

## **A KISS OF DEATH: THE PERILS OF MIGRATION IN DONATO NDONGO'S *EL METRO***

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Unlike *Las tinieblas de tu memoria negra* (1987) and *Los poderes de la tempestad* (1997) Donato Ndongo's third novel *El metro* does not centre its attention on the author's homeland. This shift suggests that Ndongo wishes to speak of the African diasporic experience in more general terms rather than situate it within Equatorial Guinea's highly volatile political scenario. The unnamed village of the Mbalmayo region in Cameroon's Central Province becomes the cosmos from where all action either emanates from or refers back to. However, as the book's title suggests, migration moreover than the quotidian African experience is the novel's central concern and the narrative explores this motif through the protagonist's abandoning of his home. Paradoxically, only a quarter of the novel is actually dedicated to Obama Ondo's odyssey from Cameroon to Europe's shores and his subsequent life as illegal immigrant. The novel's lack of focus to its central motif may, at first, be construed as one of its shortcomings, however, further reflection reveals the prime importance of the African section of the novel. The narrative strategy Ndongo employs in *El metro* is to weave a rich tapestry of the Mbalmayo region against which the final section of the novel must always be juxtaposed. Without a prior engaging with the complexities of the postcolonial experience, the reader would otherwise fail to grasp the significance of Obama's tragic destiny. Before centring our analysis on the trope of migrancy, we shall therefore elucidate upon the Cameroonian section of the novel so as to clarify its central importance within the overall thematic structure.

If migration is *El metro's* principal concern, then the novel's central tragedy is that the protagonist's leadership qualities are truncated because of the abandoning of his native soil. Obama comes from a line of communal leaders and the text describes how the protagonist's passage from adolescence to manhood is marked by a filiation with his grandfather Ebang Motuú, the mythical leader of his people. The story of his grandfather functions as a microcosm of the colonial experience in Africa where this "man of great standing" is isolated from power due to his resistance against the colonial administration who look for local collaborators in their usurping of indigenous authority. In this respect, Ndongo once again returns to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (in *Las tinieblas* we witness the collapse of an indigenous order through the boy protagonist) where an African society suffers a head-on collision with European imperialism. As Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, Ebang Motuú resists the new colonial order and, although his fate is not as tragic as that of Okonkwo's, a wound is opened up within the collective psyche through this undermining of autochthonous governance. Obama's father, Guy Ondo Ebagn, on the contrary represents the black man's adoption of the white man's ways, and crucial to Obama's personal development is his rejection of his father mimicry to embrace a local tradition as epitomised by Ebang Motuú.

This father/son rift is a recurring theme in many African texts such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), or Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* (1964) and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), and more often than not it has to do with the clash between African traditions and European values. In *El metro*, the importance of the filial rupture is that it represents a move away from western individualism (the text clearly equates Guy Ondo Ebagn's embracing of Christianity with an augmenting of his own prestige and material wealth) and towards communal development. In oral culture it is archetypically the son who wishes to break from the father figure who represents the conservation of traditional values. As with Soyinka and Achebe, *El metro's* inversion of the filial rupture and the breaking of cultural continuity it represents is deemed necessary so that communal order may be restored.

While Obama in Cameroon has already become conscious of how vulnerable the African can become when succumbing to colonial mimicry, it is the reflective nature of migrancy that clarifies the disastrous effects of this donning of the white mask. Tending his

impromptu stall in Madrid's *El metro*, he recalls the elder Nso Endaman's (depository of the tribe's millenary wisdom) rhetorical question that poses:

¿acaso no era verdad ... que la decadencia de nuestra estirpe fue anunciada el día que los negros abandonaron sus tradiciones para abrazar las creencias y costumbres de los albinos venidos más allá del mar? (17).<sup>1</sup>

Obama reflects on his father's generation who appropriated European mores in a childlike manner and scorned the wealth of experience stored within the oral tradition. Guy Ondo Ebagn's colonial mimicry thus becomes symbolic of the betrayal of a whole generation, and Obama's vocation (both while in Cameroon and in Spain) is to transcend the ethos of self-betterment in favour of communal development. With the benefits that hindsight affords, Obama as a diasporan now visions what his new role must be:

En lugar de acomodarse al bienestar de otros mundos, se uniría a los esfuerzos de sus paisanos para conseguir que su patria también conquistara la libertad y el desarrollo y sus hijos no tuvieran necesidad de huir" (447).<sup>2</sup>

The paradox of migrancy is reflected through Obama's consciousness when he realises that his perceptions of the West were constructed upon a set of false illusions. Migrancy is not the answer, but it is only after the event of the journey to Europe that the veil is lifted and the chimeric nature of this journey is revealed.

*El metro's* narrative is nourished from the staples of the classic *Bildungsroman* structure, although we can also draw parallels with the African Departure-Initiation-Return cycle of the heroic monomyth adapted from the oral tradition. Viewed within this frame, the object of Obama's initiatic journey is his new-gained insight into Africa's dilemma observed from a European perspective. *Los poderes de la tempestad* (1997) employs a similar narrative structure where the Spanish-educated Guinean lawyer returns to his country in an attempt to release his people from the existential lethargy the dictatorial regime has produced in them. However, *Los poderes* is very pessimistic about the capacity of the individual to provoke change; a point of view personified through the protagonist who

suffers a series of calamities which begin with the sexual harassment of his wife and culminate in his own incarceration and near death.

The action in *Los poderes* is situated during the fiercely oppressive reign of Francisco Macías Nguema, and there are many parallels with Ndongo's own return to Guinea and to his own brother's imprisonment during the Macías regime (Mewolo 123). Ndongo's fictional production intersects with his public life as an activist through the unifying concept of individual responsibility for political and social change in Africa. The frustrated and pessimistic tone that pervades all his literary works can be traced back to one single fact: that a man of Ndongo's intellectual capacity and human integrity lives in imposed exile while he watches his people support miserable conditions in a country that has a GDP of over US \$30,000.

Related to Ndongo's status as forced émigré, in *El metro* there is an underlying theme of abandonment: Obama leaves the two women he has fathered children with without saying his goodbyes. Although the second abandonment of Sylvie so as to become a stow-away on a merchant ship bound for Europe is hard (Obama describes his separation with Cameroon as being comparable to having "one's skin pulled away") it is his exile from his village which is the most traumatic. The drama that underpins this first and decisive exile has to do with the intransigence of the patriarchal figure. Despite his true love Anne Mengue being sexually reserved Obama has, through the help of the local medicine man, unlocked the latent desire in her. However, his father is also amorously involved with Anne's mother whom he plans to take as his wife, and tradition dictates that such role confusion of stepmother and mother-in-law is inadmissible. This ultimate betrayal leaves Obama cold, devoid of all volition, and becomes the motivation for his abandonment. The root of his paralysis and subsequent abandoning of his cosmos is, interestingly, shifted from the debilitating effects the African postcolony has on its young male subjects (as portrayed by other African authors such as Ben Okri in his short stories "Worlds that Flourish" or "Stars of the New Curfew") and motivated by: "Unas normas incomprensibles, la férrea exogamia en que se fundamentaban las costumbres de su pueblo, había astillado su propia seguridad en al que se asentaba su universo" (171).<sup>3</sup> By placing this complex drama of desire and exogamy as the motive of Obama's willed expulsion, and by marking this moment as his transition from innocence to experience,

Ndongo injects the narrative with an ambiguity that draws attention to the protagonist's tragic flaw: his incapability to stand up to a social norm he knows to be antiquated. At an unconscious level of text, Ndongo, as does Conrad in *Lord Jim*, is referencing his own "abandoning" of Equatorial Guinea, and while the author knows that a return to the actual regime of Theodoro Obiang is nothing short of suicide, the text still leaves its trace of "incomprehension" in the face of exile. When Obama decides to stow-away in the hold of the cargo ship and thus seal his fate he, once again, is incapable of telling the people he most loves (amongst whom his wife-to-be Sylvie who is carrying his child) that he is leaving them. Whilst the narrative mitigates his incapacity to affront this abandonment by assuring us he will help his people from Europe, it indicates that: "Quizá le embargara una cierta desazón por no haber tenido el valor de confiarle al primo Ntogo su decisión" (285).<sup>4</sup>

While Obama's first exile from the Mbalmayo region is marked by the repression of desire —and furthermore construed as an expulsion from "paradise"— his second exile is clearly framed within the dilemmas faced by the post-independence citizen. As a stevedore at the port of Douala, he is witness to the new raping of Africa where wood, coffee, coco, rubber, petrol, and sugar cane all leave Cameroon but leave behind no wealth for the common people. Here, the narrative signals an intertextuality with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* by discovering the link between the archetypal practises of colonialism and modern-day neo-colonialism fomented under the auspices of autochthonous leadership. Ndongo dramatises this pillaging of Africa by having Obama stowed away on a cargo ship full of timber bound for Europe. The pathetic reality the texts flags up is that this nefarious mismanagement of the nation's natural resources is afflicting its most precious asset: its people. In the ship's hold are other Africans who, like Obama, wonder:

¿Merecía la pena arrostrar tantas penalidades por un futuro incierto? ¿Hubiera sido más conveniente seguir resistiendo en su país, presentando batalla a la diversidad, o perecer de una vez, quizá de una enfermedad penosa ... o molido a palos por la policía, o sacrificado en un festín de brujos?" (291).<sup>5</sup>

Whilst onboard the ship bound for Europe, Obama's consciousness bridges his own anguish with that of his ancestors trapped in the Atlantic Slave Trade. This motif of modern slavery is reaffirmed later in the text when Obama makes his final crossing to Europe by

employing the services of an international smuggling ring who spin a lucrative trade in “trafficking” illegal immigrants to mainland Europe in *cayucos* (traditional African boats made out of hollowed tree trunks). The smugglers treat the sub Saharans as mere cargo; a point the text illustrates when the skipper obliges the passengers to abandon the *cayuco* before reaching the shore which results in numerous Africans drowning.

In this modern Middle Passage Obama has come to symbolise the African “Everyman” and, in this respect, Ndongo is also evidencing a continuity between the phenomenon of the Black Atlantic as outlined by Paul Gilroy (1993) and what we could describe as the new “Black Mediterranean.” Furthermore, the dialectic between a forced journey and that made of “free will” becomes deconstructed once we consider the Hobson’s choice many Africans are faced with. In the specific case of Equatorial Guinea, Ndongo has on numerous occasions highlighted the plight of a country whose people are forced to survive through subsistence whilst international oil companies and local oligarchies reap the enormous benefits of an economy whose GDP ranks ninth globally. Equatorial Guinea is a salient example of an Africa that has become prey to the voracious nature of late capitalism and ironically victim of its own wealth. It is both in the hold of the cargo ship and onboard the *cayuco* when Obama most deeply reflects on how neo-colonialism and the nefarious governance in the postcolony push his fellow Africans towards migration (290-1, 337). Obama as the African Everyman thus becomes trapped within a postcolonial Manichean predicament. He is both victim of the unscrupulous mechanisms of a neo-colonialism that operates without restriction in “developing countries” and, as an “illegal émigré,” continues to be victim of a capitalist super-system which returns him to the same global injustices he has been escaping from.

All that we have spoken about so far helps to enrich the themes of hypersensitivity, double alienation, claustrophobia, and other issues of identity that *El metro* explores in its Spanish section. Obama finally reaches mainland Spain and here he falls victim of both the unscrupulous exploiters of cheap labour and of the Catch 22 situation of the African illegal immigrant. After a series of misadventures Obama ends up pedalling his meagre wares in Madrid’s *El metro* and it is here that he meets his cruel fate. The opening scene of the novel prefigures this death when his descent into the bowels of the city is likened to the hunting of the West African *grombif*, a giant field rat hunted out of its underground

tunnels with the help of a weasel. The claustrophobia the *El metro* produces in Obama functions in the text as a leitmotif for a wider sense of oppression, fuelled by a hypersensitivity he develops through his daily contact with whites: “sentía sobre sí el peso de su africanidad, la carga histórica de ser solo un pobre negro en un mundo como éste” (21).<sup>6</sup> From being a reference of guidance and wisdom in his community, he now develops a humiliated consciousness that at times borders on a self-loathing. However, in the novel’s first pages we find an Obama who comforts himself by assuring that his death shall not be an anonymous one, and that he shall one day return to take up his true role. Meanwhile, he must suffer being singled out as different through the stares of white children on public transport, or suffer “the ambiguous mix of paternalism, perplexity, and commiseration” (401) when coming into contact with Spaniards. Here we find a clear intertextuality with the Fanon of *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967); how his notion of self becomes “battered down by tom-toms” or split through the gaze of the other.

As Michael Ugarte (2006) assures, Ndongo changed his perspective on his situation as a black person through Fanon, and in his essay “Pensando en Fanon, Fanon y el racismo” (1973) he addresses the prevailing idea that Spain was free of racial dilemmas such as those experienced in the UK or other European countries. As he assures here and in other sources, the so-called lack of racial prejudice was simply due to the absence of large groups of immigrant communities. Since that essay Spain has become an active participant within a global economy and the increasing presence of Black, Magrehebi, Asian and Latin American peoples in the Iberian Peninsula is just another factor within this new economic equation. *El metro* bears witness to this alteration of both the urban and rural landscapes that have transformed from ethnically homogeneous to heterogeneous. The vexations of overt and latent racism aside, Obama must also come to terms with his own prejudices as concerned miscegenation, a trope the text personifies through Ibrahim who has started to go out with a Spanish girl. At first, Obama puts up resistance to this union and sees it as a betrayal on behalf of his travelling companion and soul brother: “¿Acaso habían salido de su país para desatender a su familia, desterrarse y soterrar sus tradiciones?” (421).<sup>7</sup> The text here registers an irony that Obama seems oblivious to; he too has been victim of social prejudice as regards miscegenation. Although he never coalesces his personal tragedy with Ibrahim’s “transgressing” of what he perceives to be

proper conduct, his sustained contact with Pilar helps him to see beyond the colour line: “la piel es sólo un envoltorio, como una camisa o una blusa” (431).<sup>8</sup> Here begins his process of opening out to society and his growing understanding that identity can never be constructed in essentialised and polarised terms.

The tragedy of *El metro* is that precisely when Obama has undergone this mental transformation and has begun to rise above the Manichean construction of Black/White present in Fanon’s *Black Skin* he becomes victim of it. Obama has been be-friended by a Spanish woman while he tends his make-shift stall and they agree to see each other one evening. After a drink he accompanies her as far as the El metro entrance and they part with a peck on both cheeks. As he descends underground he feels a certain anxiety at the hard stares he receives by a group of skinheads who have seen him with a white girl, and this anxiety augments when they change platform to enter his carriage. Obama feels momentarily protected by the presence of other passengers but when his carriage empties and he is left alone with the skinheads he now becomes victim of the racial taunt: “nunca más follarás con blancas, mono asqueroso, negro cabrón” (456).<sup>9</sup>

The racial slander is a standard controlling device which operates as a thinly veiled threat that the taunter will move from the verbal to the physical. The semiotics of violence is that a little goes a long way; when punishment is meted out it becomes a language to be interpreted. Obama, however, does not get a second chance at predicting what will be punished and the racial taunt in *El metro* becomes the signalling device for his murder. Victim of a brutal stabbing, he now lies on the empty carriage floor conscious of how his life is slipping away from him.

The text thus relates violence against the black subject as motivated by the apprehension the white man feels when he witnesses a mixed couple. One reading of this apprehension finds its roots in construing miscegenation as a threat to racial purity. As Lucy Bland (2005) assures, the 1919 race riots in South Shields, UK, between the Yemeni migrant community and the autochthonous population were partially provoked by local fears that miscegenation was transgressing the boundary markers of Britishness and was ultimately contaminating the perceived homogeneous notion of nationhood. These anxieties were prevalent during the period of High Imperialism and found their way into the collective imagination through many *fin de siècle* narratives such as Richard Marsh’s *The*

*Beetle*. Spain's imperial volition, on the contrary, was all but moribund at the time of nineteenth century European colonialism and the fears of "reverse colonisation," the idea that "the other" would steadily infiltrate the nations borders to colonise through miscegenation, was thus absent from the national psyche. However, the 2005 official Spanish government statistics show that 8.5% of the national population is comprised by a documented immigrant population, and it would seem that Ndongo is suggesting that this fear is now present within Spanish society.

One would have to ask why Ndongo has deliberately decided to give *El metro* such a pessimistic ending. Its root, perhaps, lies in the author's own fears that he will never be fully accepted in a predominantly white society, and more importantly, that his émigré status will always dilute his effectiveness in aiding his own people. Seen from this perspective, *El metro* operates as a modern cautionary tale on the perils of migrancy where Obama, the textual embodiment of a renewed indigenous leadership, has been uselessly sacrificed for a dream of prosperity, unable to fulfil his role as a guide to his people. As he watches his life slip away from him, what he most fears is: "terminar como un insecto insignificante y ruin aplastado en cualquier vereda del bosque, sin que nada alterase el orden sempiterno del universo" (256-7).<sup>10</sup> The only redeeming note the text offers is that Obama is once again reunited in the otherworld with his mother and Ebang Motuú, the genealogic focus of his own leadership ambition. The ambiguous words of comfort his mother offers him are: "hijo: al fin has llegado al puerto de destino, y tu muerte no será una muerte anónima" (458).<sup>11</sup>

In Ben Okri's *Famished Road* trilogy, Nigeria's plight is seen as a conundrum that must be unravelled at the boundary between the real world and the otherworld; an interstice where the spirit child Azaro constantly crosses back and forth from. However, *El metro*'s finale seems to posit the otherworld as the only escape from the travails of migrancy and offers very little hope for the African who makes Europe their home. Ndongo's own condition as forced exile, no doubt, infuses the narrative with its tragic vision and helps to understand the book's dystopic ending and overall pessimistic tone as regards migrancy and miscegenation, the supposed gateway towards a hybrid identity. On a more didactical note, Ndongo's *El metro* tells its reader that the road towards Europe is a long and hard one and that the goal is more often than not worth the sacrifice. The bitter

irony is, nonetheless, that many aspiring Africans cannot develop their ambitions in their native soil.

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<sup>1</sup> “was it not ... the decadence of our lineage that was announced the day black people abandoned their traditions to embrace the beliefs and customs of those albinos from overseas?” (My translation)

<sup>2</sup> “Instead of ensconcing within the prosperity of the West, he would forces with his countrymen to fight for freedom and liberty, and that way their children would not have to flee.” (My translation)

<sup>3</sup> “A set of incomprehensible rules, that strict exogamy upon which the customs of his village were founded, had shattered his sense of security upon which his universe revolved.” (My translation)

<sup>4</sup> “Perhaps he [Obama] was overwhelmed by a certain anxiety for not having the courage to confide in his cousin Ntogo and let him know his decision.” (My translation)

<sup>5</sup> “Was it worth while to endure so much hardship for such an uncertain future? Would it have been more convenient to keep on resisting in his country, to battle against the set backs, or perhaps perish from a terrible illness ... be beaten to pulp by the police, end up as a sacrifice at a sorcerer’s feast?” (My translation)

<sup>6</sup> “he felt upon him the weight of his Africanness, the historic burden of being a mere negro in a world like this.” (My translation)

<sup>7</sup> “Had they [Africans] left their land only to leave their family unattended, to banish themselves and bury their traditions?” (My translation)

<sup>8</sup> “one’s skin was no more than a wrapper, like a shirt or a blouse.” (My translation)

<sup>9</sup> “you will never fuck with white woman again, you disgusting monkey, you black fucker.” (My translation)

<sup>10</sup> “to end up like an insignificant and despicable insect, squashed on some forest trail, without there being a slightest alteration of the everlasting universe.” (My translation)

<sup>11</sup> “son: you have finally reached your port of call, and your death will not be an anonymous one.” (My translation)