the turn of the new millennium, life pulls them in different directions, and they end up going abroad on separate journeys to the US and the UK.

Although I open this chapter with *Americanah*, we should note that Adichie does not use 'Afropolitan', neither in her description of the novel nor in reference to herself. The author is critical of the term (Barber, 2013; see also Tunca and Ledent, 2015, 3), and she encourages her readers to see the book as a twenty-first-century love story, a theme which forms part of the narrative framework of *Americanah*: the romantic relationship between Ifemelu and Obinze is what ties the different strands of the novel together, keeping readers in suspense about whether they will reunite upon their return to Nigeria (see Adichie, 2014). Still, it is possible to read *Americanah* through other thematic lenses. As asserted by both scholars and reviewers (e.g., Cruz-Gutiérrez, 2018, Goyal, 2014, Schulz, 2013), migration, race and gender play a substantial role in the text, for instance. Echoing existing scholarship on Afropolitanism, I maintain that it is instructive to include the book in a study of belonging in Afropolitanism. As Eva Rask Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek (2016, 240) demonstrate, the text converges with (other) Afropolitan novels in the way it foregrounds the theme of mobility to recognise and explore the many complexities that come with the twenty-first-century 'African experience in the diaspora' and, more generally, the experience of travelling across borders. Their study further shows that belonging is an experiential concept in the novel, one which pivots on the individual migration and travel knowledges of each protagonist. Other scholars situate the text in Afropolitanism on similar terms (e.g., Wasihun, 2016).

In this section, I expand on these readings by incorporating into the discussion the other forms of mobility the novel also portrays, the different ways in which they become interlaced with the characters' access to material travel and how they, in turn, affect the experience of belonging for each character. My claim is that it is by looking at the different journeys Ifemelu

and Obinze embark on that the readers can begin to form an understanding of how mobility inflects belonging in the novel. The first part of the discussion considers the way in which the opening chapters of *Americanah* draw attention to the different spatial and temporal settings in which Ifemelu and Obinze have found themselves over time to highlight to its readers the ambiguity and uncertainty in each character's belonging across borders. Divided into two parts, the remaining part of the discussion explores how the rest of the novel follows up on these sentiments in the characters' individual narratives. Here, we see that their experiences are largely determined by broader structures and politics of belonging – an impression which is substantiated frequently on their travels abroad. Occasionally, we also come across instances where the characters themselves get to define belonging – to decide what belonging means to them. Yet, this rarely happens without interruptions from the structures and politics that lie outside the characters' control – interruptions that, in turn, make for an underlying tension in the novel's conception of belonging and which I propose is central to Afropolitan texts' take on what it means to belong in the early twenty-first century.

Ambiguous and Uncertain Belongings

Americanah's third-person narrator weaves together 'here,' 'there' and 'elsewhere' – the different spatial and temporal settings in which Ifemelu and Obinze have found themselves over time – by jumping back and forth between significant moments in their lives. This weaving together is particularly important in the opening chapters because it leaves the readers of *Americanah* with an initial impression of belonging as a multi-layered and multi-local experience for both characters. But we also get to see from the beginning of the novel that the characters' individual stories are underpinned by ambiguity and uncertainty. This becomes evident in the first chapter when we are introduced to Ifemelu. At this point, she has not yet returned to Nigeria and still lives in the US where she has spent more than ten years. Overall,

Ifemelu represents, as scholars note (e.g., Androne, 2017, Ndīgīrīgī, 2017), a successful migrant story that shows how her journey abroad leads to US citizenship. And the very first paragraph gives a similar impression, portraying Ifemelu as a character who knows the US intimately. The narrator notes how:

> Princeton, in the summer, smelled of nothing, and although Ifemelu liked the tranquil greenness of the many trees, the clean streets and stately homes, the delicately overpriced shops and the quiet, abiding air of earned grace, it was this, the lack of smell, that most appealed to her, perhaps because the other American cities she knew well had all smelled distinctly. Philadelphia had the musty scent of history. New Haven smelled of neglect. Baltimore smelled of brine, and Brooklyn of sun-warmed garbage. But Princeton had no smell. She liked taking deep breaths here … [and] watching the locals. (Adichie, 2013a, 3)

Utilising the sense of smell as the signifier of her intimate and experiential knowledge of metropolitan life on America's East Coast, the novel demonstrates that Ifemelu is a mobile character and a spectator who knits together the here and there into a seamless experience of belonging.

The text quickly disrupts these initial sentiments of belonging, however, noting towards the end of the same paragraph that Ifemelu 'liked, most of all, that in this place of affluent ease, she could pretend to be someone else, someone specially admitted into a hallowed American club, someone adorned with certainty' (ibid.). This sentence which forms a contrast to the first extract echoes Roger Bromley's (2000, 12) point that 'the outsider, the migrant' lacks 'the vestments of the local or national territory – colour, language, accent', for instance – and so is often 'seen as being beyond/outside localisation and territorial ordering'. For Ifemelu, we see that this means that her experience of belonging to the US comes to hinge on ambiguity and uncertainty: while other people are members of the 'hallowed American club', she is still considered an outsider and so can only pretend that she belongs – despite the fact that she has

obtained US citizenship and knows the subtle differences between the cities that make up her new home.

The idea of an ambiguous and uncertain belonging that comes to the surface in the extracts above appears again when we are introduced to Obinze in the second chapter. Obinze, who has recently returned to Lagos at this stage, is haunted by a similar sensation of belonging, one which, in this case, feeds into his attachment to Nigeria. We get the impression that this is linked to a 'disorienting strangeness', a feeling of being out of place after living abroad (Adichie, 2013a, 27). Yet, we shall see that the unease is also the result of a creeping realisation that he, like other people, has to 'negotiate [his] desires for belonging as through a maze of club rules' – rules which are determined by broader structures and politics of belonging not just in Lagos but elsewhere and which are difficult to make sense of (Probyn, 1996, 24).

Inward and Outward Journeys

While the opening discussion above identifies the sentiments of belonging that are gestured towards in *Americanah*'s initial portrayal of Obinze, I suggest that we now take a closer look at how the character's belonging is depicted later in the text. Here, we get to see that the attachments the young Obinze conjures up on his imagined journeys before he moves to London (and subsequently returns to Lagos) form a contrast to the older character's experience of material travel and that this adds to the sense of ambiguity and uncertainty.

The novel's distinction between different kinds of movement brings to mind other scholars' references to mobility, both in African literature and in Afropolitanism. Mildred Mortimer (1990) speaks of female and male characters' 'inward' and 'outward' journeys in French African literature from the twentieth century, for example. Another distinction is seen in Knudsen and Rahbek's interview with Gikandi where the latter claims that there are two groups of Afropolitans who rely on different journeys. There is an 'elite group' who moves and

lives across borders, often as a result 'of being born across boundaries', but we also see a 'non-elite group' who lives a transnational experience of belonging 'through the imagination', one which is usually triggered by or 'based on media images' and which is demarcated by their limited access to physical mobility (Gikandi in Knudsen and Rahbek, 2016, 49). Eze (2014b), who points to a similar distinction, notes that the latter group 'might be geographically bound within the spaces of their nation', but that their 'imaginations are not': they can still imagine life elsewhere and form attachments to what lies outside the borders of home, albeit from a distance.

While *Americanah* hinges on the idea of inward and outward journeys, the novel does not give the impression that they are divided along the same lines of gender and class. Whereas Mortimer (1990, 12) maintains that fiction by African male writers usually revolves around a male character who embarks on an 'outer journey' and African women writers tend to depict female characters' journeys inward, we shall see below that Obinze's story includes both kinds of movement. And the question of who gets to travel and belong across borders is not a straightforward one in Adichie's text, but rather one which is determined by specific politics of belonging. Note, for instance, when Obinze – after spending years in Nsukka and Lagos longing to belong to the US and imagining life across the Atlantic – applies for a visa at the American embassy, and his application is denied. Obinze's mother, who teaches English language literature at the university in Nsukka, quickly realises that the outcome of the application is a result of the politics of belonging dominating the climate in the US at the turn of the century, a country which has become 'averse to foreign young men' from certain parts of the world because of terrorism fears after 9/11 (Adichie, 2013a, 233). The novel thus demonstrates that the character's access to mobility and belonging is directly affected by specific political

structures and decisions that depend on historical circumstances – in this case, by US immigration policy.

At the same time, *Americanah* indicates that social actors look for ways to navigate the wider politics and structures affecting their lives, as is evident when Obinze's mother helps the character circumvent the system by listing him as her research assistant so he can travel to London. This might not get him to America, but at least it will give him a break from the stagnant job market and the 'choicelessness' that saturates his and other young people's existence in Nigeria (ibid., 276). Relocating to the UK does not mean that Obinze has more agency nor does it get him any closer to the place he has visited on his imagined journeys, however: his temporary visa quickly expires, and he soon finds himself trapped by politics of belonging once again, cleaning toilets and working in a warehouse under another man's name. And when he agrees to a sham marriage in a desperate attempt to secure new documents, he is detained by the authorities and sent back to Nigeria.

Obinze's journey complicates Gikandi's distinction between Afropolitans' inward and outward journeys further by illustrating how belonging and class intersect and become fluid and unpredictable in the context of mobility. We have already seen above that Obinze's belonging turns into non-belonging, but the journey abroad also inverts his middle-class position in Nigeria by placing him at the bottom of the social ladder in the UK. The irony of this inversion is not lost on Obinze who reminds himself that 'people who [go] abroad to clean toilets' is a common joke in Nigeria (Adichie, 2013a, 237). But the experience has a profound effect on him. His failed attempt to go to the US and struggle in the UK shatter his initial sense of being connected to a place beyond the borders of Nigeria, making him increasingly aware that people's experience of belonging is always, as Nira Yuval-Davis (2011) and Elspeth Probyn (1996) contend, determined by social and political forces which often lie beyond their

own control and which tend to intersect with restrictive immigration policies and official structures that are set in place to limit the possibilities of belonging for 'outsiders'. In this case, we see how the character has been marked as an illicit and unwanted person, unlike the people around him: as he watches 'people brushing past him' in the streets of London, he thinks to himself, 'with a lost longing': '*you can work, you are legal, you are visible, and you don't even know how fortunate you are*' (Adichie, 2013a, 227, italics in original).

Arriving in Lagos after being deported, Obinze is faced with another irony when he finds that the fact that he has lived abroad makes it easier for him to become a 'Big Man': evidently, the concept of class does not operate in the same way in Nigeria, and his physical mobility continues to set in motion an unexpected fluidity of class. While this fluidity works in his favour in this instance, helping him climb the social ladder upon his return, the arbitrariness of his belonging begins to cement in his mind, making him 'feel bloated from all he [has] acquired – the family, the houses, the cars, the bank accounts', 'overcome by the urge to prick everything with a pin, to deflate it all' (Adichie, 2013a, 21). As such, the text demonstrates that Obinze's unease – the one we encountered when we first met the character – has to do with more than the initial feeling of being out of place: the disorienting strangeness he feels is triggered by this context as well.

What is significant here is how the text juxtaposes Obinze's outward journey and subsequent return with the inward journeys that took him elsewhere when he was younger. On these journeys, which take place before he graduates from university, his belonging is characterised as a distinct desire to belong across the Atlantic, a sense of belonging which remains unquestioned and unambiguous in his mind. This recalls Probyn's (1996) distinction between the experience of belonging and that of longing to be (see Introduction), indicating a slippage between the different meanings that are associated with the word. Even if the young

protagonist longs to become part of the US, his access to physical travel is restricted and so this longing does not turn into a 'real' belonging. He and his mother do not have the means to travel even if they are part of the middle class in Nigeria, and so he quickly ends up spending most of his time (during his formative years in Nsukka at first and later in Lagos) longing to be in the US and pondering what it is like to live there. For Obinze, this experience of (be)longing across borders is also shaped by a transnational flow of culture, however – one which instils in him very particular ideas and images of American life, thus bringing us back to Gikandi's point that Afropolitans' inward journeys are often underpinned by their cultural consumption:

> The advertisement on NTA for *Andrew Checking Out*, which [Obinze] had watched as a child, had given shape to his longings. "Men, I'm checkin' out … No good roads, no light, no water. Men, you can't even get a bottle of soft drink!" (Adichie, 2013a, 232-3)

The TV advertisement which encourages the young Obinze to leave Nigeria by 'checkin' out' gives him the naïve impression that the US is the 'elsewhere' he is supposed to be longing for and late twentieth-century Nigeria the opposite. As he grows older, his longing for the US turns into an obsession which extends to most facets of American life, and he begins to consider himself an expert on everything associated with the place:

> Everybody watched American films and exchanged faded American magazines, but he knew details about American presidents from a hundred years ago. Everybody watched American shows, but he knew about Lisa Bonet leaving *The Cosby Show* to go and do *Angel Heart*. (Adichie, 2013a, 67)

There will be more discussion of how the idea of the elsewhere works stylistically in other Afropolitan texts later in the thesis (see Chapter Two), but for now we should note this romantic notion of an imagined elsewhere, one which becomes increasingly stubborn and intensifies the character's desire to travel after he graduates from university: 'He had never simply wanted to

go *abroad*, as many others did … It had always been America, only America. A longing nurtured and nursed over many years' (Adichie, 2013a, 232; italics in original). Although the character has not yet visited the place that permeates his dreams, popular culture gives him a sense of America in Nigeria, and it becomes a source of inspiration in his imagining of what it means to belong to there. Inspired by what he sees, hears and reads, he is convinced that 'the universe [will] bend according to his will' and that his sense of belonging beyond the national boundaries of Nigeria will go undisputed (ibid.). Over time, the US becomes the place he is 'destined to be' in: he is supposed to be 'walking the streets of Harlem, discussing the merits of Mark Twain with his American friends, gazing at Mount Rushmore' (ibid., 232-3).

One could argue that Obinze's interaction with the world beyond Nigeria depends on a limited choice in the culture he consumes in the sense that it is *made* available by larger structural and global forces of distribution which are always restricted in one way or another (see Malcomson in Cheah and Robbins, 1998), and which do not necessarily provide an accurate presentation of life elsewhere. It is perhaps even tempting to say that the character is a victim of globalisation. Yet, engaging with the US through TV, literature and other forms of media and culture is also an opportunity for him to actively participate in transnational culture(s), to imagine what it is like to live elsewhere and to give a distinct shape to his (be)longing across borders. Even if his choices are dictated by globalisation, we should therefore acknowledge that there is a degree of agency at the same time.

The fact that Obinze has access to and is able to engage with a diverse selection of cultural sources further indicates a certain level of privilege compared to other segments of Nigerian society: he consumes random TV advertisements, but he also has the time (and access) to carefully select and engage with specific examples of American popular culture and use it as a template for his longing. As we shall see later in this chapter, Unigwe's novel offers a similar

portrayal of characters who rely on a global circulation of culture to imagine and yearn for life elsewhere, but the products they consume mainly consist of the occasional image they have seen on TV or songs from the local record shop. In other words, they do not appear to have the same level of access as Obinze does. While this implies that he is more 'elite', we should not conflate him with the Afropolitan crowd that has unlimited access to material culture, as is portrayed in Selasi's (2005) 'Bye-Bye Babar'. Nor do I wish to imply that he mirrors the protagonists we encounter in Chapter Two in my readings of Sarah Manyika's *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun* and Teju Cole's *Open City*: these characters similarly rely on culture to develop a sense of belonging across borders, but it is important to note that they have access to a more unrestricted physical mobility because of their social and economic ties and because they are already attached to different locations outside Nigeria through their family.

As *Americanah* jumps back and forth between Obinze's inward and outward journeys, the text creates a contrast and tension between his lived experience of belonging and the kind of belonging he conjures up in his mind and through culture: he might be able to imagine himself part of somewhere else, but he essentially relies on a naïve idea of the concept. This becomes clear to the character after travelling to London. Here, the initial impression of an unrestricted belonging is gradually replaced by a different and more complex perspective. Life across the Atlantic still permeates his dreams, and he continues to look (in American literature, for example) for 'a resonance, a shaping of his longings, a sense of the America that he had imagined himself to be a part of' (Adichie, 2013a, 256). Yet, he now finds the act of engaging with the place from a distance and through culture to be a disappointment because it fails to speak to the ambiguities and uncertainties that haunt him in London, a place in which he feels stuck with a lingering sensation of alienation and exclusion. The realisation makes him reflect critically on the intricate ways in which politics influence the migratory patterns and histories

that inform the world in the present moment. The novel demonstrates that the character's view of the world is challenged and changed by his movements across borders, making him increasingly aware not only what it is like to be denied the privilege of unrestricted mobility but of the connection between the UK and other parts of the world and the complexities of the various 'push' and 'pull' factors shaping migration at the turn of the century – factors which, in the extract cited here, are explained as remnants of the colonial and imperial politics of the previous centuries but which, as the character himself recognises, continue to inflect experiences of belonging in the early twenty-first century:

> The wind blowing across the British Isles was odorous with fear of asylum seekers, infecting everybody with the panic of impending doom, and so articles were written and read, simply and stridently, as though the writers lived in a world in which the present was unconnected to the past, and they had never considered this to be the normal course of history: the influx into Britain of black and brown people from countries created by Britain [who, like him, were] … overcrowding an already overcrowded island. (Adichie, 2013a, 258-9)

Obinze is on the train when he silently reflects on this history – a reflection which echoes McLeod's (2017, 4) reference to millennial Britain and its 'residual routes of migrant and diasporic connection' which, 'shaped by Empire and post-war decolonisation', form 'one constituent of an increasingly complex webbing, formed through global upheavals which have propelled people across oceans and checkpoints in fear for their lives and in search of safe futures'. Surrounded by other people commuting around London, Obinze notices that a woman who sits next to him is reading a newspaper with a hostile article about immigrants, and this leads him to ponder how his own illegal presence in London fits into the picture. Not long after, he is deported by the authorities and sent back to Lagos, thus leaving the readers of the novel with a haunting idea of what it is like for the character to move between Nigeria and the UK.

Mobility and Belonging in a Virtual World

So far, my reading of *Americanah*'s inward and outward journeys provides an example of how belonging is portrayed in Afropolitan texts. In this final part of the discussion, I return to Ifemelu's story to consider belonging in the context of the character's access to physical and digital mobility.

Ifemelu's migration story has already been discussed at length, especially in light of her arrival in the US and subsequent return to Nigeria (e.g., Emenyonu, 2017, Hallemeier, 2015, Knudsen and Rahbek, 2016). Detailed readings of the character's online presence (and, in particular, the contents of her blog and how it features as a narrative component in the novel) have also surfaced (see Cruz-Gutiérrez, 2017, 2018, Guarracino, 2014, Shringarpure, 2020). What I suggest we consider here is how Ifemelu's physical mobility leads to, and intersects with, her mobility in the virtual world and, in turn, the extent to which this affects her belonging. Adichie employs digital mobility to investigate how the character's belonging is complicated beyond her outward journey at a point in time which is characterised not just by early twenty-first-century migration patterns and global networks of culture, but by the Internet. To some extent, the novel hints at a new experience of belonging for the character by showing that going online can help her carve out a new place for herself in the US.

Whereas class plays a key role in Obinze's experience of belonging across borders, I am particularly interested in Adichie's emphasis on gender and race issues in Ifemelu's story and how they take part in de-romanticising the successful migration story we encountered when we first met the character in the opening chapter. The readers quickly get the impression from Ifemelu's trajectory across the Atlantic that an ongoing negotiation of her gendered position as a migrant woman is required when she, not long after arriving from Nigeria, is looking for a way to pay for her studies and is forced to use her friend's work permit because of the restrictions on her student visa. Becoming increasingly desperate when finding a job proves

impossible, she responds to a dubious newspaper ad from a sports coach who is looking for a female personal assistant with 'communication and interpersonal skills' and ends up accepting money for giving him a 'massage' to 'help [him] relax' (Adichie, 2013a, 143-4).

The intimate encounter demonstrates that Ifemelu's (non-)belonging is partly shaped by the fact that she is a woman and partly by her legal status in the country. While *Americanah* thus draws attention to how belonging is determined in the context of mobility, it also points to the emotional effects this can have on the individual, indicating that the character develops a depression because of the anxiety-inducing incident with the coach. Marking her as an outsider for whom there is no room to navigate apart from as a gendered object satisfying a stranger's needs, the episode leaves her struggling for months, making her feel 'like a small ball, adrift and alone', 'so tiny, so insignificant, rattling around emptily' (Adichie, 2013a, 154).

Later in the novel, Ifemelu manages to work her way up the social ladder when landing a job in public relations after graduating. Once again, however, we see that the character's belonging is compromised – this time, by its intersections with gender and race. Before starting the new job, she is advised to straighten her hair in order to look 'professional' and so starts using chemical products known as 'relaxers' (Adichie, 2013a, 204). When the products burn her scalp and her hair starts falling out, she reluctantly gets a new two-inch hairstyle. Having internalised the 'institutionalized racial and gender discrimination' that permeates the US beauty industry (Cruz-Gutiérrez, 2018, 8), she is convinced that the haircut makes her look 'unfinished', 'all big eyes and big head', and that it will affect her career and compromise her belonging because she does not live up to expectations of how women should look (Adichie, 2013a, 208).

The character (as opposed to Obinze who resorts to his imagination) turns to the World Wide Web to look for a way to cope with this experience. After stumbling across a website

with advice on natural hair care, she ends up immersed in a world of online hair communities 'with a tumbling gratitude', seeing how African American women are 'sculpt[ing] for themselves a virtual world where their coily, kinky, nappy, woolly hair [is] normal' and where they can share hair 'journeys' and exchange tips on beauty products (Adichie, 2013a, 212). Based on this initial journey into the online realm, it makes sense to say, as Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez (2017, 255-6) does, that the Internet is valuable because it offers 'safe spaces' of 'self-expression' for the character that, at first sight, appear to be detached from the politics of race and gender saturating her life when she is offline. The online realm is rewarding because it leaves her with a sense of recognition and affiliation when she receives 'positive reinforcement through thumbs-ups and virtual hugs' (Cruz-Gutiérrez, 2018, 10). It also marks a turn in her outward journey because it changes how she feels about living in the US: joining an online community allows her to finally connect with other people in a place that has otherwise felt frustratingly alien.

The web further helps Ifemelu to create her own (digital) space in the US. Soon after venturing online, she launches a blog titled *Raceteenth or Various Observations about American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*. From our perspective (as readers of the novel), the blog adds a different point of view: the blog entries are inserted in the chapters throughout the novel which means that the readers alternate between the third-person narrator's perspective on the experiences and Ifemelu's own commentary on these same experiences. Making space for both 'accounts' encourages us to consider the overall trajectory of her journey abroad as it is offered by the narrator but also how it affects the character from her own perspective. And the blog is productive for the character herself who finally finds a place that is hers and where she is free to engage with and reflect critically on the world around her and, in the process, become more familiar with the

wider structures and politics that underpin it. In a way, the blog thus becomes a virtual elsewhere – a digital space that speaks to a new kind of belonging for the character.

Even if the blog is valuable for the protagonist, however, it is important to note that the Internet does not provide a safe space in the long run. *Americanah* suggests as much by illustrating that her online and offline journeys are not separate but rather closely entwined entities. The novel thus reiterates a key point made by scholars from the early 2000s onwards, including Mia Consalvo and Charles Ess (2013, 4) who argue in their introduction to *The Handbook to Internet Studies* that 'distinctions between the real and the virtual, the offline and the online' are neither 'accurate' nor 'analytically useful'. This is in response to 'the cyber-utopianism' that was prevalent in the 1990s and which paved the way for optimistic assumptions about the Internet, including one that Internet users would be able to leave behind their bodies when venturing online and in this sense feel free from the various limitations or obstacles they might face in 'real' life (ibid.).

According to Jan Fernback (2007, 53), we should not accept the online/offline dichotomy because 'interactions' in both spaces 'occur in a single social realm'. Similarly, Janne Bromseth and Jenny Sundén (2013, 283) insist that Internet users remain 'embedded in larger sociopolitical structures and cultural hegemonics.' One way in which this becomes evident in their study is in how queer women's 'online bodies are disconnected neither from dominating discourses of gender and sexuality, nor from the material specificity of bodies' in offline spaces (Bromseth and Sundén, 2013, 275). This emphasises that the web does not automatically allow people to engage with the (outside) world on their own terms nor is the infrastructure offered by the Internet cut off from the ones we find ourselves navigating when we go offline.

Hence, even if it appears that Ifemelu finds a space which is 'safe' from outside interference and allows her to leave behind the 'real' world, this is actually not the case; her experiences, online and offline, are part of the same social reality, and the new experience of belonging that comes with creating the blog is questioned in both realms. The text itself demonstrates this when the character begins to blog about race as a 'non-American black' and is reminded by her readers that she is an outsider – that she does not belong because her personal experience of race, unlike African Americans', is not bound up with the long and complicated history of race and racism in the US. This becomes apparent to her once again when she starts dating Blaine, an African American professor whose racial (and gendered) terms of belonging diverge from her own and who is acutely aware of this difference between them. Blogging about race and engaging with Blaine in discussions of the nuances and tensions between their individual positions in the US might seem like separate experiences but both make her increasingly aware of the nature of her affiliation – that although she is black, 'race is not embroidered in the fabric of her history' as is the case for Blaine (Adichie, 2013a, 337). She still gets to feel how her belonging, like African Americans', is contingent on the colour of her skin, yet, as a black African migrant woman, she does not feel tied up with history in the same way as Blaine whose African American experience is often characterised as being weighed down by the country's legacy of slavery.

While this context perhaps means that Ifemelu can navigate society without feeling self-conscious, it nevertheless comes to define (and limit) her sense of belonging, both online and offline. This is evident when the blog itself becomes the discussion point at a dinner party and Blaine's sister tells Ifemelu that 'she doesn't really feel all the stuff she's writing about', 'that it's all quaint and curious to her' because 'she's writing from the outside' as an African and that if she were African American, 'she'd just be labelled angry and shunned' (Adichie, 2013a,

336). While the critique does not mention Ifemelu's (non-)belonging specifically, it illustrates how her affiliation with the US – and the extent to which she has the right to demonstrate this connection by blogging about race in an American context – is being questioned by people who are close to her. The novel thus implies that the distinction between her 'real' life and the reality she experiences as it unfolds on the Internet is an arbitrary one and that she cannot escape the various challenges facing her in the US simply by being online.

The reading above has focused on each character's journey outward to consider how their experience of physical mobility forms a tension with other kinds of movement and leads to ambiguous and uncertain belongings. I have engaged with Ifemelu's and Obinze's stories separately, but we should also, as a final note here, recognise the juxtaposition between their journeys. Most importantly, there is a discrepancy between the idealised images of the US Obinze conjures up on his journey inward and Ifemelu's outward journey: the young Obinze's ideas fail to capture the nuance and complexity of this elsewhere because they do not make room for the historical and experiential differences of race and belonging amongst black people in the country – differences which limit the extent to which Ifemelu can relate to the African American experience. Neither do his ideas of the US account for the questions of gender which underpin her first job hunt. *Americanah* then demonstrates that the journeys taken by Ifemelu and Obinze are undercut in multiple ways – rather than allowing readers to assume that access to mobility automatically brings an unambiguous and unrestricted feeling of belonging, the novel offers two evocative narratives of two characters' journeys across borders to suggest that the opposite is the case.

The remaining two sections of this chapter will concentrate on the blog *MsAfropolitan* and the novel *On Black Sisters' Street*, each of which can help expand on the reading above. In what follows, I turn to *MsAfropolitan*, a text which allows us to take the discussion further by

encouraging us to think about ownership, agency and critical inquiry and the role they play in the formation of belonging.

MsAfropolitan and Belonging in a Digital Space

Whereas *Americanah* highlights the bleaker sides of the web in the early twenty-first century, Salami's blog *MsAfropolitan* leaves us with a different impression – a more optimistic portrayal – of what is possible in the online realm. The text attests to the ambiguity and uncertainty that have shaped its author's experience of (non-)belonging as she has moved and lived across borders, but in this section we shall also see how going online and creating her own space has allowed her to generate new kinds of belonging for herself and her readers – ones that leave her with a sense of ownership and agency, but which are inclusive of multiple voices and perspectives, too.

I agree with George Ogola (2019) and other scholars working in African studies that it is crucial to remember that digital technology usually ends up replicating global power dynamics and that we are therefore, to quote Shola Adenekan (2020), 'far away … from any notion of a digital utopia'. Nevertheless, we would be remiss to overlook the promises of the Internet. Dina Ligaga (2012, 4, 2) writes that the Internet comes with challenges, but that it still leaves room for agency: with 'its global presence, fluid nature, and multi-user characteristics', the Internet allows 'for a vast majority of people to articulate their opinions and desires' and to 'negotiate the meaning of political and cultural issues in their lives'. In similar terms, Achille Mbembe highlights the potential for more access and for a new kind of mobility with the advent of the Internet. He is of the opinion that the web offers its users a digital form of movement which can help them form new attachments by helping them transcend the need for physical movement (see Mbembe, 2015). Highlighting these characteristics, my reading in this section

will speak to a utopian idea of the Internet. The online realm might hold promises of unrestricted mobility, agency and access but such promises are not yet fully realised. Still, I argue that there is value in acknowledging the new possibilities that come with digital technology, proposing, like Bromseth and Sundén (2013, 275-6), that it is 'important for strategic, political reasons' to 'insist on the transgressive … potential of Internet media. Utopian thinking in/of cyberspace is not merely far-fetched and illusory'; it also holds 'promise in its way of imagining things differently'. My contention is that *MsAfropolitan* is a good place to think about this idea of the Internet in Afropolitan texts: it offers an intriguing example of how forging new spaces online can be a way to imagine belonging differently.

Salami employs *MsAfropolitan* as an online platform to discuss and share her critical reflections regularly, often writing several new blog entries every month. While the entries vary in length (some count over 3,000 words whereas others only include a short paragraph) and offer a vast archive structured around a diverse range of issues, the blog has a distinct angle: focus is often on Africa or the diaspora, and reading the blog indicates an ongoing interest in probing the world from a feminist point of view. The blog title is itself a reflection of this assemblage, inspired by the US-based feminist magazine *Ms*. as well as Selasi's Afropolitan essay, 'Bye-Bye Babar'. The themes are also central to her other work. Since launching *MsAfropolitan* in 2010, the blog author has become an influential figure in debates on Afropolitanism and feminism, contributing new ideas on discussion panels at cultural events, in conversation with scholars, and in her work for *The Guardian Nigeria* (in which she has contributed with her own column titled 'Gender Politics'), *Al Jazeera* and other news sites. In addition, she has published two books, including a collection of essays which explores feminist issues from an African perspective (see Salami, 2013a, 2020a).

My overall argument in this section is that belonging becomes a concept which holds multiple meanings on *MsAfropolitan.* After opening the discussion with some examples of how the blog author's multi-local existence has shaped her view on belonging in her writing, I turn to four metaphors – a room, a basket, a space and a cipher – that are brought into play, sometimes in reference to her own life or to *MsAfropolitan*, other times in her conceptualisation of Afropolitanism. Reading the metaphors alongside one another, I illustrate how they come to signify different (and sometimes contradictory) ideas of belonging: while one signals an entity that is closed off and private and which generates a sense of personal ownership and agency, for instance ('I've created what Virginia Woolf called a "room of my own"' (Salami, 2020a, 83)), another is rooted in the image of Afropolitanism as a 'cipher', an entity which is open and inclusive of multiple voices.

The metaphors can be used to understand how different ideas of belonging come to inform the blog itself. Salami has put *MsAfropolitan* together as a digital space that belongs to her, one which offers a unique way for her to engage with the world around her, allowing her to record her personal thoughts, ideas and opinions over time and to probe questions in open-ended motion. I suggest this is in a way which echoes Knudsen and Rahbek's (2016, 3) definition of Afropolitanism as 'a space of critical inquiry': the platform the author has created represents her own critical inquiry, centred on her voice and structured around issues she is passionate about. By way of introduction, we should note that these ideas tie in with the scholars cited in the beginning of this section who assert that the Internet has encouraged many of its users to utilise blogs and other online platforms such as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook as a way to engage in a kind of critical inquiry and in this way become active participants in their own culture and on their own terms (Adenekan, 2020, Ogola, 2019, see also Rasmussen, 2014). At the same time, however, we shall see that *MsAfropolitan* is inclusive of its readers. While

the readers cannot claim the same level of ownership and agency, Salami deliberately leaves the space open for them to enter not just to read her blog entries but to use the comment section following each entry to offer their own ideas and perspectives and, in this way, become part of the blog.

Moments of (Non-)Belonging

The blog author's life is not the focal point of *MsAfropolitan,* nor does the platform provide an extensive narrative of her lived experience of the concept – at least not to the same extent as Clarissa Bannor's blog *This Afropolitan Life* which centres on autobiographical content and foregrounds its author's thoughts about her own itinerant history (see Chapter Two). The author of *MsAfropolitan* is also sceptical about the idea of fully belonging anywhere. When asked in an interview, she explains that 'there is no place where I feel that I belong' (Salami quoted in Knudsen and Rahbek, 2016, 161). Using Nigeria, her father's home country and the place where she grew up and still frequently visits, as an example, she elaborates:

> In Nigeria I feel a lot of the things that make it difficult for me to belong. It is not so much that I'm outside of Nigeria. It is being a woman and having the thoughts that I have in a very patriarchal society. It can be really saddening that you are made to feel that your contributions are not valuable or valid, just because of your gender. (ibid., 162)

Salami explains here why articulating a meaningful affiliation to Nigeria is challenging: it is not so much the affiliation itself that makes her feel out of place but rather the patriarchal attitudes she encounters in connection with it. The interview extract helps clarify that the feeling of (non-)belonging speaks to a very particular framework of national identity and belonging and a singular experience, both of which are determined by the extent to which it is possible

for her to recognise herself in the broader politics and values of the country and whether her contributions are acknowledged or dismissed by others.

Even though Salami argues that she does not belong anywhere, we also find brief 'moments' on the blog where the readers catch a glimpse of what the concept means to her. Such instances – in which the author usually reflects on the different locations that make up her itinerant background (nations or cities, but sometimes regions and continents, too) – allude to the complexity of belonging: what it is like to experience an affiliation with multiple locations at once, having to make sense of the differences between these affiliations, realising that one's experience of belonging is conditioned by social constructs such as gender and race or longing for one place whilst feeling alienated in another. One *MsAfropolitan* blog entry from 2012 reads, for instance: 'Bright red double-decker buses. I don't know why these particular vehicles have come to represent any sense of alienation that I feel in England. Nevertheless, the reflection of one against my window feels unwelcoming. I miss Lagos' (Salami, 2012a). Another example appears in an entry Salami writes five years later. Here, she illustrates how the pride that comes with her connection to Finland where her mother was born is tangled up with feelings of shame: she is 'proud to come from [a place] … that always led the way in gender equality', but it is impossible to ignore the racism that has 'infest[ed] its darkness in the hearts and minds of even our children' (Salami, 2017). She explains that this has left 'a wound in my psyche', reminding her that the place in which 'I have encountered the most hatred is also one of the countries that I love the most' (ibid.). These examples attest to the complexity of Salami's belonging and the contradictions it leads to: even as she articulates a close connection to Finland in the 2017 entry by highlighting the country's long-standing tradition of implementing feminist ideas in politics, she feels a need to draw attention to the haunting sense of non-belonging that has been compounded by the country's problematic and ongoing history

with racism. Still, she considers herself to be part of Finland, indicating in her choice of words (note the collective pronoun 'our' and the move from 'hatred' to 'love' in the quotes above) that this strong attachment comes from her caring deeply about the place.

Similar moments are seen elsewhere. Taking a brief look at Salami's essay collection *Sensuous Knowledge*, we find an example where she ponders the different components that make up her multi-local itinerary: Finland and Nigeria but also places such as Sweden and New York where she has lived previously as well as London, the location in which she currently resides. The tone is more optimistic here, leaving us with the impression that the various locations have left her with a meaningful affiliation based on her intimate knowledge and embodied experience of each place. She has, for example, found a connection to Lagos through the different 'sounds, tastes, and rhythms' of the city which, in this instance, are what make the foundation for a close connection with the place:

> I am mixed race. I am Yoruba. I am Nigerian and Finnish by heritage and Swedish by naturalization. I am a Londoner. I was once a New Yorker. I have varying degrees of affiliation with each … I feel at home in Lagos. My roots are embedded in the cultural expressions, sounds, tastes, and rhythms of life that we so easily take for granted until we are distanced from them. I revel in my Finnishness … when I read Finnish poetry or hike in Finland's beautiful nature … Still nowhere in this world is as endearing as London, the city in which I've created what Virginia Woolf called a "room of my own". (Salami, 2020a, 83)

Tracing belonging from the two blog entries from 2012 and 2017 quoted from above (Salami, 2012a, 2017) to this more recent moment in *Sensuous Knowledge* suggests another contrast: whereas the 2012 entry portrays London as alienating, for instance, the city has turned into a place that feels like the author's own in the last extract. This divergence attests to the unstable and often ambiguous nature of belonging, demonstrating that the extent to which Salami experiences a connection might vary depending on the context: it is likely that there are

moments where she feels that she belongs and others where she does not. One should also keep in mind the eight-year gap between the first and last publication. It is just as likely that she feels more at home now than earlier because she has had more time to settle down and anchor herself in the city. The latter reading still leaves us with the impression that belonging is not a concept with a singular meaning, however.

A Room, a Basket, a Space and a Cipher

Salami brings four metaphors into play – a room, a basket, a space and a cipher – which offer us different ways of reading belonging. In this part of the discussion, I take a closer look at how she invokes each metaphor. My argument is that belonging becomes about more than the extent to which the blog author gets to feel at home in the various cultures, communities and locations that make up her personal history when we consider these four metaphors: we shall see below that it is also about creating a space for herself, somewhere that leaves her with a sense of ownership and agency, whilst making sure that she is inclusive of other voices and perspectives at the same time.

Returning to the previous quote from *Sensuous Knowledge*, we encounter the first metaphor when Salami (2020a, 83) concludes that she has created a 'room' of her own, making a reference to Virginia Woolf's essay, a text which advocates for women finding a place for themselves in a literary landscape otherwise dominated by men and in the patriarchal structures of society more generally. When the latter wrote *A Room of One's Own* in 1929, based on a talk she gave at the University of Cambridge, she found that this was a necessary point to make because of how women were excluded from various spaces in the public sphere, a gendered restriction which extended to universities where they were 'only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of recommendation,' and asked to step off the grass because only 'Fellows and Scholars [were] allowed' (Woolf, 2015,

5-6). Woolf (2015, 57, 48) contemplates the consequences these (and other restrictions) have on women's freedom to think for themselves: although there is 'no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind', she concludes that it is crucial for a woman to find a place for herself where she 'will be free to write what [she] likes'.

Looking at the extracts from *MsAfropolitan* which I have discussed so far suggests that, according to Salami, there is still a need for women to assemble a space for themselves in the twenty-first century: even if the historical and geographical context she responds to takes us beyond the one addressed in Woolf's text, she also finds herself facing restrictions because of her gender. This is evident if we consider the patriarchal attitudes she has encountered in Nigeria which, as we saw earlier, have left her with a lingering feeling that her voice is marginalised. One gets the impression that it is in response to experiences such as this that she has felt a need to create a 'room' of her own.

To help us understand the role *MsAfropolitan* plays here, we can turn to the second metaphor Salami deploys. In a 2012 entry, she explains to her readers that the platform functions like a 'basket' that allows her to archive 'a smorgasbord of thought, dialogue and forever shifting fragments of African heritage womanhood', a container which is practical in that it offers a way to store and easily access her writing over time (Salami, 2012d). But the metaphor can also be understood as an extension of the idea of London as a 'room' of her own: the blog is another contained space she has created for herself since settling down in the city, one which signifies a kind of belonging through the sense of ownership it brings. The author herself alludes to a similar reading in a 2013 entry, 'Why African women should blog'. Here, she employs the idea of space as a third metaphor, explaining that, in her experience, 'author[ing] a blog is to own a space' (Salami, 2013d).

The ‘room,’ the ‘basket’ and the ‘space’ all come to signal belonging through the ownership they generate, implying that the blog author has found a place where there are clear boundaries around what is hers and that this is what generates a feeling of belonging. Interestingly, this emphasis on ownership brings to mind a point made by Carola Lentz (2006, 1) who, quoting Sally Falk Moon, observes that, in the context of belonging, ‘“property” is “not about things … but about relationships between and among persons with regards to things”’: ‘rights to land’ and the idea of ownership are ‘intimately tied to membership in specific communities’. Lentz’s focus is on land ownership in Africa, but her observation is relevant here, too: the places Salami creates for herself reveal a need to claim somewhere that feels like hers *in relation to* her membership in different communities and locations (the UK, Nigeria and so forth).

The metaphors further speak to a sense of agency, implying that the author has assembled a place where she is left with a feeling that she is able to think and express herself freely. As suggested previously, the writer is conscious that this is shaped by her gendered experiences, but she also implies in a 2018 entry that race is a significant factor:

> As a Black feminist writer with dissenting views on patriarchy, imperialism and capitalism, I have never been comfortable with my ideas existing in social media or other media outlets alone … I’ve kept this blog going for almost a decade … so that I, at least to some measure, own the public archive of my writing and can easily access it. (Salami, 2018)

The extract is from a blog entry about a post the author has written on Facebook and Instagram in which she contemplates the #MeToo movement as it has played out in Nigeria, a country which, in her opinion, remains largely silent on sexual abuse despite being a place where ‘sexual violation is commonplace’ (Salami, 2018). Salami (2018) explains that ‘there is something hauntingly loud about this silence, it’s like a tinnitus’ which testifies to the ongoing gender

inequalities women face in Nigeria and which highlights a need for them to create a space where they, like Salami herself, are free to share their own #MeToo stories. The #MeToo movement further illustrates how she and other women of colour face restrictions in a global context because it has ended up perpetuating old power dynamics of gender and race: although the movement was initiated by Tarana Burke, a black American woman, and has been 'popularised via the global narrative', its 'loudest voices' now belong 'predominantly [to] elite, white-American' and 'Western European women' (ibid.).[4]

The 2018 entry is thus important for its ideas of ownership and agency in the online realm. While social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram have become increasingly popular tools for self-expression and agency in global and local culture (Adenekan, 2020, Ogola, 2019), for Salami, one of the qualities of creating a personal blog like *MsAfropolitan* is that it makes her feel like she remains in control of her own story because it is a space which belongs to her and where she is in charge. Finally, the entry shows that she is conscious of how blogging is embedded in broader structures and histories not just of gender but race: for her, as a woman *and* as a person of colour, it is important to claim a space for herself in order to make sure that she is heard on her terms.

It is common to envisage blogs as a means for 'self-expression and self-empowerment', as noted by Susan C. Herring *et al.* (2005, 143, see also Blood, 2000). Significantly, other blog authors rely on the same metaphors of belonging, placing similar emphasis on the question of ownership and agency. Note, for instance, Paul Hodkinson's work on blogs materialising in the context of a UK-based subculture. Here, one author views the online platform she has built as

[4] First utilised in 2006 by US-based Tarana Burke to raise of awareness of abuse against women, the phrase 'Me Too' has since then become the popular name and 'hashtag' for a global movement dedicated to calling out sexism and sexual violence carried out by people who misuse their privilege and power, as seen in the entertainment industry and in politics, for instance (see Burke, 2018).

‘a personal, physical space’, explaining that ‘it’s like being given a room’: ‘you can furnish it’ and ‘paint it the way you want – and make it your room’ (Hodkinson, 2007, 635). Likewise, another author’s opinion is that a blog is ‘your space so you decide what the rules are’, thereby indicating, to quote Hodkinson (2007, 634), that the platform can be understood as ‘the sovereign territory of its owner’.

What distinguishes Salami from these other examples is how she continues to link *MsAfropolitan* to a gendered trajectory of writing. In the entry ‘Why African women should blog’, this is done to provide her own spin on what it means to blog. She explains that creating a space through blogging (for her, as someone whose writing is anchored in an African and feminist perspective) is to evoke ‘an écriture feminine of sorts, championed by Audre Lorde, Anne Frank, Mary McLeod, Adelaide Casely-Hayford, Virginia Woolf, Nuha al-Radi, Anaïs Nin’ (Salami, 2013d). According to Salami, *MsAfropolitan* builds on this diverse group of women from Africa, the diaspora and beyond who have not only become known for their personal essays and journals but for how they have used writing to create their own space. Blogging is perhaps not a gendered act in and of itself, but it reminds her of how she ‘continue[s] a legacy of female writing’ by doing what these other women have done before her (Salami, 2013d).

The blog author also conjures up the spatial metaphor in her conceptualisation of Afropolitanism, explaining in a 2015 entry, ‘32 views on Afropolitanism’, that she understands the term as constituting its own space: it is a figurative and theoretical space which signifies an ongoing ‘interrogation and exploration’ of the ‘realities’ shaping the lives of people of African descent, but it is a space which is ‘in constant flux’, too, depending on who contributes to the space as well as the kinds of ideas and themes they bring up (Salami, 2015). Elaborating on this reading elsewhere, Salami (quoted in Knudsen and Rahbek, 2016, 160) states that

Afropolitanism is a space which aims to 'shak[e] things up': its main objective is to explore and interrogate but also to *complicate* what it means to be African in the twenty-first century by deliberately drawing attention to 'the specific textures and realities that we, as people of African heritage, experience in the world' and which are sometimes overlooked in discussions of other terms such as cosmopolitanism (ibid., 159). The latter, I would argue, can be read as an extension of Selasi's (2005) and Mbembe's (2007) assertion that Afropolitanism complicates one-dimensional perspectives on Africa's histories of mobility and belonging. It further aligns with Knudsen and Rahbek's (2016, 291-2) reading of Afropolitanism as a space which serves a specific purpose – namely, as a 'critical inquiry' of ideas revolving around 'what it means to be a twenty-first-century African in, or of, the world'.

In '32 views on Afropolitanism', Salami (2015) introduces the idea of the 'cipher' as another metaphor for understanding the Afropolitan space: the cipher, she explains, is 'of African origin and has travelled from various locations' to different parts of the world, but is a phenomenon that has become particularly popular in hip-hop culture where 'emcees come together in a circle', each of them 'freestyling in turns in order to non-violently and harmoniously exchange energy even when the energies are in friction'. In her view, 'the Afropolitan space is metaphorically similar', hinging on 'a circular motion' that is ongoing and which is made up of the voices of multiple people and where 'intersecting topics' such as 'decolonisation', 'politics' and 'cosmopolitanism' are 'invoked and expressed' (ibid.).

In scholarship on hip-hop culture, the cipher is defined in similar terms, for instance by Paul Watkins and Rebecca Caines (2015, 1) who explain that it is 'a gathering of rappers, beatboxers, and/or breakers in a circle' where 'one emcee will rap about a certain topic' which is then 'quickly taken up or flipped by another emcee who plays off the prior words and themes', often adding new ones in the process. For the emcees who join the circle, 'to cypher' is 'to

borrow and to lend, to playfully freewheel through' whilst 'carefully considering all the sounds, meanings, and interpretations' of each word (ibid.). As the cipher moves from one emcee to the next, it can 'go on continuously, as long as emcees, beatboxers, dancers, and the crowd keep the fluidity of the cypher going' (ibid.). While rappers themselves have placed emphasis on the circular and ongoing movement of the cipher (see Fitzgerald, 2000), the content is equally important, according to Paul Khalil Saucier (2014) who studies hip-hop culture in an African context. In his view, the cipher is just as much about self-expression and agency: it is a way for them to engage critically with their own culture.

The cipher is a striking metaphor for Afropolitanism, especially if we consider how the debates on the Afropolitan term have unfolded in the past two decades since the word first materialised in the mid-noughties with Selasi's and Mbembe's founding essays (see Introduction). The cipher is also a compelling image that we can keep in mind as we move between Afropolitan texts in this thesis. Here, we will see how a handful of cultural producers (Ade Bantu and Abby Ogunsanya (Chapter Two), as well as Clarissa Bannor (Chapter Two) and Nicole Amarteifio (Chapter Three)) all have their own ideas and perspectives on the Afropolitan term and how they, like the many emcees in the hip-hop cipher, can be pictured as 'freestyling in turn', exchanging 'energy' as well as creating 'friction' – especially through their differing takes on what Afropolitanism means. Making room for their different contributions, the thesis illustrates how the Afropolitan space has come to pivot on ongoing movement, like the hip-hop cipher, not only because of its circular shape but because more discussants have joined as new 'emcees' over the years. Reading the Afropolitan space as a cipher further demonstrates how the very meaning of Afropolitan(ism) has become 'malleable' and flexible', resisting any singular definition as different cultural producers have chimed in with their own approach (Salami quoted in Knudsen and Rahbek, 2016, 156). Finally, the idea of the cipher

speaks to Afropolitanism as ‘a space of voice, of claiming space and making voice and being seen and heard’ (ibid, 160). This, again, is reminiscent of the hip-hop cipher which, according to Watkins and Caines (2015, 1), is all about ‘claiming your own voice, your own right to speak’.

While the space and cipher provide apt metaphors for Afropolitanism, they are also significant here because they leave us with a kind of belonging which diverges from the one we have encountered so far in our reading of *MsAfropolitan*. We saw previously that the ‘room’ and the ‘basket’, both suggesting something that is physical, bounded and limited, came to represent a belonging that hinged on borders and exclusion and, in the process, provided a sense of personal ownership and agency. In the same way, I demonstrated that Salami’s initial reference to ‘space’ (in her reflections on owning a blog) alludes to a separate entity which helps her draw a line between the online platform she has created for herself and the world beyond this ‘container’. However, it became evident that this metaphor holds other qualities, too – ones which become apparent when she uses ‘space’ to define Afropolitanism as an ‘open’ and unbounded realm. By pivoting on the idea of being inclusive of other voices and perspectives, the cipher, I propose, represent similar ideas. Joining a cipher is about creating space for oneself, but the cipher circle is also ‘welcoming’ in its form and ‘models a pedagogy that is inclusive … in nature’, on the one hand because it makes space for multiple performers and their diverse performances, on the other hand because other participants, including the ‘crowd and spectators’, are equally ‘integral to maintaining the energy’ (Watkins and Caines, 2015, 1). The four metaphors are thus contextual and serve different purposes, alluding to belonging as a personal and private affair in some instances and, in others, as an experience that is inclusive and collective.

So far, I have illustrated how the first metaphors (Salami's 'room' in London and her blog as a 'basket' and 'space' that belongs to her) feature within *MsAfropolitan*. In what follows, we shall see that the online platform also evokes the 'open' kind of belonging that is alluded to in her reading of Afropolitanism.

A Critical Inquiry with Multiple Voices and Perspectives

The form and content of *MsAfropolitan* echoes the image of Afropolitanism as an open space which is structured around a critical inquiry: the blog entries generally hinge on Salami asking questions and offering critical reflections, usually without giving any straightforward answers, instead coming back to the same topic in a new entry and contributing additional thoughts and ideas or looking at it from another angle, for instance by placing it in a different context or providing specific examples. This approach is part of her conscious attempt to 'boost intellectual discussions' that can 'empower us [Africans] to make sense of our diverse journeys' in the early twenty-first century (Salami, 2013d).

I wish to take a look at a blog entry from 2013, 'Second class citizen: African women and nationalism', to consider how belonging becomes a topic of discussion in Salami's critical inquiry. Here, she adds further nuance and complexity to belonging by reflecting on the concept in a broader context. In the entry, she asks:

> What does it mean to be a Nigerian and a woman? I thought. I compared myself to Nigerian men; to my father, my boyfriend, wondering if they feel Nigerian in a different way? Unlike theirs, my heritage is also Finnish, but is my Nigerianness also changed by my gender? (Salami, 2013b)

The questions are followed by a more general reflection on African women's rights. Arguing that African women experience exclusion from different spaces in the public sphere today, she

notes that this is in spite of their role in the African struggle for independence which they 'joined alongside men' in the twentieth century (ibid.). She contemplates how 'women's rights and the nation can be in conflict' in post-colonial Africa when their involvement in the decolonisation process should have given them the same rights as those gained by their male peers: 'African women have countries insofar that we are entitled to citizenship status and via our ethnic origins and cultural belongings such as language, religion and traditions', yet 'when it comes to a fundamental pillar of citizenship, the legal rights or the constitution, women's roles in the independence struggle did not guarantee our place within the nation' (ibid.). Instead, she and other African women have been left with 'distinct laws when it comes to land entitlement, divorce, military participation and so on' (ibid.). Note the trajectory of the critical inquiry here as Salami moves from thoughts on her personal experience as a Nigerian woman to women's rights in the wider context of the continent to specific examples of how she and other women are excluded and, lastly, what this says about their national belonging.

The example illustrates what I mean when I argue that *MsAfropolitan* can be understood as the blog author's own critical inquiry, but we should note that the discussion extends beyond the author's personal reflections. This is evident if we turn to the comment section on the blog. Looking at her exchange with the people who visit and leave comments on the site demonstrates that it is not only her but her readers who keep the conversation going. Salami seems genuinely interested in hearing from the readers, actively encouraging them to participate in the space she has assembled by asking them questions (e.g., 'What do you think?' (Salami, 2020b)) and leaving the comment section following each entry open for them to share their own thoughts and ideas. Occasionally, other blog authors are also invited to contribute with their own entry. Being inclusive of readers when signing off on a personal blog is not unusual, and allowing comments from visitors and guest bloggers is a feature of most personal blogs (see Herring *et*

al., 2005). These features have come to shape other creative forms that have materialised in the online realm as well. According to Madhu Krishnan and Kate Wallis (2020), some African literary podcasts are created by producers who, 'in the name of forging spaces for recognition and affiliation' between the speakers and their listeners, foster an atmosphere where people, as they tune in, feel that they get to be 'part of something'. Nevertheless, it is important to mention such characteristics because it helps to illustrate how Salami invites her readers to join her critical inquiry. I further claim that it is in the exchanges between the author and the readers that the blog comes to resemble the idea of the cipher, one which hinges on an open and inclusive idea of belonging, making room for multiple voices and perspectives, and reiterates Salami's (2013c) own theory that 'ideas thrive on public discussion'.

Some blog entries on *MsAfropolitan* generate little or no response whilst others end up having between twenty and thirty comments, and sometimes more. It is also worth noting that Salami and her readers sometimes (re)visit old entries; while most comments appear in the days and weeks after she has published an entry, some are added later. The process and nature of the exchanges are more important, however. Like most blogs, *MsAfropolitan* occasionally attracts trolls who leave offensive feedback, especially on Salami's posts about controversial topics. Yet, most of the readers adopt a critical attitude and analytical approach reminiscent of the author's own. And like the emcees in the hip-hop cipher, they can be said to 'freestyle' as they comment on the blog entries, playing off the ideas and themes the author brings up, as well as the words she uses, often adding their own in response, in this way, exchanging 'energy' and sometimes 'friction', depending on whether they agree with what she has written.

The cipher is a particularly striking image if we look at entries with contentious topics such as 'Is it unAfrican to be gay? The Nigerian case' (Salami, 2011) and 'Feminism has always existed in Africa' (Salami, 2012c) where Salami asks questions or makes statements that are

provocative and which many readers are therefore likely to have a strong opinion on. In the comments in the latter, one reader is sceptical of Salami's use of 'feminism' in the context of pre-colonial societies in Africa, arguing that the term, along with the word 'gender', is a Western construct. The response causes friction and leads to a long exchange between the blog author and the readers who end up debating which terminology is valid, eventually without reaching a straightforward answer.

While I maintain that this and other exchanges are indicative of how the readers become part of the digital space Salami has created, it is interesting that there is room for them to connect with one another and experience a kind of recognition and affiliation beyond the (sometimes heated) debate. It is also a diverse readership that is part of this experience, and they bond with the author over different things in the blog entries. Sometimes it is her ideas that capture their attention and generate response, other times it is her background they recognise themselves in or have in common. For instance, in the comment section to a 2012 entry, it is mainly black women readers who see themselves in Salami's personal experience with stereotypes of African women, using it as a point of reference to connect with her and share their own perspective (see Salami, 2012f). Conversely, in a different entry from the same year, we see how the author's reflection on intersectionality resonates with a black male reader who in his comment goes on to contemplate how his own experience of living and working in the UK has been affected by other people's prejudice towards him as a person of colour, on the one hand, and his own privilege as a male, on the other (see Salami, 2012b)).

In this and other instances, Salami makes the readers feel welcome and included. In the comment section to another 2012 entry, 'White Women, Black Men, and African feminists', a white Dutch woman responds to the author's call for solidarity across racial and gender lines. The reader who identifies as feminist reflects on the limits of feminist discourses in the West,

explaining how it has made her extremely self-conscious of the privilege that comes with her white, European background, in the end asking, 'Where does that leave me, labeled the white feminist? You tell me. I'm listening' (Salami, 2012e). Salami applauds the reader's honesty and vulnerability because 'it is illustrative of a feminist dialogue that I believe is truly desirable' and a key element of creating understanding across racial lines: 'The African feminist needs to curb (not neglect) her anger towards the negative images that many white feminists have perpetuated on her and focus on the resourceful work that many white feminists have produced about Africa'; conversely, 'the white feminist needs to be starkly aware and analytical of her privileged position' (ibid.). The exchanges are thus not always ones where the readers see themselves in the author: the recognition (and affiliation) also happens in instances where it is the ideas that resonate with them. This adds to the impression of *MsAfropolitan* as a space which, like the cipher, hinges on a kind of belonging that thrives on friction and tension, but which is 'open' and inclusive. In many ways, the emphasis on inclusivity contradicts the other ideas of belonging we have encountered on *MsAfropolitan*, but I propose that they exist side by side in the digital space Salami has created, as if indicating that there is room for all of them. And although there is sometimes friction between the participants, everyone gets to have a voice in the discussions that take place on the platform.

Throughout my reading of *MsAfropolitan*, I have drawn attention to how the text speaks to belonging from a gendered perspective. In what follows, I leave the discussion of the Internet to examine Unigwe's novel *On Black Sisters' Street*, a novel about four female characters' individual experiences of belonging. In this text, we will see how their aspirations for belonging become restricted when they move across borders, a trajectory which is reminiscent of Obinze's in Adichie's *Americanah*, but which also echoes Salami's *MsAfropolitan* and its emphasis on

gender issues and the need for multiple perspectives on what belonging means in the early twenty-first century.

On Black Sisters' Street and Aspirations of Belonging

Unigwe's novel *On Black Sisters' Street* does not fit neatly into the Afropolitan category. This can be explained by the characters' trajectories which diverge from the upwardly mobile segment of Africans and people of African descent who are usually labelled Afropolitan. By contrast, *On Black Sisters' Street* portrays four African women whose highly restricted journeys take them to the red-light district of Antwerp in Belgium where they end up as sex workers in an underground trafficking network that links Africa and Europe. The novel oscillates between a detailed account of the character Sisi's journey to Belgium which leads to her death and the narrative present in which her housemates and fellow sex workers, Ama, Efe and Joyce, sit in their home in the city's red-light district. Here, we see them coming to terms with the loss of their friend as they share their personal experiences of travelling from Africa to Europe with one another.

Most scholars read Unigwe's portrayal of the four women as a feminist investigation of human rights and a contemplation of illegitimate diasporas (e.g., Eze, 2014a, Omuteche, 2014), but *On Black Sisters' Street* also features in Knudsen and Rahbek's (2016) *In Search of the Afropolitan*. As explained in the Introduction, Knudsen and Rahbek insist that the Afropolitan term is not inherently tied to a specific class and that it makes sense to include a novel like *On Black Sisters' Street* because their stories probe questions related to what it means to be African and move across borders in the world today. Furthermore, Knudsen and Rahbek (2016, 210) are of the opinion that the moments shared between Ama, Efe and Joyce on the couch in Antwerp signify 'the emergence of an Afropolitan community', a space which, instigated by an

untimely death, makes space for companionship but also a critical inquiry: though smaller and more intimate than the wider Afropolitan space, this community is significant for how it relies on storytelling and conversation about 'what it means to be African in the world and what "Africa" means in the world'.

While the small communal space the women create for themselves does indeed reiterate the idea of Afropolitanism as a space of critical inquiry, it is a space which echoes the one Salami assembles for herself in the online realm by gesturing to a need for multiple voices and a gendered perspective on belonging: as Ama, Efe and Joyce share their stories in the wake of Sisi's death, they highlight the need to create a place where they are free to discuss their experiences of belonging in a society where they, as black African migrant women who have entered the country on illegal terms, are relegated to the margins. Simultaneously, the women's stories (including Sisi's) encourage us to consider the dreams and aspirations of belonging that have saturated their inward journeys and eventually motivated them to travel abroad.

My reading in this section will take Sisi's story as the main point of discussion whilst occasionally drawing on examples from the other women's journeys to examine how belonging is portrayed in the context of mobility. Their stories offer another intriguing example of characters who have an unrestricted sense of belonging across borders but whose outward journeys are a sign of the opposite. We shall see that Sisi's (be)longing takes her from job hunting as a young university graduate in Lagos to a marginalised existence in Antwerp's sex industry. Frustrated with the lack of job opportunities in Nigeria which keeps her from belonging on her own terms, she is persuaded by a man named Dele who specialises in supplying female workers to the red-light districts of Europe and agrees to let him pay for a passport and a plane ticket to Belgium. Although this 'favour' means that she will have to work full-time in prostitution to pay off the loan, she is convinced that this will eventually allow her

to pursue her aspirations of belonging. I argue that it is by examining this broader context of mobility that we get to understand how belonging operates in the novel and how the novel's portrayal of belonging interlocks with *Americanah* and *MsAfropolitan*. I find *On Black Sisters' Street* a compelling example because it, like Obinze's story in *Americanah*, complicates the meaning of belonging in a transnational context whilst attesting to a contrast and tension between its characters' inward and outward journeys, and, like *MsAfropolitan* (and Ifemelu's story in Adichie's novel), shows how the meeting between belonging and gender can become restrictive. While the focus on gender issues is very much in line with Unigwe's other work (*Night Dancer* (2012) and *Better Never Than Late* (2019), for example), this points to a convergence between *On Black Sisters' Street* and (other) Afropolitan texts.

Past, Present and Future

Like *Americanah*, *On Black Sisters' Street* interlaces past, present and future in an episodic framework to give its readers an impression of its characters' connection to here, there and elsewhere. Yet, whereas Ifemelu and Obinze are clearly haunted by their ambiguous and uncertain belongings in the opening chapters of *Americanah*, the first chapter in Unigwe's novel introduces its readers to a character who feels confident in her right to belong to Belgium. Sisi is certain that she will be able to leave her current home in Antwerp's red-light district to move in with her new boyfriend, Luc, and, in the process, redefine the terms on which she belongs to the country. She feels her existence is changing for the better as she 'slough[s] off a life that no longer suit[s] her', convinced that, with everything planned for the future, 'the world [is] exactly as it should be. No more and, definitely, no less', with 'the love of a good man. A house. And her own money – still new and fresh and the healthiest shade of green' (Unigwe, 2009, 1). Even if she has only arrived in Belgium recently and on illegal terms, she believes that she will be able to pursue her aspirations of a better life.

The narrator punctuates this sense of unlimited agency, however, by suggesting that what Sisi will 'find out only hours from now' is 'just how absolute the transition [will] be' (Unigwe, 2009, 1). The text thus creates suspense, weaving together the character's future into the narrative present as a way to foreshadow her death as the final 'transition'. This fluctuation between proleptic and analeptic moments in the first chapter 'reveal[s]', as Jairus Omuteche (2014, 288) observes, a 'discrepancy between what the characters anticipate or hope for and the consequences of the choices they make in an effort to realize their aspirations' for succeeding in life – a discrepancy which is substantiated in a subsequent chapter when the narrator's foreshadowing is confirmed and Sisi is killed by one of her Madam's employees. Yet, the novel's weaving together of different moments in time also recalls what we encountered in the discussion of *Americanah*. As we shall see below, Sisi's inward and outward journey similarly demonstrates the inconsistency between her (be)longing across borders, on the one hand, and the broader structures and politics that prevent her from achieving the kind of belonging she desires. At the same time, I would suggest that the move between present and future seen in the extracts above draws attention to what is missing, implying that it is difficult to understand Sisi's insistence on belonging without considering her journey up until the present moment. At this stage in her story, the readers have not been told much about her past. How she has ended up in Antwerp as a sex worker and why she is so insistent on articulating belonging on her own terms remain unclear. The only way to find out is by considering her journey as it unfolds in the following chapters.

If we look at the rest of the novel's back-and-forth movements (between the stories of the different characters but also the various spatial and temporal settings in which each character finds herself), we see that they serve another specific purpose – namely, to mirror the uncertainty and ambiguity that come with the women's movements across borders, and which

affect their experiences of belonging: by utilising an episodic and fragmented framework that resembles the one each woman has to navigate in her experience of belonging, the novel leaves its readers with a haunting idea of what it is like to oscillate between contrasting ideas of the concept.

Belonging on Gendered Terms

Unigwe's novel mirrors the questions of agency and illicit work seen in Obinze's story, yet here it is entangled with gender issues which echo those found in Ifemelu's journey to the US as well as the ones that surfaced in my reading of *MsAfropolitan*. *On Black Sisters' Street* explores gender issues in a very particular context, however, placing its characters' experiences of crossing borders in an early twenty-first-century global and commercial sex labour market which profits from migration by promulgating illicit forms of travel and creating a demand for cheap labour which, in this instance, exploits four women's desire to escape the limiting circumstances of their existence.

In *On Black Sisters' Street*, belonging becomes restricted as the characters move across borders. The characters themselves are made aware of this in the process of travelling. With life teaching Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce 'to make the most of the trump card that God had wedged in between their legs' (Unigwe, 2009, 26), they become conscious of the fact that their connection to Antwerp depends on the illicit terms of their arrival and that navigating national and transnational structures as black African female migrants means that the extent to which they belong is limited. Dele and Madam, the two people who are in charge of their work, represent the invisible and illicit web of the trafficking industry that sets out the terms for their belonging, as 'the common denominator' that makes it possible for them to enter Europe (Unigwe, 2009, 113). The same web makes sure that they are denied any sense of independence or free movement once they reach Belgium. The readers see how this is made clear to the

women when the text, in one of its frequent flashbacks to the past, depicts Sisi arriving with no other official documentation than the fake passport Dele has given her. Because she is not a refugee, it is likely that her presence will not be approved by the authorities, and she is therefore asked to use a cover story to apply for asylum. When Sisi's request for asylum is denied, Madam looks at her, 'as if trying to size her up, a commodity for sale, a slab of meat at the local abattoir', and takes her passport, clarifying the new conditions of her existence, with 'every sentence [coming] out like an order': '"You're persona non grata in this country. You do not exist. Not here … Now you belong to me"' (Unigwe, 2009, 116, 182). Sisi thus belongs on terms which are entirely dictated by someone else – someone who treats her as an inanimate and gendered object designed for profit.

The fact that the female characters' belonging is defined on gendered (and racial) terms is made clear in the narrator's portrayal of the women's work in Antwerp. Foregrounding what Eze (2014a, 90) refers to as the 'outright objectification' of black African women in the trafficking industry, this becomes particularly apparent in the following extract where the readers catch a glimpse of Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce 'watch[ing] the lives outside', as they work the red-light districts of the city 'from their glass windows' facing the street:

> Tourists with their cameras slung around their necks … [would] suddenly come face to face with a line-up of half-dressed women, different colours and different shades of those colours. They look and, disbelieving, take another look. Quickly. And then they walk away with embarrassed steps … Those who know where they are … walk with an arrogant swagger and a critical twinkle in their eyes. They move from one window to another and having made up their minds go in to close a sale … looking for adventure between the thighs of *een afrikaanse*. (Unigwe, 2009, 178)

Reminiscent of Unigwe's own account of visiting the *Schiperskwartier*, the government controlled red-light district of Antwerp (see Unigwe, 2008, see also Bastida-Rodriguez, 2014), the quote makes the women's illegal presence and gendered location more concrete: while they

can look at the city and are able to return the pedestrians' objectifying gaze, they are reduced to black female bodies on display, fixed on the margins of the metropolitan centre, on the one hand because their surroundings cannot 'be tainted by the lives behind the windows', on the other, because they require the women's bodies to serve their own needs (Unigwe, 2009, 178). As Omuteche (2014, 279) notes, Unigwe thus reveals 'how convoluted in nature boundaries and cosmopolitanism are in the globalized world' by showing how the characters are 'unable to rework [their] belonging' as they find themselves 'entrapped' in 'a transnational tourist hub' which, ironically, 'exhibit[s] flamboyantly the characteristics of fluid borderlessness and unbounded freedom'. Unigwe indicates that belonging takes on a completely different meaning in the context of the trafficking industry by illustrating how it comes to signify fixed borders and permanent exclusion for the women.

While it might be tempting to assume that the women would face few or no obstacles if they had not become part of the trafficking network and belonged to a different social class, *On Black Sisters' Street* thus repeats a point made in *MsAfropolitan*: that gender (and race) inflects and imposes restrictions on belonging – in this instance, for women – across different social demographics. What is haunting about the passage quoted from above is that the readers get the chilling impression that Sisi is not only aware of this dynamic but that she soon realises that she will never be able to untangle herself from the web of the trafficking network: the narrator notes how the character feels as if 'the bright lights of Antwerp' is her fate and not, as she has 'stupidly imagined, a transit route to an infinite betterment of her world' (Unigwe, 2009, 246).

Despite the novel's bleak sentiments leaving its readers with the impression that the women are stuck in Antwerp, belonging to nowhere, I would argue that their stories are characterised by a sense of agency and that belonging is still seen as being subject to negotiation between each character and her surroundings. This becomes evident in the women's self-

conscious reflections on the direction their journeys across borders have ended up taking – a direction which is unexpected initially, but which, to some extent, is also an attempt on their part to utilise their gendered position as a way to negotiate the broader structures and politics that determine the extent to which they belong. Sisi tells herself that there is 'no room for Shame. Or for Embarrassment. Or for Pride' because she cannot 'afford to lug' these emotions 'around in her new world' but that there are '*worse ways to put [her] punani to use*' – at least, it allows her to keep her dreams of a better future alive (Unigwe, 2009, 102; italics in original). The character thus perceives her outward journey as a means to an end and part of a bigger picture: travelling to Europe and working for Dele and Madam is a stepping-stone which she believes eventually will allow her to match her future with her aspirations of belonging. In the final part of the discussion below, we shall see that these aspirations have come about largely as a result of the circumstances of her life in Nigeria but also her journey inward – a journey which has allowed her to articulate and hold on to her own idea of belonging.

Dreams of Elsewhere

The readers gain insight into Sisi's existence leading up to her journey abroad as the novel jumps back in time and space to show us what it has been like for her to come of age in Nigeria at the turn of the century. The narrator suggests that it is difficult for her to find work after graduating from university because the job market in Lagos favours people with the right connections. Brought up by a father who believes that the 'only way to a better life is education' and who blames his own 'stagnant career' on the fact that he never studied beyond secondary school, she is, at first, certain that a good degree can get her anywhere in Nigeria's commercial hub; she simply has to 'unwrap' the opportunities of her new degree, as if they are 'a gift' that will 'hurtle her to dizzying heights of glory' (Unigwe, 2009, 18-9). After two years of unsuccessfully sending applications to Lagos banks, however, the optimism is replaced with

more ambiguous emotions as the character realises that the local job market is structured on corruption and nepotism, catering to 'less intelligent classmates with better *connections*' (Unigwe, 2009, 22; italics in original). The only viable option, it seems, is for her to abandon the hope of a flourishing career and to settle down in a marriage with her boyfriend Peter. Yet, seeing him 'eas[e] into the lot life had thrown at him [as a teacher], floating on clammy handshakes with government officials', often whilst struggling months-on-end without pay, Sisi knows that he, 'like her father, [will] never move beyond where he was' (Unigwe, 2009, 43). Saturated with unfulfilled dreams, these circumstances frustrate Sisi because they contradict her desire to pursue a successful career and make a life for herself without having to rely on someone else.

In the end, Sisi begins to contemplate what life would look like if she were somewhere else and we soon get to see how her initial aspirations of a prosperous life and successful career in Lagos make way for a yearning to belong elsewhere: her focus is now on figuring out how to leave the city and in this way avoid the 'stench of mildewed dreams' that haunts her surroundings (Unigwe, 2009, 18). Evidently, she catches onto the idea that 'labour migration' is 'the only viable way to improve [her] life chances', an assumption which, according to Unigwe (2008, 116), has emerged in Nigeria as a consequence of the country's history of political instability. In the novel, the author implies that this assumption has become part of the general mood of the population, feeding into the ideas of what life is like outside Nigeria and circulating in popular culture:

> Who did not want to go abroad? People were born with the ambition and people died trying to fulfil that ambition … People knew the risks and people took them because the destination was worth it. What was it the song said? *Nigeria jaga jaga. Everytin' scatter scatter*. (Unigwe, 2009, 81-2)

Coming of age in Nigeria, Sisi's impression of the world beyond her immediate location hinges on this idea of the elsewhere, one which is kept vague in the novel to illustrate what it looks like in the minds of its characters: the idea of going abroad becomes synonymous with unlimited affluence and success. Sisi and the other women conjure up different places in their imagination that come to stand for this idea by using a few random sources. Ama, for instance, has compiled a short list of possible locations that serve as her elsewhere based on a song played at the local record shop, as well as the random images she has seen on television:

> She wanted to go to London. She had seen pictures of London Bridge on TV. Her other choices were Las Vegas. Or Monaco. She heard the names once in a song playing from the music store across the road: *So I must leave, I'll have / To go to Las Vegas or Monaco / And win a fortune in a game, my life / will never be the same*. (Unigwe, 2009, 134)

This is a variation of the longing for elsewhere we encountered in Obinze's story in *Americanah*: whilst his idea is incredibly detailed and ends up taking on a very distinct shape based on his encyclopaedic knowledge of the US, the one that comes to the surface in Ama's mind is not – London, Las Vegas and Monaco are turned into a one-dimensional signifier of what it means to go abroad: the 'opportunity' of 'living in full' (Unigwe, 2009, 117). Both of these ideas echo Michael Hanchard's (1991, cited in Davies, 1994, 14) definition of the elsewhere in the sense that what is implicit in the word is usually contingent on a 'combination of knowing the condition of one's existence, imagining alternatives and striving to actualize them'. Obinze's notion of the elsewhere embodies this reference in full, it seems – he has somewhere very specific to attach himself to, somewhere he can pursue and add depth to in his mind and through culture, and he is extremely conscious of his attempt to imagine the elsewhere as an alternative to the circumstances shaping his existence. Ama and the other characters in *On Black Sisters' Street* embody Hanchard's idea, too. They are aware that their aspirations of

going abroad are prompted by their frustration with the conditions that structure their lives but what exactly constitutes the elsewhere is unclear. It is important that we do not dismiss their ideas just because they are less specific, however; Ama's ideas tell us something about the nature of her initial experience of (be)longing across borders, showing that it is an aspiration to belong somewhere else that will allow her to pursue a better life.

The women's ideas and aspirations of belonging elsewhere are also important because they motivate them in their eventual decision to go abroad when they, on separate occasions, meet Dele, the man who orchestrates illicit journeys for African women as part of his underground trafficking network. When Efe who desperately wants to make sure that her son has the best possible odds to succeed in life accepts Dele's offer of bringing her to Belgium and realises that the trip will become a reality, she begins to dream up 'the riches she [will] amass' in Europe, with 'the word, "abroad", [bringing] a smile' that stretches 'her lips from one end to the other and a sweet taste to her tongue, a taste not unlike that of ripe plantain' (Unigwe, 2009, 83-4). Upon her arrival in Belgium, this initial idea of the place seems to be confirmed by what she sees. Although the narrator suggests shortly afterwards that the reality of the character's journey abroad will eventually complicate the naïve image she has conjured up of Belgium and of her future, note here how particular images, based on the names of the places the character expects to visit and little else, continue to inform her perspective: 'The floors were shiny and the air was purer, so she skipped, skipped, skipped and took in the first sights of her new world. Belgium. *Bell*. *Jyom*. Next door to London. Tinkling like a bell' (Unigwe, 2009, 88; emphasis in original).

The novel recognises the significance in the characters holding on to their ideas and aspirations after arriving in Europe and working in Antwerp's red-light district, illustrating that believing in the possibility of an unlimited belonging becomes a survival mechanism, a way for

them to cope with their new circumstances. If we return to Sisi's story, it is already evident from the passages I discussed previously that she keeps dreaming about her future. This serves a specific purpose, however: if her new existence abroad teaches her anything it is that she must transport herself to other worlds to escape the oppressive environment she finds herself living and working in. To let 'the dreams [keep] expanding to make sure nothing else' comes in, 'to smile, to pout, to think of nothing but the money she would be making' while throwing 'her legs in the air' and counting 'how much more until she could open her boutique. Start her car export business. Her Internet café. All the dreams filling her head' (Unigwe, 2009, 237-8). In other words, to survive the journey abroad, she must keep going on a journey inward to keep alive the ideas, dreams and aspirations that made her leave Lagos and insist on the unlimited possibilities of belonging.

Sisi's insistence on belonging is best illustrated in her regular walks through Antwerp, an activity which, as we shall see in Chapter Two, is repeated by *Open City*'s Julius whose daily routine includes walks through New York City. For Julius, this allows him to claim the city on his own terms and to reflect on the multiple and intertwined histories and cultures in the metropolis. According to Patricia Bastida-Rodriquez (2014, 204, 207), Sisi is similarly an 'invisible *flâneuse*' whose walks become a symbol of her 'reclaiming the spaces of the city for herself' and 'her need to belong and feel part of [Antwerp]'. Yet, while Julius can be considered a classic example of the flâneur, it is important to keep in mind that Sisi is not: she does not resemble a detached character, nor do we see her insisting on belonging to nowhere. And the circumstances which shape her outward journey are indicative of a physical (and social) mobility that is severely limited because of the restrictions imposed on her by the trafficking network and her illicit journey to Europe.

Even bearing in mind the context for Sisi's wanderings, I find it useful to consider what her walks can offer to the discussion of belonging. Walking through Antwerp allows Sisi to escape painful memories of the past as well as the bleak circumstances of the present. But it is also a way for her to experience the city, other than from the red-light district where she can only rely on her imagination to dream about this elsewhere: she might be able to catch a glimpse of Antwerp here, but she is stuck in motion, confined behind her glass window. The walks provide an antidote to this experience of confinement. Walking allows her to immerse herself in her surroundings, to *feel* on her body what it is like to pass through the city and at her own ease and, in the process, become part of the elsewhere she has conjured up in her mind. Note the narrator's emphasis on the character's embodied and multi-sensory experience of the city and how the idea of being associated with its material qualities is what makes her feel part of the place – both aspects seem to trigger a sense of belonging:

> She liked the Keyserlei with its promise of glitter: the Keyserlei Hotel with its gold façade and the lines and lines of shops … So many choices. She liked the rush of people, the mixing of skin colours, the noise on streets … [It] made her heart race, made her feel alive; a part of this throbbing living city. (Unigwe, 2009, 254)

The walks become a way for Sisi to live out the possibility of an unlimited belonging: now that she has left Lagos and finally walks through Antwerp, she is certain that 'she [can be] somebody else, with a different life … Anyone from anywhere … She was any story she chose' (Unigwe, 2009, 255, 258). In turn, we see the character conjuring up various stories about herself and why she has travelled to Belgium, as seen in one instance where she imagines she is a rich tourist as she walks through the city, browses shops and has casual conversations with shopkeepers – someone 'who [can] afford to travel the world for leisure, taking in sights and trying the food' (ibid.). What is intriguing here is that whereas Sisi's outward journey has

otherwise formed a contrast to the journeys taken in her imagination, they seem to meet in this instance. It is almost as if the character finally gets to experience in real life what it is like to belong to Antwerp on her own terms. Although the character can only pretend that her stories of unrestricted movement and belonging are real, inventing them is liberating and leaves her with a feeling that she has agency, that she might be able to 'liv[e] out her fantasies' (ibid.).

Sisi never gets fully to realise her dreams. Instead, they remain an illusion as the readers get to see that she still must return to her window in the red-light district. And when she finally decides to leave the trafficking network behind to move in with Luc, her new boyfriend, the outcome is fatal. The question is to what extent *On Black Sisters' Street* can be understood as an Afropolitan narrative of belonging, with Sisi's death as the most definitive marker of her and the other women's exclusion from the world they live in. I suggested previously that a possible answer lies in the small community Ama, Efe and Joyce assemble for themselves in the wake of her death where they create a space that leaves us readers with multiple voices and perspectives on what it means to move and belong across borders. I further claimed that the novel is not unlike the other texts we have read so far, most significantly because of its in-depth examination of the effects different kinds of movement have on belonging in the early twenty-first century but also because of how it highlights the limiting factors that might come from belonging's meeting with other social constructs – gender, in this instance. By way of conclusion, I would add here that my reading in this section highlights a convergence with Afropolitanism's open-ended exploration of belonging's possibilities. In particular, the discussion above has illustrated that the meaning of belonging is subject to ongoing definition and negotiation between the individual characters and their surroundings: it is certainly dictated by factors that lie beyond their control, but the novel points to a continued emphasis on personal agency and the significance in each woman's ability to articulate her own sense of belonging

and on her terms. Even if these terms are never fully realised, the novel demonstrates that they are important in the formation of belonging and that the women's inward journeys are what helps them create and sustain their own ideas of the concept – ideas which can provide a significant counterpoint to the limitations they face on their journeys outward.

Chapter Conclusion

Americanah, *MsAfropolitan* and *On Black Sisters' Street* speak to the complex characteristics of belonging by grounding the concept in a context of early twenty-first-century mobility. Like the ongoing debates on Afropolitanism, the texts highlight and complicate African experiences of moving and belonging across borders, but they also make clear that other kinds of movement – the journeys that can be taken through the imagination, as well as those that take place in the online realm – feed into and affect these experiences. The texts suggest that belonging takes on meaning in social interaction and that the concept is often refracted through wider structures and politics of belonging – ones which intersect with other social constructs such as gender, class and race and which often lead to highly ambiguous and uncertain experiences of belonging. Yet, we have also come across another observation made previously in the thesis, namely that belonging is a deeply personal topic that is subject to individual desires, dreams and aspirations. And it is especially the inward journeys the characters embark on in *Americanah* and *On Black Sisters' Street* that have helped illustrate this point. In *Americanah* and *MsAfropolitan*, digital journeys stand as another alternative to material forms of travel. Both texts remind us that the Internet is not a separate realm – going online does not mean that we are cut off from the social realities that seek to determine the extent to which we belong. At the same time, they emphasise that the Internet is valuable in the way that it can help people imagine belonging differently and make room for their own ideas and formations of the concept.

In the next chapter, I turn to the ideas of style and (self-)fashioning which have circulated in the debates on Afropolitanism; in thinking about how belonging takes on meaning in the context of mobility in Afropolitan texts, it is worth exploring in more detail how they construct self and persona through mobility.

CHAPTER TWO

Self-Conscious (Self-)Fashioning and Other Ideas of Style and Belonging

> The little downstairs dancefloor swells with smiling, sweating men and women fusing hip-hop dance moves with a funky sort of djembe … kente cloth worn over low-waisted jeans; "African Lady" over Ludacris bass lines; London meets Lagos meets Durban meets Dakar … Were you to ask any of these beautiful, brown-skinned people that basic question – "where are you from?" – you'd get no single answer from a smiling dancer … They belong to no single geography, but feel at home in many. (Selasi, 2005)

In the extract above, Taiye Selasi takes her cue from an urban night club scene to give an example of what it means to be Afropolitan and part of a wider pattern of peoples and cultures moving across borders. The excerpt which is taken from the writer's essay 'Bye-Bye Babar' brings to mind Arjun Appadurai's (2010) global flows of circulation, leaving the readers with the impression that perpetual movement and mixing play a fundamental role in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, creating a process in which music, clothing and various other cultural forms of expression (as well as the commodification, styles, ideas and images that shape these forms) are in transit.

Without repeating the broader questions of 'Bye-Bye Babar' which already feature in the Introduction, I make a brief return to the essay here because it offers a compelling starting point for a reading of style in Afropolitan texts. The writer's portrayal of the Afropolitan generation and their style is not merely a signifier of consumer choices nor can it be reduced to a question of income or class privilege, as argued by Anna Leena Toivanen (2017) and other critics of Afropolitanism. By only referring to a narrow demographic of people moving across borders between Africa and the diaspora, Selasi's rendition of the Afropolitan figure is indeed

indicative of underlying class issues, but we should note that 'income, alone, does not make a style', as Stuart Hall *et al.* (in Hall and Jefferson, 2006, 42) observe; rather, it is 'stylisation – the active organisation of objects with activities and outlooks' in 'the form and shape of a coherent and distinctive way of "being-in-the-world"', as well as the context in which this activity takes place that is central to the meaning of style. Hence, even if questions of class and material access play an important factor in Selasi's portrayal of (Afropolitan) style, we should note that such queries are always present in styling processes *and* that there are other equally significant aspects to consider.

In the introduction to this chapter, my interest lies in exploring how the idea of style – as it is alluded to in Selasi's essay – can help us think through the experiences of moving and belonging across borders that are portrayed in Afropolitan texts. Echoing Timothy Mitchell's (1991, 5) definition of representation as 'everything [that is] collected and arranged to stand for something', 'set up' to 'always evok[e] some larger truth', the extract from the essay shows how Afropolitans utilise their personal style as a means of representation: they use different cultural expressions to assemble selective, eclectic and syncretic styles and, in the process, tell us something about belonging at the turn of the new millennium. This weaving together of different cultural expressions reiterates Achille Mbembe's (2007, 28) idea of Afropolitanism as an 'interweaving of worlds' and the 'awareness' that this process is the result of people moving between and belonging to 'here and there' (see Introduction).

What drives Afropolitans' making of style(s) in Selasi's essay, however, is not just a general representation of belonging but a *self*-representation which speaks to what it means for *them* to form attachments as they move and live across borders. Selasi's Afropolitans wear the Ghanaian kente cloth with jeans which, previously an icon of American fashion, are now synonymous with urban youth culture across various continents; and literary and musical styles

from different generations merge as Randy Weston's jazz version of Langston Hughes's poem 'African Lady' is interlaced with the tunes of contemporary rapper Ludacris. Throwing these different elements together, they conjure up a self-fashioned style(s) that, as an act of self-representation, stands for the connections they have formed to multiple locations. In this case, we see that the main source of attachment is Ghanaian and American fashion and African American popular and literary culture which signals ties to West Africa and North America, but the writer links these references to other places to demonstrate how they also have affiliations elsewhere – London and Durban, for instance.

The insistence on foregrounding a connection to one place whilst weaving it together with another is not new, as Mbembe (2007) insists in 'Afropolitanism'. Nor is the idea of a syncretic style, as already illustrated in scholarship on popular culture in West Africa (e.g., Barber, 1987, Newell, 2011), but it is a key aspect in the extract quoted above, and I propose that it plays a central role in the way belonging is imagined both in Selasi's essay and in the wider cultural landscape associated with Afropolitanism. The style(s) we encounter here can be understood as a self-conscious approach to belonging: the fusion of different types of fabric and genres of music and literature is a way for Afropolitans to articulate a critical and reflective attitude towards belonging and to communicate, in self-conscious terms, not only what it means for them to be African but how they feel connected to different places in Africa and beyond.

Focusing on Sarah Ladipo Manyika's *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun*, Teju Cole's *Open City*, Clarissa Bannor's *This Afropolitan Life* and Abby Ogunsanya's and Ade Bantu's Afropolitan Vibes, this chapter shows that a similar idea of style comes to the surface in novels and other examples of Afropolitan cultural production. The overall argument of the chapter is two-fold: the four texts add meaning to belonging through style, and they demonstrate a self-consciousness about the process of assembling style, often reflecting at length on how it

is indicative of particular experiences, ideas, histories or narratives of moving and belonging across borders. In the texts, we shall see that style is imagined in several ways – denoting music and fashion styles, but also personal aesthetics (interests, clothing and appearance, for instance), attitude and outlook. The texts thus illustrate that style can be employed in various contexts, a suggestion which is substantiated by the definition(s) of the word. 'To style' denotes 'to design, arrange, make, etc., in *a particular … style*' (OED Online, 2019; emphasis added). This definition links the verb to the noun form which designates a 'distinctive or characteristic manner of doing something', indicating the stylistic choices that, for example, determine the composition of a song, an individual's attitude or outlook, or the components of that individual's outfit (see Penguin English Dictionary, 2004). In Afropolitan texts, we shall see how these different facets come to stand for ideas of belonging in the context of African experiences of moving across borders in the early twenty-first century.

In the chapter, I propose that style further refers to the creation of a pose and the fashioning of a self. In this understanding of the word, I echo Simon Gikandi and Stephen Greenblatt. Reading 'pose' as a variation of style, Gikandi (in Knudsen and Rahbek, 2016, 55) puts forward the idea that both words signify 'a way of being and of presenting yourself in a certain way'. Similarly, Greenblatt (1984, 2) takes style and fashioning to mean not only the making of 'a distinct style or pattern' but 'the forming of a self'. In Greenblatt's (1984, 2) view, self-fashioning is a feature in renaissance literature which turns on the assemblage of 'a distinctive personality, a characteristic address to the world, [or] a consistent mode of perceiving and behaving', often whilst adhering to a set of socially acceptable standards in a self-conscious manner. Finally, we shall see that Afropolitan texts illustrate another point made by Greenblatt, namely that the distinction between fashioning and self-fashioning is often blurred. The process of self-fashioning is likely to cross the boundaries of the self, for example

by including ‘the experience of being molded by forces outside one’s control’, or ‘the attempt to fashion other selves’ (ibid., 3).

A similar idea of style is seen in ethnographic accounts of contemporary fashion, music and other forms of cultural production in Africa and elsewhere (Hansen, 2003, Hansen and Madison, 2013, Miller, 2010, Shipley, 2013), as well as earlier studies of subcultural styles (Hall and Jefferson, [1993] 2006, Hebdige, 1988). Here, style is seen as a source of agency, with ‘the individual construction of an aesthetic based not just on what you wear but on how you wear it’ (Miller, 2010, 15), and as a means to create a distinct expression that can help communicate specific ideas, political convictions or personal beliefs. Jesse Weaver Shipley (2013, 11) identifies a comparable pattern in his discussion of Ghanaian hiplife music: here, style is seen as a vehicle for the ‘agentive self-fashioning subject [that] striv[es] for success and mobility’. Unlike Greenblatt, however, he places his definition in a contemporary context, arguing that it coheres with ‘neoliberal beliefs in the performative power of individual self-fashioning’ which posits ‘bodily comportment as a reflection of personal success’ (ibid., 76).

Most of these accounts share the observation that the sense of agency that comes with making a style is always conditioned (and limited) by context. The elements that make up a style and take part in shaping its meaning are determined by local and global processes of circulation of products, cultures, traditions and conventions, and the economic, social and political circumstances of the individual creating it. Thus, even if scholarly work puts emphasis on personal agency, this implies that meaning is signified through the content of style and the process of putting together this content, *as well as* the broader context in which the assemblage takes place.

The chapter is built around these various ideas. I illustrate that the style that is created in Afropolitan texts is often syncretic, eclectic and ‘open’ because it signifies connections to

various locations, people and cultures. From this perspective, (self-)fashioning appears to foster agency in the formation of belonging, allowing for multiple attachments to be represented, highlighted and reflected upon. But the texts also complicate assumptions of agency, for instance by demonstrating that social interactions can undermine the various connections that are alluded to in the styling process.

Focusing on Manyika's *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun*, the first section of the chapter explores how its protagonist constructs a style by creating a distinct outfit and surrounding herself with an eclectic mix of material belongings to signal her movements and sense of belonging across borders. In the second section, I show how the main character in Cole's *Open City* articulates a critical attitude in his reflections on the ambiguous nature of belonging, both in terms of his personal history and in the wider histories that circulate and underpin the urban environments in which he finds himself. In my reading of the two novels, my focus is not on Manyika's and Cole's own self-fashioning but rather how both authors employ fiction as a means to explore belonging in the context of style and from the viewpoint of a particular character. Both authors, I argue, create a fictional character to help them think through how experiences, ideas, histories and narratives of belonging can be connected to processes of (self-)fashioning and to give an embodied, experiential and complex form to belonging.

Leaving the realms of fiction to explore belonging beyond Afropolitan novels, I propose a different approach to *This Afropolitan Life* and Afropolitan Vibes. Here, I draw on interviews I conducted with each producer, using them as commentary on their work, as well as on Afropolitanism and belonging, as I weave them into my readings of their texts to demonstrate that their (self-)fashioning is an expression of a distinct pose. The third section explores Bannor's creation of a personal style on her blog *This Afropolitan Life*, a platform which can

be understood as an open-ended autobiographical collage of her life and, more specifically, her ongoing experience of moving and belonging across borders. My assertion is that the blog gives its readers insight into what belonging means for the author through her creation of a self, a text and a personal style that offer a way for her to contemplate the fluctuating characteristics of her experiences and shifting views on belonging.

The fourth section concludes the chapter with a reading of Ogunsanya's and Ade Bantu's concert series Afropolitan Vibes. Whilst the discussion revolves around the 50th iteration of the show, I further consider the producers' own perspective on style and belonging and how it feeds into the creation of the event. I suggest that we read the series as their self-conscious attempt to create a collective space that speaks to an 'open' and inclusive idea of belonging, but which is fashioned in the image of Lagos and the local agbero figure. Taking on the defiant attitude associated with this city and figure helps them carve out a place for themselves in the local music scene but also respond to Afropolitanism and offer their own take on the term. Finally, I claim that their event embodies Paul Gilroy's (1999, 101) idea of a 'syncretic complexity' which, in the context of Afropolitan Vibes, becomes an extension of Lagos' own histories and patterns of syncretism and eclecticism.

Fashioning a Style in *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun*

Manyika's novel *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun* pivots on the experiences of Morayo da Silva, a Nigerian retiree, San Francisco dweller and eccentric older woman who is prone to sentimentality at the cusp of her 75th birthday, frequently losing herself in memories of the past. Like other recent African diaspora novels (e.g., Omotoso, 2016) that can be read as a *Reifungsroman*, a literary genre centred on ageing characters, the novel departs from stereotypes of older people. The book portrays a protagonist who, to borrow Barbara Frey

Waxman's (1985, 321) definition of the genre, 'ripen[s] and matur[es] in an emotional and philosophical way' as she reflects on memories of the different places, cultures, people, things and ideas that have made up her belonging over time.

In a recent article, Sandra Sousa maintains that Manyika's novel subverts another stereotype. Morayo represents an 'unconventional' example of the Afropolitan figure by diverging from the demography of young people living across twenty-first-century Africa and the diaspora who are associated with the Afropolitan term (Sousa, 2019, 50). Sousa thus joins the group of critics who, as mentioned earlier in the thesis, identify literary characters that can help broaden the script as it was laid out originally in Selasi's 'Bye-Bye Babar' (see Introduction). In Sousa's (2019, 50) view, Morayo's lack of 'Afro-pessimism' fits the celebratory mode associated with Afropolitanism, yet the novel does not cohere with other representations of the Afropolitan figure, especially those seen in other Afropolitan novels. Compared to the characters in *Americanah*, for instance, *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun*'s character is more grounded not only because of her maturity in age but because her sense of belonging is clearly demarcated by the time she has dedicated to Nigeria and the US, respectively: avoiding a conventional narrative of displacement, she 'does not strive to belong in any of her worlds; she just belongs to both, past and present – one physically, the other in her memory' (Sousa, 2019, 48).

Even if Morayo is perhaps more certain in her connection to Nigeria and the US, her belonging comes across as ambiguous – much like Ifemelu's and Obinze's in *Americanah*. In this section, I demonstrate that Manyika foregrounds this ambiguity by creating a character whose attachments to Nigeria, America *and* elsewhere are both asserted and scrutinised in connection with her concern with style. We shall see that Morayo draws attention to her multi-locality in a self-conscious performance of an eclectic, yet carefully, curated style – one which

pivots on her wearing items of clothing and surrounding herself with material belongings that all form part of and signify her personal history of moving and living across borders. We will further see that her connection to different locations have become a thing of the past and, in the process, taken on an ephemeral quality. The character herself alludes to this ephemerality in the process of styling herself and in her reference to the various possessions she has accumulated over the years. Finally, the author highlights the ambiguity and ephemerality of the character's belonging in her interaction with people around her by showing that it leads to different perspectives on how to read her style. This, I argue, is what encourages us to read the character's story through the Afropolitan lens, aligning it with Selasi's portrayal of self-fashioning in 'Bye-Bye Babar' but also other texts associated with the concept which, as we shall see over the course of this chapter, offer a similarly complex picture of style and belonging.

Dressing Up, Feeling Good

Manyika offers an eclectic selection of details in her portrayal of Morayo's style to allude to the various places, people, things, ideas and memories that play a role in the character's life and speak to her self-conscious efforts to style herself in a particular way to give an impression of her history of moving and belonging across borders. Early on in the book, we learn that she wears toe rings from India where she has lived previously and that she wraps Ankara garments in vibrant colours expertly around her body; that she is the former wife of a Nigerian diplomat and her Yoruba name, Morayo ('I see joy'; see Sousa, 2019, 50), alludes to her optimism and is a reminder of her West African roots; and that she stands in the yoga pose tadasana when drinking tea in front of her kitchen window overlooking the San Francisco Bay and is the proud owner of a Porsche 993, a vintage car which gives her a sense of freedom and independence as she swiftly navigates the streets of the city. Together, these details are indicative of Morayo's

personal style and how it is a self-conscious way for her to weave together here, there and elsewhere, based on her personal attachment to Africa and elsewhere.

The fact that Morayo is keen to make a style through her own efforts and in a self-conscious manner is evident in the opening chapter when she assembles her outfit for the day. Rather than an everyday activity that is quickly dealt with, the act of getting dressed turns into an elaborate procedure, with the character indulging in every step of the routine. I quote the process at length here to illustrate how it allows her to lose herself in self-conscious reflection on her history of moving and belonging across borders. For the author, this is an opportunity to interlace the narrative present in the character's San Francisco apartment with brief glimpses of distant memories of Lagos and in this way add layers and depth to her multi-local existence:

> In my wardrobe sit a stack of brightly coloured fabrics … Today I select a new Ankara in vibrant shades of pink and blue and then bring it to my nose. When I open the folds of cloth I'm delighted to find the smell of Lagos markets still buried in the cotton – diesel fumes, hot palm oil, burning firewood. The smell evokes the flamboyance and craziness of the megacity that once was mine in between my husband's diplomatic postings … I've often thought of returning to Lagos … where everyone calls me "Auntie" or "Mama"; the land of constant sunshine and daily theatre … But even as I find myself searching the Internet for homes in Ikoyi [in Lagos], I know that I'm not likely to feel at home … My desire to return comes more from nostalgia than a genuine longing to return … In any case it's [to] Jos, the city of my childhood, that I'd most like to return. (Manyika, 2016, 4-5)

Manyika invites us here to understand Morayo's style both for its content and for the process of assembling it self-consciously. As the character engages with her personal belongings and ponders how they remind her of a connection to something, someone or somewhere, she adds meaning to them and, in turn, to her stylistic ensemble. In this instance, we see how the act of getting dressed is a way for her to make sense of her belonging, indicating to us, the readers of the novel, that she still maintains a close attachment to Nigeria but is acutely aware of how it

mostly hinges on distant memories and nostalgic ideas of home – a reflection which lends an ephemeral and ambiguous quality to her belonging.

In the extract, Manyika also foregrounds the relationship between people, places and things, thus expanding on ideas from her non-fiction work (see Manyika, 2003, 2010) and her debut novel *In Dependence*, in particular. Towards the end of this first novel, one of the protagonists notes that his attachment to Nigeria is best described as a 'cultural non-belonging' (Manyika, 2008, 218). He distances himself from what he views as a 'cultural tendency', namely 'to gravitate toward other *people* rather than toward *things* and *places*', and comes to the conclusion that '"things" (such as books filled with ideas) and "places" (memories of places and destinations yet to be visited) are what captivate [him]' (ibid.; emphasis in original). What is interesting here is how Manyika undercuts this dichotomy between things, places and people: even if the character insists on an unambiguous attachment to places and things rather than people, the sentimental tone and style of his reflection reveals a yearning for a deeper connection with the latter. Moreover, in his attempt to distinguish between the three categories, he admits to how things and places easily slip, moving away from their 'thingness' and towards people, often whilst turning into a complex web of ideas and memories of all three. As such, *In Dependence* indirectly asks what it is we claim belonging to when we say that we belong. Does the sense of belonging pivot on a particular place, or rather an idea or memory of that place? And in what way do things and people inform the experience of belonging? Manyika blurs these lines further in *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun* by showing how, as time passes and Morayo's affiliation with Nigeria becomes increasingly distant, she must turn to her material possessions and the personal memories of specific locations associated with them to remind herself that she belongs – and even then, the connection has an ephemeral quality to it.

Although this makes it seem as if Morayo's belonging is slipping away from her, we also get the impression that she feels a strong and embodied connection to Lagos through her material belongings. And this makes for an interesting overlap with Adichie's *Americanah*, illustrating how both texts speak to belonging as an embodied experience. In Chapter One, I noted that the distinct smell of urban locations in America comes to represent Ifemelu's ambivalent attachment to the US. This perspective is comparable with Morayo who indicates that to belong to a place is to know that place intimately through a familiarity with its materiality. For Morayo, who no longer lives in Nigeria, it is the material quality of the Ankara fabric and its smell of Lagos markets rather than the city itself that operate as a physical embodiment and metonymic representation of her connection: the fabric is merely one fragment of her belonging.

Karen Tranberg Hansen's work offers useful context here. With her views of belonging, Morayo illustrates Hansen's (2013, 3-4) point that 'body and dress [become] intimately entangled' in the process of (self-)fashioning and that this entanglement is 'deeply entwined with the biographies of [the person wearing it] and [the] particularities of time, space, location, site and context'. In a discussion of fashion in contemporary Zambia, Hansen (2003, 308, 303) further argues that there is an 'experiential dimension to dress, both in the wearing and viewing', and that 'the preoccupation with the dressed body is an aesthetic sensibility' which requires a 'discerning [of] skills' in 'creating an overall look that results in pride, pleasure, and … feeling good'. Similar ideas feed into Manyika's portrayal of Morayo, implying that, for the character, it is about creating stylish outfits and highlighting her best features to feel good about herself:

> I wrap the material around my waist keeping my legs spread hip distance so as not to pull too tightly, then I wrap it again and finish with a secure tuck at the side. I choose

> contrasting yellow material to wind around my hair and then check in the bathroom mirror, patting down the top of my Afro. Satisfied, I rub pink gloss on my lips and blot with a tissue. Off come my glasses and then two quick brushes of the eyebrows towards the temples with a baby toothbrush kept just for this purpose … This draws people's attention to the eyes. Eyes, said the apostle Matthew, are the lamp of the body. And … eyes are the one thing that never age. (Manyika, 2016, 5-6)

Whereas the first extract established Morayo's Nigerian connection, Manyika demonstrates here how other aspects of the character's style designate a desire to feel young and unique (and thus good about herself) in San Francisco. This is highlighted in another moment where Morayo takes us through her plan of getting a tattoo:

> It's not just the fact of getting a tattoo but it's where I intend to have it done that thrills me … Something on the wrist or ankle would be too ordinary … [Maybe] bougainvillea … a fine long thread of it winding its way up my back … What colour would look best on my darker skin? … Perhaps I should just have a small sprig … inked at the base of my neck … Perhaps I could have a tiny little blossom, symbolic of the tropical climes that I so love. (Manyika, 2016, 26)

Morayo never gets the tattoo because her birthday plans are interrupted when she slips and falls in the shower. What is important about the passage above, however, is that it makes clear that she leaves nothing to chance in her self-fashioning and that the process is as much about which elements should go into the style as it is about how to arrange them and why, both to connect with her immediate surroundings and to allude to her itinerant history.

A common assumption about style in the discourse of Afropolitanism is that what people wear and how they wear it is a sign of superficiality. Here, clothing is, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, seen as little more than the global consumer tendencies and material access of middle-class Africans who navigate the neo-liberal and capitalist world of the twenty-first century as they move between Africa and the diaspora. A similar reading of style is prevalent in both public and academic discourses in Europe and North America,

according to David Miller. Miller (2010, 16, 13) argues that it is an assumption which is often rooted in 'a certain relation between the interior and the exterior' that takes 'what we truly are' to be 'located deep inside ourselves' and 'in direct opposition to the surface,' and clothes as a sign of superficiality because they are merely 'material objects situated at the periphery of the body'. In his opinion, the problem with this hypothesis is both that it is assumed to be a universal way to understand clothing and that we are 'inclined to consider people who take clothes seriously as themselves superficial' (Miller, 2010, 13).

Demonstrating that Morayo's clothing is anything but a shallow surface, Manyika's novel is similarly critical of this conjecture. Like Miller (2010, 40), her text encourages us to reconsider the metaphor of surface by implying that even if the character's style depends on material access, 'clothing plays a considerable and active part in constituting [her] particular experience of the self' from her perspective. The fact that Morayo cares about what she wears or how she looks is not a sign of superficiality. Rather, it implies that what she wears – what is on the surface – gives her 'the freedom to construct [her]self [without being] categorized by circumstance' (Miller, 2010, 17), and to wear her multi-local sense of belonging on her sleeve. Below, we will encounter a similar idea in the character's engagement with her material belongings.

Belonging and Belongings

In *The Sense of Things*, Bill Brown identifies a preoccupation in nineteenth-century American fiction with the physical object world and the role it plays in everyday life. Discussing the literary strategies writers from this period employed to illuminate how we 'engage with [things] as something other than mere surfaces', Brown (2003, 13) claims that modernist writing erases the boundaries between people and things. Without conflating this literature with the text I am reading here, I find Brown's (2003, 12; emphasis in original) notion of a 'slippage between

having (possessing a particular object) and *being* (the identification of one's self with that object)' particularly intriguing here; in Manyika's novel, the protagonist's engagement with objects points to a slippage in the definition(s) of belonging, collapsing the distinction between what she owns and the places and cultures to which she is attached to show how her physical belongings (the things she surrounds herself with and considers as her possessions) feed into her history of belonging across borders. We shall see that this reading of belonging and belongings is also relevant in the discussion of Bannor's *This Afropolitan Life*, a text which attests to another slippage in the meaning of the word and substantiates Brenda Cooper's (2008) assertion that African writers utilise material objects in their stories as metonymical images of their characters' border crossings and connections to different locations.

The first object Morayo identifies with in the novel is the apartment where she has lived for the past twenty years. Introducing the readers to her home in a conversational manner, she reports thus in the opening lines of the novel:

> The place where I live is ancient. "Old but sturdy," our landlady tells us … So strong apparently, that it withstood the 1906 earthquake. "Didn't even burst a single crack" … Who knows, when the earth finally decides that it's tired of fidgeting and needs a proper stretch … But it's the view that matters in San Francisco. And my view, oh yes, my view is *magnifique*. When you stand at the kitchen sink you can see all the colourful houses of Haight Ashbury … The eucalyptus and pine forests of the Presidio that stretch across the bay where, on a clear day, the waters shimmer azure blue. (Manyika, 2016, 1)

What is interesting here is that Morayo quickly moves from a detailed sketch of her home to a description of her own personality: 'For I, like this building, am ancient. Ancient if you're going by Nigerian standards, where I've outfoxed the female life expectancy by nearly two decades' (ibid., 2). This opening moment does more than simply set the scene, illustrating how the character's material belongings slip from one meaning to another as she moves from a

description of the apartment to her perception of herself and her connection to San Francisco. Just like the building, she still stands tall, and the panoramic view of San Francisco from the kitchen window not only makes her feel connected to the city, but is a metaphor for how she, from the vantage point of old age, tends to perceive her own history of belonging – in hindsight and from a distance.

Morayo's car is another example of the slippage between her belonging and belongings. Affectionately named 'Buttercup' (which is what Morayo's mother used to call her), the car allows her to expand on her own idea of what it means for her to live in San Francisco, one which, as we shall see later, forms a contrast to Julius's wanderings through New York in *Open City*: whereas his walks expand on a literary tradition of walking New York that allows him to reflect on the city's complex and layered histories of belonging, Morayo swiftly navigates San Francisco from the comfort of her car in a way which highlights her adventurous spirit and style and speaks to a sense of independence and freedom in her personal history of moving and belonging across borders. But the car is also an example of how she tries to hold on to a sense of agency as she gets older. When her deteriorating sight leads her to park it too far from the curb and someone reports her to the local council, she is worried that she might lose the car if her licence is revoked. She thus soon finds herself worrying about how old age is likely to restrict her sense of belonging on her own terms in San Francisco: 'I want to remain independent – to be able to take off whenever I feel like it … the freedom to do as I choose' (Manyika, 2016, 17).

A former literature professor, Morayo further cherishes the literary company she keeps, more than once referring to the books on her shelves as her 'shelf friends' (Manyika, 2016, 112). In *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Wayne C. Booth (1988, 171-2) explains that this habit of seeing literature as close companionship is a recurring phenomenon in

literature: ‘In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the personification was widespread’, with various examples of fiction and poetry purporting the idea that ‘happiness [was] found in a pursuit of friendship’ and the quality of lives ‘in large part [being] identical with the quality of the company we keep’ in the form of books and their authors. For Morayo, the books on her shelves are friends whose stories keep her company, but they also become part of her self-fashioning as she rewrites their endings in her mind and self-consciously organises them ‘according to which characters [she] believe[s] ought to be talking to each other’:

> *Heart of Darkness* is next to *Le Regard du Roi*, and *Wide Sargasso Sea* sits directly above *Jane Eyre*. The latter used to sit next to each other but then … it [is] best to redress the old colonial imbalance and give Rhys the upper hand – upper shelf. (Manyika, 2016, 23)

The exercise is both an example of the character’s self-conscious pose and critical attitude and an illustration of Booth’s idea of ethical criticism. Morayo subjects her books to a postcolonial critique, creating a distinct order on her shelves not only to show which books to read but how to perceive them in relation to one another. This implies that Morayo and the authors on her shelves are friends who learn from one another: while she has benefited from reading their work, she adds her own ideas to the mix by re-arranging the collection in a way that coheres with her outlook and reflects her critical attitude towards imbalances in literary history.

Changing Perspectives, Social Interactions

So far, I have demonstrated how working within the realms of fiction allows Manyika to generate a nuanced and complex idea of belonging by giving access to the inner life of a character and in this way present it as an experiential, embodied and deeply personal concept that can become highly ambiguous and ephemeral in the context of mobility. In what follows, we shall see how the author creates contrast and tension in the character’s social interaction

with other people and through an interjection of other characters' perspectives – a narrative strategy which attests to how the novel form, with its rich potential for layering multiple voices, can be a means to channel and alternate between contrasting views on style and belonging.

The story is mainly told by Morayo from a first-person point of view, but other perspectives materialise in the dialogue and in occasional shifts to the first- and third-person perspective of minor characters. These narrative shifts underline the subjectivity of style, showing how the meanings that are attributed to it are usually a combination of personal preference, collective expectations, and cultural norms, and that this combination is often subject to negotiation. The text thus reiterates what Hansen (2013, 3) refers to as the social interaction of fashion and clothing: 'The meaning of dress does not inhere in the garments themselves but is attributed to them in ongoing social interaction'. When Manyika begins to alternate between different perspectives a couple of chapters into the book, we already have a comprehensive understanding of Morayo's own take on her eclectic and vibrant appearance, but we now learn that this perspective is not universal. The protagonist is frequently subjected to other characters' scrutiny and critique, with collective expectations of age shaping their response:

> Once upon a time she must have been stunning – such a tall woman with a fine ass, even now. She was probably even stylish, although now, at her age, all these bright colours with the pencil and flowers sticking out of her hair only made her look odd. (Manyika, 2016, 11)

This reductive reading of Morayo's style helps explain why she is so conscious of how age underpins the styling process we witnessed earlier. The character who is quoted here does not voice his thoughts so Morayo never hears them, but the text suggests that she is aware of the

fact that she is probably seen as a quirky old lady. To work against this stereotype, she latches on to comments which make her feel at home in San Francisco:

> "You look awesome", says a stranger, startling me from my thoughts. "Well, so do you", I smile, noting the man's carefully manicured fingernails. I enjoy this sort of attention from San Francisco's gentlemen. It's one of the things that I love about the city … I find [it] gentler than most … Here in San Francisco, both men and women seem to admire my sense of style. Whereas if I were back in London or certain parts of New York, where buba and gele are commonplace, I know that I wouldn't turn heads, not at this age at least. And back in Nigeria, where so many are dressed like me, I wouldn't draw any attention at all. (Manyika, 2016, 16-17)

Morayo appreciates attention from strangers because they acknowledge her efforts to create a distinct look. The irony is, of course, that her desire to feel unique is not unique at all, especially not in the immediate environment of San Francisco, a city known for being open to individual self-expression. But what is significant here is that the character is recognised by people who are driven by a similar desire to feel unique and that this makes her feel like she belongs. Manyika thus implies that it is not only the process of self-fashioning but the social interaction that follows which gives the protagonist a sense of agency in defining the terms of her attachment.

Another way in which Morayo's perspective is questioned is in inconsistencies in her behaviour and attitude. For instance, she projects her anxieties of growing older onto other women of her age and looks down on eccentric locals. A similar discrepancy is evident in a phone conversation with an employee from the DMV office (the Department of Motor Vehicles) about her driving licence. When the employee's name brings back memories of living in India, Morayo finds herself eager to connect with him based on the things they must have in

common. Highlighting the subjectivity of the character's perspective, this allows Manyika to test the limits of her open-minded attitude:

> I smile, picturing the young man sitting in a call centre somewhere in India next to his metal lunch box, layered with aloo paratha and pickles … How surprised he'll be when I disclose that I once lived in his country, when I tell him how I miss all my friends at the spice markets. I'll tell him that I still keep cardamom and cumin … to remind me of those days … [And] the toe rings … which also came from Bombay. Mumbai. (Manyika, 2016, 7-8)

Morayo is keen to show off her connection to India, but the grand gesture of bonding with the employee is quickly deflated when she realises that he is based in Sacramento, and she admits that only certain places are likely to instigate interesting conversations: 'Such a disappointing capital city. So lacking in character. No hills or mountains, just flat like a plate. What a shame he wasn't calling from India. And me, ready to exchange a few greetings in Hindi' (Manyika, 2016, 8). Pointing to a possible difference in class perspective between Morayo and the call centre worker, the fact that she dismisses him on these terms reveals a contradiction in her self-fashioned pose. She may see herself as an open, worldly and well-travelled person, but she is still capable of narrow-mindedness, dismissing locations and people based on personal preference.

When we first meet Morayo, she does not have a network of close friends and relatives in San Francisco. And we mainly see her making sense of her belonging through her material possessions and by interacting with strangers even if they remind her of its ambiguous and ephemeral nature. Following the generic pattern of the *Reifungsroman*, however, Manyika alludes to a gradual shift in the character's attitude after her fall in the shower, an incident which leads to a brief spell in a nursing home. Reminding her that old age will inevitably catch up with her, Morayo becomes aware of how engaging with material objects and random strangers

only adds to the ephemeral characteristics of her belonging. And confronted with overwhelming feelings of loneliness, she admits to herself that books are not 'real' friends (Manyika, 2016, 112). This realisation speaks to her development as a character, suggesting that she is beginning to yearn for a more intimate connection with people, admitting that her books and other possessions only stand as one kind of belonging. This point is highlighted further when she finds a close companion in Reggie (an older Caribbean gentleman who pays daily visits to the nursing home to see his wife who is suffering from Alzheimer's) soon after her arrival at the home and, in the open ending of the novel, imagines what their blossoming friendship and future conversations will look like. With this opportunity for a close and meaningful connection with another person, the text indicates that Morayo has thus found a new kind of belonging, one which still allows for her connections to here, there and elsewhere, but which makes room for close relationships with other people, too. As such, the novel gives the impression that personal style is not important in and of itself in the formation of belonging; it is also in the circumstances in which style is created that the concept takes on meaning.

Expanding on the ideas of style we have encountered above, the next section turns to Cole's *Open City*, a novel which depicts a character's efforts to articulate a distinct style (or attitude, more specifically) for himself and illustrates how this helps him take a critical stand on what it means to belong in the early twenty-first century.

Articulating an Attitude in *Open City*

Cole's *Open City* offers another way of thinking about style and belonging. Manyika stages an active making of style by showing how her character accumulates material objects and puts together outfits for herself, deliberately and self-consciously weaving them into a stylistic ensemble that signals her multi-local belonging. Conversely, Cole demonstrates how Julius, the

German-Nigerian protagonist of *Open City*, articulates a critical and (self-)reflective attitude in his engagement with the world around him, one which helps him bring out the complexities and ambiguities of wider histories of belonging. Told in hindsight and from a first-person perspective, Julius traces the final year of his training as a psychiatrist, a year spent wandering the streets of New York and going on a short trip to Brussels to look for his maternal grandmother. He prefers to spend his time going on long, solitary walks through both cities, observing urban life from a distance and only occasionally pursuing the company of a select few. Although he has lived in New York for some time when we meet him in the opening chapter, he comes across as someone who is detached from other people: he has recently broken up with his girlfriend and is often reluctant to connect with the people he meets. And while he does refer to friends, he rarely goes into detail about their role in his life. Instead, he is preoccupied with the city itself, losing himself in careful and extensive readings of specific buildings, historical sites, art exhibitions and strangers in the street. Whereas the title of the novel implies that New York engenders an 'open' kind of belonging with its various and shifting urban spaces making room for multiple interpretations of the concept, the character suggests in his silent reflections that it is also layered with more complex and ambiguous histories and ideas of belonging.

The character's reflections are interlaced with a short series of flashbacks to his childhood which add complexity and nuance to his critical stance on belonging, providing a more intimate understanding of his own movements across borders. Growing up as the child of a Yoruba father and a German mother in Nigeria, Julius is confronted with the ambiguity of belonging at a young age. He notes how he quickly became aware that his mother's tangible connection to Nigeria, 'the country she loved but to which she could never belong', extended to him:

> The name Julius linked me to another place and was, with my passport and my skin color one of the intensifiers of my sense of being different, of being set apart, in Nigeria. I had a Yoruba middle name, Olatubosun, which … surprised me a little each time I saw it … like something that belonged to someone else but had long been held in my keeping. (Cole, 2011, 77-8)

His father passes away when the character is a teenager, and he soon becomes estranged from his mother. Shortly after graduating from school, he applies for colleges in the US and eventually relocates to New York. A consequence of his bi-cultural, -racial and -national heritage, this early experience of (non-)belonging implies that settling down somewhere else is an attempt to circumvent his feeling of being caught in-between.

What is significant about Julius's style is his critical and reflective attitude in his engagement with the world around him: he reflects on New York and its architecture, culture and people much like he reflects on works of art – as objects whose stories he can dwell on in an analytical and critical manner. This aspect of the character's style feeds into the novel's style, making it remarkably similar to Cole's essay collections *Blind Spot* (2016a) and *Known and Strange Things* (2016b). Julius's style has also invited both scholars and reviewers to read him as a detached character belonging to nowhere, applying different labels, including the 'flâneur' (Foden, 2011), the 'fugueur' (Vermeulen, 2013), and the 'cosmopolitan' (Hallemeier, 2013). More recently, Rebecca Clark (2018, 185-6) has defined him as a 'diagnostic narrator' who is characterised by his 'objective, distanced, analytic stance towards … the world and the other characters', operating as 'a (view)point and nothing more'.

While I agree that the character is a means for Cole to explore a certain way of looking at the world, in this section we shall see that Julius's attitude does not signify a desire to belong to nowhere but rather his response to the histories he encounters on his walks through the city, as well as to specific ideas of how he should belong and to what or whom. My assertion is that

as Julius articulates this critical and (self-)reflective attitude towards New York, he carefully works through his own story of belonging and positions himself in relation to other people and other stories in a particular way. This implies that he is more than a mere voice, that he is someone who, like some of the other characters we have encountered so far in this thesis, is grappling with the concept of belonging as a result of moving and living across borders.

Questions of belonging also feature prominently in *Every Day Is for the Thief* (2015a). Initially a blog revolving around Cole's own time in Lagos but later turned into his debut novel (first published in 2007), the book depicts a character who visits the West African city after spending several years in New York. As he moves through Lagos to reconnect with friends and family, he contemplates how Nigeria has changed into something that seems both strange and familiar, a feeling which makes him ponder the shifting nature of his attachment. In this section, we shall see how *Open City* inverts this framework by exploring a character's belonging in the context of New York – a character who is acutely aware of how wider patterns of migration and mobility affect and complicate his connection to the city, yet is yearning 'to begin life in [a] new country, fully on [his] own terms' (Cole, 2011, 85). We shall further see how the novel creates tension in its portrayal of Julius's critical engagement with the city, for instance by showing how he is frequently interrupted by other people who either try to lay claims on him or make him feel as if he does not fit in.

City Walks and Histories of Migration and Belonging

In a reading of literary portrayals of characters walking New York, the 'cosmopolitan, cultural center of America', Stephen Miller (2015, xii) writes that moving through this particular city on foot is often described as 'mentally numbing, even disorientating'. As Miller observes, Cole builds on this tradition by alluding to how confusing it is for Julius to make sense of the place when the activity first becomes part of his daily schedule. The character himself makes a note

of this, explaining that he has to sort through the congested spaces and 'incessant loudness' of the streets, with their never-ending 'crowds of shoppers and workers', 'road constructions' and 'horns of taxicabs' (Cole, 2011, 6). The sense of disorientation that comes from the walks is perhaps indicative of how he does not quite feel that he belongs, but the walks are a productive way for him to get more familiar with the place. The walks are also a way for him to articulate a critical and reflective attitude towards New York as it works 'itself into [his] life at walking pace': taking daily walks across Manhattan is a way for him to reflect at length on what he sees – to complicate and be critical of New York's multiple, layered and complex histories of migration and movement, and how they are connected with ideas of belonging and to ponder how his own narrative sits amongst the various other migrant stories that shape the congested spaces of the city (ibid., 3). This is evident in the following extract about the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. Symbols of inclusive ideas of what it means to belong to America, the histories of these physical structures give the impression of an 'open city' which, as Madhu Krishnan (2015, 675) notes, brings with it 'the illusion of freedom of movement'. Julius notes how:

> From where I stood, the Statue of Liberty was a fluorescent green fleck against the sky, and beyond her sat Ellis Island, the focus of so many myths; but it had been built too late for those early Africans – who weren't immigrants in any case – and it had been closed too soon to mean anything to the later Africans like Kenneth, or the cabdriver, or me. Ellis Island was a symbol for European refugees. Blacks, "we blacks," had known rougher ports of entry. (Cole, 2011, 54-5)

With self-conscious phrases such as 'from where I stood' and 'Blacks, "we blacks"', Julius implies that how we read historical monuments and the stories they represent depends on our perspective. In his view, the statue is not an unambiguous signifier of national belonging, but rather a testament to a series of unanswered questions: if the symbols of one of America's dominant narratives of belonging were constructed in response to a particular wave of European migration to the US, where does this leave other people who, either willingly or by force, have

moved across borders and settled down in the city and other parts of the country? In what way can African Americans, for example, be expected to relate to a point of entry from which they were originally and deliberately excluded? And where does this leave Julius and other Africans who have left the African continent and crossed the Atlantic more recently and on their own initiative? Are they, as Miller (2015, 200) asks, supposed to see themselves in the history of slavery or in the 'immigrant story' of Europeans coming to America via Ellis Island? That is, to what extent do New York's historical buildings and sites define New York as an 'open' city and how do they relate to Julius's and others' belonging in the early twenty-first century?

Julius embodies Mbembe's (2007, 28) idea of Afropolitanism here, acknowledging in his critical scrutiny of people's movements between different parts of the world – Africa, Europe and the US in this instance – a 'way of belonging to the world … [that] has always been marked by … the presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa, [and] the relativisation of primary roots and memberships'. On a short trip to Brussels, Julius adopts a similarly critical and reflective attitude on this history of migration and belonging. Like most of the character's contemplations, the following meditation is extensive but worth quoting at length here to demonstrate how his critical and reflective attitude informs his reading of the city:

> [The park] was covered in fog, but this made the scale of the monuments seem even bigger. The already gigantic arcades shot up vertiginously … The park, built by a heartless king, was also of inhuman scale. A handful of tourists, so dwarfed by the monuments that, from a distance, they looked like toys … [In front of the Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire] under the arcade was a plaque displaying in relief the portraits of the first five Belgian kings … and beneath it an inscription that read: HOMMAGE A LA DYNASTIE LA BELGIQUE ET LE CONGO, RECONNAISSANTS MDCCCXXXI. Not triumph, then, but gratitude … for triumphs received … I was there, it seemed to me, to no purpose, unless being together in the same country, as I and my oma now were (if, that is, she were still alive), was, by itself, a comfort. (Cole, 2011, 100)

To Julius, Brussels's architecture is another example of how today's urban sites and monuments testify to a past of oppression and exclusion, weighing down on the present moment. In the extract above, the histories that are connected to the physical structures make it difficult for him to recognise himself in the city because they contradict contemporary and more inclusive ideas of belonging. This is not only emphasised by the eerie atmosphere and the contrast between the inhuman scale of the monuments and the toy-like tourists, but in the language that is used to commemorate Belgium's colonial past and reminds him of his own non-belonging – that his only connection to the city is an estranged grandmother (who may no longer be alive).

It is thus in Julius's critical and reflective attitude towards the different urban spaces he moves through that the novel complicates belonging. Engaging in this manner with the crowded spaces of New York and Brussels as they unfold before him on his wanderings, Julius implies that both places highlight belonging as a concept that is full of tension and ambiguity. If we return to the sections in the novel that are dedicated to New York, another example is seen when the character passes by the site of 9/11 where the World Trade Center buildings collapsed in 2001. Whilst taking this moment from the recent past as his starting point, he quickly moves on to reflect on how the broader history connected to the site is saturated with stories of settlement, movement and migration that attest to the city's multi-layered and fluctuating histories of belonging – the various ideas, experiences and narratives of the concept that have shaped the place over time:

> Before the towers had gone up, there had been a bustling network of little streets traversing this part of town. Robinson Street, Laurens Street, College Place: all of them had been obliterated in the 1960s to make way for the World Trade Center buildings, and all were forgotten now. Gone, too, was the old Washington Market, the active piers, the fishwives, the Christian Syrian enclave that was established here in the late 1800s. The Syrians, the Lebanese, and other people from the Levant had been pushed across the river to Brooklyn … And before that? … The site was a palimpsest, as was all the city, written, erased, rewritten. There had been communities here … human beings had

> lived here, built homes, and quarrelled with their neighbors … Generations rushed through the eye of the needle, and I, one of the still legible few … I wanted to find the line that connected me to my own part in these stories. (Cole, 2011, 58-9)

The text indicates that Julius's intention is not to detach himself completely from the city but rather to adopt a critical and reflective attitude in his engagement with these histories of migration and belonging and, in the process, bring out the tensions and complexities that lie latent in the city and to question his own place in this context: what does it mean for him to arrive in a city like New York, and in what way can he form a meaningful connection to a place that is in constant flux? Is it even possible to make sense of one's own position in a city where history is constantly 'written, erased, rewritten' and so many experiences are forgotten or overlooked?

While urban structures represent the city's many histories of migration and belonging, Julius also observes how new ones are made in the early twenty-first century in his brief interactions with other migrant figures and with the few characters whose company he actively seeks out. Representing a broad spectrum of people, they include an older gentleman from Berlin who arrived as a young boy shortly before World War II, a young Liberian refugee, Professor Saito, who is his former teacher, and Farouq, a Moroccan immigrant residing in Brussels. Much like Julius, most of these characters are trying to carve out a place for themselves in the city and have their own stories of (non-)belonging to tell. And in his account of their experiences, he deploys a similarly critical and reflective attitude, reading them like he reads monuments – in a descriptive and analytic language that is usually void of empathy and sentiment. This suggests that, to him, they are all part of the same complex trajectory of urban histories of migration and belonging: as Clark (2018, 189) notes, the character 'collapses all of the stories he hears', retelling 'them in his own affectively flat, unhurried, unidirectional univocality'.

Aesthetic Consumption

On his walks in *Open City*, Julius also visits art and photography exhibitions, museums and other cultural sites in New York, and listens to music – an aesthetic consumption in which the character's 'aesthetics and ethics', according to Chielozona Eze (2016, 117), 'issue from … openness' to the interweaving of worlds, admitting 'the simple fact that one's culture or society is composed with strands from other societies and cultures' and that here, there and elsewhere are closely intertwined as a result. In Eze's view, this is evident in how the character interlaces different cultural elements and makes them part of his own stylistic ensemble, without allowing them to undermine one another – much like the Afropolitan figure that is portrayed in Selasi's 'Bye-Bye Babar', as well as Morayo in Manyika's novel. 'His love for Gustav Mahler [has] never displaced his enjoyment for Fela Kuti', for example (Eze, 2016, 115).

In *Open City*, however, Julius's engagement with culture is not just Cole's way of showing how the character relies on the process of self-fashioning to highlight his personal experience of moving and belonging across borders. Other scholars have argued that it is also a way for the author to weave other 'texts' into the character's story (Cobham-Sander, 2020, Sollors, 2018). In my reading of the novel here, I propose that staging Julius's engagement with various forms of culture helps Cole add layers to the character's critical and reflective attitude towards the world around him. Julius is not always critical or reflective in his musings on culture. Sometimes works of art merely provide a means of escape, a place where he can lose himself and give in to whatever he sees, hears or feels – as seen early in the novel when he finds himself in a record shop, browsing through the section of classical music. When the opening movement of Gustav Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* starts playing, he quickly finds himself entering 'the strange hues of its world' and notes how

> It happened subliminally, but before long, I was rapt and might have, for all the world, been swaddled in a private darkness. In this trance, I continued to move from one row of compact discs to another … All I had to do was bide my time, and wait for the emotional core of the work … I sat on one of the hard benches near the listening stations, and sank into reverie. (Cole, 2011, 16-7)

The character himself notes that classical music speaks to him on an intuitive level, a point which is reiterated in the next chapter where he compares it with jazz, a genre with which he does not experience the same 'emotional connection' (ibid., 23-4). What is interesting is how Julius seems to have abandoned his critical and reflective attitude here, giving in to classical music without spending too much time questioning why – a pattern which is replicated in his engagement with other cultural forms that give him a similarly transcendental feeling, leaving him with 'the sense of having wandered into the past', losing 'all track of time' as if 'all time between them and [him has] somehow vanished' (ibid., 36).

The critical and reflective attitude articulated on his walks still comes to dominate his engagement with culture, however, with the novel showing how he, in his many readings of various art works, contemplates their style, function and purpose. During a visit to the International Center of Photography halfway through the novel, for instance, he contemplates how:

> Photography seemed to me … an uncanny art like no other. One moment, in all of history, was captured, but the moments before and after it disappeared into the onrush of time; only that selected moment itself was privileged, saved, for no other reason than its having been picked out by the camera's eye. (ibid., 152)

Julius moves from an ekphrastic reading of Martin Mukáncsi's work to the general role of photography here, pondering the way in which some images make history while others do not. What is intriguing about this and other moments in his engagement with culture is how his 'aesthetic recognition of objects' (Brown, 2003, 74) is informed by a critical attitude, one

which, echoing the one he adopts on his walks through the city, takes on a self-reflective quality: on the surface, it appears that the observation on photography relates to the work of art that is in front of Julius, but we can also understand it as an indirect scrutiny of his own story in New York, with the character asking to what extent his own story of belonging is privileged over others in the city, and what implications the city's complex and ambiguous histories of migration and belonging have for his initial yearning to find a way to belong on his own terms.

Interruptions

Cole illustrates how Julius is frequently interrupted in his critical and reflective engagement with urban histories of migration and belonging and in his connection with works of art – interruptions which lead to a heightened self-consciousness of the role certain narratives and ideas of belonging play in his life. After spending time at the Folk Art Museum, the character gets into a taxi and accidentally offends the driver because he forgets to greet him. While Julius tries to avoid further tension by using the colloquial 'brother' to address the driver, the latter is insulted, asking him, 'Hey, I'm African just like you, why do you do this?' (Cole, 2011, 40-1). Julius does not reply, impatiently thinking to himself: 'I wasn't sorry at all. I was in no mood for people who tried to lay claims on me … Anger had welled up within me, unhinging me, the anger of shattered repose' (ibid.). Reminiscent of Morayo's conversation with the call centre worker in Manyika's novel, the incident suggests a possible class difference in perspective between Julius and the driver, showing how the 'repose' the main character experiences from his afternoon in the art gallery is shattered. But the moment serves another purpose, too – namely, to highlight that he is wary of people who try to label him, frustrated with the idea and expectation that, as an African, he should behave in a certain way.

Cole reiterates this point in another encounter in the following chapter. When Julius stops at a bar on one of his walks, he is approached by a Caribbean man who works as a guard

at the museum. Recognising Julius from his visit, the guard tries to strike up conversation, but the protagonist is reluctant, especially when the topic turns to Africa:

> He asked where I was from, what I did … One of my housemates, once, in Colorado, he said, was a Nigerian … Yoruba, I think he was, and I'm really interested in African culture anyway. Are you Yoruba? Kenneth was, by now, starting to wear on me … I thought of the cabdriver who had driven me home … hey, I'm African just like you. Kenneth was making a similar claim. (Cole, 2011, 53)

While 'brother', to the driver and the guard, is a word that is meaningful in that it allows them to acknowledge and connect with other people living in the African diaspora, Julius merely uses it as a strategy to avoid confrontation. And he is dismissive of their connection, echoing Selasi's (2005, see also Selasi, 2014a) scepticism of the question, 'Where are you from?' – in his view, their connection does not resonate with him nor does the fact that he is from Nigeria imply that they have things in common. Instead, it is a reminder of how he is expected to conform to wider politics and structures of belonging dictated by ideas of descent (and race). And the character does not want to belong on others' terms nor does he wish to be part of a diasporic community structured around their shared ties to the African continent. Of course, the irony here is that while Julius gets frustrated with strangers who make assumptions about him and his personal history of moving and belonging across borders, Cole demonstrates how the character himself is quick to judge, dismissing people almost immediately after having met them. As such, *Open City* complicates and engages critically with what it means to be African and belong here, there and elsewhere in the early twenty-first century in a way which is reminiscent of what we have seen so far in this thesis, both in terms of Knudsen and Rahbek's (2016, 3) idea of Afropolitanism's 'critical inquiry' but also characters in other Afropolitan novels and producers of other Afropolitan texts.

Open City further emphasises the inconsistency in its character's critical attitude by highlighting his failure to subject himself to his own scrutiny. While he submits the world around him to careful reading and extensive criticism, he does not engage with the 'blind spots', or problematic aspects of his own personality which is perhaps most obvious towards the end of the book when he meets Moji, an old friend who confronts him with the knowledge that he raped her when they were both teenagers in Nigeria. When she accuses him of acting like he 'knew nothing about it, had even forgotten her … and never tried to acknowledge what [he] had done' (Cole, 2011, 244), he resorts to a silent reflection on the immediate surroundings around him and avoids commenting on the incident afterwards. Cole implies that this testifies to the character's refusal to engage in a critical reading of himself, gesturing towards it in elusive phrases ('I have searched myself' (Cole, 2011, 147)) which suggest introspection but without showing the actual process.

Another significant interruption occurs towards the end of the novel when the character attends a performance of Mahler's Ninth Symphony at Carnegie Hall. To begin with, Julius feels himself being transported into the world of the music. But he is soon distracted by the public nature of the setting, and his mind slowly begins to drift from stage to audience:

> Almost everyone, as almost always at such concerts, was white … I notice it each time, and try to see past it. Part of that is a quick, complex series of negotiations: chiding myself for even seeing it, lamenting the reminders of how divided our life still remains, being annoyed that these thoughts … pass through my mind at some point in the evening. Most of the people around me … were middle-aged or old. I am used to it, but it never ceases to surprise me how easy it is to leave the hybridity of the city, and enter into all-white spaces … The only thing odd, to some of them, is seeing me, young and black … I get looks that make me feel like Ota Benga, the Mbuti man who was put on display in the Monkey House at the Bronx Zoo in 1906. (Cole, 2011, 251-2)

The moment attests to how Cole, as Josh Epstein (2019, 416) notes, questions the assumption that art 'can make a subject whole' and that 'listening to great music can affirm one's

"connectedness"', by revealing how '[the character] is not just made, but unmade, by the things that he consumes'. Throughout the novel, Julius has been keen to engage critically with New York and its many buildings, sites and cultural spaces and, as the narrator of his own story, look for his own place in the city. Yet, Cole illustrates here how New York's cultural spaces easily remind him of the ambiguous and ephemeral quality of his connection to the city, suggesting that certain ideas and expectations of belonging which link the concept to class, race and other social 'locations' (Yuval-Davis, 2011, 10) continue to dominate life in the city, making it seem less 'open' to him.

Still, Julius insists on the idea that art belongs to everyone: self-conscious of how he works against stereotypes, his view is that the Ninth Symphony does not belong exclusively to anyone and, as someone who is moved by Mahler's music, he is entitled to listen to the music – 'Mahler's music is not white, or black, not old or young, and whether it is even specifically human, rather than in accord with more universal vibrations, is open to question' (Cole, 2011, 252). Note here how the character mentions race and age as dividing factors but again does not consider how class fits into the picture, instead simply avoiding recognition of the class distinctions that are often associated with taste in classical music. The text itself undermines the assumptions Julius makes about art both here and previously in the novel – which, as Epstein (2019, 416) notes, echo the liberal (and high-brow) cosmopolitan idea that feeling elevated from the experience of music is a universal notion of art – by interrupting this private reflection with an ironic turn of events where the character accidentally locks himself out on the fire escape of the building after the performance. Following Krishnan's (2015, 675) perspective, this is Cole's way of demonstrating that urban (and cultural, I would add here) spaces are not 'inherently liberatory'. Even if the character insists on the possibility of connecting with art and

music, a city like New York will continue to disrupt this idea, with its many conflicting histories of migration and belonging.

In the final chapters, the character notes to himself that 'remaining here in the city is the only choice that makes emotional sense to me' (Cole, 2011, 248). And so in his creation of a critical and reflective attitude towards New York's histories of migration and belonging, it thus seems as if he has found a way to connect with the city. However, New York still stands as a symbol of belonging's complex, ambiguous and ephemeral nature in the last chapter. Here, we see how Julius catches another glimpse of the Statue of Liberty on a boat trip, and his mind drifts to another disturbing aspect of history: the statue, originally a working lighthouse, not only guided ships into Manhattan's harbour in the late nineteenth century but had an unsettling track record of attracting migrating birds that, 'fatally disoriented', would lose 'their bearings when faced with a single monumental flame' (Cole, 2011, 258). Krishnan (2015, 693) argues that this image forms a contrast to 'the "miracle of natural immigration"' of birds described by Julius in the opening pages of the novel, a portrayal which the character now complicates by showing how the birds actually 'highlight the illusory appearance of freedom in the open city, covering over a deeper and more sinister production'. *Open City* ends with the character's reflection on this aspect of New York's history, thus making a final gesture towards the city's multiple and layered histories of migration and belonging and the obscure role they play in shaping the experiences of the people who move through its many congested and disorientating spaces.

So far, this chapter has concentrated on how belonging and style are portrayed in two Afropolitan novels. In the following section, I turn to the blog *This Afropolitan Life*, one of the non-fiction texts that has materialised in the wider cultural landscape of Afropolitanism since the mid-noughties. My readings of Cole's and Manyika's novels clarifies how these texts fit

within the framework of Afropolitanism by engaging critically with belonging in the portrayal of their characters' style, but we should note that neither of these authors use the Afropolitan term in reference to their work nor to themselves. *This Afropolitan Life* forms a contrast here. In what follows, we shall see how the author of the blog deliberately places her work within the context of Afropolitanism to generate her own definition of what belonging means for the Afropolitan figure in the early twenty-first century by using her own experience of belonging as an example. We shall further see how she assembles a syncretic and eclectic style to make sense of this experience.

Blogging *This Afropolitan Life*[5]

A look beyond fiction reveals that other texts associated with the Afropolitan term also explore early twenty-first-century experiences of belonging across borders in the context of Africa and the diaspora, and that they similarly push the idea that a process of self-fashioning can be an opportunity to reflect on one's connection to here and there. One example of this is the blog *This Afropolitan Life*, a non-fiction online text which, like Minna Salami's blog *MsAfropolitan* (see Chapter One), signals Afropolitan sensibilities both in its title and in its incentive to complicate the concept of belonging. And like Cole's and Manyika's novels, *This Afropolitan Life* perceives 'Afropolitan' as a concept that hinges on a particular approach to style. In my interviews with the blog author, she explained that for her, being Afropolitan means being 'everywhere at once [and] still acknowledging your African sensibilities' and 'know[ing] where you are from in Africa … [and] take that with you wherever you go' but also to reflect this in

[5] Since conducting the research for the thesis and writing this section of Chapter Two, Clarissa Bannor, the author of the blog *This Afropolitan Life*, has deactivated the site, and so the content is no longer directly available online. My quotations of the blog are therefore based on the version of the blog I read when I last accessed it in 2019.

your style – a style which is created through 'a mixing' of different elements and which supports her need to be 'able to negotiate culture' (Interview with Clarissa Bannor, 07.05.2019).

In our conversations, Bannor herself proposed that Afropolitan novels embody this definition but noted that her blog is an attempt to give a different perspective. Although she did not want to underestimate the significance of Afropolitan novels, being an avid reader of fiction herself, she was keen to encourage readers and discussants of Afropolitanism to consider non-fiction as well as other kinds of text:

> Unpackaged stories about us aren't told as much as they should be … We have the packaged stories. We have the stories that are in literature, you know, so you get to read about a character, what their thought processes are … [But] there aren't that many journals of immigrant children's lives or … [the] first-generation experience of a day-to-day girl next door. (Interview with Clarissa Bannor, 07.05.2019)

When Bannor started the blog in 2009, she was motivated by the cultural landscape at the time. She knew that, as a Ghanaian-American woman and a child of immigrant parents, her experience of moving and belonging across borders was common. And she felt that she could see herself in the fiction that was published in and about Africa and the diaspora, especially in Afropolitan novels such as *Americanah*. Yet, her experiences were not reflected in the non-fiction blogosphere, a gap which encouraged her to share her own journey: 'Back then blogging was all the rage. There were mom blogs … [and] lifestyle blogs everywhere. I wanted to kind of document my story because I thought it was important. All of the stories that were online … didn't look like mine' (ibid.).

I open the third section of this chapter with my interview with Bannor not just because it clarifies her initial motivation to create *This Afropolitan Life*, but because of the comparison she makes between different kinds of text – one which not only helps us situate the blog in relation to the texts I have discussed so far but substantiates the methodology and overall

framework of this thesis. Instead of drawing a line between Afropolitan novels and Afropolitan blogs, Bannor is of the opinion that the exercise of reading across borders will illustrate to us that these texts revolve around similar questions: bridging the gap between her own work and others', she noted in the interview that *This Afropolitan Life* is comparable to Afropolitan novels in the way that they shed light on the experiences of individuals who live and move between Africa and the diaspora in the early twenty-first century. At the same time, she insists that reading a blog like *This Afropolitan Life* gives us something different, namely a 'real' account of what it is like to be Afropolitan, one which is rooted in the personal and the 'everyday', unlike the fictional stories readers are presented with in novels.

In the passages cited above, Bannor brings up another difference between Afropolitan novels and her blog, explaining that the textual form of the latter is less 'packaged' compared to conventional forms of (print) literature. This, she noted in our conversation, is because blogs rarely rely on the same extensive editing and publishing process, a process which often increases the gap between novelists and their readers. In Bannor's own words, the less packaged form of the blog makes you feel as if you 'get to know other cultures and get to see how your story is replicated in other places' (Interview with Clarissa Bannor, 07.05.2019). One could argue that the emphasis on the 'everyday' ties in with Knudsen and Rahbek's (2016, 294) proposition that Afropolitan novels put on display 'quotidian moments' in their characters' lives. And even if the blog form centres around the author's experiences and thus seems closer to 'real' life, it is still – like all forms of writing – constructed and mediated in one way or another (and thus 'packaged'). Bannor's reflections are nevertheless useful here, adding to our understanding of the context in which *This Afropolitan Life* materialised in 2009. And the author makes a valid point about the relevance of Afropolitan blogs because of the 'immediate' nature of their online existence. This is substantiated by early scholarship on blog writing. Here,

John Zuern (2003, xii) explains that blogs, in relying on the Internet's 'reduced interval in time', can give more direct access to the experiences that are portrayed in the blog text and, in turn, generate a 'temporal immediacy' and 'intimacy between writer and reader'.

In what follows, I elaborate on this initial discussion of *This Afropolitan Life*, offering a reading of its portrayal of style and belonging and suggesting how this portrayal fits into the context of Afropolitanism. While Bannor draws on blogging as a digital form of self-fashioning, similar ideas of the blog form – of self-expression, more specifically – have been adopted widely across the world and so is not unique to Afropolitanism (as noted in Chapter One). In this section, however, my main interest lies not in discussing the idea of self-fashioning on its own but rather how it relates to Bannor's experience of belonging; this, I claim, ties in with what we have encountered so far in this chapter – both in Selasi's 'Bye-Bye Babar' and in Cole's and Manyika's novels. My contention is that Bannor fashions a self, a text(s) and a personal style which all make room for shifting perspectives on belonging and which demonstrate how her experience of the concept hinges on her (and her family's) itinerary. I further propose that reading through the entries on *This Afropolitan Life* suggests that the blog author is self-conscious of how she constructs a self, a text and a personal style on her site and how they speak to the flexible characteristics of her belonging. Finally, we shall see that reading the blog entries that have been published on the platform over the years gives the impression that belonging feels like a process for Bannor, one which is open-ended and where she adjusts her perspectives and ideas as time passes.

A Self, a Text and Shifting Perspectives on Belonging

Bannor has tried out audio-visual forms of media (including podcasting and vlogging) as self-expression, but *This Afropolitan Life* constitutes the main trajectory of her creative output and is the platform on which she mainly reflects on her style and belonging. Although new content

has only appeared intermittently since the blog was launched in 2009 and up until Bannor deactivated it (at some point in 2019), the site offers a rich collection of material that is fragmented and episodic in its structure and consists of diary-style blog entries revolving around different aspects of her life, offering content that is brief but personal and in a tone which is laidback and conversational.

Reminiscent of diary-style mommy blogs (see Morrison, 2010, 2014), most of the early blog entries on *This Afropolitan Life* document Bannor's experiences during the early stages of motherhood. Yet, the layout of the site has been subject to change over the years, with the later entries focusing on the author's life more generally, and the site being structured around four thematic sections: 'Motherhood and Musings', 'Style and Wellbeing', 'Travel and Adventure' and 'Bibliofile'. Reading through the entries on the blog, we see that the platform pivots on an episodic and fragmented form that allows the blog author to move from one topic to the next without generating any particular coherence between the different entries. Each entry is thus a text that can stand on its own and as an autobiographical 'moment', reflecting the author's life as it is lived in 'real' time. The blog further mirrors the flow of life in its serial form, allowing Bannor to fashion an online self and text in ongoing motion. And it is in the reading of this self and text that we find an autobiographical narrative that is Afropolitan, one which gives its readers insight into the author's lived experience of moving across borders and belonging to here and there, both in Africa and beyond.

This Afropolitan Life's formal characteristics are reminiscent of the paratactic form of the online journal discussed in Madeleine Sorapure's work on blogs published in the 1990s and early 2000s. According to Sorapure (2003, 13), the paratactic form generates content 'without connectives or with only coordinating conjunctions' which results in 'a disjointed rather than a coherent or causal narrative' and 'an episodic structure that is more the record of the ongoing

process of living and writing than a finished, polished product'. Sorapure notes that these characteristics are emphasised by the fact that the writer can edit or delete individual posts or even (and as is the case of *This Afropolitan Life*) deactivate the site. In Sorapure's view, the paratactic form of online journals is different from 'conventional' autobiographies in which authors often record their 'life journey' in hindsight and present a more coherent narrative.

While I agree that blogs are disjointed and episodic in their form, we should note that this is not a feature that is unique to blogging. Other scholars have illustrated how many authors – especially women writers, as well as authors of postcolonial life-writing (both men and women) – have taken a similar approach in their print autobiographies, operating with episodic and fragmented frameworks (see Moore-Gilbert, 2009). To some extent, I would argue that these formal characteristics are also reminiscent of what we have seen in other Afropolitan texts previously in the thesis – not only in Salami's blog *MsAfropolitan* but Cole's and Adichie's work, for instance. In *Americanah*, Adichie weaves Ifemelu's blog entries into the character's journey across borders, a narrative technique which adds to the novel's episodic form. And in *Open City*, we have seen how Cole lets its character jump from one topic to another in a disjointed fashion, a literary style that is reminiscent of *Every Day is for the Thief* (a book which, as mentioned in the second section of this chapter, bridges the gap between the novel and the blog). This speaks to the influence postmodern style and online forms have had on literature, including some Afropolitan texts.

At the heart of *This Afropolitan Life* is the online self Bannor creates – a self which is assembled from the text(s) she produces and publishes in the digital realm and which, as we shall see below, is based on an ongoing experience of moving and belonging across borders. Here, the blog again echoes scholarship on online writing and the literary tradition of autobiography. This is particularly evident when the blog author – in one of the entries I cite

from below (Bannor, 2009) – refers to family and friends as 'characters' and as 'the cast' that makes up her life, using an ironic tone and choice of words to hint at the distance between her 'real' life and self and the life and self that are recreated in textual form on the blog. This distinction coheres with Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's (2014, 77) readings of online life writing in which they propose that, like conventional print forms of autobiography, the media technologies that are available on the Internet 'do not just transparently present the self', but 'constitute and expand it' through textual production. In addition, digital technologies generate an 'automediality' which relies on 'an aesthetics of collage, mosaic, pastiche' (ibid., 78). This means that, like the 'I' that appears on the conventional page in offline life-writing, the online self 'cannot be regarded as an entity or essence; it is a bricolage or set of disparate fragments, rather than a coherent, inborn unit of self' (ibid.).

Bannor invites a similar reading of her online self in an early blog entry titled 'Coming From Where I'm From' in which she presents her itinerant background to the readers:

> I'm multi-cultural; Ghanaian American or American of Ghanaian decent [sic] (However we call it these days). *What does that mean?* It means I was born in Alexandria, Virginia, raised for the most part in Maryland, and lived six years of my life in Ghana. From eleven to sixteen to be precise … My folks are from Ghana, my mom was raised in Sierra Leone though. For the most part I was raised by my mother … The intricacies of my journey so far are too deep to uncover in one blog post. So I'll start with the characters that I hold dear. (Bannor, 2009; italics in original)

After introducing close family members and friends with pictures and a couple of words about each person, the blog author concludes: 'There are many people, places and circumstances that … continue to shape my life, choices, and perspective and I hope to share my experiences through my blog. Welcome to my journey' (ibid.). What is significant about the passages cited here is how she stages the fashioning of a self, one that is aware of the gap that exists between

life offline and the text she creates in the digital sphere. But the extracts are further interesting for how they complicate the relationship between the blog author's identity and belonging. Bannor indicates that she feels inclined to explain her hyphenated identity because of its limits: it does not reflect the many layers of her belonging, nor does it explain that they are the result of an itinerary which includes not two but multiple locations. Referring to herself as 'Ghanaian-American' also seems to bring up more questions than answers about her experience of belonging. To what extent does this hyphenated identity inform her sense of belonging to the US, for instance? And does the fact that she is American of African descent stand in the way of her feeling a connection to Ghana and Africa? That is, even if the construction of a hyphenated identity allows for some complexity by implying that she is affiliated with more than one location, it fails to accurately reflect the complexity of her and her family's movements, omitting, for example, that she is not just of Ghanaian ancestry but has spent her formative years in the country and so has a close attachment to both Ghana and America. Nor does it signal her mother's connection to Sierra Leone, one which is significant to Bannor by extension because of their close relationship.

Bannor creates an online self that circumvents the limits of her hyphenated identity, pivoting on the shifting perspectives and patterns of the multiple and multi-local connections that make up her itinerary. These patterns are subject to change, based on how the author's life unfolds offline, but they depend on the readers' perspective, too – which blog entries they choose to read first and whether these entries present her life in chronological order. They can read the blog in different ways – not just chronologically but thematically, for instance, or by clicking on the most recent entry and following the individual hyperlinks and themed 'tags' that are attached to that post. This, in turn, determines how they read the blog author's sense of belonging. If we zoom in on her early years first, we might draw the conclusion that her

experiences are mainly rooted in America – it is likely that she would feel more American at this stage in her life in spite of her parents being Ghanaian. Conversely, a jump ahead in time to when she lived in Ghana as a teenager could suggest a different and more intimate sense of belonging to the country. The shifting perspectives we see here add to our understanding of the online self and text Bannor creates on *This Afropolitan Life*, highlighting their fragmented form – but they are also important because they signal that her belonging is an open-ended process and that the blog form is well-suited to narrating this experience of the concept.

Creating a Personal Style

Alongside the assemblage of her online self and text on *This Afropolitan Life*, Bannor demonstrates how she creates a personal style. And much like the self and text, the style she puts together for herself makes room for shifting perspectives on belonging – perspectives which she frequently alludes to in the blog entries she has filed under the section titled 'Style and Wellbeing'. In the blog entries in this section of the blog, the blog author reflects on anything from clothes, headwraps and hair styles to her yoga routine, the food she eats and how she decorates her home. In many of the posts, we see a particular kind of styling process taking place, one which implies that she is highly self-conscious, for instance about what she wears. And while some of the entries mainly consists of her sharing photographs of her outfits without much reflection, in other entries we also see her contemplating how to express herself through what she wears:

> I've always been one to express myself creatively … Lately, I've been in a style rut. Especially since working from home doesn't necessitate leaving my habitat. I don't do too well dressing up when I don't have anywhere to go, because where I'm going dictates my dress. (Bannor, 2010, 'Personal Style Challenge')

The elements that go into her style further become subject to a selective process which relies heavily on her Ghanaian roots but makes room for other cultural influences at the same time, as well as her connection to the US. For example, sharing tips and tricks with the readers in one entry, she revamps Ghanaian and other West African dishes to suit her vegan lifestyle; in other entries, she writes about *The Cosby Show* and the role it has played in her childhood in the US. Significantly, the two connections that make up Bannor's hyphenated identity are not portrayed as a binary opposition between different cultural influences here, but rather as a self-conscious act of weaving together various elements from her life. Reiterating her own idea of the Afropolitan term, her affiliation with US and other places are often featured, but the close attachment to Ghana and West Africa (and, in some instances, Africa more generally) plays a prominent role in this styling process. Thus, putting together a style is a way to feel good about herself, but it also allows her to recognise her multi-local sense of belonging and to foreground her roots in Africa.

Reading through the entries in 'Style and Wellbeing' reveals that she reflects at length on the items in her clothing collection that are from the continent and with the same level of self-consciousness as seen above. This is evident in one entry where she shares pictures of a top with a matching headscarf in a velvet, floral African wax print fabric, a family heirloom and now part of her own belongings (Bannor, 2015, 'Vintage African Wax Print Fabric'). She notes that the outfit was originally part of a kaba and slit (a long wrap-style skirt and a matching top) belonging to her great-grandmother, and she explains how she was unsure of how to wear the full outfit in connection with her existing wardrobe at first. It was only once she had it tailored to suit her own style that it felt like it was part of her stylistic expression. Echoing the approach to style we saw earlier in Selasi's portrayal of the Afropolitan figure in 'Bye-Bye

Babar', as well as in Manyika's novel, this suggests that she wants to make sure that whatever she wears feels like her own.

Yet, reflecting on the process of making the item her own further leads Bannor to ponder the broader history of African wax print fabric and its role not just as a material object but as one of the key heirlooms in West Africa:

> The silent stories within African wax prints, are passed from generation to generation, collectively narrating our history; stories of events, people, places, and sagacity of those who came before us. All these things, conveyed through symbols, patterns, and designs, embossed on fabric. (Bannor, 2015, 'Vintage African Wax Print Fabric')

Bannor's interest in weaving clothing items into her personal style repeats a tendency by contemporary African writers who, according to Brenda Cooper (2008), foreground material objects in their portrayal of the migrant experience and often encourage their readers to see it as a way of holding on to 'home'. Yet, for Bannor, material objects – and heirlooms in particular – can also be seen as 'tangible props for one's life story' (Bannor, 2013, 'Family Heirlooms'). Repeating some of the ideas we came across earlier in this chapter, this quote indicates a recurring emphasis on the embodied and material experience of belongings in Afropolitan texts. At the same time, we see how Bannor highlights storytelling as another important aspect of the material belongings she surrounds herself with. The latter is seen in her reference to a family gold coin which, having belonged to her Fante ancestors for centuries, is one of the symbols of her family's 'affluence, lineage, and rich history in Elmina' on the Ghana coastline; although the coin was lost before it was passed down to her, the story of it leads to reflection and feeds into her sense of being connected to West Africa: 'It's special to be able to point to something specific; a diamond ring, an old engagement necklace; proof of undying love; symbols left behind as legacies of a past life' (Bannor, 2013, 'Family Heirlooms').

A similar emphasis is placed on material objects in other entries where Bannor contemplates the fact that she, unlike African Americans whose heritage often remains unknown, is lucky not just because she has inherited family heirlooms, but because she is able to trace her lineage and still has access to the stories of her ancestors. Like Adichie's *Americanah*, *This Afropolitan Life* thus ponders the difference between the African American experience and the contemporary African immigrant experience. Suggesting that the distinction is manifested in (the lack of) heirlooms, the blogger makes this comparison to clarify the nature of her own belonging: while she, as the child of recent African immigrants, can maintain a close attachment to the continent, she is conscious of how this differs from other people whose ancestral arrival in America was a result of slavery and displacement.

Although the discussion above illustrates that the blog author's assemblage of a personal style leaves her with a more tangible sense of belonging because of the materiality of her belongings, Bannor mentioned in the interviews I conducted with her that she is extremely conscious of how she 'constantly negotiate[s] culture', both on the blog and in everyday life (Interview with Clarissa Bannor, 07.05.2019). This negotiation which feeds into her Afropolitan experience of growing up and living across borders is accompanied by a critical questioning of what is acceptable when it comes to fashioning a personal style and how to 'mix and match cultures' as someone with more than one cultural affiliation. For instance, 'can we', as Afropolitans, 'cherry-pick one thing over the other?' And is it acceptable for us to 'wear beaded bracelets … even if we are not going, like, to a wedding or a funeral or something—can we wear [them] with our outfits?' (ibid.).

Reminiscent of Julius's critical attitude seen in *Open City* (as well as what we have seen previously in other Afropolitan texts – say, Salami's critical inquiry on her blog *MsAfropolitan* (see Chapter One)), Bannor applies this self-conscious style of questioning to various areas of

her life. She views her role as a mother as another example of what it means to be Afropolitan, for example: it is a constant negotiation and self-conscious knitting together of American and Ghanaian traditions, values and norms that have shaped her own upbringing. She is extremely aware of how she might embrace some ideas but discard others because they are not aligned with her outlook on life. From her perspective, this makes her motherhood 'Afropolitan' (Bannor, 2016, 'Afropolitan Motherhood: A Guide to Raising Culturally Balanced Children'). Elaborating on this claim in the interview, she noted that while she thinks that 'motherhood is something we all negotiate', she finds herself, as an Afropolitan mother, with an inclination to be self-conscious and deliberate about 'taking what [she] want[s] and rejecting what [she doesn't] want', adjusting every element to fit her own perspective and preference (Interview with Clarissa Bannor, 07.05.2019).

So far, we have seen how different aspects of *This Afropolitan Life* – the self, the text(s) and the personal style Bannor creates for herself, as well as the blog's shifting perspectives – speak to an experience of moving and belonging across borders and tie in with her own definition of what it means to be Afropolitan in the present moment. In the final part of the discussion below, I consider how reading through the blog gives the impression of a process – and, to some extent, an autobiographical narrative – of belonging, one which alludes to a kind of belonging that is subject to the blog author's own shifting perspectives.

Belonging as a Process

While *This Afropolitan Life* is episodic and disjointed in its presentation of the writer's life, I would still argue that reading the posts as they appear over time on the blog reveals an autobiographical narrative of belonging. In '33 Things I Never Told You', Bannor explains: 'Before I married my husband, I'd called 21 different places "home"' (Bannor, 2012). She published this entry when she was renting an apartment outside Washington, D.C., with her

husband. When I asked her in the interviews if she could elaborate on the entry, she said that the intention was to spell out how she has spent most of her life on the move and to contemplate all of the places she has lived but also to give the readers a sense of how essential it was for her at this stage to create her own home – as she writes in the entry, 'why settling down and establishing roots' was 'so important to me' (ibid.). The journal-style form of the blog is particularly useful here because it allows us to see some of the different stops in this itinerary and how her perspective on belonging changes as a result.

When Bannor and her husband can finally afford to buy their first house together, Bannor documents this milestone in a series of blog entries to reflect on what it means to put down roots. Early in the entries, we see that the move into a suburban home will take some time getting used to because it means a new life outside the city. The initial reservation seems to fade gradually, however, when she later observes how everyday moments with her family in the new place leave her with a growing sense of attachment:

> I couldn't help feeling our roots begin to spread in our sleepy little town … And just like that, there, in that bright, fluorescent-lit gym, littered with hoola-hoops and dodge balls, this corner of the world begins to feel like home. (Bannor, 2014b, 'Establishing Roots')

Feeling 'grateful for this beautiful house to raise [her] children in', she continues in a similarly optimistic tone in another entry: 'I am blessed. I will make it into the home of my dreams, even if we do decide to pack up and leave it eventually. For right now, I am here and that's what matters' (Bannor, 2014d, 'Take Care of What You Have'). This ties in with the philosophy of 'blooming where [she's] planted (for now)', a sentiment which admits to the ephemeral characteristics of belonging (Bannor, 2014c, 'Explore Your Neighborhood'). But the entries also make clear how the blog author oscillates between not wanting to be tied down (or, at the

very least, a wish to be able to move from one place to another) and a desire to put down roots permanently. This tension was repeated in my interviews with Bannor in which she noted, 'one place for your entire life. That is scary', as she reflected on her state of mind when they first bought the house:

> Sometimes … we think we want rootedness which is great. But sometimes you just want to pick up and … [brief pause] leave. That's just my personality … [But at that point,] I wanted to change into wanting roots and see what that felt like. (Interview with Clarissa Bannor, 09.05.2019).

As such, we get a sense of how reading through *This Afropolitan Life* illustrates an Afropolitan narrative of belonging – one which takes many shifts and turns over time not only as she moves across borders but as her perspective and desire for belonging changes.

Bannor continues to allude to the open-ended nature and process of belonging. There is a shift in the tone and attitude, however. Balancing ironic banter with a harsh critique of the blog author's initial perspective when they first moved into the house, 'Escaping Surburbia' reads: 'Let's be real: the suburbs ain't it. Why do we move here anyway? Who served us this Koolaid?' (Bannor, 2019). Going over the history of American suburbs leaves a lingering sensation of being out of place, of not belonging, and a distinct longing for the city, the place where she would now rather be: in a sarcastic tone and colloquial language, she makes herself part of a collective 'we' that represents the undesirable segments of American society who have recently moved to the 'boonies in droves', either because of a desire to 'actively purchas[e] that coveted piece of the American pie', or because of 'displace[ment] into it thanks to gentrification' of urban areas (ibid.). Alternating between past and present to contrast her state of mind then and now, she notes how she has been fooled by the myth that living in suburbia is more affordable and that she has realised since then that she does not feel at home. Over time,

she finds herself yearning for a different connection and a more diverse setting, neither of which is available in the immediate environment of their house:

> I need to be able to sit and eavesdrop on a juicy convo at a quint [sic] little tea shop. I need access to art, theater … I need to walk and stumble upon things. I need signs of life. Which I'm hard-pressed to find in suburbia, where people hide in their little top boxes. So I have to be intentional about seeking out these things that are important to me. There's literally a line item in my budget for escaping suburbia. (ibid.)

Making an indirect gesture to her earlier blog posts, she concludes: 'That cute little community playground you fell in love with and fantasized taking your kiddos to as you bought into your subdivision? Yea, that's just a selling point. Don't be fooled … The suburbs ain't it and the suburbs *ain't cheap*. Choose wisely' (ibid.; emphasis in original). Apart from the financial aspect and missing the hustle and bustle of city life, the change of perspective here is not entirely clear from the blog entries – whether she does not feel that she belongs because of issues related to race, for instance. What is particularly interesting, however, is how her longing for elsewhere feeds into her shifting perspective on belonging, too. Reminiscent of *Americanah*'s Obinze and the four characters in *On Black Sisters' Street* who also move through different stages of belonging, we thus see how the blog author goes from dreaming of buying a house and wanting to try out a more fixed sense of belonging, to an uncertainty about the place where she has planted her feet, to a close connection to the home she has built together with her family and, finally, to a yearning to be in the city – a shift which helps to clarify that the different ideas and kinds of belonging we conjure up for ourselves do not always align with one another.

What then does it mean to belong, according to the self and text Bannor has created on *This Afropolitan Life*? Documenting the trajectory of her experiences of movement and mobility, the entries referenced above imply that belonging depends on time and context. The instance above is one example of how belonging is narrativised on *This Afropolitan Life*. The

connection to Ghana discussed earlier is another one – one which not only pivots on the entries about the African wax print fabric but on other entries that revolve around her latest visits to the continent to see her mother who has moved back to Ghana. Contributing to a recurring and unanswered question of whether the author herself will return to the continent (see Bannor, 2014a, 'Will I ever be an African Returnee?'), these latter entries emphasise the blog's resistance to any kind of fixity in the narrativisation of belonging.

This Afropolitan Life thus elucidates how creating a home and a sense of belonging is a process for the online self – a process which, much like that of creating a personal style, relies on a changing notion of belonging. Perhaps then belonging, both in 'real' life and in the life that is portrayed in writing, is more like a mooring or anchoring than a permanent rooting of oneself; it is to attach oneself to a place and establish a meaningful connection to that place, even if the connection is likely only to be temporary. Echoing Bruce Whitehouse (2012, 211), this suggests that it would make sense to replace the notion of 'roots' and other examples of 'language of fixity' with the idea of 'anchoring': 'mobility makes human beings more like nautical vessels than trees'; 'like vessels, we can also remain at rest in certain locations under the right conditions; all it takes is some kind of anchor … a connection', for instance, 'between our individual and collective identities' and 'a specific geographical location'. *This Afropolitan Life*'s serial form emphasises this idea, leaving the definition of belonging 'open' to change: instead of reaching for closure, it shows how the online self continues to adjust her perspectives and aspirations of belonging, rather than arriving at a final and fixed idea of the concept. And even if Bannor has deactivated *This Afropolitan Life* and so no longer expands on her online narrative of belonging, the flexible nature of the online realm means that it is still possible for her to return to the site (or launch a new platform) and continue to document the process.

In the section below, I discuss style and belonging in the context of Ade Bantu's and Ogunsanya's concert series in Lagos. We shall see that they, like Bannor, deliberately place their work in the wider framework of Afropolitanism and engage with the concept of belonging in a self-conscious assemblage of a style.

A Night of Afropolitan Vibes[6]

Afropolitan Vibes, a concert series created by Ade Bantu and Ogunsanya in Lagos, provides another example of how creators of Afropolitan cultural production explore and reflect on belonging through questions of style. Inspired by ethnographic accounts of music events and other examples of popular culture in urban Africa (Callaci, 2017, Shain, 2009, Shipley, 2013), I structure this final section of the chapter around my attendance at the 50th iteration of the Afropolitan Vibes concert series which took place at Muri Okunola Park, Lagos Island, on 21 September 2018. My focus is on Ade Bantu's and Ogunsanya's assemblage of the event itself and how this ties in with the overall concert series, as well as the artists and their performance on stage during the evening – what their song lyrics and musical styles, as well as other aspects of their stylistic ensemble, tell us about style and belonging. I argue that much like *This Afropolitan Life*, the series makes clear how the style that is assembled in Afropolitan texts can pivot on a process of self-conscious (self-)fashioning. And like Bannor's *This Afropolitan Life*, Afropolitan Vibes appears in serial form. Each iteration operates simultaneously as a 'closed' entity that, with a separate line-up of musicians (usually consisting of Ade Bantu's own band Bantu and a handful of artists from Nigeria, Africa and the diaspora), works on its own and as a smaller part of the open-ended structure of the series. In this context, however, my interest

[6] Karin Barber and Pelu Awofeso have helped me with the translation of the Yoruba lyrics in this section.

lies not so much in the producers' styling of themselves, but rather in their fashioning of the event and the way it signals particular ideas of belonging.

While my focus in this section is on the aspects mentioned above, we should note, as Barber (2007) encourages us to do in her theory of textuality (see Introduction), that Afropolitan Vibes is also made up of both written and oral kinds of text, not only Bantu's lyrics but those of the visiting artists, as well as a free magazine (with the most recent edition handed out during the concert). The producers have further experimented with digital forms such as blog entries and podcast episodes and occasionally arrange an Afropolitan Vibes festival as well as smaller acoustic gigs in different locations in Lagos. They thus illustrate how some producers of Afropolitan texts work with and across different kinds of text and, in turn, how a variety of genres and cultural forms push the Afropolitan term in different directions.

In my reading of the 50th iteration below, we shall see that one of the ways in which Afropolitan Vibes signals belonging is their compilation of musical styles and genres. At the event (which is referred to as an 'edition'), the producers invite guest musicians to perform with Bantu, Ade Bantu's thirteen-piece band which, in his view, can be understood as a music collective and as 'the sound of fufu' because of how they weave their own music together with other artists' on stage and in this way 'glue … everything together' at Afropolitan Vibes (Interview with Ade Bantu, 28.09.2018). The band itself is a fusion of distinct sounds from Afrobeat, hip hop, highlife, folk, R&B and other genres. This suggests that an overarching stylistic principle is syncretism and eclecticism, one which is reiterated in the producers' assemblage of the 50th iteration but which also runs through the structure and content of the concert series more generally. Finally, my assertion is that the producers, as well as Ade Bantu's band, fashion the concert in the image of Lagos and the local agbero figure, forming a collective space which hinges on the open and/or defiant attitude associated with this city and figure. We

shall see that using this attitude in the fashioning of the series is part of the producers' response to the restrictive ideas of belonging that circulate in the Lagos music scene as well as in the context of Afropolitanism.

Fashioning a Collective Space for Music Heads in Lagos

It is after 6 p.m. on a Friday evening in Lagos. The sun is quickly setting as people make their way through the city's heavy 'go-slow' (the local term for traffic jam). Every day, as millions commute to work during rush hour, traffic builds up from the mainland to the islands where the financial and business centres are located. On the night before the weekend, however, cars, vans, lorries, danfos (minibuses), kekes (tricycles) and okadas (local motorbike-taxis) move in every possible direction as Lagosians zigzag across the heavily congested infrastructures. Like the rest of Lagos, the area just off Lekki-Epe Expressway and Falomo Bridge on Victoria Island is crowded, with a steady flow of vehicles looking for parking spaces and people queuing up at the entrance to Muri Okunola Park, the venue where Afropolitan Vibes is scheduled to take place.

Inside the gate, the atmosphere is less hectic; the concert starts at 8 p.m. The stage, set up on the day of each concert, is situated in front of a pavilion supported by concrete pillars in the middle of the park and facing a big, green lawn which will eventually fill up with people. The perimeter of the open area in front of the stage is lined with trees, and behind them are the walls between the park and the rest of the city. A path is on the right-hand side of the stage where vendors sell food. In a designated bar area towards the back, palm wine and other refreshments are on offer. As music plays from the speakers, the crew gets the stage gear ready. Bantu and Johnny Drille, one of the visiting artists, do a final soundcheck. Afropolitan Vibes' own photographers and camera men, along with people from local broadcasting companies and newspapers, set up equipment on a large platform to secure a panoramic view of the stage.

Scattered around the venue, laughing and chatting in small groups, some audience members have arrived early; the rest of the crowds are still making their way through Lagos traffic.

At a first glance, the venue appears to blend in perfectly with the affluent business quarters surrounding the park as the island's high-rise buildings, palm trees and evening sky provide the elegant backdrop behind the walls. Yet, taking another look at the setup suggests an atmosphere that is more laidback and egalitarian compared to other more commercial music events in the city: there is plenty of room for the crowds to mingle; the stage with the open space in front encourages the artists to communicate with the audience as a whole; and, unlike other music events in the city such as Jameson Connects Lagos and Felabration, there is no VIP section, or corporate advertisement from sponsors. There is also no visible security inside the walls of the park, nor do you see any closed-off backstage area.

The attempt to create a more inclusive event is further reflected in the history of the series. The first event took place in 2013 at Freedom Park on Broad Street, Lagos Island, with somewhere between 50 and 100 people attending. (The number varies, depending on who you ask.) Initially, the show was free of charge (apart from the gate fee to the park which was around N200 (less than 50p) when I visited the venue). Instead, a calabash would circulate the space in front of the stage to encourage the audience to make a small donation. The series quickly turned out to be a hit with the crowd, and people soon started returning every month. And the monthly event quickly became part of the city and its materiality, creating a small community that extended beyond the wall of Freedom Park where locals saw the concert as an opportunity to make extra cash by taking up parking duties and in this way claim it as theirs. More recently, the producers have relocated the concert series to Muri Okunola Park on Victoria Island, a decision which was motivated by a feeling that it had 'outgrown' the first venue (I was told that the average number of attendees is now around 2-3,000, but it sometimes reaches close to 5,000

(see Bantu, 2016)) and a wish for more independence in the production of the show. Although still too expensive for some Lagosians, the new ticket price (N1,000 which is approximately £2) remains way below average prices for live concerts in the city.

While Afropolitan Vibes is now considered a glamorous, high-prestige event and the biggest live music scene in Lagos (Esene, Galvin and Shearlaw, 2016), the setup of the 50th iteration is indicative of an 'alternative', egalitarian style, with the producers attempting to depart from the elitism and commercialism of more mainstream events in the city: it is their effort to fashion a collective and open space that will encourage Lagosians to rub shoulders with one another and share their passion for music. This is substantiated by Ade Bantu's initial motivation to set up the show. When he left Germany's hip-hop scene and took his latest music project Bantu with him and moved back to Lagos in the 2000s, he wanted to carve out a space for their music. With the local industry favouring mainstream popular music on the radio and at live events, their music did not quite fit other local producers' script of contemporary music and so it was difficult for them to get booked for gigs (see Bantu, 2016). Creating Afropolitan Vibes and fashioning it as an open-ended concert series in a fixed location in the city was a way for Ade Bantu to circumvent this problem – it meant that the band would have somewhere to perform on a regular basis and that no one could dictate the terms of the music or performance in an otherwise market-dominated music industry.

A marketing consultant, Ogunsanya is not a musician, but she is equally passionate about music and has experience in producing concerts prior to Afropolitan Vibes. In her view, it was important for herself and Ade Bantu to create a platform that could provide the public not only with high quality live performances on a regular basis but an event that was 'the most organised, [and] the best in terms of sound' (Interview with Abby Ogunsanya, 3 October 2018). Lastly, it was about catering to fellow 'music heads' by creating a distinct 'vibe':

> If you come to our show, you can have the German ambassador … standing next to my plumber or my cook … This [is the] kind of space or the vibe we are trying to create … Just come and have a good time … If you go to another concert in Nigeria, you will get a whole lot of VIP tables at the front … [often, the people at these tables] just want to be seen. And then you have a barrier and then you have the real music heads at the back, almost like prisoners. (ibid.)

It is interesting to note how the event is perceived by its producers as creating a collective and egalitarian space in the city, one which is fashioned in a way that collapses class differences between members of the audience by avoiding the usual strategies for separating people at music events. A manifestation of this collective space, the 'vibe' which Ogunsanya refers to above adds to this particular idea of belonging – of a community and 'home' not just for the producers and Bantu but for the crowd, a place where there is an atmosphere that makes everyone relax and feel at ease. While it is difficult to know how far this idea plays out in practice (that is, whether everyone feels the 'vibe'), it signals an 'open' belonging, one which is inclusive rather than exclusive and which is understood as cutting across the social differences that inform other music events in the city, as well as the 'class-conscious society' of Lagos and Nigeria more generally (Bantu, 2016). This point was reiterated in my interview with Ade Bantu who claimed that 'the aesthetics of Afropolitan Vibes' give 'people a sense of belonging': 'It is like a family, a gathering of like-minded people … in Lagos. People that sometimes feel a little out of place in this environment … For you to identify with Afropolitan Vibes, there is a certain openness and curiosity that goes hand in hand with it' (Interview with Ade Bantu, 29.08.2018).

At the show that evening, the band Bantu open with a long introduction to 'Omowalé', a track from their 2007 title album, giving them time to gently ease into the set, and to allow for the familiar beats of the song to encourage the growing audience to move towards the stage.

As more people arrive at the venue, the band takes on the role of the local agbero, using the sound of their music and their position as 'crowd pullers' to encourage the public to make their way through the city to join the party. This impression is recognised on both sides of the stage. As the crowd gets bigger, and more and more familiar faces turn up, the band members begin to greet members in the crowd. Shaking hands with people standing in front of the stage, they make playful comments ('You guys are not drunk. If you were drunk, you would make some more noise! Brother, are you drunk?'), and the audience responds enthusiastically, 'Agberos International!', a reference to their latest album. Ade Bantu and the rest of the band laugh in response.

The whole scene illustrates how both band and producers root the event in their surroundings by using terminology that is specific to Lagos. If we consider the connotations of the agbero figure in today's Lagos, this appropriation might be considered a controversial move. The word roughly translates as 'crowd pullers' or, as Daniel Agbiboa (2018, 73, 62-3) notes, 'caller of passengers', but it is currently a local euphemism for motor touts who employ motor-parks and other open spaces around the city 'as an operational base to extort taxes' from danfo drivers, often 'with violent extortionary tactics' and 'hair-trigger temper'. The producers and the band are perfectly aware of these connotations, yet Ade Bantu argues that the attitude that is associated with the notorious figure reflects the defiant attitude of Lagos itself. In the interview, he noted that 'Lagos is in your face. Lagos does not explain itself. We don't say, "Welcome to Lagos". This is Lagos. Deal with it' (Interview with Ade Bantu, 29.08.2018). In his view, agberos are also 'a product of the realities on [the] ground' where many Lagosians must find alternative ways of navigating the city's economic, social and political infrastructures to find a place for themselves and to eke out a living (Interview with Ade Bantu, 29.08.2018). Agbiboa (2018, 67) substantiates this critique, demonstrating that agberos materialised in Lagos

in the 1980s shortly after Nigeria's structural adjustment programme which pushed 'youth in Lagos … to the limits of survival on the fringes', a programme which has had severe consequences for many people living in the city. Ade Bantu and his crew consciously adopt the defiant and provocative attitude of Lagos and the local agbero figures that navigate the West African city to create a place for themselves in the city and in their own way. In Ade Bantu's own view, like the city and the agbero, they 'are just doing [their] thing – with an attitude':

> We are not explaining ourselves. Deal with it. You do not like it, hm, all good. You enjoy it, perfect, come and join the party … We are not trying to appeal to the sophisticated, hip, urban, whatever, diaspora crowd. (Interview with Ade Bantu, 29.08.2018)

Fashioning Afropolitan Vibes in the image of the city and the agbero is thus a way for Ade Bantu to bring the Lagos street energy – its defiant 'deal with it'-attitude and distinct atmosphere – onto the stage and in this way claim a place for themselves and to dictate on their own terms how their events belong in Lagos.

While the above speaks to how Afropolitan Vibes is fashioned in a particular way to fit in on the producers' own terms, 'Omowalé', a track from one of Bantu's early albums (see Bantu, 2004) and the opening song of the evening, reiterates the idea of the concert series as a collective space for music heads – a place of return for both band and crowd. The Yoruba title which translates as 'The Child Has Come Home' places emphasis on movement and return, and, making a similar gesture, the lyrical content centres on the idea of an imaginary homeland, contrasting tales of hope from 'an ancient land' with 'imprisoned promises harbouring broken dreams', and the idea of an eventual return to home (Bantu, 2004, 'Omowalé').

Structured around the lead vocalists, Ade Bantu and Mide, the track alternates between personal and collective experiences: jumping back and forth between 'I' and 'we', it joins

together singular and shared narratives of belonging. In a soft-spoken voice following a slow beat, Mide sings about an 'I' who sets out on an arduous journey after hearing a story about an alchemist from 'an ancient land too far to be seen', a story which leaves the 'I' with the following message: 'Humble yourself and open up within, let your light shine properly' (Bantu, 2004, 'Omowalé'). Later, the 'I' moves 'through the sinking sand', searching for the place to 'plant / only joy 'n' happiness' (Bantu, 2004, 'Omowalé'). These lines are interspersed with Ade Bantu's rap which, as the rest of the band picks up the pace, invites the audience to reflect on how history informs the present moment of a collective 'we' and affects the conditions of their belonging:

> As long as denying is the basis of surviving
> We'll miss mothers calling ancestors warning
> Multiple choice unified as one voice
>
> (Bantu, 2004, 'Omowalé')

Connecting with the 'homeland' through movement can redefine the terms of belonging: a return journey will help the collective 'we' give new meaning to the place 'down south' by 'creatively visualis[ing] a new paradise' and refusing 'victimhood' (Bantu, 2004, 'Omowalé'). With the style and composition of the music building gradually in anticipation of the child's return ('Omowalé'), the track culminates in a Yoruba chorus that encourages the 'I' to return and 'focus on the sweet part of life' – 'F'okan sibi t'aye dun' (Bantu, 2004, 'Omowalé').

Rooting the track in a distinct hip-hop style and merging the rap lyrics with the R&B sound, the vocals are linked through the musical line which, with drums and keyboard, performs a similar function across the two sections. The mood and style of the different vocals are foregrounded in the shifting pace of the instruments, and it is the sound of individual instruments that creates coherence: whereas the cymbals, for instance, continue across both sections, the drums pick up the beat to distinguish the different styles of the two vocals. Both

verse and chorus are interspersed with long sequences that, taking on an Afrobeat style, make room for the brass instruments. With Ade Bantu moving in quick succession from one word to the next, the elevation leads to, and culminates in, the chorus where the female vocalists join in and the talking drums become more prominent, both signalling the return to the continent.

When the singers urge the crowd to come forward as they and the rest of Bantu finish the song, an eager wave of people floods the front of the stage almost instantly. As the band continues their set with tracks from the new album, the venue at Muri Okunola Park reaches full capacity, and the initial vibe of the show is replaced by a growing sense of anticipation. Ade Bantu takes on the role of guiding the audience through the evening with nostalgic reflections, making frequent references to the success of Afropolitan Vibes: 'Tonight we are celebrating! It has been a crazy journey'. And it is not long before he starts giving personal shout-outs to audience members. The crowd is clearly familiar with his charismatic and instrumental role and conscious fashioning of the event – as the lead singer in Bantu, the creator and co-producer of Afropolitan Vibes and the compere in-between the songs and acts. When the band steps up a gear to suit the celebratory note of the evening and turn their attention to faster paced tracks from their 2017 album *Agberos International* like 'Ká Máa Dúpẹ' ('May We Give Thanks') and 'Anything for the Boys' and all four vocalists take turns in the limelight as they effortlessly switch back and forth between English, pidgin and Yoruba, the crowd swiftly follows suit, as if merging with the people on stage. Singing and dancing along, they bring home the idea that Afropolitan Vibes is a collective space.

The question is what the artists and audience do share in this collective space that is created in the centre of Lagos. My account of the opening moments above suggests that it is the connection they get to experience through the music and the live performance: the beats, rhythms and words bring about an embodied feeling of belonging at the event as everyone sings

along and move in unison to the sound of the music. From this perspective, Afropolitan Vibes resembles Shipley's idea of a sonic community. Shipley's (2013, 232) study of Ghanaian hiplife music demonstrates how live concerts and parties help form a connection with 'diasporic Ghana'. Making the observation that they 'align participants with new imaginaries entailed in the bodily experience of a musical concert's sights and sounds', Shipley (2013, 232, 265) argues that the 'shared sensory and emotional experiences [at these live events] invoke a sonic community', which, in turn, generates an experience of national belonging. I take the overarching idea here to be that both artists and crowds experience a feeling of belonging to these sonic communities because the familiarity with particular songs and distinct sounds provides a sense of common ground and a feeling that the events represent collectively experienced moments that can be shared by everyone who is present.

While Shipley maintains that Ghanaian hiplife events bring about an experience of national belonging, connecting Ghana with its immediate diaspora, the music experience of Afropolitan Vibes is firmly rooted in Lagos, as an extension of a city that is defined by its linguistic, ethnic and cultural heterogeneity. At the same time, it engages with the wider world beyond its borders – not just Nigeria and its diasporas in the UK and the US. Instead of relying on a single location or nation, the producers engage with music on an international scale and invite a diverse group of artists to join the show, including musicians from other parts of the African continent and other (non-Nigerian) Africans in the diaspora. Afropolitan Vibes thus does not pivot on exclusive ideas of belonging. Sometimes the focus is national (as was the case of the event I attended in 2018), but it is more common for the events to connect music and people across borders. This perspective of an 'open' music scene ties in with the sense of belonging the producers are trying to give the audience:

> The sense of belonging [at the event] is one of being free [from an] environment where there are so many constraints … [To sell one particular philosophy] would be disrespectful to the music we play, to the audience as well – they are so diverse … [And] we feed off the diversity. (Interview with Ade Bantu, 28.09.2018)

Hoping that the conscious fashioning of the event will make everyone feel at home at the show, the producers thus generate an event that moves beyond the boundaries of the city and the borders of Nigeria, and which creates space for an inclusive kind of belonging.

A 'Syncretic Complexity'

While the discussion so far demonstrates how the 50th iteration is representative of a kind of belonging that is inclusive of everyone at the show, I claim that similar ideas are seen in how the evening fosters an 'alternative' music collective by crossing stylistic borders and by including new and upcoming musicians, older genres and artists from past generations as well as female voices in what otherwise tends to be a male-dominated business in Lagos. Although this points to a convergence with the blog *MsAfropolitan* and other Afropolitan texts that are vocal about gender issues, the response here is again to a specific context. According to Ade Bantu, their celebration of the 50th iteration of the series was a deliberate attempt to put on display his and Ogunsanya's general outlook and unconventional and experimental style ('we see ourselves as "left field", be it the politics we address in our music, be it the style of music or the sounds that we use' (Interview with Ade Bantu, 29.08.2018)), neither of which fit into the existing structures of the contemporary music scene in Lagos.

The producers' inclusive idea of belonging is further evident in the syncretism and eclecticism of Ade Bantu's band who have taken their sound to Lagos and, in the process, made it hinge on a cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity that reflects the city's crowded spaces and histories of transcultural exchange – a city which speaks to a 'syncretic complexity', a term used by Paul Gilroy (1999, 101) to describe the Black Atlantic. Gilroy does not reference Lagos

in relation to this term. Instead, he illustrates how it applies to cultural forms and styles of expression in the diaspora. However, his ideas reflect Lagos' own history which, as some scholars note, is tied up with the formation of Yoruba culture in southwestern Nigeria – a culture that has been shaped by '"the creole society of the [West African] Coast", particularly the Sàró and Afro-Latin returnees from Brazil, and through their interchange and dialogue with the Afro-Brazilian diaspora and its intellectuals' (Jones, 2019, 261, see also Matory, 2005, 51). I would suggest that Bantu, as an extension of Lagos, adopt a similar syncretic complexity: instrumental components such as the West African talking drums are foregrounded alongside the guitar and the keyboard; Ade Bantu's rap complements vocal styles characteristic of American R&B and soul as well as Afrobeat (which in itself is a fusion of American blues, funk and jazz, and West African highlife and fuji music); and the vocalists effortlessly mix languages in the lyrical content and in shout-outs to the audience as they dance to the different beats and rhythms. And their movements and gestures sync in perfectly with the lyrics but appear relaxed and spontaneous: sometimes they move independently to the sound of the music; other times they coordinate with one another.

Reminiscent of the remix seen in Selasi's portrayal of an urban night club scene, the stage outfits mirror these patterns of syncretism and eclecticism. Ade Bantu wears a tailored three-piece suit in vibrant African print, black shoes and a mid-twentieth-century fedora hat. Mide sports white sneakers and a tracksuit consisting of white trousers and a black and white top in a style reminiscent of African print. The female singers are dressed in urban street wear: matching jackets in black and yellow with black, ripped jeans, white sneakers and large hoop earrings. The remaining band members are dressed in buba and sokoto (a loose shirt, usually reaching halfway down the thighs, and trousers, both part of traditional Yoruba attire), or jeans and a shirt or t-shirt. Some of them wear an aso oke hat (a soft, hand-woven hat worn by Yoruba

men). Together, the outfits form their own version of Gilroy's syncretic complexity, but they also highlight individual music genres if we consider them on their own: the African print matches the band's Afrobeat and highlife rhythms, for instance, and the urban street look complements the hip-hop attitude and sound.

Similar patterns are invoked in the guest artists' performance. Ade Bantu soon hands over the stage to Johnny Drille who positions himself with his acoustic guitar at the centre of the stage, delivering his personal twist on Western pop and folk genres as he serenades the women in the audience with love songs in pidgin English. Led by his softly spoken lyrics, the crowd slows down almost immediately. The sound changes again when Omawumi joins the stage with her band: her upbeat combination of contemporary pop, reggae, R&B and highlife quickly elevate the mood in the park and as she punctuates her tracks with a playful call and response, people immediately pick up the pace.

While members of the Afropolitan Vibes crew circulate the venue to sell the band's new album and hand out the latest edition of the Afropolitan Vibes magazine, the two guest performances are interspersed with more songs from Bantu. Linking the framework of Afropolitan Vibes to the past, they play a memorable rendition of Fela Kuti's famous 'Colonial Mentality', originally remixed in Germany in a collaboration between Ade Bantu and Schäl Sick Brass Band (see Bantu, 2016). As the rest of the band slows down Fela's characteristic Afrobeat sound to foreground the hip-hop style, Ade Bantu raps over the original lyrics, reflecting on the Ogoni people's struggle for environmental and social justice in the Niger Delta in a manner that reiterates the band's and the concert series' critical and defiant attitude.

The evening wears on, and suspense builds in the crowd as people wait in anticipation for the evening's third guest, Bright Chimezie, a legend in Nigerian music who is famous for his contribution to highlife music. Finally, as dimmed stage lights and slow-rising effects from

the fog machine make way for subtle beams of light to cut across the stage, Ade Bantu appears on stage to introduce the guest to the crowd. With this third act, the producers show how the concert series is linked and indebted to the legacy of their elders. The senior musician soon starts dancing to the signature beat of his 'Zigima Sound' as he repeats the phrase, 'Everybody say "Ice water"!' The audience forms one united response, 'ICE WATER!', and the crowd erupts in front of him. When the evening draws to a close and the concert crew starts taking down the stage gear, the sea of people that is gathered on the lawn in front of the stage gradually disperses. Some leave while others linger, patiently waiting around as the DJs set up under the pavilion to begin the after-party.

As such, the 50th iteration of the concert series clarifies that the style we see emerging on the Afropolitan Vibes stage is more than a product of globalisation and the contemporary diaspora (as otherwise indicated in Selasi's essay 'Bye-Bye Babar'): it is also connected to a particular way of being (and belonging) in the cultural and commercial centre of Nigeria – one where patterns of syncretic complexity are seen as the result of a longer history of heterogeneity. In what follows, I consider how this perspective ties in with the producers' take on the urban histories of movement in the city and how they place them in the context of Afropolitanism.

'Afropunk, Afrowiz, Afropolitan e o'

By way of conclusion, I suggest that we consider some of the terminologies that circulate on stage – another illustration of how the concert series is fashioned in the defiant image of Lagos but which further implies that Ade Bantu and Ogunsanya are reminiscent of Emily Callaci's (2017, 2-3) 'popular urban intellectuals', a term used to describe cultural producers in African cities who fashion their events as platforms to disseminate 'new modes and visions of urban community'. Echoing these sentiments, the concert series is assembled as a collective and 'open' space of belonging *as well as* a place where the producers can generate new meanings

and ideas and play around with different terminologies in a self-conscious way without tying themselves to a fixed meaning.

Although 'Afropolitan' features prominently in the title of the series, the word is a contested part of the framework. Evocative of the tensions that continue to run through both popular and academic discourses on Afropolitanism (see Introduction), this is substantiated in my interviews with the producers. As a Nigerian-German who grew up in Lagos and now lives in the city after relocating from Germany, Ade Bantu found that 'the [Afropolitan] term was in some ivory tower' when he first read about it: revolving around the mobility of 'this hip new urban African', it was defined on the terms of the 'privileged few' in the West, and 'the average Lagosian was not being consulted' (Interview with Ade Bantu, 29.08.2018). Ogunsanya was similarly sceptical. Born in Nigeria and considering herself a local of Cornwall, Bristol and London in the UK where she has also lived, she would have preferred to avoid the term entirely because of the elitist connotations. Yet, Ade Bantu felt differently:

> This constant having to explain [one's identity with different terminologies] … I am not really friends with it … [But] to wholeheartedly say that I denounce [Afropolitanism] would not work … We need to engage people. We need to expose flaws in systems and in thought processes. (ibid.)

The musician has previously worked with 'Afro-German' and 'Afropean' whilst living in Germany yet decided to adopt 'Afropolitan' when he moved back to Lagos. In his view, Afropolitanism's emphasis on movement and mobility reflects the history of this city, the cultural and commercial capital of Nigeria. Reiterating scholarship on Lagos history (Falola and Heaton, 2008, Matory, 2005), he sees Lagos as an urban space that, like other cities on the continent and across the globe, is the product of constant movements of people – ones which have led to an ongoing cultural negotiation and shifting ideas of identity and belonging and an

open-ended mixing – of different cultures and languages, for instance. As an example of how these movements have shaped (and continue to shape) urban spaces in the twenty-first century, Lagos adds historical depth to the framework of Afropolitanism:

> I [took] this term to Lagos because here in Lagos we have always been at the confluence of culture, you know, with Europe[an] and African identity as always kind of negotiating and constantly reinventing itself. (Interview with Ade Bantu, 29.08.2018)

The characteristics of Lagos which Ade Bantu is referring to here are emphasised by recent figures. The West African metropolis has expanded rapidly since the early twentieth century and is now listed as a mega-city and the biggest city on the continent, with recent numbers of the population being estimated at up to 21 million (Leithead, 2017). In his view (which echoes Mbembe's (2007) reading of Afropolitanism), this indicates that we should redirect the concept of Afropolitanism to Africa. Adopting Afropolitanism in an urban space like Lagos can help substantiate Mbembe's (2007) claim that the term signifies mobility and movement of various demographics not just in the diaspora but within the continent. At the same time, placing 'Afropolitan' in close proximity with Ade Bantu's and the band's names, the producer highlights Africa's mobile populations in a longer historical trajectory of migration. The band name Bantu is an acronym for 'Brotherhood Alliance Navigating Towards Unity' (Bantu, 2020) whilst Ade Bantu is what people started calling the musician after he formed the band (Bantu, 2016), but the names can also be seen as a reference to the Bantu peoples who moved from West Africa and to other parts of the continent five thousand years ago (see Whitehouse, 2012, 6).

Afropolitanism is scrutinised further in 'Afropunk' (Bantu, 2017a), a track from the album *Agberos International* which starts out with a self-conscious reflection on style. The

song knits together various sounds and genres from all over the world in order to challenge the 'musical apartheid' of 'Mr style police':

> Mr style police why you meddling in my biz trying to pigeon hole my vibe and get me on my knees
> Your musical apartheid I ain't gonna bow to
> Listen up Mr Sabiall my name na Bantu
> Student, apprentice of life is what I am
> Grenzgänger, wanderer who don't fear no man
> …
> Music's a continuum for the children of the sun
> The cycle of creation is abundant everlasting as long as you're open and your soul is willing
> We're the Bad Brains, Fishbone, Living Color Collation, brothers with an attitude on a world-wide mission.
>
> (Bantu, 2017a, 'Afropunk')

Ade Bantu and the band do not work with a single sound or image because they thrive on an 'open' style that enables them to build on, and acknowledge, other artists – in this instance, the African diaspora 'collectives' Bad Brains and Fishbone whose genres and styles, like Bantu's own, pivot on patterns of syncretism, fragmentation and mixing.

The intertextual references are a self-conscious way for the band to define their own stance as musical 'Grenzgängers'. The references are also a general comment on how musical styles tie the work of different artists together and create a sense of belonging across borders. One could argue that even if the individual sound and vibe of the different artists invite us to distinguish between them, music operates as a continuum in which genres and styles are subject to constant mixing, change and mutation. The song text thus brings an important message to discussants of Afropolitanism: instead of insisting that the fashioning of an eclectic style is a process that is distinctly Afropolitan or that turning multiple styles, forms and expressions into a syncretic mix is a new phenomenon, this is part of a broader history and ongoing tradition of music-making in Africa and the diaspora. Definitions and discussions of Afropolitanism should

reflect these and other histories of movement and take into account how they are products not only of globalisation and the contemporary diaspora but Lagos and other cities, both in West Africa and elsewhere in the continent.

Finally, according to Ade Bantu and his crew, we can read the Afropolitan term alongside other concepts as the spoken intro and chorus in 'Afropunk' encourage us to do, and everyone is welcome at Afropolitan Vibes, regardless of which one they might adhere to:

> [Intro]
> Brothers and sisters, ladies and gentlemen
> Agberos international, outernational
> Afropunks and Afropolitans
> Wafunkateers
> Time to connect to the Bantu vibe
> Show the world you're alive baby
> …
> [Chorus]
> Na so o o gari getti as e bi upside down inside o
> Na so o o Afropunk, Afrowiz, Afropolitan e o
>
> (Bantu, 2017a, 'Afropunk')

Reminiscent of Salami's blog *MsAfropolitan* (see Chapter One), as well as Knudsen and Rahbek's (2016) work (both of which invite us to read Afropolitanism in connection with other concepts), Afropolitan Vibes and the band Bantu thus place the Afropolitan term in a broader conceptual context. In this case, we see how they make comparisons between 'Afropunk, Afrowiz, Afropolitan' in a playful manner to demonstrate how the word might be new but is part of a bigger picture, standing alongside other words which reflect similarly on the connections between the African continent and the diaspora. 'Afropolitan' is also subject to scrutiny in the satirical comment on how this and other terminologies usually end up as ambiguous words with shifting meanings that, 'e bi upside down inside o', cause confusion. At the same time, the song illustrates how the producers of Afropolitan Vibes claim the term as

theirs, showing how they add new meaning to it – in this instance, by placing the word in a new context based on their own perspective and ideas of how music signals and generates movement and a sense of belonging across borders.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter sheds light on how style and belonging are portrayed in *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun*, *Open City*, *This Afropolitan Life* and Afropolitan Vibes. These texts draw on a notion of (self-)fashioning which is employed by the writers and cultural producers of the texts in order to expand on patterns of style that are already familiar in both popular culture and literature. The use of syncretic and eclectic processes of styling is therefore not exclusive to Afropolitanism. Nonetheless, this notion of style and the emphasis on (self-)fashioning has been at the heart of discussions of Afropolitanism since Selasi's publication of 'Bye-Bye Babar' and so, while it may not be exclusively Afropolitan, it is certainly a distinctive and characteristic feature of Afropolitan texts.

The four texts display how style can be a means to make sense of contemporary migrant experiences but also to illustrate how such experiences can result in a feeling of belonging across borders. This suggests that style can generate a sense of personal agency in the formation of belonging: in knitting together fabrics, clothing styles and eclectic music genres and dance moves lies an opportunity to represent one's personal perspective on the concept. And like Selasi's 'Bye-Bye Babar', the texts imply that there is a self-consciousness at play in the styling processes seen in Afropolitan cultural production. We have further seen that self-fashioning can make room for shifting perspectives on belonging, giving the impression that the concept itself is flexible and adding to Elspeth Probyn's (1996) idea that it is often experienced as a process. Yet, we have also come across examples of how such sentiments can be undermined in social interaction where wider structures and politics of belonging end up dictating who belongs and

who does not. This, in turn, leaves us with the impression that belonging is an ambiguous and ephemeral experience.

In the last chapter below, I expand on these latter ideas as I explore the affective nature of belonging in the context of Afropolitan experiences of moving and living across borders. Here, I propose that in some Afropolitan texts we also see an interest in emotions as movement.

CHAPTER THREE

Anxious Forms and Non-Belonging

In their 'founding' essays, Taiye Selasi (2005) and Achille Mbembe (2007) seek to highlight and complicate the meaning of belonging in the context of mobility, suggesting that mobile African lives – both today and in the past – are shaped by a sense of belonging to here, there and elsewhere and that this is based on people's individual movements across borders (see Introduction). In the previous chapters, I pointed to various ways in which Afropolitan texts not only speak to a similar idea of belonging but emphasise how it often leads to a feeling that the concept is full of complexities, uncertainties and ambiguities. Even if the experience of being connected across borders brings forth a sense of agency, making it seem as if belonging is a flexible and 'open' concept that comes with different meanings, it is often subject to ongoing negotiation and undercut by social structures and broader politics which determine who belongs and who does not. This chapter reads three texts which further complicate Selasi's and Mbembe's initial definition of belonging by foregrounding their characters' emotional response to the experience of *non*-belonging: Nicole Amarteifio's *An African City*, Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* and Olumide Popoola's *When We Speak of Nothing*. All set in the first decades of the twenty-first century, these texts demonstrate that non-belonging can be a haunting experience in the present moment – one which leads to a sensation of being out of place and stuck in motion.

The first section illustrates that the web series *An African City* contemplates how returning to Accra after years of living abroad triggers ambiguous and conflicting feelings for five young women, leaving them to feel both empowered and independent, but also anxious about their belonging. In the second section, I explore a similarly complex register of emotions

but here it is in the familial context of the novel *Ghana Must Go*. The novel shows how a doctor's wrongful dismissal from a hospital in Boston affects both him and his Nigerian-Ghanaian family: unable to come to terms with the pain, anger, shame and anxiety that haunt him after being fired, the character leaves his wife and four children; as the rest of the family try to cope with the emotional turmoil that comes with his absence, they are left with the haunting feeling not only that their life is unravelling, but that they are no longer able to connect with one another. The third section concludes with *When We Speak of Nothing*, a novel which follows a young, London-based mixed-race and transgender character who embarks on a journey across borders to confront the absent figures in his life, as well as the lingering feeling of non-belonging that has been triggered by them.

While I consider Selasi's 'Bye-Bye Babar' largely to be a celebratory account of the Afropolitan figure, it is important to note that the text relies on an emotional register which similarly complicates the idea of belonging across borders and which is thus worth taking into account here. In a short statement (published in Knudsen and Rahbek, 2016, 289), Selasi has explained that her intention with 'Bye-Bye Babar' was to tell herself (and others with a similar experience), 'You are not isolated … You belong'. She clarifies further in an interview elsewhere that she wrote the essay to deal with the pain of being in a 'stranded place' where she was constantly aware that she did not belong to the locations in which she lives (or has lived) and that she did not have the right to claim the cultures that form part of her and her family's itinerary as her own (Selasi, 2015a, 160). She argues that she 'was not writing … from a position of overt optimism', but one of 'pain':

> To grow up as my twin sister and I did was painful … In our world, we were acutely aware at all times of our non-belonging. If I say I'm American, people say "no you're not". If I say I'm British, as I was born in the UK, people say "your accent isn't credibly British. No, you're not". If I say I'm Nigerian and try to speak Yoruba, my cousins

> mock my horrible accent … You're not American, you're not British, you're not Ghanaian, you're not Nigerian … This was incredibly alienating … I'd start to feel the first faint blush of belonging, only to be told: "You don't belong here either". This was disorienting … Everyone has so much to say about what we're *not* … "Afropolitan" came from that stranded place. (Selasi, 2015a, 158-160; emphasis in original)

The emotional struggle is depicted in the essay itself:

> The modern adolescent African is tasked to forge a sense of self from wildly disparate sources … Most were once supremely self-conscious of being so "in-between". Brown-skinned without a bedrock sense of "blackness" … [yet] often teased by African family members for "acting white" … The baby-Afropolitan can get what I call "lost in transnation". (Selasi, 2005)

The extracts offer an evocative rendition of belonging in the context of Afropolitanism. Leaving a vivid impression of what it has been like for the author to be pushed away repeatedly, regardless of where and how she tries to belong, they highlight how the experience has led to a feeling of being unable to anchor herself anywhere and clarify to us, her readers, that 'Bye-Bye Babar' is both her claim to a (multi-local) sense of belonging and an effort to recognise and uncover the emotional turmoil that comes with the (often ambivalent) experience of (non)belonging.

Keeping this perspective in mind, it is, as Carli Coetzee (2016, 102) notes, ironic that the essay then is often characterised as 'a celebration and a theorization of a branded and loud night club lifestyle' in the initial debates on Afropolitanism. Here, the '"stranded" tone of the original piece' and the '"pain" and anger' are usually 'emptied out' (ibid., 2016). More recent scholarship on the Afropolitan novel does acknowledge the latter characteristics, however. Taking the author's interview as her starting point, Aretha Phiri (2017, 147), for instance, argues that Selasi shows how the Afropolitan subject's attempt at 'self-construction' is

consistently met by ‘a negative, dialectic articulation of de-construction’ and that this leads to an ‘existential anguish’ about always being defined by her differentiation.

Other scholars have made similar observations. Although not a direct comment on Selasi’s essay, Simon Gikandi admits that in his initial response to Afropolitanism (see Gikandi, 2011) his focus was ‘too much on the celebration’ (Gikandi in Knudsen and Rahbek, 2016, 53). He explains that this made him overlook the ‘anxiety’ that is experienced by Afropolitans when their ‘sense of belonging to Africa’ is questioned (ibid.). Gikandi shares this observation in an interview with Eva Rask Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek (2016) whose study of contemporary diaspora literature makes a similar claim. Knudsen and Rahbek’s (2016, 110) view is that an ‘anxiety of belonging … characterises many of the literary figures’ in Afropolitan novels. Elsewhere, they note that ‘the postcolonial anxiety’ of earlier postcolonial literature was ‘mobility induced in a different way’ than the one that is seen in these latter novels: whereas the former came from ‘feeling lost in-between homeland and host-land’, this one materialises from the experience of ‘being in transit, and multi-local, while commuting across geographical locations, and feeling a sense of belonging to all or none of the places involved’ (Knudsen and Rahbek, 2017, 118).

Building on this recent intervention in the debate on Afropolitanism (which is significant because it has added new layers to the concept), I propose in similar terms in this chapter that (non-)belonging is an affect-driven experience. Rather than focusing exclusively on anxiety like the existing scholarship, however, I explore the emotional register in Afropolitan texts more generally – anxiety, pain and anger, for instance – illustrating that they can all play into the experience of non-belonging. In addition, I incorporate a wide theoretical lens to frame the broad range of emotions that are at work in the texts, and which can highlight non-belonging from an affective point of view. In *An African City*, *Ghana Must Go* and *When We Speak of*

Nothing, we shall see that their characters' emotional response is registered internally and detected in language, but that the authors of the texts also show interest in how affect manifests as bodily form, for instance by exploring to what extent anxiety and anger become visible in gestures and facial expressions, or how they are felt on the body. At the same time, we shall see that the emotions feed into and manifest in textual form. Using one or more of these 'manifestations' of emotion, I claim, helps the authors foreground the experience of non-belonging and, in the process, recognise the complexities, uncertainties and ambiguities of what it means to belong in the context of Afropolitanism.

Recent scholarly work from the so-called 'affective turn' in the humanities and social sciences in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century provides a useful foundation for understanding the multi-layered focus on emotion in Afropolitan texts (Clough and Halley, 2007). While various theories on affect have informed academic disciplines in the past, Michael Hardt insists that the recent shift is important because it continues the legacy of feminist and queer theory both by highlighting the significance of emotions in lived experiences and by exploring the role of the body within this context. He further maintains that affect theory helps us acknowledge 'our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it', as well as 'the relationship between these two powers' (Hardt in Clough and Halley, 2007, ix).

I find Sara Ahmed's work in cultural studies particularly rewarding here because it provides a framework for understanding how emotions feed into the complex experiences of moving and belonging across borders that are portrayed in *An African City*, *Ghana Must Go* and *When We Speak of Nothing*. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed (2014, 10-1) is of the opinion that the word 'emotion', derived from the Latin 'emovere' ('to move, to move out'), signifies a particular movement: when we are affected by something, this is 'an orientation or direction toward that thing', and we 'are shaped by, and even take the shape of, [this] contact'.

Emotions 'are not only about movement', however – 'they are also about attachments or about what connects us to this or that', but this 'takes place through movement, through being moved by the proximity of others' (ibid., 11). This implies that 'emotions are relational: they involve (re)actions or relation of "towardness" or "awayness" in relation to … objects' and are thus always '"about" something' (ibid., 7-8). This is important because it clarifies not so much that emotions are signifiers of an inward reality, but that they have 'worldly effects', informing 'the contours of social as well as bodily space' and operating as 'a form of … world making' (ibid., 209, 12).

In *An African City*, *Ghana Must Go* and *When We Speak of Nothing*, the characters' emotional response to the experience of non-belonging operates in a similar manner: pain, anger, anxiety and other related emotions come to the surface in particular situations where the characters find themselves labelled as people who do not belong (usually because of their movements across borders but often also because of their nationality, race, ethnicity, gender and/or class), and, as a result, find it difficult to establish a meaningful attachment to a place or a family, for example. The emotions that are triggered by this experience can be detected in different ways in the texts – in how they are registered internally by the characters, or how they move, shape or become visible in the characters' actions and on their bodies. In the first section, I argue that anxiety dominates the experience of (non-)belonging that is portrayed in *An African City*: here, the main characters feel anxious about the extent to which they belong to Accra upon their return, a feeling which continues to haunt them throughout the series. In section two and three, I suggest that in *Ghana Must Go* and *When We Speak of Nothing* multiple emotions materialise, including pain, fear, anxiety, shame and anger. Much like the anxiety that is seen in the web series, these emotions are difficult for the characters to shake off and affect how they perceive and engage with the world around them.

At the same time, I contend that anxiety plays a prominent role in all three texts as each author visualises the painful side of the Afropolitan experience by making this emotion a distinct part of the textual fabric. The texts, I illustrate, take on an anxious form in different ways, for instance by relying on erratic, intermittent and restricted movements in the language or in the overall structure. This helps the authors channel the difficult and troubled movements of their characters. We shall see that one example is when the third-person narrator in *Ghana Must Go* declares in the opening sentence that one of the protagonists 'dies barefoot on a Sunday' (Selasi, 2013, 3), but only in the last paragraph on page 93 shows him taking his last breath. By stretching the moment of dying across the first part of the novel in this way, the narrator can jump back and forth in time to give an idea of the unresolved emotions that have shaped the character's existence. As character and text oscillate between past and present in this manner, it seems as if both are stuck in an anxious motion, unable to shake the emotional turmoil that haunts the final moment of his life.

In my reading of this anxious form, as well as other similar examples in the three texts, I build on Eugenie Brinkema's *The Forms of the Affects*. In this significant contribution to film studies, Brinkema (2014, 36, 25) is of the opinion that we must reframe the concept of emotion by paying attention to how it 'manifests in, as, and with textual form', rather than 'as a matter of expression' or 'sensation for a spectator'. This means that we should be 'reading for form', an activity that 'involves a slow, deep attention … to the usual suspects of close reading' and which, in film studies, includes 'montage, camera movement, mise-en-scène, color, sound', but also 'more ephemeral problematics such as duration, rhythm, absences, elisions, ruptures, gaps, and points of contradiction (ideological, aesthetic, structural, and formal)' (ibid., 37).

Brinkema then demonstrates that anxiety can take on a particular form in the language and the overall structure of a text. Turning to Sigmund Freud's work on anxiety and, later, the

2003 horror film *Open Water*, she identifies what she refers to as a 'form of anxious intermittency', one which, in her view, can be detected in 'the erratic movements' of both texts (ibid., 199, 197). Freud's text offers 'a theory *of* anxiety, not merely about but constituted by … failures, intervals, repetitions, and punctuations', and this 'makes up the sense of intermittency': 'the structure of [his 1926 text on anxiety] fails to unify or cohere' because it is frequently 'marked by fits and starts', and 'its language,' equally anxiety-ridden, 'provides no antidote but wanders adrift, continually slips away from itself' (ibid., 196-7; emphasis in original). Likewise, in *Open Water*, she encounters an equally 'difficult movement of form, a form that begins to choke, that is strangled and restricted, has nowhere to go', and which is seen in the structure of the narrative which is 'an assemblage of temporal concurrences' of the film's segments (ibid., 209, 217). Thus, the movement in this form of anxiety 'is given over as troubled movement, strangled, frayed, worked-over' (ibid., 194).

These examples of anxiety as form invoke the etymological meaning of the word. Brinkema (2014, 199) notes that anxiety is 'etymologically linked to confinement', with 'its root in *angustus* (narrow) and *angere* (to choke)' and its 'deriv[ation] from narrow straits, a place that chokes, a choking place'. Expanding on Søren Kierkegaard's philosophical reflections on the term, she further writes that anxiety can feel like 'the infinitude of … a descent' and a sensation of being stuck in this motion as if 'one will never find ground' (ibid., 184-5). In what follows, I illustrate that similar sentiments feed into the textual forms of some Afropolitan texts. What is characteristic here, I claim, is that the distinct form of anxiety – of anxiety as the sensation of being stuck in motion, for instance – helps visualise the haunting feeling of being trapped in a place of non-belonging and foregrounds the emotional turmoil that comes to shape this experience.

Independent, Empowered and Anxious in *An African City*

Amarteifio's Accra-based web series *An African City* follows five highly mobile, upper-middle-class female characters in their mid-twenties to early thirties who strive for independence and personal success. The series is framed as an exploration of what it means to return to Africa in the early twenty-first century: longing to reconnect with the continent and looking for new opportunities in Ghana's capital, Nana Yaa, Ngozi, Sade, Makena and Zainab decide to repatriate after coming of age and obtaining a degree from an elite university abroad and making connections elsewhere (the US and the UK but also Nigeria and Sierra Leone, for instance).

The show hinges on the returnee, a familiar character type which, in Ghana and elsewhere in West Africa, is often referred to as the 'been-to' figure.[7] The been-to often generates laughter in popular culture, and cultural producers tend to use the character to make a mockery of people who boast about their education, wealth and status after returning from abroad. By contrast, the tone is more serious in African literature. Here, Helen Cousins and Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo (2016, 1) note that, navigating a colonial (or post-colonial) context, been-tos usually follow a pattern which recalls Frantz Fanon's idea of the native intellectual: they initially adopt 'European culture as if it were [their] own' when moving to the colonial country, but later repatriate 'to return to [their] "roots"' and disassociate themselves with the culture they have embraced abroad; eventually, the readers witness them fighting political corruption and other forms of injustice as they try to awaken other Africans 'from their lethargy'. 'There may be laughter' in this framework, Cousins and Dodgson-Katiyo (2016, 2-3) observe, 'but it is a nervous laughter, sometimes verging on the macabre' as we see the

[7] For a variation of this character type in Ghana, see Boris Nieswand's (2014) discussion of the 'burger' figure. Other popular expressions for the figure circulate elsewhere in West Africa. In Nigeria, for instance, 'IJGB' ('I Just Got Back') is slang for someone who has returned from overseas and whose frequent talk about the experience often leads to ridicule from those at home (see Rebecca Jones, 2019, 221).

characters being haunted by disillusionment and alienation 'in a country they can no longer recognize'.

Like earlier examples of the female been-to figure (see Cousins and Dodgson-Katiyo, 2016), *An African City* offers a gendered portrayal of the returnee narrative that highlights the different strategies the women have for negotiating life upon their return, most of which speak to ideas that are specific to the West African context. I consider *An African City* to be an update on this familiar narrative, however. Unlike the been-tos who, as indicated above, favour one culture or nation over another and view them through a binary lens, the main characters in Amarteifio's series embrace the various cultural influences and locations that have shaped their existence as a result of their movements across borders: they are not always experienced as a dichotomy nor do the women stick to one culture, elevating it over the other. Instead, they acknowledge that both 'here' and 'there' inform their sense of belonging. Reiterating my readings of other Afropolitan texts in Chapter Two, this is particularly evident in their confident and self-conscious styling of themselves: wearing Accra-based Christie Brown and other local high-end brands known for a distinct Africa-centred aesthetics and mixing African print fabric with chic suits, trendy jumpsuits, jeans and other elements associated with global urban fashion helps them feel connected locally but also elsewhere.

For the five returnees in *An African City*, belonging then is not experienced as the sole signifier of their connection to Accra and Ghana. Nor is the concept a binary construct hinging on 'movement between places that are home and those that are not' (Cousins, 2016, 185). Instead, it is refracted through the individual connections the characters have formed to the multiple places they have moved between. Opening up the meaning of belonging in this manner is a way for them to circumvent their status as outsiders and consider themselves part of the city – to insist that Accra (and Ghana) *is* home. But it further suggests that the series sketches

belonging as an experience that is determined by the women's sense of belonging elsewhere, too.

What is intriguing about *An African City* is that it undermines the agency that comes with this initial take on belonging by portraying the characters as independent, empowered *and* anxious. Most discussions of the series highlight the characters' sense of independence and empowerment – they do not 'feel trapped in patriarchal structures' and 'are not re-inscribed in the domestic sphere', to quote Lindsey Green-Simms (2018, 97). Yet, as I demonstrate in this section, the women also come across as anxious – an emotion which, I argue, is triggered by the experience of non-belonging and which often comes to the surface in situations where the women feel insecure and uncertain about what it means to return and (re)establish a connection to Accra. We shall see that the characters themselves perpetuate the idea that they are out of place (for instance by comparing their 'Ghanaianness' to other characters'), but that this is frequently exacerbated by local connotations of their returnee status and socioeconomic background, in turn leading other characters (who either assume that they are foreigners or insist that they are not really African because they have lived abroad) to remind them of their non-belonging.

Finally, my discussion of *An African City* illustrates that the series relies on a formal manifestation of affect to undercut the characters' independence and empowerment and to bring attention to their anxiety: firstly, by blending drama and comedy in the overall structure of the series; secondly, by adding a form of anxious intermittency and erratic movement to highlight the characters' emotional turmoil in individual scenes; and, lastly, by adding an element of (self)mockery in the portrayal of their returnee experience. Amarteifio's series thus adds to Afropolitanism's perspective on the experience of moving across borders in the early-twenty-

first century by alluding to emotion as (another kind of) movement – both in the characters' anxious response to non-belonging and its own formal manifestations of this anxiety.

Blending Comedy and Drama

An African City has drawn much attention since Amarteifio, and her co-producer, Millie Monyo, launched the first season on YouTube in 2014 and followed up with season two on VHX, an online fee-based platform, in 2016. The pilot has been viewed more than half a million times, the first season has generated more than three million YouTube views and season two made $20,000 in its first month (Rao, 2016a, 2016b). And various magazines, newspapers and broadcasting companies in Ghana and abroad have commented on the show (Chávez and Cordes, 2018, Karimi, 2016, Tomchack, 2014).

In spite of its popularity, *An African City* has been heavily criticised in both popular and academic discourses. Valérie Bah's (2014) view is that the series glosses over Accra in 'fleeting' establishing shots of upper-middle-class restaurants, fancy apartment buildings and other urban sites that depict an 'Accra [which] is so indistinct … that it could represent any location' in the world. According to Sylvia Bawa and Grace Adeniyi Ogunyankin (2018, 6-7), the show perpetuates a simplistic view of African women by focusing on what they refer to as the '"new" woman': a 'young, financially independent, diasporan returnee' who is 'transnational, resourceful, world-travelled and upwardly mobile'. Bawa and Adeniyi Ogunyankin take issue with how this figure is juxtaposed with other female characters. Expanding on the critique elsewhere, Adeniyi Ogunyankin (2016, 42, 46) writes that the five protagonists come across as 'empowered returnee[s]' whereas the rest of the cast represent the '"traditional" African woman' that has 'yet to become modern'.

In Adeniyi Ogunyankin's (2016, 38) view, the returnees' elite background also substantiates the claim that Afropolitanism is a classist term. This, I propose, is further evident

if we consider how the concept materialises in the series itself. 'Afropolitan' appears in two instances on the show: Nana Yaa refers to herself and her friends in passing as 'us Afropolitans' (in the episode 'Things Fall Apart', 2016d), and a recurring sponsor advertisement for African Regent Hotel (one of Accra's high-end hotels) in the opening credits to season two reads 'Simply Afropolitan'. The word is not explained or contextualised in either of the two instances, but it is worth noting here that, in the former, the main character employs the word as an identificatory label to describe her and her friends' itinerant selves; in the second case, it is a signifier of African Regent's target audience: upwardly mobile, cosmopolitan Africans. In both instances, the series thus perpetuates certain ideas of gender and class which leave viewers with the impression that being Afropolitan is reserved for a small percentage of people.

These sentiments are in line with Amarteifio's response to the concept. When I asked her about the meaning of the word during an interview I conducted with her in Accra, she acknowledged its complicated history, but explained that 'Afropolitan'

> made me just feel good when I first saw the word … My work in development had always focused on one type of African, [so] I thought, 'Oh, wow, this is focusing on another aspect of what it means to be African' … [Afropolitans are] beautiful African women in various cities across the continent, seated in fancy restaurants, drinking colourful cosmopolitans. Or palm wine. That is what I took from it. [Laughs.] (Interview with Nicole Amarteifio, 04.02.2019)

This reaction is different compared to the ones we saw earlier in this thesis, especially from Ade Bantu and Abby Ogunsanya who are critical of these elitist connotations (see Chapter Two). Whereas they insist that we should offer new and more inclusive definitions, the question of class was not questioned to the same extent in my interview with Amarteifio. Instead, the focus was on how the word resonated with the producer when it first began to circulate in popular discourses after Selasi published 'Bye-Bye Babar' – back then, it made her feel

empowered as a young Ghanaian woman because it foregrounded a gendered and urban perspective of Africans living and moving between Africa and the diaspora and this resonated with her own itinerant perspective. What is interesting here is that her rendition of Afropolitanism encourages us to acknowledge not so much the flaws of the term, but rather how the overall storyline and aesthetics of the series embody the producer's own idea of what it means to be Afropolitan.

Much of the critique of *An African City* is valid, but it is important to keep in mind that the series is also a deliberate subversion of particular, non-African ideas of what it means to be African in the twenty-first century. Amarteifio, who is a self-taught filmmaker, began to write the script while working as a social media strategist for the World Bank, a time during which she found herself engaging with Western development and media discourses that perpetuated bleak images of African women with no agency and the continent as a static, backward site overcome by famine and poverty. Moving back to Accra and watching reruns of *Sex and the City* made her contemplate how a similar narrative could offer a contrast by showing an elite version of the continent and discussing serious issues but in 'an entertaining way'; she 'wanted [*An African City*] to be entertaining. [She] wanted to laugh' (Interview with Nicole Amarteifio, 04.02.2019).

I would argue that most critiques of *An African City* fail to take seriously the connection with *Sex and the City* despite the fact that Amarteifio's adaptation of the latter's narrative strategies forms an important part of her text. Amanda Lotz (2006, 92-3) writes that *Sex and the City* 'construct[s] narratives around a multiplicity of female characters' and their 'conversations about emotions', revealing how they 'experience life and manage the prosaic predicaments they encounter'. The women's conversations show that each character represents 'a curious mixture of success and vulnerability' (ibid., 1). Another important characteristic is

the blend of comedy and drama: *Sex and the City* strives to make its audience laugh, but the series also registers and explores the nuances and complexities of the characters' experiences. This mix allows for ambiguity and multiple 'potential interpretations' (ibid.). The show further 'break[s] from realist traditions by incorporating devices that draw attention to [its] status' as text, for instance by using 'first-person narration', thereby exposing 'perspectives and information unavailable through conventional narrative [film] structures' (ibid., 90-1). Portraying female characters in this manner is a way to 'strip a layer of surface to reveal' each woman's 'uncertainties and flaws' (ibid.).

In *An African City*, we see a similar focus and strategy. The episodes are short (in the first season, the average episode is around twelve minutes whereas later episodes last roughly twenty-five minutes), pivot on a dialogue full of sharp, witty remarks and include (self)mockery of the women's return to Accra. This makes the show entertaining and easy to watch and re-emphasises the idea that 'getting a laugh' remains a 'narrative goal' (Lotz, 2006, 33), but the content touches on sexual assault and other serious issues as well. What is significant about this blend of comedy and drama is that it offers two different ways of looking at the Afropolitan experience of return: the series encourages viewers to recognise the significance of the characters' anxiety by drawing attention to it repeatedly and throughout the series whereas the witty remarks help break down the gravity of the drama, leaving the audience with a feeling that they can still laugh even as the anxiety unfolds on the screen.

Humour is also a tool for the five characters which helps them deal with their emotions. In what follows, we shall see examples of how they frequently resort to (self)mockery as an instrument to hide their anxiety, especially in situations where the extent to which they belong is questioned by others. What is ironic here, of course, is that the laughter ends up drawing attention to the feeling of anxiety, rather than disguising it. The text itself often uses these

instances to cut the Afropolitan figure down to size, for instance by mocking the limitations of the women's perspective and poking fun at the characters' anxiety about returning to Accra.

Erratic Movements and 'Sweating the Small Stuff'

The second season episode 'Sweating the Small Stuff' is a good example of how individual episodes and scenes frame the Afropolitan figure in a humorous light but ask us, the viewers, to take seriously the anxiety that comes with the experience of non-belonging at the same time. In the episode, the characters oscillate between sentimental declarations such as 'there is just something about being back' to comparisons between life in Accra and the (more) convenient lifestyle they had when they lived elsewhere ('Sweating the Small Stuff', 2016c). The comparisons turn into complaints about small things, including strange messages on their boyfriends' phones, but also bigger issues such as water shortage, power cuts and other challenges which they are only just getting used to (ibid.). The voiceover notes that it is not uncommon for 'Ghanaian immigrants returning home' to be 'sweating the small stuff' in this way – that is, to complain 'too much about the little things' that may frustrate other people but are considered part of everyday life in the city (ibid.). The irony here is that as the returnees alternate between their romantic ideas of Accra as 'home' and the bleaker images of the city as somewhere that is different and unfamiliar, they remind themselves (and others) of their returnee status by sketching themselves as a caricature of the been-to figure and pushing the idea that they do not belong.

While Amarteifio encourages the audience to laugh at this behaviour, she asks us to acknowledge the sense of displacement and alienation that comes with the returnee experience by showing how it makes them feel stuck with an anxious feeling of non-belonging. The most striking example is a scene where Ngozi is torn about whether she should sit in the front passenger seat next to her driver, Paul, or if it would be more acceptable to stay in the back

seat. She does not want to perpetuate the idea that she is an outsider by doing something which, in this case, is considered either American or elitist. But she does not know how to avoid it, and this uncertainty haunts her and triggers an anxiety of non-belonging. This becomes evident as the scene unfolds. Allowing the viewers to see how the conflict manifests in her facial expression and body language, a medium close-up shot shows her deeply absorbed in thought with a frown on her face. Meanwhile, Nana Yaa's voiceover offers a window to her mind, 'hover[ing] above the action, summarizing and theorizing' in a way that is reminiscent of *Sex and the City* (Dykes, 2011, 54). The voiceover notes that the character silently contemplates the signals she sends to other people, worrying that her behaviour will contradict her new job at a development agency in the city: 'Sitting in the back felt too elitist, and [Ngozi] worked on poverty reduction. Was sitting in the back sending the wrong message?' ('Sweating the Small Stuff', 2016c). With an increasingly worried look on her face, Ngozi asks Paul to pull over. The camera then shoots from a different angle, capturing the car in a wide shot to illustrate how Ngozi switches seats in a slightly agitated and tense manner. When the car is back on the road, we look over the character's shoulder from the back as the voiceover continues – in a more relaxed tone at first, but then gradually changes her pitch to mirror Ngozi's growing anxiety as she frantically begins to alternate between the two options in her mind:

> Yes. The front seat felt better … We're both human beings so why not sit next to one another … Right? However, maybe the African thing to do was to sit in the back? Like all of us, defending our Africanness, Ngozi didn't want to come across as too American. Sitting in the front felt very American. (ibid.)

Echoing Ahmed's (2014, 66) reading of emotions, the voiceover emphasises here how, 'in anxiety', thoughts 'often move quickly between different objects, a movement which works to intensify the sense of anxiety. One thinks of more and more things to be anxious about … until

it overwhelms other possible affective relations to the world'. When Ngozi realises that sitting in the front is 'too American', she quickly asks the driver to pull over again. Neither option is likely to cast her in a favourable light or leave her with a sense of belonging. Nevertheless, she desperately tries to settle on one of them. As she steps out of the car and gets into the back, Nana Yaa continues: 'Yes, much better. Mm. Sitting in the back felt more professional. It commanded more respect. But [brief pause] – was that too self-righteous? Who was she to command more respect?' ('Sweating the Small Stuff', 2016c). She feels better for a moment because sitting in the back indicates that she does in fact belong even if this means that she is 'elite'. She is soon haunted by her initial insecurities, however: she considers herself a successful and empowered woman, but she is not comfortable with the idea of elevating herself above other people in Accra – even if it is common for Ghanaian businesspeople and professionals who live in the city to sit in the back. She therefore asks the driver to make a third stop, her body language now clearly tense and awkward as she this time moves quickly from one door to the other.

Ngozi's anxiety manifests in the camera movements in a way which recalls Brinkema's (2014) theory of anxiety as form: mirroring the character's frantic and repetitive movements, the camera relies on the same shots and angles throughout most of the scene, oscillating between a medium close-up shot of the character inside the car and a wide shot of her next to the car in the street. Lasting approximately three minutes and only capturing Ngozi's troubled and restricted movements, the scene itself is also repetitive and makes it seem as if time slows down for the character as she is weighed down by her anxiety of non-belonging. If we keep in mind these movements – the character's own and the camera's, as well as the overall structure of the scene – it becomes increasingly clear that she is stuck in motion without getting anywhere: evidently, there is no right way for her to fit in.

The car scene anticipates some of the movements we will see in Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* and Popoola's *When We Speak of Nothing*. In these other texts, the characters are affected by the experience of non-belonging in a similar way, paralysed by a haunting anxiety which makes it seem as if they are stuck in motion. What is distinct about *An African City* is its humorous take on the situation. Towards the end of the scene, Nana Yaa's voiceover observes in an ironic tone that 'if this was "small" stuff, Ngozi was certainly sweating over it,' suggesting that there is a degree of triviality in her worries ('Sweating the Small Stuff', 2016c). This is a subtle mockery not just of her and the other women's elite status but her self-conscious attempt to circumvent this status. And the fact that she has time to worry about 'small stuff' confirms the very thing she tries to avoid – a point which is foregrounded by the repetitive and exaggerated movements, and which implies that the scene turns into a farce, leading the audience to laugh at Ngozi and dismiss her problems as insignificant.

The text continues to make light of the situation when Ngozi returns to her car with Nana Yaa later in the same episode. Reminded of how she has been sweating over a 'small decision that felt very big to her' earlier in the day, she quickly picks up where she left off and begins to pace back and forth between the two car doors (ibid.). When Nana Yaa gives her a puzzled look, Ngozi appears more and more agitated, laughing apologetically but continues her frantic movements until we finally see her dropping to her knees. We might take this as a sign that she has given up, yet the farce continues in the next clip when the character walks out of a shop and the driver follows behind, carrying a brand-new bicycle; evidently, she has decided that the only way to solve her predicament is to avoid it. The voiceover comes to a similar conclusion, declaring that Ngozi has 'eradicat[ed] the problem in its entirety' by not allowing herself to be 'consumed by [the] big car-passenger-seat ethics' (ibid.). This encourages more laughter from the audience, but it also highlights an underlying issue: by investing in a bicycle,

she does not actually address the connotations that are associated with her return and which make her feel like an outsider. Nor does she confront the anxiety that is triggered by the experience. While Amarteifio thus casts Ngozi's anxiety in a humorous light and pokes fun at the obstacles that the Afropolitan figure faces upon her return, this simultaneously implies that the emotional turmoil that is triggered by the experience merits close attention. As such, the episode invites us to think in very concrete terms about the women's anxiety about their return to Accra, one which, to them, feels substantial and overwhelming and remains unresolved.

National Belonging, Returnee Characters and (Non-)'Ghanaianness'

Ngozi is not the only character who is anxious about the experience of non-belonging. In this final part of the discussion, we will come across examples showing how Nana Yaa also questions the extent to which she belongs to Accra and Ghana, a self-scrutiny which is perpetuated by other people's questioning of her 'Ghanaianness', as well as the contrasting views on (national) belonging which she encounters upon her return to the city.

In the pilot, 'The Return', Nana Yaa's voiceover sets the stage over establishing shots of Kotoka Airport and Accra's bustling streets in the evening while Ghanaian rapper M.anifest's 'Motherland' plays in the background. Introducing the character, Nana Yaa's voiceover notes that 'there are 7 billion people in the world. Once in a while, one of those people finds his or her way home' ('The Return', 2014c). The song then continues to play over shots in which the character steps off the plane and confidently moves through the airport to pick up her suitcases. The viewer is left with a romantic idea of a homecoming here: the beginning of a contemporary fairy tale about a young character returning home to her motherland. However, these initial sentiments are interrupted in the subsequent scene as another narrative of return unfolds on the screen, one which is characterised by a sense of displacement. Here, the character arrives at passport control and, in a casual tone and with an American accent,

greets the immigration officer at the counter, only to find him asking her to move to the queue for non-Ghanaians. Keeping the same laidback and confident composure, Nana Yaa responds indifferently that she is in the right place, but the officer refuses to believe her and declares with a knowing smile that she does not 'look or sound Ghanaian' ('The Return', 2014c).

This moment resembles earlier portrayals of the returnee figure. As Julia Udofia (2016, 13) observes in a reading of the been-to in Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments*, home and belonging are subject to ongoing negotiation when the figure returns: even for successful been-tos, they 'may have to be negotiated or re-negotiated' because 'every return crafts a new home and creates a new meaning of home [and belonging]' which is 'shaped in the course of the return'. The incident further hints at the displacement some 'diasporans face upon return' when they learn that other people consider them '"western" in Africa' as a result of 'their socialization in the West' (Bawa and Adeniyi Ogunyankin, 2018, 9). *An African City* demonstrates that a similar idea features in Afropolitan texts: Nana Yaa may have the passport to prove her national affiliation, yet the connection to Ghana is considered tentative because she looks and talks like someone from abroad.

Once again, the web series puts its own comical spin on what is potentially a bleak moment of return, however. This is evident when Nana Yaa, annoyed that she has to perform her Ghanaian identity to convince the officer of her belonging, shifts to pidgin English and a West African accent, assuring him in a mocking voice when he sees her passport: 'See? Me a Gha-nee-nee?' ('The Return', 2014c). She puts on the voice of a 'real' Ghanaian here to make fun of the officer's idea of national belonging which, in her view, is limited and flawed. The mockery seems justified when the officer exclaims, 'Oo! You are Gha-nee-nee', in a similar pitch and accent and, with a big smile on his face, lets her walk through the gate (ibid.). What is interesting here is the indifference that is seen in Nana Yaa's response, which is a sign that

the experience of non-belonging is a common one. It is not unusual for people to question her ties to Ghana and label her as 'un-Ghanaian', and so it does not get to her. The reaction is also reflected in her body language and facial expression: her body language is defiant, and the camera shows her looking directly at the officer and slowly shaking her head, her eyebrows raised, without revealing any distress.

There is nonetheless an anxious mise-èn-scene around belonging here; watching the opening scenes in succession, it becomes evident how the moment of return is informed by an anxious intermittency which turns on jarring 'fits and starts' (Brinkema, 2014, 197), jumping from one take on belonging to another – the character's own idea of what it means to belong and the reality of her return. Nana Yaa's mockery of the officer further hints at her own anxiety, one which, as we shall see below, becomes more dominant as the character's storyline develops in the series. This is substantiated in a subsequent episode. Here, we see her meeting Segun, her ex-boyfriend, and Kukua, his new girlfriend, when she accompanies Sade to pick up her belongings at a warehouse at Ghana Customs. An awkward conversation ensues when Kukua addresses her in Twi (a dialect of the Akan language which is spoken in southern and central Ghana) which the protagonist sees as '[her] own' yet barely speaks ('A Customs Emergency', 2014b). The encounter makes her feel out of place and anxious. Again, we get to see how the character's response is reflected in the camera's swift movements which not only show her questioning and increasingly hesitant body language as she makes an agonising attempt to look for the right words in Twi, but quickly cut back and forth between her and Kukua as the latter makes an effortless shift to English to reassure her. In-between these shots, the camera adds to the strained atmosphere by making frequent cuts to Sade who listens as she cringes. The conversation quickly halts, and the two parties, conscious that the meeting is fraught with tension, awkwardly say goodbye.

The camerawork and Nana Yaa's response – each with its own frantic and erratic movements – demonstrate how her anxiety operates. The character's response further illustrates that anxiety 'is not simply an inner psychic state', but an emotion which can manifest in bodily form (Ahmed, 2014, 85). When the camera frames the character from the shoulders up in a medium close-up shot, it captures her anxious response as she first buries her face in her hands and then shakes her head, rolls her eyes and looks over her shoulder in the direction where Segun and Kukua left – and then finally puts her emotional turmoil into words:

> Oh my God, she 'Twi'd' me! … I am so embarrassed. I can't even speak my own language … It's simple. She represents everything that I'm not … [Continues in a mocking tone:] I'm a Westernised African and I'm lost … She is Ghana. She is *Africa*! ('A Customs Emergency', 2014b)

Nana Yaa resorts to a defensive and mocking tone here, inviting the audience to laugh at the situation with comments such as 'she "Twi'd" me', but she is unable to hide her anxiety behind the laughter. She implies that she has unresolved feelings for Segun in the extract, but the scene also reveals an anxiety about the question of (national) belonging. This anxiety is triggered by a dichotomy between Ghanaian returnees, on the one hand, and Ghanaians who have not moved and/or lived across borders, on the other – a dichotomy which hinges on the extent to which each group is versed in local culture and, in turn, whether they are 'fully' Ghanaian. Nana Yaa sees herself and Kukua as the embodiment of this division. Even if a homecoming indicates a connection for her, she still comes across as foreign to other people because she, unlike Kukua, does not speak the language that is associated with her ethnicity.

In an attempt to reassure Nana Yaa, Sade takes the situation lightly at first: 'You are fabulous! I mean, she probably did some juju on him. Please, how can he choose her over all of your *fabulousness*?' ('A Customs Emergency', 2014b). But Nana Yaa is still conflicted. And

Sade thus adopts a more earnest tone, arguing that she should not feel intimidated by someone else's 'Ghanaianness' and that she belongs as much as Kukua: 'You're Ghanaian. Just a different kind is all' (ibid.). To Sade, belonging to Ghana thus means different things to different people, depending on their individual experiences: it is possible to feel a connection to more than one culture, ethnicity and/or nation and to be cosmopolitan and attached to locations elsewhere whilst holding on to a national sense of belonging.

Nana Yaa remains paralysed by anxiety, however, and she begins to look for ways to compete with Kukua, declaring in another episode that she plans to take language lessons to make sure that she 'will not "out-Twi" [her]' ('The Belly Button Test', 2014a). Evidently, the character continues to feel anxious about her attachment to Ghana. This is emphasised further in the second season episode 'Another Return' when Nana Yaa's cousin Adoma returns from the US, and the character finds herself overwhelmed by their contrasting views on what makes a 'proper' homecoming. To welcome Adoma, the five returnees take her to a high-end restaurant famous for its smoked salmon imported from Europe. 'This does not feel like home', according to Adoma who has looked forward to local dishes such as tilapia and waakye ('Another Return', 2016a). It seems that an 'authentic' homecoming is then predicated on specific ideas of what is (or is not) Ghanaian. These ideas become more pronounced when the other characters take Adoma to a salsa club, and she criticises them for their 'Western' perspective. While Nana Yaa and her friends insist on the right to choose what to include in their return, in Adoma's view, there is only one way to reconnect with the city:

Adoma:	I did not come to Ghana to dance salsa … I want to drink akpeteshie. I want to eat kelewele by the roadside. [In Twi:] I want to go to Epos'
[…]	
Sade:	I don't know what I would do if I couldn't get an assemblance of the things that I love in the West.
[…]	

Adoma: Really? Then why did you guys move back here? Why not just stay in America? … You guys are acting like white people!

[…]

Sade: We are acting like ourselves!

('Another Return', 2016a)

Adoma maintains that the other returnees' way of (re)connecting with Accra is wrong because their cultural preferences mirror the behaviour of 'white people' in the West, thus adhering to the notion that 'the local [is] somehow pristine and abstracted from the global, transnational, or a-national structures' (Probyn, 1996, 146). The other characters disagree, arguing that their cultural preferences represent a multi-local experience of belonging and the idea of Accra as an urban space and a twenty-first-century African city that is both local and global. In their view, Ghana's capital is a cosmopolitan hub which, to repeat Mbembe's (2007, 28) definition of Afropolitanism, comes with a 'presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa'. For them, this means that the city feels like home exactly because they can buy waakye from a roadside stall, eat salmon in an upscale restaurant, drink akpeteshie and go salsa dancing. That is, one element does not exclude the other, and the local *and* global characteristics of the place are what makes Accra feel like home.

Much like the conversation with Kukua, the conflict with the cousin affects Nana Yaa, leaving her with an anxious feeling that she will always be labelled as an outsider in Accra because of her inclination to mix different cultures: 'I feel like a traitor because I-- sometimes I prefer deep-pan pizza over Banku and Tilapia' ('Another Return', 2016a). This comment recalls the (self)mockery we saw in earlier episodes and is likely to make the audience laugh, highlighting the absurdity in Nana Yaa allowing her connection to the city to be determined by her love for deep-pan pizza. But it also illustrates that the women's anxiety is grounded in everyday experiences of cultural differences, thus reiterating an argument made previously in

this thesis: that belonging is a highly experiential and affective concept and that its meaning is often established in social interaction.

Nana Yaa's anxiety remains unresolved towards the end of the second (and, so far, final) season. Although this implies that the character is still stuck in motion, paralysed by her experience of non-belonging, I propose that there is also an underlying sentiment of hope as she continues to look for ways to rekindle the connection to Accra and make a life for herself in the city – a sentiment which becomes more prominent as her story develops. Even if her attachment to Ghana is frequently questioned throughout season one and two and this makes it difficult for her to ground herself and feel at home, she gradually becomes more confident as time passes. The series then speaks to the idea that belonging is experienced as a process and can lead to shifting perspectives over time. While this echoes the ideas that surfaced in my reading of Clarissa Bannor's blog *This Afropolitan Life* in Chapter Two, in *An African City* we see how other people's scrutiny of Nana Yaa's 'Ghanaianness' feeds into the process by forcing her to develop and articulate her own idea of what it means to belong to Accra and Ghana – one which fits her own experiences, values and worldview. Nana Yaa the voiceover alludes to this character development when she offers a conclusion to the dispute with Adoma: 'Know why you came … [And] accept that other returnees will come back, but they must come home their way, to what coming home means to them' ('Fight or Flight', 2016b). The serial form of *An African City* leaves room for a similar idea of hope, suggesting that the character's experience of (non-)belonging is ongoing and open to change – much like *This Afropolitan Life*. While this is not to say that anxiety is no longer an obstacle in *An African City*, the serial form thus makes it seem as if there is a possibility that the character will find a place for herself.

Ghana Must Go and Familial Non-Belonging

Much like *An African City*, Selasi's 2013 novel *Ghana Must Go* places emphasis on its characters' movements across borders as well as the emotions that move them in different directions when experiencing non-belonging. Unlike the five returnees in Amarteifio's web series, however, we shall see that their emotional turmoil is triggered by an experience of non-belonging in the context of family. The novel is structured around the question of what belonging means for the Sais, a Nigerian-Ghanaian family whose existence begins to unravel when the father Kweku is the victim of a wrongful dismissal from a hospital in Boston in the US where he has worked as a surgeon for years. Eventually, the family members relocate to different cities around the world (in the US, the UK and Ghana), uprooted, scattered and with a lingering sensation that they belong to nowhere.

Several literary scholars refer to *Ghana Must Go* as an Afropolitan novel (e.g., Ede, 2016, Gehrmann, 2016), yet some are still wary of applying the term, including Maximilian Feldner who questions the extent to which the concept accurately denotes contemporary literature from the Nigerian diaspora. Feldner (2019, 143) maintains that even if the majority of Selasi's characters bear the same demographic markers as the Afropolitans who are portrayed in celebratory accounts of the term (that is, young professionals who are upwardly mobile, educated at elite universities in the West and navigate multiple locations, both in Africa and abroad), their experience is not 'frictionless'. They 'feel lost, unbound, and unconnected to any group or history', and this contradicts 'the sense of being at home in the world', the idea which, in his view, is frequently associated with the Afropolitan term (ibid., 133).

As mentioned in the Introduction, other literary scholars have taken this divergence as an indication that Afropolitan novels are more than the familiar story of the successful Afropolitan, in turn including in their literary discussions characters with a different

socioeconomic status but also ones whose movements across borders are characterised by emotional distress (e.g., Knudsen and Rahbek, 2016, 2017, Phiri, 2017, Rushton, 2017). They propose that what is distinct about Afropolitan novels such as *Ghana Must Go* are their characters' experience of being in the world, one which is complicated in various ways and often marked by an anxiety of non-belonging as they move across borders. A tendency here is to focus on the politics of identity, home and place that inform the characters' lives – even if the author of the novel insists that 'not a single character, with the exception of [the youngest one], gives terribly much thought … to the question of where they are from. Who, yes. But where, less. It's not their central concern' (Selasi, 2014b). In spite of this context, scholarly work on the novel demonstrates that the text itself still deals with these politics – a point that is also implied in the title of the novel which attests to a broader political context revolving around identity and belonging by referencing the expulsion of Ghanaians from Nigeria by the Nigerian government in 1983 and the so-called 'Ghana Must Go' bag used by migrants for their belongings during this expulsion.

The question of politics is further relevant if we pay attention to how it affects the Sai family's movements across borders. According to scholarship on the novel, the tension between identity, home and place leads to an anxiety of belonging – one which, in Knudsen and Rahbek's (2016, 53) view, is particularly dominant in the lives of the four children who lack 'the rooted experience of feeling at home', but they note that the parents' existence also hinges on a search for home and belonging. Similarly, Phiri (2017, 146) whose main focus is on Sadie, the youngest daughter in the family, refers to a 'cultural and subjective anxiety'. She is of the opinion that this anxiety is linked to the family's ongoing negotiation of identity, a result of the 'elusive and fragile reality of being fundamentally unhomed' (ibid., 147-8). According to Amy Rushton (2017, 50), the family's return to the African continent is shaped by an anxiety that

shows how home 'has the potential to trouble one's sense of belonging to a local, a community, a region'.

In this section, I expand on these readings of the novel, exploring how the emotional turbulence that is triggered by the characters' experience of non-belonging plays out in the context of the family. I argue that the various emotions that come to the surface in this context – anxiety, but also anger and pain, for example – serve to illustrate how broader politics of belonging affect families who move and live across borders. I further contend that the novel, like *An African City*, hinges on an anxious form that, with its own troubled movements, helps to place the family's experience of non-belonging at the centre of the story. The discussion will take Kweku's dismissal from the hospital in the first part of the novel as a starting point to explore how politics of belonging affect the character on an emotional level; it then turns to other examples from the book that can help us understand the ripple effect of Kweku's experience on the rest of the family and from their perspective. What seems common for the family as a whole is how they remain caught up in their own emotions, unable to (re)connect with one another once the life they have built together begins to unravel. As such, *Ghana Must Go* offers us another example of how the experience of non-belonging fits into the movements across borders that are portrayed in Afropolitan texts.

An Anxious Intermittency

Tracing the Sai family's movements across borders in reverse chronological order, *Ghana Must Go* hinges on a three-part structure ('Gone', 'Going' and 'Go'). And the novel's free indirect discourse has a distinct style. While some parts consist of short sentence fragments which are strung together ('Unable to, glued there, transfixed by the view, with the first few tears forming now, loosely, like cumulus, clouding his eyes, too unripe yet to fall' (Selasi, 2013, 57)), other times, more elaborate paragraphs reminiscent of a stream of consciousness dominate the

chapters, with the flow of thoughts revealing the complexity of the characters' emotional response to difficult situations. The third-person narrator often interrupts the paragraphs, however, using phrases such as 'End scene', thereby adding a cinematic quality to the text (ibid., 14).

The narrative style leads to the lack of a sense of flow in the text, but the rhythm is also interrupted by the characters who punctuate their own thoughts by wandering back and forth between past, present and future, as well as the various locations they navigate. In such moments, signifiers such as 'here' and 'there' stand for the family's multi-local connections and signal the rapid shifts from one temporal or geographical location to another. In the father Kweku's mind, for instance, they represent the home he had with his family in Boston, the home in Kokrobité outside Accra where he grew up and the house he has built in the suburbs of the city later in life:

> This sight and this sound, these two senses – of his daughter, (a), a modern thing entirely and a product of *there*, North America, snow, cow products, thoughts of the future, of his mother, (b), an ancient thing, a product of *here*, hut, heat, raffia, West Africa, the perpetual past. (ibid., 52; emphasis in original)

This brings to mind Morayo's memories in Sarah Manyika's novel (see Chapter Two), but it also recalls the frequent jumps between here, there and elsewhere we saw in Chimamanda Adichie's and Chika Unigwe's novels in Chapter One. In *Ghana Must Go*, however, the present moment is repeatedly suspended. This is particularly evident in 'Gone', the first section of the book. The focal point here is primarily Kweku's perspective on his journey across borders. (Only a couple of times do we see the narrator turning to the character's wife, Fola, or their four children and, on occasion, the eccentric Mr Lamptey whom Kweku hires to build his house in Accra.) The opening sentence begins with the narrator declaring that Kweku 'dies barefoot on

a Sunday before sunrise', and the entire first part of the novel pivots on this unsettling statement (Selasi, 2013, 3). While the character's death is announced on the opening page, the narrator stretches the moment of dying to the final pages of the section not only by suggesting that he is about to take his last breath but showing how his mind keeps drifting to the past to run through the pain, shame and various other emotions that have shaped his experience of living and moving between Ghana and the US. Thus, while Brinkema (2014, 196-7) finds the language in texts with an anxious form to be drifting and slipping away from itself, in the first part of *Ghana Must Go* it is Kweku's thoughts that wander adrift anxiously.

In the following extract, Kweku is only just becoming aware that 'he's dying': 'He knows. But doesn't notice … Inconspicuous among his other thoughts … Still ten, fifteen minutes from awareness … At the moment he is on the threshold, transfixed by the garden' (Selasi, 2013, 21). Kweku's mind then begins to wander; what follows is a flashback to the time when he built his house and garden in Ghana; fifteen pages later, we return to the present as 'he shakes his head lightly to knock the thought loose' and 'snaps back' (ibid., 36). Making him 'short of breath', the character's mind frequently moves in this anxious way, interrupting and then returning to the present, repeating the movement over and over again, with no particular order or structure and in what often seems like an erratic, unpredictable and disorientating manner (ibid.). This makes it seem as if both character and text are stuck in motion, suspended in the minutes leading up to his death. As such, the novel helps set the tone for the character's story by giving a vivid impression of his state of mind. In what follows, I consider how the anxiety that comes to the surface in the novel's form is echoed by Kweku's own movements.

From Politics of Belonging to Emotional Turbulence

Kweku's story is driven by a self-conscious self-fashioning. This is evident when he drifts away in his thoughts early on in the novel and imagines that a 'silent-invisible' cameraman follows

him around, 'quietly filming his life' and arranging each scene by a role in which he has cast himself – as 'The Considerate Husband' or the 'Intelligent Parent,' for instance (Selasi, 2013, 3-4, 15). The cameraman adds to the script-like quality of the text whilst pointing to a similarity between Kweku and the highly self-conscious protagonists that populate Teju Cole's and Manyika's novels (see Chapter Two). In *Ghana Must Go*, the self-fashioning is a playful way to 'visualise' Kweku's aspirations, with the cameraman – who has followed Kweku since he left home as a young man in Ghana to pursue a degree and career in medicine in the US – capturing 'the life of the Man Who He Wishes to Be' (Selasi, 2013, 4).

Kweku's deliberate self-fashioning is also motivated by a wish to anchor his experience of belonging in the idea that he and Fola have found home in each other and in the family they have built together since relocating to the US. This, the character believes, has allowed him to disentangle himself from the stereotypes associated with stories like his own which tend to follow 'one basic storyline' and which, in his case, include painful memories of the 'loss of sister, later mother, absent father, scourge of colonialism, birth into poverty and all that': leaving Ghana where he grew up and building a new life with Fola in the US, he can 'somehow unhook … his little story from the larger ones, the stories of Country and of Poverty and of War that ha[ve] swallowed up the stories of people around him' and, eventually, locate himself primarily as a human being: to find 'a human story, a way to be Kweku' (Selasi, 2013, 28, 91). This approach to belonging suggests that, for Kweku, the concept hinges on family and extends 'beyond being "citizen"' (ibid.). *Ghana Must Go* thus offers an approach to belonging which diverges from what we saw earlier in *An African City*, a text whose focus is on characters that root their belonging in cities and nations.

In *Ghana Must Go*, Kweku's attachment to his loved ones might be instrumental in his understanding of belonging, but this does not mean that he is able to shut out bigger questions

related to the concept: even if he has succeeded in fashioning a meaningful idea of belonging for himself, it quickly turns out that this has been a fragile one that has been disrupted by broader politics surrounding the concept. This becomes clear as he looks back on his life in the minutes leading up to his death. Here, we learn that he was wrongfully dismissed from the hospital where he worked as a surgeon, an incident which turns out to have been a major disruption, resulting in a permanent distance between him and the family, both emotionally and physically.

After performing an unsuccessful surgery on an older patient, Kweku is fired by the hospital. The hospital board concludes that the operation was a case of malpractice, arguing that even if the patient had little chance of surviving and '[Kweku is] a phenomenal surgeon, [he] failed' (Selasi, 2013, 72). The incident – which, it is soon revealed, is an example of discrimination – is instigated by the patient's family who disapprove of Kweku because he is not from the US ('The Cabots looked at Kweku, then back at the president [of the hospital] … "But he's a—" "Very fine surgeon. The finest we have"' (ibid., 74)), as well as their personal physician who, equally sceptical, questions his ability to perform the surgery ('And where did you do your "training"? Air quotes' (ibid.)). A couple of pages later, it is confirmed that this initial distrust is rooted in highly problematic and discriminatory ideas of nationality, race and class and was the determining factor in the hospital's decision: the board terminated Kweku's contract in an attempt to please the Cabots, 'one of Boston's richest families, one of the hospital's biggest donors' (ibid., 77).

The character himself notes that the incident makes him feel as if he is up against a 'machine' (ibid., 69). When he first uses the word, it signifies strength and pride – 'feeling part of the machine … and stronger for it' (ibid.). But the meaning of the word is turned upside down when he is fired and realises how easy it is for broader politics of belonging to undermine

the sense that he 'belong[s] to it' (ibid.). Illustrating Ahmed's (2014) theory of emotion, this implies that the character is not only shaped by, but takes the shape of, the experience here – it has a restrictive effect on him, making him feel as if he has lost all sense of agency: 'The machine turned against him, charged, swallowed him whole, mashed him up, and spat him out of some spout in the back' (Selasi, 2013, 69). Overwhelmed by a whirlwind of different emotions, the character is thus affected by the incident in a profound way.

Kweku's emotions do not always reach the surface of the text, as seen when he hires a lawyer and is told (almost a year later if we follow the timeline of his narrative) that there is no point in pursuing a lawsuit because he cannot prove that the dismissal was discriminatory. The narrator notes here how the character feels 'nothing' in response: 'Not panic, as he'd suspected, given the money he'd spent. Just numbness. Almost pleasant' (Selasi, 2013, 70). But the experience also triggers emotion. Initially, he is moved by anger – an emotion which is motivated by a sense of justice and wanting to hold on to the idea that he still belongs to the hospital, and which is evident in his defiant behaviour, first when he answers the Cabots' ignorant questions in a sarcastic manner by making fun of Western stereotypes of Africa and, later, when he takes legal action against the hospital.

Yet, even as Kweku tries to hold on to his connection to the hospital, he is aware that this idea of belonging is flawed in a country like the US which is largely founded on a romantic (and deceptive) myth about European settlers. The narrator alludes to this when the lawyer finally advises Kweku to drop the case, and the character, staring at the trees outside the office, notes in passing that the trees, 'so at odds with the landscape', belong to the 'native Americans' – that 'this land is their land' (Selasi, 2013, 71). This suggests that the character – much like *Open City*'s Julius (see Chapter Two) – is perplexed by questions that so often are left unanswered when looking at the dominant narratives and ideas of belonging in US history. At

the same time, we get the impression that he has allowed himself to buy into the idea that he would be able to feel at home and belong to something bigger beyond the context of his family and, in the process, has ended up jeopardising the family's livelihood, with the dismissal eventually disrupting the kind of belonging he and Fola have worked for.

The latter moment of realisation is painful and Kweku's anger soon subsides as he is paralysed by the pain. To quote Ahmed (2014, 65), this pain is 'felt as … [an] unpleasant form of intensity', one which affects the entire body, how 'one sweats, one's heart races, one's whole body becomes a space of unpleasant intensity'. Simultaneously, the readers get to see how pain 'overwhelms us and pushes us back with the force of its negation' – a force which 'may sometimes involve taking flight, and other times may involve paralysis' (ibid.). In *Ghana Must Go*, Kweku responds thus:

> "Though a phenomenal surgeon, you failed…" But Kweku couldn't hear … He could only hear Fola – at twenty-three years old, with her law school acceptance letter framed on the wall, with a full ride to Georgetown and Olu in utero – say, "One dream's enough for the both of us" … Twenty years exactly from that to this moment, the whole thing erected on the foundation of a dream … His success for her sacrifice … So quite literally couldn't process the words that came next, if there *were* words that followed "you failed". (Selasi, 2013, 72-4; emphasis in original)

What is significant to note here is that the pain that paralyses Kweku when he receives the bad news is also accompanied by an underlying fear of letting down his family and that both of these emotions quickly turn into an anxious sensation of the past flashing before his eyes.

Unlike the other emotions, the anxiety manifests in multiple ways in the text: not just in the way that the past overwhelms the character, but in the language that captures his state of mind and in the text's erratic movements – in episodic paragraphs that make swift jumps in time from the day he is fired to the day he performs the surgery to the following months taken up by the work with his lawyer and, finally, to the day he is advised to give up the case:

> "You failed" … Then eleven months arguing that he hadn't, in court, hadn't failed, had been fired without cause. Which he had … Hours, bloody hours, trying to save the woman's life, with the president [of the hospital] there observing from the gallery upstairs … Then eleven months pretending … That nothing had changed … Now [his lawyer], too, was letting him go. (Selasi, 2013, 74-6)

And with the anxiety comes shame as Kweku concludes that he has indeed let down his family. Instead of facing them, he pretends that he still goes to work every day, as if 'nothing ha[s] changed' (ibid., 75). It is only when the lawyer drops the case that he realises he can no longer pretend. With a nervous laughter that is riddled with tension and anxiety, he observes that he 'had nowhere to go. He started to laugh. He had nowhere to go. He laughed harder. Had nowhere to *pretend* to be going … He was defeated. He was delirious' (Selasi, 2013, 76; emphasis in original). The shame that haunts Kweku here is an emotion which, to quote Ahmed (2014, 103-4) again, 'involv[es] an attempt to hide, a hiding that requires the subject to turn away from the other and towards itself'. This feeling is perpetuated when the character turns the experience around on himself and decides that he has never deserved Fola, especially now that he has 'wiped them [the family] out trying to beat the odds' (Selasi, 2013, 86). And it illustrates how, as Ahmed (2014, 103-4) further notes, the feeling of shame not only 'overwhelms and consumes the subject', but affects 'the subject's relation to itself': shame can be 'taken on by the subject as a sign of its own failure', 'impress[ing] upon the skin, as an intense feeling of the subject "being against itself"'. Kweku thus ends up blaming himself instead of the politics of belonging that have changed his life, showing how a '"bad feeling" is attributed to [himself], rather than to an object or other' (ibid.).

And unable to face the family, Kweku instead calls Fola to announce that he is leaving and does not come home for weeks, without explaining the circumstances, instead leaving her to think that he has abandoned them. When he is finally ready to see them, it is too late. Angry

and devastated, the family refuse to let him back into their lives. As time passes, Kweku, in turn, decides to move back to Ghana and eventually ends up marrying another woman.

Selasi thus demonstrates how broader politics of belonging happening outside the family lead to the unravelling of the life and home the Sai family have built together in the US. But she also employs the anxious language of the novel to visualise Kweku's memory of these politics in the moment leading up to his death. Capturing this anxious form in a way which is strikingly close to Brinkema's (2014, 184-5) idea of an infinite 'descent' where one keeps moving and never 'find[s] ground', the narrator notes how:

> The heartbreak he fled from has found him … The way it unravelled. As things fall from cliffs … The sheer speed of it. The mind-boggling speed of a death. (Or was it the other way around? Mind-boggling speed of a life?) … Who would have thought? That she'd flee, refuse to see him, or to let him see them … Weeks becoming months becoming seasons: unforgiven. An existence unraveled. Irreversible … A life that had taken them years to put together would take weeks to break apart? A whole life, a whole world, *a whole world* of their making … He laughs. He takes a step forward and stumbles, and falls. (Selasi, 2013, 86-9; emphasis in original)

For Kweku, the memories seem to imitate a fall as they take him through the rapid unravelling of the family. Years have passed since he was fired, but he remains paralysed, still unable to deal with the past and to shake the emotions off. Only after reliving the whole experience in the minutes leading up to his last breath is he able to confront the past; as Fola appears in front of him, he realises that 'one detail [is] worth remembering. That he found her in the end', and the narrator concludes:

> [Kweku] almost can't fathom it … Believing such endings unavailable to him … That he found her and loved her … A point to the story … And so to death. He lies here facedown with a smile on his face … Unconcerned … with beauty, with contrast, with loss … Silence. (Selasi, 2013, 91-3)

Kweku thus finally remembers his initial take on belonging, the one that made him feel at home when he met Fola all those years ago. Yet, what stands out to the readers here – as he finds her again in the end – is the underlying feeling of regret when he asks, '*Why did I ever leave you?*', thus recognising that he has never been able to move past the fact that he allowed himself to be swooped up in the broader politics of belonging that disrupted their life together (Selasi, 2013, 89).

So far, my focus has been on the way in which the politics of belonging that led to Kweku's wrongful dismissal affect both character and text in the minutes leading up to his death. The final part of the discussion below considers how the experience eventually affects the rest of the family by highlighting some key examples from 'Going' and 'Go', the last two sections of the novel. The common denominator for the characters in these examples is a haunting sensation of feeling disconnected from the family. Another similarity is the emotions that come to the surface – pain, fear, anxiety and shame – all of which continue to cluster around the novel's anxious form.

'That Warm-Yellow-Glowing-Inside-Ness of Home'

In 'Going' and 'Go', the narrator relies on the same narrative techniques that were mentioned above, frequently jumping between present and past (after and before Kweku's death). Here, however, the text navigates swiftly between Fola and the children to give access to their perspectives on Kweku's death. And whereas the slow pace in the first part of the novel helps illustrate how he is stuck in motion, it is as if the narrator speeds up in the last two parts to give the readers a different experience of anxiety as form. The events that happen in the present moment only play out over the course of a few days, but it is as if the narrator now moves too fast. This is particularly evident in 'Going' which is mainly structured around a string of phone calls between the rest of the family members (as they pass on the devastating news about

Kweku's death), but which keeps interrupting the present by jumping to the past. The text rushes ahead to work its way through the characters' emotions, and this is disorientating, on the one hand giving the impression that the narrator is anxiously trying to cover enough ground to show the complexity of the experience, on the other, making it seem as if the text itself imitates a fall. Again, this anxiety is instructive, leaving the readers with an impression of what the experience of non-belonging feels like for the Sai family as their life swiftly unravels – first when Kweku leaves them and, later, when they find out that he has passed away.

Taking the readers back to the morning when Kweku takes his last breath, 'Going' opens with an anxiety-ridden description of Fola waking up in Accra. Weighed down by a dream she has just had but does not quite remember, she is unable to shake a sudden fear in her body that something bad has happened to her children:

> Fola wakes breathless that Sunday at sunrise, hot, dreaming of drowning, a roaring like waves … Her "Kweku!" is silent, two bubbles in water … becoming a tide, turn, return up the middle, thighs, belly, heart, higher, then burst through her chest. The sob is so loud that it rouses her fully … *[But] leaving no trace whatsoever of the dream ... Only fear remains vaguely* … She touches her stomach … First the upper right (Olu) beneath her right breast, then the lower right (Taiwo) where she has the small scar, then the lower left (Kehinde) adjacent to Taiwo, then the upper left (Sadie), the baby, her heart. Stopping briefly at each to observe the sensation, the movement or stillness beneath one palm. (Selasi, 2013, 97-9; emphasis added)

This distinct sensation of fear is linked to that of losing family, of not having loved ones to belong to – a sensation which overwhelms Fola's body even if she does not yet know why it is suddenly present. The narrator further intimates that the fear is also a response to the experience of no longer having anyone close and that Fola is trying to hold on to a sense of familial belonging despite the growing gap between her and her children. At this point, she is no longer in contact with Kweku and knows that the family is scattered across borders, but desperately holds on to a connection to the children by imagining it as a strong, intuitive and embodied

attachment. The children have come of age, and she has just relocated to Ghana after inheriting a property from her surrogate father – a decision which seems impulsive ('just packed up and left' (ibid., 98)) but comes after they have all left home and she has witnessed the increasing distance between them.

Finally, the readers get the impression that Fola's idea of belonging is similar to Kweku's. To her, belonging is not only an intuitive connection, but also rooted in family. This perspective is disrupted, however, as seen in the extract above where Selasi complicates Fola's intuition by implying that there is an underlying disconnect between the character and her family, first when it turns out that the fear is actually about Kweku ('Her "Kweku!" is silent, two bubbles in water') and later when the character dismisses the feeling, thinking that it comes from the painful memory of losing her father. It is only when Fola receives the news of Kweku's death later in the day that she realises what her body has been trying to tell her.

In the following chapters, Fola calls her four children to deliver the bad news. Here, the text takes the readers through their individual reactions to their father's death to emphasise how the loss not only brings painful memories back from the past but reinforces their ambivalent feelings about belonging to the family. In the last part of my discussion, I wish to turn our attention to a couple of examples from the chapters about Olu and Taiwo – their stories are particularly pertinent here, illustrating how losing their father has led to a significant shift in their individual experiences and perspectives on what it means for them to belong to a family. They further demonstrate that the loss has triggered different emotions – pain and shame, for example. For both characters, these emotions materialise in the present moment when they hear about their father's death, but the readers quickly get to see how they are also rooted in memories of the past.

For Olu, the news of his father's death reverberates like a painful sound in his body, 'five quick sobs, drumbeats' that affect him immediately: '*your-fa-ther-is-dead*' (Selasi, 2013, 110; emphasis in original). The character feels paralysed at first as this message plays over and over in his mind, but he is soon overwhelmed by an unexpected shame. Note how the anxiety-ridden language that we saw earlier continues to dominate the text as this shame 'spread[s] like warmth' through his body:

> Thick with shame. Of all things. Not with sorrow or grief … Does an exceptional surgeon just die in a garden of cardiac arrest? … *How*, when his whole life he's sought to be like him, has forgiven the sins in the name of the gift, has admired the brilliance … *How* can he … tell [his wife] the father he's told of died this kind of death? (ibid., 113-4; emphasis in original)

Olu cannot think rationally about the cause of Kweku's death, finding it too unremarkable, and, in the process, finds himself weighed down by shame because he is thinking in this way about his father. When Olu's wife tries to comfort him and refers to herself as his family, he lashes out: 'I don't *want* to be a family … I don't believe in family' (ibid., 183; emphasis in original). This response comes as memories of the past begin to surface, reminding him of an older feeling of shame extending back to his childhood – a feeling which, it turns out, is rooted in an unsettling sensation of being different, of having a home that was different compared to other homes in the neighbourhood where he grew up. The narrator notes that, in the young Olu's mind, this difference manifested in his family's and other families' belongings – material objects that would put on display their family history of belonging:

> They didn't have photos, such as Olu found lining the stairs of other homes of his classmates in school, faded, framed and important, generations of *family* … He'd tour [his friends'] homes aching with longing, for *lineage*, for a sense of having descended from faces in frames. (Selasi, 2013, 251).

Realising that his father is gone, Olu remembers how he used to long not just for a familial sense of belonging but for this to be visible – to have a home that signalled where he was from and that the family belonged together which was not the case in the home that Kweku and Fola had given him and his siblings.

For Taiwo, one of the twins in the family, the news of Kweku's death brings back the memory of him leaving the family – a memory, which is compounded by another painful memory of Fola, in a desperate attempt to make ends meet shortly after Kweku has taken off, sending Taiwo and her twin Kehinde to Lagos to stay with her half-brother Femi who sexually abuses them. Both experiences are traumatic, triggering a mix of emotions – pain, shame, anger – and making Taiwo feel abandoned and alienated from the family. And the memories of this sensation trigger a third one of growing up in a family home that felt incomplete. Looking back on her life, the older Taiwo feels as if she never has had a chance to experience a familial belonging because something was always missing at home. The Sai family lacked a distinct feeling, an 'inside-ness' of home, which the character now sees whenever she is passing by houses in the street and looking through the windows: 'What bewitched her was all those warm windows. The glow … The families implied … She had never once felt what she saw in those windows' (ibid., 123). Hence, for both Olu and Taiwo, what makes a family is something that the Sais never achieved before 'things went pear-shaped' (ibid., 123-4). From Taiwo's perspective, it seemed as if they lived in a house, '*but not a home*', and even if this house had a 'sense … of an ongoing effort … of a thing being built: *A Successful Family*', it remained a dream deferred, something 'yet unreached' and lacking a distinct feeling: 'that warm-yellow-glowing-inside-ness of home' (ibid., 123-4; emphasis in original). And this sensation of never having had that familial sense of belonging makes Taiwo feel stuck in an anxious place of non-belonging: 'To drive and keep driving, to wherever, not here, not this house-not-a-home, but to

where? … Her family, all over, in shambles, down one. Where would she go? There is nowhere' (ibid., 141).

While 'Going' continues to explore the Sai children's response to Kweku's death, we see an attempt to resolve it in the third part. Knudsen and Rahbek (2017, 119-20) claim that this is reflected in Selasi's reversal of the chronological order in the tripartite structure: 'Go', the title of the book's last section operates as 'the stylistic pointer of Afropolitan agency', allowing 'the reader' to assume that the family members that are left behind 'are bound to move on again after [a] cathartic stay in Africa'. I would add here that the reversal is also a way for Selasi to disrupt the anxious form of the novel by working against the sense that the text and the characters have nowhere to go. As such, we see how the novel embodies Brinkema's ideas of anxious form on the one hand, leaving its characters to be stuck in motion and belonging to nowhere, and, on the other contradicts these sentiments by implying that they will eventually be able to cope with their loss and no longer find themselves in a stranded place.

The character development in 'Go' supports this latter reading, illustrating how the children arrange a trip to Ghana to attend Kweku's funeral with Fola. At first, the chapters are full of awkward moments, and the trip is riddled with the emotional tension that dominated the novel initially, indicating that the family members are still overwhelmed by the emotions that weighed them down in the past. But we also see a glimpse of hope in other moments which show how the characters are beginning to (re)connect with one another and share the unresolved feelings that are tied to the family's experience of non-belonging. The text thus makes it seem as if a familial belonging might be possible after all. This is evident in one example when Taiwo talks to Fola for the first time about the abuse that she and her brother suffered in Lagos. Sharing this incredibly painful experience ends up being a cathartic moment for Taiwo where she allows herself to feel close to her mother for the first time since the abuse. And when she breaks down,

'Fola lurches forward, catching [her] as she buckles', a 'movement [which] is instinctive' and 'puts their skin in contact for the first time in many years' (Selasi, 2013, 289-90). Full of 'shame and sorrow', aware that 'someone has damaged her children irreparably', Fola knows that she 'unable to fix it' and so is 'able only to hold' her daughter (ibid., 290-1). However, this type of emotional support is what Taiwo needs as she, in turn, 'grab[s] her fiercely and grip[s] her wrist. "Don't let me go yet, please don't let me go"' (ibid., 292).

With this and other cathartic moments, *Ghana Must Go* thus alludes to a movement forward, showing not only the Sai family's 'hurts', but the 'faint hopes drifting softly behind them' of reconnecting as a family and finding a way that can help them move on together (ibid., 301). This movement is substantiated as we reach the last pages of the novel and Fola imagines having a conversation with Kweku after receiving a Ghana Must Go bag with some of his belongings. She concludes that the important thing is no longer the pain they have inflicted upon each other nor the politics of belonging that made their life unravel, but rather that the family is back together – an unexpected but significant outcome of Kweku's death: 'They're here … I got what I wanted. You sent them all home' (ibid., 317). In this way, *Ghana Must Go* gestures beyond the last page and towards the future – a future which seems to come with a new possibility for belonging for the characters as they begin to find a sense of belonging in each other.

Feeling Out of Place in *When We Speak of Nothing*: Another Afropolitan Story of Non-Belonging?

Popoola's 2017 debut novel *When We Speak of Nothing* is a split narrative which follows the journey of seventeen-year-old Karl and his best friend Abu. Focusing on Karl's experience of non-belonging, this section situates the novel in the discussion of Afropolitanism even if it is, perhaps, not a typical Afropolitan text. This is partly explained by the fact that Karl's

background diverges from the upwardly mobile segment of people otherwise associated with the Afropolitan figure: Karl is a British-Nigerian character who lives in a small council flat in London with his mother Rebecca and whose connection to the African continent (in the beginning of the novel, at least) is barely present because his father and Nigeria, his father's home country, have been absent figures in his life.

When We Speak of Nothing is also a 'busy' novel with multiple narratorial components. The text opens with a short prologue by Esu Elegbara, the narratorial voice of Karl's and Abu's stories who is created in the image of Esu, the Yoruba deity of 'crossroads' and, to quote Julian Wacker (2019, 108), the overall 'frame of reference' for the novel's 'queering [of] heteronormative, binary, and linear understandings of belonging, desire, space-time, and the novelistic form'. Following Esu's prologue, we then turn to Karl's and Abu's storylines, the main body of the text in which the narrator's voice mediates and oscillates between the individual perspectives and feelings of each character. This part is frequently interrupted by fictional dictionary entries, and each chapter is preceded by a short epigraph. Several of these components (including Abu's storyline which mainly revolves around the council estate where he lives with his family, as well as his experiences with racism in the time leading up to the 2011 London Riots) are indicative of how Popoola draws on African folklore, British estate fiction and other generic traditions (see Wacker, 2019) and imply that the novel cannot be easily allotted to any single generic or conceptual framework.

In this section, I nevertheless suggest that we consider the novel as an Afropolitan text, arguing that Karl's story lends itself to a compelling comparison with *An African City* and *Ghana Must Go*, illustrating in a similar way how the experience of non-belonging can lead to emotional conflict. We shall see that Karl struggles emotionally with his attachment to other people. As the novel unfolds, the narrator gradually reveals that Karl is transgender and that he

– as a result – feels that he lacks a deeper connection with both family and friends, and that he is often reminded in social interaction with his peers that the world does not accept him because of his gender identity. Later in the novel, after finding out that his father lives in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, he embarks on a search for this absent figure, convinced that meeting him will help him resolve the feeling of being out of place. During this journey, we see a shift in the character's perspective on belonging as he slowly begins to articulate what it has been like for him to feel out of place, first in London and later in Port Harcourt. Helping him develop new connections and redefine old attachments on his own terms towards the end of the novel, this shift is instrumental because it leaves him with a hope that he will eventually come to experience belonging in a way that makes sense to him.

The overall trajectory of Karl's movements indicates that Popoola's novel sheds light on the experience of life as transgender, as noted by both scholars and reviewers (Alimi, 2019, Edoro, 2017, Tsipane, 2018, Wacker, 2019), but also that it is not a typical portrayal. While there is a tendency in literature among writers (and critics) to allow 'the "transgender question"' to exist in fiction 'as a philosophical conundrum rather than a lived reality', according to Rachel Carroll (2018, 20, 15), *When We Speak of Nothing* is more interested in how Karl's gender identity forms part of his everyday life and, more specifically, in his lived experience of non-belonging.

Karl's story further has its own way of portraying anxiety by reflecting this emotion in the absences (one of the more 'ephemeral' examples of anxious form, according to Brinkema (2014, 37)) that define his existence, as well as in his response to them: an emotionally absent mother, a lost father and a haunting sense that something is missing in his connection to other people. These absent 'figures' add to the character's lived experience of non-belonging, leaving him with an inarticulable feeling of being out of place – a feeling which is not only painful and

overwhelming but affects how he interacts with the world around him. Finally, we shall see that the novel diverges in the way that it allows the emotions to feed into the other narratorial elements of the novel: even if Karl's feelings are inarticulable to himself, the text finds other ways to express them to the readers – for instance in the fictional dictionary entries which, to quote Wacker (2019, 114), not only 'conjour the common lexical definition of a word', but also tend to 'rewrite [them] according to Karl's perspective or feelings'. In this way, we see how the novel's narratorial elements, which are not part of the character's story as such, come to influence our understanding of his (inarticulable) feelings. Simultaneously, I claim that the different narratorial layers, as well as the generic traditions, themes and storylines, make for a fragmented, confusing and disorientating text which points in various directions and makes the readers uncertain of where it belongs, thereby adding to the anxious form of Karl's story.

Absent Figures and Inarticulable Feelings

In the opening chapters of the novel, the readers get to see how Karl's experience of non-belonging is not nationally inflected or centred on a particular location like it is for the characters in *An African City*. Nor does it pivot on familial dysfunction like *Ghana Must Go* – at least not in the same way. Instead, the narrator implies that the experience is defined by a feeling of being out of place, one which is largely triggered by the complexities and ambiguities surrounding his filial and affiliative relationships with different people from his life in London. Popoola thus brings together filiation and affiliation, two ideas which feature in her earlier work. In the novella *this is not about sadness* (2010) and the play *Also by Mail* (2013), the writer works with the two terms, but mainly on their own. Exploring the filial ties that connect a family, *Also by Mail* follows two Nigerian-German siblings who embark on a journey to Nigeria to reconnect with family in the wake of their father's death. By contrast, *this is not about sadness* depicts three women from different walks of life and the affiliative community

they have built in London – a small community which, as Jamele Watkins (2019, 261-2) explains, is 'based on a relational affinity instead of a familial one'.

The distinction that is made here recalls Edward Said's (1991) definition of the two terms as different types of relationships. Filiation denotes relations that are 'held together by natural bonds', and affiliation hinges on 'nonbiological social and cultural forms' (ibid., 20, 23). Whereas the former signals the ties that exist between family members, the latter refers to those connections that materialise outside a familial framework and which take different forms such as a shared 'culture', 'a set of beliefs', or 'a world-vision' (ibid., 19-20). What is key here is the struggle in cases where filial relationships are missing: experiencing a 'pressure to produce new and different ways of conceiving human relationships' in such instances, people often turn to affiliation to replace the filial bonds that are not present in their lives, for instance (ibid., 17).

In *When We Speak of Nothing*, Karl's relationships – most of which are non-familial and put in place to compensate for the absence of his father and, to some extent, his mother, Rebecca, who is frequently in hospital – fit Said's description of affiliative relationships. Apart from his close friend Abu, Karl relies on support from Abu's parents who have agreed to act as kinship carers and Godfrey, a social worker who has been assigned special guardianship. What is clear in the opening chapters is that for Karl – who comes across as a character that is certain of his gender transitioning and feels at home in his body – the relations appear to lack something important, leaving him with a sense that something is missing. They imitate a hollow idea of family, an 'alternative-style family' where people stick around not because of a deeper connection or relational affinity, but because they feel obligated to look after him, having 'tied [themselves] in by law' to make 'a group effort to get this thing safely to the other side: Karl's growing up' (Popoola, 2017, 30, 26). From Karl's perspective, this means that even if people

'were having [his] back, in some real, big-time way … *it wasn't enough*' (ibid., 22; emphasis added). We shall see below how this haunting sensation works on a sensory and emotional level for the character, but it is important to note the initial failure to elaborate on it here: the phrase 'it wasn't enough', which is not only vague but elusive, implies that even if Karl registers that something is missing in the relationships, he is not able to articulate what it is and how it makes him feel.

This response resonates with the general sentiments of 'All the Feels', one of Popoola's non-fiction texts published in an essay collection titled *Brave New Words*. Here the author writes that:

> Affects are bodily sensations, impressions on and in the body … They denote a being in the moment that is actively defined by what the body experiences … *We are not entirely aware (conscious) of them, or not able to name in that instant.* They are received on a sensory level and we draw on all that is available to us to give them meaning and thereby place them accordingly. *It is a sensing before the cognitive, a happening, perhaps unnoticed, perhaps uncategorised, perhaps unspoken*. (Popoola, 2019, 203; emphasis added)

Popoola elaborates on this definition by quoting Deborah Gould (2010, 26) who argues that the sensation that a feeling can seem 'inarticulate and inarticulable' is a common feature of affects. In Gould's view,

> We often experience our feelings as opaque to ourselves, as something that we do not quite have language for, something that we cannot fully grasp or express but is nevertheless in play, generated through interaction with the world, and affecting our embodied beings and subsequent actions. (ibid.)

A similar idea of an 'inarticulable' sensation is at work in Karl's story, one which the character is not able to fully articulate – other than the fact that it leaves him with the impression that things should be different. Although it is not unusual to experience feelings as opaque to

oneself, it is important to note the underlying anxiety in this experience of not being able to put into words what he is feeling. Significantly, it also brings to mind Brinkema's (2014, 197) idea of the anxiety-ridden language as one which 'continually slips away from itself'. Whatever it is that is missing in his life, it is something that he does not quite have language for.

While the character himself cannot fully express the anxious sensation that something is missing, the readers still get an idea of what this feels like for him by witnessing the complex nature of his relationships and the absent figures that feature in his life. Karl's mother is frequently in and out of hospital because she suffers from Multiple Sclerosis. And when she is present, she is usually in too much pain to give him attention. This means that he is often on his own and that it is difficult for the two characters to stay close. Although perhaps unwillingly, the mother complicates the relationship further by refusing to talk about the past, thereby leaving Karl alone to ponder the reasons for his father's absence: 'I thought I had no dad. That mum didn't know him or he was such an arsehole that she couldn't even talk about him' (Popoola, 2017, 27). Another example is the relationship with Abu and his parents who have become a kind of surrogate family to Karl, offering a contrast to life at home, as well as the streets where he frequently finds himself marginalised by his peers because of his transgender identity. The narrator notes that Abu's parents 'accepted Karl as the brother from another mother' and that the friendship with Abu seems equally familial – they feel and look 'like twins', as if their friendship has 'rubbed on to their bodies, accepting that they were a pair, in tandem. Teamwork' (ibid., 7).

At the same time, however, the narrator implies that the two characters are different, distinct in their physical features but also in their personality. Abu is impulsive, loud and outspoken whereas Karl is quiet, sensitive and alert, often 'just taking in scenes, waiting them out' (ibid., 9). Another difference is seen in the characters' approach to their appearance. Abu

is frequently irritated with the amount of time that is dedicated to his friend's self-fashioning, with Karl 'doing his usual, *must look pretty* thing … Ironed denim wasn't enough. It all had to be prepped properly and colour-coded until it was just so' (ibid., 8; emphasis in original). While Karl is simply wasting time, according to Abu, the character himself has a different perspective: reiterating the idea of style we encountered in Chapter Two, *When We Speak of Nothing* implies that self-fashioning is a source of agency and part of a process of figuring out how to belong in his own way, helping him fit in and feel comfortable in his own skin by reflecting his gender identity on his terms. Although Abu accepts Karl as he is and embraces his difference, we see how this close attention to detail in the making of style has repercussions in his social interaction with their peers from college who, in an 'affront against his style', take it as an invitation to beat him up (ibid.). In their view, belonging is not predicated on an acceptance of difference, but rather on an expectation of sameness and predetermined ideas of gender and fashion.

The readers do not have access to Karl's thoughts to show how this interaction affects him. Instead, we witness his emotions as they register in his body language and facial expression in an evocative illustration of how emotion(s) 'transforms or "works on" the surfaces of bodies' (Ahmed, 2014, 85). While Abu is defiant and angry, 'talking away, cursing and shouting', as he stands his ground and fights back, the readers see how Karl is moved by emotion in the opposite way:

> Karl didn't say a word; no sound left his lips. His upper body folded over as much as it could … No crying or cursing or anything … Preventing anything from entering his pretty head, where the real feelings are. But still it reflects, the way his eyes close. (Popoola, 2017, 9)

The extract above implies that the character deliberately tries to distance himself from the experience in an act of self-preservation: turning his body away from his oppressors and

resorting to silence is his way of protecting himself both physically and emotionally. At the same time, the narrator indicates that the (lack of) response is a sign of his body moving in a particular way, that the experience triggers a pain which, in turn, paralyses him.

The incident suggests that Karl's feelings of being out of place mainly have to do with the hostility that is directed at his gender identity. The same feelings surface in his relationships with people who are close to him and support his gender transition, however. Here we also see that he is overwhelmed – in this instance, by an urge to run. In this part of his life, running seems to be the default reaction to the complexities and ambiguities surrounding the relationships, especially when they are reduced to the sense of obligation and restriction mentioned earlier: 'No reason whatsoever other than [he] liked to run. At night away. Not to disappear, just to run. And not to call any-bloody-fucking-one. Not Godfrey, not Rebecca' (ibid., 20). Sometimes running is a response to the pain that comes from witnessing his mother's struggle and not having her around:

> Running was running and the point was still the same: to be away. Because his mum, Rebecca, wasn't there, couldn't be there … [And so] he ran and ran until the cold air almost cut into his face. Fingers throbbing, temples wanting to burst. His breath was broken and fast and spitting air with all that other stuff that was tight inside his stomach. Inside. Outside. If there were better ways to handle the difference, he would. We all bloody would. (ibid., 22-3)

To some extent, this echoes what we saw earlier in *Ghana Must Go*; Karl's urge to run gives another impression of a character who just wants to 'go' but does not get anywhere – in the end, he is still stuck in motion. Another convergence with *Ghana Must Go* is seen in the way that the language itself is shaped by an anxious form that, once again, gives a vivid rendition of a character's emotions. In the extract quoted above, this is evident in how the text moves erratically from one sentence fragment to the next. Running is thus another example of how

emotions work in Afropolitan texts – as an embodied experience, as movement and in the form of the text itself. In the next part of the discussion, I consider how these patterns are repeated when Karl travels to Nigeria to find his absent father.

Searching for a Lost Father

When Karl comes across a letter addressed to his mother in the third chapter of the novel, he learns not only that his father lives in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, but that Tunde, his father's brother, has tried to convince her for years to let them get to know one another. Finding out about his father in this way is an upsetting experience that has an immediate effect on his body: 'Inside Karl, things sank. The heart, the stomach, the lung, all fell, crashing hard, pushing out the hallow bit of air that had survived' (ibid., 25). This initial response is followed by an impulse to leave for Nigeria right away: 'I want to go' (ibid.). To some extent, this urge is compounded by a need to escape the ambiguities and complexities that dominate his life in London, but it is also driven by something else: a desire to form a connection with someone whose absence has had a big effect on his existence.

Finding the letter prompts Karl to convince Godfrey and Tunde, his uncle, to help him plan a trip to Port Harcourt without telling his mother. What is significant here is that Karl is gradually able to articulate the experience of non-belonging in this process, and that it is becoming clearer to him how this experience is tied not just to a sensation of being out of place but a desire to belong, thereby reiterating other Afropolitan texts: '"I just need to do it my way. Something for me. Just me". Calm again and not looking at anyone, face in high-alert mode. So devastating. The longing. Belonging' (ibid., 42). While this may be symptomatic of a new confidence in reading his own feelings, it is interesting to note that the text continues to stumble from one interrupted, stripped-down sentence to another as if to say that he is still affected emotionally. Another way of reading the full stops in the latter part of the quote is to say that

they signal a deliberate pause as if to invite us to dwell not only on the significance of each word but the connection between them – devastating; longing; belonging. The emphasis on belonging *and* longing ties in with what we have seen so far in this thesis and indicates that both can form part of the experience of belonging, while the first word, devastating, speaks to the overall sentiments of non-belonging expressed throughout this chapter.

The figure of Karl's absent father is reminiscent of the (lost) father featuring in the Sai children's lives in *Ghana Must Go*, but he is also evocative of a recurring trope in travel narratives from the late twentieth and twenty-first century by authors such as Noo Saro-Wiwa and Adewale Maja-Pearce. Their narratives have, as Rebecca Jones (2019, 219) notes in a study of Nigerian travel writing, 'at their heart a lost father, through whom the author or narrator's often ambivalent feelings about their fatherland, Nigeria, are refracted'. Karl's ambivalence towards his absent father is likewise extended to Nigeria on his journey abroad. The character is eager to meet him, hoping it will lead to a new relationship; yet, it is strange and surreal to meet someone who has found out about his existence only recently. And Karl projects these conflicting feelings onto the first encounter with the fatherland, a place which seems strange and unfamiliar, but also exciting: 'Although he was warm and muggy and with luggage, he felt light, floaty. All romantic, blurry-eyed … He was *here*' (Popoola, 2017, 56-7; emphasis in original). This ambivalence is exacerbated when he arrives at the airport in Port Harcourt and realises that he is an outsider. Self-conscious of the physical markers of his non-belonging, he is overwhelmed by an anxiety that manifests as 'dizziness' (ibid., 58). The narrator observes how:

> It was hard enough to stay level with this much newness … He felt lost. And scared. How to fit in here? How to even try? … The foreigners from the plane were lining up with Karl. It was easy to spot the lot of them, either white or light-skinned, like Karl,

> almost as if they were carrying signs: *not really from here*. (ibid., 58; emphasis in original)

To some extent, I would suggest that the anxiety that unfolds in the passage above is reminiscent of the airport scene in *An African City*, but it also echoes the moments of return in the contemporary travel narratives discussed in Jones's book, many of which illustrate how their writers' and characters' presence is questioned by authorities because of what they look like.

However, Popoola adds another layer of complexity to the experience of moving across borders here, implying that Karl's gender identity could potentially become a serious issue in Nigeria, a country which is often seen as conservative and intolerant in discourses on gender and sexuality and where many politicians – along with '98% of the population', according to public surveys conducted in the 2000s – do not believe in same-relationships, for instance (Green-Simms, 2016). For Karl, the anxiety thus comes from a place of 'bare panic' about meeting 'an overzealous immigration officer, aka gender police' (Popoola, 2017, 58). This reaction seems justified when four immigration officers congregate at passport control to scrutinise his personal style because it, in their view, does not match the biological sex stated in his passport. Yet, after he has endured some excruciating minutes of watching the officers deliberate, the men eventually decide that the contradiction between his physical appearance and biological sex is not their problem but his family's.

Still, at this point, Karl is already deeply affected, with the narrator noting how the character, overwhelmed by the sense of non-belonging the incident brings with it, 'made himself scarce, pulled himself away from his skin, disappearing inside his bloodstream so that nothing on the outside could touch him' (Popoola, 2017, 59-60). Karl tries to stay calm, but he is scared that the incident will lead to a disclosure of his transgender identity and so the situation

quickly becomes unbearable as fear begins to take over his body and an anxious sensation of being stuck in time weighs him down:

> The puddle of sweat on his lower back was descending, trickling between his cheeks into his underwear … Time was now freezing over, sucking out all movement until everything became unreal, dangerously flat, a wall that would collapse and bury you in its debris. (ibid.)

Once Karl is out of the airport, and has recovered from his encounter with the immigration officers, he is met with another sensation of non-belonging as he realises that the word 'father' – even at this stage – feels 'unfamiliar, almost sideways in his mouth' (and, ironically, 'even more foreign than his first experience of the country'), and, soon after, mistakes someone else for his father at the airport, only to be told that he has gone missing (ibid.). This moment of non-belonging which stands in close proximity to the first one makes everything around Karl go 'all flatline, tone not dropping out but going on and on and on … There are gaps and there are cliffs. There are sudden changes to the ground, whether for real or in your panic' (ibid., 76-7). And these sentiments are reiterated in one of the fictional dictionary entries:

> fear /fɪə/
> noun
> 1. Emotion alerting you: there might be a threat of danger, pain, or harm here.
> Verb
> 1. Feeling that something that is to come, either by or through someone or an action, is likely to be dangerous, painful, or harmful. (ibid., 61-2)

Implying that in order to understand the experience at the airport, we need to pay attention to how he is affected by it, the epigraphs place a similar emphasis on affect. They indicate, for example, that the father's (continued) absence feels like a distinct and painful presence in Karl's life which exacerbates his experience of being out of place: 'Missing is still a presence'; 'What is being, anyway, if not the way we are measuring the absence?' (ibid., 43, 72). A final point to

make note of here is that it takes another 75 pages or so (and several weeks, if we follow the story's timeline) for the father to turn up. This helps to substantiate the initial impression that the protagonist is stuck in motion: his search for a new belonging is suspended as he waits for one of the key figures in his life to make an entrance.

At first, as Karl waits around for his father in Port Harcourt, time continues to shift in ways which reveal that he is still anxious – 'another drop in time. A lapse, a spin, a funny angle' (ibid., 75). And he deliberately tries to keep his gender transition hidden, scared of what will happen if people find out. We see a gradual shift here, however, as he meets new people and begins to form new relationships and time suddenly 'speed[s] up, like no man's business' (ibid., 106). And as he grows more intimate with some of the people he meets (including Janoma with whom he falls in love), he finds to his surprise that they accept him for who he is, including his gender transition. Popoola thus shows that Karl gets to experience what it is like to be in a place without the baggage that comes with his life in London – a place where he can form connections without feeling weighed down by how other people perceive his transition. At the same time, the readers get to see how the people he connects with form a contrast to stereotypes of Nigeria as a place of intolerance. The experience is liberating and makes the character realise that he wants to belong, to 'be here, just be here, you get me. No shit from the wannabes [in London], no past. Just now' (ibid., 118). For 'the first time in [his] life', Karl finds himself somewhere where he can 'walk around and just be. No hassle, no questions. No pity or sympathy or harassment or being beaten up' (ibid., 142).

This opportunity to connect with the world around him in a new way is challenged when the father finally shows up and refuses to acknowledge Karl because he is transgender. Note how this longer extract foregrounds the character's emotional response to this rejection:

> No fucking warmth as far as Karl was concerned, but all getting in your business … "Carla…" … "This is not what I've been expecting". Things were funny like that. *And this is not when I was expecting you* … "Being trans… I always knew. As long as I can remember. Mum always let me be myself" … "Who told you to dress as a boy? What is this?" … "I cannot accept your behaviour" … No one had talked about behaviour. Karl had spoken about *being*. Being himself … That things weren't all that clear-cut or obvious. Not even what constituted a man or a woman … "I think it's best for you to return to London straight away". Karl's mouth stayed open, words stuck inside … There had been no embrace. Their skin had not touched each other's in any way. He left the house, door ajar, stepped out, into the air. There was no bloody relief. (ibid., 131-7; emphasis in original)

While the defiant tone in the language here suggests that the anxiety, panic and fear that have haunted Karl so far now give way to anger, he quickly falls back into an anxious sensation as the initial hope of a new and meaningful connection crumbles and 'the air hung lazy and heavy, closing in on [his] throat' (ibid., 137). The text thus illustrates how the (absent) father once again leaves him feeling stuck with a sensation of non-belonging; even if he finally gets a chance to experience a new way to belong, this is interrupted by his father.

A New Perspective on Belonging

While the discussion above demonstrates how the process of meeting the father confirms that he is out of place, I want to suggest here, by way of conclusion, that we see a shift in his perspective on belonging – both in the extract above and in his new relationships – and that they indicate that he has arrived at a new awareness of belonging and its complexities. The initial evidence of this is seen in the conversation between Karl and his father in which he notes that belonging is as much about connecting with other people as it is about *being*. This implies that the longing he experienced before he travelled to Nigeria is no longer just about meeting his father but about longing for a relationship that allows him to *be himself* on his own terms. As the conversation progresses, the character slowly begins to grasp not only that his and his father's ideas and values (of gender, in this case) clash, but that it is essentially the father's

refusal to accept their differences that stands in the way of a meaningful connection. This, in turn, leaves him with another perspective on belonging: to him, the concept is a question of acceptance and recognition of his difference, but it is also about where and how he positions himself in relation to other people: as one epigraph reads, 'only belonging defies what's been given but responds: how and where one places oneself' (Popoola, 2017, 139).

Even if it is still difficult for Karl to articulate this new awareness and the feelings that come with it (as intimated later in sentences such as 'how to say those things that sound better felt' and 'how to say everything and find the right words, the right sentiments' (ibid., 206)), the shift becomes more pronounced when he returns to London and is able to shed new light on the nature of his and his mother's relationship as well as those with other people who are close to him. In a conversation with Rebecca, he notes how:

> There was nowhere to breathe here for me. Yes, all of you are very understanding … But where am I? … *With all of you I am the problem that needs to be taken care of, that needs to be protected. On the streets, I am the freak. I was not here. I didn't exist* … I run so I don't have to scream, so I don't say things that will upset anyone. So I don't say: I want to know. What it's like to be me … *All I need is to know that you are with me. That I can trust you. That I can talk to you and get an answer when I need to* … [In Nigeria] *I was being myself. I wasn't a problem … Other people saw me for who I was, not how hard I had fought to get there.* (ibid., 239-40; emphasis added)

This extensive reflection on the dynamics of the relationships is a contrast to the inarticulable feelings which, as we saw earlier, dominated the first part of the book. We should also note here how Karl's feelings are no longer displaced in the text. Instead, it is now the character himself who offers a comprehensive reading of the experience of non-belonging and the emotional turmoil that comes with it.

Much like *An African City* and *Ghana Must Go*, *When We Speak of Nothing* thus gestures towards the future and a new beginning on his own terms – in a way which reiterates Probyn's idea of a new beginning for belonging:

> To begin again … If the primary sense of beginning is the time and place at which anything begins, nothing says that those things and places are fixed, no one orders us to start again from where we began before, and no one can say where or when the next beginning will occur, or where it may lead. (Probyn, 1996, 122)

As such, Popoola implies that the future – beyond the scope of the novel – holds the possibility of a future with a new beginning, one which seems to come with new possibilities and configurations of belonging for the character as he begins to reassemble his connection to his loved ones at home in London and continues to explore other relations elsewhere.

Chapter Conclusion

An African City, *Ghana Must Go* and *When We Speak of Nothing* give insight into the lived experience of (non-)belonging by making room for the various feelings that haunt their characters as they move and live across borders. In the three texts, this is often portrayed as a painful experience which leaves the characters with a haunting sensation of being stuck in an anxious place of non-belonging. The three texts highlight this experience by speaking to emotion in various ways – as movement, embodiment and textual form, in particular. The texts illustrate how the experience of non-belonging can trigger various emotions – anxiety, pain, shame, anger and fear – and these emotions affect and move the characters in different ways. At the same time, we have seen examples of how these emotions are felt and registered on the body and, lastly, how they feed into and manifest in textual form, with the authors giving their

texts a distinct and anxious form that leaves us – the readers and viewers – with a haunting sensation of what it is like to be stuck in motion and belonging to nowhere.

While this encourages us to recognise the complexities, uncertainties and ambiguities which underpin Afropolitanism's configuration of belonging in the early-twenty-first century, the three texts gesture towards new possibilities for their characters, indicating that even if the concept is still subject to ongoing negotiation and is frequently undercut by the social structures and broader politics that inform their lives, the meaning of belonging is also flexible and open to change.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has offered a comprehensive discussion of a diverse selection of texts from Ghana, Nigeria and their diasporas – six novels, a web series, two blogs and a live concert series – situating each text within the wider cultural landscape of Afropolitanism. The focus throughout the study has been on belonging and how the term is conceptualised in Afropolitan cultural production. I have suggested that the texts and their representations of belonging can be read as extensions of Taiye Selasi's and Achille Mbembe's essays and the thematic trajectories that have materialised in the debates on Afropolitanism since the publication of these two 'founding' texts. The ten examples discussed in this thesis echo many of the preliminary ideas found in their essays, highlighting the complex nature of belonging for individuals who move and live across borders in Africa and the diaspora and questioning essentialist readings of the concept. At the same time, the texts encourage their readers and viewers, as Peter Geschiere (2009, 32) urges us to do, 'to take the word *belonging* itself more seriously' by considering how various ideas related to the concept 'so strongly assert themselves in quite different recent configurations'. According to Geschiere (2009, 31-2), 'one of [belonging's] advantages over identity is that it is at least in the *-ing* form', unlike the latter which often reveals 'an unfortunate tendency to fix what is in constant flux'. Afropolitan texts operate with a similar conception, showing how belonging is subject to ongoing definition and negotiation.

Crucially, the study has also identified new ways of talking about belonging in Afropolitan texts. Making room for various modes of representation which communicate in their own ways not only what it means but *feels* like to belong, the method of reading across different kinds of text has been an innovative way to bring forth the affective range of the

concept. The analyses of a broad selection of contemporary African diaspora fiction – *Americanah*, *Ghana Must Go*, *Open City*, *On Black Sisters' Street*, *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun* and *When We Speak of Nothing* – have provided important insight into how questions of belonging shape the (Afropolitan) characters' existence and the extent to which these questions are influenced by wider structures and politics of belonging, as well as how they affect their inner lives. Although the web series *An African City* can give us a similar perspective, for instance through dialogue and narrative voiceover, it has also left us with visual images of what it is like to be stuck in motion, haunted by the paralysing sensation of non-belonging. Conversely, the blogs *MsAfropolitan* and *This Afropolitan Life* have given us, as their readers, a unique opportunity to get a glimpse into their authors' lived experiences of belonging and a platform from which we can trace their personal ideas of the concept as these ideas develop over time; with their serial format, as well as their flexible and inclusive setup, the blogs demonstrate that belonging can be given new meaning in the digital realm, one which forms a contrast to the authors' offline experiences of (non-)belonging. Finally, my reading of the live concert series Afropolitan Vibes illustrates how some cultural producers have turned to live music and performance and, in the process of using an audio-visual and live format, have implemented and disseminated exciting new perspectives on belonging in the context of Afropolitanism, for example by showing what belonging might look like as an embodied and 'in-the-moment' experience. Examining these various examples of Afropolitan cultural production and the different ideas and kinds of belonging they generate marks this study's contribution to the current scholarship on Afropolitanism in which focus tends to be almost exclusively on literary texts and the novel, in particular.

To consider in more detail what this study of Afropolitan texts has told us about belonging, I wish to conclude by taking a brief look at Caroline Levine's *Forms: Whole,*

Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network (2015). Levine's book is intriguing for how it detaches 'form' from its aesthetic connotations in literary studies and asks scholars of literature to connect the word to political, social and historical context in their textual readings. Form, she argues, exists outside literary texts: the word refers to all 'arrangements', 'shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference' that are seen in literature but also in the wider social landscape (ibid., 19, 2). What all forms have in common – novels, TV series and other literary and aesthetic forms, as well as social forms such as gender and class – is that they 'organize things': 'it is the work of form to make order', for instance by implementing hierarchies or networks (ibid., 9, 2). Levine further contends that all forms have affordances. That is, they all come with 'potential uses or actions', and any form, literary or social, 'afford[s]' its own 'particular constraints and possibilities' (ibid., 6). It is instructive to consider the affordances of forms because they, to quote Levine (2015, 10), 'point to what all forms are capable of', that is, 'the range of uses each could be put to, even if no one has yet taken advantage of those possibilities', but 'also to their limits, the restrictions intrinsic to particular materials and organizing principles'. And although forms are interesting to study on their own, what is equally compelling to examine is what happens when they meet – say, when social forms such as gender and class intersect, but also when social and literary forms collide. The outcome, Levine notes (2015, 22), is often unpredictable, and 'the ways in which literary and social forms come into contact and affect one another' means that we cannot 'presum[e] that one is the ground or cause of the other'.

Levine's inclusive reading of form is compelling, providing a new framework for understanding how social constructs are imagined and examined in literature, and, in many ways, puts into a theoretical perspective what this thesis has done – namely, to see belonging as a social form that comes with many affordances. The Afropolitan texts that have been

discussed throughout the study illustrate that the meaning that is attributed to belonging is likely to change over time and that being affiliated with a nation-state is only one of the options that lie latent in this social form. In the chapters above, we have come across other possibilities for belonging – for example, the familial attachment and connection to a family home that underpin *Ghana Must Go* (Chapter Three) but also the ones characters articulate in their relationships with other people outside the filial frameworks that structure their lives, as seen in the small, yet affective and supportive communities that appear between the female characters in *On Black Sisters' Street* (Chapter One) and the protagonist and his closest family and friends in *When We Speak of Nothing* (Chapter Three).

In the concert series Afropolitan Vibes and written texts such as *Open City* and *This Afropolitan Life* (Chapter Two), we have seen instances where material and cultural objects come to represent particular ideas of belonging and that style and the process of (self-)fashioning can be imbued with multiple connections. Here, my readings demonstrate that the making of a syncretic style can make room for the possibility for a multi-local belonging and that the things we own and surround ourselves with can represent our attachments to different places, peoples and cultures. In many of the texts, belonging further becomes a signifier of the *personal* attachments that are made to a city – in the book *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun* (Chapter Two), we see the protagonist reminiscing about life in Lagos one minute and in the next revelling in her latest attachment: San Francisco. The attachments she has formed to each of these locations play an important role in her experience of belonging. Conversely, Accra becomes the centre of attention for the five characters in *An African City* (Chapter Three) whilst reading the blog *MsAfropolitan* (Chapter One) gives us a sense of how its author oscillates between her connections to Lagos and London. And *MsAfropolitan* highlights the significance of ownership – of owning and claiming a space for oneself, whether

it is a digital platform or a physical place like a room. In *Americanah* and *On Black Sisters' Street* (Chapter One), one idea that becomes prevalent is that of longing for a place – somewhere else that, in the characters' minds at least, has something better to offer than where they currently find themselves and which indicates that belonging is not only about the attachments we have already formed – it is just as much about those we are free to conjure up in our imagination and even those we perhaps have not yet fully articulated.

Afropolitan texts thus speak to some of belonging's many affordances and re-emphasise one of the key points I have made throughout this thesis – that belonging is a flexible concept in Afropolitan cultural production. My close readings of the ten texts suggest that its meaning can be altered or moulded, for instance through the process of self-fashioning or the fashioning of a text, but also that it is possible for social actors to assemble their own versions of belonging: to decide what it means to belong *for them*. Following Levine's theory, this does not rule out other arrangements or configurations of the concept because it, like all social forms, holds multiple affordances simultaneously. However, it does imply that there is, at least to some degree, a level of flexibility and personal autonomy at play in the formation of belonging.

What is important to note about the many possibilities for belonging in Afropolitan texts is that they are frequently juxtaposed with – and sometimes interrupted or undermined by – alternative possibilities for belonging and, in particular, by their constraints. They come with their own patterns and arrangements of belonging which, as we have seen in *Ghana Must Go* and other texts, tend to be structured around a drawing up of boundaries and which are put in place to determine the extent to which individuals belong or do not belong. Such boundaries are also influenced by other social forms that feed into those individuals' existence, and they illustrate how social forms are likely to clash and, in the process, become a limiting factor. In *Ghana Must Go*, this becomes evident for the character Kweku when ideas of belonging and

race meet at his work place in the US and he finds himself fired from his job as a surgeon. A second example is found in *MsAfropolitan* where belonging collides with race, but especially with patterns and arrangements of gender that perpetuate cultural expectations of a hierarchy where men's voices are attributed more value than women's. Reading *MsAfropolitan* suggests that this has left the blog author with a feeling of not wanting to belong anywhere because of the constraints that come with this collision. In the collisions we have seen in *Americanah*, the experience of belonging for the character Obinze is informed by class hierarchies as he travels between Nigeria and the UK. In this character's story, it is significant that the outcome of the meeting between these forms is unexpected. Although Obinze notes that it is not uncommon for Nigerians relocating to the UK to end up at the bottom of the social ladder, regardless of their socio-economic background, he is surprised by the flexibility of social mobility when he returns to Lagos and finds that his newly obtained returnee status leaves him with new possibilities for belonging. Thus, what is affecting belonging for Obinze seems not only to be certain ideas of class but ones which shift unexpectedly as the character moves across borders. As such, Afropolitan texts give an idea of how the meeting between social forms might vary, and how this can lead to affordances of belonging that are limiting and problematic and sometimes in ways that are unpredictable.

Reading belonging across the ten texts has further helped to highlight how the concept, like other social forms, becomes 'the stuff of politics' as questions of belonging motivate political decisions, especially those that have to do with the ongoing 'matter of distribution and arrangements':

> Do working-class crowds belong in the public square? Do women belong in voting booths? Does earned income belong to individuals? What land belongs to North Americans? Sorting out what goes where, the work of political power boundaries

> involves enforcing restrictive containers and boundaries – such as nation-states, bounded subjects, and domestic walls. (Levine, 2015, 3)

It is exactly this 'ordering, patterning, and shaping' of belonging and the ongoing attempt to contain and restrict the concept as a social form that is under scrutiny in Afropolitan texts (ibid.). They illustrate that belonging is perhaps a deeply personal experience, but it is also about distribution of power and access to wealth, and deciding who and what goes where, as well as what belongs to whom. Afropolitan texts further demonstrate that, in the process of working out these politics, it eventually comes down to who *really* belongs, with 'really' becoming the operative word, as if belonging is to be determined by who has the most 'authentic' connection and therefore the right to belong.

The question of who belongs is evident in the texts' critical reflections on the debates on Afropolitanism. Note, for instance, how some of the cultural producers have contributed to the discussion – Ade Bantu and Minna Salami, in particular – by asking who should be able to claim the Afropolitan term and making deliberate attempts to re-define the word so that it is more open and inclusive. At the same time, we have seen critical reflections on how belonging is conceptualised beyond this discussion, asking questions that have to do with the nature of the concept in more general terms. Both *Open City*'s Julius and *Americanah*'s Obinze ponder how complex histories of migration and belonging are not only tied up with colonial ideas of expansion and land ownership but have led to what Levine (2015, 3) refers to as the 'ongoing contest over the proper places for bodies, goods, and capacities'.

I find it compelling here that even if Afropolitan texts acknowledge that political attempts to define and create boundaries are pervasive and not only part of history but continue to play a key role in shaping experiences of belonging in the early twenty-first century, they never assume that such politics will succeed in undermining belonging's other affordances,

including social actors' own ideas and perspectives on the concept. Instead, they show how all of the possibilities and constraints that might come with belonging can be subjected to scrutiny and become part of an ongoing definition and negotiation of what it means to belong in the present moment.

What has been particularly intriguing about tracing belonging across a diverse selection of Afropolitan texts has been to observe its meeting with different aesthetic forms. As indicated already, all aesthetic forms come with their own affordances, and here we can benefit from reading belonging in multiple kinds of text: the possibilities that come with each form can bring out the complexities of belonging as a social form and, more importantly, its affective qualities. However, in its collision with the ten texts, we have further seen how belonging can shape and, in some instances, take over their form. In Chapter Three, I demonstrated that the anxious sensation of non-belonging that is at play in the web series *An African City* and the novels *Ghana Must Go* and *When We Speak of Nothing* feeds into their individual forms. This is evident in the erratic, jarring and anxiety-ridden movements of the camera in the first text but also in the equally haunting movements of the other ones – in their language, for instance. In all three examples, it is the characters' sensation of non-belonging that seems to determine their pace and rhythm, turning it into a disorienting and uncomfortable experience for the readers and viewers who consume the texts. This collision is important, I have argued, because it illustrates how Afropolitan cultural production gives an evocative impression of non-belonging, leaving us with an embodied experience of what it feels like to be out of place via different aesthetic forms.

The thesis has illustrated that the different forms sometimes work the other way around, too. The three examples referred to above revealed how belonging can affect the formal characteristics of Afropolitan texts. Yet, we have come across instances in all three chapters

where aesthetic forms end up shaping belonging, too, with the serial forms of the blogs, as well as the web and concert series, leaving us with a kind of belonging that seems open-ended and subject to change, and where the interactive and inclusive characteristics of their aesthetic forms allude to a version of belonging that gives space for multiple voices and perspectives. This provides a challenge to the assumption that the wider structures and politics that determine the Afropolitan figure's experience of belonging will always be the 'version' of belonging that comes out on top – a challenge which is substantiated by the resistance to closure we have encountered in some of the novels as they point beyond their final pages and gesture towards future possibilities for new kinds of belonging.

The insistence on movement and resistance to closure encourage us to consider and take seriously how belonging is imagined in the early twenty-first century as a social form, leaving us with a perspective which is particularly urgent in the current political climate that is unfolding in many places, both in Africa and elsewhere. Even if it seems as if belonging is becoming more restricted as borders are shut down and new boundaries are drawn up between nations, regions and continents, the Afropolitan texts discussed in this study draw attention to how the world, as Mbembe and other scholars argue, is (and always has been) in constant motion and, in turn, the extent to which this feeds into contemporary experiences of belonging.

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