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Bye-Bye Barack: Dislocating Afropolitanism, Spectral Marxism and Dialectical Disillusionment in Two Obama-Era Novels

Abstract: In contextually specific and formally distinctive ways, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016) are fictional interrogations of Obama's presidential pledge to resuscitate the American dream on the wake of the global financial crash. This paper explores how they supplement and challenge familiar tropes associated with African and American, rather than African-American, diaspora writing. Given broader debates within transnational literary studies about flows and exchanges (of people, finance, cultural production, dissemination, consumption et al) linking the global South and North, I consider how these texts grapple with the complexities and complicities of contemporary neoliberalism through the lens of renascent African Marxisms. While my chosen writers could not be described as Marxist, I engage with more materially oriented scholarship, such as Krishnan's *Writing Spatiality in West Africa* (2018) and Ngugi's *The Rise of the African Novel* (2018), to consider how *Americanah* and *Behold the Dreamers* circulate in a global literary marketplace where certain texts, not to mention authors, are seen as symptomatic of an African and/or Afropolitan and/or 'Africapitalist' renaissance. By grappling with Marxist-inflected scholarship, this paper interrogates the politics, as well as poetics, of the oft-conspicuous airbrushing of those socio-economic, specifically class concerns at the heart of these entangled debates.

Keywords: Afropolitansim, Marxism, Adichie, Mbue, Barack Obama, financial crisis

The global economic crisis has brought into relief the basic fact that the entire world is now part of the same universal history, subject to the same underlying forces. There is no more dramatic illustration of capital's universalization than the fact that the entire world has been engulfed by its effects. This is not the first time this has happened, of course. Crises in the history of capitalism have always been global in their impact. But it is the first time such a cataclysm has hit since post-colonial theory arrived on the scene. For the first time since the 1980s, everyone is talking about capitalism – not alterity, or hybridity, or the fragment, but the ubiquitous, grinding, crushing force of capital. (Vivek Chibber, 2013, p. 294)

[Americans] are by turns hopeful and frightened about the future. Their lives are full of contradictions and ambiguities. (Barack Obama, 2007, p. 24).

As these epigraphs suggest, this intervention is written in the shadow of various post-mortems. These include obituaries, premature or otherwise, of postcolonial studies (Zabus, 2015), the 2007-2009 financial cataclysm and Barack Obama's presidency. Chibber's work has prompted rebuttals from Anievas and Nişancioğlu (2015, pp. 35-38), amongst others. I invoke it at the outset, however, as he situates the global economic crisis, and its ongoing fallout, within longer genealogies of capitalist turbulence. Given the aims of this special issue, Chibber's critique shapes my central research questions: how are theories of postcolonial capitalism inflected by the advent of the global financial crisis? How do these draw on a series of longer debates concerning Marxist discourse from and on the African continent? In what sense do these issues confront us with the multiple Marxs and Marxisms sketched by Enzo Traverso (2016, p. 155)? Finally, how are these entanglements mediated through the tensions and ambiguities of novels which, to borrow from Tuire Valkeakari's *Precarious Passages*, are 'well suited to portray the ambivalences that characterize diasporic longing of the scattered and displaced to belong' (2017, p. 5)? My comparative focus falls on Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016), texts that might be grouped under the slippery heading 'West Africa rising.' Taking my lead from the Obama epigraph, I argue that both novels, in distinctive ways, probe the 'contradictions and ambiguities' at the heart of neoliberal discourse, from the African to North American continents. As such, I explore them against a discursive backdrop where 'Africa' invariably figures as an absent presence, particularly in post-crash discussions about the future(s) of postcolonial capitalism (Žižek, 2015, pp. 158-159). How does this correspond with debates about multi-layered paradigms including Africapitalism, Afropolitanism (Pahl, 2016, p. 77) and Afropessimism, when seen in the contextual and conceptual terms of African renaissance(s)? As my Taiye Selasi-inspired title suggests (2005), I approach these texts and questions through an immediately post-Obama-presidency lens, foregrounding how and why Adichie and Mbue use their fiction to critique the promises and betrayals of the period, in a manner that resonates with Teju Cole's withering treatise of the 'reader in chief' (2017, p. 257). In turn, Madhu Krishnan has offered a robust critique of these supposed literary celebrities in *Contingent Canons* (2019, pp. 41-66). As I both grapple with and depart from it, I explore how *Americanah* and *Behold the Dreamers* explore these Afrocentric and Marxist-

inflected issues. In doing so, they simultaneously interrogate and recalibrate the mythos of the American Dream in an Obama era of strained neoliberal meritocracy tethered to US hegemonic and financial decline.

For Michael Kimmage, the faith of many within and beyond the US following Obama's election cannot be divorced from the fiscal (sur)reality sketched by Chibber: 'By the fall of 2008, the economic crisis had become visible and unavoidable. Those at the apex of the American Dream were somehow at the center of a massive instability' (2011, p. 35). *Americanah* and *Behold the Dreamers* twist conventional aspirant narratives in this crash-specific period, with Obama an explicit and sometimes adversarial referent in both. In so doing, they interrogate the cosmopolitan illusion of the US set out by Timothy Brennan; 'an immigrant refuge, and a polyglot, panchromatic, unity-in-diversity whose international appeal has nothing to do with its control of resources, only its moral and aesthetic superiority' (2007, p. 211). In the context of Ifemelu's faltering relationship with Blaine in *Americanah*, for instance, Obama appears to symbolise 'a more perfect union' (Dionne Jr., 2017, pp. 51-69), in more ways than one: 'there was a new passion, outside of themselves, that united them in an intimacy they had never had before, an unfixed, unspoken, intuitive intimacy: Barack Obama' (Adichie, 2013, p. 352). Adichie and Mbue are attuned to Obama's rhetorical reliance, both before and during his tenure, on resuscitating the American Dream. As well as using the distinctive contours of his autobiography, Obama has an appreciation of 'the standard literary curriculum of the student of postcolonialism, all of the African-American tradition available to him, and a host of other figures, movements, and traditions' (Purcell, 2015, p. 9) to strategically 'transnationalize' conventional dream discourses. When tracing a theoretical genealogy from Ngugi through Lazarus via Parry, Gugelberger, Brennan and Krishnan, the postcolonial indebtedness to materialist scholarship has an impressive pedigree (see Young, 2001). While I engage with this criticism throughout, I consider how and why Adichie and Mbue leverage Marxist-oriented debates from positions that are neither anti-imperialist nor pro-capitalist. This simultaneously recalls Emmanuel Ngara's earlier discussion of Chinua Achebe (1985, p. 112) and acts as a counterpoint to Marxian trends in the critical scholarship surveyed above. This, I suggest, can be seen in concert with their disruption of the more celebratory because oftentimes abstract and class amnesiac prescriptions of Afropolitan discourse. It also chimes with Brennan's critique of cosmopolitanism as 'semantically overdetermined'

(1997, p. 4) when it comes to the development of postcolonial studies in the 80s and 90s. In a supplementary sense, I contend this rhetoric might be figured in terms of similar critiques of Obama's pluralist posturing as purveyor of neoliberalism. As Yogita Goyal maintains, '*Americanah* ... complicates the possibilities opened up by the Afropolitan, both mocking it as a stylish identity for the global elite and nuancing its paradoxical claim to visibility within a finely calibrated nexus of class and privilege in contemporary Lagos' (2014, p. xv). For Krishnan, by contrast, the novel is defined by its vacuity: 'For all of the extent to which it has been positioned as an exemplary text of mobility and cosmopolitan fluidity ... *Americanah* remains ambivalent. Ifemula, despite the novel's insistence on her unique presence and startling beauty, presents as a character with little substance' (2019, p. 53). While robust and insightful, I reclaim ambivalence for more generative purposes, situating my dialectical reading of both texts in the spaces between Goyal's and Krishnan's critiques.

One of the ways Adichie and Mbue recalibrate aspirant Dream narratives amidst particular manifestations of capitalist turbulence is by having their protagonists leave the US to return to Nigeria and Cameroon respectively. While tensions between stayees and returnees have long defined migrant texts, the shifting sense that America might no longer be the existential, not to mention industrial solution propels these fictions in particular ways, as they do others of US disenchantment from NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013) to Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007). As Adichie has recently stated, thinking through the analogies between Trump and Nigerian patriarchal autocracy; 'I'm mourning an idea of America that I used to hold very close' (2019). My approach uses materialist and Marxist discourse as a springboard to broaden discussions of flows (1997, Brennan, p. 205), exchanges and networks of people, capital and culture in historical, as well as contemporaneous terms (Haines Wallis, 2018). It therefore chimes with the base/superstructure orientation of Mukoma Wa Ngugi's *The Rise of the African Novel* (2018, p. 9), as well as Chimalum Nwanko's call to think about a more capacious sense of the relationship between cultural production and the material realities of 'a continent perpetually battling with the comprehensive restitution of a face maligned by tragic historical forces, by periodic self injury, or sustained epochal conspiracies implicating alien greed or imperialistic exploitation' (2012, p. 7).

A precursor to these Afrocentric interventions is Ellen Meiksins Wood's seminal work, particularly her diagnosis of capitalism's structuring antinomies (also see Heller, 2011, pp. 215-242). While *Empire of Capital* was written at the century's turn, it is peculiarly resonant in post-crash contexts: 'from the beginning, capitalist imperialism has been affected by one of the main contradictions of capitalism: the need to impose its economic 'laws' as universally as possible, and, at the same time, the need to limit the damaging consequences that this universalization has for capital itself' (Wood, 2003, p. 22). This obviously links with thinkers such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) and Walter Rodney (1972), who maintain that any understanding of 'Africa' is always already informed by imperialist discourse, drawing on Marxism to read history in more dialectical and therefore dynamic ways. The afterlives of these arguments galvanise more recent scholarship, such as Adam Mayer's *Naija Marxisms*. In it, he maintains that 'Marxism ... [has] been a major analytical framework and an instrument of African self-assertion vis-à-vis the metropole and internationally' (Mayer, 2016, p. 191). Such interventions also chime with those charting the toxicity of the financial implosion in ways that resist the parochialism of previous, global North-oriented scholarship, as well as Omafune Onoge's still resonant call to combat 'a depoliticized literary universe inhabited by abstract human beings with the abstract moral values of an abstract religious pietism. A literary universe which, our prosaic logic compels us to add, must be created by astral writers and equally astral critics' (1985, p. 53). To reiterate, while neither of my chosen writers are Marxist, they are by no means 'astral.' Their fictive treatments of everything from the dialectical promises and betrayals of the Obama era in an age of neoliberal expansion and violence to the illusive notion of West Africa rising complicate more directly anti-imperialist and Marxian critiques in a manner that can, with some readerly imagination, be generative.

Given this scaffolding, I foreground *Behold the Dreamers* as it most explicitly engages those cluster of capitalist pressure points that emerged in the wake of the Enron and Lehman Brothers scandals. While considering it alongside elements of *Americanah*, I see Mbue's novel as a self-reflexive meditation on themes that have become synonymous with economic (mis)management and decline, as well as civil (mis)governance, in post-independence Africa. These include corruption, nepotism, fraud and embezzlement. For Scott Taylor, shifting the terms of such debates is linked with reconceptualising the genealogies and futures of African capitalism: 'what we

conventionally understand as capitalism has demonstrated viability in modern Africa ... cronyism [is] a persistent global phenomenon rather than a uniquely African one' (2012, p. 24). These preoccupations cannot be divorced from cognate concerns in the scholarship of those reorienting Marxist thinking in regard to the specific contexts and complexities of the African continent (Krishnan, 2019, pp. 37-42). This is once again suggested by Goyal who, with rhetoric that borrows as much from Lukács as it does from Derrida and Jameson, asserts that '[h]ow we understand history and its relation to now, how we interpret the presence of the past, its ghostliness, or its reification by capital leads directly to how we conceive of our present and future' (2014, p. xi). With this in mind, the spectral Marxisms of my title also riff on the 'African' Derrida considered by Christopher Wise (2002). As the following suggests, preoccupations with the hydra-headed ghosts of capitalist exploitation are central, if sometimes latent, in both Adichie and Mbue. To return to Goyal's statement, an underlying theme of *Behold the Dreamers*, in particular, is that the 2007-9 crises do not simply concern markets, equities and assets. They also jolt the security, if not sanctity of American senses of self, both individually and collectively, particularly at the inception of the Obama era. Such dislocation recalls similarly mythologised facets of Afropolitanism, memorably described by Stephanie Bosch Santana as 'a haunted and haunting term ... [a] fitting spectre, for it is always in excess of itself' (2016, p. 123).

Focalising these events through precariat Cameroonian immigrants to the US, emboldened by Obama's election and audacious enough to hope it might realise his campaign rhetoric ('America is big enough to accommodate all [our children's] dreams,' 2007, p. 269), Mbue probes the psychological, cultural and ethical dimensions of the financial crisis and its ghosts. This echoes Obama's 2011 'Remarks on the Economy,' where he suggests that the crash signalled moral, if not mortal blows to the American Dream: 'This kind of gaping inequality gives lie to the promise that's at the very heart of America: that this is a place where you can make it if you try ... That's why immigrants from around the world have historically flocked to our shores' (Dionne Jr., 2017, p. 181). Mbue challenges her reader to confront what Virilio calls 'the speeding-train effect of high finance' (2012, p. 13) from the perspective of immigrants directly affected by the downturn Obama describes and, latterly, exacerbates. *Behold the Dreamers* therefore invites us to consider one of the most pressing questions of all: just how 'global' is/was the 'global financial crisis' (van Bergeijk et al)? Linked to this, how might more robustly materialist approaches,

which both supplement and depart from earlier interventions (Moore-Gilbert, 2001, p. 24), offer diagnostic help? Finally, does capitalism have the capacity to be ‘more humane,’ as suggested by the self-styled ‘not ... anti-capitalist’ Adichie (2019)?

Physics and Metaphysics: From Dreams to Crises

Writing before the financial meltdown, Obama declares that ‘part of America’s genius has always been its ability to absorb newcomers, to forge a national identity out of the disparate lot that arrived on our shores’ (2007, p. 231). Following Wole Soyinka’s destruction of his green card and African return post-Trump’s election, these issues assume particular burdens of significance. Like *Americanah*, *Behold the Dreamers* engages with the more celebratory aspects of Obama’s discourse on America’s national promise in the same way it probes the class amnesia of certain versions of Afropolitanism. These are powerfully laid out in Amatoritsero Ede’s essay (2016, pp. 91-96), which can be read alongside Obadias Ndaba’s sense that ‘Afropolitanism is not so much an ideology as it is a way of being and seeing the world through one’s own eyes and on one’s own terms’ (2017, p. 369). By attending to the vagaries of the visa lottery and dangers of deportation, the material contingencies of transnational migration, in what Axelle Karera calls a ‘new epoch of dispersion and circulation’ (2013, p. 237), are foregrounded. This, in turn, supplements Ede’s Marxian sense that ‘a blanket application of [Afropolitanism] is not supported by actual lived experience and contemporary global and local material realities’ (2016, p. 89), as well as Krishnan’s argument that ‘the Afropolitan may badge themselves as a citizen of the world, but their daily movements and self-conception remain contingent on their admission to a global system structured around the deterritorialisation of capital’ (2019, p. 42). Similarly, both novels offer dialectically rooted and routed responses to Obama’s question: ‘what do immigrants want from the US’? Imagining his own answer, Obama illustrates his rhetorical indebtedness to an aspirant imaginary oriented around dreams:

mostly [immigrants] want affirmation that they, too, are Americans. Whenever I appear before immigrant audiences, I can count on some good-natured ribbing from my staff after my speech; according to them, my remarks always follow a three-part structure: “I am your friend,” “[Fill in the home country] has been a cradle of civilization,” and “You embody the American dream” ...

Of course, not all my conversations in immigrant communities follow this easy pattern ... They have been reminded [post-9/11] that the history of immigration in this country has a dark underbelly; they need specific assurances that their citizenship really means something, that America has learned the right lessons from the Japanese internments during World War II, and that I will stand with them should the political winds shift in an ugly direction. (2007, pp. 260-261)

The levity of Obama's first paragraph is offset by a more sobering evaluation of American Dream narratives inflected by longer, invariably darker histories of imperialist exploitation and violence. This once again echoes some of the most incisive, because genealogically-committed treatises on 'the fashionable, yet problematic, concept of Afropolitanism,' particularly its airbrushing of socio-economic class (Toivanen, 2017, p. 189. See Coetzee et al 2019).

As the above suggests, debates about the morphologies of postcolonial capitalism have led to reconsiderations of Marx, as Orientalist or otherwise (Chibber, 2013, p. 285. See also Traverso, 2016 and Satgar, 2019). Given her concern with illuminating and interrogating the various dark underbellies of American Dreams via immigrant imaginaries necessarily moored to more material diagnoses of history, Mbue offers her take on the conventional base/superstructure model refined by Gramsci, amongst others (see Gorlier, 2002). She does so in relation to events clustered around the Enron/Lehman collapse as symptomatic of fault-lines in global capitalism. In terms of space and/as symbolism, architectural reflections play crucial roles throughout *Behold the Dreamers* and *Americanah*:

On a sunny day it was hard to see how far the Lehman Brothers office tower extended into the sky. Its walls seemed to soar on forever, like an infinite spear ... But on a cloudy day ... he could see all the way to the top. Even without the sun's rays falling on it, the building glimmered and Lehman Brothers stood regal and proud, like a prince of the Street. (Mbue, 2016, p. 47)

By focusing on the tower as chronotope of capitalism and/as cataclysm, Mbue distils many of her central preoccupations. These include taxonomy, (in)security, risk, status, aspirations, dreams, decline and the violence of neoliberalism, all of which are intensified through the dialectical relations between imploding markets and migrant imaginaries. The importance of these architectural asides, which invite the reader to consider the solidity, or otherwise, of the economic foundations upon which the superstructures of everything from educational to cultural to legal institutions are built, cannot be divorced from the emphasis on visibility, particularly tied to variable

weather conditions. For Jende as spectator, the sun obfuscates. This leads him to believe that the building is one of limitless, potentially mythic proportions. The tower's zenith, metonymic of the power and supposed reach of US capitalism, is as chimerical as the subterranean structures upon which it is built, recalling Cole's earlier exploration of buried African indenture histories in *Open City*. This economic foregrounding recalls the discursive manoeuvres of the Warwick Research Collective, with their materialist emphasis on the entanglements between markets and cultural politics from the off (2015, p. 1). Mbue's metrological motifs also chime with rhetoric used to describe market turbulence, such as Jonathan Kirshner's forecast of 'the bitter winds inherent in unbridled capitalism' (2014, p. 5). This echoes Obama's analogy above, while also suggesting the kinds of critiques levelled against abstract Afropolitanism (see Pahl, 2016). For Krishnan, texts such as *Americanah*, *Open City* and *Behold the Dreamers* are

untainted by the spectre of politics, institutions, or the structural conditions under which violence, inequality, and injustice continue to proliferate, hastening the acceleration of global inequality in an ostensible era of connection and mobility ...These are, despite the traces of violence beneath their narrative surfaces, novels which flatter liberal notions of the individual as entrepreneur of his or her own life, the idea of human capital and or meritocracy, of choice and of the marketplace of ideas. (2019, pp. 59-60)

While Krishnan's work is exemplary in thinking through 'the contours of African literature as a global market category' (2019, pp. 2-3) in the kinds of more local, materialist and capacious ways championed by WReC and others, in what remains I suggest alternative ways of engaging texts she calls out.

When the sun shines in the Mbue passage, we are tempted to subscribe to the various dreams, both individual and collective, about the natural, potentially infinite power of capitalism and/as American empire. This resonates with Brennan's trenchant claim that, 'not only does the sun never set on the American empire, there is no place it shines that is not America' (1997, p. 4). When conditions cloud over, however, we are able, if not indeed compelled to view the whole structure, in terms of its edifices as well as its extremities, melting into air, to borrow Marx's own Shakespearean epithet. As is the case throughout *Behold the Dreamers*, the same approach could and perhaps should be taken to what Obama elsewhere calls 'the idolatry of the free market' (Dionne Jr., 2017, p. 36). What the tensions, ambiguities and sometimes contradictions at the heart of Mbue's and Adichie's respective fictions

encourage us to consider is the manner in which this rhetoric is always already folded into the practical realities of a president and presidency fortifying rather than dismantling the wider structures of neoliberal violence and inequity. While Mbue's readers conclude with the sense that, even on the cloudiest of days, the Lehman building stands 'regal and proud,' we know that the 'prince of the Street' is laid bare across this creative mapping of financial collapse. Adichie adopts a similar approach when describing Ifemelu's initial arrival in the US, with disorienting weather conditions serving as a pathetic fallacy for demythologisation itself: 'The sweltering heat alarmed her ... She stared at buildings and cars and signboards, all of them matt, disappointingly matt; in the landscape of her imagination, the mundane things in America were covered with a high-shine gloss' (2013, pp. 103-104). Whether it is Adichie's gloss paint or Mbue's glimmering architecture, the optics of the real throw darker (because more material) palimpsests into relief in a manner that recalls the scholarship championed in *The New African Diaspora* (2009), amongst others. This, I suggest, amplifies their respective interrogations of the gaping fissures between the transformational rhetoric of the Obama presidency and its reality, constituting what we might call a neoliberal literature of disillusionment. If neither *Americanah* nor *Behold the Dreamers* offer the kind of stridently Marxist critique of writers such as Ngugi, Gordimer or Armah, attending to the ambivalences of their fiction opens up interpretative possibilities when it comes to thinking through the violent disorder of the present. As such, it can be read in light of those structural factors foregrounded by WReC when discussing their reconfiguration of Trotsky's paradigm of combined and uneven development: 'capitalist development does not smooth away but rather *produces* unevenness, systematically and as a matter of course' (2015, p. 12).

Throughout *Behold the Dreamers*, Leah (boss Clark's secretary) is a key interlocutor for Jende. While she is not a migrant, she occupies other liminal positions, thereby expanding the range of subordinate subject positions beyond the diaspora. As such, Mbue's decision to fade her out of the narrative is telling. If the novel pivots around the hyper-visible figures of Jende and Clark, who seem to represent two faces of the fallout, Leah is one of the forgotten precariat. All-too-disposable, Leah's strategic importance is established early on when she serves as cultural-economic translator for Jende. Once again, it is the Lehman building that provides a particular locus for her diagnosis:

“Clark and his friends up there, they don’t have any reason to be nervous. When it’s time to lay off people, do you think they’re the ones who’ll be going? No, honey, it’ll be us, the little people ... Everyone’s gossiping, talking about stock prices going down, profits going down, all kinds of stinky things happening in the boardroom, but the top guys won’t tell us squat.” (Mbue, 2016, p. 50)

Leah’s attention to the rhetorical obscurantism relied on by corporate elites resonates with the tone of many concerned with the genealogies and consequences of the global financial crisis. Her use of collective and therefore exclusive pronouns is also striking, particularly in light of Obama’s election victory address: ‘Let us remember that, if this financial crisis taught us anything, it’s that we cannot have a thriving Wall Street while Main Street suffers’ (Dionne Jr., 2017, p. 93). As the above suggests, *Behold the Dreamers* takes place on the contested terrain between Main and Wall Streets, oriented around concerns with who ‘we’ and ‘us’ refer to. It might therefore be read alongside calls to ‘rethink the intersectional and interdisciplinary relationships among diaspora studies, world literatures, Marxism, transnational feminism, ethnic studies, queer studies, postcolonial studies, and globalization’ (Goyal, 2014, p. xi).

Given the stakes of pronominal politics within and beyond postcolonial studies, Leah’s reflections are a counterpoint to Clark’s earlier prognosis: “I can guarantee you that the feds will be ready to hang Tom the way they hung Skilling, and the rest of us ... You think it’s going to be that nice and clean, huh?” ... “Somehow everyone’s just going to walk away nice and clean from the burning building ... No! ... We’re drowning” (Mbue, 2016, pp. 40-41). In terms of how the novel supplements extant discourses surrounding capitalist crises, particularly those precursors from the global South, Clark’s allusion to Jeffrey Skilling (former Enron CEO) is crucial. In this sense, Marx’s diagnostic reliance on vampyric motifs retains its urgency. As David McNally maintains, it is only by interrogating the microphysics of such corporate collapse that the organs of global capitalism might be exposed and, potentially, transplanted:

The Enron case ... provides a key to understanding the occult economy of late capitalism: beneath the esoteric circuits of finance lie material practices of plunder of the world’s resources and its labourers. As much as Enron tried to remake itself in America as a financial-services firm specialising in derivatives, its operations always remained tethered to predatory practices in the Global South. (2011, p. 171)

Fast forward to today and this enables us to consider how what, in the global North, has been dubbed the ‘age of austerity’ has much longer historical antecedents in ‘the deep sleep of colonial domination’ (Ngara, 1985, p. 32), amongst other exports of extractive violence. While Clark’s development of something approaching a corporate conscience towards the novel’s close is overdetermined, reading it in the context of McNally’s intervention reminds us that the events of 2007-9 have specific material histories. In a footnote, Krishnan maintains that *Behold the Dreamers* is indicative of ‘the African novel, [which] in the contemporary era, has become that which celebrates fluidity, celebrates human capital, and which, against the will to ignorance about the continent, erases the possibility of a larger reckoning with the ongoing asymmetries of violence which contribute to its exploitation and despoliation’ (2019, p. 61). I question whether, particularly against this crash backdrop, Mbue’s text is quite as celebratory of supposed cosmopolitanism and fluidity in the Obama era as this critique makes out. This once again resonates with scholarship on both Afropolitanism as multifaceted paradigm (Mbembe, 2016) and the financial crisis, some of which, consciously or otherwise, seems to borrow from postcolonialism in its bid to diagnose neoliberalism’s violent iterations. Andrew Farlow’s conclusion, for instance, is almost Saidian:

The crash has served to redraw the battle lines between liberal democratic capitalism and nationalist authoritarian capitalism. Emerging economies, including those in Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa, are starting to find the latter attractive ... More than ever, we need people willing to arm themselves with the lessons of the past and to ‘speak truth to power.’ (2013, p. 350)

Farlow’s call for a hermeneutics of suspicion (reading the past to circumvent its mistakes) chimes with Jende’s frustrated attempts to decipher the Lehman building, as well as Leah’s critique of the obfuscatory (mis)communications of the culpable and complicit.

Clark’s reliance on eschatological metaphors, alternating between all-consuming fire and water and their resultant ghosts is particularly suggestive. In this context, the burning building, as well as its fallout, extends beyond Lehman tower to threaten the US and global economy as a whole. More suggestive, particularly in the times of supposedly ‘liquid capital’ representative of ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman, 2000), is the reference to drowning. This is a motif Mbue relies on throughout. Be it perishing by water or fire, the suggestion is that people drown, burn and live on as the

neoliberal undead differently. If the imagery complements Farlow's allusion to the inadequacies of the post-crash 'rescue vessel' (2013, p. 349), it also resonates with a host of affiliated discourses concerning the disposability of life, as central to Marxists, comparative economists and ecologists as it is to colonial discourse analysts and postcolonial theorists. Given the significance of Hurricane Katrina, an event Obama cites as exemplary of the biopolitical mismanagement of the Bush regime (2007, pp. 228-230), the centrality of these incendiary and engulfing images extends beyond the events of 2007-9. They suggest crisis lexicons reflecting the peculiar time signature of global capitalism itself (Feldner et al, 2014, p. 4), with specific antecedents in formerly colonised parts of the globe. In what follows, I narrow my focus to more fully consider the implications of engaging Mbue's text, particularly given its concerns with transnational capitalism and its material fault lines, in the spectral aftermath of Obama's departure from office.

Dystopias and Utopias: From Crises to Dreams

In the opening of *Behold the Dreamers*, as Jende surveys reading material before his interview with Clark, we are told that

One of the *Journal* pages, peeking from beneath sheets of numbers and graphs, had the headline: WHITES' GREAT HOPE? BARACK OBAMA AND THE DREAM OF A COLOR-BLIND AMERICA. Jende leaned forward to read the story, fascinated as he was by the young ambitious senator, but immediately sat upright when he remembered where he was, why he was there, what was about to happen. (Mbue, 2016, p. 5)

More than a contextual co-ordinate, this synthesises many of the text's key themes. While not as explicit in her critique of fallacious post-racialism as Adichie (see Ifemelu's 'Is Obama Anything but Black'? blog, 2013, pp. 337-338), Mbue's opening chimes with Donald Pease's sense that, '[t]he transformative moment of Obama's election and the structuring racist antinomy that should have rendered it impossible did not converge to form a postracial American society. They instead collided into one another' (Purcell, 2015, p. 176). With this in mind, it is crucial that the first Obama reference is embedded in the specific context of *The Wall Street Journal*. While Nigerian immigration lawyer Bubakar sees the senator as aspirant poster-boy

for the African diaspora (Mbue, 2016, p. 74), akin to Paul Zeleza's work (2009), the most compelling details are the numbers and graphs framing the Obama headline and anchoring it to a fraught economic base. The sense that his tenure was always already enmeshed in the financial implosions tracked across *Behold the Dreamers* is captured in Obama's first inaugural address, not to mention the various neo-con conspiracy theories of his closet Marxism: 'Our economy is badly weakened, a consequence of greed and irresponsibility on the part of some, but also our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age' (Dionne Jr., 2017, p. 97). With Obama's diagnosis in mind, we are compelled to read the kinds of celebratory framing of his election captured at strategic points throughout *Americanah* ('Obama's voice rose and fell ... around him the large and resplendent crowd of the hopeful ... And there was, at that moment, nothing that was more beautiful to [Ifemelu] than America,' Adichie, 2013, p. 361), in light of Pease's sense that it 'brought audacious hope into intimate relationship with radical despair' (Purcell, 2015, p. 179). For Mbue, in particular, this dialectic bridges rhetorical and all-too-material spheres. Her fiction probes the ambiguous space between them.

If this gives one sense of my 'Bye-Bye Barack' title, the other speaks to what Afropolitanism 'gets to sweep under the rug of privileged cosmopolitanism,' namely its glossing of 'gender, class, and sexuality' (Ngugi, 2018, pp. 176-177). While arguments rumble on about a term which is as 'semantically overdetermined' as cosmopolitanism (Brennan, 1997, p. 4), neither Mbue nor Adichie shy away from the particularity of class dynamics when it comes to specific modes of mobility open to and enjoyed by their protagonists, not to mention themselves. Again, they are very far from Marxism. Yet this material orientation sits at the heart of novels that speak to Ngugi's 'rooted transnationalism' (2018, p. 163). This is attended to most explicitly in *Americanah's* final section, which traces Ifemelu's return to a Lagos defined by rapidly mutating capitalism: 'the true Lagosian ... was always hustling, eyes eternally alert to the brighter and the better' (Adichie, 2013, p. 31). Given the academic self-reflexivity that characterises the text, concerned as it is with intellectual and other traffic between Princeton and Nsukka universities, Adichie exposes the dark underbelly of an overly mythologizing Afropolitanism (a term she has dismissed in favour of 'pan-African', if not 'African') through the Nigeropolitan as chronotope. Like the Lehman tower, it concretises Adichie's key concerns. One consequence is that conventional narratives of remittance wealth flowing from global North to South

are defamiliarized in a manner that recalls alternative genealogies of populist politics and those advocates of austerity. As in Ifemelu's Obama reflection, withering critique is reserved for a blog:

Lagos has always been indisputably itself, but you would not know this at the meeting of the Nigerpolitan Club, a group of young returnees who gather every week to moan about the many ways in which Lagos is not like New York as though Lagos had ever been close to being like New York. Full disclosure: I am one of them. Most of us have come back to make money in Nigeria, to start businesses, to seek government contracts and contacts. Others have come with dreams in their pockets and a hunger to change the country ... (Adichie, 2013, p. 421)

As Ifemelu acknowledges her neoliberal complicity in the cliques she attacks, she figures the entrepreneurial energy of both stayees and returnees using the dream discourse so central to Mbue's novel. This accords with Pahl's sense that, alongside Cole, these 'writers demonstrate a strong political engagement in their works, challenging dominant ideologies of capitalism, cultural hierarchies and globalization' (84). Adichie's reliance on 'dreams' and 'hunger' also recalls the young Obama who, announcing his candidacy, stated his desire 'to keep the American Dream alive for those who still hunger for opportunity, who still thirst for equality' (Dionne Jr., 2017, p. 44). Given the productive tensions between the homogenising imperatives of Afropolitanism, derivative of what Obama calls 'the dizzying pace of globalization, the cultural levelling of modernity' (Dionne Jr., 2017, p. 163), and the sense of distinctively local, material cultural practices, Ifemelu's *Dreams from My Father*-inspired reflection on her time in the US is as applicable to the global South as the North: "The best thing about America is that it gives you space ... I like that you buy into the dream, it's a lie but you buy into it and that's all that matters' (Adichie, 2013, p. 434). Given Adichie's and Mbue's shared concerns with cultures of consumption, American decline and evisceration of the myth of economic meritocracy, it is striking that dreams themselves are reified (Goyal, 2014, p. xi). This echoes the crushingly neoliberal depiction of Lagos as "depressingly transactional. Even relationships, they're all transactional" (Adichie, 2013, p. 430). As in *Behold the Dreamers*, bodies become commodities in ways that situate them in much longer genealogies of 'ur-event' Middle Passage exploitation and pain (Valkeakari, 2017, p. 3).

In 'Circulations: Finance as a Model of City Making,' AbdouMaliq Simone includes Lagos in his list of cities defined by their cultures and economies of

‘experimentation’, ‘replete [as they are] with heterogeneity’ (2010, p. 187). Adichie captures this by juxtaposing the topographies of Lagos and Abuja. In doing so, she invites her reader to grapple with the implications of Africapitalism, as championed by Tony Elumelu, amongst others. As with the Jongas’ decision to return to Cameroon, Ifemelu’s returnee perspective illuminates the complex flows and exchanges of specifically Nigerian capitalism:

At first, Lagos assaulted her, the sun-dazed haste, the yellow buses full of squashed limbs, the sweating hawkers racing after cars, the advertisements on hulking billboards (others scrawled on walls – PLUMBER CALL 0801777777) and the heaps of rubbish that rose on the roadsides like a taunt. Commerce thrummed too defiantly ... One morning, a man’s body lay on Awolowo Road ... Here, she felt, anything could happen ... (Adichie, 2013, p. 385)

The arc of such descriptions echoes scholarship, both Marxian and other, concerning contemporary and prospective mutations of postcolonial capitalism, particularly as they pertain to the African continent (Williams and Satgar, 2018). At its structural, as well as conceptual core is the material, inevitably damaged body that has predominated earlier discussions of African Marxisms (Ngara, 1985, p. 15). In light of the base/superstructure consideration above, this recalls that the aspirant dreams of some, capitalist or otherwise, only exist because of the deferrals and/or destruction of others. This is also attended to by Obama in the context of American Exceptionalism: ‘for all those who scratched and clawed their way to get a piece of the American Dream, there were many who didn’t make it’ (Dionne Jr., 2017, pp. 60-61. See also Sethi, 2011, p. 94). As is the case with *Behold the Dreamers*, the destruction/dream/deferral dynamic unfolds across *Americanah*. Arguably, the most significant aspect of the passage, particularly when theorising postcolonial capitalism, is that, rather than paralyse her, the sensory overload of Ifemelu’s experience enables her to imagine alternative futures where ‘anything could happen.’ As such, this offers a further, typically ambivalent recalibration of Obama’s celebration of American pioneering, both individually and collectively, leaving us to consider the implications of substituting ‘Nigerian’ or ‘African’ for ‘American’ (Mayer, 2016): ‘it is that American spirit, that American promise, that pushes us forward even when the path is uncertain; that binds us together in spite of our differences; that makes us fix our eye not on what is seen, but what is unseen, that better place around the bend’ (Dionne Jr., 2017, p. 86).

For all Adichie's nods to Africapitalisms, Afropolitanisms and Afropessimisms in this rich final section, we are invited to connect it with Obinze's earlier reflections on Afrofuturisms in interrogative dialogue with exhausted 'development' paradigms (Hoogvelt, 2001) or hydraulic ones (Mbembe, 2016, p. 37) in ways that once more recall Rodney's seminal work. As Obinze reflects on an entrepreneurial evolution sparked by his deportation from the U.K., readers ponder how his success as a property developer results from his alertness to the particular supply and demand dynamics of the domestic market (Goyal, 2014, p. xiv). Rather than slavishly following European cults of renovation, the strength of his portfolio derives from a commitment to originality:

“When I started in real estate, I considered renovating old houses instead of tearing them down, but it didn't make sense. Nigerians don't buy houses because they're old ... It doesn't work here at all. But of course it makes sense because we are Third Worlders and Third Worlders are forward-looking, we like things to be new, because our best is still ahead, while in the West their best is already past and so they have to make a fetish of that past.” (Adichie, 2013, p. 436)

In terms of scholarship concerning morphologies of multiple African Marxisms and capitalisms, as well as how these might sit alongside African Renaissances (Ngugi, 2009), the second half of Obinze's reflection is particularly suggestive. In light of the above citation, the Obama correspondence is also striking. If, as with Mbue, architecture performs a series of chronotopic functions, Adichie's final sentence is carefully calibrated to defamiliarize the sense that 'third-worlders' are synonymous with the kind of arrested development often used to critique established Marxist discourse. This once again resonates with Taylor's work. To substantiate his argument about the connections between deep pasts and supposedly contemporary events, Taylor maintains,

Because so many observers of contemporary Africa ... are decidedly “presentist” in their thinking, there is a tendency to devalue or discount any intrinsic indigenous capacity for enterprise that predated colonialism. Yet it is worth examining that history, both because it undermines any lingering Afropessimist assertions that Africans lack capacity for business and because we can identify certain qualities in Africa's history of indigenous entrepreneurship that resonate within contemporary business. (2013, p. 23)

To return to the Adichie citation, of much greater significance than a praise-song to Lagosian entrepreneurs is the emphasis placed on futurity, innovation and ingenuity, both individually and collectively. Once again, therefore, we might see this as an Afrocentric transposition of Obama's American Exceptionalism, as captured in his second inaugural address. Here, 'risk' is reclaimed from the sphere of reckless financial speculation and imagined in more generative terms: 'America's possibilities are limitless, for we possess all the qualities that this world without boundaries demands: youth and drive; diversity and openness; an endless capacity for risk and a gift for reinvention' (Dionne Jr., 2017, p. 203). Adichie's final Lagosian section might be seen as a twenty-first century response to Fanon's concluding call in *The Wretched of the Earth*, a touchstone for so much postcolonial-Marxist scholarship, to bring forth new visions for and versions of mankind (2001, pp. 254-255). This recalls the materialist orientation of Adichie-specific interventions such as Goyal's (2014, p. xiv), as well as Krishnan's gynocentric recalibration of Fanon in *Writing Spatiality in West Africa* (2018, p. 124) and Ngugi's recuperative sense that '[i]f African literature is not to be fenced in by literary criticism ... then we have to free it by offering globalectical, Afropolitan, global, and transnational readings' (2018, p. 164). With these discursive (re)negotiations in mind, we find that, in suitably ambivalent ways, it is now the West rather than 'the rest' accused of fetishizing an invariably mythic past.

As with *Behold the Dreamers*, it is only towards the end of *Americanah* that we appreciate the importance of a series of key paradigms, to borrow from the Raymond Williams venerated by Gugelberger amongst others. Fetishism is chief amongst them. Given the novel's disruptive temporality, Obinze's early dissatisfaction with more conventional commodity fetishism is most suggestive when set against the above: '[Obinze] had begun ... to feel bloated from all he had acquired – the family, the houses, the cars, the bank accounts – and would, from time to time, be overcome by the urge to prick everything with a pin, to deflate it all, to be free' (Adichie, 2013, p. 21). If this suggests the insidious influence of cultures of consumption embedded in the wider structures of neoliberal violence and inequity, the privileging of fetishism also enables Adichie to critique the patronising complicities of the very elite cossetted by this order. It is imbued with more than a hint of Marxian urgency (Goyal, 2014, p. viii), offering a different frame for her recent comments about 'humane capitalism'. This is captured in Ifemelu's interactions with white suburbia, where the 'poor' (whoever 'they' are, wherever

‘they’ come from) are as reified as they are deified. Here, ‘gleaming’ anticipates Jende’s description of Lehman tower, as well as echoing Ifemelu’s gloss-paint image: ‘Poverty was a gleaming thing; [Kimberly] could not conceive of poor people being vicious or nasty, because their poverty had canonized them, and the greatest saints were the foreign poor’ (Mbue, 2016, p. 149). This solipsistic interrogation is amplified in the novel’s second half. As the following suggests, Ifemelu anchors her critique at the material level of capitalist flows of people, goods and services:

sometimes one of them had a dinner party, where Ifemelu mostly listened ... were they serious, these people who were so enraged about imported vegetables that ripened in trucks? They wanted to stop child labour in Africa. They would not buy clothes made by underpaid workers in Asia. They looked at the world with an impractical, luminous earnestness that moved her, but never convinced her. (Adichie, 2013, p. 314)

Given Adichie’s oscillations between fetishism and futurity, my reading is also inspired by revisiting Arif Dirlik’s *The Postcolonial Aura*. In the ongoing fallout of the financial crisis, I see both Adichie and Mbue inviting us to reassess how far we are still wrestling with the spectres of Marx he conjures. The following is particularly pertinent to the neo-liberal narcissism captured above:

[Postcolonialism’s] preoccupation with local encounters and the politics of identity rules out a thoroughgoing critique of the structures of capitalism, or of other structurally shaped modes of exploitation and oppression ... the postcolonialist focus on Eurocentrism to the exclusion of the structural connections between Eurocentric power and capitalism also provides an alibi against radical critiques of capitalism, shifting the debate over capitalism from the terrain of political economy to the terrain of culture. (Dirlik, 1997, pp. ix-x)

In the wake of the financial crisis, and given Mbue’s PEN Faulkner award, as well as Adichie’s high-profile PEN advocacy, we might ask whether certain cultural responses are pushing back against these structures, bearing critiques such as Krishnan’s in mind. In their introduction to *It’s the Political Economy, Stupid*, for instance, Gregory Sholette and Oliver Ressler suggest art can resist ‘the language of ultra-deregulated capitalism [which] penetrates every detail of our lives ... becoming a kind of toxic mortgage of the soul’ (2013, p. 10). In their distinctive ways, *Americanah* and *Behold the Dreamers* are similarly propelled by dialectical, if ambivalent, negotiations of hegemony and counter-hegemony, the local and the

global, physics and metaphysics and the pasts, presents and futures of a neoliberalism defined by its dynamism (Krishnan, 2019, p. 37) in a way inflected, if not directly inspired by a Hydra-headed Marx (Traverso, 2016, p. 164). In Mbue's novel, this is signalled early on.

Driving Clark through New York, Jende performs as an imagined tour guide to hometown Limbe. In an echo of Aravind Adiga's eponymous *White Tiger*, Jende offers the following map: "as you pass through Mile Two, you will see the lights of the town at night as they are shining all around you. The lights are not too bright or too many. They are just enough to say that this is a town made of magic, an OPEC city, national refinery on one side of the shore, fishermen with their nets on the other side" (Mbue, 2016, p. 38). While Jende's reflection is nostalgic, it establishes a significant because disruptive imperative for the narrative as a whole. As above, this emerges out of the commitment Mbue shares with Adichie to defamiliarizing the automatic assumptions between spaces and representation, set within broader conceptual and contextual frames, from the Africapitalist to the Afropolitan and beyond. In this instance, Jende showcases his rhetorical skills by lending Limbe just enough exoticism ('made of magic') to capture Clark's attention. Of greater importance is his topographical balancing. As in Ifemelu's Lagosian encounter, this enables him to expose the material edifice upon which the town's fate rests, reliant as it is on both the oil industry's 'modern' infrastructure and the more 'traditional' business of fishing. Conveniently positioned on either side of the road, both enable Mbue to foreground the 'occult dialectics of the local and the global' (McNally, 2011, p. 177). This implies that, rather than the overhaul promoted by Marx from 'primitive' to 'advanced' development, more syncretic models, perhaps along the heterodox, contradiction/confrontation Gramscian lines imagined by Mayer (2016, p. 188) and Gorlier (2002, p. 102), might be more productive.

In terms of broader debates surrounding Afropessimism and Africapitalism, Jende's Limbe reflection echoes Obinze's attempt to blur lines of perception between the global South and North, as well as providing historical depth to the very notion of Africapitalism. This once again resonates with revisionist and more broadly genealogical scholarship (Goyal, 2014, p. x). As Taylor maintains, there is a peculiar prescience to disrupting teleological narratives that conflate the advent of continental capitalism with colonialism: 'Europe introduced some aspects of capitalism to Africa, but it did not introduce modern capitalism *to Africans* ... European colonialism ...

interrupted, deprived, and forestalled the entrenchment of African capitalism whose origins preceded it' (2012, p. 29). This in turn chimes with more avowedly Marxist scholarship from and on the continent (see Satger, 2019). To return to the citation above; if Limbe is read as an allegory for Cameroon and, by extension, Africa as a whole, given the geographical ignorance exposed throughout both novels, the vision Jende promotes, as in Adichie, is one of innovation and inventiveness, rather than replicating conventional binaries of ossified tradition versus industrial, and therefore 'advanced,' modernity. As such, it anticipates a reconceptualization of centre/periphery debates as they evolve against the backdrop of the financial crisis. In the remainder of this article, I attend to these key sections to synthesise the central strands of my argument.

The first describes the instant mediatisation of Lehman's collapse. Focalised through Jende and Neni, it captures a general bewilderment:

[Jende] heard a journalist say that the collapse was a massive earthquake that would reverberate across the world for months to come ...

Neni placed her hand on her chest. "Does it mean Mr. Edwards has no job now?"

Neither of them asked the next question – did it mean Jende would have no job, too? ... Similar questions would burrow into the minds of many in New York City in the coming weeks. Many would be convinced that the plague that had descended on the homes of former Lehman employees was only a few blocks from theirs ... virtually everyone who stood along the path where money flowed to and from the Street fretted and panicked that day. For some, the fears were justified: Their bread and wine would indeed disappear, along with the billions of dollars that vanished the day Lehman died.' (Mbue, 2016, p. 174)

Once again, the form/content relationship here, especially the frame, is revealing in light of Marxian debates which have often relegated the former in favour of the latter: 'Marxist aesthetics is an aesthetics based on content with form playing a subordinate role, just as the superstructure is subordinate to the economic base' (Ngara, 1985, p. 3). Typically, the media borrow from natural disasters, suggesting something all too man-made cannot be fully comprehended without such analogies. The eschatological urgency is intensified via this global emphasis, as well as potential duration (Saleh, 2010, p. 1). Read in a context where walls, real or virtual, are high on political agendas, the passage also pivots around discourses of protectionism, isolationism, tariffs and trade. This carries more than a hint of Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest*

Stage of Capitalism, cited by Ngugi as one of two books to read if you want to understand anything about ‘African literature’ (1986, p. 63). Returning to the passage, Mbue’s commitment to tracing the ripple effects of such fallouts are also evident in the concluding lines which, as well as personifying Lehman as a haemorrhaging body politic, demonstrates how and why this is symptomatic of the atrophy of an even bigger behemoth (‘the Street’). Equally revealing are apocalyptic allusions to plague. If this accords with the earlier Old Testament imagery of all-consuming fires and floods, it also resonates in peculiarly contemporary terms with capitalism defined by its viral and/or virtual nature. This recalls Obama’s 2009 Cairo address, in which he revealingly juxtaposed fiscal cataclysm with pandemics: ‘we have learned from recent experience that when a financial system weakens in one country, prosperity is hurt everywhere. When a new flu infects one human being, all are at risk’ (Dionne Jr., 2017, p. 125). The fissure between rhetoric and reality is once more evident here. This in turn complements Mbue’s concluding comparison, where the food (bread) and drink (wine) of life are figured alongside the evaporation of vast, spectral sums. As such, the passage’s most disconcerting feature is Neni’s structurally and thematically central question, which might echo the axiomatic, destroyed body at the heart of Adichie’s Lagosian description. As at strategic points throughout the ambiguous *Behold the Dreamers*, it is telling that Mbue leaves this question open-ended.

If solutions remain in short supply, Mbue foregrounds the processes by which her characters appreciate crises lexicons, as well as their genealogies, in a manner befitting Marx. As above, readers are invited to interrogate those rather ossified, quasi-ontological discourses associated with the global South and North. One of the most striking moments records how Lehman’s fall destabilises Jende’s sense of the US, echoing the Obama citation above (Dionne Jr., 2017, p. 181):

He thought about how strange and sad and scary it was that Americans were talking about an “economic crisis,” a phrase Cameroonians heard on the radio and TV virtually every day in the late eighties, when the country entered a prolonged financial downturn ... No one could tell how long it would take before this avoidable pandemonium that Lehman’s fall had caused would end. It could take years, the experts on TV said. Maybe up to five years, some said, especially now that the crisis was spreading around the world and people were losing secure jobs, losing life’s savings, losing families, losing sanities. (Mbue, 2016, pp. 183-184)

If the final image of proliferating catastrophe resonates with virological discourses, the more significant counterpoint is that between Cameroon's situation in the late eighties (subject, as with many other African countries, to predatory debt repayment and other structural conditions. See Krishnan, 2019, pp. 137-174), and the neo-liberal hyper-reality of America today. While reliant on what we might imagine to be exclusively Euro-American pronouns, Feldner et al's Marxian reflection on the dialectic between debt and capitalist expansion is suggestive: 'Through debt we have been living on borrowed time; yet, without the prospect of real growth the issue of debt sustainability only foreshadows a much trickier one, for the covenant of capitalist societies itself is rendered nil and void' (2014, p. 1). When seen in relation to scholarship concerning market implosion, we might revisit Sartre on Fanon to consider how far such downturns in the global North function as 'boomerang effects' of those experienced in the global South decades earlier (2011, p. 17). Read in light of intertwined concerns with American Dreams more redundant than resuscitated, Ifemelu's response to Obinze also inverts traditional remittance flows: "How can you be sending me money from Nigeria? It should be the other way around" (Adichie, 2013, p. 145). The overarching and unresolved question remains: how symptomatic is this of disrupted socio-economic orders and impoverishment, both domestic and transnational? Put another way, how does it capture those systemic 'contradictions' (Ngugi, 2018, p. 161, p. 181 and p. 186) so beloved of writers, Mbue and Adichie amongst them, particularly given the latter's recent rendering of Trump as a version of Nigerian big-man-*real-politik*?

As Jende's post-crash diagnosis evolves, it becomes clear how this section weaves together some of the novel's key imagistic and conceptual strands:

More jobs would be lost, with no hope of being found in the immediate future. The Dow would drop in titanic percentages. It would rise and fall and rise and fall, over and over, like a demonic wave. 401(k)s would be cut in half, disappear as if stolen by maleficent aliens ... Dream homes would not be bought. Dream wedding plans would be reconsidered. Dream vacations would not be taken, no matter how many days had been worked in the past year, no matter how much respite was needed.

In many different ways it would be an unprecedented plague, a calamity like the one that had befallen the Egyptians in the Old Testament. The only difference between the Egyptians then and the Americans now, Jende reasoned, was that the Egyptians had been cursed by their own wickedness. They had called an abomination upon their land by worshipping idols and enslaving their fellow humans, all so they could live in splendor.

They had chosen riches over righteousness, rapaciousness over justice. The Americans had done no such thing.

And yet, all through the land, willows would weep for the end of many dreams. (Mbue, 2016, pp. 184-185)

Shaped, if not informed, by the multimedia overload that explodes in the crash's wake, Jende is once more unable to imagine events beyond an eschatological register. Tempestuous markets are likened to demonic waves, recalling Obama's inaugural warning about 'gathering clouds and raging storms' (Dionne Jr., 2017, p. 97). More striking is the lexical shift from natural to supernatural realms ('maleficent aliens'). If this complements Kimmage's sense that '[t]he American Dream has physics and metaphysics, a material and a spiritual component' (2011, p. 27) in a manner that also recalls Mbembe's defence of Afropolitanism as multifaceted critical reflection of African 'planetary' being (2016, pp. 29-31), it similarly suggests the hermeneutic models we use to decipher the labyrinthine world of risk finance owe more to speculative, science and/or 'astral' fiction than anything else. Mbue, however, deepens Jende's intertextual framework by invoking the Bible, giving these 'astral' concerns weight in the process. Once again, ancient Africa is a counterpoint to the contemporary US, suggesting that twenty-first century diagnostics, reliant on contagion and virology, are in dialogue with an Old Testament preoccupied with the causes and consequences of plague. This in turn might be seen to chime with Marx's own reliance on the ambiguities and productive tensions of literature, from Shakespeare to Defoe via Tolstoy, for his diagnostic purposes (see Eagleton, 2012 and Prawer, 1976). While Jende must make the ideological distinction between hubristically cursed Egyptians and righteous Americans to inoculate himself against a doubt threatening to overwhelm the last vestiges of his immigrant 'dream' (the passage's most repeated word), Mbue offers a devastating supplement in the final Ayi Kwei Armah-esque 'And yet.' The section is pivotal. While it relies on suitably fatalistic rhetoric at the outset, it ends in a manner that reminds us of the etymological roots of 'apocalypse' – both end **and** beginning. While significant elements of Jende's American Dream seem to crumble with Lehman's fall and the curses it threatens to unleash, it also creates an interregnum in the Gramscian sense that appealed to Nadine Gordimer, amongst other African writers (1983). In terms of wider debates about developments within postcolonial capitalism and the lineages of Marxist theory, as well as how these sit in terms of Obama's aspirant rhetoric, it is

once again crucial that the territory on which new dreams are imagined is African rather than American. When considered in relation to Brennan's critique of economics as 'an absent signifier in cultural studies unless, of course, it has been semanticized and dissipated into a libidinal or affective sense' (2006, p. 211), the counter-hegemonic benefits of materially-anchored readings multiply.

While the central spheres in *Americanah* and *Behold the Dreamers* are African and American, there are also strategic moments where Mbue, in particular, reflects on 'the juggernaut of global capitalism' (Chibber, 2013, p. 288) as it hurtles through other regions. This is particularly prominent towards the close, with the reader left to consider how certain formal decisions might have been influenced by recent 'crises.' The juxtaposition of two reflections is particularly revealing. As preparations for his family's Cameroonian return intensify, Jende and Winston discuss the omni-pertinent question of US/Mexico relations:

"One day, I'm telling you, there will be no more Mexicans crossing the border to come to America. Just wait and see."

"Maybe it will be Americans running to Mexico," Jende said.

"I won't be surprised if that happens one day," Winston agreed, and they both burst into laughter at the image of a multitude of Americans surging across the Rio Grande." (Mbue, 2016, p. 323)

Whether 'multitude' is a knowing nod to Hardt and Negri or not, this brief, deceptively light-hearted exchange once again drags paradigms and discourses of global North/South relations centre stage. Given the turbulence of postcolonial capitalism, is the notion of Americans flooding Mexico so absurd? In this particular instance, of course, these very cartographical notions are as fluid as the Rio Grande, jeopardising any wall building plans in this particular contact/conflict zone. Remaining with the physics and metaphysics of water/liquidity, it is also revealing that Mbue supplements this with perhaps the most materially tragic of all fallouts associated with the violence of neoliberalism today. It plays out on the 'death sea' (Jick and Toh, 2018, p. 17):

When [Jende] had told [his mother] of his plan to return home, she had wondered why he was coming back when others were running out of Limbe, when many in his age group were fleeing to Bahrain and Qatar, or trekking and taking a succession of crowded buses to get from Cameroon to Libya so they could cross to Italy on leaky boats and arrive there with dreams of a

happier life if the Mediterranean didn't swallow them alive. (Mbue, 2016, pp. 323-324)

Given *Behold the Dreamers*' overarching concerns with the vicissitudes of postcolonial capitalism inflected by the global financial crisis, it is appropriate that Neni's sense of Cameroonian futurity is entangled in discourses of gain and loss, credit and debt, boom and bust:

For her children, Neni wavered between joy and sorrow – joy for the beautiful things Cameroon would give them; sorrow for the things it wouldn't ... In Limbe, Liomi and Timba would have many things they would not have had in America, but they would lose far too many things ... while there existed great towns and cities all over the world, there was a certain kind of pleasure, a certain type of adventurous and audacious childhood, that only New York City could offer a child. (Mbue, 2016, pp. 361-362)

The ambiguity and ambivalence of these concluding reflections are fitting in the context of the Jonga family's decision to swap one 'domain of precarity' for another (Ferguson, 2015, p. 32). Whether or not the 'audacious' childhood is a purposive gesture to *The Audacity of Hope*, this particular reflection once again invites us to transpose Obama's US-specific meditation on 'Americans' to those return narratives that shape the conclusions of *Americanah* and *Behold the Dreamers*: 'They are by turns hopeful and frightened about the future. Their lives are full of contradictions and ambiguities' (2007, p. 24).

Conclusion

Beyond its titular resonance with *Behold the Dreamers* and *Americanah*, *Dreams from My Father* is the text that inspires Ifemelu's fleeting sense of American belonging against the backdrop of what Na'Imah H. Ford calls 'a multi-layered, racialized milieu of nationhood and globalization' (2018, p. 55): 'She was absorbed and moved by the man she met in those pages ... He reminded her of Obinze's expression for people he liked. *Obi ocha*. A clean heart. She believed Barack Obama ... and said, "If only the man who wrote this book could be the president of America" (Adichie, 2013, p. 354). If this captures the hope felt by many during an election embroiled in the financial crisis, it is necessary to position Obama's memoir as a prolonged reflection on ambiguity and ambivalence, as well as the dialectics of promise and failure. This relates to his racial and existential status within America, as

well as his complex relationship with 'Africa'. As David Borman maintains, '[w]hen the final section of the memoir narrates his first trip to Kenya, it is no surprise that the country and its continent signify ambiguously for Obama' (2016, p. 108). From ambiguity, we shift to ambivalence as Borman concludes, 'Obama's chosen links to Kenya happen as an ambivalent return, and in building his African family through return – rather than mythologizing Africa as a homeland comfortably in the past – he makes a space for Africa as a generative force in shaping his identity' (2016, p. 115). In light of the argument I have pursued throughout, this final sense of Africa as productive, mobile and generative, rather than ossified, mythologized and stagnant is suggestive when imagining how these novels pry open evolving discourses of African Marxisms, postcolonial capitalisms and Afropolitanisms, all of which might be framed in terms of their structural contradictions. As with Obama, the African returns of both Ifemelu and the Jonga family are left to 'signify ambiguously' for the reader, in much the same way the US is mapped over the course of these overlapping, yet distinct fictions.

In terms of how Obama's own writing might inform debates about African renaissance(s) and Africapitalism, it is revealing to compare his productively ambiguous rendering of Kenya with the later, more manifesto-driven vision captured in *The Audacity of Hope*. Recalling a meeting with Google co-founder Larry Page, who he lauds as an American pioneer able to take advantage of the very economic meritocracy denied Jende, for instance, Obama describes his encounter with a 'three-dimensional image of the earth rotated on a large flat-panel monitor' (2007, p. 140). Reflecting on this technological survey, he states:

The image was mesmerizing, more organic than mechanical, as if I were glimpsing the early stages of some accelerating evolutionary process, in which all the boundaries between men – nationality, race, religion, wealth – were rendered invisible and irrelevant, so that the physicist in Cambridge, the bond trader in Tokyo, the student in a remote Indian village, and the manager of a Mexico City department store were drawn into a single, constant, thrumming conversation, time and space giving way to a world spun entirely out of light. Then I noticed the broad swaths of darkness as the globe spun on its axis – most of Africa, chunks of South Asia, even some portions of the United States, where the thick cords of light dissolved into a few discrete strands. (Obama, 2007, pp. 140-141)

As with so many conventional renderings of colonial, postcolonial and neo-colonial capitalism, the African continent is figured as darkness and lack, recalling Krishnan's

discussion of the ‘dynamics of visibility’ (2018, p. 13). This obviously conjures with Hegelian ghosts, so influential for Marx, as well as those Marxist spectres so enchanting for the ‘African’ Derrida (Wise, 2002). Revisiting *The Audacity of Hope* in the wake of Obama’s departure from office, as well as the ongoing fallout of the financial crisis, however, the final pairing of ‘most of Africa’ and ‘some portions of the United States’ is suggestive. If neither Mbue’s nor Adichie’s novels suggest that one or the other has all the answers, I find their explorations of the peculiar dynamics of postcolonial capitalisms and multiple Marxisms productive. This is because rather than in spite of their signifying ‘ambiguously.’

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