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Cosmopolitan Wounds: Race, Mobility, and Ethical Failure in Nigerian Migrant Literature

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Abstract
This paper interrogates the structural failures and internal contradictions of liberal universalism through an analysis of "cosmopolitan wounds" in contemporary Nigerian migrant literature. By placing Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, Teju Cole's *Open City*, and Helon Habila's *Travelers* into conversation with the theoretical frameworks of Achille Mbembe, Walter Mignolo, and Judith Butler, the study argues that these narratives perform a decolonial epistemic shift. This shift constitutes a reconstitution of ethical knowing from the position of those whom the dominant cosmopolitan tradition was structurally designed to exclude. The analysis demonstrates how these texts anatomize the racial and historical conditions under which cosmopolitan hospitality fails its own ideals, exposing a necropolitical regime that governs global mobility. Through a reading of the production of racial grammars in Adichie, urban phenomenology in Cole, and the crisis of refugeehood in Habila, the paper contends that Nigerian migrant literature functions as an indispensable site of epistemological production. Ultimately, these works do not merely illustrate theoretical crises but demand a fundamental rebuilding of cosmopolitan ethics grounded in the embodied particularity and lived experience of the migrant subject.

Keywords: Cosmopolitanism, Necropolitics, Decoloniality, Nigerian Literature, Racial Economy

Introduction

The figure of the migrant has long occupied a paradoxical position within the architectonics of cosmopolitan thought. Celebrated in the dominant liberal tradition as the privileged embodiment of cross-cultural fluency and world citizenship, the migrant is simultaneously rendered suspect, disposable, and deportable by the very political economies that produce migration as a condition of survival rather than a mode of free self-fashioning. From Immanuel Kant's foundational vision of perpetual peace among a federation of republican states to Martha Nussbaum's elaboration of cosmopolitan moral education in *Frontiers of Justice*, the philosophical tradition has articulated a universalism premised on the shared humanity of all persons, irrespective of national origin or

cultural particularity. Yet this universalism has historically been extended with a selectivity that its own principles cannot justify, and it is the task of contemporary Nigerian migrant literature to anatomize with sustained critical precision the racial, historical, and structural conditions under which cosmopolitan hospitality fails its own most fundamental ideals. Works such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, Teju Cole's *Open City*, and Helon Habila's *Travelers* constitute not merely representations of migratory experience but sustained philosophical interrogations of cosmopolitanism's internal contradictions, exposing what this essay calls its constitutive wounds, by which is meant the structural exclusions that liberal universalism has historically required in order to function.

Theoretical Considerations

To speak of cosmopolitan wounds is to invoke simultaneously the harm inflicted upon migrant subjects by a world order that promises inclusion while enforcing hierarchical exclusion, and the damage done to the theoretical framework itself when it is confronted with the lived realities of race and mobility that it has consistently failed to theorize adequately. The metaphor draws productively on Achille Mbembe's theorization of the Black subject as one constituted through regimes of wounding, dispossession, and differential exposure to death. In *Necropolitics*, Mbembe argues that the sovereign power exercised over colonized and postcolonial populations operates not merely through the biopolitical administration of life that Foucault identified as characteristic of modern governance, but through the more extreme and more nakedly racial power to determine who may live, who must survive on the margins of existence, and who may be left to die without institutional mourning or political consequence (Mbembe 92). When Nigerian migrant writers inscribe their characters within the circuits of global movement, they reveal that cosmopolitan ethics, for all its universalist aspiration, remains structured by what Frantz Fanon identified as the Manichean geography of colonial modernity, a spatial and moral cartography in which the Black body is perpetually positioned as intruder, supplicant, or threat rather than as rightful inhabitant of the shared world that cosmopolitanism claims to envision. The literary texts examined here do not merely illustrate this diagnosis; they theorize it through the formal and aesthetic resources of narrative itself, making literature an indispensable site of epistemological production rather than a secondary reflection of ideas worked out elsewhere.

The scholarly conversation this essay enters is simultaneously rich and radically unfinished. Paul Gilroy's foundational work in *The Black Atlantic* established that diasporic cultural production has always functioned as a critical counter-discourse to the exclusions of both ethnonationalism and liberal cosmopolitanism, generating what Gilroy calls a “black Atlantic” modernity irreducible to either its African origins or its European contexts (Gilroy 15). More recently, Achille Mbembe's *Out of the Dark Night* has extended this analysis by situating African subjectivity within what he terms the planetary condition of Afropolitanism, a mode of worldliness produced through centuries of forced and voluntary mobility that differs fundamentally from the European cosmopolitan imaginary precisely because it was forged in the experience of dispossession rather than conquest. Scholars such as Simon Gikandi and Elleke Boehmer have mapped the specific contributions of African literary modernism to these theoretical questions, tracing the ways in which postcolonial African writing has consistently refused the terms on which metropolitan criticism has sought to receive it. More recent interventions by Madhu Krishnan, whose *Contemporary African Literature in English* examines the global locations and postcolonial

identifications of contemporary African fiction, and Jeanne-Marie Jackson, whose *The African Novel of Ideas* theorizes the philosophical dimensions of African novelistic practice, have pressed these questions further into the political economy of global literary production (Krishnan 14; Jackson 22). This essay advances these conversations by arguing that Nigerian migrant literature performs what Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, in *On Decoloniality*, describe as a decolonial epistemic shift, understood as a reconstitution of the grounds of ethical knowing from the position of those whom the dominant tradition was structurally designed to exclude (Mignolo and Walsh 10).

The Racial Economy of Cosmopolitan Space

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* stages the crisis of cosmopolitan aspiration with characteristic structural intelligence, locating the failure of liberal universalism not in its explicit ideology but in the experiential textures of everyday life through which race is produced as an organising principle of social existence. The novel's protagonist, Ifemelu, embarks on a migration from Lagos to the United States that is framed at the outset as a movement toward the metropolitan centres of cosmopolitan modernity, a movement animated by the familiar aspirational logic through which the global North constructs itself as the destination of legitimate human ambition. What Ifemelu discovers, however, is that this modernity is organised around a racial grammar she was not equipped to read because, in Nigeria, racial difference in the American sense was not the primary axis of her social formation. It is only through the encounter with American racial classification that she is interpellated, to invoke Althusser's vocabulary, into the subject position of Black woman, a position that precedes and overdetermines her individual subjectivity in ways that the cosmopolitan rhetoric of personal merit and cultural openness entirely fails to acknowledge. The novel's most theoretically charged insight is that race is not a pre-given biological fact but a political production, and that the migrant from the African continent must undergo a second formation, a learning of the racial codes of the receiving society, that is itself a form of violence because it demands the substitution of a collectively imposed identity for the particular selfhood the migrant carried across the Atlantic.

Adichie's formal choices are inseparable from this theoretical argument. Ifemelu's blog posts, which punctuate the novel's narrative at strategic intervals and address the experience of non-American Blackness with a directness that the third-person narration cannot always sustain, enact a form of vernacular counter-discourse that refuses the assimilationist logic through which liberal multiculturalism would absorb racial difference into a colour-blind universalism. The blog as form is itself theoretically significant, constituting a vernacular public sphere that operates outside the institutional frameworks through which cosmopolitan discourse is produced and legitimated, accessible to a readership that includes both those who share Ifemelu's experience and those who are implicated in the structures she describes. In this sense, Adichie's text performs what Raewyn Connell, in *Southern Theory*, identifies as the specific epistemological challenge posed by knowledge produced from the global South, understood as a challenge to the foundational assumption that theory travels unidirectionally from metropolitan centres to peripheral recipients, rather than being produced everywhere that human beings encounter the contradictions of their historical situation (Connell 45). Ifemelu's interventions in American racial discourse are not those of the grateful immigrant thankful for inclusion; they are the interventions of a subject who refuses the terms of inclusion itself, insisting that the category of the human cannot be genuinely universal so long as it is administered through a racial hierarchy that determines in advance who counts as

fully human and who does not.

The spatial politics of cosmopolitan failure are developed with a different but equally exacting philosophical density in Teju Cole's *Open City*. Cole's narrator, Julius, is a Nigerian-German psychiatry fellow in New York whose primary mode of engagement with the city is the long urban walk, a practice that functions simultaneously as a narrative technique, an epistemological method, and a form of melancholic historical reckoning. The novel's governing conceit is that the open city, that ostensibly democratic urban space of anonymous encounter and cosmopolitan exchange that theorists from Georg Simmel to Richard Sennett have celebrated as the spatial embodiment of modern freedom, is in fact densely inscribed with histories of violence, racial exclusion, and colonial dispossession that the cosmopolitan imagination requires itself not to see. Julius moves through New York as a figure of apparent cosmopolitan ease, multilingual, culturally and musically literate, professionally integrated, and possessed of a restless intellectual curiosity that the novel presents as simultaneously admirable and ethically compromised. The systematic destabilisation of this ease, which Cole pursues through accumulating juxtapositions of cosmopolitan cultural consumption and the raw material of others' suffering, constitutes the novel's central ethical argument.

Cole's engagement with the structural limits of cosmopolitanism reaches its sharpest articulation through Julius's encounters with other migrants and disenfranchised urban subjects whose situations expose the sharp differential between cosmopolitan mobility as it is experienced by the professional class and as it is endured by those without documentation, without institutional affiliation, and without the cultural capital that converts foreignness into exoticism rather than threat. Julius's conversations with a Haitian couple, a Liberian man facing deportation, and a Moroccan shopkeeper constitute a phenomenological inventory of cosmopolitan failure, presenting instances in which the promise of open encounter is systematically foreclosed by the material conditions of immigration enforcement, racial profiling, and economic precarity. What Cole renders with particular formal precision is the gap between Julius's capacity for cultural and intellectual empathy and his failure of ethical solidarity with those whose situation demands more than appreciation. When Saidu, the Liberian man detained by immigration authorities, recounts his experiences of flight and detention and the prospect of forced return to a country devastated by civil war, Julius's response is characterised by an aesthetic distance that Cole presents not as personal coldness but as a structural incapacity of the cosmopolitan formation Julius embodies. The novel's most devastating critique is not of individual callousness but of a cosmopolitan culture that trains its subjects in the appreciation of difference while leaving the ethical demand of genuine political solidarity systematically unaddressed.

Mobility, Necropolitics, and the Ethics of Witness

If Adichie and Cole engage cosmopolitan failure through the registers of racial formation and urban phenomenology respectively, Helon Habila's *Travelers* confronts it through the more acute and less aesthetically mediated crisis of contemporary refugeehood. Published in 2019, at a moment when the so-called European migration crisis had made the Mediterranean a site of mass death and the political management of African displacement a central fault line of global politics, *Travelers* is structured around the interconnected testimonies of African migrants in Europe, bringing to the surface what the other texts examined here tend to treat in more oblique registers, namely the nakedly necropolitical dimension of contemporary migration governance. Habila's

Europe is not the site of cosmopolitan promise but of a managed system of abandonment in which African lives are rendered expendable by the administrative machinery of what critical migration scholars have called fortress Europe. The structural violence of detention, deportation, and the deliberate policy of allowing unseaworthy vessels to founder in international waters is presented not as an aberration from cosmopolitan values but as their logical expression under conditions of global inequality.

Habila draws extensively on the testimonial tradition of migrant life-writing, embedding within the novel's polyphonic structure a series of first-person accounts that resist the aestheticisation of suffering which critics such as Stef Craps, in *Postcolonial Witnessing*, have identified as a persistent risk in literary and critical engagements with atrocity and displacement (Craps 32). The testimonial mode is not deployed here for its affective power alone; it functions as an epistemological insistence on the particularity of individual experience against the abstraction through which migration discourse, including its liberal humanitarian variant, tends to reduce displaced persons to a homogeneous mass of vulnerability. Each migrant in Habila's novel carries a specific history, a specific set of political and economic circumstances that produced their displacement, and the novel's formal commitment to individuating those histories is itself an ethical argument against the generalisations that make the mass death of African migrants politically tolerable to European publics.

The novel's narrator, himself a Nigerian academic on a fellowship in Germany, occupies an ambivalent position that Habila deploys with considerable structural sophistication. This figure, educated, documented, institutionally affiliated, and in possession of the cosmopolitan credentials that the global academy bestows, benefits from the very freedom of movement that is denied to the undocumented migrants whose stories he collects and whose suffering he witnesses at a safe remove. His cosmopolitan privilege is precisely what enables him to move freely through the spaces where others are detained, deported, or drowned, and Habila refuses to allow this irony to remain merely implicit. The academic's fellowship, his passport, and his institutional identity are revealed as instruments of a global stratification that the language of cosmopolitan openness actively obscures. In staging this structural complicity, the novel performs what Judith Butler, in *Frames of War*, theorizes as a critical intervention into the differential distribution of grievability, understood as the politically organised and racially structured disparity between those lives whose loss is publicly mourned and those deaths that pass without institutional acknowledgement, without media coverage, and without the political weight that comes from being recognised as a life that mattered (Butler 25). Habila's formal insistence on naming, historicising, and individualising his migrant characters is a sustained act of counter-framing, a refusal of the visual and discursive regimes through which African migrant deaths are rendered statistically legible but humanly invisible.

Mbembe's concept of necropolitics illuminates with particular force the structural logic that *Travelers* sets out to expose. Where liberal political theory, following Foucault, has understood modern governance primarily through the category of biopower, understood as the administration of population health, productivity, and reproductive capacity in the service of national development, Mbembe argues that the colonial and postcolonial management of racialised populations has always involved the more extreme exercise of what he calls the right to expose to death, which is the power to withdraw the protections of governance and leave certain populations to die as a matter of deliberate political calculation (Mbembe 92). The contemporary Mediterranean is a theatre of precisely this power, being a space in which the legal and

humanitarian obligations of European states toward persons in distress are systematically evaded through a combination of maritime law manipulation, the outsourcing of border enforcement to Libyan militias, and the political criminalisation of non-governmental rescue operations. Habila's novel insists that this is not a failure of cosmopolitan values but their expression under the conditions of actually existing global capitalism, in which the free movement of goods and finance is sacrosanct while the movement of African bodies is subject to a regime of violent containment.

Decolonising Cosmopolitan Ethics

The cumulative force of the ethical diagnoses offered by these three literary texts demands a response that goes beyond critique toward what Mignolo and Walsh, in *On Decoloniality*, describe as the epistemic work of the decolonial option, understood as the active construction of alternative modes of knowing, being, and relating that do not simply invert the hierarchies of colonial modernity but reconstitute the very grounds on which ethical life is understood to be possible (Mignolo and Walsh 10). Nigerian migrant literature participates in this reconstitution by insisting on what might be called an ethics of embodied particularity, which involves a thoroughgoing refusal of the abstract universalism that characterises the dominant cosmopolitan tradition in favour of a sustained attention to the specific, raced, gendered, and historically situated bodies through which global mobility is materially experienced. This is not a retreat into particularism or cultural relativism; it is a demand that universalism earn its name by genuinely accounting for the particular lives it claims to encompass, rather than simply projecting the experience of a racially and economically privileged minority onto the screen of humanity as such.

This ethics of embodied particularity is theorized in Adichie's novel through Ifemelu's gradual and hard-won elaboration of a counter-cosmopolitan sensibility, one grounded not in the transcendence of particular identities but in their critical inhabitation and strategic mobilisation. The novel's ending, in which Ifemelu returns to Lagos after her years in the United States, has been read by some critics as a retreat from cosmopolitan engagement, a reversion to a cultural nationalism that the novel's earlier energy seemed to have surpassed. Such a reading, however, entirely misses the theoretical weight of Adichie's gesture. The return is not a renunciation of global consciousness but a refusal to accept that such consciousness requires the sacrifice of African particularity, the continuous performance of cultural translation for a metropolitan audience that constitutes the unspoken condition of the African writer's cosmopolitan legibility. As Simon Gikandi has argued with characteristic precision, the African literary text occupies a peculiar and structurally constrained position in the global literary economy, where it is expected to translate African experience into forms legible to metropolitan readers while simultaneously claiming a universal relevance that the literary marketplace reserves for texts produced at the centre, and it is the most theoretically and aesthetically sophisticated African writers who refuse this double bind by insisting on the irreducible specificity of their cultural formations as itself a form of universal address (Gikandi 319).

Cole's Julius offers a more troubled and philosophically less resolved version of this counter-cosmopolitan possibility. His cosmopolitan ease is persistently undercut by moments of ethical failure that the novel refuses to redeem through retrospective insight or moral growth. His inability to sustain genuine solidarity with Saidu, his aestheticisation of the historical violence inscribed in New York's built environment, and his cultivation of ironic detachment as a habitual response to the suffering his walks bring him into contact with are none of them simply condemned by the

novel, but none is exculpated either. What *Open City* offers instead is a precise anatomy of the cosmopolitan intellectual's structural incapacity, a demonstration that the formations of knowledge, taste, and professional identity through which figures like Julius are produced are not incidental to their ethical failures but constitutive of them. In this sense, the novel performs what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, in *The Undercommons*, describe as the fugitive knowledge produced at the margins of institutional belonging, a knowledge that indicts simultaneously the liberal university, the professional-managerial class, and the cosmopolitan public sphere as sites in which the appearance of critical thought is systematically substituted for the more demanding and more dangerous practice of genuine solidarity (Moten and Harney 28). Julius has been trained in every form of cultural and intellectual appreciation except the one that matters most, which is the capacity to recognise in the suffering of those structurally unlike himself an ethical claim that his cosmopolitan formation has equipped him to deflect rather than to meet.

What unites these three works, despite their significant formal and thematic differences, is a shared and structurally consistent insistence that cosmopolitan ethics, if it is to deserve the name, must be rebuilt from the lived experience of those it has historically excluded. This rebuilding requires, in the first instance, the kind of honest and theoretically rigorous accounting of cosmopolitanism's racial and colonial genealogy that these literary texts provide. It requires also a fundamental reconception of the moral community that cosmopolitan ethics claims to address, one that does not begin by abstracting from the material conditions of global inequality in order to posit a community of rational equals, but that begins precisely with those conditions and asks what genuine ethical relation would look like from within them. Seyla Benhabib, in *The Rights of Others*, argues for what she terms democratic iterations, understood as the reappropriation and contextual renegotiation of cosmopolitan norms through the political practices of subaltern actors, a process through which universal principles are progressively extended toward their own most demanding implications (Benhabib 45). The literary texts examined here perform something analogous to Benhabib's democratic iterations, but with a critical radicalism that her liberal framework consistently stops short of. They do not merely press existing cosmopolitan norms toward their unfulfilled implications; they expose the structural exclusions that make those norms possible in their current form and demand a transformation so fundamental that the resulting ethical framework may no longer be recognisable as cosmopolitanism in any of its received senses.

The question of form is inseparable from this argument, and it matters that these interventions are made through literature rather than through philosophy or political theory, not simply because literary form reaches a wider audience or renders abstract ideas more accessible, but because the ethical claims these works advance are inseparable from the specific formal and aesthetic strategies through which they are made. The testimonial polyphony of *Travelers*, the blog's vernacular counter-theory in *Americanah*, and the ironic juxtapositions of cultural literacy and ethical failure in *Open City* each enact a specific epistemological argument that cannot be adequately paraphrased in the discursive language of philosophical prose without significant loss. Literature is not a delivery mechanism for ideas developed elsewhere; it is a mode of knowing that produces insights unavailable to other disciplinary formations. The Nigerian migrant writers examined here exploit this capacity to the full, making their texts not merely objects of theoretical analysis but active participants in the theoretical conversation they stage.

Conclusion

Nigerian migrant literature, as exemplified with particular force by the works of Adichie, Cole, and Habila, constitutes one of the most philosophically searching and formally sophisticated engagements with the promises and structural failures of cosmopolitan thought produced in the contemporary moment. Reading these texts through the theoretical lenses furnished by Mbembe's necropolitics, Mignolo's decolonial epistemology, Butler's ethics of precariousness, and Gilroy's theorization of diasporic counter-modernity, this essay has argued that these works perform a sustained interrogation of the racial economy that structures cosmopolitan space, the necropolitical governance of migrant mobility, and the epistemological exclusions that have historically defined the boundaries of cosmopolitan subjecthood. The wounds that these texts anatomize are not merely the wounds of individual characters navigating hostile social environments. They are the constitutive wounds of a theoretical tradition that has promised universal ethical inclusion while systematically delivering racially and economically stratified exclusion, a tradition whose internal contradictions have been most devastatingly exposed not by its philosophical critics but by the African writers whose lived experience it cannot accommodate.

The critical force of these literary works lies precisely in their refusal of consolation, their resistance to the redemptive narrative arcs through which literature is conventionally expected to transform suffering into wisdom and critique into affirmation. They do not offer a reformed or chastened cosmopolitanism as the solution to cosmopolitanism's failures; they demand a more radical and more uncomfortable reckoning with the structures of global inequality that make migration a condition of survival for millions while celebrating it as a mark of cultural sophistication for the privileged few. In this demand, they anticipate and in certain respects exceed the most searching critiques offered within academic philosophy and political theory, demonstrating with compelling force the unique epistemic capacity of literary form to hold in productive and unresolved tension the theoretical and the experiential, the systemic and the embodied, the historical and the immediate, the wound and the will to survive it. Cosmopolitan ethics, if it is to develop any genuine claim to the universality it has always asserted, must begin not with the abstract philosophical figure of the rational world citizen but with the concrete historical figure of the migrant whose existence, in its precarity and its resistance, its suffering and its epistemological richness, constitutes both the most searching indictment of the world as it is and the most compelling argument for the world that might yet be possible.

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