



**“A MAN CAN FIND A HOME ANYWHERE”: AFRICAN MOBILITY
AND THE FALL OF DREAMS IN *BEHOLD THE DREAMERS***

**“PODE-SE ENCONTRAR UM LAR EM QUALQUER LUGAR”:
MOBILIDADE AFRICANA E A PERDA DE SONHOS
EM *BEHOLD THE DREAMERS***

**“SE PUEDE ENCONTRAR UN HOGAR EN CUALQUIER LUGAR”:
MOVILIDAD AFRICANA Y LA PÉRDIDA DE
SUEÑOS IN *BEHOLD THE DREAMERS***

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ABSTRACT:

Inspired by the notion of mobility explored by Zachary Guthrie’s book *Bound for Work: Labor, Mobility, and Colonial Rule in Central Mozambique, 1940-1965*, this study aims to analyze the journey of the Cameroonian characters in Imbolo Mbue’s novel *Behold the Dreamers* by showing how travelling outside of Africa can become a means of representing and understanding what is considered foreign and Other. In addition, assist on the understanding of self-perception and self-definition (Moffat), but also how said understanding does not exclude a complex net of illusions, disappointments and failures. As *Behold the Dreamers* shows, the voluntarily moving outside of Africa in search of a better life is not simple for it is burdened with political, racial, social class, and employment issues, as well as misconceptions of the West.

KEYWORDS: Journey, mobility, African Literatures, Cameroon Literature

RESUMO:

Inspirado pela noção de mobilidade explorada pelo livro Bound for Work: Labor, Mobility, and Colonial Rule in Central Mozambique, 1940-1965, de Zachary Guthrie, este estudo pretende analisar a viagem dos personagens camaroneses no romance Behold the Dreamers de Imbolo Mbue, demonstrando como viajar para fora de África pode ser um meio de representar e entender o que é considerado estrangeiro e Outro. Além do mais, tem como intenção ajudar na autopercepção e autodefinição (Moffat), mas também como essa percepção não exclui uma complexa rede de ilusões, desilusões e fracassos. Como Behold the Dreamers mostra, o movimento voluntário para fora de África na procura de uma vida melhor não é simples, uma vez que este se encontra carregado de problemas políticos, raciais, laboriais e de classe social, assim como de falsas percepções do Ocidente.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Viagem, mobilidade, literaturas africanas, literatura camaronesa

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RESUMEN:

Inspirado en la noción de movilidad trabajada en el libro Bound for Work: Labor, Mobility, and Colonial Rule in Central Mozambique, 1940-1965 de Zachary Guthrie, este estudio busca analizar el viaje de los personajes cameruneses en la novela Behold the Dreamers de Imbolo Mbue. Demostraremos que viajar hacia fuera de África puede ser un medio de representar y entender lo que se considera extranjero y Otro. Además, nuestra intención es contribuir para la formulación de un otro tipo de autopercepción y autodefinición (Moffat), observando cómo esta percepción no excluye una compleja red de ilusiones, desilusiones y fracasos. Como Behold the Dreamers nos enseña, el movimiento voluntario hacia fuera de África, asociado a la búsqueda por una vida mejor, no es sencillo, dado que se encuentra cargado de problemas políticos, raciales, laborales y de clase social, así como de falsas percepciones del Occidente.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Viaje, movilidad, literaturas africanas

“There are two kinds of people in the world, those who leave home, and those who don’t.”

Tayari Jones

The journey is arguably the most common among literary motifs. One can merely think of Homer’s *The Iliad* and *the Odyssey* to develop an argument of its fundamental presence in Literature. Throughout history the motif of the journey has become an essential element for many works of fiction assuming not only the form of physical displacement, significant to the narrative structure and character development, but also as symbolic or metaphorical movement. As mentioned by Pedro Theobald and Luara Pinto Minuzzi “aviagem constitui um dos temas mais antigos e frequentes das várias literaturas, e se mantém porque apresenta a capacidade de expressar não apenas relatos sobre o deslocamento físico, mas engloba toda uma representação simbólicado movimento mental e intelectual da própria vida” (THEOBALD, MINUZZI, 2014, p. 821). Such movements, as they mention, “(...) implicam abandono do anteriormente próprio e busca do inicialmente estrangeiro, que pode vir a ser apropriado e incorporado no futuro” (THEOBALD, MINUZZI, 2014, p. 822). Aníbal Pinto de Castro concurs by stating that “(...) a viagem como tema ou como motivo, quer no plano meramente descritivo, quer numa dimensão alegórica ou simbólica e, por conseguinte, poética, está presente em todas as literaturas, desde o Livro do Êxodo, o segundo de quantos compõem o texto Sagrado da Bíblia” (CASTRO, 2005, p. 780). Xavier de Maistre’s (1763–1852) humorous exploration of his bedroom is arguably one of the most striking examples of a symbolic journey. The journey is birthed out of the capacity of imagining and creating. It can involve the process of knowing the “other” and their customs, values and traditions; it can take the form of a “virtual” journey, by the utilizing memory or imagination; or it may come out of the need of escaping from a country, a way of live, and in worse case scenarios, a running from wars, famine and social, politic and economic crisis. Meryem Belcadi further affirms that “A viagem contribui para a descoberta do outro e também para a descoberta de si mesmo, ou seja, a viagem permite ver melhor o outro,

e essa visão também ajuda a elucidar sobre o conhecimento próprio” (BELCADI, 2016, p. 49). Even though, Belcadi states that every journey has some fundamental rules, “a viagem tem ida e volta, partida e chegada, e entre esses dois, há a descoberta e as suas consequências sobre o viajante” (BELCADI, 2016, p. 49), sometimes that journey has no return to the place of origin, as, for instance, in the case of millions of displaced around the world.

Focusing specifically on Africa, Rachel Moffat states that even though there is an abundance of fiction about Africa, by both Africans and foreigners, “Africa has throughout the twentieth century been primarily represented by Western writers” (MOFFAT, 2009, p. 9), constructing their own images of the continent. Despite these Western fabrications, “African literature by Africans has written back’ (...), profoundly realigning Western perceptions of Africa” (MOFFAT, 2009, p. 9). Moffat stresses that besides advances and developments in fiction, they are not evident in travel writing. The critic goes more in-dept to reveal this absence in African literature. Even though it is a long quotation, it is worth paying close attention to her words:

Few African writers use travel at home as a means for self-exploration and definition. The exception, (...), is South Africa, where both white and black writers reflect upon their connections to their native country and culture. (...) Westerners have a strong sense of their national and cultural identities, having examined and defined them closely. Such self-scrutiny, at least in travel writing, is less well-developed in Africa, a vast continent of widely varying cultures, languages, terrain, and economic and political development. The Western culture of travel, a physical journey paralleled by an internal one, a discovery of self, is not yet a well-developed theme in indigenous African travel texts. There is still great scope for Africans to ask questions of themselves, of the similarities and differences which co-exist on one continent and whether it is possible for individuals of different tribal and national origins to be united or defined collectively” (MOFFAT, 2009, p. 9)

Regardless of Moffat’s description of this lack, African literature is also not a stranger to the journey motif in its diverse forms: travel reports, escape portrayals from the reality of war, social, political and economic mobility inside and outside the continent, as well as dreaming as a form of traveling. Her analysis is centered on the twentieth-century African literature, more specifically that of representations of Ethiopia, Kenya, Republic of Congo and South Africa, and one can attest to a slow but steady rise of African twentieth-first century narratives where the journey is a central motif; mostly by writers of afro-descent living in different diasporas across the world. To name just a few and, in this case, all women, one can find writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Nigeria), Sarah Ladipo Manyika (British-Nigerian), and Nadifa Mohamed (Somali-British) developing narratives portraying the journey as a confrontation with Western and African cultures. Post-independence Mozambican writer, Mia Couto, can

be portrayed as an example for Lusophone African literature as well as an illustration of the narrative form of “dream-traveling.” His novel *Terra Sonâmbula* is a clear case of traveling in one’s own imagination to escape the harsh realities of war. Another example about this writer will be mentioned later. Regardless of the point mentioned above, Rachel Moffat alerts for the fact that “Travel writing has long been important for understanding the West’s relationship with non-Western countries and cultures. Conversely, changing attitudes to other people and places affect travel writing so there is an ongoing reciprocal adjustment in vision” (MOFFAT, 2009, p. 1). She further adds that “travel writing has made an important contribution to national and cultural self-definition. And it is now universally understood as a means of representing and understanding what is foreign and Other and consequently, of course, assisting self-perception and self-definition” (MOFFAT, 2009, p. 1). The colonial era was relevant in the sense that it defined later relationships between African and Western countries. As Moffat affirms, “Expressions of colonial perceptions have continued in the postcolonial era as the economic hegemony of America and Europe, and the growing economies of China and India, allow richer continents to remain dominant” (MOFFAT, 2009, p. 8).

Inspired by the notion of mobility explored by Zachary Guthrie’s book *Bound for Work: Labor, Mobility, and Colonial Rule in Central Mozambique, 1940-1965*, this study aims to analyze the journey of the Cameroonian characters in Imbolo Mbue’s novel *Behold the Dreamers* by showing how travelling outside of Africa can become a means of representing and understanding what is considered foreign and Other. In addition, assist on the understanding of self-perception and self-definition (Moffat), but also how said understanding does not exclude a complex net of illusions, disappointments, and failures. As *Behold the Dreamers* shows, the voluntarily moving outside of Africa in search of a better life is not simple for it is burdened with political, racial, social class, and employment issues, as well as misconceptions of the West.

Though Guthrie’s book is centered in Southern Africa with a focus on Mozambique, the notion of mobility used in his migrant laborers’ analysis can become a useful tool here. The author shows that mobility played an important role in African workers’ lives, allowing for diverse work and life opportunities in a colonial society. Certainly, this was something that was not limited by the Portuguese Empire. Guthrie also demonstrates the dynamics of autonomy and coercion within workers’ travel to and from worksites and how these workers were able to use labor to their advantage. In one of his conclusions, he refers that “controlling mobility remains essential in controlling labor” (GUTHRIE, 2018, p. 158), as it persists to be a continuous push and pull between migrants’ quest for improved economic working circumstances and governments’ control over workers’ mobility and working conditions for their own economic and political purposes. African mobility inside one’s own country, in the continent or abroad, has been a reality during colonial times or in its aftermath. The reasons may vary, nonetheless,

working purposes are of special interest for the scope of this study since the main characters of *Behold the Dreamers* emigrate to the United States based on working opportunities in search for a better life. At the country of arrival, as we shall see, they face working conditions that they do not have much control of. Their mobility, in turn, is affected by their lack of labor law regulations. The Jonga family experiences, not only the difference between here and there, but “the greater (...) gap between a foreign place and one’s own home and culture, [that leads to] the greater the impression of discovery and exoticism” (MOFFAT, 2009, p. 2).

Before dwelling on Imbolo Mbue’s novel, it is of significance to have a brief context of the history of Cameroon Literature in order to better understand the crescent visibility and impact that Cameroon writers are starting to accomplish outside of their own country. In his article “Preface to a History of Cameroon Literature in English,” Stephen Arnold addresses the issue of the relatively invisibility of Cameroonian literature, affirming that “in spite of its existence, anglophone Cameroon writing was conscious of itself only in fragments, having been isolated from the mainstream of literature on the continent, and even within its own national boundaries by Cameroon’s unique historical circumstance” (ARNOLD, 1983, p. 498). In fact, it is difficult to find a dense body of literary criticism on such literature, even after almost forty years from his article. This is not to say that it is not growing, as the body of literary works and literary analysis shows. The book by Emmanuel Fru Doh from 2014, *Anglophone-Cameroon Literature. An Introduction* is a significant example. Fru Doh presents the origins and growth of a relatively young but compelling literature. The country’s especial situation—colonial and postcolonial—certainly contributed to an “(...) imbalance between francophone and anglophone literary productivity” (ARNOLD, 1983, p. 500), Arnold explains. Despite this imbalance, and while arguing against Patrick Sam-Kubam’s article on the “Paucity of Literary Creativity on Anglophone Cameroon” (1978), Arnold affirms that “Anyone surveying anglophone Cameroon literature from within Cameroon alone would naturally be ignorant of many things published in foreign reviews and by foreign presses” (ARNOLD, 1983, p.504). Other examples can be found in the book *Perspectives on Written Cameroon Literature in English* by Shadrach A. Ambanasom from 2013, or in the article by Joyce Ashuntantang from 2016, “Anglophone Cameroon literature 1959–90: A brief overview,” where the latter argues that the writers from the period of 1959-1984, “like their counterparts elsewhere in Africa, critique the ‘othering’ of formerly colonized people in texts written by the colonizers. To counteract this marginalization, and as a vital part of the process of decolonization, these texts seek to provide voice to the ‘subaltern’ in order to expose the misrepresentation and ‘negativization’ so rampant in colonial writings.” (ASHUNTANTANG, 2016, p. 109). The second phase of Anglophone Cameroon literature, according to Ashuntantang, started in the mid-eighties and reached its apex in the 1990s. In her words, “The literature of this period is an imaginative response to the political, social, and economic climate of this time. (...) the 1980s and 1990s were pivotal decades for Anglophone Cameroon literature” (ASHUNTANTANG, 2016, p. 109). Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyiadds

in her study on post-colonial literature that “Cameroon writing (...) is actively engaging [in] personal, local, national, international and global issues” (NFAH-ABBENYI, 2016, p. 11).

It is in the last period of Cameroon literature that we can situate Imbolo Mbue, a writer that appeared recently in the literary scene. Her first novel *Behold the Dreamers* was published in 2016 and received the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction and the Blue Metropolis Words to Change Award. Mbue was born in Limbe, in 1981, where she was raised until she moved to the United States, in 1998, to pursue her higher education studies. Her debut novel draws from her own experiences as an immigrant as well as other immigrants pursuing the American dream. In an interview with Jeff Vasishta, she explains that her “definition of the American Dream is quite different from Jende and Neni’s [two of the main characters in her novel]—to me it’s more about opportunities to make the most of one’s potential than it is about material/financial success—but like them, I left Limbe, Cameroon for the US, excited about what lay ahead” (VASISHTA, 2016, n/p). Her experience during the 2008 financial crisis led her to realize some of the deepest problems engrained in American society, and to write about immigration as well as the issues associated with it:

I went to college and graduate school here, and then got a job in New York, which I lost during the recession. It was while I was unemployed that I went for a walk one day and noticed chauffeurs waiting for executives in front of the Time Warner building in midtown Manhattan. I’d never met anyone in America who had a chauffeur so I was intrigued by what I’d seen. Being that some of the chauffeurs looked like they could be African immigrants, I wondered what the relationship between a white executive and his African immigrant chauffeur might be like, and the different ways the recession might have affected them. I began writing a story about a fictional Lehman Brothers executive and his Cameroonian-immigrant chauffeur and, after several drafts, I started looking for an agent. (VASISHTA, 2016, n/p)

Even though the focus of this article is not on the publishing/readership problems that most African countries face, it is worth noting that *Behold the Dreamers* has not been published in Cameroon. When asked about this specific matter, Mbue replied:

I haven’t been back to Limbe recently but I imagine that, thanks to the Internet, a few people there have heard that someone in America wrote a book about a family from Limbe. The book hasn’t been published in Cameroon so most book-lovers there know nothing about it, though, I’m hopeful it will be available there one day—I imagine readers there, particularly in Limbe, will have a singular interpretation of the story. (VASISHTA, 2016, n/p)

Despite the novel’s acclamation and the merit awards received, only one short analysis

was dedicated to it, amongst several national (U.S.) and international book reviews. In her book review, Elizabeth Toohey affirms that *Behold the Dreamers* “follows the path of a Cameroonian family whose members, like many newcomers to America, harbor dreams of success unavailable to them back home. Undocumented immigration, the widening gulf between rich and poor, and the thinly veiled racism of an avowedly ‘post-racial’ culture converge in this new generation of immigrants’ painful encounter with the American Dream” (TOOHEY, 2018, p. 23).

The Cameroonian family is composed of the protagonists Jende and Neni Jonga. The reader follows their journey as they decide to immigrate to New York City, landing at the heart of the 2008 financial crisis. While Sarah Wyman’s analysis of the novel explores the tropes “of food and shared feasting to enrich representations of family and inter-cultural encounters” (WYMAN, 2019, p. 4), I will take a different path here, by looking at the class, race and gender issues at stake when one makes the decision of leaving Africa. These issues are bound in the novel to the notion of mobility (or lack of it) and political and economic control. The fact that the novel opens with Jende’s job interview with Clark Edwards, a Lehman Brothers executive, and in his office, he spots a newspaper headline that reads “Whites’ Great hope? Barack Obama and the Dream of a Color-Blind America” (5), is certainly not unintentional. As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor refers in her book *From #BlackLives Matter to Black Liberation*,

Barack Obama became president right at a time when Black people needed help the most, yet he has done precious little. In fact, when he ran again in 2012, he reassured the nation (or at least white voters), ‘I’m not the president of Black America. I’m the president of the United States of America.’ It’s not only that Obama is reluctant to offer or support a Black agenda: he has also played a destructive role in legitimizing the ‘culture of poverty’ discourse (...). (TAYLOR, 2016, p. 12)

Taylor also gives insight that can help understand the pitfalls of the notion of a “color-blind America.” She explains that

It is important to understand “colorblindness” as much more than the denial of racism. Colorblindness has become the default setting for how Americans understand how race and racism work. It is repeatedly argued that the absence of racial insult means that racial discrimination is not at play. Indeed, the mere mention of race as a possible explanation, or as a means of providing greater context, risks accusations of ‘playing the race card’—a way of invoking race to silence disagreement. This is deployed to hide or obscure inequality and disparities between African Americans and whites. It has helped to elevate and amplify politics that blame Blacks for their won oppression. (TAYLOR, 2016, p. 72)

That specific headline that captured Jende’s attention at the beginning of the novel can be interpreted as sign of what waiting for him and his family would look like; a peak into the future of lessons to be learned. As Taylor puts it: “Colorblindness and ‘postracial’ politics are vested in the false ideas that the United States is a meritocratic society where hard work makes the difference between those who are successful and those who are not” (72). As we shall observe, *Behold the Dreamers* deconstructs these false ideas through the journey of the Jonga family.

The journey of Jende and his hiring as Clarks’ chauffeur is a lie in its roots, despite being a necessity. This was, after all, the only way to get the job:

What would he have said if Mr. Edwards had asked more questions? How would he have explained that his work permit and driver’s license were valid *only* for as long as his asylum application was pending or approved, and that if his application were to be denied, all his documents would become invalid and there would be no green card? (...) Would there have been a way to convince Mr. Edwards that he was an honest man, actually but one who was now telling a thousand tales to Immigration just so he could one day become an American citizen and live in this great nation forever? (MBUE, 2016, p. 7-8)

Jende has to hide his desperation in order to be able to get the job that would give his family a slightly better economic condition, or as his “fast-talking” Nigerian lawyer says: “We all do what we gotta do to become American, *abi*?” (MBUE, 2016, p. 20). Winston, his more experienced cousin, makes clear to Jende that race difference is something that is part of American society no matter how hidden it may be, “You think a black man gets a good job in this country by sitting in front of white people and telling the truth? Please, don’t make me laugh” (MBUE, 2016, p. 17). However, lying to be part of a society does not come without a price for Jende.

Neni, Jende’s wife, becomes enchanted, to say the least, with New York City. She is impressed by the splendor of the Big Apple and, in being so, she easily falls into the traps of artificial objects and the illusion of economic purchase power that fake brand clothes and accessories can bring to those who can’t afford the “real thing,” not to mention the fantasy that one day you too will be able to get that “real thing.” “How she loved New York City. She still couldn’t believe she was here. Couldn’t believe she was walking around shopping for a Gucci, no longer a jobless, unwed mother, sitting in her father’s house in Limbe, sunrise to sunset, dry season to rainy season, waiting for Jende to rescue her” (MBUE, 2016, p. 12). Neni starts comparing, as is natural in the traveler’s journey, to her own country and its possibilities—the place of departure—to her hypothetically new one—the place she so fondly daydreamed about and where she had finally arrived:

Limbe was now some faraway town, a place she had loved less with every new day Jende was not there. (...). A year and half later now and New York city was her home, a place with all the pleasures she desired. (...) For the first time in her life, she had a job, as a home health aide through an agency that paid her in cash, since she had no working papers. She was a matriculated student for the first time in sixteen years (...). And for the first time in her life, she had a dream besides marriage and motherhood: to become a pharmacist like the ones everyone respected in Limbe because they handed out health and happiness in pill bottles. (MBUE, 2016, p. 13-14)

Neni strongly believes that she “(...) was close enough to having, everything she’s ever [ever wanted] in life” (MBUE, 2016, p. 14). In some sense, she would completely fit in American society since she places a firm emphasis in the “havings” of life, something that her hard experience abroad will not change in her. At the beginning, her husband shared her dreams and beliefs, especially when he had yet initiated his journey into the United States:

He was leaving Cameroon in a month! Leaving to certainly not return after three months. Who traveled to America only to return to a future of nothingness in Cameroon after a mere three months? Not young men like him, not people facing a future of poverty and dependency in their own country. No, people like him did not visit America. They got there and stayed there until they could return home as conquerors—as green card- or American passport—bearing conquerors with pockets full of dollars and photos of a happy life. (MBUE, 2016, p. 19)

Jende’s delusion and innocence regarding his new country persists throughout nearly the entire narrative. He tells his boss: “Everyone wants to come to America, sir. Everyone. To be in this country, sir. To live in this country. Ah! It is the greatest thing in the world, Mr. Edwards” (MBUE, 2016, p. 39). And he explains in a quite embarrassed and trembly way that in his country, “(...) for you to become somebody, you have to be born somebody first. You do not come from a family with money, forget it. (...) I came from nothing. No name. No money. My father is a poor man. (...)” (MBUE, 2016, p. 40). When Clark asks him if he thinks America has something for him, he replies enthusiastically that “America has something for everyone” (MBUE, 2016, p. 40), using Obama as an example of what can be achieved in that country. Like many black Americans who viewed Obama as a sign of hope, Jende was also innocent about the traps of politics. He was not aware, as many still are not, that “colorblindness is a critical weapon in the arsenal of the political powerful and economic elite to divide those who have an interest in uniting to make demands on the state and capital to provide the means for a decent quality of life” (TAYLOR, 2016, p. 72). In his blinded view of the country, Jende goes as far as believing “that anything is possible for anyone who is American. (...) And in fact (...), I hope that one day my son will grow up to be a great man like you” ((MBUE, 2016, p. 46). He thus looks at the Western white world as something to look up to, to be part of, in order to achieve

success and be recognized in life.

Jende’s journey as he circulates around New York driving Clark Edwards to and from his business meetings, and the rest of his family members on their daily chores, also becomes a journey of self-awareness as he starts to get a better grasp of the society around him. He begins to understand how Americans look at the *other*, in this case, the Africans, and how their (un)knowledge is based on misinterpretations, common-places, superficiality and uneasiness:

Whenever Jende met such women (at Liomi’s school; at Marcus Garvey Park; in the livery cab he used to drive), they often said something like, oh my God, I saw this really crazy show about such-and-such in Africa. Or, my cousin/friend/neighbor used to date an African man, and he was a really nice guy. Or, even worse, if they asked him where in Africa he was from and he said Cameroon, they proceeded to tell him that a friend’s daughter once went to Tanzania or Uganda. (MBUE, 2016, p. 48-49)

With time and by listening to Clark’s phone conversations, Jende also starts to become aware of the intricacies of the business world and how the people who worked for Lehman Brothers, a global financial services firm, were “cooking the books.”² Around the same time, he also learns that his days in America are numbered since his asylum application was not approved: “He would have to go back home. He would have to return to a country where visions of a better life were the birthright of a blessed few, to a town from which dreamers like him were fleeing daily” (MBUE, 2016, p. 60). Nonetheless, he does not want to give up his dream and will do anything that is necessary to remain in America and give his son a better life, even if that entailed “get[ting] rid of their cable and Internet and tak[ing] second jobs (...), and [having] to go to bed hungry (...)” ((MBUE, 2016, p. 60). Bubakar, his lawyer, tries to give him hope by exposing the American Immigration System which is anything but a fair system:

‘As far as Immigration is concerned, there are many things that are illegal and many that are gray, and by ‘gray’ I mean the things that are illegal but which the government doesn’t want to spend time worrying about. You understand me, *abi*? My advice to someone like you is to always stay close to the gray area and keep yourself and your family safe. Stay away from any place where you can run into the police—that’s the advice I give to you and to all young black men in this country. The police is for the protection of white people, my brother. Maybe black women and black children sometimes, but not black men. Never black men. Black men and police are palm oil and water. You understand me, eh?’³ ((MBUE, 2016, p. 74)

² Before filing for bankruptcy in 2008, Lehman was the fourth-largest investment bank in the United States.

³ Taylor gives, for instance, the example of Philadelphia, considered the birthplace of American democracy but also the place of one of the most brutal police departments in the country. According to the critic, “When the Department of Justice (DOJ) conducted an investigation of the Philadelphia Police Department from 2007 to 2013,

If we look at Taylor’s analysis of the social, political, and economic dimensions of the prevailing racial order in the U.S., we find a striking resonance of Bubakar’s words and an explanation for his advice to Jende. She bluntly states: “This crisis goes beyond high incarceration rates [of Black men]; indeed, the perpetuation of deeply ingrained stereotypes of African Americans as particularly dangerous, impervious to pain and suffering, careless and carefree, and exempt from empathy, solidarity, or basic humanity is what allows police to kill Black people with no threat of punishment” (TAYLOR, 2016, p. 3). The way the Immigration system works is also a key component of mobility control leaving immigrants with few options to make a decent living. Comparatively to colonial times where governors of colonies control the movement of the colonized by demanding, for instance, forced labor or “contracted” labor, the new “Empires” rest as well on a system of laws where immigrants are forced to move due to the impediments of finding legal employment. Jende becomes more sensitive to the fact that his actions could be misinterpreted due to his skin color when later on in the novel he tries to comfort Mighty, the Edward’s youngest son, who is crying over one of his parents’ fights: “‘Oh, Mighty,’ Jende said, pulling the child to his chest. He thought for a moment that someone might see him and call the police—a black man with a white boy against his chest, inside a luxury car, on the side of a street on the Upper East Side—but he hoped no one would, because he wasn’t going to push the child away as his tears ran full force” (MBUE, 2016, p. 221).

Race clashes and awareness are also part of Neni’s “living dream.” She is reluctant to go to Winstor birthday party because she is not used to being around white people:

What was she going to do or say to those people out there for two hours? She’d never been invited to a party with mostly white people, and even if she had, she would not have attended. (...) Nothing shamed her more than black people embarrassing themselves in front of white people by behaving the way white people expect them to behave. That was the one reason why she had such a hard time understanding African-Americans—they embarrassed themselves in front of white people left and right and didn’t seem to care. (MBUE, 2016, p. 90-91)

When Neni leaves the party, knowing for sure that the look on people’s face meant “What the hell are you doing here, you stupid African woman?” (MBUE, 2016, p. 94), she realizes “that most people on the street were walking with someone who looked like them. (...) Even in New York City, even in a place of many nations and cultures, men and women, young and old, rich and poor, prefer their kind when it came to those they kept closest” (MBUE, 2016, p. 95). Despite her awareness of racial gaps, she is not able to judge the system and actually accepts its normalization: “And why shouldn’t they? It was far easier to do so than to spend one’s limited energy trying to blend into a world one was never meant to be a part of” (MBUE, 2016, p. 95).

it found that 80 percent of the people Philadelphia police officers had shot were African American, even though less than half the city’s population is African American. Perhaps the most important finding, though, is that despite police shootings of unarmed people in violation of the force’s own standards and rules, it is virtually impossible—let alone indict, jail, or prosecute—police for this criminal behavior” (TAYLOR, 2016, p. 2-3).

It is Vince, the Edwards’ hipster son, who has the most accurate view of the U.S. In a car conversation, he tells Jende that he can continue to “unindoctrinate [him] on all the lies [he]’ve been fed about America” (MBUE, 2016, p. 103). Though Jende is still unmoving on his opinion that America is the greatest country in the world, Vince believes that that is the problem, “People don’t want to open their eyes and see the Truth because the illusion suits them. As long as they are fed whatever lies they want to hear they’re happy, because the Truth means nothing to them” (103). He gives the example of his rich parents who “are struggling under the weight of so many pointless pressures, but if they could ever free themselves from this self-inflicted oppression, they could find genuine happiness. Instead, they continue to go down a path of achievements and accomplishments and material success and shit that means nothing because that’s what America’s all about, and now they’re trapped. And they don’t get it!” (MBUE, 2016, p. 103-104).

His mother, Cindy, a nutritionist for models and movie stars and a New York socialite who develops a secret drug addiction, does not understand her son’s rebellion against the family and the capitalist world. She came from nothing but is not aware of the superficial and money-driven society she lives in—still holds her to the same nothingness. Furthermore, she is incapable of understanding her son and would prefer he finds a job at the Lehman Brothers than move to India in pursuit of his true self. She asks: “What does he have against being wealthy? Why should good hardworking people feel bad about their money just because other people don’t have as much money? (...) He found the Truth, and now I am naïve, close-minded, materialistic, lost. The only way I can see the light is to first lose my ego” (MBUE, 2016, p. 137). Cindy also embodies the views of the West towards Africa, fallacies and traps that have sustained the western mind since the colonial era. At a moment where she opens up to Neni about her past of poorness, she tells Neni that she can’t understand what it means to be poor (and white) in America, comparing it to be poor in Africa. She states that “Being poor for you in Africa is fine. Most of you are poor over there. The shame of it, it’s not as bad for you. (...) Over here, it’s embarrassing, humiliating, very painful” (MBUE, 2016, p. 123). Her lack of empathy and self-absorption is notable: “You have no idea how much I’ve endured,” she tells Neni, as if the black woman in front of her have not herself endure as much or more. These views of Africa and Africans can be traced in the Mozambican Mia Couto’s novel *O Outro Pé da Sereia* where the journey is made in the opposite direction, from America to Africa. One of the novel’s characters, Benjamin Southman, is an African-American historian who travels to Mozambique to find ancestral roots and to “collect data that will confirm the hypothesis that ‘the stigma’ of slavery and the colonial past lies at ‘the origin’ of (or ‘explains’) the continent’s current misery” (MADUREIRA, 2008, p. 216). Brought up as an American, and notwithstanding his African ancestry, he views Mozambique, its poverty, through lenses of superiority. What Cindy Edwards as well as Benjamin Southman are incapable of realizing is that when an economic crisis hits, either in Africa or America, is that, as Clark states, “The likes of them were going

to lose money in the short term but they were going to be okay, sooner rather than later, unlike those poor devils on the streets” (MBUE, 2016, p. 181). That is the harsh reality of the capitalist system where those who didn’t have “more conscience on the Street” (182) were the ones who were left unpunished.

When Jende receives his deportation letter, his marriage begins to deteriorate. His views of America change, and he does not think it is the best country in the world anymore. We see his loss of innocence when he tells Neni, after she is impressed by the way white people treated her at a church, that “‘Maybe it is because they don’t have black people there, and they want to have a black family(...) Those kind of white people are always trying to prove to their friends how much they like black people” (MBUE, 2016, p. 229). He decides that it is best to go back to his country. He does not want to humiliate himself even more, he explains to his unmovable wife who will do anything to stay, inclusive thinking about marrying another man to obtain a green card, give her son for adoption, and blackmail Cindy for money; this last one she does accomplish:

‘You think I don’t want to remain in America, too? You think I came to America so that I can leave? I work as a servant to people, driving them all over, the whole day, sometimes the whole week, answering them all over, the whole day, sometimes the whole week, answering yes sir, yes madam, bowing down even to a little child. For what, Neni? What pride are you talking about? I lower myself more than many men would ever lower themselves. What do you think I do it for? For you, for me. Because I want us to stay in America! But if America says they don’t want us in their country, you think I’m going to keep on begging them for the rest of my life? (...)’ (MBUE, 2016, p. 230-231)

After being dismissed as Clark’s chauffeur, he still tries to make ends meet by getting a job at two restaurants, working mornings, afternoons, evenings and weekends and getting paid less than a half of what he used to make. Even though Jende tries to console himself thinking that this is better than not having a job in a bad economy, it was still “an undignified fall” (MBUE, 2016, p. 257).

America thus proves to Jende, as he begins to change his demeanor due to financial stress and health issues, he is still a prisoner of a crude system that does not reward hard work, but corruption. He “much rather be truly free” (MBUE, 2016, p. 259) than to be part of a system that enslaves him every day with no perspectives facing way up the social ladder. His cousin Winston poses a rhetorical question that rather synthesizes the illusion embodied by America: “‘Why does everyone make it sound as if being in America is everything?’” (MBUE, 2016, p. 322). With the question hanging in the air, the Jonga family closes their door on America and entail a journey back home, home here being interpreted in Homi Bhabha’s dual conceptualization:

One—something to do with the normalized, the naturalized, the inevitable, the original. It’s there—the “thereness” of your existence, even more than the “hereness” of your existence. It is always there; this is my home. I understand this landscape. I know these people. I know the language, and so on. So that’s one important concept. And the other, it seems to me, is the kind of Conradian idea that home is what you return to. So, there are these two moments of temporality, these two narrative moments—coming out of the home and somehow allowing yourself to imagine, whether you can or you can’t, that you can go back: so emergence and return are complicit with the concept of home. (BHABHA and STIERSTORFER, 2017, n/p).

Behold the Dreamers suggests, following Bhabha’s notion of home, “that everyone who moves on follows a certain narrative structure” (BHABHA and STIERSTORFER, 2017, n/p). In their movements, there is a narrative since “there are reasons why [they] move; there are the losses of it, of where [they] moved from, and the gains of where [they] move to. (...) it is part of a process of choice and judgment” (BHABHA and STIERSTORFER, 2017, n/p). Furthermore, as Hannah Arendt suggests in her book *The Human Condition*, the author of social action may be the initiator of its unique meaning, but as an agent he cannot control the outcome. Thus, the journey of the Jonga’s was one where they were able to initiate and give meaning to a movement towards a dream. Nonetheless, despite all their efforts, the control of external powers over their mobility and work opportunities rendered that dream to no more than just that, solely a dream.

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