

## Études littéraires africaines

# African and American Selves: « Contact Zones » in *All Our Names* by Dinaw Mengestu

Corinne Duboin



Numéro 44, 2017

Africains... et américains ?

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1051541ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1051541ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association pour l'Étude des Littératures africaines (APELA)

ISSN

0769-4563 (imprimé)

2270-0374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Duboin, C. (2017). African and American Selves: « Contact Zones » in *All Our Names* by Dinaw Mengestu. *Études littéraires africaines*, (44), 95–111.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1051541ar>

Résumé de l'article

*All our Names* (2014), troisième roman de l'écrivain éthiopien américain Dinaw Mengestu, est un double récit qui alterne entre l'Ouganda nouvellement indépendant et les États-Unis à la suite du mouvement des droits civiques, offrant ainsi une double critique de l'Afrique postcoloniale et de l'Amérique multiraciale. Il donne voix à la fois à un étudiant africain qui cherche refuge aux États-Unis et à une assistante sociale blanche, enracinée dans sa ville natale du Midwest. Nous étudions comment Mengestu construit ses deux personnages et entrelace leurs douloureuses histoires individuelles, formant deux récits subjectifs, narrés à la première personne, qui donnent à voir deux perspectives différentes de l'africanité et de l'identité noire. Nous analysons ensuite comment le romancier utilise leur rencontre (l'histoire d'amour secrète d'un couple mixte) pour souligner les contrastes et les similitudes de leurs deux mondes séparés et ainsi mettre en lumière, au-delà de leurs différences, l'instabilité de l'identité et le sentiment de soi des deux personnages.

AFRICAN AND AMERICAN SELVES :  
« CONTACT ZONES » IN *ALL OUR NAMES*  
BY DINAW MENGESTU

**ABSTRACT**

*Ethiopian American writer Dinaw Mengestu's third novel All Our Names (2014) is a double narrative that alternates between post-independence Uganda and post-Civil Rights America, thus offering a critique on both postcolonial Africa and multiracial America. It gives voice to both an African student who seeks refuge in the U.S. and to an American social worker, a white Midwesterner deep-rooted in her hometown. This essay examines how Mengestu constructs his two characters and weaves together their painful singular stories as parallel subjective first-person narratives that offer two different perspectives on Africanness and Blackness. It further analyzes how he uses their encounter (a secret interracial love affair) to point to the contrasts and similarities of their two separate worlds and thus expose the instability of identity and the sense of self that go beyond their differences and affect both characters.*

**RÉSUMÉ**

*All our Names (2014), troisième roman de l'écrivain éthiopien américain Dinaw Mengestu, est un double récit qui alterne entre l'Ouganda nouvellement indépendant et les États-Unis à la suite du mouvement des droits civiques, offrant ainsi une double critique de l'Afrique postcoloniale et de l'Amérique multiraciale. Il donne voix à la fois à un étudiant africain qui cherche refuge aux États-Unis et à une assistante sociale blanche, enracinée dans sa ville natale du Midwest. Nous étudions comment Mengestu construit ses deux personnages et entrelace leurs douloureuses histoires individuelles, formant deux récits subjectifs, narrés à la première personne, qui donnent à voir deux perspectives différentes de l'africanité et de l'identité noire. Nous analysons ensuite comment le romancier utilise leur rencontre (l'histoire d'amour secrète d'un couple mixte) pour souligner les contrastes et les similitudes de leurs deux mondes séparés et ainsi mettre en lumière, au-delà de leurs différences, l'instabilité de l'identité et le sentiment de soi des deux personnages.*

\*

Dinaw Mengestu was two years old in 1980 when his family escaped the violence of the Communist revolution in Ethiopia and

settled in the United States. Mengestu grew up in suburban Chicago and lived « an American childhood »<sup>1</sup>. The U.S. was the only country he had ever really known until he returned to Ethiopia at twenty-six and also visited neighboring countries<sup>2</sup>. Since then he has made several trips to Africa as a free-lance journalist to cover the conflicts in Darfur, Uganda, and the Congo. As a novelist, he focuses on the plight of African immigrants who constitute a « new black diaspora »<sup>3</sup> in the U.S. alongside the long-established African American community. Defining himself as both « an African writer » and « an American writer »<sup>4</sup>, Mengestu breaks down cultural boundaries and offers an alternative perspective on what it means to be black in the U.S. He thus contributes to the increasing diversity of American literature and its ethnic landscape at the outset of the twenty-first century.

During an interview in 2015, Mengestu discussed his personal search for identity and his growing self-awareness as an Ethiopian American. Rejecting hyphenation, he expressed his need to « merge those two competing sides », though he remained aware that there is « a unique divide, [...] a double consciousness that you never really get to escape ». He concluded by saying that his work was « born out of that tension »<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, the common thread of his three novels is the loss of a stable sense of self felt by immigrants who had to leave war-torn, violence-ridden African countries and who feel « stuck between two worlds »<sup>6</sup>. His works of fiction address the theme of identity building and bring to light the problematic « contact zones » defined by Mary Louise Pratt as « social spaces where

---

<sup>1</sup> MENGESTU (Dinaw), interviewed by CASALI (Clovis), « Dinaw Mengestu : Understanding the Puzzles of Identity », *France 24 English* : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nzcmX6VpEXQ> (video posted June 26, 2015 ; accessed Sep. 09, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> See his short essay : MENGESTU (D.), « Returning to Addis Ababa », *Callaloo*, 33.1, Spring 2010, p. 15-17.

<sup>3</sup> See KONADU-AGYEMANG (Kwado), TAKYI (Baffour K.) and ARTHUR (John A.), eds., *The New African Diaspora in North America : Trends, Community Building, and Adaptation*. Lanham, MD : Lexington, 2006, 310 p.

<sup>4</sup> MENGESTU (D.), « Linked Fates and Great Expectations », *W.E.B. Du Bois Lecture*, University of Maryland (11.11.2015), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Se9LKTFP1cc> (video posted Nov. 13, 2015 ; accessed Sep. 02, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> MENGESTU (D.), interviewed by KRESH (Diane), « Author Dinaw Mengestu Speaks at the Arlington Public Library », *Arlington Reads 2013*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=afEj\\_SJwj9w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=afEj_SJwj9w) (video posted Apr. 26, 2013 ; accessed July 02, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> MENGESTU (D.), *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* [2007]. New York : Riverhead, 2008, 240 p. ; p. 228.

cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today »<sup>7</sup>.

In order to expose Mengestu's fictional representation of racial and national identity formation in the context of migration, and to examine the way he captures the resulting contact zone dynamics in multiracial America, I will focus my analysis on his latest novel, *All Our Names*<sup>8</sup>, which received good reviews from a number of critics after its release in 2014, but which has not gained much scholarly attention to date.

The novel is set in the early seventies. It is a dual narrative that alternates between post-independence Uganda and post-Civil Rights America. In the chapters entitled « Isaac », the author gives voice to a restless young man who has left Ethiopia to study in the capital city of Uganda and who aspires to becoming a writer. With his new friend Isaac (the *real* Issac), met on campus in Kampala, he gets involved in a violent rebellion that turns into a bloodbath. Choosing to sacrifice himself for the safety of his friend, Isaac gives the narrator his passport and his name so that he can escape from Uganda and seek refuge in the U.S. as an exchange student. In the chapters entitled « Helen », the narrator is a white American social worker rooted in her « quiet, semi-rural Midwestern » hometown (*AON*, p. 11). Helen is assigned to help out a newly arrived African student who calls himself Isaac and is rapidly involved in a furtive, interracial love affair with him. He is suspiciously secretive about his past and evasive over his plans but ultimately breaks his silence and makes a painful confession about his true identity and his feelings of grief and guilt since being informed of his friend's death in Uganda : « We were very close [...]. He was like a brother and a father to me » (*AON*, p. 137). It is thus late in the novel that Helen discovers who her lover really is and the circumstances of his migration. The rea-

---

<sup>7</sup> PRATT (Mary Louise), « Arts of the Contact Zone », *Profession*, 91, 1991, p. 33-40 ; p. 34.

<sup>8</sup> MENGESTU (D.), *All Our Names*. New York : Knopf, 2014, 272 p. Hereafter *AON*. In his debut novel, *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears*, the burden of history affects a lonely Ethiopian émigré who ponders upon his American experience and his uncomfortable sense of in-betweenness. In his second novel *How to Read the Air* (New York : Riverhead, 2010), Mengestu exposes the need for second-generation immigrants to recapture their forgotten, silenced family past by using the redemptive power of imagination and storytelling to fill in the blanks of African history as lived experience and pass on a cultural legacy in order to come to terms with themselves in America.

der, who never gets to know the male narrator's original full name, is also initially confused since there are two Isaacs. It is only at the very end of the novel that the narrator gives an unsatisfactory hint : « For the first time he [Isaac] called me by the name my father had given me when I was born. "D— [...]" » (*AON*, p. 253). Thus, the chapter heading « Isaac » ambiguously refers to both the narrator's Ugandan friend in Africa and the narrator himself under his assumed name in America. It bridges the gap between the two continents <sup>9</sup>.

Mengestu thus exposes the instability of identity, the shifting sense of self in relation to others, that similarly affects both characters-narrators, despite their differences. The author weaves together the painful singular stories of his two protagonists as parallel subjective first-person narratives that offer different perspectives on Africanness and Blackness. He uses their encounter and transformative close relationship to point to the contrasts and similarities of their two separate worlds that meet and overlap in a globalized Black history.

Indeed, the novel's fragmented narrative structure enables Mengestu to make a powerful social commentary that binds post-colonial Africa and multiracial America together, each nurturing dreams of democracy which generated violent upheavals followed by frustration and bitter disenchantment. According to Caren Irr, a shifting and variegated genre has recently emerged in American fiction, which she calls the international « geopolitical novel ». This broad literary genre « draws on several strains of writing in order to revive the problem of representing the world in a new, lively form » <sup>10</sup> and includes « the migrant novel » and « the revolutionary novel ». Mengestu's book fits into these two categories, although his double-stranded narrative can also be read as a love story.

By partly setting his novel in Uganda in the decade that followed the decolonization process marked by a short-lived phase of political optimism giving way to a period of civil unrest, military coups, and the rise of dictatorship, Mengestu focuses on a critical turning point

---

<sup>9</sup> For the sake of clarity, I will refer to the novel's male character-narrator as D., while the first name « Isaac » will be used to refer to his Ugandan friend.

<sup>10</sup> IRR (Caren), *Toward the Geopolitical Novel : U.S. Fiction in the Twenty-First Century*. New York : Columbia University Press, 2014, 280 p. ; p. 9-10. For Irr, « The five genres of the international novel [...] are the migrant novel, the Peace Corps thriller, the national allegory, the revolutionary novel, and the expatriate satire » (p. 10).

in the building of newly independent African nations, « the mourning after » to borrow Neil Lazarus's phrase<sup>11</sup>. As D. notes,

They held on to their socialist, Pan-African dream, while ignoring the corruption and violence that touched the rest of the capital, for as long as they could. By the time Isaac and I arrived on campus, the dream had proven rotten and was cast to the side (*AON*, p. 24).

The author shows how young political activists who originally believed in the « ecstatic promises » of « a new African utopia, of a borderless and free continent » (*AON*, p. 3 ; p. 80) took part in escalating violence and turned into merciless armed rebels responsible for massacres and atrocities in dehumanizing conflicts.

Mengestu's representation of a collective dream turned sour underlines the enduring impact and perpetuation of a (neo)colonial system using violence to divide and rule, as shown through the complex character of Joseph Mabira, a British-educated revolutionary leader who had returned to Uganda to liberate his people and who compromises his lofty ideals to become a cynical mass killer while showing his deep affection to young Isaac in a fatherly way. Even Isaac, who in the past had denounced exactions and other abuses perpetrated by the new ruling class, becomes the oppressor, a callous revolutionary who kills two child soldiers in cold blood : « I knew then what all that violence had done to him. Life was trivial, and here he was trying to prove it », D. says (*AON*, p. 197). The narrator describes how he himself took part in the burial of corpses in a mass grave :

A man much older than me [...] took the legs and I took the arms of each body passed to us. [...] After the fifteenth or twentieth I decided to think of them as a single body named Adam. In my head I said, « You were a brave soldier, Adam... Your mother and father will miss you... You should have stayed in your village, Adam... You have no reason to come here... You could have gone to school and become a doctor, Adam. » And when I ran out of alternate endings, I simply thought, « Adam, Adam, Adam, Adam, Adam, Adam, Adam, Adam, Adam, Adam, Adam, Adam, Adam, Adam, Adam, Adam, Adam, Adam, » until we had carried the last body out of the lorry [...]. We pushed all of

---

<sup>11</sup> LAZARUS (Neil), « Great Expectations and the Mourning After : Decolonization and African Intellectuals », in *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction*. New Haven : Yale University Press, 1990, 288 p. ; p. 1-26.

the bodies into the shallow grave on the other side of the tree, facing away from the village. We took turns shoveling the earth back. [...] The soldiers who had been guarding us walked away as if they had finished watching a street performance that had only mildly held their interest to begin with (*AON*, p. 229-230).

By naming each unidentified body « Adam » (« man » in Hebrew, and the first person God creates in Genesis), the narrator tries to bear the unbearable ; he aims to give back to the victims the life and dignity they had been deprived of. Yet, as he is unable to individualize them and give them an identity, they symbolically form a single, collective body – the recognition of a shared humanity. The soldiers' moral indifference and their insensitivity reveal the disturbing banality of horror.

Through his depiction of irrational collective violence born out of devious political revolutions, the author draws attention to the failure of ideologies promoted in post-independence Africa. He addresses the need to look back and confront the past that explains the present of both Africa and its Diaspora. Yet *All Our Names* is not a historical novel. About Uganda's dictatorial turn, Mengestu claims : « I didn't intend a real depiction of that historical moment, but my story is very much informed by it »<sup>12</sup>. D.'s war narrative is indeed a personal account of the unbreakable bonds of friendship and male camaraderie turning into deep platonic love when he and Isaac stick together as budding revolutionaries : « He put his arm around my shoulder and kissed the top of my head. "Together," he said, "we are remarkable" » (*AON*, p. 29). In his reinterpretation of decolonized Africa from the vantage point of a naïve young man saved by his dearest friend at the cost of his life, the author aims to illustrate the complexity of human relations and the paradoxical capacity for both cruelty and profound love, self-interest and commitment to others, cynicism and faith in one's ideals. He thus erases the common, simplistic image of helpless, hopeless Africa – the so-called « dark continent » as perceived through Western eyes. In his 2007 article « Children of War », Mengestu vehemently criticized the Western world's obliviousness and condescending perception of Africa and praised African writers such as Nigerian Biyi Bandele whose novel, *Burma Boy* (2007), about West African

---

<sup>12</sup> NANCE (Kevin), « Dinaw Mengestu on "All Our Names" », *Chicago Tribune*, March 21, 2014 : [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2014-03-21/features/chi-all-our-names-dinaw-mengestu-20140321\\_1\\_dinaw-mengestu-printers-row-journal-uganda](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2014-03-21/features/chi-all-our-names-dinaw-mengestu-20140321_1_dinaw-mengestu-printers-row-journal-uganda) (accessed July 2, 2014).

child soldiers, shows « both the folly and the love that war breeds among boys pretending to be men »<sup>13</sup>.

To some extent, Mengestu's fictional reconstruction of the early seventies reflects a presentist transnational approach to history. His recent personal experience of war-torn Africa, as an Ethiopian American journalist covering twenty-first-century international events through a Diasporic lens, partly fuels his imagination and impacts his literary representation of 1970s Uganda. In a 2006 article on Darfur, Mengestu mentions a rebel leader of the Sudanese Liberation Army, Manni Arkou Minnawi, whom he interviewed. His description indeed reminds us of his Ugandan character Isaac :

If anyone embodies the conflicting nature of the war in Darfur, it's Minnawi. A poor village boy turned revolutionary, he is emblematic of any of the hundreds of men who have tried to lead a crumbling army into power in Africa, using violence and intimidation to simultaneously free and destroy their countries<sup>14</sup>.

Moreover, as Aaron Bady pointed out in *The New Enquiry*, the character of Joseph Mabira recalls the infamous Ugandan rebel Joseph Kony, leader of the Lord's Resistance Army<sup>15</sup>. In his fictional reconstruction of Africa in the seventies, Mengestu may also have drawn upon his family's memories of the Red Terror in Ethiopia<sup>16</sup>.

---

<sup>13</sup> MENGESTU (D.), « Children of War », *Newstatesman*, June 14, 2007 : <http://www.newstatesman.com/books/2007/06/africa-war-burma-beah-sudan> (accessed Dec. 3, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> MENGESTU (D.), « Back to the Tragedy of Darfur », *Rolling Stone*, Sep. 07, 2006 : <http://www.learntoquestion.com/resources/database/archives/001375.html> (posted Oct. 06, 2006 ; accessed June 06, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> BADY (Aaron), « The World and What it Isn't : Dinaw Mengestu's "All Our Names" », *The New Inquiry*, March 27, 2014 : <http://thenewinquiry.com/blogs/zunguzungu/the-world-and-what-it-isnt-dinaw-mengestus-all-our-names/> (accessed June 06, 2016). See also Mengestu's paper on Kony : « Not a Click Away : Joseph Kony in the Real World », *Warscapes*, March 12, 2012 : <http://www.warscapes.com/reportage/not-click-away-joseph-kony-real-world> (accessed June 06, 2016). « Joseph » is also a recurring Biblical name and a fatherly figure present in each of his novels : Sepha's friend Joseph from Congo in *The Beautiful Things*, Jonas's father Yosef in *How to Read the Air*, and Joseph Mabira in *All Our Names*.

<sup>16</sup> During the Red Terror, one of Mengestu's uncles was arrested and died in custody. In his work about twenty-first-century immigrant writers in America, David Cowart points out that « If at times these writers seek to represent the old country, they must do so at second hand : they must construct pre-diasporic settings through the myth-making memories of their immigrant parents » — COWART (D.), *Trailing Clouds : Immigrant Fiction in Contemporary America*. Ithac : Cornell University Press, 2006, 264 p. ; p. 2. As for Mengestu, his refugee family



In his seminal work, *On the Postcolony*, which reinterprets Africa's violent postcolonial history, Achille Mbembe refers to « the age of postcolony » as « time in the state of becoming » or « emerging time » of existence and experience<sup>17</sup>. This time of existence is not linear, says Mbembe ; it « is not a series but an interlocking of presents, pasts, and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones »<sup>18</sup>. Mengestu's conflation of historical events that extend beyond national boundaries and blur the line between past and present is representative of this « interlocking » ; it underscores the recurrent challenges faced by African postcolonies in nation building as a democratic process.

The title of the novel *All Our Names* explicitly highlights this ongoing process of national, collective, and individual self-(re)definition : old identities and those imposed by others need to be shed in new social contexts so that all can move on. To reinvent themselves, discard the burden of legacies and embrace their futures, both nations and individual subjects must break with the past : « When I was born, I had thirteen names. Each name was from a different generation », D. says (*AON*, p. 178). « On the bus ride to the capital, I gave up all the names my parents had given me [...] I shed those names just as our bus crossed the border into Uganda » (*AON*, p. 3)<sup>19</sup>. D.'s second border-crossing, his coming to America with a Kenyan passport under the name « Isaac Mabira », is yet rife with ambiguities. The passport was originally given to his friend Isaac by Joseph. His new identity is a complete fabrication : neither D. nor Isaac are from Kenya. His new name is also a dual heritage, with a Biblical resonance that calls to mind Isaac, the sacrificial son : « Isaac was the name his parents gave him. [...] "Isaac" was their legacy to him ; [...] that name became his last and most precious gift

---

was very reluctant to talk about their traumatic past and the author knew very little until he was an adult and began asking questions and researching his family history.

<sup>17</sup> MBEMBE (Achille), *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley : University of California Press, 2001, 274 p. ; p. 11 and p. 16. In the original French edition : « le temps à l'état naissant ou, mieux encore, le temps en cours » – *De la postcolonie. Essai sur l'imaginaire politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine*. Paris : Karthala, 2000, 293 p. ; p. 36.

<sup>18</sup> MBEMBE (A.), *On the Postcolony*, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>19</sup> Similarly, one of Helen's elderly clients is known as Rose. Yet, « [h]er real name was Agnes, but after her husband died five years before, she decided she wanted to be called Rose. She was eighty-one » (*AON*, p. 77). Here again, self-renaming symbolizes change, emancipation, and rebirth.

to me » (*AON*, p. 5). D. also receives Joseph's last name Mabira which establishes a dubious filiation. Paradoxically enough, while D. escapes from the ubiquitous danger of civil war by endorsing a new, redemptive name in America, he still carries the weight of his African past through that very name and needs to come to terms with that past as it implies loss, separation and death<sup>20</sup>.

In parallel, Helen's relational narrative echoes D.'s account. Firstly, it extends the themes of great expectations and unfulfilled democratic ideals by exposing the persisting resistance to racial equality in the U.S. The Civil Rights Movement as a watershed for race relations and, to a lesser extent, the end of the Vietnam war, form the historical background to the American storyline of the novel. Through Helen's fragile romance, the author depicts America's enduring racism : « our quaint town, which only a decade earlier had stopped segregating its public bathrooms, buses, schools, and restaurants [...] still didn't look too kindly upon seeing its races mix » (*AON*, p. 17). Helen takes small actions that she views as subversive boldness and « important victories » (*AON*, p. 34) against prejudice and bigotry, such as inviting D. for lunch at the local diner. In the same way that D. and Isaac started their « mock revolution » on campus (*AON*, p. 147), a non-violent « paper revolution », by posting fliers which listed « Crimes Against the Country » (*AON*, p. 29), Helen wrote down on a piece of paper, before going to that restaurant, « We have every right to be here » (*AON*, p. 36). The white waitress, however, serves D.'s lunch on a paper plate with a plastic fork and knife. This antagonistic gesture toward D. blatantly signifies that he is not welcome. Helen's act of defiance dramatically turns into a devastating and humiliating experience : « I was reminded that we were no longer, if ever, on the same side. [...] When we left the restaurant and were back in the car, he said to me, "Now you know : this is how they break you, slowly, in pieces" » (*AON*, p. 38, p. 40). The incident echoes a violent scene in Kampala described by D : he and Isaac, then poor villagers and would-be-students, were involved in a physical altercation with a group of wealthy students at the Flamingo Café owned by Joseph.

---

<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, Nigerian author Chris Abani used the themes of escape, re-naming and rebirth in a somewhat similar way in *GraceLand* (New York : Picador, 2004, 321 p.). His young protagonist Elvis, a Presley impersonator growing up in Lagos, uses his friend Redemption's passport – « My gift to you » (*GL*, p. 317) – to migrate to America. The novel closes on Elvis's reply to the airline clerk's call at the boarding gate : « Elvis stepped forward and spoke. "Yes, this is Redemption" » (*GL*, p. 321). As for Mengestu's protagonist, he tells Helen : « I became Isaac as soon as I stepped on the plane » (*AON*, p. 175).

Both situations place a focus on discriminations : racism in the U.S. and class division in Uganda.

As a mixed couple, Helen and D. have to face challenges and obstacles. Yet, these difficulties as well as the nature of their relationship and its outcome are perceived from Helen's standpoint alone : « I understood how easily the tiny world Isaac and I were slowly building could vanish » (*AON*, p. 21). Mengestu constructs an elliptical narrative in which D.'s feelings for Helen, his felt experience as a migrant and his gradual understanding of multiracial America are overshadowed. Thus, through Helen's narrative, the author departs from the conventions of the classic immigrant novel. Indeed, when discussing his works of fiction, Mengestu maintained that they are not « immigrant stor[ies] », considering that the reductive label « push[es] the novel[s] into a category outside of American literature, [...] it rejects the blackness of my characters [...] reduced to marginal figures ». To put it another way, « It isolates the problem of their identity, the problem of race in America » <sup>21</sup>.

As an African émigré, D. has to deal with prejudices and racial discrimination, as shown in the climactic diner scene. Yet, Mengestu does not focus on the foreign newcomer who has crossed borders, who goes through the process of reinventing himself and has to negotiate his new identity. The writer aims to show the impact of « migrants [who] participate in and reshape the social worlds within which they move » <sup>22</sup>. He thus shifts the reader's attention away from the newcomer's predicament to Helen's Western viewpoint and her inner crisis triggered by her interaction with D. who embodies the Other, the outsider. Mengestu sheds light on the fact that their encounter leads her, as a white American, to enter a disturbing contact zone as she tries to erase « an invisible, but no less real barrier » (*AON*, p. 225) that separates them, and has to face D.'s enigmatic attitude, « his mystery trip across America, his spotless apartment, [...] and the single-page file at the office that revealed practically nothing other than he existed » (*AON*, p. 100). She also has to struggle with her own lack of understanding and misconceptions about D. and Africa and is led to confront her own prejudices, « assumptions [she] wasn't aware of possessing » (*AON*, p. 14). Helen's quandary helps her gain a new perspective on herself, her « little Midwestern world » as she says (*AON*, p. 14), and on America at large : « All that time lost – not to have done more, but

<sup>21</sup> MENGESTU (D.), « Linked Fates and Great Expectations », video cit.

<sup>22</sup> PAPASTERGIADIS (Nikos), *The Turbulence of Migration : Globalization, Deterritorialization and Hybridity*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 2000, 256 p. ; p. 21.

to have seen better » (*AON*, p. 100). Indeed, as she notices a group of African American students on her town's college campus which had been the site of black protest in the turbulent sixties, she becomes aware of her own blindness to the race problem : « The right to *claim their small share* of this country had always been theirs ; they knew that long before the rest of us. I wondered if the same would ever be true for someone like Isaac » (*AON*, p. 100 ; italics mine). Helen's grasp of the legacy of racism in America, her pondering over the need to rethink America's growing diversity so that it be more inclusive, is to be paralleled with D.'s own thinking about Uganda as a crumbling country, ten years after independence : « there was still hope in the brighter future to come, and we were there like everyone else to *claim our share* » (*AON*, p. 3 ; italics mine).

Helen's narrative also shows her personal trajectory of liberation and empowerment. She still lives with her divorced mother and has never traveled further than St. Louis. She leads an « ordinary and predictable » life (*AON*, p. 76) until she meets D. : « My relationship with him was the greatest trip I had ever taken so far » (*AON*, p. 188). Through her encounter with D., Helen becomes aware of her own « entrapment » (*AON*, p. 67) in the same way that D. felt as if he « had been born into a prison » (*AON*, p. 178) when living in Ethiopia. Her mother's stifling house becomes the image of the maternal womb and symbolizes the immutable past : « the past was all over the walls, in pictures and souvenirs, but because I was never far away, I rarely thought of them as markers of a time that had ended » (*AON*, p. 207). Helen puts her life in perspective and realizes the time has come for her to take her distance from her mother so as to become a new independent woman. Just as D. lives in a nearly empty, spotless apartment, she gradually gets rid of most of her bedroom furniture. She eventually decides to leave for Chicago with him, just as D. left Ethiopia to change the course of his life and escape his family's stagnant existence. As the novel comes to an end, Helen and D.'s prospects seem uncertain, their romance doomed. Yet, like D. and Isaac's relationship, their liaison remains a fruitful experience as it helps them envision new beginnings and new possibilities resulting in a profound rupture. As Helen tells D., « We're taking off. We're finally ungrounded » (*AON*, p. 244). Indeed, in a similar way, Isaac's friendship helped D. move forward and trust an unknown future in times of precariousness and profound uncertainty : « With Isaac near me, I may not have known where I was going, but there was always a destination waiting » (*AON*, p. 105).

Mengestu's narrative choices, his juxtaposition of historical episodes narrated in retrospect by confused characters located in two separate cultural spaces, black Africa and white America, the novel's two, interlaced, fragmented storylines that echo one another and eventually converge, its dual perspective and its non-linear, apparently discontinuous, structure, all reveal the porous borders and possible intersection of cultures that collide and « grapple with each other » (Pratt). The dual narrative also forces the reader to navigate between two cultures, two different timelines and plotlines (a revolution in Africa and a love story in America) and go beyond the disjunctions of the text to grasp its structural coherence and thematic unity. By bridging the distance between different African and American selves, between pasts and presents, Mengestu underscores overlaps. The novel's web of contact zones, the characters' interwoven narratives of unfulfilled ambitions, love and friendship, sacrifice and possible renewal, all point to the changing meaning of America as « a world, not a nation » (*AON*, p. 226). The author aims to show that the U.S., like Uganda or any other nation-state, is a fluid social space in process and permanent renewal, an « imagined community »<sup>23</sup> that is best understood through an examination of cross-national interactions and global interconnectedness.

One can also read as subtext the author's own coping with his twoness as a second-generation immigrant who understands himself as a « man formed by multiple narratives »<sup>24</sup> and who views his books as « an attempt to merge a hybrid sense of [...] who [he is] »<sup>25</sup>. Taken together, D.'s Africa and Helen's America form Mengestu's intertwined transnational legacies. A black African man who fled his home country as a child refugee and grew up in America, he feels the need to retrace and embrace the interlocked (dis)similar histories and cultures of Africa and African America that have shaped him. Mengestu's literary project, his composite account, then exemplifies Mbembe's concept of the postcolony and its implications both within Africa and beyond its borders :

As an age, the postcolony encloses multiple *durées* made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another, and envelop one another :

---

<sup>23</sup> ANDERSON (Benedict), *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London and New York : Verso, 1983, 240 p.

<sup>24</sup> NANCE (K.), « Dinaw Mengestu on "All Our Names" », *art. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> MENGESTU (D.), « All Our Names », *Politics and Prose*, March 18, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nh1A6WjN-8E> (video posted March 21, 2014 ; accessed July 02, 2014).

an *entanglement*. I also wanted to pose the whole question of *displacement*. [...] The central concern was to rethink the theme of the African subject emerging, focusing on him/herself, withdrawing, in the act and context of *displacement* and *entanglement*. Displacement is not simply intended to signify dislocation, transit, or « the impossibility of any centrality other than one that is provisional, ad hoc, and permanently being redefined »<sup>26</sup>.

Mengestu's way of writing is reflective of what Mbembe calls « an aesthetics of entanglement »<sup>27</sup>, a cultural *mélange* that results from multiple mobilities. D.'s quest for a literary voice outside Ethiopia, the troubled homeland, is suggestive of Mengestu's own need to position himself as a diasporic African-born writer in America. Mengestu's male narrator explains that in Uganda, some villagers mispronounced his « real name » given to him at birth : « my name had been transformed into Daniel – a Biblically familiar name » (*AON*, p. 213). This playful remark is indicative of a possible identification between the author and his character, since a phonetic approximation brings the two names Dinaw and Daniel together.

Most importantly, the narrator's ambition, his migration to Uganda, was not fueled by greed and a thirst for power, but by the historic June 1962 Conference of African Writers of English Expression held at Makerere University in Kampala. The participants (who included Achebe, Ngũgĩ, and Soyinka) addressed the legacy of colonialism, held heated debates on the use of the English language by African writers and focused on the (re)definition of African literature and the new directions to be taken, away from the Western canon and the *Négritude* movement. However, Mengestu's narrator points to the fact that by the time he reached Kampala, new repressive leaders had already stifled the emergence of artistic creation on the continent :

Many of the writers who attended that conference had already begun to make themselves scarce [...] : several were already reported to be in exile in America ; others were rumored to be dead or working for a corrupt government. But I still dreamed of joining their ranks nonetheless (*AON*, p. 10).

Moreover, D.'s access to and conception of literature were then limited to « the same Victorian novels » he had read « a dozen times,

<sup>26</sup> MBEMBE (A.), *On the Postcolony*, op. cit., p. 14-15.

<sup>27</sup> My translation : « une esthétique de l'entrelacement » (italics in original). MBEMBE (A.), *Sortir de la grande nuit : Essai sur l'Afrique décolonisée* [2010]. Paris : La Découverte, coll. Poche Essais, 2013, 254 p. ; p. 228.

and [he] assumed that was how proper English was spoken » (*AON*, p. 4). Because he talks like « someone out of an old English novel » (*AON*, p. 17), Helen and her boss David rename him « Mr Dickens » in a mocking tone<sup>28</sup>. As theorized by Homi Bhabha, D.'s ventriloquism, his linguistic « mimicry », is a « parody »<sup>29</sup> of Victorian British English wrongly perceived as normative. D.'s need to pretend and conform, his « mimicry » as « an *ironic* compromise »<sup>30</sup>, is a form of verbal masking and self-delusion. D.'s imitation is a repetition with a difference as he remains the African Other, « almost the same, but not quite »<sup>31</sup>. Knowing that Victorian literature promoted colonialism and British imperialism, Mengestu suggests that his character is in search of an artistic identity that will only be achieved through the rejection or the revision of old Eurocentric models. D.'s journey to America and Isaac's and Helen's love and support will make possible his emancipation. As Helen says, « I didn't hear his real voice until the very end of our relationship, in the months just before he was supposed to leave » (*AON*, p. 51-52).

Mengestu claims that « It's through the literature of African Americans that [he] became American » and forged his own identity as a black male in the U.S.<sup>32</sup>. He also argues that his fiction is part of Western literature, beyond the racial divide : « I write out of the American literary tradition ; the writers I have grown up with and the writers I'm aware of when I'm thinking about my own writing are European and American »<sup>33</sup>. Helen's gift to D., a copy of Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (*AON*, p. 17), is thus rich with meaning as the British novel itself informs Mengestu's text with the use of similar themes such as duality, revolution, love and sacrifice. European intertexts in Mengestu's fiction confirm his appropriation and reworking of mainstream Western literature in the same way as D., an enthusiastic reader of Dickens's *Great Expectations*, appreciates the exotic European novel that makes sense to him only because he can recontextualize (or displace) the story and thus transform and

---

<sup>28</sup> To some extent, D. is reminiscent of V.S. Naipaul's character, B. Wordsworth in *Miguel Street* (1959).

<sup>29</sup> BHABHA (Homi K.), *The Location of Culture*. London : Routledge, 1994, 285 p. ; p. 86.

<sup>30</sup> BHABHA (Homi K.), *The Location of Culture*, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

<sup>31</sup> BHABHA (Homi K.), *The Location of Culture*, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

<sup>32</sup> In particular, Du Bois, Wright and Baldwin. MENGESTU (D.), « Linked Fates and Great Expectations », video cit.

<sup>33</sup> « The Q&A : Dinaw Mengestu, Novelist », *The Economist online*, Apr. 26, 2011 : [http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2011/04/qa\\_2](http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2011/04/qa_2) (accessed May 29, 2011).

rewrite it : « London was now Kampala ; Pip a poor African orphan wandering the streets of the capital » (AON, p. 164).

In his analysis of the burgeoning African diasporic literature in the U.S., Louis Chude-Sokel contends that « Writers like Dinaw Mengestu inevitably function within this still unreconstructed “Diaspora” framework far more than they operate within the conventions of African or African American literature »<sup>34</sup>. Their eclectic works of fiction have brought new postcolonial and transnational perspectives on twenty-first century America. They disturb the conventional image of the newcomer who made a one-way passage to the promising New World so as to start anew, put down roots, and become American.

Among this generation of African writers in the U.S., novelists such as Taiye Selasi, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Teju Cole, and most recently Imbolo Mbue, aim to expose new patterns of migration and create a different range of characters : culturally hybrid migrants who do not feel trapped by a sense of in-betweenness and unbelonging, middle-class cosmopolitan expatriates who circulate more freely in an open world and who enjoy the possibility of making choices. Taiye Selasi, who was born in London to a Ghanaian father and a Nigerian-Scottish mother and who was raised in Massachusetts, views herself as being « lost in transnation »<sup>35</sup>. In her oft-cited essay « Bye-Bye Babar », she exposes her perception of African cosmopolitans who « belong to no single geography but feel at home in many. [...] We are Afropolitans: not citizens but Africans of the world » (GMG, p. 322-323). By also defining herself as « a multilocal Afropolitan »<sup>36</sup>, she insists on the plurality of places she identifies as « home ». In her semi-autobiographical debut novel *Ghana Must Go* (2013)<sup>37</sup>, she addresses the vexed questions of race,

---

<sup>34</sup> CHUDE-SOKEL (Louis), « The Newly Black Americans : African Immigrants and Black America », *Transition*, 113, 2014, p. 53-71 ; p. 62. Interestingly, an entry on Mengestu has been included in the second edition of Wilfred D. Samuels' *Encyclopedia of African-American Literature* (New York : Infobase Learning, 2013). However, while Samuels considers Mengestu to be part of African American literature, the Nigerian American writer Uzodinma Iweala, who was born and raised in the U.S. and is the author of the acclaimed novel *Beasts of No Nation* (New York : HarperCollins, 2005, 176 p.), is not listed in the encyclopedia.

<sup>35</sup> « Bye-Bye Babar », in SELASI (Taiye), *Ghana Must Go* [2013]. London : Penguin, 2014, 336 p. ; p. 323. Hereafter GMG.

<sup>36</sup> SELASI (T.), « I'm a Multilocal Afropolitan », Interview with Kim Skotte, Louisiana Literature 2013. Louisiana Channel. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4XgRINx5mj4> (accessed Aug. 23, 2016).

<sup>37</sup> SELASI (T.), *Ghana Must Go*, *op.cit.* The novel's title refers to the expulsion of Ghanaians from Lagos, Nigeria, in 1983.



ethnicity and national belonging. *Ghana Must Go* portrays an upper-middle-class African family of successful professionals, scholars, and artists scattered across three continents and reunited in Ghana after the death of the father, a brilliant Ghanaian surgeon who had abandoned his Nigerian wife and four children in the U.S. to return to Accra after being wrongly accused of malpractice and fired. Selasi crafts her narrative from multiple points of view weaving together the separate lives of her characters and revealing their psychological scars. The initial dream to « become a Successful Family » (*GMG*, p. 124) in the U.S. has collapsed because of racism and the crushing burden of humiliation :

Kweku. Not a father, a surgeon, a Ghanaian, a hero, a monster, just one Kweku Sai, just a man in a crowd with an odd sort of bearing, a stranger in Accra as in Boston. Alone. [...] he'd never find a home, or a home that would last. [...] one never feels home who feels shame, never will (*GMG*, p. 248, p. 273).

Selasi's characters interrogate race and racial identity as social constructs that intersect with class divisions in a society that values material success : « For all the hoopla about race, authentic blackness, it is obvious for Saide that *all* of them carry this patina of whiteness, or WASP-ness more so: be they Black, Latin, Asian [...]. They are ethnically heterogenous and culturally homogeneous [...] » (*GMG*, p. 146).

Through their casts of multicultural characters, emergent transnational writers like Mengestu and Selasi highlight national tensions in postcolonial Africa, the instability of diasporic identities linked to shifting urban environments and the need to rethink America's diversity. They take an innovative approach to race and gender as unstable parameters in the construction of identities. Their focus on mobilities and mutations, together with their re-examination of individual, collective or national anxieties, stresses the need to reconsider social categories and invalidate traditional dichotomies. They reject race as a defining category ; their common position sets them apart from race-conscious African American writers who claim a cultural uniqueness and an artistic « black difference » that characterizes a well-established African American literary tradition.

Reflecting upon this « expanding literary diaspora », its transnational turn and potential new positioning over the coming years, Thomas Hale argues that

the writers are invigorating, reshaping and renewing the literatures of Europe and North America as they extend the range of

African literature today. It is not clear, however, to what extent these writers will fall into a no-writers-land that is neither African nor European [or American]. One wonders if they will be co-opted into a new literary context, or simply become pioneers in a new global village of world literature<sup>38</sup>.

Indeed, their American works of fiction span continents. These novelists stand at intersections, blurring boundaries, erasing national borders. Disrupting literary conventions, they thus invite analyses that take into account their negotiation of new transnational identities and plural belonging. With his third novel, Mengestu contributes to shaping alternative ways of writing about this new African Diaspora and brings more diversity to the contemporary American literary scene. The dual narrative of *All Our Names* leads the reader to untangle the intertwined threads of personal and collective histories that bring to light knotty issues of race and national identity. The characters' trajectories some forty years ago and their emotional journeys and encounters expose the contact zones, the multiple points of collision and possible convergences that remain central in today's global age.

■ Corinne DUBOIN<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> HALE (Thomas A.), « Bursting at the Seams : New Dimensions for African Literature in the 21st Century », in EMENYONU (Earnest N.), *New Directions in African Literature : A Review (ALT 25)*. Oxford : James Currey, 2006, p. 10-21 ; p. 18.

<sup>39</sup> Université de La Réunion.