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ON A PERPETUAL STATE OF BECOMING:

Transnationality and Precarity against the American Dream in Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*

ABSTRACT: This paper reads Ethiopian-American writer Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007) to consider how the liminal experience of national identity that is often thematized in transnational literature pertains not only to the intersections of race and gender, but also to class conditions. The novel's protagonist, Sepha, struggles to reconcile idealistic notions of America with the harsh realities of working-class life in a low-income DC neighborhood. To Sepha, citizenship figures not as the stable destination the American dream professes to offer, but rather as a marginal state of isolation and uncertainty. For decades, linear notions of immigration as assimilation have been subject to critique and re-framing. In addition, recent developments in the labor market under late-stage capitalism have generated working-class narratives that are fragmented by the forces of precarity. Mengestu's novel addresses, through Sepha, an intersection between an ephemeral transnational identity and a precarious working-class position, subverting the narrative chronology of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century migrant novels. By contrast with these, transnational and precarious narratives defer such stable endpoints to remain in transition. The result, this paper argues, is the aesthetic expression of a perpetual state of becoming, the prevalence of which ought to be further considered within the field of American studies.

Keywords: transnational literature, working class, transnationality and class, precarity, intersectionality, liminality

Dinaw Mengestu's debut novel *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007) introduces Sepha Stephanos, an Ethiopian immigrant who runs a struggling grocery store in Washington, DC. As part of an unspoken routine, his two longtime friends, Joseph and Kenneth, have made a habit of stopping by the shop on Tuesdays. One afternoon, as the three sit by a small fold-up table in the back of the shop, Joseph jokingly asks: "How is America today, Stephanos?" (Mengestu 6). It soon becomes clear that the question is a standard part of their weekly meetups, and that the answer varies according to the profits made on the day on which it is asked. Most of the time, Sepha finds himself disillusioned by the grocery store's slow economic decline. On the rare days it earns him a slim margin, however, his faith is restored in the simple mantra that "America is beautiful after all" (5). As Sepha's unsteady confidence in the US suggests, he is always navigating liminal spaces, both between the unstable positioning of his working-class and immigrant status, as well as between his Ethiopian and American identities.[1] The fluid motion of these navigations, in which Sepha grasps for things that remain out of his reach, is arguably characteristic of transnational literature. As the present paper understands this genre, it can be defined less by its depiction of finite journeys, and more by its awareness of the many overlaps that stratify and coexist within a matrix of the migrant's experience. That notwithstanding, Sepha's frangible sense of belonging can also be attributed to a crumbling belief in the possibility of social mobility that is often metaphorized through the concept of the American dream. Challenged for centuries as a romanticized ideal in stories of America, from Friedrick Douglass' *Narrative* (first published in 1845), to Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills" (1861), the dream of reaching some "final destination" in a composite of social attachment and economic security now faces the new pressures of "precarity." As Guy Standing defines this concept, it refers to the many personal liabilities and risks that workers are forced to accept in the flexible labor market of late-stage capitalism (Standing, *Precariat Charter* 21). Indeed, one could then argue that a state of insecurity is making its imprint on transnational literature, not only in its narrativization of cross-border migrations, but also in its representation of the material conditions that frame these journeys.

Published only two years after Shelley Fisher Fishkin's addressal of "the transnational turn" in American Studies, Mengestu's novel constructs an interesting thematic connection between matters of national belonging and class position. As Pieter Vermeulen writes of *Beautiful Things*, "Mengestu's novel cuts across the conventions of the literary migrant novel; it shows how different forms of restlessness and mobility fail to map onto each other, and how the friction between these movements generates a tractless affect that cannot be slotted as readily recognized emotional experience" (284). This argument connects to Vermeulen's broader claim that works of contemporary migrant fiction mediate the "market logic" of neoliberalism. In the case of *Beautiful Things*, he suggests that the novel ostensibly promises an emotionally moving tale of migration, but that its resistance to resolution undercuts our ability to consume it as such (278). Instead, readers are asked to stay with Sepha in the midst of a challenging life situation, without reaping the quick satisfaction of a happy ending. In the same vein, this paper argues that overlapping portrayals of precarity and transnationality are key to the novel's proposed break with tradition. In particular, the liminal space these concepts generate can be seen as a disruption of the narrative chronology we might associate with some late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century narratives of immigration. Where the latter imply a linear journey toward a "final" American identity, transnational and precarious stories typically defer stable

endpoints to remain ever in transition. As I stress further below, the tendency to remain in flux instead of attaining the American dream has long been explored through the migrant novel, and it remains a highly topical theme in transnational literature. But in my view, the negative role a precarious class position can play in this destabilization could be further explored in scholarly readings. As Nicholas Van Hear points out, "the form of migration and its outcomes are shaped by the resources—economic or network-based—that would-be migrants can muster" (101). In this, he importantly reminds us that material conditions impact, and often circumscribe in detrimental ways, how a transnational story might unfold.

As for *Beautiful Things*, the novel can be read as refuting the possibility of a stable identity positioning on the liminal fringes of society because Sepha's journey never truly ends. One could certainly object that the flexible expression of identity that emerges in this trajectory is not an inherently negative one as it reflects the general plasticity of modern society. In my view, one's class position can nevertheless be seen as rendering such a perpetual state of becoming more destructive than productive. In this, I refer to the risks of limited agency, social isolation, and fiscal insecurity that accompany precarity. In any case, the field of American Studies ought to consider the aesthetic expression of perpetual states of becoming and ask what these mean for the future of the discipline. Here I point to the way in which these everlasting journeys dislodge the markers of nationality and identity from which the limits of the field have been historically drawn. As such, I align myself with Fishkin's ambition for American Studies to persevere as "a place where borders both within and outside the nation are interrogated and studied, rather than reified and reinforced" (20). But I am also asking that we remain attentive to the transnational subject within this radical boundary dissolution, especially as such subjects' location within the hierarchy of class can impact their ability to positively partake in its free flow.

Whose American Dream? Mythmaking, the Migrant Novel, and the Legacy of the Bildungsruman in Transnational Literature

The origins of the American dream as an idiomatic phrase are contested, but Scott Sandage points to an early outline in James Truslow Adams's *The Epic of America* (1931), which describes the "dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are" (404).[2] As such, the dream is a surprisingly young concept, but its ideological bearings arguably trace even further back to the country's seventeenth-century colonization. Likewise, critiques of the dream as an illusion have long been formulated, for instance through Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853), whose titular character is driven into paralyzing apathy by the repetitive and meaningless work he executes in a Wall Street office. Other nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers, such as Frederick Douglass and Charles Alexander Eastman/Ohiyesa, have also drawn attention to the inescapable fact that the dream is only attainable to a privileged few, as well as its intrinsic bond to racial constructions of whiteness and hegemonic masculinity.

Despite its deceptive nature, the dream's lasting influence on American culture has, in turn, been widely recognized in scholarship since the mid twentieth century. For instance, Jennifer L. Hochschild noted in 1995 that "those who do not fit the model disappear from the collective self-portrait. Thus the irony is doubled: not only has the ideal of universal participation been denied to most Americans, but also the very fact of its denial has itself been denied in our national self-image" (39-40). Hochschild importantly

underlines that there is a difference between referencing the American dream as a proxy for an underlying ideology and referencing it as a practical phenomenon. For while the former has proven surprisingly durable throughout the centuries, its execution in real life is unfeasible against the tangents of class, race, and gender that are still used to control and suppress its contenders. Therefore, I here apply an understanding of the American dream as a cultural myth which, despite its many contradictions, persists, and has shaped and imprinted narratives of migration.

In this interpretation, the dream's imaginative power has made an imprint on the narratives of America, particularly in its execution through the subject of the "self-made man." Indeed, aspirations of a linear trajectory of success have played a role in several notable nineteenth- and early twentieth-century narratives of immigration. Works like Drude Krog Jansson's *A Saloonkeeper's Daughter* (1887), Abraham Cahan's *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896), and Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* (1912) see characters who face much resistance as they enter American society, but nevertheless strive to forge fully formed identities by means of upward social mobility. Other examples remain in conversation with the American dream, but see it derail from its linear path into an impasse. Of note here would be Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1905), which follows a Lithuanian family into the darkest corners of the Chicago meat-packing industry. Furthermore, scholars have also problematized the narrativization of America as a "new world" at the grasp of actors who are, as Adams put it, "innately capable" of forging their future. For instance, Mishuana Goeman duly argues that these ideas have been used in art to create and sustain a "settler aesthetics" (16). I am not suggesting that the early migrant novel, or the academic scholarship dedicated to its interpretation, should be accused of naively idealizing the American dream. The reason I bring up the literary examples of Jansson, Cahan, and Antin is rather that these works assemble themselves on the "autobiographical" adumbrations of the Bildungsroman, and therein represent a complex, but nevertheless linear, narrative structure that we rarely see in contemporary works such as *Beautiful Things*.[3]

Literary scholars John Frow, Melissa Hardie, and Vanessa Smith capture the elemental form of the Bildungsroman in the following way: "a young man from the provinces seeks his fortune in the city, and undergoes a process of education in the ways of the world such that he eventually becomes reconciled with it" (Frow, Hardie, and Smith 1905). In its most conservative interpretation, Jagdish Gupta elaborates, the genre thus "emphasizes the idea of masculine maturation propelled by a chronological progress for a higher stage" (366). But as these scholars further note, the Bildungsroman has since developed beyond this simple "template," as the placeholder for each intersection they mention (e.g., the gender of the protagonist, their origin and destination, not to mention what "the process of education" they undergo entails) can be reimagined endlessly. Here one should note the subgenre of the "ethnic Bildungsroman," which has, since the mid twentieth century, decentered the aforementioned theme of "masculine maturation," with its consideration of ethnicity, race, and individual aspirations. That notwithstanding, the scope of this paper prevents me from addressing the many figurations Bildung has taken on over the decades, and as such, my argument refers only to the linear story of "becoming" that has girded its tradition. There is strong evidence to suggest that the Bildung's recognizable narrative structure, which has in turn served as a metaphorical proxy for the myth of the American dream, has borne a lasting influence on the migrant novel. As the points above show, however, the bond between motif and genre has never been an uncomplicated one.

As a contemporary example of the migrant novel, *Beautiful Things* considers how the American dream can erode and fray without fully disappearing from view. Throughout the story, its lasting image as an unattainable but alluring fantasy looms over the ambitions of the characters. While Sepha's belief in the dream is waning at best, his uncle, Berhane, maintains a more naïve optimism:

> He used to have the grandest ambitions for me when I first arrived from Ethiopia. "Just wait and see," he would tell me in that soft-spoken, eloquent voice of his. "You will be an engineer or a doctor. I only wish your father could have lived to see it." Tears would well up in his eyes sometimes as he spoke about the future, which he believed could only be filled with better and beautiful things. (Mengestu 41)

When tears well up in Berhane's eyes at the prospect of his nephew becoming an engineer or a doctor, he describes the American dream in its most idealized form, despite the hardships both he and Sepha have faced since coming to the US. Berhane's character comes to represent the lasting belief in social mobility I associated above with some examples of the earlier migrant novel. Resonant here is the fabula diagram developed over forty years ago by William Q. Boelhower in is his attempt to define the genre. As part of Boelhower's model, subjects move through three central stages in their venture between the homeland and their new destination: expectation, contact, and resolution. Importantly, Boelhower associates the final narrative stage of resolution with the process of assimilation (5). Recent scholarship explores this idea further. For instance, in her reading of Jean Kwok's *Girl in Translation* (2010), Brygida Gasztold argues that the novel remains in conversation with earlier "assimilative immigrant narratives," among them Antin's *The Promised Land* (80). Writing on migrant fiction after 9/11, Katie Daily-Bruckner sees recent additions to the genre that critique and resist a renewed pressure to align with a narrative of American nationalism (261). With this, we are reminded of the fact that Boelhower's model, despite figuring as an ideal type, reads as far too simple from a present perspective, particularly in its lacking an account of the ways in which the migrant novel can subvert such narrative stages. Notably, it places heavy emphasis on the concept of assimilation as a means to *resolve* liminal positions, suggesting in turn that the migrant subject can or wants to shed their former identity/identities, which is most certainly not always the case. And yet, the model mirrors Berhane's assimilationist (but well meaning) ambition for his nephew to *become* an American.

Sepha understands the unattainability of this dream and yet struggles to discard it entirely. The assimilationist logic that undergirds it is, of course, a deeply problematic one with a long history of violence. But as Mengestu's novel is sensitive to the many intersections of the transnational migrant experience, it is nevertheless unafraid in its consideration of assimilation's allure of social cohesion. Although Sepha feels ambivalent toward American society and his place within it, part of him also yearns for a sense of belonging. This desire is especially reflected in his interest in literature as a means to escape, but also to re-frame, his precarious existence. In a particularly salient passage, Sepha reflects: "I had tried to recast myself into the type of man who dined casually on porcelain plates and chatted easily about Emerson and Tocqueville while sitting on a plush leather couch in a grand house" (Mengestu 80). Ultimately, Sepha feels that this "recast" fails, and feels foolish for ever having had confidence in it. In my view, we can nevertheless read these reflections as a recognition of the appeal traditional migration narratives carry, although a more complex reality ultimately calls for a more nuanced reframing.

This reframing is largely achieved by Sepha's ongoing conversation with the myth of the American dream, the linear chronology of which he replaces with a perpetual state of becoming. The space of his low-income neighborhood, Logan Circle, remains key in the representation of this ephemeral experience:

> Here in Logan Circle, though, I didn't have to be anything greater than what I already was. I was poor, black, and wore the anonymity that came with that as a shield against all of the early ambitions of the immigrant, which had long since abandoned me, assuming they had ever really been mine to begin with. As it was, I did not come to America to find a better life. I came here running and screaming with the ghosts of an old one firmly attached to my back. My goal since then has always been a simple one: to persist unnoticed through the days, to do no more harm. (41)

The story Sepha tells of his own identity starkly contrasts with the fixed roles Berhane ascribes to the concept of American success. Instead, Sepha's narrative recognizes the postulations put down by his class and race alike. Although he mentions "the early ambitions of the immigrant," he also makes it clear that he has never felt a sense of ownership over the naïve optimism the phrase implies. Where Berhane wants nothing but the best for his nephew, Sepha imagines a life for himself that is marked by the strict absence of ambition altogether. Instead, his wish to "persist unnoticed through the days" mirrors the liminal position he is confined to. Like a ghost or a specter, Sepha wants to be weightless and invisible, the verb "persist" underlining his passive endurance of the outside forces that impact his daily life.

One might think that Sepha would find a sense of belonging with his two longtime friends, Kenneth and Joseph. Instead, these characters have invested in other narratives of immigration that are not necessarily liminal. Unlike Sepha and Joseph, Kenneth *has* achieved the American dream in the strictest sense and now works as an engineer. Still, Sepha seemingly feels that Kenneth is enacting a shallow role through his reproduction of typical Americanisms. Partial to idioms about working hard, Sepha dryly notes that "he's come to believe that American men are so successful because they say the same thing over and over again" (2). Joseph is a waiter at "an expensive downtown restaurant," and his life appears more similar to Sepha's (5). Although he is originally from Congo, one of his recurring jokes is based on the obfuscation of his country of origin. As Sepha puts it, "There was hardly a single thing in Joseph's life, though, that hadn't become a metaphor for Africa" (100). From this, it appears that Joseph aligns his sense of self more closely with the African diaspora, which, despite being culturally complex and disjointed, lends him a more stable sense of self. Of the three friends, Sepha thus stands out with the distinctly liminal telling of his story, underlining his status as a highly individualized, but also alienated, transnational subject.

Overall, Sepha's story illustrates how the migrant novel has evolved into new, complex, and pluralized expressions that are not as so easily conceivable as a linear Bildungsroman, nor as a celebration of the American dream. This brings us back to the notion of transnational literature and calls for some further clarifications of the concept itself. Not only does increasing globalization complicate questions of national identity, but technological developments have also made it easier to maintain familial and social connections across geographical borders. It is against these developments, Paul Jay argues, that we need this kind of literature:

> transnational literature is a particular type of literature, emergent at an identifiable historical moment and dealing,

> collectively, with a set of issues and themes associated with decolonization, globalization, postmodernity, and technology. Put another way, transnational literature is about the variety of forms of transnational experience produced by the convergence of these forces. (51)

Although Jay notes that what constitutes transnational literature is notoriously difficult to pin down, he suggests a tentative definition in literature that represents forms of "transnational experience." Crucial to this representation seems to be a *dynamic* understanding of migration as an ongoing process (as opposed to one with a finite conclusion). Here, I also reiterate another crucial critique of the early immigration literature, which heavily emphasized whiteness. As Spickard, Beltrán, and Hooton note, the classic celebrations of the migrant formulated by historic writers such as Wittke and Crèvecoeur, were, despite their potency, unequivocally dedicated to newcomers from Northwestern Europe (5). In reality, racially diverse migrants have entered the US long before the contemporary age, something that is further complicated by the American history of slavery. Transnational literature has long decentered monolithic and white-centered conceptions of the migrant, instead distinguishing itself as keenly attentive to both race and racial prejudice. Where the American dream might have offered a final destination in some earlier stories of immigration, as illustrated in Berhane's fantasies above, transnational literature thus brings to light a much more complicated reality.

Precarity and Class Position in Transnational Literature

Much as the concept of transnational literature reminds us that contemporary stories of immigration hold much more than a set journey from start to finish, so has the academic discourse on class been positively diversified in recent decades. Moving away from traditional labor history, which, in the American context, has been known for favoring white, male, industrial workers, Lizabeth Cohen noted already in the mid 1990s a turn in modern working-class studies not only toward smaller grass-roots actors but also to the intersectional relationship between class, race, and gender (Cohen). This shift relates to the point I touch on above, namely that class significantly intersects with figurations of transnational experience. Race has already been recognized as an overt theme in notable works of transnational fiction such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016). This is also true for Mengestu's *Beautiful Things*, which Bénédicte Ledent aptly reads as an exploration of "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" (110). While it is absolutely true that discourses of race and racial identity comprise a crucial aspect of many transnational stories, I nevertheless reiterate that class should also be approached as a foundational structure that postulates the limitations and possibilities available to the transnational subject. Although a higher class position cannot fully protect individuals from prejudice, material resources can certainly serve as a buffer to the structural constraints race and gender put forth and typically open up doors to otherwise unattainable social spaces. This type of freedom is associated with cosmopolitanism, a philosophy that presupposes the existence of human interconnectedness across nation states. As Peng Cheah notes, the concept of cosmopolitanism has been criticized on these very grounds, as it glosses over obvious social and economic inequalities brought on by global capitalism (Cheah). Resoundingly, a lower-class position will quickly confine transnational subjects, who are already vulnerable, to the fringes of society, denying

them the benefits that a "free flow" between states and identities can bring.

Indeed, a contemporary working-class position is typically far from cosmopolitan. Guy Standing has written extensively on the rise of temporary forms of labor in the wake of the 1980s' neoliberal surge, and how this has impacted class-structures and identities. From this, he suggests the emergence of a new class category which he has named the "precariat":

> One defining characteristic of the precariat is distinctive relations of production: so-called "flexible" labor contracts; temporary jobs; labor as casuals, part timers, or intermittently for labor brokers or employment agencies. But conditions of unstable labor are part of the definition, not the full picture. More crucially, those in the precariat have no secure occupational identity; no occupational narrative they can give to their lives. (Standing, "Precariat" 10)

As Standing explains the precariat, this new class category is not only shaped by the financial pressures of uncertainty, but also by the loss of identity occurring as a direct consequence. He notes how, in the past, long-term positions on the factory floor ensured not only financial stability for workers, but also a foundation of collective experience from which they could relate to one another. With this, Standing does not claim that workers under the Fordist model of production did not face oppression, but that it nevertheless afforded a valuable sense of stability. As he suggests, short-term contracts for employers like Amazon or Uber puts strain on workers to secure their next paycheck, and by extension, erode the social bonds that have previously united the working class. Precarity can thus be understood as a contemporary working-class experience marked by insecurity—of livelihood, community, and self.

As I see it, Mengestu's *Beautiful Things* is a literary work aptly aware not only of this particular type of insecurity, but also of the ways in which precarity interlaces with the transnational experience to render a more destructive state of perpetual becoming for vulnerable migrant subjects. Sepha is clearly transnational, but defining him as a precariat worker in Standing's sense of the term is more complicated. Since he runs his own business, he is technically part of the entrepreneurial middle class. Ironically, though, Sepha's store is key to our impression of his life as precarious. Since it is always teetering on the edge of foreclosure, it forces him to live day to day. As a consequence, Sepha endures a prolonged state of insecurity that makes it difficult for him to formulate what Standing above calls an "occupational narrative" ("Precariat" 10). The "story" of his failing business is a messy one, full of rifts between dream and dissolution:

> I spent two thousand dollars of borrowed money on it with the idea that perhaps my store could become a deli, and in becoming a deli, a restaurant, and in becoming a restaurant, a place that I could sit back and look proudly upon. I place the chairs right in front of the empty deli counter. I sit with my back against the glass. It's May 2. Since January, I've had exactly three deli orders (turkey, no mayo, wheat bread; turkey, mustard, wheat bread; turkey, just one slice), not a single one after lunchtime. Despite my recent efforts, there is nothing special to my store. It's narrow, shabby, and brightly lit, with a ceiling of fluorescent bulbs that hum for over an hour every morning after being turned on. I sell twenty-five-cent bags of potato chips, two-liter bottles of Pepsi, boxes of macaroni and cheese, diapers, soap, detergent, condensed milk in narrow aisles haphazardly arranged. (3)

For a moment, Sepha imagines a steadfast trajectory to his business, developing from a deli to a successful restaurant. When he envisions something to "sit back and look proudly upon," he arguably also sees a version of himself with a more permanent sense of identity. He also sits himself by the abandoned Deli counter, physically going through the motions of this dream. But as he remembers the meager number of deli orders he has received, three in total, his mind shifts back to reality. Because "there is nothing special" about Sepha's store, it fails to offer him a satisfying narrative about his life. Instead, its crooked shelves and "haphazard" arrangement embody the messier reality he has come to accept. When Sepha lists the ordinary grocery items he sells—bottles of Pepsi and condensed milk—he inadvertently underlines a sense of mundanity or insignificance that comes into stark contrast with his previous aspirations. The store thus emerges as a physical manifestation of the transnational experience under precarity—it is a messy, ill-defined, and disconcerting space. In other words, Sepha's business is also representative of his liminal identity: on the one hand, it makes him an entrepreneur, which has often been seen as epitomizing the American dream, but on the other, it places him within the precarious working class.

Liminality and the Perpetual State of Becoming

I have already applied the word "liminal" as an adjective in this paper, but the concept of liminality calls for some further clarification. That is, the perpetual state of becoming that defines Sepha's circumstances represents a form of unresolved narrative positioning that remains constantly in a conceptual borderland. As I mention above, this opaque state could certainly be read positively for transnational characters who merge different cultural experiences into a new, constantly developing whole. But for others, like Mengestu's Sepha, the liminal transnational experience is more conflicted. Part of that conflict seems to arise from class position, as stark economic divisions limit his ability to live out the idealized narrative of the American dream. Unable to either return home or succeed as a self-made man in the US, Sepha is left to navigate the fringes of an uncertain everyday. As such, the concept of liminality offers a key term for us to approach the complicated relationship between the transnational and precarious working-class experience. Theater scholars Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen and Joshua Edelman define liminality as "a transitory and precarious phase between stable states, which is marked off by conceptual, spatial and/or temporal barriers, within which individuals, groups and/or objects are set apart from society and/or the everyday" (1). Immediately interesting is Skjoldager-Nielsen and Edelman's description of the liminal position as one of *isolation*. When subjects or groups move "between stable states," they also feel themselves to be set apart from society at large. I would argue that class position is key to the valor of this dislodged experience, as it can color it either as a cosmopolitan form of freedom or as an experience of marginalized alienation. Furthermore, where Skjoldager-Nielsen and Edelman define liminality as a finite process, transnational literature arguably experiments with forms of liminality that are not temporary, but rather persist as constant states in and of themselves. Arguably, the transnational subject cannot arrive at a stable state because its very nature is one of suspension.

Part of Sepha's ambivalence also relates to the fact that he has recently befriended his neighbor Judith, a white ex-professor of American political history whose arrival in the neighborhood is inextricable from the gentrification it is currently undergoing. In Judith lies the promise of a form of social belonging and mobility Sepha has

previously felt impossible. Their first meeting becomes emblematic of this idealized vision:

> Judith was sitting on the bottom steps of the house on an early fall afternoon with a little girl leaning back in between her legs when I came out of my house. I was dressed for a wedding, and as I turned to lock the door behind me, I heard her say, "What a beautiful garment." Her use of the word "garment" struck me most—it was polite, almost formal, as if the word had been inserted into her sentence at the last possible moment out of an instinctive sense of cultural diplomacy. I was dressed entirely in white. I had on white pants, with a white shirt that had a crucifix embroidered down the middle, over which I wore a finely woven shroud of white cotton. It was an outfit that meant nothing here, stripped as it was of all context. (18)

Sepha and Judith's first meeting sees him don traditional clothes from Ethiopia. He has previously felt anxious about the outfit, which, "stripped as it was of all context," makes him vulnerable to the judgmental gaze of passersby. On the contrary, Judith grasps not only the significance of Sepha's clothing, but uses it as a means to spark up a conversation. Although Sepha notices a slight awkwardness to Judith's "cultural diplomacy," it also makes him feel seen in a way he is not accustomed to. For readers, the scene, remaining true to the novel's liminal position as a whole, allows us to read its context from more than one perspective. At its core, Sepha and Judith's initial meeting represents an ideal encounter across cultures, marked by mutual respect and a desire to understand. On another level, Sepha's traditional clothing, all-white and outfitted with a "crucifix," makes him appear almost non-human or saint-like. This leaves us to question whether his appeal to Judith lies in his personal attributes, or whether it is his cultural "exotism" that draws her toward him.

This uncomfortable ambivalence continues throughout Sepha and Judith's relationship, which teeters on the edge of, but never grows into, a fully-fledged romance. Their unresolved relationship thus speaks to the perpetual state of becoming that I argue is central to the novel. More broadly, transnational literature often uses romantic relationships to explore liminal and dislodged positions across boundaries, a prominent example of which would be Adichie's *Americanah*. In the novel, as Jennifer Leetsch argues, there is a clear "correlation between love and spatial practices," as the Nigerian-American protagonist, Ifemelu, navigates a sense of identity through her American lovers, where a nostalgic longing for the stable state of home is closely connected to her first love, Obinze (Leetsch 5). Although the story grants the possibility of the two reconnecting, Obinze and the ideas connected to his personhood remain out of Ifemelu's reach for most of the plotline, leaving her to grapple with the uprootedness of her present life. Similarly, *Beautiful Things* sees Sepha's relationship to Judith as emblematic of the liminal space he cannot transition out of. Part of Sepha wants the relationship to develop, a desire that seems fortified by the profound connection he makes to Naomi, Judith's young daughter—an intelligent and charismatic girl whose father is implied to be a person of color. His interactions are, however, stunted by his chronic passivity and feelings of inadequacy. The closest the two get is described by Sepha as "a gentle press, or an extended graze of lips, full of a sudden, almost crushing tenderness" (59). Although promising, this exchange never develops further, and Sepha accepts it as a moment that simply passes.

Of course, the stunted nature of the romantic relationship is not just a product of Sepha's transnational status, but also traces back to his class position. Realizing that he cannot live up to Judith's expectations, Sepha painfully crafts a

fictional image of Naomi's father to contend with his own precarious reality:

> The picture was complete now. I could see him, Judith's former husband and Naomi's semiabsent father. I imagined a tall, sandy-skinned man with oval wire-rim glasses and smart, well-tailored suits like the ones my father used to wear. Someone who spoke with a crisp accent, whom women described as being gorgeous. I imagined academic conferences, family vacations on windswept beaches, and late-night dinner parties. A confident and assured voice that knew how to order wines, talk to sales-clerks, and command the attention of a room. Someone I knew I could never stand against. (135-36)

Succinctly, the ex-husband Sepha makes up for Judith mirrors the person he might have seen himself become under the guise of the American dream. Attractive and well educated, this fantasy figure appears somehow reminiscent of Sepha's own father. In Sepha's mind, Judith's ex-husband possesses many markers of high socioeconomic class—he knows wine and books and treats his family to extravagant trips. The real Sepha cannot compete with this cartoonish upper-class figure. Although we never become privy to Judith's inner feelings about Sepha, she does seem to abandon the romanticized notion of him that she may have had at the outset of their relationship. Noticing the growing strain between them, Sepha reflects on how "I wanted to take it back and start all over again, just as we had that evening in my apartment, but I knew that we had run out of roles to play" (137). Indeed, Judith's relationship to Sepha ultimately reads as more explorative than committed. She invites him over for dinner, lets him watch Naomi, and frequents his store with a sense of belonging. For a time, the three appear almost like a family. But the practical realities of committing to someone like Sepha—their differences in class, finances, and sense of national belonging—ultimately becomes unrealistic. The end result is a relationship that is as precarious as Sepha's life outside it.

Toward the end of the novel, a local man disillusioned with the gentrification of Logan Circle tries to burn down Judith's house and she decides to move away. This choice she makes also demonstrates the contrasting mobility levels of Sepha and Judith as characters: "'I still owe you a dinner,' she said. 'Maybe once I settle into a temporary place, you can come over and join Naomi and me.' That we haven't spoken or seen each other since then is no surprise. It was enough to pretend, for just that afternoon, that our lives might intersect again" (228). Where Sepha is precariously stuck in the "in-between" in his state of becoming, Judith reads as a person who freely and willingly remains in motion. In the end, Sepha's life is tethered to Logan Circle, which, for Judith, only seems to have represented one of many temporary places. Although these two characters have bonded over a mutual desire to belong, or perhaps even to be, something permanent, they have very different options once the spell of this promise has been broken. In this sense, the arsenous neighbor represents a negative mirroring of Sepha's own circumstances, the many frustrations from which are manifested in a violent act of eradication.

The Isolated Denizen: Collective and Personal Relationships

Sepha's position in the liminal space of wavering national identity and precarious class position makes it difficult for him to form lasting social bonds, both on the collective and personal planes. Returning to Standing's work, he notes how a large portion of the precariat is made up of migrant workers who face overlapping forms of marginalization: "Migrants are the light infantry of global capitalism. Vast numbers vie with

each other for jobs. Most have put up with short-term contracts, with low wages and few benefits. The process is systemic, not accidental. The world is becoming full of denizens" (*Precariat* 113). Standing argues that migrant workers, pushed into the insecure circumstances we have come to associate with the precariat at large, also tend to become "denizens": a category of reduced citizenship historically reserved for non-native peoples. Denizens are forced to take on the least lucrative jobs (even if they are over-qualified), and to boot have to compete fiercely among their peers to get them. Besides the economic dimension of denizenship, Standing underlines the social discrimination that accompanies it. Migrant workers are frequently portrayed as outcasts who promote non-Western values and threaten the status quo (*Precariat* 114). The result, he argues, is not only material disadvantages, but also an isolating narrative that alienates them from participating as equal parts of the mainstream culture.

Throughout the novel, Sepha's denizen status keeps him from experiencing a sense of solidaric belonging with other Black Americans. This issue is particularly prominent in his ambiguous feelings about the ongoing gentrification of his neighborhood. Attending a meeting in a church basement on the issue, Sepha becomes a spectator as opposed to an active participant:

> When the speeches came back to the neighborhood, the people's anger was barely disguised. I don't know who used the word "they" first. . . . Once the word entered the meeting, it seemed to trail onto the end of nearly every sentence. I don't know who they think they are. What are they doing here anyway. They have their own neighborhoods and now they want ours too. It's bad enough that they have all the jobs and schools. I was convinced that if given enough space and time, a conclusion would have been drawn that held "them" responsible not only for the evictions in the neighborhood, but for every slight and injury each person in that room had suffered, from the children who never made it past junior high to the unpaid heating bill waiting in a dresser drawer. (199-200)

On this section of the book, Ledent notes how Ms. Davis, the leader of the meeting and a prominent figure in the community, "encourages the neighborhood . . . to adopt an us/them rhetoric with which Sepha finds it difficult to feel comfortable" (114). From his liminal position, Sepha observes this schism on a meta level. On the one hand, his relativized stance allows him to discern the emotional pain that lies hidden beneath the increasingly heated discussion. He understands that his neighbors are not just angry about rising rents caused by recent gentrification, but more deeply about the many disappointments structural oppression inflicts onto personal life. The coupling of "children who never made it past junior high" with unpaid heating bills in the same sentence implies a dual grief: both over futures deferred and presents continually circumscribed by precarity. On the other hand, Sepha fails to pierce through the membrane of alienation that separates these stories from his own, although there are overlaps. Indeed, he carries his own traumas from the Ethiopian war and certainly has his share of heating bills stuffed away. But despite this, Sepha is unable to claim a sense of ownership over the discussion.

In the end, Logan Circle seems to be one of the few stable fixtures of Sepha's liminal existence. In an interesting paradox, Mengestu imagines this neighborhood less as a permanent space, and more as a signifier of continual instability, which only highlights the persistence of Sepha's liminal existence even further. This impression holds true even when he has lost everything—his store has been foreclosed, Judith has left, and his neighborhood is fast becoming

unrecognizable due to gentrification. Sepha's final words seem indeed to embrace a life in continual flux, the fluidity of which is emblematized in the space of Logan Circle:

> We try to do the best we can. There are moments like this, however, when we are neither coming nor going, and all we have to do is sit and look back on the life we have made. Right now, I'm convinced that my store looks more perfect than ever before. I can see it exactly as I have always wanted to see it. Through the canopy of trees that line the walkway cutting through the middle of the circle is a store, one that is neither broken nor perfect, one that, regardless of everything, I'm happy to claim as entirely my own. (228)

Nicole Cesare has already made a compelling connection between the representation of spaces as concrete embodiments of Sepha's inner life in *Beautiful Things*. On Sepha's remark regarding his store as "more perfect than ever before," despite his lease being foreclosed, Cesare writes that the "ambiguity of the ending places the reader in the position of either filling in the narrative and constructing an alternate conclusion to Sepha's story or accepting the uncertainty of his final position" (133). This paper leans toward the latter option of this interpretation, as Sepha's soliloquy can be read as a literal acceptance of "the liminal space" his life unfolds within. Where Sepha once felt his store looked shabby, he now embraces that it is "neither broken nor perfect." In this claim, he can also be said to do away with the ideal of the American dream, which has long postulated over his life an ideal of perfection against which he has felt insufficient. When he claims the store as "entirely my own," this might have less to do with his legal ownership of the shop itself, and more to do with a final acceptance of "the life we have made." Of course, even this acceptance does not represent a stable state, for although Sepha finally claims a sense of belonging to Logan Circle, he knows that the space will continue to change. And even though his final lines signal a newfound sense of agency, readers are left to grapple with the many uncomfortable and unresolved tensions that remain. Sepha might have embraced his status as a transnational subject, but as a member of the precariat, the material bearings of his future are left in shambles.

Conclusion

Mengestu's *Beautiful Things* highlights the impact of a precarious working-class position on transnational experience, highlighting the importance of intersectional and, particularly, class-inclusive approaches to this kind of literature. As I have stressed throughout this paper, the emphasis on fluidity that transnational literature brings to conceptions of migration remains key to our understanding of the innate complexity this process holds. But the issue of class position remains ever-present in framing the potentialities and risks that accompany the migrant's journey. As such, the contribution this paper makes to the existing scholarship is in underlining how the overlaps between transnationality and precarity in Mengestu's novel speak to a broader "revision" of linear narratives—and not only those that find their home within the migrant novel genre. Sepha's perpetual state of becoming remains unresolved and calls on us to question not only the meaning of national belonging or class, but also the somewhat rigid limitations postulated by the notion of "American literature" itself. The primus motor of this dynamism is arguably not a distinct "Americanness" in Mengestu's novel, but rather lies in its investigation of the many crevices surrounding this singular node—among them those of the Ethiopian, diasporic, and working-class subject. Emerging are the outlines of a particular aesthetics in which liminal spaces force us to

suspend, revise, and re-think old lines of thought—especially pertaining to the reductive idealization of cross-border migration. This point returns us to the words of Fishkin's address, which helpfully reminds us that "[t]he United States is and has always been a transnational crossroads of cultures" (44). Indeed, it might be the case that transnational literature outfits American Studies with a new way to probe these crossroads—be they the ones long established or those that are now emerging.

Notes

1. This paper applies liminality as a theoretical concept, the definition of which is further elaborated on page 10.

2. See Sandage 261-62.

3. To this, one should note that the migrant novel does not always adapt to the form of Bildung, and that there exist other variations of this genre. In the context of American literature, however, I would argue that the motifs of the Bildungsroman remain in close affiliation to the migrant novel, although, as Jo Collins argues, the genre often deconstructs and reimagines the anatomy of traditional Bildung (Collins).

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