Transnational Citizenship and Dreams of Belonging in Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*

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"Understanding migration within a global scope helps us observe fundamental differences—legal, political, and cultural—as well as shared elements around the world," writes Dohra Ahmad in the introduction to *The Penguin Book of Migration Literature* (xix). In immigration literature and its related disciplines of multicultural and ethnic studies, the immigration process of people to the US is often thought of as being "permanent and unidirectional" and as finding its destiny in the integration of immigrants into mainstream US American society and culture (xviii). However, recent narratives about immigration to the US from African countries—for example novels by Taiye Selasi, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Imbolo Mbue—depict the migration experience to the United States from Ghanaian, Nigerian, and Cameroonian perspectives and challenge in significant ways common tropes of immigration and integration discourses and the legal, cultural, and political conditions of migrants in the US.

Imbolo Mbue's 2016 debut novel *Behold the Dreamers* depicts the lives of Jende Jonga, his wife Neni, and their six-year-old son Liomi, who migrate from Cameroon to the US in search of better living conditions and job opportunities. When Jende is hired as chauffeur by Clark Edwards, a high-ranked manager at Lehman Brothers, the family's American Dream of gaining financial security, finding a stable home, and integrating into mainstream American society seems within reach. However, when Jende loses his job in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and is unable to apply successfully for a permanent residence permit, he decides to return to Cameroon and a more secure middle-class existence in his hometown Limbe rather than staying in the US illegally. The family's assessment of their situation—no prospect for a legal permanent residence in the US paired with a bleak financial situation during the economic crisis—and their return to Cameroon counter a common trope of immigration literature. Namely, that migration "automatically leads to a better life; and that the ultimate goal of migration is to assimilate to a new place" (Ahmad xviii). The novel's outsider perspective on the multicultural US-American society thus extends the point of view on immigration literature from within the US to a transnational perspective on the mobilities of migrants in a globalized world.

Multiculturalism has traditionally located migration discourses within the realm of the "borderland and the contact zone as … mythological sites" to be "negotiat[ed] with the multicultural domestic society" (Pease, "How Transnationalism" 51). While multicultural studies within the US acknowledge the experiences and perspectives of ethnic minorities and immigrants as part of US-American social discourses and cultural productions, in my understanding of the debate, much of the discourse nonetheless focuses on the geographical and cultural territory of the US and describes immigration as "permanent and unidirectional" (Ahmad xviii). Popular cultural and literary tropes of immigration narratives in the US, such as the American Dream, cultural assimilation, and self-reliance inform cultural productions on migration and immigration despite their recognition as myths, and they reflect the hegemony of an Exceptionalist paradigm of the US American nation state and its cultural and social foundation.[1] Heike Paul identifies these tropes as "core foundational myths upon which constructions of the American nation have been based and which still determine contemporary discussions of US-American identities" (*The Myths That Made America* 11).

The shift in American Studies to a transnational framework extends the genre of immigrant literature beyond the geographical and discursive boundaries of the US and recognizes narratives that open the perspective beyond the national borders of the US and the nation-state's social, cultural, and legal discourses. Echoing Ahmad's call for a global perspective on migration, Alfred Hornung and Nina Morgan proclaim that "all transnational approaches are necessarily comparative" ("Introduction" 2). *Behold the Dreamers* is thus a transnational immigration novel that presents this comparative perspective when the main characters contemplate their living conditions as soon-to-be illegal immigrants in the US to those that await them as returnees from the US in Cameroon, and then decide for the latter. And while the novel begins as a narrative about the American Dream that Jende and Neni Jonga hope to realize—a permanent residence permit for Jende, a degree in pharmacy for Neni, and a down payment for a home in the lower Hudson Valley region—it emphasizes the legal conditions of immigration to the US when Jende's asylum application is not approved.

1 The concept of American Exceptionalism is based on the ideas that the US as a nation is politically, socially, and morally distinctly different from other nations, especially from those of the so-called Old World in Europe, because this new nation is founded on democratic documents like the Constitution and the Bill of Rights and thus a model for other countries. This exceptionalism's foundational moment is rooted in John Winthrop's declaration: "We shall be a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us," delivered in a sermon onboard the Arabella to a group of Puritan migrants in 1630 (qtd. in Pease, "American Exceptionalism"). The so-called Founding Fathers of the Republic in the late eighteenth century announced the US as the future champion of universal rights of humankind (Pease, "American Exceptionalism").

In *Contesting Citizenship: Irregular Migrants and New Frontiers of the Political*, Anne McNevin introduces the term irregular migrants for people who do not have a legal, documented, or permanent status in their country of residence. The economies of North America and Europe, as well as other countries in Asia and Africa, often rely on the labor of immigrants with indeterminate legal status (132). However, "irregular migrants are more than passive victims shuttled from one place to another. They are also active agents in the transformation of political belonging," writes McNevin (viii). Immigrants' political belonging to and partaking in the society and economy of their country of residence as asylum seekers, green-card holders, or naturalized citizens contrasts and seems to be at odds with notions of mobility and fluidity of borders, nations, concepts, and people that the transnational approaches of American Studies as well as of citizenship studies at times emphasize. It is this tension that will be discussed in this chapter.

Narratives like *Behold the Dreamers*, however, depict the hard facts of the legal conditions of mobile laborers as the prerequisites for immigrants' social and political participation. My reading of Mbue's novel *Behold the Dreamers* thus analyzes the protagonists' intertwined narratives of belonging and citizenship and argues for the centrality of the legal conditions on which all other moments of and chances for their cultural, economic, and political participation in the US ultimately depend. This approach extends the idea of migration as the movement from one place to the US, and as typically ending in integration, to a multi-perspectivity on migration when it shows how migrants turn their back on discriminatory practices in the US that perpetuate their status as illegal or irregular migrants who are exposed to criminalization and exploitation. The transnational lens applied in this chapter thereby foregrounds the central yet often neglected role that citizenship discourses hold in literary reflections about immigration processes and social and economic participations of immigrants in US-American society. Additionally, this comparative perspective on US-citizenship which the protagonists of Mbue's Cameroonian American novel present is analyzed as what Taiye Selasi has coined an "Afropolitan" view that further challenges the centrality of the United States in literary, cultural, and legal discourses on migration from the perspective of contemporary writers from African countries. Depicting the characters not so much as the global young professionals of the Afropolitan community but as irregular immigrants in the US, *Behold the Dreamers* ultimately locates current transmigration discourses around issues of cultural and, most importantly, legal citizenship.

Transnational Approaches in Literary Studies and Citizenship Studies

The Transnational Turn has shaped much scholarship in American Studies in the past few decades. Prominently introduced by Shelley Fisher-Fishkin in her presiden-

tial address to the American Studies Association in 2004, this turn seeks to counter the idea of American Exceptionalism and views the United States and US American culture as "a crossroads of cultures" located both inside as well as outside its national borders and calls for a comparative study of social movements and cultural productions (Fisher-Fishkin 28–32).[2] Sharing ties with multicultural and ethnic studies in its conception of the US as a multicultural nation, Transnational American Studies understands immigration no longer primarily from the point of view of immigrants leaving their "home" to make a new one in the US. Rather, migration is seen as a "process of comings and goings that create familial, cultural, linguistic, and economic ties across national borders" in which America is less seen as a "static and stable territory and population" (24).

In this context, globalization plays a significant role in the critical and scholarly recharting of the United States in transnational terms. Generally, the term globalization describes "[t]he process by which the world is becoming increasingly connected through access to global markets, technology and information, but at the same time homogenized by the very forces of globalization which are still located in the capitalist societies in the West" (Cuddon 304–305). The increasing connectivity between regions and people, which are made possible in large part by recent developments in information technologies, communication technologies, and modes of travel, led to the destabilization of cultural boundaries and geographical borders. At the same time, globalization increases the homogenization of products and modes of consumption that "mask older forms of Western imperial domination" (Cuddon 305). This increasing connectivity encompasses economic, social, and individual spheres. As social critics of transnationalism observe, economic changes in the US that transformed the industrial and manufacturing economy of the early and mid-twentieth century to a service economy in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries on one hand and that disintegrated local economies in the global South on the other, brought forth migrants with what Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Barsch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton term a "transnational existence" (9). This transnational existence is caused by "economic dislocations in both Third World and in industrialized nations … yet made it difficult for the migrants to construct secure cultural, social or economic bases within their new settings" (Glick Schiller et al. 9). This "new and different phenomenon" (9) of "transmigrants" who "build fields that

2 Robert Gross describes the development from American Exceptionalism to Transnationalism: "In the 1960s and 1970s, a new generation of scholars set out to demolish the myth of exceptionalism. Variously inspired by the New Left and looking at American history 'from the bottom up,' they scoured the past for proof that the United States was no different from other Western nations. Its working class had fought militantly against the bosses; its farmers could behave like peasants the world round. Patriarchy oppressed women on both sides of the Atlantic. War and conquest dominated the nation's history. And slavery and racism were the original sin. The biggest deception was the myth of American innocence" (Gross 387).

link together their country of origin and their country of settlement" (1) cannot only be attributed to "the invention of rapid transportation and communication systems" but also must consider "the current state of the world social and economic system, as the reason why modern-day migrants are more likely to maintain ongoing ties to their societies of origin" (Glick Schiller et al. 9). In a similar line, Donald E. Pease describes the complex and contested role of globalization and its social, economic, and technological processes for transnational studies and its related disciplines of literary and cultural studies:

> Transnational American studies can valorize deterritorializations that serve the interests of the world marketplace and transnational corporations. It can also endorse movements that advance concerns of antiglobalization activists, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), environmentalists, social movements, migrant laborers, refugees, and stateless peoples. ("How Transnationalism Reconfigured the Field of American Studies" 40)

Transnationalism is thus "a highly contradictory concept" and considers effects of economic globalization and the global mobility of people (Pease 40).

Charting the conceptual potentials of analyzing migration, immigration, and citizenship in a global space that goes beyond the limits and borders of the nation-state of the US, a transnational perspective redefines immigration discourses when the geographical area of the nation-state "is no longer synonymous with the interests of U.S. citizens" (Giles 16). Related to transnationalism is a planetary approach in multicultural literature that focuses on global influences on a given culture and community in a specific historical moment (Fisher-Fishkin; Hornung). "Evaluating the fate of displaced migrants and their unstable places of residence, cultural critics of ethnic writers moved away from the national frame of reference to an analysis of local factors of migrants' lives and their potential construction of a sense of place," writes Hornung in "Planetary Citizenship" (39). He continues, "[w]hile America represented the locus of global economic structures, which expressed itself in the superficial equation of globalization and Americanization, academic disciplines concerned with national literatures and cultures moved beyond these borders" (39). Globalization changes the roles and constituents of nation-states and invites new interpretations of citizenship that emphasize the mobility and fluidity of concepts and people in a globalized world.

Citizenship studies has likewise debated a transnational turn in the field of states, polities, citizens, and migrants and stresses the "boundary crossing practices, rights, identities and statuses" in political, social, and philosophical discourses on citizenship (Bauböck 2). In the introduction to *Transnational Citizenship and Migration*, Rainer Bauböck gives a detailed definition of the term transnational and its application in citizenship studies: If citizenship describes the "legal and political

status" of individuals in relation to a given nation-state and primarily distinguishes citizens from non-citizens in that state, the concept of transnational citizenship seems to be a paradox as one can either be a member or citizen of a given nation state or not (1). Emphasizing immigrants and their movements and mobilities, transnational citizenship studies postulate that "migrants are simultaneously rather than sequentially engaged in citizenship relations with at least two states and, … the crossing of territorial borders by migrants generates also a blurring of membership boundaries" (3). What follows from this observation is that immigrants may find themselves in

> … a membership relation between an individual and several independent states that is articulated through legal statuses, rights and duties, as well as informal practices and identities, and that extends across the territorial borders and nationality boundaries of the states involved. We have seen that there is nothing paradoxical about the concept if we take into account the dual nature of state jurisdiction and consider citizenship as involving not only a singular relation between an individual and a state, but a triangular one between a person and different states connected through individuals' multiple ties across borders. (Bauböck 4)

Transnational turns in both American Studies and citizenship studies emphasize the mobility and fluidity of concepts like nationality, ethnicity, and culture as well as of people as migrants, immigrants, and citizens. Concepts like citizenship, the nation-state or the polity of a given country are perceived as flexible and permeable. Recent migration literature, such as Mbue's novel *Behold the Dreamers*, however, applies this transnational perspective when it portrays the trope of the American Dream and its impact as pull factor for people worldwide vis-a-vis the legal—and most often solid—conditions of granting and gaining citizenship, and of belonging not only metaphorically but also legally to the US.

Behold the Dreamers: A Transnational Immigration Narrative

"Anyone entering this country can make up any story about what their life was like back in their country. You can say you were a prince, or someone who ran an orphanage, or a political activist, and the average American will say, oh, wow!" (*Behold the Dreamers* 226). These are the words of Winston, a successful associate lawyer, to his compatriot Jende, a recent immigrant from Cameroon and the protagonist of Imbolo Mbue's novel *Behold the Dreamers*. The quote encapsulates the novel's plot that depicts the immigration experience and attempted naturalization process of Jende and his wife Neni, who move from their hometown Limbe to the United States of America in hope of better social and economic prospects in the wake of the Obama

Presidency and the global financial crisis of 2008.[3] Jende, a low-skilled man in his thirties, leaves his home in Cameroon and migrates to the United States, applies for asylum, holds precarious jobs, and saves as much money as he can to bring his wife Neni and son Liomi to the US two years later.

Although in the first few chapters of the novel the Jonga family seem on their way to settling in New York City financially and socially, Jende's asylum application and his hope to acquire a legal permanent residence permit in the US are ill-fated, as attentive readers soon find out. Even though immigrants may reinvent the stories of their past lives and the average American listener may believe them, the novel shows that even if immigrants are able to keep up with the fast pace of the precarious branches of labor for unskilled newcomers and earn enough money to partake in American society, the legal conditions of asylum and naturalization processes in the US ultimately decide the fate of immigrants like the characters Jende and Neni. In Jende's case, the exaggerated story of personal prosecution at the hands of his father-in-law does not meet the formal conditions of asylum eligibility as defined by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service: people who are expecting to or have "suffered persecution … due to: Race, Religion, Nationality, Membership in a particular social group, Political opinion" ("Asylum").[4]

The novel introduces the sub-plot of Jende's asylum application in the first chapter when Jende answers a question about his legal status in the US in the job interview with Clark Edwards. Answering correctly—albeit only vaguely—he says he has an Employment Authorization Document, and that he is "very legal, sir … just … still waiting for my green card" (*Behold the Dreamers* 7). A few pages later the narrative depicts him reminiscing in free indirect and free direct thought about his first two years in the US and the early meetings with his lawyer Bubakar and his own hope for "claim[ing] his share of the milk, honey, and liberty flowing in the paradise-for-strivers called America" (19). "Bubakar … was not only a great immigration lawyer with hundreds of African clients all over the country but also an expert in the art of giving clients the best stories of persecution to gain asylum" (19). Although Jende and his cousin Winston doubt Bubakar's skills as immigration lawyer

3 For a detailed discussion of the post-9/11 and pre-Obama context in the novel see Elizabeth Toohey "9/11 and the Collapse of the American Dream: Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*."

4 In the "The Year of Living Nervously" in *The New York Times*, Emily Brady portrays the story of Njoya Hilary Tikum, an immigrant from Cameroon who successfully applied for asylum in the US in 2006 on well-founded grounds of having endured torture during imprisonment for his political activism for the secession of the English-speaking provinces from Cameroon. During his four months in prison, Jende suffers inadequate food and lack of medical treatment, conditions that he describes as "far more horrendous than he's imagined," but the narrative does not depict him as having experienced any physical violence or torture (*Behold the Dreamers* 245). The novel thus refrains from giving Jende a political background that would justify his asylum application.

after their first few meetings, they follow his advice and file the asylum application for "persecution based on belonging to a particular social group" due to class differences between Jende's family and Neni's parents, who do not allow their daughter to marry him (23–24).

Like Jende's stagnating asylum application, in the first half of the plot the naturalization process remains rather vague and looms in the background. Instead, the novel explores in more detail the settling-in phase of the family and their hopes and dreams for a secure future in New York, which seems to be at hand when Jende is hired by Clark Edwards. Thus, in line with its title, *Behold the Dreamers* at first evokes the ethos of the American Dream and invites readers to observe the move of the Jonga family from their bleak (albeit not endangered) existence in Limbe, Cameroon, to their new home in Harlem. Exploring the trope of the American Dream and its pull-factors, the story starts with a moment of success that catapults Jende from "dishwasher in Manhattan restaurant[s and] … cabdriver in the Bronx" to his imminent employment as chauffeur of a high-ranking executive manager at the investment bank Lehman Brothers (*Behold the Dreamers* 3). Correspondingly, the novel introduces readers to the main character Jende when he is high above the streets of midtown Manhattan for his job interview in Clark Edward's office in the Lehman Brothers building. Jende is holding the résumé that was stitched together and jazzed up a few days before by a career counselor in the public library in sweaty palms envisioning his future in the US. The success story continues when Neni receives good grades in college and is hired by Clark's wife Cindy as domestic help in the Edwards' summer house in the Hamptons. Together, the couple can save up a lot of money and the possibility of a financially stable future seems at hand.

What is at stake for the Jonga's realization of their American Dream—a "down payment for a two-bedroom in Mount Vernon or Yonkers" and a college education for their son (*Behold the Dreamers* 30)—are the legal conditions of their existence in the US. As the story unfolds, Neni's and Jende's experiences as immigrants in the US counter common tropes of immigration discourses. For example, that migration "automatically leads to a better life; and that the ultimate goal of migration is to assimilate to a new place" (Ahmad xviii). Juxtaposing the Jonga family to the white, rich family of Clark Edwards, his wife Cindy, and their sons Vince and Mighty, the unravelling of Jende's job situation halfway through the novel could easily be related to the conflicts between Clark and Cindy and their failing marriage due to which Jende loses his job as Clark's chauffeur. The economic recession during which Jende finds himself jobless certainly adds its share of challenges. However, the ultimate obstacle for Jende to succeed in the US is his unsuccessful application for asylum. Unlike Winston's exclamation above suggests, Jende did not reinvent his vitae beyond describing his miscellaneous jobs in Limbe and Manhattan in terms of more serious professions like "farmer," "street cleaner," "dishwasher," and "cabdriver" when he applies for asylum but takes the advice of his—as it turns out—clueless immigration

lawyer to tell a weak story about alleged threats of violence and imprisonment at the hands of Neni's father to prevent their marriage were he ever to return to Cameroon (3; 23–24).

The migrant Jende endorses a "relational view of citizenship" when he compares his situation in the US to that of Barack Obama, the son of an African immigrant like Jende, who at the time is competing against Hillary Clinton for the Democratic Party's nomination as candidate for the presidential election of 2008 (Bauböck 2). Whereas in Cameroon Jende does not see any chances of social standing and financial security for himself and his son because his family neither has a lot of money nor a social reputation, explaining to Clark that "Cameroon has nothing" (Behold the Dreamers 40), in the US he identifies similarities between Obama, his father Onyango Obama, and himself and his son Liomi. He thus concludes that since Obama "is a black man with no father or mother trying to be president over a country, … America has something for everyone" (40). For Jende, Obama's rise as the son of a Kenyan immigrant to Harvard Law School graduate, Illinois state legislator, United States senator, and Democratic presidential candidate symbolizes the promise of "cultural mobility and cultural sharing" accessible to all those who are willing to work hard, as entailed in the trope of the American Dream (Paul 261). Toohey summarizes Jende's conception of the American Dream: "For Jende the American Dream is a meritocracy in which neither race nor nation are an obstacle and Obama naturally symbolizes and promises all of that through his own ascendance to what appears as the pinnacle of both American and global power" (394). Conclusively, Obama gives voice to Jende's belief in the possibilities for success that the US holds for African migrants when he says in his 2008 nomination address:

> I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton's Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas…. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible. (Obama)

Obama's vita symbolizes and represents the very notion of transnational mobility and identity not only for Jende but also for transnational American Studies. Inaugurating Obama as a prime example of a transnational life constitutive of much scholarship in contemporary American Studies, Hornung has analyzed and discussed the autobiographical writings of the former US President as representative of this notion of transnational citizenship. This representation favors shared experiences of "multiple migrations, repeated efforts of adjustment and acculturation in different places of residence and problematic political allegiance to a loose concept of nation-

ality" that are reflected in life writings like Obamas and, as I assert, in recent fictional migration narratives like *Behold the Dreamers* (Hornung 40).

While the narrative of the American Dream as the success of the individual regardless of their cultural and familial background and of the US as a "crossroads of cultures" where encounters between people from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds are not only possible but enable and encourage understanding is reflected in some of the encounters between the families of Jende and Clark, *Behold the Dreamers* does not present the legal conditions of immigrants in the US as flexible, mobile, and fluid. The solid legal definition of citizen, permanent resident, and asylum seeker as described by US federal law ultimately defines the status of and re-territorializes the location of the immigrant. This seems to be the fallacy in Jende's comparison between Obama's rise as the son of an unknown Kenyan immigrant to renown lawyer, senator, and president, from which he infers the hope for his son "to become a respectable man," in the US (39). The decisive—and deciding—difference between Jende (and by extension Liomi) and Obama is that while his father was an immigrant student from Kenya, his mother was a US citizen and Obama was born in the US and is thus a US citizen, too. Jende and Liomi on the other hand have little, if no, chances for permanently staying in the US legally, as it turns out. Jende's comparison with Obama may also rest on a misunderstanding of the conditions of citizenship: understanding citizenship as "a person's allegiance to a government in exchange for its protection at home and abroad" and understanding allegiance as "the obligation of an alien to the government under which the alien resides" ("Using 'Citizen' and 'Resident' Legally"; "Allegiance"), Jende identifies himself semantically as a citizen of the US. Having verbally rejected his Cameroonian citizenship when exclaiming that "Cameroon has nothing" (*Behold the Dreamers* 40), Jende has pledged allegiance to the US when he professes a few pages later, "I thank God, and I believe I work hard, and one day I will have a good life here.... And my son will grow up to be somebody, whatever he wants to be. I believe that anything is possible for anyone who is American" (46). In this sense, the exchange between Jende and Clark in the quotes above reflects Bauböck's statement that "migrants should always be understood as being both emigrants and immigrants" (3). Transnationalism's idea of fluent and permeable borders and concepts thus finds its equivalent in the conflict that Jende faces when he feels that he must disavow his Cameroonian citizen identity to proclaim allegiance to the US:

> If we transfer this banal but widely ignored insight from migration studies to citizenship studies we become aware, first, that migrants are simultaneously rather than sequentially engaged in citizenship relations with at least two states and, second, that the crossing of territorial borders by migrants generates also a blurring of membership boundaries. (Bauböck 3)

This blurring of membership boundaries, however, is not part of the legal process of Jende's asylum and naturalization process. Still, he will find a way to reconcile this transnational understanding of citizenship with his legal situation in the US toward the end of the narrative, as I will discuss below.

As slowly as the asylum application process started in the beginning, the faster it unravels once Jende must appear in court before an immigration judge. Shortly after Neni and Jende's daughter is born, Jende receives a letter from the US Citizenship and Immigration Service that his asylum application is not approved:

> On the basis of being admitted to the United States in August of 2004 with authorization to remain for a period not to exceed three months and staying beyond November 2004 without further authorization, it has been charged that he is subject to removal from the United States, the letter said. He was to appear before an immigration judge to show why he should not be removed from the country. (*Behold the Dreamers* 224)

Immigration lawyer Bubakar and Neni urge Jende to prolong deportation and exhaust all legal and financial means to stay in the US for as long as possible. "We're going to buy you a whole lot of time in this country," Bubakar promises (224). From the perspective of the lawyer, asylum applications are a business, and the process of gaining a green card or an American passport is a business transaction and an investment. "It's going to cost good money, my brother. Immigration is not cheap. You have to do what you gotta do and pay it," says Bubakar to Jende (224–25). However, taking up the legal battle would happen at the same time when the family is facing financial difficulties. Not only does Jende's rejected asylum application coincide with the birth of their daughter Timba, who is *jus soli* a US citizen, but this is also the winter of the economic recession and the moment when Clark lays off Jende as his chauffeur at the insistence of Cindy, who feels ashamed that Jende knows about their marriage crisis. Jende must work three jobs at the same time but still does not make enough money to cover the family's living expenses, and he soon suffers from health problems.

The novel leaves open to interpretation the causality of the sequence of events around Jende's job situation and the rejected asylum application. It remains open to speculation if Jende and Neni's situation would have been different were this not the year of economic recession in the US or the period of post-9/11 immigration policies.[5] However, the bleak job opportunities bring Jende to assess his situation more realistically and he begins to accept the fact that they will have to return to Cameroon eventually, because he understands that even if he were able to prolong his legal case,

5 For a detailed discussion of *Behold the Dreamers* as post 9/11 fiction see Toohey.

the family's financial situation and the country's economic state would make it impossible for them to lead a safe and self-reliant life in the US:

> In America today, having documents is not enough. Look at how many people with papers are struggling. Look at how even some Americans are suffering. They were born in this country. They have American passports, and yet they are sleeping on the street, going to bed hungry, losing their jobs and houses every day in this…this economic crisis. (307)

This quote encapsulates the intricate situation of many immigrants in the US in the early twenty-first century and shows that reading the immigration narrative of Jende and Neni in terms of metaphorical belonging would fall short of considering the legal and economic foundations on which concepts like self-reliance and the American Dream rest. A reading that focuses on the legal and economic backgrounds of the immigration narrative then brings to the fore dire conditions of poor and working-class immigrants in the US, because for many of them, as for Jende and Neni, their legal situation very much depends on their financial situation:

> Even if Jende got papers, Winston went on, without a good education, and being a black African immigrant male, he might never be able to make enough money to afford to live the way he'd like to live, never mind having enough to own a home or pay for his wife and children to go to college. He might never be able to have a good sleep at night. (322)

Thus, social and cultural participation in the US is not so much about welcoming immigrants, as the liberal protestant pastor and immigrant Natasha preaches at the church Neni joins (364–65).[6] Rather, for immigrants and many US citizens alike, social and cultural participation is more a matter of who can *afford* to partake in American society.

The legal situation of Jende and Neni is grounded in their financial situation, which is one that cannot be changed through hard work and diligence. This means that the aspirational goal of immigrant cultural integration into US-American society that is entailed in the American Dream is one that is only attainable for those immigrants that have the financial means to afford living in the US. As Clark says to Jende, thinking about the future of his son Vince, who wants to quit law school, but encapsulating Jende's situation quite well, too, "unless you make a certain kind of money in this country, life can be brutal" (147–48). Jende and Neni Jonga's legal and financial situation in the US is, according to Clark and Cindy Edwards, also accompanied by cultural difference.

6 For a detailed discussion of Natasha as an example of a "white savior" see Toohey.

The car in which Jende drives Clark and his family through Manhattan and Long Island symbolizes the transnational space in which Jende, Clark, Cindy, and their sons Mighty and Vince communicate with each other about their different cultural backgrounds, their shared life experiences as parents on a mostly friendly, attentive, and at times personal level. These conversations contrast the "quasi-Babel in a New York City livery cab" created by the interactions between people from various cultural, social, and national backgrounds in the microcosm of the globalized world that New York City is a trope of in popular discourses (16). Shortly after Jende becomes Clark's chauffeur, Cindy hires Neni as help in their summer home in the Hamptons, and the interactions between the Jongas and the Edwards can first be read as an example for a successful intercultural understanding and transnational "contact zone" as envisioned by transnational and multicultural literary studies (Pratt). Although a certain cultural curiosity and skepticism or distance remains on both sides, Cindy and Clark (for example) think of Jende and Neni's hosting of a Cameroonian evening in their home in Harlem as an intercultural contact "experience" for their children (345). Differences in family traditions, social customs, or way of life do not seem to be the characteristics on which differences between the American and the Cameroonian family are based. On the contrary, familial similarities and conflicts between fathers and sons, mothers, parents, and siblings of the Jongas and the Clarks appear in conversations throughout the novel.

Thus, it is almost ironic that in the moment in which Jende emancipates himself from the tropes of the immigrant desiring to integrate into mainstream society at all costs and without choice, his legalization and naturalization process essentializes his cultural "otherness." Leti Volpp points out the legal and cultural construction of citizen and non-citizen and explains the reciprocal relationship between these constructs and the role that cultural "othering" plays in this binary:

> The citizen is assumed to be modern and motivated by reason; the cultural other is assumed to be traditional and motivated by culture. In order to be assimilated into citizenship, the cultural other needs to shed his excessive and archaic culture. Citizenship emerges through its distinction from the cultural other, who is measured and found wanting for citizenship. We should therefore understand that the cultural other is constitutive of the citizen. (574)

The moment Jende acts not as the culturally "other" "backward" or "irrational immigrant" stereotype is when he acts and decides "rationally" and "self-determinately"—at least to the point that he rejects a life as an irregular migrant—that he will not be able to become the "respectable man" he had hoped for but will have to enter the vast undocumented and unregulated immigrant work force were he to stay in the US. Unlike how the stereotype would have him behave, he is "motivated by reason," to use Volpp's formulation quoted above, and returns to Cameroon. The

moment he would thus culturally and mentally qualify as US citizen, he leaves the US, albeit as a "transmigrant" and "self-made" man who uses the money he has earned in the US to open his own business in Limbe (Glick Schiller et al. 1). Jende, Neni, and their children return to Limbe to their own house and business.

The transnational lens on the concept of citizenship prevents a reading of the migrant's return as defeat because it compares Jende's position in the US after his job loss and rejected asylum application to the prospects that he will have in Limbe after his return from the US. Reflecting the semantics of the citizen of Volpp's quote above, in a conversation with Winston Jende reasons, "Cameroon did not have opportunities like America, but that did not mean one should stay in America if doing so no longer made sense" (*Behold the Dreamers* 322). It is here that Jende can eventually emancipate himself from the "grotesque being created by the sufferings of an American immigrant life" that he has become to Neni and his children as well as from the demeaning behavior that he assumed while working for Clark Edwards (237). Visiting Clark shortly before the family's departure, Jende can now explain his situation to his former boss clearly and rationally. When Clark asks Jende why he returns to Cameroon, he answers:

> No, sir, I'm not being deported. But I cannot get a green card unless I am granted asylum, and for that to happen I will have to spend many years and a lot of money going to immigration court. And then maybe the judge will still decide to not give me asylum, which means the government will deport me in the end. It's not how I want to live my life sir, especially when you add the fact that it's just not easy for a man to enjoy his life in this country if he is poor. (372–73)

At the end of the novel, Jende can comprehend his years in the US in the context of his life and what it means for his future in Cameroon when he says, "because of that job I was able to save money and now I can go back home to live well" (372). Due to his changed financial situation and the business experience, Jende is "no longer afraid of [his] country the way [he] used to be" (373). The emancipation process that Jende experiences as the plot progresses is an example of the "complex and multilayered" context of migrations and their narratives that Ahmad describes when she writes that "migration would be better understood as effect rather than cause" (xviii).

Although Jende quickly adapts to ways and customs of US-American society and the pace of his tight work schedule in New York, he also maintains financial and emotional ties to his family and community in Nigeria when he sends money to his parents and extended family and cannot forgive himself for not being able to attend his father's funeral (304). Despite what can be called his symbolic disavowal of his Nigerian citizenship in favor of expressing allegiance to the US in the scene quoted above, Jende participates in the social and material flows across nation states and borders that mark globalization. Jende's situation as transna-

tional migrant is marked by the reconciliation of these complex and at times even conflicting characteristics of his identity, which Glick Schiller et al. attribute to transmigrants. "Through these seemingly contradictory experiences, transmigrants actively manipulate their identities and thus both accommodate to and resist their subordination within a global capitalist system" (Glick Schiller et al. 12). For Jende, the reconciliation of his Nigerian citizenship and his loyalty to the US eventually enable him to emancipate himself from oppressive US-American labor conditions and to exit voluntarily the regularization process that he started with an ungrounded asylum application before facing detention and deportation.

Afropolitan Transmigration

This transnational perspective on migration narratives presents an outside, and outsider's, perspective on immigration discourses in the US. The immigrant Jende emancipates himself from the myth of the American Dream and its narratives of metaphorical belonging that sidetrack the story of legal and economic realities of immigrants like him. Echoing the figurative language of this myth, Jende summarizes the labor conditions of immigrants in New York during the financial crisis when he says, "[t]his country no longer has room for people like us" (332).[7] And although Jende and Neni are in the beginning of the novel certain that they will stay permanently in the US since this country has so much to offer them, the juxtaposition of Manhattan and Lagos—not only metaphorically in the memories of the characters but also as concrete localities and cultural spaces—extends the tropes of the traditional immigrant novel in the US to a transnational context. Reflecting this new-found independence, Jende declines Winston's offer as hotel manager in Limbe and uses the money he earned in the US to start his own agricultural business with his family's plot of land, applying the skills he acquired while working for Clark to "diversify and conglomerate and acquire as many competitors as possible" (353). As transnational migrants, Jende and Neni no longer see the necessity to disavow US society and the so-called American way of life to reintegrate into their communities in Nigeria. Rather, they can put their skills and experiences as well as their material goods to use in Limbe when they exhibit Wallstreet smartness and fake and original Gucci and Versace outfits (11).

At the end of the novel, Jende resembles the "fair number of African professionals" who are returning to African countries from American, British, Canadian, and European metropoles and whom Taiye Selasi describes as Afropolitans in her 2005

7 This "like us" also includes American citizens such as his middle-aged co-worker Leah at Lehman Brothers, who is unable to find a new job after the bank's collapse in the ensuing economic crisis.

essay "Bye-bye Babar." The term Afropolitan refers to young artists, writers, musicians, and business professionals who live in globalized urban spaces across the world and have ties to the African continent. In Selasi's words, this new generation is a "funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics" at home in one or more "G 8 cities" and in "at least one place on the African Continent," who "choose which bits of a national identity (from passport to pronunciation) [they] internalize," and who are "not citizens, but Africans of the world" (Selasi). Foregrounding their creative work, she emphasizes that they "refus[e] to oversimplify" Africa and its pasts and presents: "Rather than essentializing the geographical entity, we seek to comprehend the cultural complexity" (Selasi). The essay sparked and rekindled a heated debate in artistic, academic, and media circles about representations of generalized and often stereotyped images of Africa and Africans in Western, that is US-American and European, discourses on one hand and about the positions and roles of contemporary creative professionals with roots and links to African countries and cultures on the other.[8]

Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* does not obviously adhere to the understanding of Afropolitan/Afropolitanism as outlined in Selasi's essay. Firstly, the novel's main characters Jende and Neni do not belong to the sophisticated, intellectual, and worldly community that characterizes Selasi's Afropolitan (Selasi). Secondly, it foregrounds the migration story of Jende and Neni in the tradition of the immigrant novel popular in the US when it sets out to depict the couple's efforts to partake in the American Dream as the self-made success story of the integrated, industrious, and enduring immigrant worker. What the so-called one percent at the top of the social ladder and the immigrant worker share is their belief in the American Dream, which they find out is a "very tough challenge achieving," as Imbolo Mbue describes the commonalities of the two families who inhabit the top and bottom steps, respectively, of the social ladder in a *CBS: This Morning* interview ("Oprah's Book Club"). Thirdly, it applies the idea of "not citizens but Africans of the world" quite literally to the legal situation of its protagonists (Selasi), who cannot choose from a set of privileged nationalities but preempt deportation by voluntarily returning to their country of national origin.

8 In "Cosmopolitanism with African Roots: Afropolitanism's Ambivalent Mobilities," Susanne Gehrmann contextualizes and summarizes the popular, digital, and academic controversies around the concept. Analyzing two key novels that engage the discourse, Teju Cole's *Open City* (2012) and Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* (2013), Gerhmann concludes, "These novels open up a fruitful literary landscape for the uncovering of contemporary Afro-diasporic identity politics traversing America, Africa and Europe" (69). Donald Morales points out in defense of the concepts as formulated by Selasi, "Afropolitanism should not be dismissed as a commercial or pop-culture movement but a future-leaning way of moving African literature and art forward" ("An Afropolitan 2017 Update" 229).

However, what *Behold the Dreamers* and the Afropolitan discourse share is the comparative point of view on US-American society and its "monopoly on the idea of being a 'nation of immigrants'" (Ahmad xix). The transnational lenses of both Afropolitanism and *Behold the Dreamers* call into question the assumption that "the ultimate goal of migration is to assimilate to a new place" and foreground the movement and mobility of transmigrants (Ahmad xviii). Speaking about the evolution of the concept Afropolitanism several years later in an interview with Bhakti Shringarpure, Selasi relativizes the critique of her essay as elitist and stresses travel as necessity rather than luxury:

> The essay describes, very specifically, a group of people in movement. But they are not—or not mostly—in movement toward luxury packaged vacations. They're going from Storrs to Nairobi to see their family, from London to Lagos on on-sale flights, they're counting their pennies to pay inflated prices at Christmas, they're trying to get home (from home). (Selasi qtd. in Shringarpure)

The young professionals of "Bye-bye Babar" are thus to be understood as the result of their parents' "obsession with upward mobility" who are raised and trained internationally with the aim to enter the "global middle class" (Selasi qtd. in Shringarpure). On a similar note, Madhu Krishnan identifies contemporary African novels that portray the returns of their protagonists, so-called narratives of return (144), as "departing from the more market-driven image of the African subject as a mobile, free-floating consumer of culture" that is represented in the image of the Afropolitan (145). Thus, Jende and Neni's return to Cameroon and the comparison of the living and precarious working conditions of immigrants in the US challenge both the myth of the American Dream as global master narrative of a successful life and the centrality or dominance of the transnational discourse of migration. Jende gives voice to this "monopoly" when he reasons that "Columbus Circle is the center of Manhattan. Manhattan is the center of New York. New York is the center of America, and America is the center of the world" (*Behold the Dreamers* 96). For Neni and Jende, Columbus Circle presents a microcosm of a global, transnational world where people from all over the world cross but do not necessarily interact.[9] Neni, for example, observes that "most people were sticking to their own kind. Even in New York City, even in a place of many nations and cultures, men and women, young and old, rich and poor, preferred their kind when it came to those they kept closest" (95). Columbus Circle thus symbolizes the promises and opportunities of the US

9 Toohey describes the symbolism of the statue of Christopher Columbus in post-9/11 narratives like *Behold the Dreamers* as follows: "Columbus as the arrival of the new and the symbolic starting point for Europeans' possession of the land and claim of racial superiority, and subjugation of enslaved Africans in the new world—these two sides of the man and his myth blend in the Jonga's experience of New York" (392).

and the American Dream. But these promises come with a price for Afropolitan transmigrants and their families and communities, as Selasi points out:

> Travel was how we kept our family together. We didn't have a choice. We did have the means. And that is, undoubtedly, a privilege. But the fracturedness of the family unit, its multi-locality, is a post-colonial outcome. To re-write that multi-locality in capitalist terms is to erase the human cost, the heartbreak." (Selasi qtd. in Shringarpure)

Globalization and the free flow of capital, goods, people, and ideas enables the Jongas to first migrate to the US without cutting ties with their families and friends at home. When they return to Cameroon it then allows them to stay connected to their friends and associates in the US. Jende's business will connect him to the US and if not Neni's education then the education of their children will take them to the US, or Canada or Great Britain. At the end of the narrative, Jende can act on the reasoning that he expressed already in the first half of the book when still being one of the dreamers:

> So they sat beneath the statue of Christopher Columbus, side by side, … In his first days in America, it was here he came every night to take in the city. It was here he often sat to call her when he got so lonely and homesick that the only balm that worked was the sound of her voice. During those calls, he would ask her how Liomi was doing, what she was wearing, what her plans for the weekend were, and she would tell him everything, leaving him even more wistful for the beauty of her smile, the hearth in his mother's kitchen, the light breeze at Down Beach, the tightness of Liomi's hugs. The coarse jokes and laughter of his friends as they drank Guinness at the drinking spot; leaving him craving everything he wished he hadn't left behind. During those times, he told her, he often wondered if leaving home in search of something as fleeting as fortune was ever worthwhile. (*Behold the Dreamers* 95–96)

It is from the core of the US-American cultural and social monopoly on immigration, legalization, and naturalization that Columbus Circle symbolizes, that the Jonga's departure from New York destabilizes the notion of the US as the center of a globalized world and the standard for measuring and judging a successful life. A transnational novel, *Behold the Dreamers* foregrounds the economic and legal conditions of transnational migration and transnational citizenship and questions the price tag attached to the American Dream for working immigrants. The characters emerge as transmigrants who compare their life and prospects in the US to those of their hometown in Nigeria. Although they may not have much of a choice in legal terms, they nonetheless are able to choose their future and reconcile the transcul-

tural markers of their identity within transnational locations that encompass the US and Nigeria—the global North and the global South—simultaneously.

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