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## Chapter 4

Globalisation, mobility and labour in African diasporic fiction

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# Globalisation, mobility and labour in African diasporic fiction

Anna-Leena Toivanen

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This chapter addresses the entanglement of mobility and labour in the global era, and suggests potential ways to study these issues in contemporary African diasporic fiction. My analysis focuses on Fatou Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* (2003), Alain Mabanckou's *Tais-toi et meurs* (2012) and Sefi Atta's *A Bit of Difference* (2014), which are novels set against the background of different forms of Afro-European mobility. The central characters' working lives in Europe – or their aspirations of having one – are important not only in the sense that they drive the plot, but also because labour is a theme that allows the texts to explore the logic of globalisation from an African perspective. In Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*, a young man on a Senegalese island nurtures hopes of becoming a professional football player in Europe. The novel promotes an anti-emigration message directed at young Africans who, lacking prospects in their countries, invest their hopes in unrealistic ideas of a working life in Europe. Mabanckou's *Tais-toi et meurs* explores informal and illegitimate labour through the figure of an undocumented Congolese migrant in Paris. The thriller draws attention to the exploitative features of globalisation through its portrayal of a diasporic criminal underground community that profits from its countrymen's dreams of a better life in Europe. And finally, Atta's *A Bit of Difference* features an affluent, London-based Nigerian who works as an auditor in an international charity organisation and travels around the world because of her job. Through its upwardly mobile protagonist, the novel brings to the fore the diasporic African upper middle class and its work-related dilemmas. The novel sets cosmopolitan ethics and responsibility in the context of labour. All three works to be discussed link questions about labour to a more familiar concern with mobility.

Mobility is a theme that has intrigued African writers for decades. Bernard Dadié's *Un nègre à Paris* (1959) is one of the first African authored travelogues featuring the figure of the African tourist; Aké Loba's *Kocoumbo, l'étudiant noir* (1960) addresses African student mobility; Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (1974) discusses migration from African women's perspective; and Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2001) represents the coerced displacement of asylum seekers. Mobility is commonly explored more generally through the migrant experience despite the fact that migration and mobility are often motivated by problems of access to adequately remunerated labour. Indeed, while there are exceptions such as Brian Chikwava's *Harare North* (2009), and Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016), few African migration novels address the mobility-labour nexus explicitly. Labour in general is a theme that remains under-examined in

literary studies (Connell 2017, 1); the link between mobility and labour has not received much attention in African literary scholarship either. This subject therefore represents a new avenue for studying African fiction.

Through the themes of mobility and labour, this chapter addresses the question of political agency in African literatures in the global era. The idea of political engagement has motivated African literatures from the very beginning, as attested by diverse literary articulations of anti-colonial, nationalist and feminist agendas. While the nation has been the axiomatic centre of political agency for previous writerly generations, the failures of national projects and globalisation processes have started to widen the scope of politics towards new areas. As a concept, labour is inherently political. Guy Standing (2014, 964; emphasis original) defines it as follows: “labour” is done for a wage or some form of remuneration. It has exchange value and is an *activity*, that of devoting time and effort to working for someone else, in some position of subordination.’ This definition is useful as it invokes the patterns of exploitation and control as well as the notion of political consciousness exploitation may generate (Standing 2014, 965). Works such as Ousmane Sembène’s *Le docker noir* (1956/1973) and *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* (1960) or Emmanuel Dongala’s *Photo de groupe au bord du fleuve* (2010) engage with labour in a context of political mobilisation. These novels portray labourers’ struggles against exploitation, injustice and poor working conditions as they mobilise themselves socially. Political agency in these novels is represented as social solidarity. However, when it comes to the treatment of the labour–mobility nexus in the novels of Diome, Mabanckou and Atta, they address it from a comparatively apolitical perspective. There are no allusions to social movements – with the exception of police and immigration apparatuses – and no allusions to the state. Mabanckou’s and Diome’s novels in particular include elements that could easily lend themselves to an overtly political treatment of labour-related mobility from the perspective of social solidarity. Yet, neither of these novels – not even Diome’s, which resorts to emphatically political tones in its anti-migration message – explores the ways in which organised social movements could redress labour-related inequalities. Agency, if there is any, manifests itself in individuals’ choices. By disregarding the notion of social solidarity, the novels under scrutiny give articulation to the neoliberalist ethos that highlights individual freedom and personal responsibility (see Harvey 2005, 23). As such, these works mark a shift away from the domain of politics.

As the analysed texts do not actively represent the question of labour from the perspective of political agency and social solidarity, a reading focusing on the politics of mobility and labour must adopt another entry point. To this end, my analysis revolves around questions of what Mekonnen Tesfahuney (1998, 501) calls ‘differential mobility empowerments’, that is, who is on the move, how and why. These ‘differential mobility empowerments reflect structures and hierarchies of power and position by race, gender, age and class, ranging from the local to the global’ (Tefahuney 1998, 501). The contextual backdrop for this analysis is the global world order whose cartography is informed by European colonialism (Behdad 2005, 70–71), and that is therefore motivated by capitalism and ‘written in the grammar of race and ethnicity’ (Munck 2010, 164). The present chapter is, then, less an endeavour to analyse the characters’ political agencies than an activity of reading the texts’ representations of labour-related mobilities through a political lens. As Liam Connell (2017, 7) formulates this idea in his study on the precarious features of labour in the contemporary novel, ‘the texts alone cannot make visible or generalise the conditions governing the characters’ relations to work and that is only possible by reading the texts theoretically.’

Prioritising politics in literary analysis may run the risk of reducing works of art to socio-political ‘proofs’ or promoters of political agendas. Therefore, a nuanced analysis of ‘the multiple trajectories’ of globalisation and labour necessitates attention to both politics *and* poetics

(Malreddy 2015, 13; see also Connell 2017, 5). In order not to deny the texts their *poetics* of global mobility while reading them through a political lens, my analysis pays attention to the literary means that the texts employ to represent different African diasporic labour-related mobilities. To this end, I study the texts' concrete images of mobility that embody 'local processes of daily transportation' (Hannam, Sheller and Urry 2006, 1): air travel and commuting, the Parisian metro and modern technologies. These tropes are telling of the fictional characters' mobile positions and symbolise their relation to labour. Analysing such tropes also allows for a 'multiple and intersecting' understanding of mobilities (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006, 2), in particular in the sense of linking these daily mobilities to the wider context of migration. By focusing on these concrete tropes of mobility, this chapter aims at widening the scope of how mobility can be understood in the study of African literary texts.

Globalisation is a complex process and a concept that carries multiple, sometimes contradictory meanings. One of its defining elements is the 'spread of a free-market-based, capitalist style of production' (Krishna 2009, 2) that started to occur in the 1970s and accelerated after the end of the Cold War, and that entails such phenomena as the transnationalisation of production, weakening labour movements, and the multinationalisation of corporations (Connell and Marsh 2011, xiv). Besides being a phenomenon characterised by liberal capitalism, globalisation is frequently described as a process of deterritorialisation and transnationalisation in which oppositions between centres and peripheries no longer hold, and which is generated by the 'flows' of people, capital and technology (Connell and Marsh 2011, xiv). In other words, globalisation is characterised by the increase and intensification of different forms of mobility.<sup>1</sup>

Globalisation processes affect labour in diverse ways. Ronaldo Munck's (2010, 159–160) keywords 'in the lexicon of global political economy of work' include (migrant) mobility, flexibility, informality/precarisation. Munck (2010, 163–164) underlines globalisation's link to colonialism and imperialism, and notes that migrant mobility should be discussed in the context of its 'root causes [...] such as uneven development and the continued subjugation of the South by the dominant capitalist regimes, not least through the active policies of neoliberal globalization.' Liam Connell (2017, 4) posits that precarious labour does not refer only to the threat of unemployment or the idea that work may not guarantee good life, but also 'signals workers whose relationship to the social, whose very being is contingent or at risk'. This element is also manifest in the novels of Atta, Diome and Mabanckou, where the work-related issues seem to be detached from the socio-political.

The 'pursuit of capital' has motivated the movement of people between Africa and the Western world since the slave trade (Otiono 2011, 6). Today, this legacy can be observed in how labour mobility from Africa towards the Global North continues to be 'a form of resource extraction' (Otiono 2011, 16) – this is the case of highly skilled African workers, but also less educated migrants on whose input the low-paid service sector increasingly relies in many Western societies (Sassen 1998, 48, 87). Indeed, it can be argued that the economy of the Global North depends on migrant labour (Bauder 2006, 3). Migrants are a welcome segment of the work force because they are cheap and flexible, which renders them vulnerable to exploitation (Bauder 2006, 4). Labour migration is 'an integral aspect of a wider neoliberal economic regime' where migrants form a new international proletariat that can be used as a work force reserve (Bauder 2006, 5–6). Members of this mobile proletariat embody the unequal effects of a neoliberal global economy as 'they command a minuscule fraction of the world's wealth even though their earnings help sustain entire communities' (Ghosh 2012, 36). These global subaltern subjects are invisible not only because they often occupy the position of undocumented migrants, but also because they become 'consumed and erased while producing value through their labor' (Ghosh 2012, 36).

Prior to becoming part of a foreign work force, aspiring migrant workers must cross national borders. The period after World War II until the mid-1970s saw a ‘migrant labour boom’ in Europe, but since then, migration policies have tightened (Cohen 2006, 138–139). Further, while globalisation has eased the transnational movement of goods, capital and information, human movement across borders is increasingly controlled (Behdad 2005, 73). This has implications for labour-motivated mobilities. By performing processes of inclusion and exclusion in the context of labour mobility, borders play a central role ‘in producing the times and spaces of global capitalism’ (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 3–4, 20–21). The selective role of borders underlines the fact that mobility is an unevenly distributed resource (Cresswell 2006, 178) and as such, crucial to the unequal processes of globalisation (Sheller 2014, 49). Obviously, exclusionary politics and the uneven distribution of the resources have not stopped migration without documents towards the global North, nor has it slowed down informal labour practices in the Global North. Unauthorised migration and the labour of underprivileged, racialised and gendered mobile subjects have contributed to a phenomenon of ‘shadow globalisation’ (Penttinen 2008). Shadow globalisation, according to Elina Penttinen (2008, 7) refers to:

activities that have been made possible by global flows of information, technology, finance and people, [and] that are taking place in informal and illegal ways [...] in the shadows in terms of otherness of the domain of subjectivity of global world economy.

The phenomenon of shadow globalisation attests to how globalisation produces ‘new forms of precarity, marginality and subalternity’ that fall beyond the scope of the normative category of wage-labour (Malreddy 2015, 2, 8) and the current division of labour motivated by racial and gender differences (Cohen 2006, 158). Given the multiplication of borders that destabilises traditional centre versus periphery binaries, these global subaltern classes can be found anywhere on the globe (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 64, 85). This trend disturbs – without entirely undoing – the ‘residual effects of colonially organised geopolitics’ (Loomba et al., 2005, 8).

While it is true that ‘global cultural flows are [...] dominated by [...] coerced migrants rather than free-willing cosmopolitan subjects’ (Gikandi 2010, 28), one should also be wary of promoting the stereotypical idea of African mobile subjects as underprivileged victims. ‘The leisured postcolonial class’ and ‘connoisseurs of global culture’ – as reads Gikandi’s (2010, 22) portrayal of privileged mobile Africans – also form one segment of global African labour mobility. The concept of middle class has been applied to the African context only recently, and it is sometimes difficult to define who belongs to it (Jacquemot 2012, 3). African middle classes also remain invisible in the study of African literatures (Adenekan and Cousins 2014, 1; Knudsen and Rahbek 2016, 106). For an analysis of fictional African labour-related mobilities, it is important to take into account class – privileged ones included – as it is one of the major factors that enables or limits one’s physical and socio-economic mobility.

What is literature’s role in the globalised African context? Even if literature only rarely features in discussions concerning globalisation, it can contribute to them. The ‘slowness’ of narrative fiction and its attention to character development may allow for an in-depth treatment of phenomena generated by globalisation (Connell 2017, 5). Narrative fiction may render visible experiences that would otherwise remain invisible – this is the case for informal labour (Dawson 2009, 139), but the same also goes for the labour of African middle classes which has not gained much critical attention in literary research. Moreover, and since literary texts have the capacity to produce ‘narrative constructions of the numerous discourses or “fictions” of globalisation’ (O’Brien and Szeman 2001, 604), fiction is well placed to embody the complexity and contradictoriness of the processes of globalisation.

Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* is a modern classic addressing migration from Africa to Europe from a bilateral perspective (Garnier 2004, 19). Salie, the protagonist, has left her native island Niodior in Senegal and emigrated to France. The novel draws attention to the intertwining of mobility and labour not only in a diasporic, but also in a local African setting. The local dimension is approached through the figure of Madické, Salie's brother who wishes to pursue a professional football career in Europe. For the uneducated young men of Niodior, football is the ultimate career goal: it involves physical mobility from Africa to Europe, which for them promises socio-economic mobility. As pointed out by Dominic Thomas (2006, 195), the world of football is in itself a symbol for globalisation. While for the unemployed young Africans, football represents 'l'issue de secours idéale' (Diome 2003, 240) ['the ideal emergency exit' (172)],<sup>2</sup> the industry sees the bodies of these aspiring players as raw material to be used and disposed of (Thomas 2006, 196; Nyawalo 2011, 98). This exploitative logic is embodied in the figure of Moussa, whose football career came to an abrupt end, driving him to a life of secrecy, illegal residency, human trafficking, deportation and suicide. Moussa's short adventure in the football industry can be read as an allegory for the neoliberal world of labour which relies on profit seeking, precariousness, competition and lack of solidarity. Moussa's expectations about a sports career contradict the reality: 'Du sport, en dehors de la promesse de réussite, Moussa n'en attendait qu'une franche camaraderie et le respect mutuel. Il ne trouva que calculs sordides et mépris' (Diome 2003, 99) ['Beyond the promise of success, Moussa expected only honest camaraderie and mutual respect from sport. He found only sordid calculation and contempt' (66)]. Once he is discharged from the football team as an unprofitable investment, he ends up doing forced labour to pay his debt for the headhunter – the expiration of his residence permit renders him vulnerable to exploitation. There is no-one to help him in his distress, and he even starts to think that 'après tout, ce n'était pas si mal d'être logé et nourri' (105) ['after all, it wasn't so bad; he was fed and had a roof over his head' (70)], which signals his resignation to the situation.

The aspiring football players refuse to take Moussa's alarming example seriously. They do not see their own complicity in this exploitative system, and are ready to serve as the raw material for the business of soccer as they see it as their only opportunity to embrace upward socio-economic mobility. Interestingly, for most of the aspiring athletes, football is nothing more than a 'simple prétexte pour atteindre l'Occident' (115) ['means of reaching the west' (78)] in their 'désir d'embourgeoisement' (116) ['desire for the good life' (79)]. It turns out that the young men would be ready to accept any job to get to Europe. Unlike these young men – and, for that matter, Salie who exercises the strongly gendered and racialised profession of a cleaner – Madické stubbornly holds on to his unrealistic dream for his professional future and in this way rejects the position of the low-paid migrant doing the menial jobs that Europe has reserved for him.

The novel shows how migrants are used as a reserve work force for low-skilled, low-paid jobs in Europe. Besides Salie who works as a cleaner, the text lists 'des experts du ménage qui s'habillent chez Tati, des gardiens de magasin qui se musclent aux nouilles, des touristes qui visitent Paris sur des camions à benne, des arroseurs de jardin qui coupent des roses pour Mme Dupont' (37–38) ['domestic goddesses who dress at Tati,<sup>3</sup> for shop security guards who build up their muscles on noodles, tourists who visit Paris huddled on dumper trucks or gardeners who cut roses for Madame Dupont' (21)]. The novel discusses in more depth the figure of 'l'homme de Barbès', a been-to who now leads a comfortable life on the island after having worked in France. His success story hides less glamorous details of his stumbling career path: menial jobs, no residence permit, informal labour and fixed-term contracts before ending up as a guard in a shopping centre – a typical 'migrant job', that is.

Diome's novel also produces its own poetics of global mobility. From the perspective of Madické's professional dreams, the most important vehicles of mobility are the television and

the telephone – they allow him to engage in imaginative and communicative travel. While these mobile technologies link Madické to global flows, he sees them as unsatisfactory substitutes for physical human mobility, and they underline his immobility in this respect. These modern technologies – which, since the publication of the novel in 2003, have become overtaken by ITC-mediated mobilities – play a key role in his professional aspirations. The television keeps Madické connected to the world of football and thus provides him with the material for his dreams, which his telephone conversations with his sister further consolidate as Salie regularly ends up buying – with her cleaning lady’s salary – the sports material Madické asks for. The television becomes a vehicle for imaginative travel that is intertwined with the transnational movement of capital and consumer culture. It promotes dreams of consumerism that seem to be available only to those who work in France. The fact that the television breaks down in the middle of the football match Madické is watching portends the likely failure of his unrealistic ideas about migrant working life in France and also conveys the unattainability of his consumerist aspirations. Further, the telephone conversations between Madické and Salie structure the novel and contribute to its poetics of global mobility. Mouhamédoul Amine Niang (2011, 239) suggests that the novel can be read as an updated version of the epistolary. Niang points out that the telephone turns into ‘a medium of psychological and social pressure on the migrant’ (2011, 243; my translation) as witnessed by Madické’s repeated requests for sports material. As such, mobility enabled by the telephone not only connects distant places, but also creates financially motivated power structures between migrants and those who stay.

*Le Ventre de l’Atlantique* promotes an articulate agenda regarding transnational labour mobility. Salie, by convincing Madické to abandon his ideas about a football career in Europe and to establish a small business on Niodior with the money she sends him, is the mouthpiece of Diome’s ‘antiglobalisation narrative’ (Coly 2010, 83). In what comes across as a personal mission, Salie fights the unrealistic ideas of France that the young men of Niodior cherish. While this anti-emigration/-globalisation agenda is an important gesture in highlighting the possibilities of the local (Thomas 2006, 200), the way in which this political message is constructed is unconvincing. As pointed out by Robert Nathan (2012, 77), the contradiction lies in Salie’s own position: while she ‘condemns the insensitivity that comes with the free movement of transnational capital under a neoliberal world economic framework, her own solution to the migration problem also involves the free movement of capital across international borders’ (Nathan 2012, 78). What adds to this contradiction is the fact that Salie manages to establish herself as a published author in France – if she can succeed, why not her brother? The novel is curiously torn between its anti-globalisation/-migration agenda – which relies on the opposition between the local and the global and on the romanticised idea of the island as self-sufficient (Nathan 2012, 78) – and its representation of the entanglement of the local with the global through different forms of mobility. The novel’s failure to promote a consistent political message vis-à-vis mobility and labour in the context of neo-liberal capitalism betrays the complexities that inform Africa’s relation to globalisation. It is equally significant that the solution to Madické’s dead-end situation comes from a family member and that the postcolonial nation-state remains entirely indifferent to his distress. This suggests that the state or nation do not have any relevance or credibility as a domain for political agency. This is partly because the state actively sabotages labour movements, as suggested by the fact that Ndétare, a fervent union activist, has been reassigned by the government to a teaching post on the isolated Niodior as he was considered to be ‘un agitateur dangereux’ (Diome 2003, 65) [‘a dangerous agitator’ (41)].

Mabanckou’s *Tais-toi et meurs* foregrounds informal elements of mobility and labour in a diasporic, criminal global underground setting. The protagonist Julien Makambo leaves Congo-Brazzaville for Paris with a forged passport arranged by Pedro, his nephew’s father. In Paris, he

is supposed to work for Pedro, who has established himself as the ‘big brother’ of the community exercising its own ‘*économie parallèle*’ (Mabanckou 2012, 145) (‘parallel economy’)⁴ on the fringes of French society. The novel thus shifts away from the hegemonic conception of work as wage labour towards an understanding characterised by informal/illegal elements. The underworld context of the novel is disconnected from the surrounding society in such a pronounced way that this illegal-informal space becomes the norm. This is conveyed in the way in which characters trivialise their criminal activities by referring to these as work.

The protagonist does not have any expectations of what awaits him in Paris, and slips rather smoothly into the role of a petty criminal. He shares Pedro’s one-room apartment with seven compatriots. The young men have ended up in the criminal milieu after their professional dreams have failed them. Unlike in Diome’s novel, their career aspirations are not *per se* unrealistic; they dream about working as estate agents, car mechanics or musicians. Their failure to gain entry into such seemingly banal professions suggests that the situation of migrant workers in the formal sector is challenging. Indeed, as one of the father figures of the ‘milieu’ claims, there were times when ‘on venait chercher les immigrés dans les foyers pour leur proposer du travail’ (37) (‘they came to get immigrants from their homes to offer them jobs’). These words refer to the migrant labour boom in France and elsewhere in Europe between 1945 and the mid-1970s. In the narrative present, the demand for migrant labour has decreased as neoliberal capitalism makes migrants compete for jobs with citizens. Difficulties of finding work in the formal sector have contributed to the establishment of the exploitative ‘*filière congolaise*’ (146) (‘Congolese network’). The ‘little brothers’ owe their diasporic lives to the father figures who have introduced them in France; the recurring notions of debt, loyalty, secrecy and hierarchy actually point at human trafficking. Yet, the narrator does not see himself as a victim – not even when, a few days after his arrival, Pedro tells him that ‘Paris c’est Paris, tout le monde doit bosser’ (58) (‘Paris is Paris, everyone has to work’), and sends him to sell falsified travel passes. This is an offer the protagonist cannot turn down; as a clandestine newcomer, he has no idea where and how to look for a job on his own.

*Tais-toi et meurs* is a fast-paced novel tracing the events that have led to the protagonist’s imprisonment in the narrative present. He has been imprisoned in the aftermath of a ‘mission’ in the course of which a woman got killed – a murder for which he is made the culprit by his community. Such key attributes of the thriller genre such as detection, conspiracy and in/visibility (Primorac 2013) drive the plot forward, and the narrative regularly links the protagonist’s experiences to imagery used in the thriller genre. The thriller form is an integral part of the novel’s representation of clandestine and criminal labour in the global underground. The protagonist is constantly on the run, and the anxiety-informed thriller form captures his futile attempts at escape from the authorities and his exploitative community. While the protagonist is a victim of conspiracy orchestrated by his community, the roots of this conspiracy lie in a wider context of global inequality. The text’s thrilleresque qualities and the first person narration immerse the reader in the gloomy world of shadow globalisation (Penttinen 2008) that is without prospects for the undocumented migrants and is detached from and invisible to the surrounding society.

In the aftermath of the murder, the protagonist is drawn from invisibility to hyper-visibility: his flight from the crime scene has several witnesses as he wears an extravagant, bright green suit. Moreover, his case is followed by the media which places the murder in the context of political discussions on migration. The green suit becomes a trope that conveys the idea of how a clandestine migrant without residency papers becomes visible when s/he wishes it the least and when it serves the purpose of anti-migration discourses. The unwelcome hypervisibility associated with the green suit also suggests that the protagonist’s consumerist aspirations,

manifested in the form of Congolese dandyism, *la Sape* (*Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes*; ‘Society of Ambiance-Makers and Elegant People’), characterised by a passion for luxurious designer brands, eventually turn against him. He drifts into this shadowy setting at the mercy of the laws of the global underground, unable to identify or challenge the fact that he is being exploited. The novel explores how globalisation generates forms of exploitation that may not even be identified as such – let alone resisted – by those exploited until they find themselves in the ultimate *cul-de-sac* like the protagonist. The thriller plot conveys this lack of agency and social marginalisation perfectly (see also Dawson 2009, 129). In the protagonist’s world, there is no room for political agency or even solidarity between ‘colleagues’. The milieu’s competitiveness could be read as a dystopian allegory of the neoliberal labour market which engenders competition between workers, undermines social solidarity, and which is characterised by precariousness and exploitation.

The novel displays a variety of mobility-related imagery, of which the Parisian underground network is the most central. Reading *Tais-toi et meurs* is like reading the map of the Parisian metro: names of the stations and their interconnections recur frequently as the protagonist heads for his missions. This underground cartography of Paris symbolises the shadow milieu in which the protagonist and his ‘brothers’ operate. In this respect, a very powerful scene features in a chapter in which Pedro sends the protagonist on a mission to test his loyalty. As usual, the protagonist takes the underground without buying a ticket. This does not go unnoticed by the inspectors, who pursue him in the labyrinth of the underground station. The protagonist wears expensive designer shoes which are not made for running – again, a detail suggesting that his consumerist aspirations have made him an easy prey. His panicky marathon leads nowhere: all he comes across are ‘no exit’ signs, dead ends and metro carriage doors closing right in front of his nose. When he finally thinks he has escaped the inspectors, it turns out that he is yet again in a *cul-de-sac*, with the triumphant black inspector – for whom catching the protagonist is a sort of a personal mission – exclaiming, ‘Fils de bâtard, tu croyais connaître cette station mieux que moi, hein?’ (Mabanckou 2012, 70) (‘Son of a bitch, did you really think you knew this station better than I do?’). This passage captures the protagonist’s impossible situation as an undocumented migrant working in a criminal milieu, and conveys the idea of how his subservient position renders him an outsider even where he is supposed to be ‘at home’. The veil of secrecy and demands for loyalty that inform the global underground milieu create an extremely limited world, attesting to the multiplication of borders typical of the globalised era (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013), and preventing him from seeing the wider picture of his situation. In his clearly bordered world, Mabanckou’s protagonist belongs to the class of new, ‘politically dispossessed’ global subaltern (see Malreddy 2015, 5). On a broader scale, however, the fact that the clandestine migrants in the novel have created their own parallel reality and economy in the margins of society suggests that at least for the father figures, the ‘filière’ represents an opportunity to reject the position of the low-paid migrant worker that the global economy reserves for many Africans in Europe. The father figures are not simply victims of globalisation but do claim some agency, albeit in a form that subjects their fellow Africans to exploitation.

Unlike Diome’s and Mabanckou’s novels, Atta’s *A Bit of Difference* addresses privileged labour-related mobilities. The Nigerian protagonist Deola Bello lives in London where she works as an auditor of an international charity organisation. The novel opens with a scene in which Deola’s flight from London has just arrived at Atlanta airport. By describing her as ‘an arriving passenger’ who wears a ‘pin-striped trouser suit’ (Atta 2014, 1) and carries a laptop, the narrative positions the protagonist as a business traveller, and thus foregrounds the link between mobility and labour. When the protagonist is on the move, there is often a work-related motive to it: she travels abroad for business and commutes between her London home and work place.

With its allusions to commuting and international business travel, the novel draws an itinerary of its middle class protagonist. Her class status is conveyed in how she travels. In her diasporic life, she enjoys somewhat banal middle class comfort. Thanks to her British passport, she can travel in Europe as she pleases. When going to work from her London home, she can either use public transport or drive her own car – that it is an old, small Peugeot suggests that she is not interested in showing off her success, unlike many of her fellow Nigerians in the novel. Commuting, often portrayed as an alienating, boring and frustrating form of mobility (Edensor 2011, 189), embodies the idea of Deola Bello's banal, yet relatively comfortable working life, and portrays her as part of the anonymous masses of commuting Londoners whose lives are structured by work. As such, her inter-city mobility stands in a stark contrast to Mabanckou's protagonist's anxious mobility in the Parisian underground network. When back in Lagos with her well-off family, her conditions of mobility undergo an upgrade: she travels in air-conditioned SUVs driven by a chauffeur. It is in Lagos, sitting in the back seat of these relatively luxurious cars, that the protagonist is most aware of her privilege.

It is not only the protagonist's profession that is highlighted in the narrative: whenever her friends or family members feature in the text, attention is quickly drawn to their careers, and their discussions often revolve around work-related issues. Labour, then, plays a central role in defining the characters' ways of being in the world both globally and locally. With the exception of some of her friends working in the creative sector, the protagonist's circle of acquaintances consists of upper middle class people working as doctors and lawyers, or in finance. In this sense, the world of labour in Atta's novel differs drastically from those narrated in Diome's or Mabanckou's novels: like Deola Bello – daughter of a successful Lagosian banker – Atta's characters belong to a group of privileged mobile Africans who cannot be seen as victims of globalisation.

The class status of the protagonist is underlined throughout the narrative. When she meets a man with whom she gets romantically involved, her writer friend Bandele suspects in a tongue-in-cheek sort of a way that the man must be 'a doctor, or a lawyer, or an accountant' (Atta 2014, 195). It can be argued that Atta makes a statement with a protagonist so firmly immersed in the upper middle class environment. Deola Bello does not read African literature because she does not recognise her experiences in its 'exotic' (190) imagery, finding it 'preoccupied with politics in a way she never was' (194), and feels that representations of Africa on the television fail to take into account the perspective of middle class Africans. As the narrative voice states, 'What she would give to see a boring old banker going on about capital growth, as they do in Nigeria, just for once. Why not? Don't they exist?' (291). *A Bit of Difference* brings these experiences directly to centre stage.

Africa in this novel is not necessarily a place to escape from, nor Europe an imagined Eldorado. The text addresses the question of brain drain, but it is not made the key issue of the novel's politics of global mobility. In effect, the narrative questions the importance of the phenomenon by suggesting that 'there are enough brains in Africa' and that resourceful people in Africa 'make the opportunities overseas look like a joke' (119). Despite the fact that the people around the protagonist form a homogenous group in terms of class, she is clearly conscious of how privilege has affected her life. This consciousness is thrown into relief during her travels to Nigeria where the class divide is flagrant. After having lived abroad her entire adulthood, the protagonist pays attention to the fact that she and her family are surrounded by housemaids and chauffeurs. During her stay in Lagos, she notices her brother's chauffeur eating lunch in her mother's garage, and observes: 'She might not have noticed him had she not lived overseas and had the experience of being ignored at work' (176). As these words suggest, the protagonist's experiences as a black African worker in Europe have subjected her to marginalisation. She has

learned how to adjust her accent in order not to come across as incompetent. Her braids have been deemed ‘unprofessional’ (211), and once, at her arrival at a bank for an auditing, she was told that ‘Deliveries are through the side entrance’ (211). These experiences of racist belittlement she discusses with her Nigerian friend Subu who works as an investment banker. Both Deola and Subu seem somewhat resigned to the racial biases of the European work life but lack tools to address these flaws. Moreover, while Deola Bello is now a holder of a British passport, she still cannot allow herself to criticise aloud the border control procedures at an airport because of her skin colour. By drawing attention to such elements of unease, the narrative points out that even the mobilities of privileged African workers are not as unproblematic as one might think. Race and nationality continue to matter in the allegedly borderless global world of labour.

The protagonist’s experiences of racial marginalisation have generated a feeling of professional discontent. The beginning of the novel finds Deola working in a charity organisation where she has been for three months, after ‘a lacklustre stint’ (4) in a consultancy firm, and yet there is no ‘indication that she intends to remain here’ (25). She wonders why she has ‘ended in a dreary office’ (27), and considers her career ‘banal and unsatisfying’ (40). While such feelings could be dismissed as the complaints of a privileged professional who could easily secure a new job, the protagonist’s dissatisfaction drives the narrative in the sense that it is one of the reasons that leads her to consider returning to Nigeria. Her professional dissatisfaction, experiences of ‘rivalry’ (4) and her somewhat erratic work history point at the precarious nature of labour in the global era. It also suggests that there is a ‘mismatch between the promise of success [that work is supposed to entail] and the feelings of insecurity’, which Connell (2017, 3) considers to be one of the main dilemmas of contemporary work life.

As an auditor, who is involved with the financial rather than the humanitarian dimension of the charity industry, the protagonist is painfully conscious of the risk of corruption that charity projects may run. Her particular concern is the bad reputation of Nigeria – she refers to the phenomenon as ‘Africa’s self-sabotage’ (Atta 2014, 218) as it reinforces Western stereotypes of the continent as corrupt. Her position places her in a difficult situation: when she suspects corruption in a Nigerian NGO, she is reluctant to share her suspicions with her Western colleagues as she believes it will feed their stereotypical views and jeopardise the funding of non-corrupt organisations. Deola Bello is suspicious not only of the way in which the charity business represents Africans in a sensationalist, stereotypical light, but also of the very philosophy of the industry grounded on the idea of Africa as ‘a charity case’ (205). Her growing inability to accept the politics of the organisation she works for – culminating in her superior’s dismissal of her suggestion of moving from charity to microcredit – leads her to resign. When she announces her resignation, she tells her managers that she wants to fight the brain drain as she thinks it is what they want to hear. Deola Bello sees her own role in a wider context of global politics and is able to make a choice that is in line with her moral convictions.

Through the figure of Deola Bello, *A Bit of Difference* gives voice to cosmopolitan ethics. While a privileged mobile position does not automatically lead to a cosmopolitan vision of the world, Deola Bello’s experiences as a diasporic African in Europe allow her to adopt a stance informed by cosmopolitan ethics. Her cosmopolitanism is much more than her travels in business class or her being an ‘Afropolitan commuter’ (Knudsen and Rahbek 2016, 90). Nor is it a mere question of style or a self-congratulatory personal attitude as cosmopolitanism is often defined (Calhoun 2017, 192–193). Instead, this cosmopolitan stance can be observed in the protagonist’s critical understanding of her own privileged positionality and her ability to see things from a perspective that is freed from nationalist parochialism (Toivanen 2017, 198–199). Cosmopolitanism is commonly considered a condition of being ‘at home in the world’. Yet, critical distance to cultural tokens that lies at the core of cosmopolitanism can be seen to result

from a certain ‘homelessness’ that allows one to value and criticise different phenomena from an outsider’s perspective. In *A Bit of Difference*, this critical detachment is paired with a pronounced sense of national belonging and affinity: Deola Bello’s strong national identity does not prevent her from criticising the flaws of her society. This criticism and detachment translate into an ironic narrative voice that surfaces in particular when she comments on phenomena that she considers as ‘typically Nigerian’. Irony, as Cyrus Patell (2015, 6) points out, is a literary strategy that conveys a critical cosmopolitan position by allowing one to place one’s feelings of belonging in a global perspective. Cosmopolitan ethics inform Deola Bello’s acknowledgement of her responsibility for being part of a global business that bolsters stereotypical images of Africans and reduces them to dependent victims. In this way, the novel places cosmopolitan ethics in the global context of labour. Consequently, Deola Bello’s resignation can be read as an ethically and politically motivated gesture that embodies the idea of affluent ‘cosmopolitans’ responsibilities towards those who are more urgently subjected to the unequal effects of globalisation (see Calhoun 2017, 191, 198).

Attention to subjects with political ramifications in contemporary African literatures may not always be as explicit as in texts by previous generations of writers. Atta’s and Mabanckou’s texts are cases in point: *Tais-toi et meurs* resorts to the popular genre of thriller, and *A Bit of difference* refuses to make obvious politically motivated issues such as the brain drain its core agenda. The novels by both Atta and Mabanckou do engage with issues that have political ramifications, but they are far from being political texts. Through the figure of Deola Bello, the criticism *A Bit of Difference* articulates is multidirectional and subtle, drawing the reader’s attention to the complexities informing her position as an African upper middle class professional working in Europe in the charity industry. Mabanckou’s novel relies even more on the reader’s willingness to read the text politically; the narrative itself does not directly engage in a critique of globalisation because it builds on the protagonist’s limited vision of his own situation. When it comes to a political response to exploitation, neither of these works addresses it in the form of social solidarity in the traditional sense. The global underground in Mabanckou’s novel is characterised by ruthless competition. The characters form an exploitative community in which there is no room for solidarity, and the global underground milieu they inhabit is totally disconnected from a world in which constructive communal action is possible. In Atta’s novel, expressions of solidarity with regard to labour are located within the private sphere; the characters discuss their problems between family and friends. In this way, *A Bit of Difference*, too, performs the gesture of turning away from politics. Deola’s way to fight against the inequalities that she believes her work generates is to resign.

Compared to Atta’s and Mabanckou’s texts that gesture only indirectly at the political underpinning of labour in the global economy, Diome’s more overt political agenda may come across as the expression of a position that has been overtaken by events, especially in Europe. In effect, the contradiction that lies at the heart of Diome’s anti-globalisation/–emigration discourse derives in part from the fact that the neat distinctions between the local and the global have become blurred and from the fact that xenophobia is rapidly becoming the new face of anti-globalisation itself. Yet, when it comes to political agency, Diome’s novel is equally marked by a gesture of turning away from the domain of politics: resolution to problems related to labour and mobility lies less in social solidarity than in the individual’s initiatives and choices. Underprivileged Africans cannot rely on the state in their predicament either locally or in the diaspora, and acts of social solidarity are limited to the private realm. All in all, the novels analysed in this chapter detach the issues of mobility and labour from what is traditionally conceived as the domain of politics. For different reasons, they see no room for political agency and reflect the neoliberal ethos of the global world order.

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## Notes

- 1 While increased mobility is one of the characteristics of globalisation, different mobilities 'have long been a central aspect of both historical and contemporary existence, of urban and non-urban locales, of Western and non-Western experience' (Sheller 2014, 48). Mobility studies is a field whose focus is less on globalisation *per se* than on the complex intertwining of different forms of mobility and the ways in which power relations affect and produce (im)mobility (Sheller 2014, 48).
- 2 English quotes are from *The Belly of the Atlantic*, translated by Lulu Norman and Ros Schwartz.
- 3 Tati is a French budget clothing store.
- 4 Translations from *Tais-toi et meurs* are mine.

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