

Reconfiguring the African Diaspora in Dinaw Mengestu's

The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears

Bénédicte Ledent (B.Ledent@ulg.ac.be)

Abstract

Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007) has been greeted as a subtle and moving exploration of the migrant condition, written in elegant and lyrical prose; one of its main specificities, however, is its calling into question of monolithic approaches to the African diaspora. Depicting the loneliness that characterizes the life of displaced people the world over, this novel offers a glimpse into the specific experience of Sepha Stephanos, a member of the Ethiopian community in the United States. This article examines how Mengestu problematizes the relationships of this individual with white America, but also with other African immigrants and with African Americans. Sepha and the last two groups are bound by their complexion and a similar experience of racial discrimination, and have therefore access to a form of black diasporic solidarity; yet, this sense of fellowship is shown to be fragile and ultimately fraught, if only because diasporic identity tends to erase individuals' essential distinctiveness and for this reason cannot accommodate the need of each person to come up with their own singular narrative.

Congolese writer Alain Mabanckou's 2012 book-length essay, *Le Sanglot de l'homme noir*, contains a revealing anecdote. The author tells us of the time when he was living in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 2003, and of his friendship with two black Americans: Pierre, a doctoral student of mixed French and African American descent, and Tim, an African American working as a

garbage collector. In the presence of these two friends, Mabanckou almost feels as if [il incarnait] presque leurs racines l'Afrique profonde le Noir qui n'avait pas connu l'esclavage, as if he were the incarnation of their roots, of the heart of Africa, of the black man who had not experienced slavery (120).¹ While Mabanckou gets on well with Pierre, a man inclined to cosmopolitanism, his relationship with Tim, who is involved in the defense of black people in the United States and has a mythical view of Africa, is more ambiguous. This is confirmed one day when Tim has drunk more than usual and starts assaulting the author, threatening to kill him because, he says, he is responsible for the enslavement of Tim's ancestors and has been given a good job in a university while he, Tim, has un job de merde comme à l'époque de l'esclavage, a shitty job, as in the time of slavery (124).

While Mabanckou's narrative skills make this incident stand out in the book, this story is actually far from exceptional. It is indeed not the first time that our attention has been drawn to the complicity but also potential antagonism, and sometimes more or less figurative tug-of-war, between African Americans and other groups of African descent in the United States, whether they come from the Caribbean or from Africa. Writers of West Indian descent, such as Claude McKay or Paule Marshall, already tackled aspects of this issue some time ago. Yet this complex, multi-directional relationship between the different black communities in America continues in some sense to this day, even if it is possibly more often addressed now by artists of the so-called new diaspora. Take, for example, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's declaration in a 2009 interview that arriving in the United States as a Nigerian immigrant meant that she had to face her own blackness, and that she resisted this by buying into the stereotypes of African-Americans because to be a foreigner who's black, you're just one tiny step above on that ladder . . . people give you a tiny bit of respect because you don't have the history of slavery

(Koval). Adichie's testimony bespeaks a sense of continuity in black diasporic connections in America. Yet, important changes have been taking place in the way today's African immigrants relate to their host society. Racial considerations are losing ground in favor of less predictable, more personal attachments connected not only to the individual's economic or political status, but more generally also to their individual relationships, or what Louis Chude-Sokei has called, in a perceptive essay examining fiction by writers from the new African diaspora, "the choices that make intimacy possible" (54). In this thought-provoking text the scholar highlights the crucial impact that this writing is likely to have on the critical paradigms that still dominate the field of African diasporic studies, such as that of the Black Atlantic, and that revolve, when used uncritically, around romantic and narrowly affiliative conceptions of the black diaspora. He concludes:

Because [the] questioning of race, culture, and solidarity provides the subtext of so many contemporary African American fictions in America, it demands a reckoning beyond the sometimes too comfortable and possibly over-compensatory frameworks of "Diaspora," or, as Anthony Appiah would remind us, of even "blackness" itself. (64)

Adichie is one of the authors that Chude-Sokei addresses in his piece. So is Dinaw Mengestu, an American writer of Ethiopian descent, whose first novel, *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (first published in England in 2007 under the title *Children of the Revolution*), contributes to this delicate debate around contemporary black diasporic identities in the United States and provides the major impetus for Chude-Sokei's insightful argument. It would certainly be tempting to read the novel's rationale as evidence that "diaspora as a political singularity or sign of continuity or shared affect is . . . troublingly anachronistic" (64), as Chude-

Sokei does. Nevertheless, in the following analysis I will make a case for the continued relevance of this now problematic notion, while at the same time insisting on the need to perceive it ðless [as] a condition or a state than a search for identity that is constantly contested, re-imagined, and re-inventedö (Fabre and Benesch xiv). In other words, I will read Mengestu's novel not so much as a text aiming to replace existing paradigms relating to diasporan Africanness, but rather as a critique of their occasional conceptual rigidity and as a reaffirmation of their potential complexity. For Corinne Duboin, this complexification constitutes the main contribution of contemporary African writers in the US (180); Chude-Sokei indirectly touches on this too when he writes at the end of his own article that what the ðnewö diaspora must do is ðnot displace the 'old' one but differentiate itself from itö (71). In that sense, then, what Mengestu does in *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* is not so much try to provide his own idiosyncratic answer to Countee Cullen's well-known question, ðWhat is Africa to me?,ö a query typical of the ðoldö diaspora, as respond to an updated version, ðWhat is Africa to me *now*?,ö by focusing on the multifaceted ðnewö diaspora's experience in a globalized world, which does not exactly fit any of the previous identitary models, yet at the same time still relies on them for meaning.

Quite understandably, because of their topics and their authors' origins, twenty-first-century novels by US-based migrant writers of African descent, Mengestu's among them, have been read in comparison with twentieth-century fiction by African American and Caribbean writers in the United States, focusing on how the newcomers to the American literary scene differentiate themselves from the production of their black literary forebears in their handling of questions of belonging and displacement. If most commentators have rightly highlighted the new generation of writers' thematic originality, this uniqueness should nonetheless be qualified in

many cases since it does not represent a radical break from their forerunners' preoccupations, but is paradoxically rooted in these as well, in an arguably oblique way. In her book on US fiction in the twenty-first-century, Caren Irr has defined the novelty of young African novelists in America--including Chris Abani, Teju Cole, and Dinaw Mengestu--as being essentially a move beyond trauma, a fact that, for her, "creates an inward-looking ethnic enclave largely defined by its hostile relation to an American environment organized around a binary system of race" (24).

She further writes:

As African migration fiction writes itself into being, in short, it turns away from themes of cultural loss and traumatic history. In place of absorption by the historical wound, this fiction elects to map the restless psychology of newly mobile contemporary global subjects. (50)

It might make sense to see *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* as a potentially "post-traumatic" (50) narrative, inasmuch as it "not only points to the need to leave trauma behind but also describes that process" (Irr 53). Yet, even if the novel does not directly focus on the memory of slavery, as the works of writers such as Toni Morrison did in the twentieth century, it is nevertheless difficult to satisfactorily reconcile this process of leaving trauma behind with Mengestu's protagonist's haunting recollections of the Ethiopian Red Terror, which claimed his father's life, caused his own exile, and follows him to America. This traumatizing historical event is obviously a major milestone for the Ethiopian diaspora in America, as also shown in Maaza Mengiste's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* (2010), another powerful first novel by an American writer of Ethiopian descent, which imagines how the beginning of the bloody revolution in 1974 tragically affects a middle-class family based in Addis Ababa. In Mengestu's novel the suffering caused by the same events, while not directly related to the African American situation, cannot

be completely dissociated from the protagonist's own peculiar African diasporic identity, which, as we will see later, remains historically and paradigmatically linked to the trauma and subjugation that binds all migrants of African descent in the West. What is more, it is important to insist that Mengestu's novel does not do away with racial division, a sociological phenomenon that Irr associates with trauma, but rather supplies us with its own modernized version of it, whereby an apparently post-racial and literally post-colonial present is still fighting the demons of the past.

Written in elegant and lyrical prose, *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* provides a subtle and bittersweet examination of the black migrant condition in the United States through the consciousness of its protagonist, Sepha Stephanos, an Ethiopian shopkeeper who, at the time of narration, has been living for seventeen years in a Washington neighborhood that used to be peopled with drunken men and prostitutes but is now in the grip of gentrification. However, the novel conveys much more than this first layer of reading might suggest: it contains a nuanced and non-romantic exploration--conducted in an almost allegorical mode--of the complex, fluctuating interactions between diaspora and race in the protagonist's quest for meaning, in his own attempts to understand who he has become. It deals more particularly with the difficulty for an individual African migrant in America to adopt a ready-to-wear diasporic identity or to feel a sense of natural allegiance to the African American cause. The African migrant and the African American community are arguably bound by their complexion and a similar experience of racial discrimination, yet the sense of solidarity that one might expect between them, and which derives from an idealistic vision of the "African diaspora," is fragile and ultimately fraught. For African diasporic identity, in its most essentialist acceptations, does not take much account of individuals' social distinctiveness or of their specific ambitions and for this reason cannot

accommodate the need of each individual to come up with their own singular narrative, which can only be conveyed through what Chude-Sokei has described as a “commitment to intimacy and its failures” (54).

This is very much the sense one has on the last page of Mengestu’s open-ended novel, where the protagonist expresses his reluctance to remain “a man stuck between two worlds” and looks at his store as “one that is neither broken, nor perfect, one that, regardless of everything, I am happy to claim as entirely my own” (Mengestu, *The Beautiful Things* 228), even if, at that point, he has been asked to vacate the premises because he is virtually bankrupt. This inconsistency between the character’s sense of achievement, however tenuous, and the reality of his situation testifies to the elusiveness of the American dream. It is also typical of the kind of bittersweet irony that pervades the novel, particularly in the statements of its protagonist, whose questionable triumph is very close to that of Mr Biswas in V. S. Naipaul’s famous novel, *A House for Mr Biswas*, where the rundown house of the main character is the dubious result of his “claim to [his] portion of the earth” (14). The “two worlds” between which Sepha has, as he says, “dangled and been suspended long enough” (228) can be interpreted in different ways, depending on one’s reading of the narrative. If one reads *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* as a straightforward story of migration, as was the case in shorter reviews of the book (see Brodwin, for example), these two worlds could indeed simply be Sepha’s native Ethiopia, on the one hand, and the US, the place where he believes at some stage that everything is possible, on the other.

But such a dualistic reading would be reductive, if only because, as Pieter Vermeulen demonstrates, Mengestu’s book “cuts across the conventions of the literary migrant novel” (284) by preventing any facile identification with its protagonist (278) and more generally “underlines

the pervasiveness and the destructiveness of the logic of categorical codification (285). It would therefore make more sense to see the two worlds that Sepha mentions as multiple and variable, pointing toward an intricate web of interactions between him and his surroundings, rather than as parts of a preconceived diasporic pattern. There are at least four separate but interacting and overlapping constituencies to which Sepha (mis)relates and that partake of his own singularity, nesting within each other like Russian dolls (Abani). Starting from the most to the least familiar, in almost concentric fashion--which, Chris Abani also suggests, might be reminiscent of the architecture of Dante's *Inferno*, from which the American title of the novel derives (99 and 100)--we have his Ethiopian family, Sepha's two African immigrant friends (who view him as Ethiopian), the African American community (who view him as African), and the white American community (who view him simply as black). The last two groups are represented more specifically by his neighbors, black Mrs. Davis on the one hand, and white Judith, on the other. Only such a complex, changeable identity configuration is likely to pay due respect to a novel at all times wary of simplifications, of a facile Manichean, binary opposition between the tyrannies of despotic regimes in Africa and the virtues of Western democracies (Duboin 184). The narrative indeed conveys what Mengestu has called in an interview a sense of never wholly identifying with one category (Conversation 3), which matches his own experience as an immigrant in America and is to him the main contribution of the new African diaspora to a fresh perspective on race relations in the United States.

In what follows I will conduct a closer reading of the novel and examine the ways in which Sepha concretely connects with these four different groups, and how these shape his loyalties and affect his fluctuating sense of self, while at the same time he retreats from the practice of affiliation (Chude-Sokei 54). What I will argue is that, in spite of everything, this

composite identity could still be labeled diasporic in so far as it relies on a constant interplay between similarity and diversity, continuity and rupture, which, as Stuart Hall has shown in relation to black Caribbean identities, leads to a positioning, always in the making, at the intersection of various cultural presences. In Sepha's case, these are Ethiopian, African, African American, and white American.

There is something almost ghostly about Sepha's Ethiopian family and community, which conveys the young man's desire, but eventual inability, to completely distance himself from his past in the hope of taking full advantage of what he thinks the American dream has to offer. With the exception of his mother, with whom he speaks on the phone every month and who, in an ironic reversal of the usual migrant narrative, sends him money orders from Ethiopia, Sepha's relatives surface in the story through more or less distant memories, showing his inability to "find the guiding principle that relegated the past to its proper place" (127). Apart from one cousin, his only living relative in America is his uncle Berhane, a senior official in his home country, who now works as a taxi driver and looks after the young man when he arrives in the States. A quiet and secretive man, Berhane lives not very far from Washington, in a twenty-eight-story building inhabited almost entirely by Ethiopians, encapsulating the isolation of the community. "To call the building insular is to miss the point entirely," the narrator says in his usual tongue-in-cheek tone. "Living here is as close to living back home as one can get, which is precisely why I moved out after two years and precisely why my uncle has never left" (116), a remark that also highlights the difference between the first and second generations of Ethiopians in America. However, the major Ethiopian figure that haunts the unconsciously guilty Sepha throughout the book, and who should prevent us from seeing his narrative as moving toward the "post-traumatic" (Irr 50), is his soft-spoken and wise father, a lawyer who was savagely

murdered by members of the Ethiopian Communist regime for hiding flyers that had actually belonged to his sixteen-year-old son. While Sepha has physically isolated himself from his original community and his "natural" family, able to "count the number of Ethiopian friends still in [his] life with two fingers" (118), he is mentally bound to his late father, whose absent presence is acknowledged several times in the novel and who more concretely survives in his son's life through a pair of cuff links bearing "the old Ethiopian flag with the Lion of Judah and his crooked crown" (50). These cuff links suggest the two men's close attachment, culturally but also metaphorically, since these trivial fashion accessories irretrievably "link" father and son to each other, but also to their native country.

Sepha's current family is rather made up of his only close friends, two immigrants from Africa with whom he worked in a hotel shortly after his arrival in the States: Joseph from the Congo and Kenneth from Kenya, two men who like him are stuck in America, unable to go back home. As Abani points out in his review of the novel, the names of Sepha's friends are not random, evoking as they do two important figures associated with their respective countries but also with African literary and political history in general, Joseph Conrad and Jomo Kenyatta, a detail that underlines their symbolic function as the novel's representatives of the continent and of its history. The three friends, who "[have] suffered enough mockery and humiliation to last [them] well beyond [their] lifetimes" (11) and have not established any lasting and stable love relationships in America, could very well be called "The Lonely Washingtonians," as an echo to Samuel Selvon's now classic novel, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956). Like Mengestu's story, Selvon's tale is told by a disillusioned narrator who has developed a love-hate relationship with the place in which he has settled; moreover, it depicts the isolated lives of Caribbean (and, to a

lesser extent, African) immigrants in post-war London, who, like Sepha and his friends, manage to achieve some kind of collective identity in exile, however fragile it may be.

Referring to themselves as ‘the children of the revolution’ (47), in reference to T. Rex’s famous 1970s song, but also to the political uprisings that caused their own migration, Sepha, Joe, and Ken regularly meet to drink and talk ‘in the sanctuary of their own company, free from the exhausting courtesies of self-anthropologizing explanations’ (Nixon). They also play a strange game that consists in quizzing each other on the military coups and wars that have taken place in Africa as well as the many dictators that the continent has had since independence. This game perpetuates the stereotype of Africa as a place of endless interethnic barbarism and underlies the legacy of pain that binds them while also radically undermining the idea of racial solidarity that has sometimes been thought to link all members of the black diaspora. At the same time, it demonstrates that in spite of their common African origins, the three men are aware of the national specificities of each individual country, as shown on the map of Africa that Sepha ‘[keeps] taped on the wall’ (7) of his store.

The game plays a cathartic role too for it helps the three men to obliquely evoke yet de-dramatize the scenes of extreme violence that they each experienced firsthand in their own countries and that in some way account for their crossing of the Atlantic. Interestingly, in Joe and Ken’s cases, this crossing to America smacks of colonialism and slavery, and can therefore be assimilated to a Middle Passage of sorts. Sepha’s friends work for white bosses, Joe as a waiter in a posh restaurant evocatively called ‘The Colonial Grill’ (168), which he jokingly nicknames ‘the Colony’ (170), and Kenneth as an engineer whose demanding boss requires that he work even on Christmas day (180), which for Joe makes Ken the updated version of the nineteenth-century ‘house nigger’ (182). The two men’s quasi servile condition in exile seems to fly in the

face of the prejudice often entertained by African Americans in regard to their African brothers, who would be responsible for the enslavement of their transported ancestors, as in the anecdote told by Mabanckou, but would themselves escape servitude. Sepha is an apparent exception to this sense of history repeating itself, since, as a shopkeeper, he can claim to be his own boss, which explains the keen vicarious interest that his two friends have in his business undertaking, which for them was supposed to signal a departure from frustrating, underpaying jobs and unrealized ambitions (145). Sepha's seeming independence in comparison with his two friends' situation might metaphorically allude to the fact that, unlike most African countries, Ethiopia was not an actual colony and that it has therefore occupied a special place in the history of the African diaspora, for example through such movements as Ethiopianism (see Schmeisser) or Rastafarianism. However, according to Maaza Mengiste, we should relativize this myth of Ethiopian exceptionalism for, if Ethiopia did not have a history of colonization like Sierra Leone, Kenya or Nigeria, . . . that does not mean that Ethiopia was not subjugated (Imma, "Conversation").

In the same way, Sepha's freedom is only superficial. As Dayo Olopade has shown, his occupation as an eventually bankrupt shopkeeper makes him a victim but also an agent of capitalistic accumulation (150), thus a cog in the very system that subordinates his two friends and has contributed over the centuries to the destruction of his native continent as a whole. Very much like Salim, V. S. Naipaul's protagonist in *A Bend in the River*--the first book that Sepha reads in his shop (39) and which was given to him by Joseph--Mengestu's character appears as an initiate of the trades described in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, as a man with a transnational identity [asserted] through commercial self-positioning (Mengestu, *The Beautiful Things* 135). However, by the end of the narrative, after his short-lived but emotionally

energizing platonic involvement with his white neighbor, he regains some ability to counter the forces of capital, notably by abandoning his store to undertake an exploration of the area, by placing reading above commercial transactions or by giving milk, instead of selling it, to his African American neighbor, Mrs. Davis (150).

Sepha's run-down shop is also central to his relationship with the African American community, who are, like him, poor and black (40 and 41) and, until the arrival of white, affluent faces (189) in the neighborhood, make up the overwhelming majority of his customers. None of them, however, have any distinguishable physical and patronymic identity. They could be described, like his Ethiopian family, in terms of ghostliness--with the exception of Mrs. Davis, an old widow who lives in the same building as Sepha and who tries to look out for him and truly communicate with him, although she speaks jokingly of Africans as primitive, hut-dwelling people (23). Sepha's general indifference to the black people around him and to their social marginalization, which might derive from a refusal on his part to share their fate--a feeling also suggested in the quote by Adichie above--is confirmed when they start getting evicted to make room for the area's new white inhabitants or, to put it in Sepha's words, when the neighborhood [known for its prostitutes] moved from decay to respectability (190).

As the local people angrily demonstrate against the evictions and the rise in rents, Sepha expresses his lack of solidarity by saying, "I stepped outside of my store once to see what was happening, but I knew my place. It was behind the counter, not in the middle of a dispute in which I had no part to play" (192). Yet almost in the same breath he says that he "[pities and resents] those people, whoever they may have been, for being chased out of their homes, perhaps in part because I felt even then a similar fate waiting for me once more" (194). This tension--which is typical of a character who often indulges in paradoxes and is still in the process of

understanding who he is and how he relates to his surroundings--indicates that Sepha's compassion for the African American "others" is often triggered by some personal fear, and could therefore be read not really as opportunistic, but at least tinged with some measure of selfishness. Sepha's divided loyalties seem to be confirmed after a bossy Mrs. Davis holds a protest gathering in a derelict AME church. There she encourages the neighborhood -- which she significantly misspells in an informative leaflet as the "NEIGHBROHOOD" (194) -- to adopt an us/them rhetoric (200) with which Sepha finds it difficult to feel comfortable now that he has become closer to his white neighbor Judith. While he does not buy into such collective brotherhood, the protagonist is still able to express some empathy, although it remains unuttered and detached, for a poor black man who, out of despair at being evicted from his lodgings, sets fire to Judith's house. At that point Sepha realizes "how closely he [the arsonist] and I resembled each other I began to think of [him] as my coconspirator in life. I even thought briefly of visiting him in jail so I could tell him that I alone understood why he did what he did" (225). As we will see later, one can also suspect that his empathy here is more likely to relate to his frustration at being rejected by Judith than to a genuine sense of racial or social solidarity, although another way of explaining Sepha's compassion could derive from the fact that, as Emad Mirmotahari asserts, "The gentrification and eventual anti-white violence in which it culminates mirrors the social and political turmoil that cost Stephanos his family" and thus sends him back to his original trauma.

Beyond his link with the Ethiopian, African immigrant, and African American communities, Sepha also significantly connects with white America, through his passing romantic interest in his neighbor Judith, a professor of American political history, who is the new owner of the mansion next door to his shop, and through his paternal complicity with Judith's

eleven-year-old daughter Naomi, whose mixed ancestry might embody for Sepha the hope of his own incorporation into white America. Sepha's relationship with Judith and her daughter gives rise on his part to genuine feelings of tenderness and love, which seem stronger than anything else he has known in a long while. Nevertheless, this relationship, which African American Mrs. Davis frowns upon (80) and which very much resembles the fling between America and the migrant who thinks he can belong there, seems to be doomed from the start, for a number of reasons.

First of all, Judith, who is described as having "something almost doll-like about her" (19), has an unreal, mirage-like quality, in the same way as America appears as a kind of paradise to the African newcomer in America. Secondly, the social differences between Judith and Sepha leave the narrator with a painful sense of inadequacy, which reaches a climax at Christmas time, often a period of intense loneliness for isolated people, when he mistakenly thinks he will spend a festive evening with Judith and her daughter, but ends up on his own. Ironically enough, Judith is the author of a book entitled *America's Repudiation of the Past* (157), yet she embodies some of the country's unpalatable history and to that extent her phenotype is important.² Her surname, for example, McMasterson (157), might be viewed as an echo of America's involvement in slavery. So is her big house, which resembles a plantation mansion, while also evoking "something that bordered on the miraculous, the impossible" (209), a symbol of America's ethics of progress and achievement against all odds. "Shining" (209) and always full of glowing lights, Judith's house dramatically contrasts with the dimly lit houses of her black neighbors or the harsh light in Sepha's flat and shop and might be seen, like white America, as an alleged beacon of enlightenment in the surrounding darkness or squalor. No surprise therefore if her house becomes the target of the desperate man mentioned above, who is

an economic victim of the urban changes and sets Judith's place on fire, an act reminiscent of slave revolts and again suggestive that slavery is still relevant to decipher today's relationships between different racial groups in the United States. Nor is it astonishing if the narrator seems to sympathize with the extreme reaction of the arsonist, as Sepha realizes that his relationship with Judith is nothing but a "case of mistaken identity. I had forgotten who I was, with my shabby apartment and run-down store" (80). If the narrator fleetingly thinks that he has become a "new man" (156) and temporarily forgets about his own origins, these are very clear to Judith from the start, since the first time she sees him in the street, he is wearing an Ethiopian outfit that he only dons when he attends weddings (18), which suggests that there might have been something attractive to her in his ethnic/non-American otherness.³

The four spheres between which Sepha navigates in the course of the novel hardly intersect in the narrative reality. When they do, it is often with negative consequences, such as discrimination or violence. With the exception of the scenes involving Sepha and his African friends, and to some extent those involving Sepha and Naomi, truly peaceful interaction between different ethnic or racial groups only takes place in the world of advertising, which, for the narrator, is where "the liberal idea of America is at its best" (98). The ad for the Virginia community college that he briefly attended is an example of this, featuring "Four students--one white, one black, one Asian, one Hispanic-- . . . walking across [a] lawn, books in arm, smiling at one another" (98). Within Sepha's mind, however, the different cultural realms that in a sense partake of who he is--Ethiopian, immigrant African, African American, and white American--are made to interact with each other more actively, in a way that unpredictably reconfigures the notion of diaspora as simultaneously richer and looser than in its traditional acceptance. This clearly surfaces in the narrative structure: the novel's sixteen chapters, told in the first person,

shuffle backward and forward between the various interlocking yet separate facets of Sepha's existence. This also occurs when Washington and Addis Ababa virtually blur into each other before the narrator's eyes (for example, 92, 173 and 216; see Irr 51 and Vermeulen 289) or when he stares at his friend Joseph through the windows of the restaurant where the latter works and the two silhouettes superimpose each other, suggesting at once familiarity and distance between the two friends, the latter feeling conveyed through an inability "to make sense of the image staring back from only a few yards away" (172).

Sepha's cultural confusion becomes even more obvious when one pays closer attention to the language used in the book and to the sometimes contrasting expressions of his alternating inclusion or exclusion. What is the meaning to be given to the word "community," for example, when Sepha's shop is described by Joseph before its opening as a "Community Store" (143, emphasis added) or when Mrs. Davis calls her group of protesters "The Logan Circle Community Association" (195, emphasis added)? While Sepha is not fully part of any of these communities, he has nevertheless become aware by the end of the narrative that "there is a safety in numbers that goes beyond any home" (226), which confirms his need to belong to a group, however lonely he seems to remain. The first-person plural possessives and personal pronouns that pepper the narrative also convey this sense of fluctuating allegiances at the heart of the new African diasporic experience. Alternatively referring to Sepha, Joe, and Ken—"our store," (145, emphasis added), to Sepha, Naomi and Judith (89 and 111) or even to Sepha, Mrs. Davis and the neighborhood (198 and 199), are these "we" and "our" equally inclusive of Sepha? And in what capacity? Such questions are not given any straightforward answer in this rich and meditative novel, which focuses on the idiosyncratic, contemporary meanders of the diasporic condition, rather than on a more general overarching narrative with universal claims. Through the story of

his protagonist, Mengestu eventually signifies that no stable, reliable answer can be given to traditional identity queries, including Cullen's famous question. It proves impossible to satisfactorily capture Sepha's peculiar diasporic Africanness. Even if it is sometimes helpfully illuminated by existing patterns of understanding--provided, for example, by the history of slavery--it still fluctuates in time and space, depending on the character's interactions with the various people he comes across during the journey of his life. In such a confusing picture, the only certainty is perhaps that there is none.

It is rather unsurprising, then, that when Mengestu was asked by an interviewer what his novel had to say about national identity, he replied, "I don't know if novels are supposed to say anything. I think they exist to complicate and expand upon our understanding of the world" ("Conversation"). Without any doubt, *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* has lived up to this sensible expectation by making us feel, through Sepha's singular story, what it means to be displaced, to "stumble blindly from one place and life to the next" (228), from one constituency to another.

Notes

1. Translations are by the author of this essay unless otherwise indicated.
2. In this regard, it is probably no coincidence if, in her discussion of the novel, Caren Irr hardly mentions the fact that Judith is white, but simply refers to her as Sepha's "scholarly neighbor" (53), which buttresses her own reading of the novel as a text that overcomes racial binarism.
3. This might also be confirmed by the fact that the father of Judith's daughter Naomi is a man of Mauritanian origin.

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