The making of America in Okey Ndibe's *Never look an American in the eye: A memoir of flying turtles, colonial ghosts and the making of a Nigeria-American*

When Ndibe turned up in the United States in 1988, the USSR was performing its swansong on the world stage. A year later, it would extricate itself from the quagmire which seemed to have sapped its lifeblood in Afghanistan, and allow for the Berlin Wall to be torn down in anticipation of Germany's reunification. 1989 would see the wall torn down and the USSR coughing weakly on its death bed. The Cold War, partly responsible for the development of American outreaches such as the Parvin Fellowship, was all but over, prompting Fukuyama (1993) into taking what in hindsight now appears to be one of the most ill-judged victory laps in Western intellectual history when he conscripted Hegel into characterizing that collapse—and the proliferation of colour TV sets in China—as "the end total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism" (3) and "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (4). As Moynihan (1989:29) foresaw, "I fear he will survive to live once again "in interesting times"!".

Outwardly at least, the America to which Ndibe arrived more to Fukuyama's point, the exemplar of Western liberalism, the world's predominant cultural, political, and financial hegemon—with the added bonus of speaking a variety of English that a besotted[1] Ndibe thought to be the end of English.

[1] A clear-eyed Ndibe would probably have realized that Nigerian Pidgin English, to the Nigerian, embodies, to an infinitely greater degree, the characteristics with which he endows the brand of English spoken in America.

> Coming from a culture where English usage was a form of spectacle, I found the American English endearing—in its aspiration for a democratic plainness, its openness to innovation, its jazzlike musicality, its sheer variety (*Never look,* 141).

For Ndibe and the few thousand Nigerians who were able to obtain a visa at this time, America, with its "democratic" English and promise of a more fulfilling life, was an outlet through which escape could be found from the hellish pressures of disenchantment in Nigeria.

The Nigeria that Ndibe travelled from was also different too, very different from the one from which Clark had departed on his ill-fated journey to Princeton. In the intervening period, Nigeria had suffered profound tragedies, including a three-year civil war whose deleterious societal and personal effects Clark so movingly committed to verse in "The casualties" (1970). By 1988, Nigerian soldiers had already enacted all but one of the several successful military coups that ravaged Nigeria from the mid-1960s till the mid-1990s. Beset by raging social, economic, and political turmoil, it had lost much of the self-confidence of Clark's time and become the sort of fretful place from which Ndibe and significant numbers of Nigeria's intelligentsia were prepared to leave for increasingly longer periods. Writing in 1997, Ibrahim Jumare summarizes the extent to which the momentum had shifted:

> Hitherto, Nigeria received expatriate scholars from other African countries, Europe and the United States, but now it is Nigerian academics who are being displaced to all parts of the world, especially to the industrialised countries. In the 1950s and 1960s, when educational development was a priority, Nigeria recruited African and non-African scholars to teach in universities and colleges. Even in the 1970s, when the economy of the country was strong due to the oil boom, and just before the first austerity measures were taken to forestall the impending economic crisis that forced hundreds of Nigerian scholars out of the country, Nigerian governments were still hiring expatriates to teach in the sciences, engineering, medical, and technical departments of its institutions of higher learning as well as to work in research centres… (Jumare, 1997).

On the cultural front, a fog that would not begin to lift until the 2000s had blanketed the vibrant creative atmosphere that Clark and company had helped to define and set in

motion. Where Clark had been relatively nonchalant, even reticent, about accepting the Fellowship nomination, Ndibe was so desperate to emigrate to the US that he deliberately misrepresented facts in his visa application:

> I had been warned that the US embassy would deny me a visa if I told the bald truth—that I was going to take up an editor's job in America. I couldn't countenance being turned away, my dream nullified. So when I applied for a visa, I had to fib. I told the young American consular chap who interviewed me that I was going for a conference and then a short visit (*Never look,* 25).

As may already be apparent, the circumstances in which Clark and Ndibe travelled to America are different. In what remains of this chapter, I will further pursue those points of difference and, by consequence, examine the influence of the peculiarities of Ndibe's subjectivity on the America that he makes in *Never look.* I will also examine the rhetorical strategies through which Ndibe's America takes form. Because, unlike Clark, Ndibe essentially emigrates from Nigeria, with the consequence that points of difference between early Ndibe-in-America and latter Ndibe-in-America can also emerge.

Although inevitably similar to Clark in certain respects, Ndibe could not be more different from his literary predecessor. Where Clark's upbringing and self-carriage showed him to be "a man already prominent in the public affairs of his country" (Wren, 1984:57), Ndibe takes pains to highlight his humble background. Ndibe, the son of an ex-serviceman, postal clerk and schoolteacher, grew up without "the fortune of sleeping in a bed" (11). When Ndibe travels to the US, he is expected to assume such responsibilities as taking financial care of his parents and paying for the education of some of his siblings—a burden that, in the early years, further blights his already precarious existence in the United States. A "pristine" bathroom that the 28-year-old Ndibe encounters shortly after arrival in the US is imbued with overdetermined significance. It is both a statement of Ndibe's social positioning and of the agency and peculiar sight of the individual producer of discourse:

> My hosts' bedroom was so clean you could eat in it. Its air had a hint of scent. *For sure, some wealthy people back in Nigeria also had such pristine bathrooms, but I had never been in one.* For me, then, the bathroom seemed an advertisement of America's power, prosperity, excess (48, italics added)

Some of Ndibe's earliest involvements with the drama of re-presentation also result from social positioning. We learn that young Ndibe had a classmate with affluent parents, who by virtue of travel, could produce "amazing tales" (*Never look,* 5) of London for "a coterie of the curious" (6) that is the eager Nigerian audience in his classroom. Although the London this traveller produces is concrete as far as the eyes can see (6), Ndibe, acutely aware of the cultural and metaphorical role his classmate was fulfilling, equates this traveller to Mungo Park. "Park had discovered a great river in my backyard; my classmate had discovered London" (6)! Later on, when an older Ndibe is no longer bound to the position of receiving travel tales, he can survey England for himself and produce idiosyncratic discourse, which incidentally is simultaneously a counter-discourse to his affluent classmate's idiosyncratic portrayal of London as an endless concrete sheet:

> All these years later, even after I had made several visits to London, after I had beheld the city's tree-lined streets and tree-rich parks, after I had seen the English countryside in the summer, with its verdant hillocks and endless rolling greenery, my classmate's first portrait still has a vestigial fascination (6).

Even the title of Ndibe's book suggests the character of the self he took to the US. Published twenty-four years after Clark's *America*'s first outing, Ndibe's title was taken from the admonition an uncle offers to Ndibe upon learning of his impending travel, supposedly because Americans shoot people who look them in the eye. Clark, who looked America square in the eye, would have found this admonition rather amusing, as would Osuofia, ostensibly a village man with little of Ndibe's education, who, perhaps because he is fictional, continually confronts London with impish arrogance (*Osuofia,* 2003). It is, however, an admonition that Ndibe not only takes to heart but which colours some of his earliest

interactions in the US (*Never look,* 33). Ndibe's report of a meeting with Dillibe Onyeama, author of *Nigger at Eton* (1972)[2], is instructive of the constructed self: "Here was a bona fide writer, and one who spoke English as proficiently as the very originators of the language, and he knew who I was, down to being familiar with my writing" (117). Additionally, where Clark could hardly wait to leave America after his misadventure, Ndibe persisted in his residency, despite the fiasco of his editorship of the perpetually embattled *African Commentary*. Within a decade of his arrival, Ndibe had even applied for and attained US citizenship.

Other facets of Ndibe's pre-American life are also important in sufficiently contextualizing his self-presentation. Instead of the overwhelmingly Western literary education Clark had received in secondary school,[3] Ndibe had been the beneficiary of a shift in Nigerian literary education:

> My set had had the luck of coming along just as a major curricular shift was taking shape. After decades of being disdained, Africa was finally incorporated into secondary school curriculums. African history replaced British and European, and African literature unseated the former focus on (very) English literature. Where those who preceded my set had studied such writers as Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens, Emily Brontë, and Charlotte Brontë, my classmates and I were assigned books by Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (who then went by James Ngũgĩ), Kwesi Brew, Cyprian Ekwensi, Robert Wellesley Cole and Kofi Awoonor (then known as George Awoonor-Williams). Most of the titles we studied were published in Heinemann's African Writers Series… (17)

At the tertiary level, Ndibe studied business administration, first at Yaba College of Technology, and then at the Institute of Management Technology in Enugu[4]. Having discovered books and journalism mostly of American provenance, Ndibe developed a

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[2] Redressed by Penguin as *A Black boy at Eton* (2022)

[3] *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe's watershed novel, was only published in 1958, shortly graduated before Clark graduated from university.

[4] Ndibe has since gone on to obtain an MFA and a PhD in Literature from the University of Massachusetts Amherst and teaches extensively in the United States.

penchant for sending off opinion pieces to newspapers, which in turn precipitated a career in journalism. After a stint working at Concord Group's newspaper (*Never look,* 16, 19), Ndibe became assistant editor at the *African Guardian*. It was while at this job that Achebe, with whom he had developed an overly fawning, almost subservient relationship, recruited him to edit an international magazine in the United States.

Where Clark's account is that of a temporary visitor, Ndibe's is that of an emigrant, written—and/or compiled—decades after his arrival in America. Clark's focus on America is almost absolute, his journey hardly even prefaced with details of his usual life, whereas the arc of *Never look* bends overtly from Ndibe's childhood all the way to his present circumstances as a Nigerian American in the United States. As Essien-Udom (1968) has already stated, it is one thing to live in America and quite another to attain the commanding heights from which Clark produces his America. And though Ndibe had, in the time between his arrival and the publishing of his memoir, obtained an MFA and published two novels, *Arrows of Rain* (2000) and *Foreign Gods* (2014), Ndibe's portrayal quite apparently lacks the chutzpah of Clark's.

Ndibe's portrayals are constructed largely by contrasting an African self with American phenomena. Ndibe is aware of this, going as far as to state it explicitly:

> From the outset, inevitably, a sense of contrast had framed my American experiences. I had viewed America through my African sensibility; through it, I sifted, weighed, and evaluated the multitudinous impulses that were a part of my everyday experience in the United States (134).

Consequently, Ndibe luxuriates in the clash-of-cultures trope and frequently uses juxtaposition to place himself across his subject. Ndibe clearly considers himself as representative of an "African" culture insofar as one can be defined. He spells out these sometimes idiosyncratic cultural assumptions and then places them against the cultural

behaviour under his gaze. By comparison, Clark hardly offers explicit remarks on his own cultural values, the more to lend these values the air of normativeness. In *Never look,* Ndibe, it appears, continually unites a double impulse within himself: explaining his Africa to his America at the same time that he is reporting his America to his Africa. Gesturing back to his travelling classmate's tales, Ndibe, now the seeing-eye, produces the doubled discourse:

> In my first letters to friends and relatives in Nigeria, I strained to find the language to convey what winter felt like… In the end, I figured out the only comparison they could relate to: *Winter*, I wrote, *was akin to living in a refrigerator.* (45)

Because of winter, Ndibe continues, houses in America are fitted with heaters rather than the air conditioners that people are used to back home (45). Houses back home are built with concrete and mud, where in America wood is the predominant fabric of houses (55). The profusion of TV channels, like bathrooms, is a statement of "America's spoiled-rotten prosperity and robust diversity and freedom" (48), and leaves Ndibe "both in awe and dismayed" (48).

Ndibe's juxtapositions are not always simply that of a Nigerian "self" observing phenomena in the United States. Sometimes, the contrast is provided by latter-day Ndibe, the Nigerian American, observing young Ndibe, the Nigerian in America, in hindsight. For example, he defines the American's zealous insistence on "personal space"—more or less the right to keep to oneself or permit visits—against the tendency for Nigerians towards camaraderie and "communal space" (135). Personal space for young Ndibe-in-America was "a plague", "pregnant with peril" and "signaled isolation, disconnection, pain, and alienation" (135). Ndibe even characterizes explanations proffered by Americans themselves as "gobbledygook". It is hardly surprising, then, that he embarks on a self-appointed one-man civilizing mission to exorcise possession by personal space from America's body politic

through the instrumentality of his friend, Kitty Axelson (137). Like its infamous European cousin, this modern-day crusade eventually founders in the face of spirited local opposition (136-7).

> I left a bit dismayed but also educated. After the surprise visit to Kitty Axelson, I realized that I would have little chance of converting her—or other Americans—to conform to my cultural norms. I gave the matter much thought. Slowly, I came to concede that my ways were not better—they were, simply, different. (137)

Despite the education, Ndibe still defines personal space in terms of alienation. America's pet fetish, according to Ndibe, is a direct result of their obsession with personal space, and "dogs have come to serve as welcome, neo-human mediators of loneliness and solitude" (140). Most of the dogs Ndibe saw in Nigeria were guard dogs that had even attacked him on occasion (140). This arms-length relationship with dogs probably colours his characterization of America's relationship with dogs to some extent and is one more exemplification of the idiosyncratic discourse of the individual producer.

The objective correlative, defined by T.S. Eliot (1950:100) as "[a] situation, a chain of events" that serve to evoke particular emotions (or in this case, ideas) is also a key discursive device for Ndibe, even if he never quite attains Clark's sophistication. For one, the Ndibe situation is almost always editorialized. In one example, Ndibe recounts the episode of his arrest—on the basis of mistaken identity (*Never look,* 71-79)—to produce a picture of casual but deadly racism in America. In another example, his first meal at a restaurant is at the instigation of an interlocutor and results in a "moment of profound cultural disorientation" that he characterizes and contextualizes as below:

> I was meant to pay for a meal, even though she had suggested it—she had, in light of my Nigerian cultural experience, freely offered me the meal?
> My trouble was compounded. As a Nigerian, I didn't know what "tip" meant. Nigerians do not tip. In fact, the whole idea of paying more than the cost of my food struck me as absurd. Far from paying more, Nigerians would quibble, haggle, and harangue their way to a lower bill. (64)

Sometimes, Ndibe's situations can serve a dual purpose. In an episode that echoes Clark's description of the steak he was served as "rather redolent of human flesh" (*America,* 26), Ndibe uses the event of a dinner at the home of one of his professors to shine a light on what he considers the strange eating habits and comic ignorance of Americans. Ndibe and his parents had been served rare steak, ostensibly because Africans did not cook their food—a reversal of sorts because, in Clark's America, "meals are often only half-cooked to retain all calories and vitamins" (*America,* 151):

> Right before their eyes was a meal of salad, steak, boiled potatoes, and sautéed vegetables. Much of it looked unpromisingly bland. But that was the least of the problem. The steak on the platter was rare. Blood seemed to surge out of it, coloring meat and plate alike. They had never seen cooked meat awash with blood. They sat staring at the strange sight, too horrified to touch the food. (*Never look,* 98)

Like Clark, Ndibe arrives in the United States through New York. The first images he produces are appropriately through the aircraft's window, as commanding a view over landscape as one can achieve. From here,

> I looked down, half in awe, half in dread, at huddles of skyscrapers, a crisscross of bridges over a shimmering expanse of water, a maze of streets and highways that carved up and contained New York City's sprawl. (*Never look,* 39)

We can read the half-dread-half-awe with which Ndibe first perceives New York as the straightforward ambivalence with which a stranger might perceive a strange place and people. In more formal terms, we might read it as Ndibe's attempt at projecting what he imagines to be literariness through florid prose. But it is also symptomatic of the exoticization, the summoning of primal and primitive instincts, with which colonial discourse often regards unfamiliar places. That something akin to this classic exoticization is afoot here becomes clearer when, upon stepping out of the airport, Ndibe reports his "first *savage* brush with winter" (50, emphasis added):

> The exit doors parted as I approached, and I pushed my cart outside. I knew, instantly, that I had erred terribly; I had walked, willy-nilly, into an air ambush. I felt surrounded, stormed by a swirling gust of arctic air. The sting of it forced me to halt. Here I was, a lifelong tropical being, buffeted by air so frigid it seemed to drill its way to my marrow. Nothing in the vocabulary of my experience prepared me for this assault. (41)

As we will see shortly, when Ndibe is brought to a bus terminal in New York, that sense of primordial terror is now unmistakable. What we suspect to be an ordinary scene is daubed with a patina of mystification. The place itself is transmogrified into a grotesque, Gothic otherworld crawling with objects and people playing uncanny versions of themselves. Discovery, it would appear, is the defamiliarization of someone else's familiar:

> Then he took me via the subway to New York's cavernous Port Authority Bus Terminal. The descent down a flight of stairs to the subway platform was a novel experience, at once terrifying and exciting. I felt like a burrowing being surrounded by many other such creatures. Down on the platform, I had the sensation of being cast into a Homeric cauldron. Hundreds—perhaps thousands—of people milled about. Their faces seemed staunchly closed and mute. Every space appeared occupied, but there was the impression that each man, each woman, stood alone, apart. In the cavern, the sound of trains pulling in, pulling out, was a horrendous belch. A horde of passengers would emerge from the belly of each train and others would rush in to take the vacated spaces. The train would pull away, its sound like a metallic monster's hideous roar. (51)

Elsewhere, Ndibe continues: "Taking in the scenes that whirled past, I had the sensation that we were headed into the vast violent belly of a strange implacable city" (45). Hardly had the city been possessed than it was already being refigured into the heart of darkness.[5]

If Joseph Conrad's Marlow was drawn to exploration by the metaphorical power of maps (Conrad, 2007:10), Ndibe is drawn to foreign places by a number of devices: the BBC World Service for London (*Never look,* 11), the USSR by communism (11) and "the sheer

[5] There are uncanny echoes here of Marlow arriving in the Congo in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899)

flourish of the name" (13), and America through the pervasive pull of Americana: TV programmes, films, wrestling, magazines, etc. (13-15). These desires, nurtured in the abstract, install within the traveller a system of expectations:

> […] I recalled the day of my arrival in America, lugging one suitcase and loads of advice—remarkably from friends and relatives who knew little to nothing at all about America.
>
> I had come to find it amusing that, thanks to westerns that Hollywood long ago exported to the rest of the world, my relatives, like many other Nigerians, were confident that they knew what America was all about. And their dominant image of America was of mean streets where swashbucklers held sway, their guns drawn, ready to wreak havoc at the slightest provocation—or none at all. As far as some relatives of mine were concerned, America was some sort of concrete jungle, where the tough and mighty reigned, and arguments were settled—decisively won—by the man able to pull the faster *bam-bam.* (133-4)

Perhaps because Ndibe crams a lifetime into 200-odd pages, his portrayal of America can seem cartoonish, populated with people and places that are two-dimensional at best and spectral at worst. Nevertheless, the ruling sentiment of its picture of America highlights the centrality of the individual producer of discourse. That Ndibe characterizes the relationship between himself and this once-strange place as a blossoming romance—what, in *Americanah*, Obinze describes as "the exaggerated gratitude that came with immigrant insecurity" (*Americanah,* 119)—that culminated in citizenship (134) is unsurprising once we take into account the circumstances of the production of those experiences as well as the book itself.

In the grand scheme of things, Clark's visit was an excursion reluctantly undertaken—if we take his word for it. The visit lasted nine months, and had he managed to remain in the good graces of his hosts, would perhaps have lasted all of twelve months. It was *a visit*—of a supremely self-confident member of the intellectual elite of a newly independent Nigeria to the United States, which, on account of being shrouded in the fervent mist of its own exceptionalism, is perhaps the most outwardly self-confident entities of all. In this sense, we

are back at the originating principle of Hegel's famous dialectic where two self-conscious subjectivities are locked in a battle for supremacy (Hegel, 1807).

By contrast, Ndibe, although a journalist like Clark when he arrived in the US, was cut from different cloth. Ndibe in 1986 belonged to the orders of Nigeria's beleaguered professional classes, was not an inheritor of a literary modernism, and, though possessed by the imperiousness of the scrivening traveller, was not inflated with the afflatus of supreme self-confidence. To him, America represented escape—a new stage upon which the drama of self-fulfillment may be enacted. It is easy to see how, in the final analysis, Ndibe's America becomes home—warts and all, whereas Clark's America is a plodding, clay-footed beast. One last thing. *Never look* is so consumed by Ndibe's beloved clash-of-cultures gimmick[6] that we are hardly confronted by—and certainly not compelled to interrogate—the ways in which his production of discourse will be complicated by the fact that a nominally foreign location has become home. It falls to Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* to pose that question with the requisite significance.

[6] As Edoro (2014) discerns of yet another Ndibe title, the 2014 novel *Foreign gods Inc.*, "Ndibe borrows the culture-contact motif that structures Achebe's trilogy".