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Anxious Mobilities in Accra and Beyond

*Making Modern African Subjects in Ama Ata Aidoo's Changes: A Love Story**

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Abstract

In Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story* (1991), the characters are constantly on the move: tropes of mobility recur throughout the novel. Cars, hotels, business and leisure travel, modern technologies and the figure of what can be referred to as the Afropolitan *avant la lettre* play a pivotal role in embodying meanings that pertain to class, gender, globalization, and consumerism marking the postcolonial African condition, and give the novel an articulate contemporary character. This article adopts a wholesale understanding of mobility in order to explore the ways in which Aidoo's characters employ different forms of mobility in their processes of self-fashioning as modern African subjects. The article draws attention to the anxiety that informs processes of self-fashioning among urban African elites, caught as they are between the tensions of the traditional and the modern.

Keywords

Afropolitanism – Ama Ata Aidoo – globalization – mobility – modernity – postcoloniality

Mobility is a key feature of (post)modern life, and it has become an important subject of inquiry in the social and human sciences. The new mobilities paradigm promotes a broad understanding of mobility that ranges from physical and technology-enhanced human travel to the movement of ideas,

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images, and materials through different networks, including not only information technologies and airline connections but also infrastructures that limit and regulate mobility.¹ Mobility is a condition that shifts the focus away from stasis and boundaries: it is seen as a form of critique directed at essentialism and hegemonic structures maintaining order at all costs.² In the postcolonial context, transnational mobility is embraced as a condition that destabilizes methodological nationalism.³ Given that current theoretical discourses promote a critical outlook on nationhood, transnational mobilities have received much attention in contemporary African literary scholarship. In this context, mobility is most often understood in terms of migration.

Yet, mobility is not limited to migration, and African literatures do address different aspects of the mobility theme. While mobility is a key element in 'third-generation' African fiction,⁴ the theme inspired earlier generations of writers as well. A case in point is Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story* (1991), which is an ironic 'romance' novel about affluent, urban Ghanaians whose lives are marked by the tense coexistence of the 'traditional' and the 'modern'. Because of her age and publication history, Aidoo cannot be counted among third-generation writers. In terms of her explicitly feminist engagement, she belongs, rather, to the second generation, who write back to often biased masculine fictional representations of women.⁵ Nevertheless, there is a profoundly contemporary element in *Changes* with respect to its emphasis on mobility. The story takes place mainly in urban Accra, but through the frequent use of tropes of mobility, such as modern communication technologies, travel agencies, business or leisure trips, and hotels, the novel articulates an understanding of elsewhere beyond the local and the national that is cosmopolitan in

1 Mimi Sheller & John Urry, "The New Mobilities Paradigm," *Environment and Planning A* 38.2 (2006): 212.

2 Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

3 Ato Quayson, "Postcolonialism and the Diasporic Imaginary," in *A Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism*, ed. Ato Quayson & Girish Daswani (Malden MA & Oxford: Blackwell, 2013), 140–141.

4 Pius Adesanmi, "Of Postcolonial Entanglement and *Durée*: Reflections on the Francophone African Novel," *Comparative Literature* 56.2 (Summer 2004): 227–242; Tanure Ojaide, "Migration, Globalization, and Recent African Literature," *World Literature Today* 82.2 (March–April 2008): 43–46.

5 See, for example, Irene Assiba d'Almeida, *Francophone African Women Writers: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1994); Florence Stratton, *Contemporary African Literatures and the Politics of Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

nature. In short, *Changes* conveys the idea of how Africa's past and present are marked by a "paradigm of itinerancy, mobility, and displacement."⁶ Therefore, in *Changes*, tropes of mobility not only "drive the plot" and "place gender roles and expectations in conflict [...] in the national context," as argued by Kwabena Opoku-Agyemang in his reading of Aidoo's short story "Birdsong,"⁷ but also extend the scope of the novel towards the transnational and the global.

Changes has been widely analysed from the perspective of gender and feminist politics.⁸ While also touching on gender issues, the primary subjects of inquiry of the present article are the text's tropes of mobility. Aidoo's representations of one specific subgenre of mobility, namely automobility, has been discussed by Lindsey Green-Simms from a feminist perspective in one chapter of her doctoral dissertation,⁹ and, less extensively, by Maria Olausen.¹⁰ Green-Simms's central argument is that automobility fails to pay out on its promise of freedom for African women drivers.¹¹ In my reading, the focus is less on the "women in traffic"¹² aspect than on the anxieties that inform the novel's conception of modern African mobilities on a general scale. In other words, instead of analysing automobility in isolation from other forms of mobility as Green-Simms¹³ does, this article promotes the idea, buttressed by mobility studies scholars, that "mobilities need to be examined in their fluid interdependence

6 Achille Mbembe, *Sortir de la grande nuit* (Paris: Découverte, 2013): 227. My tr.

7 Kwabena Opoku-Agyemang, "Rituals of Distrust: Illicit Affairs and Metaphors of Transport in Ama Ata Aidoo's 'Two Sisters' and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 'Birdsong,'" *Research in African Literatures* 44.4 (Winter 2013): 70.

8 Ginette Curry, "Women from Ghana: Their Urban Challenges in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story*," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 32.1 (2011): 179–198; Nada Elia, "To be an African Working Woman: Levels of Feminist Consciousness in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*," *Research in African Literatures* 30.2 (Summer 1999): 136–147; Angela M. Fubara, "Figures of Pedagogy in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* and Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke*," *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 51.1 (2014): 18–28; Maria Olausen, "'About Lovers in Accra': Urban Intimacy in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story*," *Research in African Literatures* 33.2 (Summer 2002): 61–80; Waleska Saltori Simpson, "'What Fashion of Loving Was She Ever Going to Consider Adequate?': Subverting the 'Love Story' in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*," *English in Africa* 34.1 (May 2007): 155–171.

9 Lindsey Green-Simms, "Postcolonial Automobility: West Africa and the Road to Globalization" (doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2009): 213–241.

10 Olausen, "'About Lovers in Accra.'" The mobility theme is also present in Aidoo's short story 'Bird Song'; see Opoku-Agyemang, "Rituals."

11 Green-Simms, *Postcolonial*, 239–240.

12 Green-Simms, *Postcolonial*, 213.

13 Green-Simms, *Postcolonial*, 213.

and not in their separate spheres.”¹⁴ Such a wider understanding is useful in appreciating the novel’s complex and wholesale vision of how different forms of mobility contribute to the characters’ troubled processes of self-fashioning as modern African subjects.

The central characters of *Changes* belong to a class of urban, educated postcolonial African elites—modern “enlightened subjects” as creations of what was initially colonial modernity, as David Scott has written. As Scott argues, for the postcolonial subject, there is an essentially tragic element in colonial enlightenment:

The tragedy of colonial enlightenment [...] is not to be perceived in terms of a flaw to be erased or overcome, but rather in terms of a permanent legacy that has set the conditions in which we make ourselves what we make and which therefore demands constant renegotiation and readjustment.¹⁵

While Aidoo’s narrative emphasizes that these “enlightened subjects” enjoy a privileged status in the postcolonial urban environment, there is also a downside to their privilege. The novel foregrounds a pronounced tension and discrepancy between, on the one hand, modern urban African lifestyles and the values of the new generation and, on the other, those of the preceding ones—tensions that the novel explores against the backdrop of heterosexual relationships and marriage. The anxiety that informs Aidoo’s representations of modern mobilities is generated by the complexities that characterize the self-fashioning of modern African subjects in a post/colonial/independence context—a condition of hybridity that, according to Aidoo’s heroine, Esi, is “so absolutely lunatic and so ‘contemporary African.’”¹⁶ In other words, in their self-fashioning as modern African subjects and their attempts to adapt Western modernity to their local settings in order to make it their own, Aidoo’s characters are obliged to struggle with the heritage of colonial superiority that informs Western modernity.¹⁷ This struggle, as posited here, lies at the core of the anxiety-ridden mobilities of the novel. At one point, the voice of the

14 Sheller & Urry, “The New Mobilities,” 212.

15 David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham NC & London: Duke UP, 2004): 21.

16 Ama Ata Aidoo, *Changes: A Love Story* (London: Heinemann, 1991): 109. Further page references are in the main text.

17 See Bill Ashcroft, “Alternative Modernities: Globalization and the Post-Colonial,” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 40.1 (2009): 84–85.

narrator suggests that “the only solution to [...] restlessness was to keep busy” (94). These words capture the strategy adopted by Aidoo’s characters of trying to cope with their anxieties by resorting to mobility. By drawing attention to the problematics of urban, postcolonial Africans’ self-fashioning as modern subjects, *Changes* challenges the idea of mobility as a liberating condition for transgressing fixed identities, affinities, and structures of power.

With reference to current discussions of what is supposed to be a specifically African cosmopolitanism, it can be argued that Aidoo’s characters are Afropolitans *avant la lettre*. They belong to the kinetic elite whose socio-economic privilege enables them to transgress national and cultural boundaries without any particular effort, as the concept is outlined by Taiye Selasi.¹⁸ Selasi’s Afropolitanism relies on the figure of the cosmopolitan world citizen and re-contextualizes it in the African diaspora. Conceived as an identity position of a privileged—and, to a certain extent, self-proclaimed—world citizen, Selasi’s Afropolitanism is a concept that lends itself well to the analysis of one of the dimensions of mobility to which Aidoo’s characters resort in their self-fashioning.¹⁹ However, as posited in the present article, an anxiety that informs the characters’ mobilities also disturbs their (pre-) Afropolitan identities. This suggests that Aidoo’s characters are not quite at ease with the complexities that the ‘Afropolitan’ identity implies. In effect, they are still actively involved in coming to terms with the tensions between the traditional and the modern, and the colonial and the postcolonial—conflicting elements that twenty-first-century Afropolitans seem to have managed to integrate more successfully as a part of their complex identity. In what follows, I analyse the anxious aspects of mobility in *Changes* as conveyed through the tropes of automobility, the hotel, modern technology, and, finally, through the figure of the (pre-) Afropolitan world citizen.

I start my analysis with some remarks on how automobility contributes to the theme of anxious mobility in the novel through imagery pertaining to erring and undecidedness. These are tropes that Green-Simms’s otherwise extensive analysis of (gendered) automobility in *Changes* does not address

18 Taiye Selasi, “Bye-Bye Babar,” *The Lip* (3 March 2005), <http://thelip.robertsharp.co.uk/?p=76> (accessed 18 October 2016).

19 The concept of Afropolitanism has also been addressed by Mbembe in *Sortir de la grande nuit*. For Mbembe, Afropolitanism captures the phenomenon of transculturation that has defined the African continent throughout its history. My interest here is in the processes of self-fashioning of Aidoo’s characters, which is also the reason why Selasi’s account of the Afropolitan as an affluent identity position suits the purposes of my analysis better than Mbembe’s formulation.

explicitly.²⁰ As Green-Simms observes, *Changes* “is a novel full of the minutiae of driving.”²¹ In effect, while the narrator claims that “mature people cannot talk about a car forever,”²² the novel does not seem to get enough of automobility. According to John Urry, automobility is “a self-organizing autopoietic, non-linear system that spreads world-wide, and includes cars, car-drivers, roads, petroleum supplies and many novel objects, technologies and signs.”²³ In Africa, the system of automobility has colonial roots. The car was initially introduced to the continent for practical reasons and to underpin colonial superiority, and it continues to be unequally distributed throughout the post-independence period.²⁴ Ato Quayson writes that in Ghana, the automobile “became a key emblem for modernization” as early as the late 1950s.²⁵ In her study of the history of Ghanaian entrepreneurial mobility, Jennifer Hart argues as follows:

Ghanaians engage in what Rudolf Mrazek calls a ‘language of asphalt’—a discourse of modernization and technological development, which uses the language of technology, speed, and progress to evaluate the present and to envision the future.²⁶

This “language of asphalt” is connected to the “narratives of aspirational modernity” that inform automobility.²⁷ It can therefore be argued that driving in Ghana has been widely conceived as “a means of becoming modern.”²⁸ While Aidoo’s characters want to see themselves as modern subjects, there are problems in the system of automobility that are beyond their control. Economic, infrastructural, and technical issues have contributed to the way in which automobility’s promises of modernity in Ghana have been subjected “to the precar-

20 Green-Simms, *Postcolonial*, 213–241.

21 Green-Simms, *Postcolonial*, 229.

22 Aidoo, *Changes*, 179.

23 John Urry, *Mobilities* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007): 118.

24 Lindsey Green-Simms, “The Return of the Mercedes: From Ousmane Sembene to Kenneth Nnebue,” in *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century: Art Films and the Nollywood Video Revolution*, ed. Mahir Şaul & Ralph A. Austen (Athens: Ohio UP, 2010), 210, 213; Jennifer Hart, *Ghana on the Go: African Mobility in the Age of Motor Transportation* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2016): 5.

25 Ato Quayson, *Oxford Street, Accra: City Life and the Itineraries of Transnationalism* (Durham NC: Duke UP, 2014): 131.

26 Hart, *Ghana*, 3.

27 Hart, *Ghana*, 3.

28 Hart, *Ghana*, 117.

ity and risks of the road.”²⁹ This idea can also be seen in the novel’s allusions to potholes and traffic jams as a form of stagnation-in-mobility in passages that describe “the tired traffic hum[ming] and crawl[ing] itself home” (40) in the streets of Accra.³⁰

While infrastructural problems disturb the “aspirational modernity of automobility,”³¹ the drivers’ own actions also contribute to this failure, as the recurrent themes of troubled itineraries and mindless driving suggest. Esi drives on the empty streets of Accra on a New Year’s Day in the brand-new car her new husband Ali has offered her. This vehicle replaces Esi’s old car, the unreliability of which is cast in relief throughout the narrative. Readings addressing the gendered aspects of automobility in the novel have highlighted how the new car can be seen as a “reward” that “instrumentalizes the relationship” and puts an end to Esi’s dreams of having “a sexual life free from the idea of female sexuality as a commodity.”³² Nevertheless, with the new car and empty streets on New Year’s Day, all the prerequisites for imperturbable movement are present. Esi begins to “get that special feeling of power that a solid car always gives its driver” (181). This sense of ease proves to be shallow, and Esi soon becomes disturbed by restlessness, embodied in the question “Where would she go?” (181) that captures the lack of orientation typical of the characters.

Not only does the new car cause itinerary problems; similar issues characterize Esi’s mobility with her old car as well. The unreliability of her car is just one side of the problem. She has constant trouble in deciding where to go—“She kept being sure and not being sure” (172). In this undecided state of mind, she performs a circular dance by first packing all of her things, getting them into the car, then starting it, only to turn off the engine and go back into the house. This defeated mobility bespeaks not only her doomed struggle within an unsatisfying relationship but also her failed itinerary as an enlightened postcolonial African subject.³³ Significantly, in the passage in which Esi packs and unpacks her car, she tries to decide whether she should drive to her home village for Christmas to see her relatives. This highlights the fact that the restlessness she experiences is caused by the conflicting demands of modern urban and traditional, rural lifestyles.

29 Hart, *Ghana*, 188.

30 On infrastructural problems of automobility in *Changes*, see also Green-Simms, *Postcolonial*, 239.

31 Hart, *Ghana*, 3.

32 Olausson, “About Lovers,” 68; see also Green-Simms, *Postcolonial*, 237.

33 See also Green-Simms, *Postcolonial*, 218.

It should also be underlined that the “strange restlessness” (96) from which Esi suffers is neither exclusively typical of her nor strictly gender-specific. Ali and his first wife Fusena are portrayed in similar situations in which itineraries become subject to sudden revision. Their troubled itineraries symbolize their attempts to achieve a balance between the conflicting demands made on their marital lives by the traditional and the modern. When Fusena confronts Ali for having an affair with Esi, she first drives to the kiosk where she works, and as she is getting out of the car she suddenly changes her mind and drives back home, only to ask Ali a single question without even getting out of her car. Then she drives back to the kiosk. Ali is equally represented as making U-turns: on his way home to Fusena, he suddenly decides to return to Esi’s place. On the way, he almost hits some children who are crossing the street, and he feels the need to pull over “to pull himself together” (144). After this incident, he once again spontaneously changes his mind and goes back to his office to “pick up a bottle of champagne for Esi” (144). As the allusion to champagne suggests, these mindless turnabouts are caprices that not everyone in the community can afford: users of public transport could not make such sudden, individual changes to an itinerary, unlike what Hart refers to as “elite ‘myself’ drivers.”³⁴

The mindless driving and changes of itinerary in *Changes* suggest that the characters are trying to use mobility as a rather unsuccessful means to reconcile the conflicting demands of the traditional and the modern. These demands are also generated by the inherently contradictory system of automobility itself. Urry’s characterization of the automobile as the “‘iron cage’ of modernity”³⁵ seems pertinent here. According to Urry, the automobile embodies simultaneously the ideas of freedom and coercion:

[it] extend[s] the individual into realms of freedom and flexibility where-by inhabiting the car can be positively viewed and energetically campaigned and fought for, but also constraining car ‘users’ to live their lives spatially stretched and time-compressed ways.³⁶

The very term “automobility” embodies this contradiction: ‘auto’ refers simultaneously to “the humanist self” and machines with the capacity to move.³⁷ “This double resonance,” Urry posits, “demonstrates that the ‘car-driver’ is a hybrid

34 Hart, *Ghana*, 187.

35 Urry, *Mobilities*, 120.

36 *Mobilities*, 120.

37 *Mobilities*, 118.

assemblage of human competences and will, and machines, roads, buildings, and signs.”³⁸ In *Changes*, this non-humanizing aspect of automobility is particularly flagrant in passages in which Esi is at home, and someone arrives at the gate. In such contexts, the caller is, first and foremost, described as a car, not as a person. In so doing, the narrative equates people with the cars they drive. This complex hybridity surpassing subjective intentions is probably even more pronounced in the African context because of automobility’s roots in colonial modernity.

Besides cars, a recurring trope of modern mobility in *Changes* is the hotel. In mobility studies, hotels are seen as transfer points or places of in-betweenness “involved in being mobile but immobilized.”³⁹ This transitional character of the hotel is obvious in *Changes*: the characters go to the hotel by car to see whether a foreign colleague has already checked in or to have a drink in the lobby after work. In this way, the narrative also draws attention to the interconnected nature of different forms of mobility. Besides being an “important gateway space between the local and the global,” the hotel “embod[ies] the grey zone between public and private.”⁴⁰ The oscillation between the private and the public is relevant from the perspective of gender that is central to Aidoo’s novel. With its ultimately deceptive claim to being “a home away from home,” the hotel problematizes the gendered space of the domestic, as it calls into question “a woman’s presumed role.”⁴¹ The hotel has become an iconic setting for cultural products,⁴² where it often serves as a “narrative backdrop and symbolic space.”⁴³ As its literal and figurative meanings entwine, “the hotel [...] constitutes a certain *milieu* which renders it an apt setting for representations of the restless modern mind.”⁴⁴ Such a definition resonates with Aidoo’s repre-

38 *Mobilities*, 118.

39 Sheller & Urry, “The New Mobilities,” 219.

40 Robert A. Davidson, “A Periphery with a View: Hotel Space and the Catalan Modern Experience,” *Romance Quarterly* 53.3 (August 2006): 169.

41 Maria Noëlle Ng, “Women Out of Fleeting Place: Hotel Living in Mavis Gallant’s Short Stories,” in *Transient Questions: New Essays on Mavis Gallant*, ed. Kristjana Gunnars (Cross/Cultures 76; Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2004): 95.

42 See Charlotte Bates, “Hotel Histories: Modern Tourists, Modern Nomads and the Culture of Hotel-Consciousness,” *Literature and History* 12.2 (November 2003): 62–75; Aritha van Herk, “Hotel Hades,” in *Mobile Narratives: Travel, Migration, and Transculturation*, ed. Eleftheria Arapoglou & al. (New York & London: Routledge, 2014): 139–150; Bettina Matthias, *The Hotel as Setting in Early 20th-Century German and Austrian Literature* (New York: Camden House, 2006).

43 Van Herk, “Hotel Hades,” 142.

44 Bates, “Hotel Histories,” 71.

sentation of postcolonial urban elites, who can be seen as hybrid inheritors of modern existential estrangement.

In terms of narrative space, the hotel is a far from unimportant setting in *Changes*. Two extensive, sequent chapters are set in a hotel. The narrative weight given to the hotel betrays Aidoo's interest in exploring 'modern' spaces beyond the scope of the domestic and the traditional. The Hotel Twentieth Century is featured in a chapter in which Esi goes there to check whether a Kenyan colleague of hers, attending a conference in Accra, has arrived. This gesture highlights the hotel's role as a gateway to the global. Simultaneously, however, the fact that the colleague has *not* arrived is yet another manifestation of the troubled quality of postcolonial mobilities, similar to the unreliable cars, traffic jams, and dysfunctional elevators that also feature in the novel. Esi's reason for being at the hotel underlines her professional identity as a mobile, highly skilled worker who attends conferences in "Geneva, Addis, Dakar one half of the year; Rome, Lusaka, Lagos the other half" (12). On her way to the hotel, Esi is impressed by a beach view that has a touristic appeal to it: there is "so much gold, golden red and red filtering through the branches of the coconut palms" (38). Esi, parking her car near the hotel, admires the landscape and wonders what it would be like to live by the sea. Esi's privileged musings are contrasted with the activities of fishermen, "busy packing up their boats," and probably "amused if they had heard her thoughts" (38). Aidoo's ironic narrative voice and her use of a "generic mix of narrative strategies"⁴⁵ allow her to maintain an emotional and epistemic distance from her characters, and invite the reader to see them in a broader context. By juxtaposing the elites with the practitioners of traditional occupations, *Changes* highlights the gap between formally and informally educated sectors of postcolonial society, and the novel suggests that the anxiety informing the elites' self-fashioning as modern subjects is in itself a marker of privilege.

As James Clifford observes, there is a strongly nostalgic and elitist inclination to the hotel image.⁴⁶ This also holds true for Africa, where, throughout the continent, tourism was "developed primarily by colonialists for the benefit of other colonialists," black Africans possessing neither "the financial nor the cultural capital to compete with European domination" of the industry.⁴⁷ As

45 Simpson, "What Fashion of Loving [...]?", 157.

46 James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1997): 32–33.

47 David Harrison, "Tourism in Africa: The Social and Cultural Framework," in *The Political Economy of Tourism Development in Africa*, ed. Peter U.C. Dieke (New York, Sydney & Tokyo: Cognizant Communication Corporation, 2000): 49.

suggested in Aidoo's novel, in the post-independence period, touristic establishments such as hotels were claimed by national elites. In this sense, the image of the hotel embodies complex meanings of colonized modernity and its post-independence legacies. The hotel's function as a marker of "social hierarchy and economic class"⁴⁸ is highlighted in a passage which compares the hotel to a nearby fishing district. While "the Hotel Twentieth Century was blazing with light, consuming enough electricity to light up the whole of the nearby fishing district" (52), the fishing community's only knowledge of electricity is

the huge pylons that stood in their vegetable patches, and the massive cables passing over the roofs of their homes as these bore the electricity to the more deserving members of the society.

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The ironic tone of voice here further underpins the socio-economic gap between Esi and the elites and the fisher community. Whereas the people in the fishing district would certainly not be admitted to the premises of the hotel, Esi and Opokuya are described rather mockingly as "users of hotel lobbies" (52). The nearness of the fishing district (as a site of traditional occupations) to the luxurious hotel (as a modern, capitalist establishment) points at the coexistence of "different spatial ecologies" that inform the cityscape of Accra, as Quayson has pointed out in his study of the dynamics of Ghana's capital city.⁴⁹ *Changes* conveys the idea of Accra as a city that bears the marks of the presence of colonial and post-independence periods as well as those of globalization and transnationalization.⁵⁰ While Esi can be said to "assert her identity in a hotel setting through economic power,"⁵¹ the gender issue persists. Once Esi has finished her business at the reception desk, where she arrives with "her shoes beating out the determination in her mind" (39), she thinks about leaving. Yet again, after the initial burst of determination, her actions are marked by an uncertainty that allows her neither to stay nor to go:

She paused for a while and moved a step or two, towards the entrance. But she changed her mind about going back out. It was clear that she was uncertain as to what to do next. She could go and sit down to have a beer.

48 Van Herk, "Hotel Hades," 143.

49 Quayson, *Oxford Street, Accra*, 4, 12.

50 *Oxford Street, Accra*, 4.

51 See Ng, "Women Out of Fleeting Place," 97.

But she knew this was not really done. A woman alone in a hotel lobby drinking *alcohol*? It would definitely be misunderstood.

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She chooses to confront the potential misunderstanding of being taken for a “promiscuous” woman in the potentially deviant space of the hotel and orders a beer. Besides drawing attention to the restrictions of traditional gender roles and Esi’s attempts to transgress them, this passage highlights the link between modernity and capitalist consumption: African elites’ self-fashioning as modern subjects is performed by consuming drinks in a luxurious lobby bar.

The hotel trope figures in other contexts as well. At the beginning of their relationship, Ali takes Esi for dinner in restaurants “that were hidden deep in the belly of the city, or far from the city centre and the arteries that led motorists to other towns” (88). These sorts of “dimly lit” places where “couples could get keys” (88) are less hotels than motels, which, according to Meghan Morris, “demolish sense regimes of place, locale, history. They memorialize only movement, speed, and perpetual circulation.”⁵² With their monotonous and shabby connotations, these motels or rooms-by-the-hour that “complicate [...] linear accounts of progress, family, and history” by offering “cheap deals, sour regrets, and nights of pleasure”⁵³ might have been more transgressive sites for romantic encounters from Esi’s viewpoint. As Olausen argues, in *Changes*, adultery represents “the ultimate possibility of exploring a relation free from utilitarian aspects” and that once the relationship becomes officialized through marriage, it also becomes institutionalized and instrumentalized.⁵⁴ It is for this very reason that the fact that “Esi and Ali reserved their love-making for the comfort of Esi’s bed” (88) is problematic.

From the perspective of the private/public binary and the transgressive potential of such in-between spaces as the hotel, it is significant that Esi meets Ali for the first time at a travel agency. Later, Esi approaches him in the hotel lobby. The choice of such non-domestic spaces as scenes for the budding romance may seem encouraging in terms of the relationship’s transgressive potential. Neither of these sites, however, becomes the central stage of the illegitimate romance: this role is granted to the domestic. It is not, then, just Ali buying Esi a new car that marks a turning point in their relationship

52 Meghan Morris, “At Henry Parkes Motel,” *Cultural Studies* 2.1 (1988): 3.

53 Sarah Treadwell, “The Motel: An Image of Elsewhere,” *Space and Culture* 8.2 (May 2005): 215.

54 Olausen, “About Lovers,” 68.

from something potentially liberating into a prison, as Olausen argues.⁵⁵ Well before that incident, the fact that Esi starts to sleep with and cook for Ali in her own home signals Esi's complicity in the construction of her own captivity. Home becomes the symbol of stagnation where power structures do not allow for negotiation. For Ali, however, the domestic represents an ideal setting for the adulterous relationship, as it "free[s] him from the ordeal of having to find a place to be with a woman who was not his wife" (90). Once the romance with Esi loses its appeal in Ali's eyes, the narrative suggests that he engages in a new affair. He asks Esi to drop him at the Hotel Twentieth Century on a New Year's Day to check in on one of his customers—obviously a pretext that fails to convince Esi. Here, the hotel becomes invested with deviant, transgressive meanings as a potential stage for another adulterous relationship, while Esi herself has turned into a captive of the domestic and her role as second wife.

The hotel trope features again when Ali takes Esi to meet his relatives in Bamako. Ali has booked "the most modern hotel in town" for their visit (159–160). There is, however, a moral obligation that prevents the newlywed couple from staying at the hotel: to avoid staying at Ali's aunt's for the first night in Bamako would have been against good manners. Yet again, the narrative gives voice to the tension between conflicting desires, embodied in the booked yet eventually unoccupied hotel room. The choice of accommodation also suggests that the couple is unable to escape the demands of the traditional. This has an effect on their relationship, because, since "the introduction to his roots," Esi becomes "more of [Ali's] wife" (167). In effect, it is in this context that, so to speak, routes start to change into roots for Esi—a development that is conveyed on the narrative scale as well. In this part of the novel, the narrative speed increases, culminating in Ali's escalated travel, while Esi's mobility is essentially reduced until it finally stops in the last two chapters with her depressive retreat from the failed relationship.

Similar to the hotel, the travel agency that Ali heads widens the scope of mobility towards global dimensions. Mentioning the detail that Ali established the travel agency just after independence draws attention to how marginally nationhood is treated in the text. While there are allusions to the challenges that a new nation faces, and an explicitly articulated concern about "these independences that have proved to be nothing more than a trick" (32). Aidoo's perspective is marked by cosmopolitanism that sees the local in connection with the global instead of promoting a strictly nation-based, monologic per-

55 Olausen, "About Lovers," 68.

spective.⁵⁶ The figure of Ali embodies an elite cosmopolitan position: he is “a son of the world” (27) with several passports. His image as a “very good looking” (27), socially and spatially mobile postcolonial African subject, himself “the most effective advertisement for Linga HideAways” (27), evokes Selasi’s admittedly superficial and commodity-oriented⁵⁷ portrayal of Afropolitans as “beautiful, brown-skinned” and “gorgeous” Africans of the world who “belong to no single geography, but feel at home in many.”⁵⁸ It should be underlined that Selasi’s Afropolitan relies on the figure of the cosmopolitan and much less on cosmopolitanism. It resonates with some earlier, elitist understandings of the cosmopolitan as a privileged identity position. The concept of cosmopolitanism, by contrast, cannot be reduced to a mere identity. As David Hansen aptly expresses it,

a cosmopolitan sensibility is not a possession, a badge, or settled accomplishment. It is an orientation that depends fundamentally upon the ongoing quality of one’s interactions with others, with the world, and with one’s own self.⁵⁹

While cosmopolitanism has indeed been conceived as “a luxuriously free-floating view from above”—this approach is echoed in Selasi’s reformulation—the concept is currently more often understood “as a fundamental devotion to the interests of the humanity as a whole.”⁶⁰ In other words, cosmopolitanism involves a complex set of ethico-utopian ideals such as openness to Otherness, global responsibility, and understanding of one’s own positionality. In this respect, Selasi’s reformulation constitutes a somewhat limited interpretation of

56 See Ulrich Beck, “The Cosmopolitan Society and Its Enemies,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 19.1–2 (April 2002): 17–44.

57 See Stephanie Bosch Santana, “Exorcizing Afropolitanism: Binyavanga Wainaina Explains Why ‘I am a Pan-Africanist, not an Afropolitan,’” *Africa in Words* (8 February 2012), <https://africanwords.com/2013/02/08/exorcizing-afropolitanism-binyavanga-wainaina-explains-why-i-am-a-pan-africanist-not-an-afropolitan-at-asauk-2012/> (accessed 23 October 2014); Emma Dabiri, “Why I am (Still) Not an Afropolitan,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 28.1 (January 2016): 104–108.

58 Selasi, “Bye-Bye Babar.”

59 David T. Hansen, “Education Viewed Through a Cosmopolitan Prism,” *Philosophy of Education* (2008): 213.

60 Bruce Robbins, “Introduction Part 1: Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism,” in *Cosmopolitanism: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, ed. Peng Cheah & Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998): 1.

the concept. Despite its limits, however, Selasi's Afropolitanism is well-suited to the analysis of *Changes*, as the cosmopolitanism of Aidoo's characters is, above all, a question of identity construction that is partly performed through consumerism, and that seems devoid of any deeper philosophical or ethical content.

Whereas Selasi's Afropolitans are affluent "21st century Africans" who live in the diaspora while claiming a link to the African continent,⁶¹ Aidoo's characters—Ali and Esi in particular—can be regarded as Africa-based, 1980s *avant la lettre* Afropolitans. However, unlike Selasi's "Africans of the world,"⁶² who feel at home not only in the world but also in their hybrid identities and affinities, Aidoo's 1980s proto-Afropolitans do not seem equally at ease. Aidoo's characters are the generation preceding the "21st century Africans,"⁶³ born around independence and living in a society struggling with post-independence issues. Their self-fashioning as modern African subjects can be read as a reaction to colonial modernity. More distanced from the colonial period and the demands of tradition both in temporal and spatial senses, contemporary diasporic Afropolitans *à la* Selasi do not suffer from their hybrid positions, but celebrate their complex affinities instead. As Chielozona Eze argues in his first-person.plural account of Afropolitanism: "We are Afropolitans [...] because we are capable of coping several cultural spaces and relations from which we define who we are."⁶⁴ These words reveal the dilemma of Aidoo's *avant la lettre* Afropolitans: they seem unready to "cope" with the hybrid heritage imposed on them. The disturbed, anxious mobilities of Aidoo's characters betray their unease with the processes of post-independence and postcolonial self-fashioning as modern African subjects. Contemporary Afropolitans, on the other hand, represent the logical next phase of African self-fashioning, as Amatoritsero Ede suggests.⁶⁵ Moreover, despite the novel's relatively cosmopolitan motivations and recurrent allusions to the world beyond the national and the local, the characters still attach themselves to the postcolonial nation. Ali, as is common to the members of postcolonial elites, studied abroad, but returned "back home" to benefit from the economic opportunities of the newly independent postcolonial nation.

61 Selasi, "Bye-Bye Babar."

62 "Bye-Bye Babar."

63 "Bye-Bye Babar."

64 Chielozona Eze, "We, Afropolitans," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 28.1 (January 2016): 117.

65 Amatoritsero Ede, "The Politics of Afropolitanism," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 28.1 (January 2016): 89.

This is also where Aidoo's characters differ from contemporary Afropolitans, who, due to the relative lack of viable future prospects in many African countries, are more likely to pursue their professional careers in the diaspora. In any case, it can be argued that Aidoo's 1980s proto-Afropolitans with their troubled self-fashioning as modern African subjects have paved the way to twenty-first-century Afropolitans who are (at least ideally) more at ease with the complex legacies and locations on which their identities are built.

Travelling, then, whether for business or for leisure, is a central aspect of postcolonial elites' self-fashioning as modern subjects. Travel involves a close link to capitalist consumerism. This feature is highlighted in the long lists of souvenirs that Ali brings to Esi from his travels: by purchasing consumer objects specific to localities all around the world, Ali seems to be acquiring the identity of a sophisticated, affluent cosmopolitan. He is constantly travelling outside the country, making him "hardly a resident here" (62), as Esi puts it, with a slight undercurrent of accusation in her voice, articulating a nationalist idea of Ali as not a properly committed national subject because of his mobility. Indeed, the narrative expressly questions Ali's national affinity and loyalties: "Ali's country? Which one was that?" (27). For Ali, such complex affinities do not seem to be a problem. Indeed, to be able to embrace a cosmo-/Afropolitan position is based on the luxury of having a place to belong to, as Simon Gikandi has pointed out.⁶⁶ This is the case with Ali's deracinated cosmopolitanism: for him, "Bamako was home" (29). Ali's affluent Afropolitanism is contrasted with Opokuya's sense of homelessness, her state of being a native of another region of Ghana than the Accra where she currently lives. The gender aspect here is obvious: the sense of belonging of Esi's friend's Opokuya is tied to her husband: "If anything happened to Kubi, where was she going to go?" (67). The question of feeling at ease in non-belonging is a luxury that only a man such as Ali can afford. While Ali is represented as "a son of the world" (27), Opokuya is simply "a native of nowhere" (67). It is, however, noteworthy that later in the novel, Ali's hyper-mobility becomes symptomatic of the anxiety informing his seemingly comfortable status as a cosmopolitan world citizen or an Afropolitan *avant la lettre*.

As already intimated, Ali's travel agency represents for him a liminal space in which he can escape the exigencies of the domestic and the traditional. During

66 Simon Gikandi, "Between Roots and Routes: Cosmopolitanism and the Claims of Locality," in *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*, ed. Janet Wilson & al. (London & New York: Routledge, 2010): 23.

the early stages of the illegitimate romance, he stays there pretending to work after office hours. In reality, he is thinking about Esi. Later, he uses his office as a space of transit between the two conflicting domestic spheres represented by Esi's bungalow and the home he shares with Fusena. The very name of the travel agency, *Linga HideAways*, gains its entire ironic meaning when Ali starts to use it as a kind of monitored compound in which to escape from his wives' conflicting demands. When Ali and Esi become involved, Ali starts to escape to his office with the pretext of checking to see if he has received messages on his telex machine. The machine represents mobile technology that enhances the travel of ideas by interweaving the global with the local.⁶⁷ The telex also has other implications: the real reason for Ali to go to his office after seeing Esi is his desire to be available in case Fusena happened to phone him in order to check on his whereabouts. In this sense, technology, and the mobility it entails, becomes an essential part of relationships in the novel, embodying changes in the understanding of intimacy.⁶⁸ As Ali's driving back and forth to his office to check his telex messages suggests, technology not only becomes a pretext for the characters' mobility but also, in a way, enslaves them. When Esi and Ali start to become emotionally distanced from each other, mobility and technology come to represent insurmountable hindrances that eventually drive them apart:

Ali phoned regularly to announce his imminent departures. He phoned from the different cities and towns inside and outside the country to which he travelled. He phoned to report his arrivals. In between his travels, he phoned regularly when the telephone lines permitted. He and Esi always had good telephone conversations.

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The last sentence, about "good telephone conversations," has an ironic ring to it, drawing attention to how Esi no longer sees "the skin of the man behind the phone calls" (189). Yet, it is not the technology itself that is responsible for the growing distance; it simply exposes a state of discord that already exists.

In the latter part of the novel, Ali's mobility escalates, as witness the hurried, head-over-heels syntax of the following passage:

67 See Sheller & Urry, "The New Mobilities," 212.

68 See Grace Khunou, "Making Love Possible: Cell Phones and Intimate Relationships," *African Identities* 10.2 (March 2012): 172.

he was “terribly rushed”, he “simply had to run”, and “darling I shall phone as soon as I land” wherever he was going, or “back home” or go and see [Esi] “straight from the airport.”

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The final part of the novel opens with a telephone conversation, which is represented in an unbalanced way so that Esi’s side of the dialogue is non-existent. This narrative strategy not only “indicates Esi’s lack of an independent identity [and] her loss of a ‘voice’”⁶⁹ but also conveys the idea of acceleration of speed: the narrative seems so overwhelmed by Ali’s hyper-mobility that it does not even have the time or space for Esi to speak her mind. Ali’s mobility is so accentuated that it becomes his way of being. He seems to be mobile for mobility’s sake; destinations no longer matter, as suggested by the narrator’s words “he returned wherever he was going” (170). Ali’s hypermobility stands in contrast to Esi’s increasing immobility; she no longer seems to be the travelling businesswoman of the first half of the novel. Significantly enough, she has started to take tranquilizers to control her restlessness and to handle the disturbing realization that “she was getting nowhere at all” (172).

After their trip to Bamako, Esi buys a computer. Considering the temporal context in which *Changes* is set, the Internet was certainly not as widespread in Africa as it is nowadays—the novel does not mention this technology, either. The computer represents a new form of technical innovation that allows Esi to perform distance work at home; she works a lot, just as when she was unmarried. Here, the use of technology, which transports Esi back to the time when she was a bachelorette, marks a rupture in her relationship with Ali. Technology again symbolizes the problems that pull the couple apart. Simultaneously, however, this new technological device and the return to unmarried life it entails may also betoken a new start for Esi in her quest for “self-consciousness as a modern African woman with progressive ideas.”⁷⁰ In the immediate narrative present, however, the distance work enabled by the computer highlights Esi’s decreased mobility: she seems to be often at home, observing cars—not primarily people—from her window as they enter and leave her field of vision. In the pre-Internet era of the 1980s in which the novel is set, an unconnected computer can, in fact, be considered an accomplice in rendering the protagonist immobile. This, in turn, makes the computer another technological innovation holding out a false promise of liberation.

69 Simpson, “What Fashion of Loving [...]?” 168.

70 “What Fashion of Loving [...]?” 169.

Conclusion

Aidoo's affluent, urban characters are in the midst of the process of self-fashioning themselves as modern African subjects. Mobility plays a central role in the self-fashioning of these 1980s proto-Afropolitans: the characters are constantly on the move in their attempt to shape colonial modernity as their own. Nevertheless, their various forms of mobility are marked by a lack of orientation and a multiplicity of disturbances which make the characters seem like captives of their freedom of movement. This entrapment results from the inconsistent exigencies to which they become subjected through their hybrid position between the traditional and the modern. In this sense, the characters of the novel are "conscripts of modernity," subjects whose becoming is enabled by the tragedy of colonial enlightenment.⁷¹ According to Scott, the "tragedy [of the enlightened colonial subject]"

inheres in the fact that, inescapably modern as [s/]he is obliged by the modern conditions of his[/her] life to be, [s/]he must seek his[/her] freedom in the very technologies, conceptual languages and institutional formations in which modernity's rationality has sought his[/her] enslavement.⁷²

In other words, the promises of freedom that modern forms of mobility articulate are, from the very outset, contradictory in nature. This dilemma lies at the heart of the anxious mobilities tracked by Aidoo in *Changes*.

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⁷¹ Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*.

⁷² *Conscripts of Modernity*, 168.

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