
Toivanen Anna-Leena
Johns Hopkins University Press

info:eu-repo/semantics/article
info:eu-repo/semantics/acceptedVersion
© Johns Hopkins University Press
All rights reserved
http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/ari.2016.0035

https://erepo.uef.fi/handle/123456789/4388
Downloaded from University of Eastern Finland's eRepository

Abstract: Mobility marks the fields of contemporary African and African diasporic literatures in a profound way. In the study of postcolonial literatures, mobility is most often understood in terms of physical human travel that is embodied in the paradigmatized figure of the migratory. Yet, mobility is a concept whose meaning cannot be reduced to migrancy or physical travel in general. In the era of globalization, the world beyond the local becomes accessible through imaginative, virtual, and communicative forms of travel. The present article adopts a wider understanding of mobility by focusing on its communicative dimensions in its analysis of the ways in which Liss Kihindou, NoViolet Bulawayo, Véronique Tadjo, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie address it on the thematic and aesthetic axes in their novels. The recurring trope of communication gap attests that while the geographical distance caused by human travel can often be surmounted with the help of communication technologies, the relations between those who leave and those who stay behind are marked by a schism that translates into an emotional, epistemic and cultural distance that may be much harder to reconcile.

Keywords: African literatures; communication technology; cosmopolitanism; globalization; mobility

Mobility is an element that marks the fields of contemporary African and African diasporic literatures in a profound way. While the most obvious subject of inquiry in the mobility theme is physical travel of people and, more specifically, migration from the African continent towards Western metropolises, it should be emphasized that mobility is a concept whose meaning cannot be reduced to these phenomena. Indeed, the new mobilities paradigm currently manifesting itself in social and human sciences highlights the multiplicity of forms that mobility takes (Sheller & Urry). Besides physical travel of people, these include physical movement of objects, imaginative travel (images and memories seen in texts, on TV, computer and so on), virtual travel (Internet), and finally, communicative travel as person-to-person messages through different media (Larsen & al.
4). In the case of information and communication technologies (ICT), mobility is less a matter of physical travel than one of interaction, that is, “the way in which [people] interact with each other in their social lives” (Kakihara & Sorensen in Adey 210). Such forms of mobility may even replace physical travel as they enable a virtual presence and proximity regardless of geographical or social distance (Urry 256).

The focus of the present article is on the communicative travel aspect of mobility and the ways in which it has been addressed in recent Anglo- and Francophone African and African diasporic writing thematically, but also in formal terms. The analyzed text corpus includes Liss Kihindou’s Chêne de bambou (2013), NoViolet Bulawayo’s We Need New Names (2013), Véronique Tadjo’s Loin de mon père (2010), and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Americanah (2014). The Internet-mediated communication technologies that feature in the texts and are focused on in this article consist of email (Kihindou’s, Tadjo’s and Adichie’s novels) and Skype (Bulawayo’s novel). While the other novels focus on email, I regard Bulawayo’s novel as seeing Skype as a logical continuum of email communications. In referring to Skype and instant messaging, We Need New Names is best synchronized with current developments in which email is being challenged by more recent technological innovations. Bulawayo’s and Adichie’s novels also frequently evoke the virtual world by referring to online services, smartphones, and the social media. This, in turn, signals their eagerness to address Internet phenomena in its different forms.

The scholarly intervention that this article wishes to make is, firstly, to convey a more complex understanding of mobility in the African literary context. Secondly, it promotes the idea that literariness is a relevant concern for postcolonial literary studies – a field in which aesthetics, as Elleke Boehmer puts it, have often been seen as “an unaffordable indulgence”(172, “Postcolonial”). And, thirdly, the article contributes to critical discussions concerning the paradigmatization of the migrant figure in postcolonial theory by suggesting that, despite their efforts to generate more subtle understandings of the intertwinment of the local and the global, diasporic African texts continue to
prioritize the migrant perspective. And finally, by exploring the communication technology theme as discussed in selected works by contemporary African and African diasporic writers, this article contributes to a new research agenda focusing on "Africa’s contribution to the fashioning of thought and practice around issues of technology, its production, consumption and mobilities" (Zegeye & Muponde 127). Addressing the new communication technology theme in contemporary African literatures can also be read as a logical continuum to the wide analytical body of work discussing the fictional representations of modern communication technologies: letter-writing and epistolary novels in particular.

Drawing attention to the diversity of forms that mobilities take in the global era is particularly important in the field of postcolonial literary studies, where the figure of the migrant has become a paradigmatic representative of the postcolonial condition – a tendency that has also drawn critical attention away from representations of national and local scenes of belonging, as several postcolonial scholars have pointed out (see Boehmer, Colonial 229-233; Coly xi; Gikandi, “Globalization” 618; Krishnaswamy; Smith). The figure of the migrant offers, however, a rather reductive metaphor for the contemporary postcolonial condition which is profoundly marked by diverse processes of globalization. The travel of objects, images and ideas tie geographically distanced places closer together in a way that does not necessitate physical human travel, and that may, ideally, lead to a cosmopolitan vision – that is, a sense of being in the world informed by “an awareness of the transnational and/or the universal situated within a condition of local embeddedness” (Primorac 52) or “the presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa” (Mbembe 28). As underlined by scholars of the new mobilities paradigm, in the global era, all places are somehow connected to others so that there are no “islands” (Sheller & Urry 209). Indeed, such global “networks of mobility” as the new communication technologies can, at least ideally, be seen as “backbone[s] of the cosmopolitan society” (Beck 33).
However, as the novels analyzed here witness, ideals only occasionally convert smoothly into reality. While the novels convey the idea of the entwinement of the local and the global enabled by communication technologies, it has to be underlined that, eventually, they end up privileging the rather conventional viewpoint of the migrant. This prioritization is most obvious in Kihindou’s, Bulawayo’s, and Adichie’s texts. Tadjo’s novel seems to be the more successful in its effort to take into account the local dimension of the mobility theme, but, significantly enough, it owes its success to the fact that the protagonist-correspondent is a migrant figure who returns to her home country. In this sense, the texts, despite the attention they grant to less obvious forms of mobility enabled by new technologies, construct a somewhat unidirectional understanding of cosmopolitanism as a stance enabled by physical mobility – in terms of movement away from the African continent in particular. I argue that the novels articulate a rupture in the entanglement of the local and the global, the here and the there – a rupture that cannot be undone with the aid of new technologies that are supposed to bring different worlds closer together. In terms of this tension, it is revealing how the trope of a gap in communication keeps recurring in the text corpus. Naturally, communication is rarely unproblematic, nor are misunderstandings unavoidable. However, the gaps in communication that I am interested in here result not from the innate instability of language to produce meaning but rather from the interlocutors’ purposeful attempts to disturb communication. The texts variably draw inspiration for their form from the new technologies. Hence, I analyze the specific features of each text and suggest that the attention of the narratives to formal features of ITC, or the absence of thereof, are equally significant in interpretation.

The text corpus conveys the idea of an epistemic, cultural and/or emotional distance that creates a rupture in communication between the interlocutors and email correspondents living respectively on the African continent and in diaspora as in Kihindou’s, Bulawayo’s and, to a certain extent, Adichie’s novels, or otherwise contacting each other from distanced locations as in Tadjo’s and also partly Adichie’s texts. Despite the fact that the fictional characters have more or less viable
communication technologies at their disposal, the risk communication gap is constantly present. John Urry observes that the specificity of the virtual travel enabled by new communication technologies is that it “produces a kind of strange and uncanny life on the screen, a life that is near and far, present and absent, live and dead” (267). There is, indeed, a certain element of uncanniness that marks the virtual interactions of the characters in the novels under scrutiny. The correspondents seem to be intentionally misreading messages to generate discord; they avoid answering emails or answer only vaguely in order to hide uneasy truths; or their words betray the fact that they have lost the common element on which their affiliation was initially based. The gap of communication that surfaces in the text corpus is symptomatic of how globalization is not merely about the world becoming smaller and more intensely interconnected, but also about worlds moving farther apart. The texts’ treatment of the communication rupture trope attests that while the geographical distance caused by human travel can be surmounted with the help of communication technologies, the relations between those who leave and those who stay behind are marked by a schism that translates into an emotional, epistemic and cultural distance that may be much harder to reconcile.

**Formal matters**

Besides featuring in the text corpus thematically, new communication technologies may also have aesthetic functions that structure the form. By employing the theme of communication technology in their content and by sometimes using it as an inspiration for the form, some novels – Kihindou’s and Tadjo’s in particular – produce an aesthetics of globalization that embodies not only the notion of mobility without physical travel but also the idea that mobility is not always smooth and effortless despite the enabling character of the technology itself. Compared to Kihindou and Tadjo, Bulawayo is not as explicitly interested in adopting the formal dimensions of communication technologies in her novel – partly because Skype does not allow for similar typographical experiments such as representations of email messages – and neither is Adichie, who includes the
email messages as part of the body of text. Nevertheless, there are elements in the literary form of Bulawayo’s and Adichie’s novels that can be read in light of the communication gap trope.

If Fatou Diome’s novel *Le ventre de l’Atlantique* and its uses of the telephone dialogues between the protagonist in France and her brother back in Senegal can be read as an update of Mariama Bâ’s feminist African epistolary classic *Une si longue lettre*, as Mouhamédou Amine Niang suggests (239), then Liss Kihindou takes this updating to the next level in her debut novel *Chêne de bambou*. Kihindou’s novel can be referred to as an e-epistolary, a literary genre typically “dominated by and/or focused on email correspondence” (Rotunno 70). Its representatives include such novels as Richard Powers’s *Galatea 2.2* (1995), Sylvia Brownrigg’s *The Metaphysical Touch* (1998), Jeannette Winterson’s *The Powerbook* (2000), and Chris Dyer’s *Wanderlust* (2003) (Rotunno 70). For a novel to be an e-epistolary, then, it is not enough to include the email and the Internet thematically as parts of the fictional worlds: emails should also structure and generate the narration (Keskinen 383). In addition to email correspondence, Kihindou’s novel includes short passages that are not narrated in the e-epistolary form, especially at the beginning of the novel, which sets the context for the email correspondence between the two friends, Miya and Inès, but also in the chapters that reproduce Miya’s literary texts, and in passages narrated in the form of a monologue, which appear regularly when the connection is disrupted as the result of a discord. Nevertheless, among the texts under scrutiny, Kihindou’s is the only one that can be considered an e-epistolary: the other novels do not structure their narration around email messages.

It is, however, noteworthy that there is something very non-email-like in Kihindou’s representations of email correspondence. The messages tend to grow too long and too elaborated; in short, too essay-like and writerly, meaning that the narrator seems to lose sight of the instantaneous nature that might be expected from email messaging between close friends – but then again, the idea of email correspondence as “spontaneous” may itself be misleading. For instance, the effortless editability of email messages may itself actually undermine the alleged spontaneity of the medium –
as attested by Adichie’s novel, where the lovers spend a lot of time formulating their messages in order to produce a desired reaction in the recipient. In any event, in Kihindou’s novel there are no misspellings, no colloquialisms or acronyms typical of Internet-mediated communication, neither does the dialogue follow typographically the formatting of email messages, which do not include Date, From, To, and Subject lines. In consequence, while it can be argued that even though the novel is among the rare representatives of the e-epistolary genre in the context of African literatures, it nevertheless fails to explore fully the aesthetic potentials of the e-epistolary form. With its rambling pace, the novel draws its inspiration less from such concise Internet-mediated communication as instant messaging than from traditional letter writing. Moreover, given that the messages tend towards monologues because of their length the dialogic aspect of the narrative is at times lost.

Tadjo’s novel cannot be categorized as an e-epistolary because the email correspondence does not structure the novel, nor does it feature in the novel in any pronounced way. Yet, it is interesting that the medium-specific features of email correspondence receive more attention here than in Chêne de bambou. In Loin de mon père, the protagonist Nina, a cosmopolitan daughter of an Ivorian father and a French mother, returns from her well-organized Parisian life to the crisis-ridden Abidjan to organize her father’s funeral. After her return, Nina becomes aware of her father’s hidden financial problems and extramarital progeny. The father’s secrets become exposed as Nina goes through his affairs, including his notebooks and email box. The email exchange mostly takes place between Nina and Gabrielle, her rebellious older sister, who lives in diaspora and remains distant throughout the novel. The novel employs a variety of written documents that punctuate the narrative and give it a somewhat fragmentary overall impression – a central aspect of the virtual world and Internet-mediated communications as such. The various documents, including Nina’s father’s notebooks, old letters, and official documents, serve the purpose of reflecting the past, whereas the email messages tie the narrative to the present. The typography in the representation of
the documents often differs from the main text. In this way, the novel draws inspiration from different writing conventions, including netiquette. The email passages include the “subject” field in them, in addition to which the narrative refers to typical technical vocabulary as it mentions, e.g., that Nina checks the “Considéré comme non lu” (91), “unread” (63) case. Nina answers the emails that she receives spontaneously “sans plus tarder” (153), “without further delay” (105), which bespeaks the rapidity typical of Internet-mediated communications. The fact that Gabrielle receives Nina’s messages while travelling and that neither the reader nor Nina never gets to know her exact whereabouts is a narrative strategy that conveys the idea of being mobile and yet reachable at the same time – an effect that a traditional epistolary cannot achieve, material letters being delivered to fixed physical destinations. The communication gap finds its literary articulation in the unanswered emails that Nina sends to her sister, which are displayed in the narrative in their entirety. It can be argued that Tadjo’s novel pays attention to the specificity of the medium more than does Kihindou’s e-epistolary.

In Adichie’s Americanah, the uses of communication technologies surface regularly throughout the novel set in diverse contexts of mobility. The lovers Ifemelu and Obinze become separated as Ifemelu leaves Nigeria to pursue her studies in the USA. Obinze is supposed to follow her, but he fails to get a visa, and ends up in the UK as a paperless immigrant instead. Eventually, they both return to Nigeria, but before this, they lose touch despite having communication technologies at their disposal for most of the time. The passages involving email correspondence or text messages are so marginal and scattered that the novel cannot be said to be an e-epistolary. Moreover, the short email messages do not stand out typographically from the rest of the narrative: most often, they are simply written in italics. It can therefore be argued that Adichie is not interested in the formal features that the email medium entails. However, besides the private correspondence between Ifemelu and Obinze, Internet communication is also addressed in the form
of Ifemelu’s blog posts, which, unlike the email messages, stand out in their typography, which gives them more narrative weight.

Of the four novels, Bulawayo’s is the least interested in the explicit formal matters that the new technologies might entail. This results partly from the fact that the mode of communication used to contact the loved ones at home is not email but the telephone, and, later, Skype. On the other hand, traditional letters written by the protagonist are not displayed in the text, either. The new communication technologies are most often used between the protagonist and her teenaged friends in the USA. These instant messages are in fact the only form of communication that stands out in the text not only in terms of typography but also of the use of language typical of the virtual environment:

wt u doin?

nothing. trynna study stupid bio, I text.

lol, y is it stupid? i kinda lykit, she texts.

thts coz u wanna be a doc. nt feelin it, I text.

(275)

This sudden interest in the formal specificities of instant messaging in the diasporic space highlights the erasure of the “African home” from the map of the diasporic novel. Moreover, the novel’s structure, cut into two along the geographical shift of focus (Southern Africa vs. the USA), formally replicates the distance and the gap of communication trope articulated in the text. The pinnacle of this growing distance – and, ultimately, disconnection – finds its articulation at the end of the novel, where Darling ends up in open conflict with a friend from “home”. That the narrative closure is so strongly motivated by this conflict suggests that the protagonist’s distance from her former home country is a troubling issue – it is, in fact, why her interactions with her old friends are pushed to the margins of the narrative.
Technological advances – from letters to email and Skype

ICT is hardly a literary theme in itself. In the texts under scrutiny, new communication technologies are most often not foregrounded in any event (except in Kihindou’s novel); they tend to go unnoticed as “natural” parts of the fictional characters’ world of experience. This invisibility is indicative of how new communication technologies such as the mobile phone, email, social media and other technical devices and applications are increasingly becoming an integral part of globalized African realities, as a consequence of which they also find their way into the literary representations of those realities.

While these new technologies are a “natural” part of the fictional worlds of the text corpus, the texts also map out the different phases of technical development, ranging from traditional letter writing to Internet-mediated communications. *We Need New Names*, for instance, portrays the developments in communication technologies from handwritten letters to mobile phones and Skype. In a scene preceding her departure to the USA, Darling promises her friends to stay in touch – which she does by sending them letters, although very soon she stops writing altogether. The novel effectively conveys the idea of traditional letter writing as “a lost art whose obituary has long been written” (see Harris 159).

After the atrophy of traditional, hand-written correspondence, the protagonist contacts her friends by phone and Skype. *Americanah*, with its wide time-span, also covers the rapid developments in communication technology during the 21st century: “At first, they [Ifemelu and her friend] wrote infrequent emails, but as cybercafés opened, cell phones spread and Facebook flourished, they communicated more often” (14). As the quote suggests, new technologies render communication more effortless, tying distanced geographical locations closer together. While similar technical developments inform Ifemelu’s communications with Obinze – with Ifemelu initially receiving his “long letters in blue airmail envelopes” (119) and later, emails from a cybercafé – the availability of technical devices itself does not render their communications trouble-free.
The need to locate the new technologies in the continuum of modern technologies such as letter writing and the telephone attests to the fact that the new technologies, despite their apparent “naturalness”, remain a relatively recent phenomenon in contemporary African literatures and hence that their uses and meanings are still being negotiated. In effect, it even seems that the rapid technological advances may be causing unease, which could be interpreted as a form of technological nostalgia. Instances of technological nostalgia, which seems to contradict the technology-inspired postures articulated by the texts, can be observed in particular in *Chêne de bambou* and *Americanah*. Towards the end of *Chêne de bambou*, the focus is on Miya’s struggle to become a writer. Here, the email is no longer solely a means of communication, but also that of distributing literary texts: Miya attaches her writings to her emails and sends them to Inès. The narrative puts emphasis on the practical character of the Internet in making information travel: Miya initially has the idea of sending her manuscript to Inès through a friend travelling back to the home country, but ends up sending the file electronically. Interestingly enough, instead of even considering the possibility of publishing her texts online, Miya insists on having her manuscript printed. For a novel that shows so much interest in technical innovation, *Chêne de bambou* conveys a surprisingly traditional, print-media-tied idea of the possibilities of contemporary publishing.

Another instance of technological nostalgia manifests itself in *Americanah* when Ifemelu tries to cut off contact with Obinze. Ifemelu has no problems with deleting Obinze’s messages unread; it only takes one click. She also changes her email address in order to avoid his messages. To receive a traditional handwritten letter, however, complicates things. The letter is a metonym of the sender:

> She sank to her bed, holding the envelope in her hand; she smelled it, stared at his familiar handwriting. She imagined him at his desk in his boys’ quarters, near his small humming refrigerator, writing in that calm manner of his. (160)
Ifemelu is tempted to read the letter, to answer it even. In the end, she lacks the courage to do so and actively forgets the letter, piling books and papers on top of it on her desk. The novel’s use of the handwritten letter trope signals a nostalgic attitude that is telling of the crisis of new communication technologies: what is seen as their easiness may actually be read as a superficiality that informs capitalist postmodernity and the interactions taking place in that context. The emotional weight with which a handwritten letter is invested – embodied by the books piled on it – conveys the idea that email messages are less successful in communicating the “truth” about the sender, remaining thus essentially shallow, and that the Internet environment itself inspires such falseness (see Rotunno). Moreover, the handwritten letter evokes an intimate sense of locality, forcing the recipient to travel back home in her mind more efficiently than an email that lacks its materiality in terms of touch and smell: a handwritten letter is concretely about “hands touching” (Harris 160). The idea of the falsity of the virtual space also surfaces in a passage that reveals Obinze’s opinion about Facebook: social media “appall[s] him by the air of unreality, the careful manipulation of images to create a parallel life” (369). A similar idea of “falsity” is conveyed when Obinze reads Ifemelu’s blogposts and does not understand how she can be their author, “so American and so alien” (374) as they appear to him. Here, the notion of falsity relates not only to the virtual space, but also to the American diaspora: life in the diaspora transforms people radically.

It is also evident that literary texts cannot keep pace with the swift developments in technology, and hence, in some senses, the novels analyzed here portray futures past. Bulawayo’s novel is interesting in that it proceeds directly from letter writing via the telephone to Skype (and instant messaging in the diasporic context), and entirely skips email as a means of communication. This strategy follows the contemporary trend in which email is increasingly becoming an outmoded communication technology – in particular amongst younger Internet users such as Bulawayo’s protagonist and her friends. Bulawayo’s novel captures the trend in current developments whereby
futures turn into pasts in no time at all, which in turn unexpectedly gives Kihindou’s e-epistolary a somewhat outmoded aura.

New technologies may at best democratize mobility as they enable forms of travel not limited to physical movement. Yet one should not be too enthusiastic about the liberatory potentials generated by the new technologies. As Tim Cresswell maintains, mobility is a resource that tends to be distributed unevenly (178). This pertains also to communicative travel as represented in the text corpus: constant access to the virtual space signals a certain class privilege that not everyone can afford – this idea of privilege finds its articulation in the text corpus. In *Loin de mon père*, for instance, Nina’s and her father’s class privilege finds its embodiment, among other things, in technological terms: in her father’s house, Nina has constant access to the Internet. In *Americanah*, Obinze, prior to his departure to the UK, goes to a cybercafé to send his emails, which signals the fact that the less privileged “citizens of the world” may not be connected all the time. When Obinze returns to Nigeria and lands a job in the service of a local business man, his higher standards of living translate to his being constantly accessible and connected by his smartphone. A powerful metaphor for his well-off situation is his addictive way of “check[ing] […] his BlackBerry often, too often” (369). In a similar vein, the novel’s narrative present portrays Ifemelu as a privileged African diasporic subject who can pick up her Blackberry at any moment and send emails to the other side of the globe without any effort.

In Kihindou’s and Bulawayo’s novels the aspect of privilege is flagrant. The latter half of Bulawayo’s novel represents Darling as an Americanized teenager who has all kinds of technological gadgets at her disposal: references to trendy, “must-have” brands surface throughout the text and stand in a peculiar contrast to the first half of the novel, with Darling and her friends from the shantytown stealing barely comestible fruit to satisfy their hunger. In *Chêne de bambou*, the opening scene, portraying Miya’s arrival at an airport in France, is contrasted with Miya’s family’s concern for her well-being; the family has not had any news since her departure. When
they finally receive her email – Miya’s little brother has printed it since the family has no Internet connection at their disposal at home – their disappointment is great: Miya does not seem to tell anything substantial about her current condition. This drives her sister to question whether it is even Miya who has written the email in the first place. Miya’s sister is ill at ease with the idea of communicating by email instead of hand-written letters or phone calls, not least because of the costs that regular visits to a cyber café incur. Moreover, the sister’s preference for hand-written letters or phone calls embodies the idea that emails lack the materiality that bears the “authentic” touch of the author (Keskinen 384, 386), thus revealing the “truth” about the sender (Rotunno 70). There is also the question of Miya’s sister’s lack of privilege, which translates into a lack of familiarity with the technology, since she doubts whether Miya has authored the email herself. This not only paints a “backward” picture of the sister and draws attention to how class and ITC go hand in hand in Africa (see Adenekan & Cousins), but also simultaneously points at “the democratic availability” of traditional letter writing compared to email (Harris 160).

**Creating distance: Gaps in communication**

In Kihindou’s novel, unease informs Miya’s communications with her family – an unease that grows into an insurmountable distance. In his email, Miya’s brother is, significantly enough, worried about Miya’s silence, and he encourages her to tell her family the truth, since, as he says, “ça ne sert à rien de nous cacher quoi que ce soit” (26), “there’s no point in hiding anything from us” (personal translation here and for all quotes from Kihindou’s novel). However, when Miya receives the message, she feels that she does not know what to say to him. There is a lengthy passage depicting her thrill generated by a visit to the National Library where the sheer number of books has profoundly impressed her, but she simply cannot write about this, since “les siens n’étaient pas prêts à l’entendre” (29), “her family was not ready to listen any of that”. She acknowledges that her experience at the library is distant from the realities that her underprivileged,
uneducated family endure at home, and she fails to articulate this experience adequately. As, later in the novel, Miya refrains from informing her family about such important events as her marriage or her failure at an aptitude test for becoming a teacher, it can be claimed that secrecy and hiding mark Miya’s communications with her family.

As the communication between Miya and her family is so fraught with tension and also complicated due to the family’s lack of regular access to the Internet, it is not surprising that the email correspondence structuring the novel takes place between Miya and Inès, an old friend from Miya’s school years. Their correspondence grows rather intense. This intensity is enabled by the fact that Inès runs a cyber café with financial help from her well-off lover, which means that she, unlike Miya’s family, has unlimited access to the Internet. The family’s limited access to the virtual space is, indeed, the reason for which they become somewhat awkwardly cut out from the narrative after the opening, as if the family no longer existed for Miya in her newly found diasporic existence. In a way, then, in the novel’s virtual universe there is only room for those who are constantly connected, not for those who have to pay for web surfing, print the emails and read them aloud at home to the rest of the family. The mobility aspect in this novel pertains mostly to the ways in which the email correspondence sheds light on the realities of those who leave, and, to a lesser extent, of those who stay on the African continent. The purpose of the email dialogue and the form of mobility it entails is therefore to inform the correspondent who stays behind of the different aspects of the diasporic life. In other words, while the novel is written in the form of a dialogue, it privileges Miya’s diasporic perspective. Slightly snobbish and patronizing phrases such as “Ce n’est pas facile de comprendre ces choses, vu d’Afrique” (48), “It’s not easy to understand these things, seen from Africa” surface regularly, suggesting that due to her immobility, Inès cannot grasp certain things that Miya as a migrant can. In this way the novel conveys the conventional idea of the cosmopolitan vision as an attribute of the migrant, rather than that of someone who stays put. The
prioritization of the migrant perspective is also emphasized by a narrative turn whereby the novel starts to focus on Miya’s ambition to become a diasporic writer.

The correspondents in Kihindou’s novel have the tendency to squabble over matters of opinion. Indeed, they often seem to be looking for a discord, as exclamations such as “Où est-ce que tu veux m’emmener avec ces questions?” (57), “Where do you want to take me with all these questions?”; “toute ça, c’est pour m’emmener où?” (70), “where is all this supposed to take me?”; or “toute de suite les grands mots!” (72), “there she goes with her big words!” suggest. What nurtures the tension beneath their interaction is that Inès often finds Miya holding back on some essential information concerning her diasporic life. When talking about her fictitious marriage to a Frenchman with whom she has had a child, Miya leaves certain details unaddressed, as Inès asks, “est-ce à dessein que tu sautes certains épisodes?” (110), “are you intentionally skipping certain episodes?” Moreover, Inès accuses Miya of prattling and making a big deal of self-evident matters. Besides these intentioned attempts to misguide Inès, Miya leaves her emails unanswered on several occasions, either with the purpose of signaling to Inès that she should not pose certain questions, or because she feels offended by Inès’s words. In these cases, it is always Inès who takes the initiative to re-establish the contact, as if it was she who benefited more from the correspondence than Miya, her “native informant” in diaspora.

In Bulawayo’s We Need New Names, the theme of communication technologies surfaces in the novel, but it features less as Darling’s means of keeping contact with her relatives and friends still living “back home” than with her new American friends who are constantly connected to the virtual space with their smartphones. Moreover, having all possible technological devices and applications at her disposal cannot hide the fact that Darling has lost touch with her old friends. In We Need New Names, contact with “home” is lost because neither the diasporic realities nor the old friendships correspond to an ideal – her diasporic life is far from glamorous and her former friends’ naïve enthusiasm over her way of life is simply embarrassing. The “awkward
silence” (207) that marks Darling’s interactions with her former friends captures this two-fold unease.

The theme of communication technologies as a means of keeping in contact with the close ones left behind in the former home country is explicitly addressed towards the end of the novel, when Darling uses Skype to call her mother. As she has become a brand-aware Americanized teenager, the narrative keeps repeating that Darling has a “Mac”, not just any computer. She uses the laptop to contact her mother back home. The Skype call is answered by a friend of Darling’s, Chipo. When Darling asks about her other friends, Chipo says that, just as Darling, most of them have left the country. There is a discomfiting element in the Skype call from the very beginning, with the interlocutors not knowing what to say next. Suddenly Darling starts to feel guilty about her comparatively privileged position and sorry for Chipo, who is stuck in the crisis-ridden postcolony. Chipo responds: “But you are not the one suffering. You think watching on BBC means you know what is going on? […] [I]t’s us who stayed here feeling the real suffering” (285). Chipo denies Darling her national identity, and when Darling claims that it is her country too, Chipo goes on to accuse her for leaving: “What are you doing not in your country right now? Why did you run to America […]? If it’s your country, you have to live in it and not leave it” (286). Chipo’s words hurt Darling, who “hover[s] the mouse cursor over the red phone thingy” (286) wanting to hang up. Chipo, however, goes on to tell Darling that she has a “stupid accent” that is not natural. At this point, Darling ends the call not by hanging up, but by throwing the laptop against the wall. On its way, the laptop hits an African mask that Darling has placed on the wall. Their simultaneous fall to the ground is illustrative of Darling’s sense of diasporic non-belonging: she is at home neither in the over-branded and over-technologized American culture, nor can she identify herself in the nostalgic idea of traditional Africa represented by the mask. Darling’s conversation with Chipo is equally revealing in the way it gives voice to a clash between vitriolic nationalist parochialism and idealistic cosmopolitan world citizenry nurturing such ideals as global
responsibility and boundary-transgressing dialogue. The stance that Chipo represents undermines the well-intentioned, albeit admittedly facile expressions of global empathy that Darling’s words embody. This clash suggests that while mobility – in this case, communicative travel enabled by new technologies – forms “the backbone of the cosmopolitan society” (Beck 33), the cultural encounters across borders that mobility generates “do not necessarily lead to a cosmopolitan attitude” (Gikandi, “Between” 24).

In *Loin de mon père* by Tadjo, the email exchange mostly takes place between Nina and Gabrielle, her rebellious older sister, who remains distant throughout the novel. Gabrielle left home at the age of 17, for a reason that Nina ignores. Nina and her relatives are assuming that Gabrielle will attend their father’s funeral in Abidjan, but her refusal to communicate her arrival date is not a promising sign. While the narrative remains silent about it, it seems probable that Gabrielle’s rebellion results from her having been aware of their father’s extra-marital progeny.

Nina first contacts Gabrielle by phone, but is left without any tangible information concerning her travel plans. Gabrielle seems to avoid the exigencies of the family that Nina represents as the person in charge of the funeral organizations. The reader knows nothing about Gabrielle’s whereabouts; it is suggested that she travels a lot, which makes her a member of the mobile postcolonial elite – or Afropolitans, as framed in Taiye Selasi’s liberal interpretation of the concept – much in the same way as her sister, whose last contact with her father was a short mobile phone call at an airport.

Nina sends an email to Gabrielle towards the end of the second half of the novel. She is still waiting for information from Gabrielle, but since the sister’s silence persists, she composes an email, giving the message a rather binding title, “Ton arrivé” (153), “Your arrival” (105). In her message, she stresses that all the relatives are waiting for Gabrielle. This signals Nina’s willingness to keep up appearances, or what is left of them after the father’s numerous illegitimate children’s march on the scene.
While Gabrielle leaves Nina’s first email unanswered, and while the use of this technology between the two sisters captures the ideas of rupture and distance rather than those of contact and closeness, there is also an instance in which email fulfills its genuine role as a means of communication. This happens when Nina receives the first email from Amon, one of her father’s illegitimate children living in Canada. From the very beginning, the communication between the siblings who are strangers to each other seems unaffected. Nina answers Amon’s email, entitled “Présentations”, immediately, addressing him as “Très cher Amon” (160), “My dear Amon” (110). The frankness and sincerity of Amon’s first message inspires Nina to adopt a new approach in her failed communications with Gabrielle. In her message, Nina abandons the subject field “Ton arrivé” used in the previous mail, entitled the new one more neutrally as ”Nouvelles d’Abidjan” (174), “News from Abidjan” (120), a reconciliatory gesture that shifts the focus from Gabrielle’s improbable arrival to the funeral arrangements, positioning Nina as a sort of a native informant or intermediary. Nina asks whether Gabrielle knows about their other siblings, pondering also the reason for her departure from home at seventeen. After having described their “new” brothers and sisters to Gabrielle, Nina accuses herself of cowardice in her unwillingness to reproach Gabrielle for her absence and lack of communication. After a sudden flashback of their childhood quarrels, Nina gains a new strength that enables her to speak her mind. Nina writes:

Les gens ont maintenant cessé de me demander de tes nouvelles. Ils ont compris. Mais compris quoi, au juste ? Que tu ne les acceptes pas ? Que tu as décidé de tirer un trait sur ton passé ? Ou alors que le pays est devenu trop dangereux pour que toi t’y aventures ? Je suis déçue. J’ai l’impression que tu nous as abandonnés. (176)

By now people have stopped asking me for news from you. They have understood. But just what did they understand? That you don’t accept them? That you decided to cut off all ties to your past? Or rather that the country has become too dangerous for
you to risk coming back? I’m disappointed. It seems like you have abandoned us.

(122)

Nina reproaches Gabrielle for neglecting her familial affiliations, and suggests also that the sister’s life in diaspora has transformed her into “a foreigner” for whom the home country is a mere dangerous destination one should think twice about visiting, nothing more. This is the first time in the novel that the sisters actually engage in a dialogue; Nina receives an email from Gabrielle within a short delay. Gabrielle explains her unconventional stance, suggesting that funerals are organized not as much for the departed but for the living, and that she only has one sister and that is Nina. In a sense, then, the developments of the email correspondence follow the general emotional itinerary of the entire narrative: from uncertainty through anger and to reconciliation, which gives the novel an overall effect that can best be described as comforting. The figure of Nina stands as an intermediary between the world of her father and her African relatives and the world of Gabrielle and her unconventional insights that can be safely articulated from a diasporic distance without hurting anyone’s feelings. Gabrielle wants to keep a distance to her father and the fatherland associated with him, whereas Nina’s relation to them becomes closer. With the short email exchange, this schism becomes, eventually, reconciled.

In _Americanah_, it is the hardships of the diasporic life for an African immigrant that lie at the heart of the novel’s treatment of the gap of communication trope. Ifemelu’s arrival in the USA is marked by an economic distress under which she is in a constant panic to find a job. After several failed attempts to secure employment, she accepts a job that is comparable to prostitution: she helps a stressed tennis coach to “relax”, that is, to masturbate. While she only does this once, she feels so ashamed – not least for becoming excited while lying next to her “boss” – that she is no longer able to talk to Obinze on the phone or answer his emails: she “delete[s] his voice messages unheard and his emails unread” (155). This is where the trope of rupture in communication surfaces for the first time. The dialectics of the lovers’ attempts to keep and to not keep in contact with each
other runs through the entire narrative. In this sense, the theme of email communication, despite its apparent marginality thematically, becomes a cohesive thread of the novel.

In the hide-and-seek communication of the lovers, Ifemelu is not the only one leaving emails unread and unanswered. A very similar sort of experience of shame that happened to Ifemelu and created the gap of communication is reproduced when, after a years’ silence, Obinze receives her apologetic email in which she tries to re-establish the contact with him. Obinze deletes her message as a reaction to his own degrading diasporic condition. As a paperless immigrant in the UK, the only job he manages to secure is that of a toilet cleaner. One night at work, he finds “a mound of shit on the toilet lid, solid, tapering, centered as though it has been carefully arranged and the exact spot had been measured” (236-237). In Obinze’s eyes, this mound of shit embodies his own failure; it represents “a personal affront, a punch on his jaw” (237) so that when he receives Ifemelu’s email the same evening, he “click[s] Delete and Empty Trash” (238). By emphasizing the Empty Trash function instead of merely having Obinze delete the message, the narrative conveys the idea of finality – a finality which is not that final after all, since the unfinished business between the lovers keeps haunting the narrative. Ifemelu’s aborted attempt to re-establish the contact is also interesting in the sense that it juxtaposes two very different forms of contemporary African travelling cosmopolitanisms: that of Ifemelu living a secured and easy-going life with her wealthy boyfriend and that of Obinze, cleaning toilets as an illegal immigrant – a form of abject cosmopolitanism (see Nyers) that culminates in his being deported to Nigeria. The narrative foregrounds the contrast by reproducing Ifemelu’s apologetic email twice: first as she sends it, with a “Swedish massage” (224) waiting for her and booked by her boyfriend, and the second time when Obinze receives it in the aftermath of the excrement scene. By juxtaposing these different immigrant experiences and by connecting them to each other through the mobility enabled by email, the narrative points at the fact that while globalization entails developments that render the world smaller, it is simultaneously about non-egalitarian developments that drive worlds apart.
The hide-and-seek communication between the lovers finds its culmination in the way in which they start composing messages only to end up deleting the drafts. This hesitation and undecidedness betrays an incapacity to let go, which, in the case of Ifemelu, can be read not only as her incapability to let go of a loved one, but also – the novel being a return narrative – of a sense of belonging that is unquestioned, unlike her diasporic condition. Besides several aborted attempts to re-establish contact, the narrative portrays the lovers composing well-thought emails with the intention either to render the recipient jealous or to remain silent about certain facts – e.g. Obinze avoiding mentioning his wife in his response to Ifemelu, who has just announced her return – in order to convey an available image of themselves. There is nothing of the spontaneity associated with emails in the lovers’ communications: they spend much time in composing and interpreting emails, with the risk of misunderstanding constantly threatening them. Towards the end, Obinze actively defies the risk by writing a sincere message. This way, the narrative suggests that email does not have to be a shallow and deceitful means of communication, but one that helps to reveal one’s true self: “Writing to her also became a way of writing to himself. He had nothing to lose” (372). Such an “honest” email provokes immediate response – one that is, significantly enough, displayed on the novel’s pages in its entity.

Conclusion: Ruptured dialogues, unbalanced cosmopolitanisms

Kihindou’s, Bulawayo’s, Tadjo’s, and Adichie’s novels’ ways of employing the communication technology theme widens the scope of how mobility can be conceived in the field of African literatures in a global era. This is crucial, because while being an important metaphor for the contemporary globalized postcolonial condition, the migrant figure is also an unavoidably reductive one: there are always those who are not on the move physically, but who are still connected to the world beyond the boundaries of the local. Thanks to technical innovation, physical immobility does not prevent one from being connected to distanced parts of the world and adopting a very practical
kind of cosmopolitan vision of the world. Yet, as suggested by the text corpus, this sort of a practical cosmopolitanism may end up being of a rather shallow character, as the correspondents or interlocutors fail at engaging a true, boundary-transgressing dialogue. Thus, if the novels contain a cosmopolitan vision, it is an imperfect cosmopolitanism of a ruptured and unbalanced nature – one in which the limits of an ideally balanced transcultural dialogue are exposed by the reality.

Moreover, the novels tend to prioritize the migrant perspective. Their focus is above all on those who have left, while those “staying put” are represented from the perspective of the migrants and are, eventually, condemned to the margins of the narrative. The texts also attest to the fact that mobility – physical, virtual, and communicative – entails issues related to class privilege so that those who stay put on the African continent may not always enjoy unlimited access to the virtual space either.

Communication technologies also inform the form of some of the novels: Kihindou’s novel is an e-epistolary and Tadjo is interested in the formal features of email messaging, whereas for Bulawayo and Adichie communication technologies are most explicitly treated on the thematic axis. In either way, the ITC-inspired form of the texts – or the absence thereof – are features that are both significant in the interpretation. Not only do they embody the notion of dialogue and mobility without physical travel but they also encapsulate the silences and ruptures that mark the interactions. By addressing the theme of communication enabled by new technologies, the novels under scrutiny draw attention to the ways in which globalization ties distanced geographical locations closer together – but not always in an unproblematic manner. Indeed, the availability of appropriate technological devices and applications does not guarantee an effortless experience of communicative travel. In the novels, the uneasiness marking communication is conveyed in their portrayals of ruptures and gaps which result from the correspondents’ urge to remain silent about some less glorious aspects of their diasporic condition such as in Kihindou’s and Adichie’s novels, or their alienation or an emotional/epistemological distance from the realities back home as in
Bulawayo’s and Tadjo’s work. The novels also witness the rapid developments in communication technologies, and above all, the decline of traditional letter writing. Simultaneously, some of the texts also articulate what could be called technological nostalgia (Chêne de bambou; Americanah).

New communication technologies help in the transgression of the boundaries of the local and the national by intertwining them with a wider, global perspective. As such, these technological innovations may be seen as enabling a very practical sort of cosmopolitan awareness beyond one’s immediate context. Yet, the ruptures in communication that the analyzed text corpus articulates suggest that this cosmopolitan vision faces challenges that are not resolved simply by resorting to technological innovation.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Alfred Kordelin Foundation under Grant 110485 and by the Academy of Finland under Grant 294780.

Works Cited:


Zegeye, Abebe, and Robert Muponde (eds.). “Special Issue: Social Lives of Mobile Telephony.”


---

1 The uses of new communication technologies in postcolonial cultural products is a theme that has not yet been widely analyzed. Telecommunications and the mobile phone and their uses in the social/cultural postcolonial contexts have received some critical attention, see e.g. McCarren or the special issue on “Social Lives of Mobile Telephony” in *African Identities* in which the editors Abebe Zegeye and Robert Muponde call for a new research agenda.