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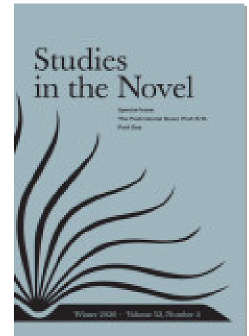

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9/11 AND THE COLLAPSE OF THE AMERICAN DREAM: IMBOLO MBUE'S *BEHOLD THE DREAMERS*

ELIZABETH TOOHEY

When Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* was published in late 2016, its nuanced and sympathetic portrayal of undocumented immigrants striving to make a life for themselves in the new world was heralded as a well-timed response to the rise of neo-nationalism in the nascent Trump-era. The headline for the *Washington Post* review pronounced it "The One Novel Donald Trump Should Read Now," while the *Boston Globe* titled its review "The American Dream Deferred," placing Mbue's novel on a continuum of American classics alongside Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun.* The influence of the African literary canon on Mbue, who hails from Cameroon, was remarked on as well. Referring to *Behold the Dreamers* as "a very African book," Aaron Bady noted in *Literary Hub* that the character arc for Jende Jonga—the protagonist of *Behold the Dreamers*, along with his wife Neni—in many ways echoes that of Okonkwo, the hero of Chinua Achebe's classic *Things Fall Apart*.[1] As strikingly, Jende and Neni's narrative trajectories could be said to reflect Paul Gilroy's insight on migration in *The Black Atlantic* that "the movements of black people—not only as commodities but engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship—provides a means to reexamine the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory" (16). Mbue herself, who with the popularity and acclaim of *Behold the Dreamers* succeeded in achieving the American dream where her protagonists did not, has also been seen as part of the trend of Afropolitanism, Taiye Selasi's term for a generation of highly educated, globe-trotting professionals whose sophistication and "effort to understand what is ailing in Africa alongside the desire to honor what is wonderful, unique" is "redefining what it means to be African," exemplified by contemporary novelists like Chimamanda Adichie, Teju Cole, and Yaa Gyasi.[2]

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In the midst of debates on where *Behold the Dreamers* fits in the African or American canon, early reviews and criticism overlooked the way Mbue's novel is imbued with themes characteristic of post-9/11 fiction, a genre centered in but not limited to American literature, and still a bit amorphous. It is certainly valid and useful to consider *Behold the Dreamers* alongside novels like *Americanah* and *Homegoing* that feature Afropolitan characters who migrate to the US but in the end opt to return home,[3] or alternatively, as of a piece with *A Raisin in the Sun* or any number of canonical American literary works centering on the American dream, yet the specific nature of the American dream's collapse that Mbue's novel portrays resonates still more deeply, I would argue, with a subset of post-9/11 literature that centers on first- and second-generation immigrants whose decision to leave the West is less an individual choice than a forcible expulsion from it—one that effectively shatters their belief in the American dream. Among the most prominent are the novels *The Submission* (2011), *From the Memoirs of a Non-Enemy Combatant* (2012), and *A Good Country* (2017), as well as the film *The Visitor* (2008) and the play *Disgraced* (2012). In these literary works, which absorb and express the political and psychological aftermath of 9/11, the American dream of freedom and meritocracy is shown to be a mythology, one that is crushed by xenophobic laws and state bureaucracies or hemmed in by widespread racism, including, but not limited to, the racialization of Islam.[4] Many of these literary texts also paint a nuanced picture of post-9/11 New York, moving beyond allusions to visual markers of the day (the physical absence of the towers or the presence of flags and patriotic murals[5]) to represent forms of local resistance through the city's diverse communities and local activism in the face of State-imposed policies and institutions that reflect the fear and xenophobia that came to dominate American political culture. That *Behold the Dreamers*, like these other literary works, was conceived of during Obama's presidency prior to the glaring eruption of Trump's white nationalism shows these authors' insight into the country's fraught political and racial dynamics, and also constitutes a questioning of the first wave of post-9/11 literature (published in the first five or so years after the attacks) written largely by authors who were white, male, and bourgeois, who focused on the trauma of the day experienced by characters much like themselves.[6]

My project, then, is to consider *Behold the Dreamers* in the context of literary works that emerged in the long, ongoing wake of 9/11, in particular what has been termed its second wave (Petrovic). In this period, collapse begets collapse—first of the twin towers, then of the financial and housing markets. Although this latter collapse of the American financial markets, and subsequently the global economy, is the explicit setting for *Behold the Dreamers*, the earlier collapse of the towers that ushered in the twenty-first century, in my view, haunts its pages, as well.

Behold the Dreamers centers on the married couple Jende and Neni Jonga, who immigrate to the US with their young son, Liomi. Their emigration

from Cameroon is not driven by war, famine, or poverty but by a dearth of opportunities financially, educationally, and professionally in their hometown of Limbe. Neni, as a college student, is in the country legally on a student visa, intent on mastering pre-calculus in hopes of becoming a pharmacist, while Jende, who has overstayed his own visa and applied for asylum, drives a livery cab. Their big break comes when Jende lands a job as a driver for the Lehman executive Clark Edwards, a connection made through his cousin Winston, a corporate lawyer. While Jende does Clark's bidding with unquestioning loyalty, Neni, now pregnant, forges a more complex relationship with his wife, Cindy, who hires her to serve at parties in the Hamptons and care for their son. It's a good set-up, offering paid vacation, an income that allows them to scrape together savings, and bonuses like Cindy's castoff designer clothes, until it unravels with the collapse of Lehman and the American economy, which also coincides with Jende's asylum application denial. After struggling to find another job and a way to appeal his asylum rejection, and surveying the landscape of the recession and the long and uncertain path to a green card, Jende concludes that the only move left is a return to Limbe, a decision that Neni initially forcefully resists, but acquiesces to in the end.

In considering the major themes of *Behold the Dreamers* and how they overlap with other post-9/11 novels, I begin with Mbue's portrayal of New York City—here, as a landscape of monuments that allude to 9/11 and the imbrication of racism through American history, but also conversely as a space of diverse communities and political resistance. My analysis continues with a discussion of Mbue's unmasking of the "post-racial" society as a myth of the Obama era. I conclude by considering the nature and implications of her protagonists' journey from an abiding belief in the American dream to a crushing disillusionment with it, a transformation that parallels their migration to and expulsion from the US. Examining these aspects of *Behold the Dreamers* serves a dual purpose, first by shedding a new critical light on Mbue's novel as pervaded by the political and affective wake of 9/11 through its rendering of New York and the immigrant experience; and, second, by illumining the still growing genre of post-9/11 literature through the themes *Behold the Dreamers* shares with other post-9/11 fictional texts. I conclude with an assessment of this new and burgeoning genre, which in many ways is very American, yet also transnational in its exploration of how, when America becomes for immigrants "a stage of life rather than a final destination" (Kirsch 61), it may confer economic and cultural capital on those who pass through its portals, but also exact a cost.

9/11 Literature in Its Second Wave

Early post-9/11 fiction written within a few years of the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon was preoccupied with themes of mourning and trauma and pervaded by the motif of a "falling man," based on the deeply disturbing photograph of a man leaping to his death from the burning

towers.[7] While the term "post-9/11 literature" once referred solely to these domestic novels that depicted that day as a game-changer for their protagonists (epitomized by those Kristiaan Versluys highlighted in *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* [2009]),[8] more recently a "second wave of 9/11 fiction has come to the fore" (Petrovic x). As September 2001 recedes further into the past, post-9/11 literature has concerned itself less with the tragedy and trauma of the day itself, instead shifting to a broader, deeper questioning of many of the givens of American national and cultural identity. September 11th may still be treated by many Americans as a discrete event that is in the past, but it reverberates politically as has been manifest in impositions on civil rights, drone strikes in Afghanistan, the warrantless wiretapping authorized by the USA PATRIOT Act (Duvall and Marzec 1),[9] and the fraught terrain of US immigration policy. Popular and literary culture alike are rife with these themes. The second wave of 9/11 literature, then, "more directly considers the multivalent forces of empire," representing a "newfound imaginative space founded on deconstructing the national exceptionalist fantasy," one that "imagine[s] America through a more pluralistic and ambiguous lens" (Petrovic x–xi). With the publication of novels that eschew representations of the events of 9/11, instead addressing its political aftermath (including the "war on terror" abroad, Guantánamo, or the "Ground-Zero mosque" controversy),[10] this second wave reflects the changing political and economic realities and the attendant anxieties, mythologies, and acts of resistance that arose in the long wake of that day.

It is just such an imagining of America "through a more pluralistic and ambiguous lens" with a deep attentiveness to its shifting political and economic sands that appears in *Behold the Dreamers*, making it a defining post-9/11 novel. Several of Mbue's major themes echo throughout this second wave literature, namely (1) a narrative that centers on the disillusionment of protagonists who build their lives on the ideals of fairness, opportunity, and meritocracy folded into the American dream, for whom it is revealed to be a fallacy; (2) the representation of New York as haunted by 9/11, but also a space of vibrancy, activism, and resistance to state power; and (3) the debunking of the Obama era "post-racial" landscape through a climax culminating in the expulsion of racialized immigrant bodies from the West.[11] One more striking motif that appears in many second wave texts is that of personal tragedy that takes the form of a monumental building's collapse. In *Behold the Dreamers*, a description of the Lehman Brothers tower appears early in the novel, pointing to the impending collapse of the financial markets, the ripples of which threaten to break Jende financially, spiritually, and physically, but also building on this motif of the looming collapse of a monumental building that is threaded through these early years of twenty-first-century American literary and visual culture.[12]

Prior to Lehman's collapse and the onset of the global financial crisis, however, the central theme of Mbue's novel, and what ties Jende and Neni

together as deeply as family bonds of loyalty or affection, is that both harbor a version of the American Dream—a belief in the possibility of reinventing themselves and moving, if not exactly from rags to riches, then from obscurity to prosperity that includes a freedom from constraints of gender and class. Jende and Neni are "by no means destitute—their lives are immune from war and want" (64), as Kirsch notes is characteristic of migrant novels in the new millennium. What these characters are is "afflicted by a sense of stasis, the impossibility of advancing individually or nationally"—or, as a character in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* says, they "need to escape from the oppressive lethargy of choicelessness" (qtd in Kirsch 64). The protagonists of *Behold the Dreamers* subscribe to this ideology of the American dream as offering the chance for reinvention, more expansive choices, and greater material success, and the two pursue this goal with a deep singularity of purpose. But like other post-9/11 protagonists, Jende and Neni Jonga are brought to face the collapse of their dream, not as a result of any character flaw but as a revelation of the hollowness of the US's promise of meritocracy. Folded into the collapse of their American dream is the exposure of the ideal of a "post-racial" society as a lie, as Jende in particular comes to realize—this, too, a recurring theme in post-9/11 second wave literature.[13]

By contrast, the city of New York appears as a culturally and ideologically diverse and vibrant landscape, one that welcomes or at least makes space for immigrants, as distinct from the State, cast as an intruder in the city in its attempts to detain, bar, and expel them. E. Ann Kaplan underlines this distinction in writing of her own experience of post-9/11 New York, in contrast to its representation by the national media, which she deems "a construction of a consensus in a Eurocentric and largely masculine form" (13):

> On the streets, by contrast, I experienced the multiple, spontaneous activities from multiple perspectives, genders, races, and religions or nonreligions. Things were not shaped for a specific effect, nor apparently controlled by one entity. . . . While a disciplining and homogenizing of United States response was at work through the media, on the streets something fluid, personal and varied was taking place. (15)

Second wave literature tends to explore the tension between this ideology imposed from above—one that advocates for and has the power to enforce a violent response and "heightened security"—and the messier mix of connection and expression (of grief, of an empathic impulse) generated organically within the city itself. In *Behold the Dreamers*, as in other novels that appear in the longer wake of 9/11, that organic mix of empathic connection appears, albeit with mixed results, between more privileged white citizens and those who face deportation or other forms of persecution fueled by racism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia. It is these themes I will explore first through a close reading of Mbue's portrayal of New York City.

The City and the State

Mbue, like many New Yorkers,[14] has a love affair with the city, and the fondly rendered details she offers of the cityscape and various neighborhoods in Manhattan are more than incidental to her story, functioning symbolically in what they suggest of the nature of the city. The most striking visual image of the city in *Behold the Dreamers*, and the first to appear, is of the Lehman tower itself. While the first wave of post-9/11 fiction writers were preoccupied with representing the collapse of the twin towers in a realist vein, later writers like Mbue allude to it more indirectly through visual terms that are symbolic. The national trauma of 9/11 cuts so deeply that in these still early decades of the new millennium it is almost impossible to describe a skyscraper or any monumental building's collapse without evoking the spectacle of the twin towers' fall. The World Trade towers glimmer like an apparition through the portrait Mbue paints of the Lehman tower, another glittering and imposing skyscraper that represents a stronghold of American political and financial power and primacy—ironically, given its own looming collapse. The Lehman tower's rendering through Jende's eyes with its false appearance of strength and solidity not only ironically foreshadows Lehman's collapse and that of the American and global financial markets, but hearkens back to the twin towers' literal fall, in what many would argue was the beginning of the end of America's dominance as a global power.

The free indirect discourse of Jende's description raises this specter, while also revealing much of his vision of and relationship to the forces of American capitalism:

> On a sunny day it was hard to see how far the Lehman Brothers office tower extended into the sky. Its walls seemed to soar on forever, like an infinite spear, and though Jende sometimes pushed his head far back and squinted, he couldn't see beyond the sunlight banging against the polished glass. But on a cloudy day…he could see all the way to the top. Even without the sun's rays falling on it, the building glimmered and Lehman Brothers stood regal and proud, like a prince of the Street. (46)

The metaphor of a spear and a "regal prince" overlays the Lehman tower with African imagery, emphasizing Jende's cultural frame of reference and deferential faith in American primacy and power. Yet given what readers know of Lehman's imminent collapse, dramatic irony shades the image—what appears to Jende as a pinnacle of strength and virtue, merging with the heavens, is founded on sand and soon to topple. The emphasis on transparency, or lack thereof, is key. The glass is opaque, obscuring the inner workings of the financial firm. Jende is dwarfed in this image, as the reader sees it, a supplicant at the mercy of this American god of capitalism, which can make or break him at its whim. To see the Lehman tower through Jende's eyes is to be reminded that in actuality the national religion of America is capitalism

and yet also that even the mightiest of capitalist structures may fall, causing vast collateral damage.

Just as significant and multilayered a symbol is Columbus Circle, a site Jende frequented to "take in the city" in his early days in New York before Neni arrived (93). When the two stroll there one summer evening, it catalyzes a revelation for Neni who has been swept off her feet by Manhattan, which offers her a breadth of experience and educational and professional possibilities absent her in Limbe. Heading north to escape a party at a bar, Neni meditates on the people around her:

> She was noticing something for the first time: She was realizing that most people on the street were walking with someone who looked like them. On both sides of the street, going east and west, she saw people walking with their kind: a white man holding hands with a white woman; a black teenager giggling with other black (or Latino) teenagers; a white mother pushing a stroller alongside another white mother; a black woman chatting with a black woman. She saw a quartet of Asian men in tuxedos, and a group of friends who had different skin colors but were dressed in similar elegant chic styles. Most people were sticking to their own kind. Even in New York City, even in a place of many nations and cultures, men and women, young and old, rich and poor, preferred their kind when it came to those they kept closest. And why shouldn't they? It was far easier to do so than to spend one's limited energy trying to blend into a world one was never meant to be a part of. That was what made New York so wonderful: It had a world for everyone. (92)

Neni's realization is reminiscent of an epiphany in *Invisible Man*, another New York–centered novel, when the narrator's metaphorical blindness drops away and he begins truly to see the people around him. "They'd been there all along, but somehow I missed them," he remarks of the Black youths of Harlem he had overlooked while in thrall to his political ambitions (443). Neni's revelation, too, relates to race but hers is of the self-segregating racial dynamics of the city, which she perceives while still reveling in its capaciousness. "It had a world for everyone," she optimistically concludes of New York, and yet much like Jende's perception of the Lehman tower, this insight becomes ironic in light of her family's expulsion from the US, when Jende is unable to obtain his papers. Does New York still offer "a world" for everyone, in particular, undocumented immigrants? Mbue's novel suggests a deep skepticism towards this idealistic premise.

Columbus Circle itself is as multilayered and paradoxical an image as the Lehman tower in this context. Arriving there, the two refer to it as "the center of the world" (93) under the illusory spell that, like the Columbus of American mythology, they, too, are laying claim to a new world. Yet the statue of Columbus at the heart of the circle works as a double-edged sword, evoking a sense of discovery and the arrival of the new to which Jende and Neni feel they belong, yet also pointing to the country's deep history of racism—here in the myth that

America was a blank slate on which Europeans could create a new state, one that erased the presence of indigenous tribes and masked the genocide perpetrated by colonizers and their descendants. Columbus as the arrival of the new and the symbolic starting point for Europeans' possession of the land and claim of racial superiority, and subjugation of enslaved Africans in the new world—these two sides of the man and his myth are blended in the Jongas' experience of New York. The city is thus haunted not only by 9/11 and its aftermath, but by the whole of American history with its racist and violent underpinnings, Mbue reminds her readers. The monument to Columbus, however attractive to Jende and Neni, raises the question of who the "real" Americans are, undercutting their idealization of America.

If these two monumental structures of Columbus Circle and the Lehman tower function as a stand-in for the history of European racist domination and contemporary global capitalism, then by contrast Mbue also paints a detailed realist portrait of some of what constitutes the day-to-day experiences of ordinary working- and middle-class New Yorkers and the spaces in which they move. So readers see Jende with his son Liomi walking down Malcolm X Boulevard eating ice cream and ordering lamb *attiéké*, an African dish made from cassava, in the restaurants of Harlem (124). We see Neni meeting with her professor from the Borough of Manhattan Community College, one of the consortium of colleges that constitutes CUNY, the City University of New York, established to give access to higher education to immigrants and first-generation college students. Neni's professor offers support by meeting in a café in Bryant Park because, as part-time faculty and a graduate student, he has no office, and after a few meetings, shares with her that he is gay and hoping to be able to adopt a child with his partner (75–76). Mbue also highlights the historic Judson Memorial Church in the West Village, founded in 1890, which in actuality sports a website with funky colors superimposed on a black-and-white photo of their steeple where the tabs "Justice" and "Art" feature prominently (Judson.org). At Judson Church, the progressive minister Natasha offers Neni counseling and the promise that her church will fight and "stand with you till the end" (231). And upon leaving Natasha's office one day, Neni encounters the beginnings of the Occupy Wall Street protests in Washington Square and thinks longingly of a day in the future when, as an American citizen, she would feel free to openly dissent and speak truth to power. When the Jongas' departure is imminent, Natasha preaches a sermon devoted to the Biblical theme of taking in refugees (360–61), taking up a collection for Neni and Jende and offering a voice of active resistance and a sense of spiritual community.

All these moments that highlight these institutions and movements—CUNY, the Judson Church, and Occupy Wall Street—suggest a side of New York that is varied and multiple and politically active, mixing diverse individual and institutional histories and showing a commitment to inclusivity. Mbue's scenes set in Bryant Park or Greenwich Village thus prove to be as thematically relevant

and impactful as Jende's vision of the Lehman tower or Neni's meditations on the city at Columbus Circle, for their description both of public spaces at the heart of the city and of ordinary New Yorkers who attempt in their own small ways to support immigrants and other marginalized individuals.[15]

Yet even as Natasha and the congregation at the Judson Church oppose the anti-immigrant, racist, and xenophobic policies and practices that have taken hold of the country, they are ineffectual in helping the Jongas in more concrete ways to extend their stay. This limit is tied to another theme of post-9/11 second-wave literature, that is, the debunking of the ideal of "post-racial America," in large part through a "failed white savior narrative," as I will term it.

Post-Racial America and the Failed White Savior Narrative

Even as the Judson Church represents political activism and an ethic of inclusivity, it also reflects *Behold the Dreamers*' critique of the Obama-era myth of the post-racial society, puncturing it in part through a failed "white savior narrative," a theme that threads through post-9/11 literature. When Neni first ventures into the Judson Church, she notes with disappointment that it is "full of middle-aged white people" (225), reflecting a lack of racial integration that exists still in the majority of American churches. For all that Natasha is a sympathetic character who offers a sense of what is best in American culture—a progressive spiritual community, open political dissent, and the possibility for a woman to occupy a leadership role—there is also more than a hint of ineffectuality in her ministry and her congregants' good intentions. Listening attentively to Natasha's sermon to rejoice with others in their times of joy even when you yourself are suffering, Neni wants to believe but instead finds herself overcome with despair (251). On another occasion, Natasha counsels her that "sometimes the best thing to do is nothing," to which Neni thinks that this is "not an option" but doesn't say so because, to Neni's mind, "it wouldn't be respectful to contradict Natasha" (282). In fact, Neni later blackmails Cindy Edwards after Cindy has pressured her husband to fire Jende, taking action in a way that may be morally compromising but is effective in supporting her family, something she does not disclose to Natasha. Similarly, when Jende early in the novel expresses shock that his cousin Winston invented a fictional resumé of job experience to convince Clark to hire Jende, Winston scoffs, "You think a black man gets a good job in this country by sitting in front of white people and telling the truth? Please, don't make me laugh" (16). It is no accident that Winston is the most successful Black man and immigrant we meet in *Behold the Dreamers*.

Neni's reluctance to contradict Natasha signals that, however kind Natasha may be, there is a power dynamic imbricated with race and class that creates a gulf between them. This dynamic appears as well in a brief interaction between Jende and an anonymous white woman that occurs while Neni is with Cindy in the Hamptons. Clark has given Jende a two-week paid vacation, which Jende uses to earn extra money by driving a livery cab accompanied by his six-year-

old son, Liomi. Sitting in the front passenger seat, Liomi knows to duck out of sight whenever Jende approaches a police car. When "a white woman points out one morning that it was illegal for a child of Liomi's age to sit in the front seat of a car," Jende shows himself savvy in the deferential tone he takes, "graciously repl[ying] that yes, it was, he knew, thank you so much, madam" (123). Folded into this brief exchange are the stakes of Jende staying out of any legal trouble as an undocumented immigrant, but also the dynamics of *any* Black man in America interacting with a white person, even a citizen. Reading this woman's admonition recalls the long and growing list of incidents when whites have made accusations against individuals "living while Black," the term coined to capture the phenomenon of whites calling the police on African Americans who are simply participating in the most mundane acts of middle-class life, from making a phone call in a hotel lobby, to golfing, to napping in a university common room.[16]

Barack Obama's ascendance to the presidency is used by Mbue as a counterpoint to the Jongas' narrative throughout the novel, ironically, as a means to puncture the inflated notion that the US has transcended racism with his election. In the novel's opening pages Jende cranes his neck to see the *Wall Street Journal* on Clark's desk, the headline of which reads: "WHITES' GREAT HOPE? BARACK OBAMA AND THE DREAM OF A COLOR-BLIND AMERICA"[17] (5). For Jende the American dream is a meritocracy in which neither race nor nation are an obstacle and Obama naturally symbolizes and promises all of that through his own ascendance to what appears as the pinnacle of both American and global power. So, too, when Jende gets a raise, "[i]t was three days after Barack Obama had been elected president and New Yorkers had danced in Times Square, three days after he and Neni had jumped all around the living room and shed euphoric tears that the son of an African now ruled the world" (187). Yet the fate of the Jongas suggests that, although the global order may be billed as an international meritocracy with Obama's political success especially, this is false advertising. The whole of *Behold the Dreamers* exposes the fallacy of America as a meritocracy in particular by puncturing the inflated self-congratulatory notion of white Americans that with the election of Obama the US had overcome its racist past. Jordan Peele's hit horror film *Get Out*, which opened just a few months after *Behold the Dreamers* was released, resonates with Mbue's novel in this way, despite its difference in genre—and it is no accident that both stories were conceived during Obama's presidency when it seemed especially necessary to expose the micro-aggressions Black Americans face and explore their implications. Peele unpacked this problem in an interview with Terry Gross by explaining, "I was coming up with [*Get Out*] in the 'post-racial lie America.'"

> That's what I've been calling it when Obama was elected and all of a sudden, we weren't addressing race, or there was this feeling like if we stopped talking

> about it, it'll go away. I wanted to point out how these seemingly harmless… micro aggressions are proof to me that racism is still very much alive in this country and they're one side of the same monster that ends up killing black men at the hands of police or the mass incarceration of black people.

Before *Get Out* spirals into the supernatural, its early scenes emphasize these micro-aggressions, as when the leading man, Chris Washington, is asked for his ID by a white policeman on a routine stop or the liberal white father of his love-interest Rose awkwardly uses the phrase "*this tha-ang*" about their relationship in an attempt to be breezy and mask his discomfort.

Mbue's novel is rife with similar moments that point to the way Black Americans must tiptoe around white people and institutions, through the constant accommodations Jende makes to Clark or anyone white in order to protect his family. Mbue's portrayal of Cindy Edwards, in particular, runs parallel to Peele's portrait of Rose, and both feel especially prescient to Trump's election. Cindy's narrative trajectory—that of a moneyed white woman's patronage of the Jongas, followed by her exploitation and punishment of them—may have been imagined by Mbue in the Obama era, but it also anticipates the alliance of white women who voted in support of Trump and his white nationalism. When Neni takes a bus to Cindy's apartment to ask her to persuade Clark to rehire Jende (and, when that fails, to blackmail her), Neni overhears men talking about the historic nature of Obama's inauguration, an ironic counterpoint to the Jongas' downward spiral (257–58).

Cindy's treatment of her "help" as expendable is obviously reprehensible, but also a bit heavy-handed,[18] whereas the way both Natasha and Clark attempt and fail to rescue the Jongas is more nuanced and potent, I would argue, despite its milder appearance. In their desire to save the Jongas from deportation, Clark and Natasha each occupy the role of a "would-be white-savior," a figure who appears regularly in post-9/11 second-wave fiction. The white-savior narrative refers to a "genre in which a white messianic character saves a lower- or working-class, usually urban or isolated, nonwhite character from a sad fate" (Hughey 1). Whereas mainstream Hollywood films feature a white-savior's success, as in a movie like *The Blind Side* or *The Help* (Hughey 1, 7), second-wave novelists like Mbue emphasize the failure of such characters to be effectual in the face of post-9/11 immigrant policies and bureaucracies. When a would-be white-savior is helpless to protect the marginalized racially other character he purports to champion, it instead emphasizes the way structural racism and xenophobia work, as well as the way the intentions of individual white Americans are rarely as pure or powerful an agent of change as they like to believe. The failed white savior narrative in *Behold the Dreamers*, in fact, highlights the powerlessness of good intentions to overcome state power and long-established racial hierarchies, as is true of many second-wave post-9/11 stories, which often deal with overlapping forms of racism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia. So, in the film *The Visitor*, the

wealthy white protagonist Walter Vale fails to save the undocumented Syrian Muslim immigrant Tarek; in the novel *The Submission*, the wealthy white 9/11-widow Claire Burwell fails to support Mohammed Khan, who immigrates to Mumbai after his design for a 9/11 memorial is rejected and his career in the US is effectively crushed by Islamophobia; and in the novel *A Gate at the Stairs* by Lorrie Moore, set just after 9/11, when a wealthy white couple adopts a biracial toddler under false auspices to save their marriage, it spells disaster for the child, who is ejected from their home back into the foster system.

Similarly, in Mbue's novel, Natasha as a well-meaning liberal may offer Neni advice and a shoulder to cry on, even taking up contributions from her congregation so that the Jongas can restart their life in Limbe, but her ministry and church can't save them from deportation. Clark is hardly progressive, yet his naïve implicit faith in the American dream emerges when he hears that Jende is leaving the country to avoid deportation. "Surely there has to be a way to keep a decent hardworking man like you in America" he counters, offering to connect Jende with a friend in the immigration department (369). His offer is belated; Jende has already endured enough physical and emotional suffering and made up his mind to return home rather than engage in an endless string of uncertain legal appeals. In this light, the gulf between Natasha and Clark as a progressive minister and a conservative Wall Street executive diminishes through their shared impulse to play the white-savior, suggesting they may not be so different after all, but two sides of the same coin that is privileged white America.

Gender and Class in the American Dream

In the same breath that Clark attempts to save Jende from deportation, he refers to his former secretary Leah, nearing retirement age, now without a pension because of Lehman's collapse. Leah has sent Clark her resumé in hopes of finding another position at his new firm. "I don't think anything came out of me forwarding it to HR, what with the hiring freeze and all," Clark remarks casually to Jende (370). That Leah's situation is dire is clear to Jende, but Clark refuses to see the reality of her circumstances. Mbue's novel centers on the experience of undocumented immigrants, but she ensures that readers catch a glimpse of the broader landscape of economic injustice through Leah, as well.

The American dream's ideals of equality, freedom, meritocracy, and reinvention are dismantled one by one in *Behold the Dreamers*, as in other second-wave post-9/11 film and fiction, which represent them as increasingly unattainable and essentially false advertising, like the billboards Jende sees while he drives, which "displayed advertisements for hotels and hospitals with pictures of good-looking people, the people at the hospitals looking as healthy and happy as the ones at the hotels" (101). The Jongas believe that the US will reward their determination and work ethic such that they can make it in America. They don't, of course, even with some connections and luck, but also through no fault of their own, suggesting the American dream is a sham. Even the ideal of

freedom, that touchstone of American cultural identity, is called into question when Jende's lawyer triumphantly declares him "a free man" after postponing his deportation hearing yet again, a sentiment Jende hardly shares. "Jende… didn't feel free," we are told. "He would much rather be truly free" (256).

What is it, then, to be *truly* free?

As a younger man in Cameroon, Jende was sent to prison by Neni's father for impregnating his daughter out of wedlock. At the time, Jende "couldn't think of anything he wanted more than to leave Cameroon, move to a country where decent young men weren't thrown into prison for minor crimes but were instead given opportunities to make something of their lives" (242). Leaving aside the fact that in the US decent young men certainly *are* often thrown in prison for minor crimes (especially poor men of color like Jende), the path Mbue crafts for Jende leads to his realization that freedom lies not just in a choice of whom to marry or in citizenship alone, but in a degree of financial security. So, he argues to Neni,

> [i]n America today, having documents is not enough. Look at how many people with papers are struggling. Look at how even some Americans are suffering. They were born in this country. They have American passports, and yet they are sleeping on the street, going to bed hungry, losing their jobs and houses every day in this…this economic crisis. (304)

That Neni refuses to be persuaded, even after agreeing to return to Limbe as a concession to Jende rather than out of her own conviction, is due in large part to her gender. The ways America does, in actuality, grant her more freedoms than her life in Limbe complicates *Behold the Dreamers* so that the novel is not simply a bitter indictment of post-9/11 America, but a more complex mix of longing and fulfillment along with its criticism of the US's growing inequalities and shrinking opportunities.

If Jende was held back in Limbe by his social class, then Neni was constrained by its patriarchal culture. Forbidden from marrying Jende by her father, who deemed him not wealthy or well-connected enough, Neni was in limbo while Jende attempted to make his fortune in New York; meanwhile, she lived in her parents' house, cooking and cleaning for them and her siblings, and caring for Liomi, born out of wedlock, with no prospects for a career or mobility of any kind (13). In America, by contrast, she can attend a university and harbor "a dream besides marriage and motherhood" (13). Separate from Jende's struggles, Neni also sees in America "a country abounding in institutions of tolerance and compassion" (361) like the best of what she experiences at her college or Judson Church.

Yet the US for Neni is also the setting for domestic violence when Jende hits Neni in a fit of rage and frustration at their financial circumstances and Neni's desire to stay in New York at all costs—the only time this has occurred in their marriage. Here is the hearkening back to Achebe's ur-African protagonist,

Okonkwo, whose major character flaw is that he beats his wives; yet this echo of the African canon's portrayal of masculinity in *Behold the Dreamers* is rooted in the particular economic and psychological pressure inflicted by American culture. While Jende's abuse must not be rationalized or excused, it is important to contextualize this act as born out of physical pain and despair.[19] This turn in the plot may be recognized as one more variation on "the always-relevant subject of what is gained and lost when people turn themselves into Americans" (Kirsch 61).

For Neni and Jende, then, a return to their homeland means different things. Whereas Jende looks forward to new opportunities upon his return to Limbe because of the wealth he and Neni have acquired,[20] Neni can only find joy in the thought of reuniting with her mother and sisters, and in aspects of the culture her children will experience—learning French and dancing, "eating *chin-chin* and cake" (357). That they will grow up in a house, rather than a cramped apartment, and experience prosperity, she admits as a benefit—the designer clothes she was handed down from Cindy Edwards, too, will bring her heightened social status—but Neni will now have no more possibility of a career apart from that of wife-and-mother. The limits imposed by her gender will continue to constrain her, and cannot be shed by returning with money, as the limits of social class can for Jende.

The Expulsion of Black Bodies from the West

However the Jongas may fare as a family, it is their eventual expulsion from America that completes the collapse of their American dream. "This country no longer has room for people like us" (328), Jende rages to Neni, and his point resonates with the economic anxiety and xenophobia that still have not subsided since the dual collapse of the World Trade Center in 2001 and the global financial markets in 2008—now compounded over a decade later by the recession caused by the global pandemic of COVID-19. Thus the Jongas join the swelling ranks of fictional immigrants treated as black and brown bodies to be expelled from the US, and other countries in western Europe, in perhaps the most strikingly persistent motif of post-9/11 film and fiction in its second wave.[21] Regardless of the wide variety of plots, characters, and contexts, the principle remains the same: The expulsion is cast as a dark or disappointing fate for non-white immigrants, who land in repressive political landscapes (Syria in *The Visitor*); prison (Guantánamo in *From the Memoirs of a Non-Enemy Combatant*); or simply the more limited opportunities of their family's homeland (Bangladesh and Mumbai for two immigrant characters in *The Submission*, and, of course, Limbe, Cameroon in *Behold the Dreamers*). The ambition, talents, and effort of these men and women, and even the support they receive by would-be white-saviors, are no match for the systematic racial and economic injustices they face. Yet while readers may mourn for the Jongas' dismantled dreams, the Jongas' homecoming is not, for them, a

tragedy. They will return with money and prospects to run a business and own a home, as well as with the cache of American culture. All this breeds confidence and new possibilities for them in the city to which they return, a recurring pattern in the twenty-first-century migrant novel (Kirsch 63). The tragedy of *Behold the Dreamers*, then, is not so much in the fate of the Jongas, which is, in the end, ambivalent and bittersweet, as in the fate of Americans, who are not who they have believed themselves to be.

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NOTES

I am grateful to the Faculty Fellowship Publication program at CUNY, and especially to Moustafa Bayoumi, for their support and feedback on my readings of post-9/11 culture.

[1] Bady discusses the shaping of the book by the American publishing industry, too, in particular the role of Jonathan Franzen, who shares a literary agent with Mbue, as an influence and model.
[2] Mbue and her characters have been cast as Afropolitan in popular and scholarly venues alike, ranging from the post-disciplinary journal *Human Affairs* (Pucherova 410) to *The Economist* (Rocco) to the website *The Conversation* (Jackson). "Afropolitan" as a concept also has its critics, of course. See Mbembe and Balakrishnan, Skinner, Eze, and especially Pahl in the *Journal of African Cultural Studies* for critiques.
[3] Adam Kirsch refers to this twenty-first-century phenomenon as "migrant literature." He writes, "Migrant novels focus on characters for whom America is a stage of life rather than a final destination" and concludes, "The migrant novel may turn out to be one of the most significant literary expressions of the twenty-first century, the portrait of an age when more and more people have the ability to cross borders in both directions" (62).
[4] The racialization of Muslims, though it predates 9/11, was greatly intensified after the attacks of that day, as Bayoumi details.
[5] See my essay "Post 9/11 New York on Screen" (211–17) for a discussion of these visual motifs.
[6] There are exceptions, but generally those texts were the ones spotlighted by reviewers and critics. The most prominent examples include Don Delillo's *Falling Man*, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Ken Kalfus's *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*, and Art Spiegelman's graphic memoir *In the Shadow of No Towers*.
[7] See Knepel for how "falling man" has become iconic in popular culture.
[8] Again, *Falling Man*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*, and *In the Shadow of No Towers* are featured in Versluys's book of literary criticism.
[9] Duvall and Marzec's collection focuses on prevalent fantasies in 9/11 narratives, which prop up American exceptionalism by masking global inequities and the brutal expansion of the American security state. In their introduction, they note that, for most Americans, 9/11 is simply "a traumatic moment that essentially has been overcome" and conclude,

> This is unquestionably one of the cultural fantasies of the present—that U.S. citizens have moved on from the national trauma of 9/11 and the excesses of the George W. Bush administration's policies on preemptive war, extraordinary rendition, and torture abroad, as well as the suspension of privacy rights and civil liberties at home. (1)

[10] The "war on terror," Guantánamo, and the "Ground-Zero mosque" controversy are featured in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *From the Memoirs of a Non-Enemy Combatant*, and *The Submission*, respectively.
[11] While many expelled characters are recent immigrants, others are second-generation Americans who are Muslim; for instance, the protagonists "Mo" from *The Submission* and Reza of *A Good*

Country face such intense Islamophobia that they no longer find the US inhabitable. Similarly, Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced* concludes with the symbolic exile of the protagonist, the corporate lawyer Amir, who is shown packing to leave his home, a large Manhattan apartment, due to both having been fired and his impending divorce from his white wife. Akhtar's play also includes the literal threat of expulsion through Amir's nephew, who is under threat of deportation to Pakistan if he refuses to work with the FBI to identify undocumented immigrants.

[12] The most fascinating recent examples are, to my mind, the popular animated films *Sing*, the climax of which is the collapse of an enormous family-run theater in a scene straight out of a disaster film, and *The Incredibles 2*, in which the superheroes reroute a ship to keep it from crashing straight into a tower in a Wall Street–like cityscape.

[13] Gilvarry offers an ironic commentary on the fallacy of the post-racial society in *From the Memoirs of a Non-Enemy Combatant* when his unreliable narrator, newly arrived from the Philippines, naively misreads New York's racial landscape of "black women cradling white babies and white women cradling Asian babies and Asian women cradling Eurasian babies" as "every diverse American and his mother!" (7). Through this misreading, Gilvarry reveals the global and national racial and class inequity woven into urban American life.

[14] Mbue has lived in New York since attending Columbia University.

[15] These scenes and characters contrast with the economically elite and racially segregated world of Clark and Cindy Edwards, the Jongas' employers. Despite centering on the Edwards, Mbue pays little attention to their narrow social world, which she paints in broad strokes—a choice some have criticized. See Henríquez.

[16] One of many mainstream media articles on the phenomenon, Grigg's column for CNN offers a brief explanation and examples.

[17] This *Wall Street Journal* headline was a real one that Mbue inserted into her fiction.

[18] The novel's one weakness, to my mind, is that the Edwards family feels a bit stock with its philandering husband; superficial and depressed wife; rebellious twenty-something son; and sweet, neglected younger child. See my review for the *Christian Science Monitor.*

[19] Jende is working on his feet all day as a dishwasher at this point and experiencing excruciating back pain. There is an article to be written on domestic abuse in 9/11 novels, but this is not it.

[20] These savings are acquired through their hard work and frugality, but also the charity of the Judson Church and the ethically problematic act of Neni blackmailing Cindy.

[21] The second-wave 9/11 literature mentioned earlier all follows this pattern, including the films *The Visitor* and, across the ocean, Laurent Cantet's *The Class*; the play *Disgraced*; and the novels *The Submission*, *From the Memoirs of a Non-Enemy Combatant*, and *A Good Country*. Muslim, Arab, and Black characters who are expelled from a privileged white world I consider part of this continuum, too—among them the biracial toddler Mary-Emma in *A Gate at the Stairs*, who is ripped from her wealthy white adoptive parents and home to be sent back to foster care, and *Disgraced*'s Amir, who is fired from his firm, left by his white wife, and seen by audiences in the final scene packing up to leave his glamorous home and life in New York. Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* is also interesting to consider in this light, despite its focus on a privileged white narrator recovering from the trauma of 9/11 like many first-wave texts, in that the non-linear chronology means readers are left at its conclusion with an image of the Indian American immigrant Khamraj "Chuck" Ramkissoon back in the jungles of Trinidad, where he grew up. In all, the symbolic and affective impact is the same.

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