



Encountering the “Other” – The “Local” and the “Global” in Recent Nigerian Popular Fiction

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*I took the camel route, and I crossed the desert. I dared everything. ... I will not give up on simple dreams because I know the camel route is not the only way across the desert.*¹

*But our lives follow us everywhere we go, because we carry it in us.*²

Fictive imaginations of spaces that project beyond the ‘local’ infuse the novelistic landscapes of recent Nigerian popular fiction. In what Griswold termed “the city-novel,”³ i.e. novels in which the site of the city itself is pertinent to the novel’s import as well as in novels and short stories that are simply located in the city, urban spaces are transcended, placed into more encompassing networks. And it is this traversing of spaces, this intersection of the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ that the present article seeks to explore. Focusing on three selected works of fiction – *The Third Dimple*,⁴ *Alpha Song*⁵ and a short story, *The Ancestors’ Visit*,⁶ the article envisions to study how novelists engage with and create an interfacing of the ‘local’ and the ‘global’, how writers go beyond the city, selectively appropriate from and re-write into fictional spaces imagined or perceived transnational flows of people, cultures and goods.

The myriad of forms through which contemporary fiction engages with the non-local – I wish to argue – opens up discursive spaces for the mediation of meanings and identities, for the re-localization of the self in the potentially translocal world we live in.

Within novelistic texts, figures may be made to inhabit other spaces, move to or visit other countries. The focal site of a novel may be infused by what is non-local. Narrative figures may creatively engage with the transnational, the transcultural. What kinds of meanings are attached to these fictional encounters? What kinds of discursive spheres are opened up through the plurality of intersections of the local and the global written into the texts of novels or short stories? These are some of the intriguing questions that we wish to study in this article.

An “urban swirl” may grip the space of the city.⁷ This is “the entanglement of an urban center with wider systems.”⁸ The mediation of this entanglement within the cultural heterogeneity typical of many cities displays a city’s cultural vitality and reveals the

¹ Maik Nwosu, *Alpha Song* (Lagos: House of Malaika & Beacon Books, 2001), p.51.

² Nwosu, 227.

³ Wendy Griswold, *Bearing Witness: Readers, Writers and the Novel in Nigeria* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 157-160.

⁴ Omowunmi Segun, *The Third Dimple* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books [Nigeria] PLC, 1992).

⁵ Maik Nwosu, *Alpha Song* (Lagos: House of Malaika & Beacon Books, 2001).

⁶ Tunde Omobowale, “The Ancestor’s Visit,” in *The Melting Pot: A Collection of Four Stories* (Ibadan: University Press PLC, 1993), 1-40.

⁷ Ulf Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity* (New York, Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 1992), 173-216.

⁸ Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity*, 198.



cultural creativity and agency of its inhabitants. This “entanglement” with “wider systems” points to the increasing “interconnectedness of the world”⁹ which involves a “flux” of culture, people and goods.¹⁰ It is imbued with a potential for emerging “transnational cultures”¹¹ and a “global ecumene.”¹²

A study of how local subjects are made to inhabit “wider systems” in fictional texts, of how the interconnectedness of the world is transposed into fiction might fruitfully draw on Hannerz’ notion of “habitats of meaning,”¹³ that is, spheres of meaning that are shaped, negotiated and inhabited by individuals or groups. Habitats of meaning constitute intersecting, overlapping or separate spheres of meaning and are not bound to a particular local space. The underlying notion of agency involved translates – in the field of literary creativity – into the cultural creativity of fictive imaginations of habitats of meaning. Appadurai's notion of “locality” also directs us to an inquiry into the ways and techniques, through which “locality” as a “phenomenological quality of life” linked to the “actual settings in and through which social life is reproduced”¹⁴ is shaped in relation to the non-local.¹⁵ This opens up a perspective on the creation of locality in a non-spatial sense that is nevertheless situated in particular settings.

From the perspective of a selected range of novels (including a short story) we thus seek to unravel, how Nigerian writers map out translocal fictional landscapes within which habitats of meanings are displayed, negotiated and re-defined in imaginative ways.

Traversing and Inhabiting ‘Other’ Spaces in *The Third Dimple*

The Third Dimple by Omowunmi Segun¹⁶ is a novel that moves swiftly between places, countries and continents as it unravels the story of a young woman, Tolu and her alleged cousin Lara, coming to terms with their origin in a social environment characterized by wealth and decadence. Through the unfolding of a range of narrative strands, *The Third Dimple* raises themes of contemporary social relevance, such as morality and immorality in the context of sudden wealth acquired through unlawful and fraudulent means, questions of political power, its unlawful acquisition, the rise and downfall of figures operating within the space of the unlawful. These themes are mediated through the lens of gender. On the one hand, issues relevant to contemporary social realities are reflected upon and mediated from a gendered perspective while, on the other hand, the negotiation of womanhood itself mirrors social realities. Situated primarily in Lagos, the narrative nevertheless projects beyond this metropolitan city, reaches out towards the global, as parts of the narrative are situated in Lomé, Paris as well as London. In what follows, we seek to explore how Segun carefully interweaves local spaces (such as Lagos) with moves of *going beyond the city*, of going to

⁹ see Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (London, New York: Routledge, 1996), 8.

¹⁰ Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity*, 126-169.

¹¹ Hannerz, *Transnational Connections*, 106-108.

¹² Hannerz, *Transnational Connections*, 3-7.

¹³ Hannerz, *Transnational Connections*, 22-23.

¹⁴ see Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press [= Public Worlds, Volume 1], 1996), 182.

¹⁵ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 178-182.

¹⁶ Omowunmi Segun, *The Third Dimple* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books [Nigeria] PLC, 1992).



metropolitan Paris and Lomé and what kinds of meanings she weaves into these intersections.

The space of the illegal and the immoral is mapped out through the figure of Mr. Amao, Tolu's father, "a general import and export merchant,"¹⁷ who during the times of civil war and Oil boom in Nigeria, acquired wealth through questionable business activities. In fact, he is a member of the "syndicate." Paris is a place he travels to on his drug business and it is also the site that exposes some of the horrendous aspects of drug trading (e.g. Segun 1992, p.26-32).¹⁸ The moral unease he experiences on his journey signifies his impending downfall, a downfall precipitated by the investigations of Mr. Johnson (Assistant Police Inspector) and his squad. His moral and material bankruptcy is symbolically figured in his passage from the city of Lagos, from his opulent villa to the shabbiness and the decrepit nature of his refuge in Lomé. This transition –ironically perhaps - mirrors his own decadence, hence the description of his flight from prosecution:

Two hours later, Amao sat uncomfortably on a wooden bench in a bar a mile away from the border. Flies swarmed // the place, landing on every exposed object. No one else seemed to notice. He was disgusted. And to imagine that Ladi had said he should relax with a bottle of beer in the midst of hoodlums, and filth.¹⁹

Alongside the spatio-temporality of Mr. Amao's downfall, the story of Tolu and Lara's adolescence unfolds. The two central female figures, Tolu and Lara, embody different conceptualizations of womanhood. While Tolu strives towards upholding her moral integrity in an immoral environment, Lara manipulates this environment to her own advantage. She is a *good time girl*, dating wealthy men in exchange for material profit and enjoyment.²⁰ Tolu is portrayed as a morally balanced young woman, interested in education rather than in party-life. Thus, she "loved quiet places where she could devour her books without any fear of being interrupted by boring gossips."²¹ She engages in discourses on womanhood, voicing for example, her ideas on family planning and an idealized conceptualization of marriage based on love. Dele, her friend, with whom she reflects upon these themes hints at the discrepancy between voicing ideas on emancipation and enacting these in one's own life:

Women here aren't that liberated yet; all they do is shout women's liberation and act contrary to the very objective of the movement. ... // If you women want to be liberated then act liberated. Compete with the men on equal terms.²²

This, in fact, reflects Tolu's own situation. She actively negotiates and shapes her conceptualization of womanhood, but is not yet able to assert and enact her views, a fact, that becomes obvious in her clash with Lara on her affairs with wealthy men:

¹⁷ Segun, 7.

¹⁸ e.g. Segun, 26-32.

¹⁹ Segun, 75-76.

²⁰ Segun, 61.

²¹ Segun, 14.

²² Segun, 51-52.



“If daddy were here you wouldn’t dare. And if you won’t stop, I’ll throw you out of this house. After all I am your next of kin.” Lara let out a scornful laughter. “My dear Tolu,” she said with irony, “... . No legal action can be taken on this house while your darling father remains a fugitive of the law. Even if it were possible, I move with influential people like Justice Olu, who you threw out.” ... Tolu got up abruptly. She had just been dealt the *coup de grace*. She headed for the staircase and said in a tearful voice, “From now on I never want to speak to you again and if you think you have won, the law of retributive justice will // catch up with you someday.”²³

Reaching beyond the local, it is Tolu who enters another space, Paris, first as a tourist, capturing its sights, taking in the atmosphere of the cafés, absorbing French culture,²⁴ very much in the sense of De Certeau’s understanding of ‘walking in the city’ as a spatial practice of appropriation.²⁵ Having thus mapped out her new locality, she is, however, confronted with new realities. Paris turns into a site that stages a number of challenges and bitter experiences which re-enact, as I wish to argue, scenes that are paradigmatic for her previous socio-economic environment in Nigeria. Inserting Tolu into a global space hereby creates the distance that may empower her to resolve the issues and challenges that she is confronted with. In her relationship with Gerald, a “Martiniquais,”²⁶ an alleged Sorbonne law-student who recites French love poems, but eventually turns out to be a drug addict, she proves able to extricate him from his drug-addiction. However, his sudden, violent death in a bomb blast near the Turkish embassy constitutes the beginning of a series of further challenges and disasters. Facing economic hardship, Tolu finds no other alternative but to begin working with a dubious Lebanese trader as sales assistant and au-pair. Her narrow escape from being raped and killed during a party given at a French “chateau”, a party she was lured to under false promises, re-creates with difference the kind of experiences that Lara has gone through.²⁷ The turning point is her re-encounter with Bode, a friend of Dele, a re-encounter that coincides with her narrow escape.

It is in Paris that the narrative strands of Tolu and Bode intersect. His own sojourn abroad, his journey to Paris, constitutes a narrative space that permits a distanced reflection on the socio-political conditions in Nigeria. The temporariness of the passage – the flight between Lagos and Paris – becomes emblematic for the country’s state. Thus the reflections of Bode:

Turbulent winds over the country rocked the plane violently; a crash was imminent – or so it seemed. Would his country arrive at the destination proposed by its politicians or would it crash on its way?²⁸

²³ Segun, 85-86.

²⁴ see Segun, 100-104.

²⁵ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendell (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1988), 93-110.

²⁶ Segun, 106.

²⁷ Lara was a kind of foster-child to Mr Amao, who found her, one morning during the times of civil war on his doorsteps after a night of ignoring the cries for help uttered by the small girl and her mother. Not only had Lara and her mother been raped by marauding soldiers, she also had to witness the killing of her mother.

²⁸ Segun, 134.



Bode's journey is both a flight from the decadence of his country on the eve of elections as well as a compromise, as he took up a post for the winning party.²⁹

The 'in-betweenness' of a passage here symbolizes not only the ambivalent nature of transitions, but also the inherent possibilities of Bode and Tolu's temporary sojourn abroad and - in a much wider context - the transitory socio-political situation in Nigeria.

With the help of Bode, Tolu is finally able to define her own habitats of meaning in Paris in a more satisfying manner which includes furthering her education (hotel management) and entering into professional life. In a more realistic way, Tolu is now able to realize her conceptualization of a relationship based on love and mutual respect through her relationship and eventual marriage with Bode, while not ignoring the fact that it involves a moment of reciprocating for help she received from Bode.³⁰ Also, she gives a more solid shape to her conceptualization of womanhood: This is reflected in her discursive encounter with her friend Vera, who arrives on a visit, financed generously by a wealthy man:

“And how many times did you have to sleep with this // friend of yours to get this kind of money.” “Must you put it so crudely? I saw him about trice,” Vera replied with insouciance. “And what does your sugar daddy do for a living?” “God, this is beginning to sound like the Spanish inquisition. Anyway, to satisfy your curiosity, he's an honourable senator in the House of Assembly.” “Honourable? What if he weren't honourable?” Vera ignored her and stopped in front of the next boutique. Tolu shrugged her shoulders and went up to her.³¹

While she is able to verbalize her own attitudes in a differentiated way, she nevertheless does not compromise her friendship with Vera.

When the need arises for both Bode and Tolu to return to Nigeria, it is Bode who succinctly reflects upon the deeper meaning of their sojourn abroad:

“Listen,” he said cuddling her close to him, “all my life I've tried to run away from problems, always looking for the easy way out. That's one of the reasons I came to Paris. I ran away from home and so did you. From now on, we'll face our problems together.”³²

On their return home, the transformation Tolu has undergone abroad enables her to assume an assertive stance towards Lara, who had meanwhile turned Mr. Amao's house into a brothel, thus Lara's judgement after a heated argument with Tolu: “What bothered her most was the new Tolu. A Tolu she could no longer intimidate.”³³ In fact, Lara is made to leave the house which plunges her into a hopeless predicament. *The Third Dimple* ends on a reconciliatory tone. In her desperate situation, Lara meets Dr. Gomez and in him, finds a helper and companion, while Tolu reconciles with her past, comes to an understanding of Lara's behaviour and discloses the secret of her own identity.

²⁹ Segun, 135.

³⁰ Segun, 186.

³¹ Segun, 199-200.

³² Segun, 211.

³³ Segun, 227.



In her novel, Omowunmi Segun inserts fictive persons into global spaces for specific purposes: Mr. Amao's passage to Lomé symbolizes and stages the moral and material downfall of a man whose life was built on fraud and immorality. At long last, it is also the site for him to voice regrets. Paris, on the other hand, assumes quite different meanings for Tolu: Her sojourn in Paris involves the integration of another culture and language into her own cultural repertoire. Also, and much more important perhaps, Tolu's initial 'dis-placement' seems to constitute a crucial transitory passage that permits her to re-localize the self, to shape her own habitats of meaning and to enact her imaginations of being a woman which ultimately enable her to come to terms with her past. Traversing spaces here is not an end in itself, but constitutes sites that enable people to imagine and enact forms of being in the world and ways of re-localizing the self, i.e. by negotiating their own identity in its situatedness in space and time.

Re-writing 'the other': Encounters as creative mis-readings in "The Ancestor's Visit"

The Melting Pot and Other Stories by Babatunde E. Omobowale (1993) evokes in its very title the interfacing of cultures, countries and people. In fact, its first story, "The Ancestor's Visit" is the intriguing fictive account of an encounter with 'the other'.³⁴

The story takes us to the royal courtyard of rural, colonial Ijaye (West Nigeria). About the king, Oba Adeyemi Adegoroye III, the Onijaye of Ijaye, it is said that: "None of the chiefs could convince him that the white men had come with a new set of culture and government."³⁵

Omobowale presents us with a realistic, often humorous account of local life in times of colonial encounter, not without some critical comments on the imposition of colonial rule and its impact on local cultural and political structures. Into this is infused another kind of reality in the sudden, science-fiction-like appearance of a "tin machine" that "fell from the sky and landed on Sekoni's farm"³⁶ on the day of the new yam festival. And here, the story unfolds as the story of an encounter with the other.

The king is confronted with the grotesque features of the extraterrestrial beings:

As the king entered the courtyard, his eyes nearly popped out of their sockets // because of what he saw. The unknown giants were green in colour. ... The figure bent down and looked at the king. He was dressed in a heavily padded rubber suit. He had a gun holster around his waist which contained a gun. ... The king shrank back in terror at what he saw. The head was covered with green scales.³⁷

A most hilarious moment is the mutual mis-interpretation of each other's identity, which not only appears to mimic the colonialists' encounter with their so defined "subjects", but which also involves a creative mis-reading of the invaders, the outer-

³⁴ Tunde Omobowale, "The Ancestor's Visit," in *The Melting Pot and Other Stories* (Ibadan: University Press PLC, 1993), 1-40.

³⁵ Omobowale, 4.

³⁶ Omobowale, 11.

³⁷ Omobowale, 16-17.



terrestrial beings, by their hosts. This mis-reading constitutes in fact, a creative appropriation of ‘the other’ into the *Ijayes*’ own cultural frames.

“We are not from this planet,” the figure said again. “We are from the planet of Ileh-Mars. ...” “But how did you understand our language?” the king stammered. “We have a superior civilization,” the figure replied. “When we sighted some of your people, we used our xlesopoxist translator machine to pick up the essential rudiments of the language.” “You say you come from Ileh?” the king asked again, with curiosity written all over his face. // “Yes,” the figure replied. “We are from Ileh-Mars, a planet about a trillion miles away from here, under the governance of our wise Emperor Zoogun Baklustan.”³⁸

At this very moment, the king ran away in excitement and spoke to his subjects:

“These people are representatives of our ancestors. Their leader has just told me, I Adegroye, the Lion hearted, that they come from Ileh. That is where our ancestors go to. At least we bury them in Ileh, the earth. Apart from this, Ogun is their king.”³⁹

Misreading the identity of the beings from “Ileh Mars” (literally: land, earth, country of Mars) who live under the supremacy of Emperor “Zoogun Baklustan” as being the ancestors of *Ilè* (the earth / the ground) and therefore the representatives of their own ancestors and as being a people linked to *Ògún*, an *Òrìsà*, that is a Yorùbá deity, a deity of hunters and blacksmiths, a deity imagined as opening new pathways and – in more modern times – a deity linked to roads and driving, these outer-terrestrial beings are being appropriated, are virtually made local and hence incorporated into the people’s own culture.⁴⁰ The king intends to ceremonially include these beings into the local ritual cycle, thus incorporating ‘the other’ into the *Ijayes*’ cultural repertoire.⁴¹

In the gaze of the outer-terrestrial beings at the human beings they encounter, a cultural practice is at work that constitutes a mirror image of the Western construction of the Orient, so succinctly described by Said (1978) as well as it reflects how colonialists constructed their ‘other’ as subjects.⁴²

The Ileh-Martian commander of the space craft is a veritable participant observer of the new yam festival ceremonies and the cultural emblems put on display before him. Ironically, perhaps, Omobowale has the speech of the *Ijayes* themselves resound with anthropological discourse, such as when the *Balogun*⁴³ explains the royal emblems to the Ileh-Martian:

³⁸ Omobowale, 17-18.

³⁹ Omobowale, 18.

⁴⁰ For a more subtle discussion on *Ògún* and the plurality of meanings and identities this *Òrìsà* is invested with, see Sandra T. Barnes and Paula Girshick Ben-Amos, eds., *Africa’s Ogun: Old World and New* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press [= African Systems of Thought], 1989).

⁴¹ Omobowale, 21.

⁴² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978).

⁴³ *Balógun* = title of the Commander of warriors.



“This is the *Èjìgbà-Ìlè* or the chain of office of our rulers,” he said. “It is made of costly beads which the founder of our town, Ogunwale brought from Ife.”⁴⁴

The Ileh-Martian, far from being the representative of the people’s ancestors, casts a colonial-cum-anthropological gaze at the ceremony, formulating - in his mind – the sort of classifications and judgments that are to enter his reports:

Wimpimitaputazisi was enjoying all the display. He smiled broadly and a large grin appeared on his grotesque face. “This primitive display is going to form a very important part of my report to the military council, when we get back home,” he said in Ileh-Martian language to his aide. “This planet is too primitive for our planned invasion.”⁴⁵

The presence of this ‘world-making’ gaze from out of space deconstructs the terms of the colonial encounter between colonial master and the Ijaye people, since people of another colour have already been incorporated into the scientific orbit of the Ileh Martians. Hearing about the presence of whites, the Ileh-Martian representative concludes that “our computerized zeloxintospor machine was right, when it said this primitive planet was inhabited by people of different pigments.”⁴⁶

Their scientific superiority as well as the fact that the Ileh-Martians are conceived of as representatives of the *Ijays*’ ancestors induced a mis-reading: Their presence is read as a sign of cultural validation, as in the words of the king: “Your presence here shows us that we do not have a backward culture.”⁴⁷

A bitter tinge is written into the *Ijays*’ encounter with ‘the other’: The meaningful appropriation and integration into the local culture of the aliens’ presence and the ascription of a meaningful identity to these ‘others’ on local cultural terms is based on a mis-reading of identities, a mis-reading of the advent of yet another group of beings – beyond and above the colonial incursion into the space of the *Ijays*. The Ileh-Martians constitute another group of invaders who, observing, analysing and classifying, seek to report to their “military government” about the alleged “primitive” nature of the people they encounter. Thus, the story ends on an ambiguous and ironic tone that already points to the potentially fateful nature of the outer terrestrial beings’ visit:

As the king and his chiefs walked past the wall into the town, the mammoth crowd behind them started singing in consonance with the rhythm coming from the royal drums. //

L’áyé Àgbo *nnìrègún la rí Odùduwà*

L’áyé Arè *sà la rí Òrúnmìlà*

L’áyé Adégoróyè, àwon Ànjò *nnú la gbà lálèjò.*⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Omobowale, 35.

⁴⁵ Omobowale, 34.

⁴⁶ Omobowale, 28.

⁴⁷ Omobowale, 29.

⁴⁸ This could be translated as:

During the times of *Àgbo* *nnìrègún*, *Odùduwà* was seen.

During the times of *Arè* *sà*, *Òrúnmìlà* was seen.

During the times of *Adégoróyè*, we welcomed (evil) spirits as our guests.



Above them in the sky, the nocturnal bats were flying, signifying the beginning of another night and the end of an eventful day. In later years, the helmet [they received from the representative of the Ileh-Martians] simply had supernatural qualities thrust upon it by the people who naively believed that it could grant them peace, prosperity and happiness.⁴⁹

“The Ancestors’ visit” could be conceived of as a science-fiction-like re-writing of an encounter with the ‘other’. Through his narrative of hilarious mis-readings and mis-appropriations of the ‘other’, Omobowale re-writes or mimics, in an almost carnivalesque way, encounters with colonialists, missionaries and social anthropologists, satirizing, in fact, both sides. “The Ancestors’ Visit” as the story of an encounter with the ‘other’ exemplifies, in an often humorous way, how culture, indeed, is a central means of shaping ‘the other’.⁵⁰

Traversing spaces and living life as a song: Nwosu’s *Alpha Song*

Maik Nwosu’s novel *Alpha Song* is less about an encounter between the local and the global, but more about metaphoric forms of traversing space and time symbolizing the figures’ quest for a meaningful life.⁵¹ The novel is a testimonial of Taneba, the central figure, who, “at forty-five”, is “a dead man walking.”⁵² *Alpha Song* recounts the life not only of Taneba, but of a plurality of figures Taneba encounters. *Alpha Song* is also the narrative of Lagosian nightlife. Nwosu creates a kaleidoscope of Nigerian city life mirrored primarily through the lenses of metropolitan night-life and the figures inhabiting it. In the itineraries of all those who move in and out of night-life, a myriad of forms of crossing space and time can be figured out. Nwosu narrates *Alpha Song* by setting up an intriguing and dense metaphoric texture that involves metaphors of itineraries across a range of localities which are interwoven with metaphors of “night” and “song”. It is through an exploration of this metaphoric landscape that we may perceive how notions of locality and of its transcending enter the lives of the novel’s figures and are invested with meaning through an interweaving with the overall metaphoric texture of the novel.

The setting of the novel is the night-life of Lagos and it is the night around which Nwosu creates an extended metaphoric tissue. Taneba, the novel’s central figure, who works in the sorting department of the central post office by day, a job he took up through the help of his uncle after graduation, is – by night – drawn into its mysteries:

The night had long fascinated me. ... I held on to my belief that I had a special pact with the night and its soda ash fountain of mysteries. The night is like a spirit and usually it possesses different people in different ways, but mostly // by freeing them from their daytime inhibitions.⁵³

[Àgbò ñmìrègún = praise name of Ifá, the deity of divination; Odùduwà = the creator deity; Àrè sà = founder of the Ìrè sà lineage; Òrúnmìlà = another name for Ifá].

⁴⁹ Omobowale, 40.

⁵⁰ see Hannerz, *Transnational Connections*, 30-31.

⁵¹ Maik Nwosu, *Alpha Song* (Lagos: House of Malaika & Beacon Books, 2001).

⁵² Nwosu, 1.

⁵³ Nwosu, 12-13.



The novel is, in fact, about how the “night” and its mysteries “possesses” people, but also, about how people possess the night, engage with its opportunities and its dangers, attach meaning to it and thus shape their habitat of meaning revolving around the night. Tamuno, once fellow student of Taneba, runs a night-club in Lagos and boasts of being in control of the night: “I manage the night.”⁵⁴ Particularly in the female figures, we perceive human agency in shaping the outlook of the night: The women working in the night-clubs, such as Tamuno’s prostitutes, assume agency in shaping their own habitats of meaning. Particularly in terms of these women, the novel’s reiterated statement that “several things on the streets are not what they seem”⁵⁵ speaks of what is hidden behind their appearance as mere harlots and *good time girls*. Their sojourn in the life of the night is but a temporary one. These women and all the others inhabiting the night have reasons grounded in their life history that injected them into the orbit of the night and some of these are revealed as the plot unfolds, such as the story of “Lovelyn”, perceived by Taneba in her “very persuasive female geography.”⁵⁶ Only much later, Taneba comes to know her as Esther, who studies law and who, laden with the responsibility of having to take care of her siblings, saw herself with no option but to work on the streets. Yet, she is assertive in defining her space chosen out of necessity:

“It’s my life, and I will live it the way I can, okay? How do you even want me to survive when all these government-miss-road people are making life hellish for everyone else? How do you want me to train myself in school?”⁵⁷

Night and *night-life* in Lagos – represents the inverse image life during daytime, of life freed from “daytime inhibitions”⁵⁸ – what it embodies is set up as the mirror image of contemporary society. Thus, Mairo, a young woman addicted to night-life (who could only at a later point extricate herself from this life to begin her studies of sociology) voices this point:

“Show me the street-life of any city or country and I can tell you its history or politics.”⁵⁹

Through the figure of Taneba a kaleidoscopic perspective on city night-life is opened up: Taneba floats in and out of night-life, interacts with its figures, passes through a number of relationships and affairs with prostitutes and good time girls, yet, in a way, remains aloof, a distanced participant observer. At university, Taneba had been named “alien”, because, in his words - “they said I had a manner of self-detachment that worked against close relationships.”⁶⁰ He inhabits the position of a kind of “other”, of a distanced observer, through whom a perspective on night-life is opened up.

Intertwined with metaphors of the night, the images and scenes of night-live, are metaphors of “song”, alluded to in the very title of the novel, *Alpha Song*, thus setting up the metaphoric grid of the novel. Nwosu creates an intricate metaphoric tissue in the presence of *songs*, the inscription of melody, rhythm and song-texts into his novel. He thereby attaches a kind of ‘song-ness’ to the book: Songs or fragmentary quotations

⁵⁴ Nwosu, 11.

⁵⁵ Nwosu, 44.

⁵⁶ Nwosu, 24.

⁵⁷ Nwosu, 55.

⁵⁸ Nwosu, 13.

⁵⁹ Nwosu, 147.

⁶⁰ Nwosu, 6.



thereof constitute recurrent leitmotifs of the novel and of the fictional quests of its figures.

The novel is figured as a quest for the “alpha song”, a metaphoric quest artfully set up through the figure of Bantu, the “note-taking companion”⁶¹ of St. Notorious, an illustrious night-life figure:

While Tamuno had the ‘vaganza of carriage, conducting himself like the owner of all the spheres around him, Bantu had the ‘vaganza of stories or imagination. An opportunity prospector like me, he was far better at it because he lived by his wits. He was a linguist by profession and had been educated abroad – in New York. ... But he appeared to have travelled to every corner of the world and, according to him, was waiting for new corners to be mapped out.⁶²

Not only does Bantu brighten up the life of people in the night-club by narrating uncountable stories and legends about spaces, towns and countries, he also goes on frequent voyages – guided by his revelation, the revelation of the “alpha song”. He discloses the revelation he had of a visionary journey to fabulous places, a journey that involved a song:

I got on to the camel and it took us inside the desert, deep inside. We stopped by a valley, and we rode right down. Then it happened to me, like being struck by a thunderbolt. I must have gone back to the origin of man. I was in this vast palace in the kingdom of a people who were neither white nor black: the Ams.⁶³

His vision of the song contains a moment of re-imagining history:

“It’s a relay vision, man, deep into history –beyond history even. Then I heard the song:

By the rivers of Babylon
There we sat down
And there we wept
When we remembered Zion
But the wicked carried us away
Captivity required from us a song
But how can we sing the alpha song
In a strange land?

“That’s the song I heard from the water at Igbo Landing: the alpha song. It’s the first stage: self-awareness, self-reclamation. After that, there is the meridian song: the conquest of the spheres, the power of miracles. And then the omega song: the immortality of the self.”⁶⁴

The Alpha songs metaphorically patterns life as a song, as a quest for a song. Its symbolism also recontextualizes individual quests in a shared history, a history that involves “water crossings”, for example, in the history of slave trade and colonialism.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Nwosu, 33.

⁶² Nwosu, 32.

⁶³ Nwosu, 76.

⁶⁴ Nwosu, 77.

⁶⁵ Nwosu, 137.



The process of re-claiming the self (from history) as a society or as an individual is embodied in figures such as Bantu as a quest for self-awareness and a meaningful life. Living 'life as a song' can therefore be understood as living life as a quest for investing one's own existence in space and time with meaning.

Tamuno embodies such a life lived as a song, e.g. by his frequently quoting the song-line "[t]omorrow, robins will sing"⁶⁶ through which he figures life as always encapsulating the enthralling potential for change and flux. He invokes this song when explaining his momentary economic downfall to Taneba:

"Tomorrow, robins will sing, my brother. It really is no big deal." It occurred to me [i.e. Taneba] then that he had chosen the song as much as it had chosen him. He was living his life as a song, according to a song.⁶⁷

The metaphoric space of songs in Nwosu's novel comes to embody the imagination of human existence in terms of songs. This 'song-ness' of life is imagined as a quest for attaching meaning and sense to one's life, as a quest for self-assertion as an individual in society.

How does this intricate interweaving of metaphors of "night" and metaphors of "song" intersect with notions of locality, with notions of local and global spaces in the novel's text?

The plot is primarily situated in Lagos and its night-life. It is the city itself that constitutes a site of dislocation, a site that absorbs and harbours displaced people. Each novelistic figure has a life-story to tell, a story of having been displaced, such as Taneba himself, who, rejected by his paternal family after the death of his mother, came to Lagos to live with his maternal uncle.⁶⁸ Lagos thus becomes a site where displaced figures re-localize the self.

The figures in *Alpha Song* 'map out' the world and their life in it. Bantu's voyages around the world, his trips to remote, almost mythic parts of Nigeria, journeys he partly undertakes with Taneba, with whom he engages in activities such as seeking NGO affiliation and opening a night-club, constitute a practice of *mapping*, a practice that involves both real as well as imaginative *mappings* symbolized through metaphors of time and space. It is through traversing space, in a real as well as in an imaginative sense, that people seek to give shape to their habitats of meaning which are no longer spatially confined.

However, *mapping* also designates the creativity and agency developed by people in shaping their habitats of meaning in terms of space. Taneba observes a spatial alteration with his friend's opening of a new night-club "Seventh Heaven":

⁶⁶ Nwosu, 74.

⁶⁷ Nwosu, 74.

⁶⁸ Nwosu, 4-7.



The effect was that on the opening night the map of Lagos appeared to have been redesigned such that all its arteries spewed people into the location of Seventh Heaven –deep in the Government Reserved Area.⁶⁹

By their own practices of localization, these novelistic figures *map out*, shape and define their locality: They may make incursions into spaces that would, otherwise, not legitimately belong to them, but – ironically - to their customers. With De Certeau, we could understand this as a popular practice, as the “practice of everyday life” that involves moves of “making do”, of “poaching” and “tactics”.⁷⁰

Mapping out the world through all these itineraries and quests turns into *mapping out the self*, thus Taneba’s insight towards the end of his account, i.e. after his return from US where he had gone through some bitter personal experiences: “I visited Nigeria, hoping I could temper my grief by re-mapping my geography. But our lives follow us everywhere we go, because we carry it in us.”⁷¹

People are inserted into global spaces, notions of the global are infused into the city, the global becomes part of local life. Taneba, in the years that begin the narration of his life, absorbs the world in his work at the sorting department of the general post office, reading postcards from all over the world:

But there were some startling discoveries in those postcards: words and phrases and sentences and whole cards that magnificently enlarged my world, flooding it with sunshine and visions of the far country in which I was no longer alone but some sort of incandescent traveller through interconnecting experiences.⁷²

Not only does Taneba absorb the world, he imaginatively travels the “interconnectedness of the world,”⁷³ becomes part of this interconnectedness, i.e. of the global ecumene, by connecting experiences. More than this, he ‘consumes the world’ in the figure of Toshiba, the external relations manager of Assured Insurance, a woman he meets in his function as manager of Stephens Speed (a courier business). Not only is Toshiba a ‘child’ of globalization, having grown up in different continents and countries, but her very person is of inscrutable ethnic definition and origin:

I also learnt much about her. She was a quarter-cast, if I could call her that. Her father was Ijaw and had named her Tongha. Her paternal grandmother was Chinese and named her after the city where she was born: Shanghai. Her mother’s mother was from the Philippines and had named her Imelda. Her mother was English; she had named her Barbara. It was from these four names –the first one or two words- that she had pieced together the name she answered: To-sh-i-ba. (...). It was not a wonder then that she looked and sounded like a girl of all nations.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Nwosu, 89.

⁷⁰ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendell (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1988), e.g. 29-41.

⁷¹ Nwosu, 227.

⁷² Nwosu, 10.

⁷³ Hannerz, *Transnational Connections*, 8.

⁷⁴ Nwosu, 94.



For Taneba, she embodies the world: “‘You know, you are the world,’ I told her, ‘the new world of racial hyphenations.’”⁷⁵

As an embodiment of the global she also embodies ambivalence – suggested not only in her allusive name, that of a multinational multimedia company, but also in her behaviour that speaks of a carefree materialism behind her voiced moral attitude of rejecting the kind of decadent night-life that her boy-friend, Taneba, appears to be involved in.⁷⁶

Some figures that inhabit the Lagosian night-life are inserted into global spaces. Thus, movements to other countries and continents form part of several figures’ itineraries on their quests for a meaningful life: For Angel, the *good-time-girl* or mistress of a French expatriate in Lagos, the global is a space of her attempts to migrate. Deported back from Paris where her prospect of working for a modelling agency had turned out to be the work of selling her body, her next destination was to be Spain. Stuck in the Moroccan underworld, however, she was deported again, but never gave up her quest: “She wanted to move into ‘the big league’ and not have to depend on any man’s generosity.”⁷⁷ Despite the “relations of disjuncture”⁷⁸ involved in globalization and manifest in her story, the global remains a site of her aspirations.

The dense metaphoric texture of Nwosu’s novel, that involves images of the night, of song, of space and time, projects life as movement, imagines human beings as traversing space and time and being traversed by space and time, both in realistic as well as in imaginative terms, as in the words of Bantu:

“Life itself is a myth: the myth of existence, of living. We don’t live, man; we only go through the motions. Every man’s life is a myth he tries // to re-tell, to personalise; he doesn’t own it, he doesn’t even understand it. Our lives could as well be fables or night dreams to us. We’re all myth-makers.”⁷⁹

Nwosu’s *Alpha Song* depicts that it is life lived as a mythic song-quest - of both individuals as well as of society - across spaces and times that embodies meaningfulness and a potential for self-recognition and realization.

Some Concluding Reflections

In the light of novels such as *Alpha Song*, *The Third Dimple* or the collection of short stories “The Ancestor’s Visit”, we might assert the need to formulate a literary inquiry into the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ as a study of the kinds of meanings attached to an interfacing of the global and the local in literary texts as well as a study of the underlying notions of what constitutes the global and the local.

In this way, our quest for the local and the global in recent Nigerian popular fiction opened up a perspective on the plurality of intriguing ways in which fictional spaces

⁷⁵ Nwosu, 94.

⁷⁶ e.g. Nwosu, 107.

⁷⁷ Nwosu, 187.

⁷⁸ see Arjun Appadurai, “Grassroot Globalization and the Research Imagination,” in *Globalization*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Durham, London: University Press, 2001), 5.

⁷⁹ Nwosu, 77-78.



are constituted as localities, as both spatially situated as well as space-transcending habitats of meaning, discursively mediated, shaped and reshaped by the very people inhabiting the fictional texts.

Each novel or story, through its unique “poetics and politics of place”, creates or opens up spaces for the mediation of issues pertinent to the shaping of people’s habitats of meaning.⁸⁰

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⁸⁰ For the concept of the “poetics and politics of place” that I borrow from George Lipsitz, see his: Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place (London, New York: Verso, 1994), 3.