

# “I’m not Afropolitan — I’m of the Continent”: A conversation with Yewande Omotoso

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## Abstract

Since the end of apartheid, South Africa has become a new home for many immigrants and refugees from all over the African continent. Engaging with this “new season of migration to the South”,<sup>1</sup> South African writers are increasingly including migrants from elsewhere on the continent into their casts of protagonists. Moreover, in autobiographies and works of fiction, African migrants themselves have begun to reflect on their experiences of living in South Africa. In this interview, Yewande Omotoso discusses her emigration from Nigeria to South Africa in the early 1990s. She argues that her family’s choice to remain on the African continent, rather than emigrating to the UK or the US, as so many contemporary Nigerian writers did, has given her a distinct diasporic experience. As the interview unfolds, she emphasizes that the notion of Afropolitanism does not capture this experience. She also discusses recent developments in contemporary South African publishing and literature, stressing that the country’s literary scene, despite its shortcomings, is vibrant, young, and full of creative energy. Omotoso’s comments on her debut novel *Bom Boy* reveal that she is a writer deeply concerned with questions of migration, displacement, and loneliness.

## Keywords

Afropolitanism, *Bom Boy*, diaspora, migration, Nigerian literature, post-apartheid literature, South African–Nigerian relations, Yewande Omotoso, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Taiye Selasi

Yewande Omotoso was born in Barbados in 1980 and grew up in Nigeria. In 1992 she moved to South Africa with her two older brothers, her Barbadian mother and Nigerian father, academic and writer Kole Omotoso. Her debut novel *Bom Boy*, published by South African publisher Modjaji Books in 2011, was shortlisted for the *Sunday Times*

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Fiction Prize, as well as the MNet Film Award. In 2012, Omotoso won the South African Literary Award in the category of English First-time Published Author. The novel was recently shortlisted for the newly established Etisalat Prize for Literature, the first pan-African prize for first-time novelists.<sup>2</sup> She is also a writer of short stories and poetry. Some of her short stories are “How About The Children” (2012a), “Things Are Hard” (2012c), “A Code” (2013), and “Two Old People” (2010), which was published in the anthology *Speaking for the Generations: An Anthology of Contemporary African Short Stories* (2010) edited by Dike Okoro. Her poem “The Rain” (2012b) was shortlisted for the 2012 Sol Plaatje European Poetry Award. Omotoso holds an MA in Creative Writing from the University of Cape Town. She currently lives in Centurion near Johannesburg where she is writing as well as running her own architectural firm with two partners.

In 2012 all five novels shortlisted for the *Sunday Times* Fiction Prize, South Africa’s most prestigious literary award, featured characters from elsewhere on the continent. *Sunday Times* books editor Tymon Smith therefore speaks of a “new ‘Africanity’ in the thinking of local fiction writers, a welcome new direction for local fiction that demonstrates the multitude of possibilities for looking not only within but beyond our geographical and psychological borders” (Smith, 2012). As mentioned, one of the shortlisted novels was Yewande Omotoso’s *Bom Boy*.<sup>3</sup> Her novel demonstrates that not only South African writers address post-apartheid issues of migration.<sup>4</sup> Writers who have themselves migrated to South Africa from countries such as Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo, or Côte d’Ivoire have recently begun to explore migration from further north to the south of the African continent in their writing. Some of them have become writers due to their own migratory experiences.<sup>5</sup>

While many of these writers arrived with expectations of a better life in South Africa, the anti-immigrant violence that has been commonplace in South Africa since the early years of the transition to democracy has shattered their “South African dream”. Particularly the so-called xenophobic attacks<sup>6</sup> of May 2008 that rapidly spread across the country’s townships and informal settlements, leaving 62 people dead and 100,000 displaced, have shaken the image of Africa’s much vaunted showcase democracy (Mbembe, 2008). With xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments rife in South Africa, the voices of writers who have come from elsewhere on the continent to South Africa are invaluable, bringing into the public sphere different and more nuanced narratives about African immigrants and refugees.<sup>7</sup> Omotoso’s *Bom Boy* (2011) deals with South Africa’s relationship with Nigeria by focusing on first- and second-generation Nigerian immigrants and their lives in Cape Town. The following interview took place on 10 June 2013 in Centurion near Johannesburg.

**RF:** Let me begin by asking how you became a writer?

**YO:** I think I became a writer because my father is a writer. I have two older brothers and we all used to write as children. We wrote on my father’s typewriter, his word processor and all the different machineries that he had over the years. My older brother would write plays and we would perform them for our parents. There was always a lot of creating and telling of stories. Towards the end of my high school, I knew I wanted to write and I wanted to study English. Circumstances happened and I studied architecture instead. By my fifth year as

a professional architect, I decided to do a part-time Master's in Creative Writing and use the course to write a book.

**RF:** Could you talk a bit about the circumstances that made your family leave Nigeria and move to South Africa?

**YO:** It was in 1992. I was 12 years old. My dad had already left Nigeria four years before in 1988 [during the Babangida regime]. He had published *Just Before Dawn* (Omotoso K, 1988/2003) and been taken to court.<sup>8</sup> There was a massive brain drain from Nigeria during those years. Particularly intellectuals, writers, and academics were targeted because they were speaking and writing out. Some were killed, a lot were persecuted in different ways, their families were attacked. In many ways, my father was forced to leave for his own safety. After being away from us for four years — he'd come back to see us once a year — he just wanted the family to be together. Education was important to him and it didn't feel like there were good alternatives in Nigeria at the time. He couldn't earn enough money as a professor in Nigeria and still give his family the quality of life he wanted. He had mostly been out of the continent. He taught at Oxford and Stirling and he travelled around and then taught in Lesotho. That's when he started engaging with the prospect of moving to South Africa. Since he didn't want to leave the continent, he decided that we would all move there. We came here in 1992. It was a gamble in many ways, very different from coming to the country in 1995. It was pre everything. We got here even before the referendum took place.<sup>9</sup> The country hadn't been through its rite of passage yet, it was not yet a democracy. The killings, the mayhem, and the fear of the transition years were still there. Many people were leaving, terrified about a coming revolution. It took a bit of vision and courage on both my parents' part.

**RF:** What was your experience of coming to South Africa at that time?

**YO:** There were moments of very blatant racism. But we were also just getting to know a new country. My brothers and I were young. I didn't fully understand. For me South Africa was a place where black people were not liked. We would grapple with this when we were at school and started engaging with society through other kids. It was not easy. Our struggle for a few years was trying to fit into what was going on here, to find our place. In those days not many people knew where Nigeria was. There weren't a lot of Africans from other parts of the continent. You were different and people did not know where to place you.

**RF:** Did not being from South Africa, your outsider position, inform your writing?

**YO:** Everything informs one's writing. We always draw from our experiences and from what we see around us. So I would say, yes, my experience as an immigrant informed my writing. I write from a unique perspective. Having lived here for so many years, I feel more South African now, but I haven't had the experiences black South Africans, for example, my age have had. I did not have to deal with the South African dynamic for the first 12 years of my life. I formed differently, I was exposed to a different dynamic. Chimamanda Ngozi

Adichie's new novel *Americanah* (2013) explores many of these questions in the American context. Generalizations notwithstanding, we have the African, the African American and the white American. The African [the young Nigerian woman Ifemelu] is trying to understand the African Americans' anger and frustrations. The novel is about all the etiquettes of how to grapple with different perspectives. It's probably similar here. Again in broad undifferentiating terms, there is me and there are black South Africans who have lived here all their lives, who are upset, who feel things that I might not feel, who see things in between actions that I might not see, who sense animosity where I might not sense it. It's important to be aware of all this, to try and understand where the anger comes from. If you haven't lived here and haven't gone through apartheid, how can you question things? All you can do is to listen and try to understand. For this reason, for me personally, it takes a lot of work to write a South African character, a black South African character because there is a lot that I don't know about that person's experience. I seldom do it and when I do, I do so with pause. I'm not saying that I will always feel this way but currently this is one of the things I grapple with.

**RF:** Do you think that living in South Africa gives you a significantly different diasporic experience from writers such as Adichie, the so-called "third-generation" of Nigerian writers living in the UK or the US? Do narratives of migration to the south provide us with a novel perspective in relation to the older narratives of migration to the north?

**YO:** I'm interested in the idea of who you write for. While some writers, including myself, might feel they aren't really writing *for* a particular audience, at the same time when I read, for instance works of those writers who settled overseas, it often appears to me that they are writing for a particular kind of audience, an overseas audience. At least they write something applicable enough that all people from many walks can identify with it. And those writers who left their home countries and settled somewhere more stable but still upon the continent, I wonder if they don't write differently, have a slightly different audience they write for, again regardless of whether Americans or the British might buy, read, and identify with their books too. That the gaze is different because even though they migrated, they did not go north. Again, I don't know where this fits but it's something recent that I think about and, as yet, have no answers to. I recently read Noo Saro-Wiwa's *Looking for Transwonderland* (2012) and I also interviewed her. I liked the book and I could relate to what she was writing at times. But there were also times when I couldn't relate. Noo is Nigerian but also British in many ways; the same way I'm Nigerian but South African too. There were things that she seemed dismissive of in her descriptions of the country that I found difficult to relate to. For example, I'm not dismissive of Ifa divination,<sup>10</sup> neither is it exotic for me. I can believe that it works, there is a law there.

**RF:** Do you think this is the case because you're still on the continent?

**YO:** That's what I think, but I'm not quite sure. A friend of mine reviewed *Ghana Must Go* (2013) by Taiye Selasi and then sent the review to me. She described

Selasi's characters as Afropolitans, referring to the author's famous article "Bye-Bye, Babar or What Is an Afropolitan?" (2005).<sup>11</sup> My immediate reaction was, "I'm not Afropolitan."<sup>12</sup> But my friend insisted, "Yewande, you are Afropolitan." I understand cosmopolitanism, but I don't identify with the West. I feel I can be African and have the views and experiences that I've had, but it doesn't take me away from being on the continent. Being an Afropolitan to me sounds as if you are supposed to be a mediator between the West and Africa because you have travelled and lived overseas. I have no torn allegiances and I have no current interest of ever living in America or the UK. I want to live here. I'm of the continent. My mother was from the Caribbean, so I'm multicultural anyway, not only Nigerian. But I feel this doesn't mean I'm Afropolitan. I've travelled to places and I've learned things, but I'm still African. It doesn't mean I'm less African, and that's why the term is problematic. Why do we have to have another distinction? You have class, language and so on and now another special group of Afropolitans. Many of those Africans who travel and get educated overseas have the money and the means to do that. So they are of a privileged class, that's all. We are living in a global village, people move around, they have cross-cultural experiences. My story is not a unique one. The term Afropolitan only seems useful for the West as it gives the West an opportunity to understand and even "consume" Africa. I am not from the West and I don't need anybody translating things for me. Do I understand everything about myself and the continent? Of course not, but that is an acceptable human condition, to be exploring and learning. It's important to me that I didn't grow up in the US or in the UK. I grew up here on the continent. Even though South Africa sometimes doesn't look like Africa (and there's a whole debate here on what Africa apparently needs to look like), I feel as if it's a distinct experience from growing up in the West. Afropolitan panders to something that I don't want to pander to. It is interesting that all these books are coming up now — Adichie's *Americanah*, NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013), Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011), Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* and so on — because they are all about identity, the traveller, the African living in the West. But the story of the Non-Southern African in South Africa would be a different narrative. In many ways, I wrote my novel *Bom Boy* with the xenophobic attacks [in 2008] and everything in mind; there's a lot of acrimony.

**RF:** Talking about xenophobic violence, I often wonder where Nigerians in South Africa stand. They appear to experience less direct physical violence than other African migrants in South Africa. But stereotypes against them appear all the more intense. Do you think this may have to do with the global archive of denigrating representations of Nigerians and the fact that they tend to live in inner-city areas rather than townships in South Africa?

**YO:** I do think that if you're out of the townships you are mostly out of harm's way. So yes, that might have something to do with why Nigerians have come under less physical attack. A friend suggested Nigerian immigrants are more socially mobile than others but I have no proof or real knowledge of this. As you say

there is plenty of stereotyping and down-talking of Nigerians in the media and just generally at dinner-table conversations. As a Nigerian I have a patient smile (on good days) for the jokes and jabs people feel obligated to deliver upon hearing where I'm from. It is boring. Few look at how stereotypes form, instead people mostly seem happy to prostrate before them.

**RF:** Do you think that this kind of stereotyping is also driven by the sense of economic and political rivalry on the continent between Nigeria and South Africa? How do you see the relationship between the two countries?

**YO:** I am unsure. I think it's complex. Firstly, the stereotyping of Nigerians exists beyond just South Africa [SA], so I wouldn't root it in a conflict between the two nations. However, this existing stereotyping is further exacerbated by the specific relationship between SA and Nigeria. I'm not sure the economic and political rivalry between them that plays out on the continent is a big factor. I think this thing is a lot less highbrow. People are ignorant, scared, and faced with scarcity. People are lazy, it's easy to rely on stereotypes as indicators and maps for how to navigate the complex socio-political terrain we exist in.

The relationship is one with a history, the nearest and most talked about of which would be Nigeria's role in the anti-apartheid struggle and support for the African National Congress (ANC). Currently, you see the relationship as one of SA as a kind of Mecca, a place to come to and leave behind the impossibility Nigeria sometimes seems to be. SA as a place of hope. But SA is also a place of death, of hardship, of isolation, and loneliness. The influx of Nigerians is regarded as a threat, especially among the poorest South Africans. There have been clear messages over the past years that they are not welcome. Meanwhile, if there were ever two countries that should shack up and make something happen for their peoples and the continent it would be these two. But we need the leaders who are interested, and I feel our leaders are either intellectually incapable or otherwise preoccupied with other less visionary pursuits.

**RF:** In the article "Why do South Africans hate Nigerians" that Adichie wrote for *the Guardian* she says that despite the overbearingly deprecating rhetoric and the xenophobic attacks of 2008, "South Africa continues to draw Nigerians." She feels this is the case "[b]ecause it is not as recognisably 'African' in its infrastructure and opportunities, it ranks much higher than the rest of sub-Saharan Africa on the scale of cool. [...] South Africa represents a kind of "doable" ambition, steps below Europe and the US, but still the sort of place that impresses your village relatives when you come back home at Christmas" (Adichie, 2009). Can you relate to this comment?

**YO:** I haven't read the article. I detect a note of sarcasm in her comment of SA as steps below Europe and the US but I might be incorrect. I don't regard SA as steps below. I'm not, actually, very good at placing which on which step. These different lands are so complicated. I'm not an economist, but if I were one I'd use some kind of economic scale to decide what belongs where, except that still won't provide a clear picture. I know my father chose South Africa and deliberately (turning down offers) did not choose America or the UK. I am

grateful for this. I am not sure I'd be who I am if we'd left Africa altogether, but this is conjecture.

She is accurate though that over the past two decades South Africa is the popular place to come to, particularly if you can't get the funds to travel all the way across the seas. Where so many African nations are struggling with thin infrastructure South Africa is, at least for now, an oasis.

**RF:** What is your own, personal relationship with Nigeria?

**YO:** Nigeria is where I am from, I'm Nigerian. It's where I spent the first 12 years of my life, it's where my father is from, it's where my grandmother is buried. After we left in 1992 there were many years (almost a decade) when I didn't return to the country but now as an adult I am forging my own relationship with the country, independent to my father and my brothers — this seems important. I love Nigeria and there is also a lot about Nigeria I do not love. While I am in Nigeria it is sometimes evident to many that I don't belong — my grasp of Yoruba is poor, my accent is mangled. But there are several like me due to the massive brain drain during the military years, Nigerian adults who spent the bulk of their childhood and teens outside of Nigeria. I think we have a role to play in the country and I am still figuring mine out — need to hurry up!

**RF:** Could you imagine living there again?

**YO:** Yes, I can see myself living in Nigeria, but with means. That's the frustrating part. You have to have money to be able to afford basic things like water and electricity. You need your borehole, your generator, your SUV, a driver so that you don't get frustrated by the ridiculous traffic. When I say "need", I'm being funny. You don't actually *need* these things. The majority of the people survive without them. That too is a problem by the way, that so much survival is required. I used public transport for the first time in Lagos when I was there earlier this year. I had never done this before, coming from a middle/upper class background. It's possible, you don't necessarily need stacks and stacks of cash. With too much money you end up being cocooned by it. At the same time I don't want to have to negotiate with the tap and the light switch, if these basic amenities were guaranteed to all, Nigeria would start to be a very different place, a better place.

**RF:** Do you feel part of the local South African literary scene?

**YO:** I do. I know a lot of other writers and have many South African writer friends. There's a strong community. South Africa is an exciting place if you're writing. I feel included and people have been kind and embraced me here.

**RF:** What makes SA such an exciting place?

**YO:** There is an appetite for writing here in spite of how tough being a fiction writer is the world over. People are definitely not reading enough in South Africa. Fiction doesn't do brilliantly here either. But still, work is being published. You have Umuzi, Modjaji, Kwela, Penguin: all these publishers are putting new work out on the market. There are many new, young, different and exciting voices. You also find this in Nigeria, but because South Africa has infrastructure it feels as if there is a real way to harness that talent here. I picked up

a little bit of frustration from the writers I spoke to when I was in Nigeria. Some of the publishing houses are closing down and things aren't working. Many writers are thinking about sending their manuscripts to South African publishers. Living here, you have a bit of an advantage. There is a lot that isn't happening, but what is happening is good. We need more publishing, but we also need to acknowledge that publishers are trying. The same can be said of Nigeria. They are trying and that's admirable.

**RF:** If you look at the contemporary South African literary scene, do you think notions such as post-apartheid, post-post-apartheid or post-transitional writing reflect what is currently being published? Are we really post-transitional as some scholars have been suggesting?<sup>13</sup>

**YO:** We're almost 20 years into democracy. But it's still early days. I don't know if it's even time to talk about post-apartheid. I know that is not a popular thing to say, people are tired and don't want to continue to deal with race. But there's so much unresolved. If you go to Cape Town, nothing there seems post-apartheid. I get upset when I visit my white friends at their homes. I ask them, "Where are all the black people? Am I the only one you know?" This is happening in 2013. These aren't old people, these are people my age, nice, cool, hip, funky. They don't seem particularly racist or prejudiced. They are not spitting at black people. Something isn't happening, people still live in silos. There's a lot of shame for white South Africans who didn't fight in the struggle, there's a lot of embarrassment and humiliation. Other people are angry, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC] couldn't possibly cater for 50 million people. Things are even more complicated now, as migrants from Zimbabwe, Nigeria, and other places have come to the country. There are more barriers and violence. So we really have to keep working, otherwise the fabric will slip away. It's dangerous to think now we're done, so let's go and have coffee and have a braai.

**RF:** I recently attended the opening of your brother's interactive exhibition *Tell Them We Are from Here*, which is part of a series of events commemorating the xenophobic attacks of May 2008. I was very impressed by Akin's insightful engagement with the communities where the violence occurred. The exhibition records the responses of community members to his film *Man on Ground* (Omotoso A, 2011) and intends to foster dialogue about identity and belonging in this country. Do you think literature can achieve a similar form of engagement with the community? Would you agree with Professor Kelwyn Sole's statement that xenophobia in the country calls for the "writer-as-activist or writer-as-witness to emerge again" (Sole, 2010)?

**YO:** I think film is a lot more immediate. It's (unfortunately) popularly considered sexier and there are more watchers than readers. That said, books and reading are still incredibly important. So there is a lot of work for writers not just to write stories but to write stories that are meaningful and also write stories that people (all kinds of people) will want to read. And also to encourage reading, as well as to seek out new writers from many corners — those writers that will be able to tell the stories that I cannot. Professor Sole is right. However, I



disagree with one thing — there is no “emerging again”; the writer should never retreat in the first place. I’m not saying that all writing has to be self-consciously political. But I don’t think politics can ever be lost, because there are so many things to critique in society. Look at corruption, look at the gender issues this country has. There’s always some secret, some hidden, something that isn’t being looked at that’s being ignored or some pretence. That’s the rule, I believe. I’m not saying it can’t be fun and sexy as well. You can write about these things in light ways with humour, or you can do it in very heavy serious ways. But it should be done.

**RF:** I would like to talk about your novel *Bom Boy* for a bit. The novel is set in Cape Town and engages with the city’s specific relationship with the African continent, the common trope of it being a Western outpost in (South) Africa. You address the Cape’s difficult relationship with the African continent, particularly in the letters that Oscar writes to his son Leke. I was intrigued by Oscar’s juxtaposition of the Rhodes Memorial with the statue of the legendary Moremi figure of Yoruba mythology at his home campus in Ile-Ife. For him, these monuments seem to capture the different cultures of memorialization that he has observed in the two countries. Could you comment on the significance of this episode in the novel?

**YO:** It is mostly playful, perhaps tongue-in-cheek. I’m not writing some diatribe or trying to lecture anyone. It’s more that I want to point out the rivalry that happened and still happens between the nations on a one-to-one level. The on-upmanship that exists, often in ridiculous ways. But for Oscar he feels deeply that he is in a strange land (the land that would be a home — or not — for his unborn unknown-to-him son), a land he doesn’t understand, he doesn’t hear the stories in the monument. There are stories, but the monument tells loud opulent stories, he can’t quite hear the softer ones.

**RF:** While Oscar has a Nigerian father and a white South African mother and spends the years of his youth in both countries, he seems to identify more strongly with his Nigerian heritage. Why is that the case?

**YO:** Oscar is born in Nigeria. His parents would have been in love at a time when they “shouldn’t be” due to South Africa’s laws. He does go back to South Africa after the apparent effects of the family curse start to take hold. His father plays a large role in Oscar’s life, telling him stories. For Oscar, being Nigerian, speaking the language and even looking Nigerian were ways to get his father’s admiration and approval. His relationship with his mother, while just as loving, was less rooted in a sense of history, storytelling, and folklore. This ties in to the thread not yet properly woven into Leke’s life — that there is a strong story he hasn’t yet heard that roots him in incidents and consequences and the stuff of life versus the fluff he keeps reaching for and not quite grasping.

**RF:** The other narrative strand of your novel, which centres on Oscar’s son Leke, follows the trajectory of the *Bildungsroman*. It traces Leke’s path out of utter social isolation and loneliness to finding a sense of stability in his life, when he finally reads his father’s letters and engages with his Nigerian heritage. Does

his loneliness result from being a trans-racial and trans-national adoptee, a “kid-for-hire” as his classmates call him?

- YO:** Is it bad to say: I don’t know? I think there are many circumstances that create a feeling of isolation in Leke. Definitely his experiences as a child teach him not to expect a sense of belonging with others. It is Jane [his adoptive mother] he loves but he loses her. The reason though for my reticence to say it’s the trans-aspects that make him lonely is I don’t think that’s a rule. He could just as well have turned out to be charismatic and socially capable. I think loneliness breeds in certain situations. South Africa’s and Cape Town’s history might not create the best breeding ground for an overall and easy feeling of togetherness. This isn’t a life sentence, we can work on this. There are times it is there, but there are many times when it is not.
- RF:** Initially, Leke’s life appears governed by an opposition between reality and dream, day and night. While his life during the day is marked by alienation and the absence of human contact, his sleep is “populated with intense friendships, kissing and other intimacies his daylight life were [sic] barren of” (Omotoso, 2011: 21). Later, after meeting the girl Tsotso, these distinctions become increasingly blurred. Could you discuss the strong preoccupation with dreams in the novel?
- YO:** The suggestion is that we live also through our dreaming hours. We resolve things, we fall in love, our fantasies are fulfilled. Leke does this. Perhaps because his waking life is so stilted, so numb, his dreams become a place of feeling and striving, as well as a space where revelations can be heard and grappled with. I like the idea that Leke finds redemption in spite of himself, that there is some force at play, whether through dreams, through his meeting with Tsotso, guiding him to a stronger understanding of life and himself in life. The very idea of “your dream” is the best of you. Literally, in his dreams Leke is most able to move forward and grow.
- RF:** What is the relationship between routes and roots in the process of his identity formation?
- YO:** Leke has a special relationship to soil and plants, specifically the four o’clock flowers that his adoptive mother fixated on towards the end of her illness. It seems to be the only thing he does do, in his drab deadened life, that is about growth and newness and fertility and hope. It’s a tenuous link, but I think it means he’s not a bad person. He’s stuck, but he has this ritual that he is dogged about. It’s one of the softest things about him; the way you might meet a mean old lady but she’s kind to her cat. He has some humanity, he can start from there and grow outwards.
- RF:** Another reason for Leke’s social isolation is a long-standing family curse, resulting from a deal Oscar’s grandparents made with a *babalawo*,<sup>14</sup> which they broke. Would you like to elaborate on the significance of the curse in the novel?
- YO:** I suppose part of it is those human beings (I am most likely one of them) who are looking. Searching for answers, some go to God, to spirits, to intellectual stores, to research, to technology, to science, to doctors, and so on. There is a

lot of searching in the book. In the grandparents' case they go to the *babalawo*, but there are rules about looking and they break them. The curse could be anything, in this example, because it is tied to Ifa divination, some might poo poo it. But it's just a model. Are there not myriad "curses" we live with? These are consequences of the cheating/lying we do on large and small scales. The curse is about consequence. It appears mysterious in the story but it's a very practical and real law of life.

**RF:** You have just attended the Ebedi International Writers Residency in Nigeria, where you were working on your second novel with the title *Your House is on Fire*. What is the novel about?

**YO:** Firstly that title died a death! So I am green behind the ears and I've now learnt not to talk about my book and its title too early in the game. But the novel is about Cape Town and a hate relationship between two octogenarians who happen to be neighbours. I deal with the themes that continually interest me, the past and its apparent imprint on us, cultural, racial, and class divisions and of course love. But I am also grappling with Cape Town, and not her beauty but her ugliness. We always need to look and consider both; it seems an honest thing to do.

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## Notes

1. Drawing on Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1969), Kole Omotoso termed this reorientation the "season of migration to the South" in his book of the same title published in 1994, which details his own account of moving to South Africa. Taking up this idea, Harry Garuba has spoken of post-apartheid immigration as the new "season of migration to the south" (Garuba, 2011: 7).
2. The prize was established in 2013. The chair of judges is acclaimed South African academic, public intellectual and feminist Pumla Gqola. The other judges are Billy Kahora, managing editor of the Kenyan literary journal *Kwani*, Anglo-Nigerian academic and writer Sarah Ladipo Manyika and South African author Zakes Mda, who is currently Professor of Creative Writing at Ohio University.
3. The other shortlisted works were the crime thriller *The Lazarus Effect* (2011) by Hawa Jande Golakai, *Lost Ground* (2011) by Michiel Heyns, *Nineveh* (2011) by Henrietta Rose-Innes, and *Eddie Signwriter* (2010) by Adam Schwartzman. Golakai grew up in Liberia and came to South Africa as a student in 2003. Dreaming of becoming the "Agatha Christie of Africa" she intends to "reclaim crime writing as an African woman" (Golakai, cited in McCracken, 2014: 5). *The Lazarus Effect* focuses on Liberian investigative journalist Vee Johnson, who investigates the disappearance of a teenage girl in Cape Town and becomes enmeshed in the dark history of the girl's family. In *Eddie Signwriter*, Schwartzman, who was born in Johannesburg and currently lives in Turkey, recounts in *Bildungsroman* form the story of his young character, the Ghanaian Kwasi Edward Michael Dankwa, alias Eddie Signwriter, who after a series of misfortunes in Ghana becomes an "illegal" immigrant in France. While Tymon Smith remarks that three of the shortlisted works include characters from elsewhere

- in Africa, all five novels in fact do so. One of Rose-Innes' minor characters is a Congolese security guard, who guards the luxury estate Nineveh in her novel. Heyns' novel features the Congolese car guard Vincent who is killed in xenophobic violence.
4. The vast range of novels including African migrant characters or dealing with the theme of xenophobia comprises, amongst others, Andrew Brown's *Coldsleep Lullaby* (2005), Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* (2001), K. Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cents* (2000) and *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* (2001), Damon Galgut's *The Good Doctor* (2003), Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup* (2001), Kleinboer's *Kontrei* (2003 – English translation *Midnight Missionary*, 2006), Rozena Maart's *The Writing Circle* (2008), Niq Mhlongo's *Dog Eat Dog* (2004) and *After Tears* (2007), Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207* (2006), Jonathan Morgan's *Finding Mr Madini* (1999), Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001), Patricia Schonstein Pinnock's *Skyline* (2000), Angelina N. Sithebe's *Holy Hill* (2007), Heinrich Troost's *Plot Loss* (2007), and Etienne van Heerden's *In Stede van die Liefde* (2005). The so-called xenophobic attacks of 2008 seem to have prompted more writers to reflect on the issue. This is visible in Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City* (2010), Troy Blacklaws's *Cruel Crazy Beautiful World* (2011), Andrew Brown's *Refuge* (2009), Imraan Coovadia's *The Institute of Taxi Poetry* (2012), Nadine Gordimer's *No Time Like the Present* (2012), Michiel Heyns's *Lost Ground* (2011), Perfect Hlongwane's *Jozi* (2013), Siphiwo Mahala's *African Delights* (2011), Zakes Mda's *Black Diamond* (2009), Patricia Schonstein's *Banquet at Brabazan* (2010), Mongane Walle Serote's *Revelations* (2010) and *Rumours* (2013), Meg Vandermerwe's short story "Mango Tree" in her collection *This Place I Call Home* (2010) and her novel *Zebra Crossing* (2013), and Zukiswa Wanner's *Men of the South* (2010). This list is by no means comprehensive; it seeks merely to cover some of the major texts addressing the new season of African migration to the country and to highlight the significance of the theme within the post-apartheid literary canon.
  5. Some of the works by these writers are: *Going Home* (2005) by Simão Kikamba from Angola, the play *The Crossing* (2009) by Jonathan Khumbulani Nkala from Zimbabwe, the refugee memoir *The Lost Boy* (2011) by Aher Arop Bol from Sudan, and *One Day I Will Write about This Place* (2011) by Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina. Veronique Tadjó and Nuruddin Farah, perhaps the most famous African writers living in South Africa, have not dealt with the subject in their novels. Drawing on the history of the Côte d'Ivoire, her home country, Tadjó wrote a non-fiction piece for Hassim et al.'s volume (2008), enjoining South Africa to stay clear from such violence against outsiders.
  6. I refer to the violence of May 2008 with the qualifier "so-called" as the term xenophobia appears only to inadequately capture the nature of the violence. The majority of the people targeted were non-nationals from other African counties rather than migrants, immigrants and refugees in general, people whom South Africans considered as non-native citizens on the basis of language and physical appearance, as well as in a few cases migrants from countries such as Bangladesh and Pakistan (Hassim et al., 2008). In view of the ongoing discourse of white supremacy within the South African social sphere, Pumla Dineo Gqola and others have suggested negrophobia as an alternative term for the attacks (Gqola, 2008). It seems, therefore, that the opposition between South Africans and foreigners denoted by the term "xenophobia" fails to account for the complexity of identities involved in the violence (Hassim et al., 2008: 25). While the targeting of someone as "other" is a subjective matter, based on stereotypes and not necessarily on the actual possession of a certain citizenship, it seems nonetheless problematic to assume from the start that it was the perceived foreignness of the South African victims that triggered the attacks against them. This assumption may occlude the role other factors (such as ethnicity) played in the violence. Moreover, the label xenophobia eludes the possibility that "xenophobia" was used as a cover-up for other motives. As

Landau notes, “[m]uch South African debate about xenophobia mistakenly equates it with an overzealous nationalism. While national boundaries serve as a powerful marker of difference, insider/outsider divisions almost equally apply to certain elements of the South African citizenry” (2011: 6). Jason Hickel, for instance, argues that the common model of explaining xenophobia in South Africa within the framework of the “anomie and uncertainty” (Hickel, 2014: 116) created by the cultural flows of globalization fails to take into account culturally-specific formulations of insider and outsider identities. For him, “many people’s perceptions of foreigners are informed by ideas about witches and witchcraft, which articulate with widespread anxieties about rising unemployment, housing shortages, and a general crisis of social reproduction” (Hickel, 2014: 122). This is not to deny the existence of strong anti-immigrant sentiments in contemporary South African society; I simply intend to point towards the complexity of the events and the dangers of hasty labelling. For further debates on this issue, see Matsinhe (2011) and Sharp (2008).

7. The distinction between economic migrants and political refugees is not as clear-cut as commonly assumed. This particularly applies to Zimbabwean nationals living in South Africa, who cannot easily be categorized as either/or. As Sisulu et al. note in this context, “a classic definition of a refugee as someone who is not able to return home does not apply. Even so, we cannot easily dismiss this large group of Zimbabweans as simply economic migrants because they are in South Africa due to the interplay between the political crisis and the economic downturn in Zimbabwe” (Sisulu et al., 2007: 565). Similarly, Landau and Segatti invite us to “rethink three divisions: between documented and undocumented migrants; between voluntary and forced migrants; and between international and domestic migration” (2009: 53–4), arguing that such clear differentiation often does not make sense, given the presence of multifarious and complex migration patterns in South Africa.
8. The novel had caused such a controversy in Nigeria that Omotoso’s publishers refused to defend him in court. He then taught as a visiting professor of English at the University of Stirling, Scotland, the National University of Lesotho, and the Tawala Theatre in London. After the family moved to South Africa, he taught at the University of the Western Cape and the University of Stellenbosch. Omotoso had performed in several plays at the Department of Drama at the Obafemi Awolowo University in Nigeria and thus came to South Africa with a lot of stage and acting experience. In the mid-1990s he shot to fame in South Africa when he appeared in a TV commercial for Vodacom. Prof. Omotoso currently lives in Centurion outside Johannesburg and is the director of the Africa Diaspora Research Group.
9. The whites-only referendum took place on 17 March 1992 and 68.7% of the voters voted in support of President de Klerk’s reform agenda (Beck, 2000: 186).
10. Ifa divination is a religious and spiritual practice of the Yoruba. To foretell the future, the diviner would throw 16 cowrie shells or palm nuts. There are 256 possible patterns in which the shells or nuts can fall. Each of those patterns is related to one of the 256 subsections in the Odu Ifa, “a vast body of oral literature in prose and poetry that contains the wisdom of the Yoruba” (Pemberton, 2000: 17).
11. In the article, published under the name Taiye Tuakli-Wosornu, Selasi wrote: “They (read: we) are Afropolitans — the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you. You’ll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes, e.g. Ghanaian and Canadian, Nigerian and Swiss; others are merely cultural mutts: American accent, European affect, African ethos. [...] There is at least one place on The African Continent to which we tie our sense of self: be it a nation-state (Ethiopia), a city (Ibadan), or an auntie’s kitchen. [...]. We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world” (Tuakli-Wosornu, 2005).

12. Omotoso's rejection of the term "Afropolitan" resonates with the address Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainaina gave at the 2012 UK African Studies Association Conference entitled "I am a Pan-Africanist, not an Afropolitan" (Bosch Santana, 2013). On the debates and critiques of Afropolitanism, see Dabiri (2014).
13. Rather than implying an absolute break with the past, Graham Pechey maintains that "post-apartheid" is "a condition that has contradictorily always existed and yet is impossible of realisation: always existed, because apartheid as a politics of permanent and institutionalised crisis has from the beginning been shadowed by its own transgression or supersession; impossible of realisation, because the proliferating binaries of apartheid discourse will long outlive any merely political winning of freedom" (Pechey, 1994: 153). More recently, literary critics have employed the terms "post-post-apartheid" (Chapman, 2009) and "post-transitional literature" (Frenkel and MacKenzie, 2010) to characterize the country's literary present in terms of evolving trends that differ from apartheid themes but also from the literary engagement with the nation-building project of the 1990s. Rather than advocating an absolute break with the past, Frenkel notes that "the post-transitional can be read as a palimpsestic concept [...] in that it enables a reading of the new in a way in which the layers of the past are still reflected through it" (Frenkel, 2013: 29).
14. A *babalawo* is an Ifa diviner.

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