

Fractured Affinities in the African Diaspora: An Interview with Louis Chude-Sokei

Erik Gleibermann

Introduction

AS HE RECOUNTS in his 2021 coming-of-age memoir, *Floating in a Most Peculiar Way*, Louis Chude-Sokei has lived a mini-cartography of the modern African Diaspora. He was born in 1967 on the eve of the Biafran Civil War to an Ibo father and a Jamaican mother who had met in the UK. After his father was killed in the war, the young Chude-Sokei immigrated to Jamaica, then to Washington DC, and finally to Los Angeles. But sitting with extended family at the dinner table, the young man searching for Black selfhood in America did not receive visionary affirmations of a joint African, Caribbean, Black American diasporic unity. Instead, he often heard ethnic prejudices and suffered a sense of alienation—immigrant and Black American communities lacked common identity. Out on the streets of South Central, his African American friends echoed a similar view. In our conversation that draws from his memoir and scholarly work, Chude-Sokei and I explored the tensions between cohesion and discontinuity in the African diaspora. He says his life story has made him particularly attuned to the rich interactions of its fragments and fissures. “My ear,” he reflects, “is uniquely situated to eavesdrop on multiple conversations.”

—Erik Gleibermann

Gleibermann: Louis, I'd like to get into exploring your memoir, but first, I think a helpful way to frame that conversation is with a startling statistic you reference in your 2014 *Transition* article “The Newly Black Americans,” that more African immigrants have come to this country since 1990 than were brought here during the slave trade. When you add that statistic to the massive Afro-Caribbean multilingual immigrant waves of

recent decades, it's clear the demographics of Blackness in America are changing. The theme you emphasize in the article and also in the memoir is the alienation between various Black immigrant populations and African Americans. To what extent do you view your personal story of negotiating these communities as a lived embodiment of their conflicted perceptions of each other?

Chude-Sokei: That statistic from *The New York Times* in 2005 really gave not just critical ballast to what I was doing as a scholar, but really hit me personally because this narrative in the memoir of being alienated amongst multiple Black diasporas was given a charge. That statistic said that however alienated you might feel in this experience, you're actually representative of a large cultural shift, and there is an ideological warmth that comes when you feel a part of something broader than yourself. The article came out when my first book came out, *The Last "Darky,"* which is about West Indian immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. I use blackface minstrelsy as a method for telling the story of how Black West Indians engaged African American culture, and in many cases passed as African Americans in a cultural context where African Americans were dominant. West Indians made up the first surge of Black immigrants in the years after the international slave trade was formally shut down in 1808. Between then and 1965, the number of Blacks coming into the United States was very small, with the exception of West Indians in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the dominant group was the Jamaicans. Being half Jamaican and half Nigerian, it's incredibly personal to me. The dominant number of people coming from Africa since 1965 have been Nigerians. I wanted the memoir to parallel my own intellectual understanding of this thing called Black diaspora and how so much of this discourse on it in the academy, which I'm committed to, is actually in flagrant disavowal of some of the tensions and contradictions of Black migration since 1965 and how they were made manifest on the street level. My story comes through Biafra and then Jamaica, the Middle Passage. A lot of Africans since 1965 have come from Biafra-like situations, political instability and genocide.

Gleibermann: You are alienated right up until the last page of this book. There's no reconciliation. It's cynical at the university where you talk about the different clubs, the separation between the African American student association and the African student association, and then you end in Nigeria on a surreal, drunken journey, so at the end, there remains a sense of being fractured.

Chude-Sokei: This is an angry young man book, a pissed off man trying to figure it out. It has a dark tone and at times an absurd tone. I hope

that the humor conveys that this persona of mine is of a guy getting things wrong, who is confused along the way. This is about my growing comfort with the divisions and the tensions. The overall picture of this world is that people are bickering all the time and have horrible things to say about each other, but they are still at the dining table. Towards the end, there is an acceptance that this is the nature of diaspora. The alienated and fractured guy came to realize that part of the problem was trying to render it all as cohesive and unified. Once I began to realize that was not possible, I began to imagine much better, and it became less a burden and more an adventure.

Gleibermann: The most painful moment in your story for me personally, maybe because I'm just bringing my own heartbreak stuff into it, is something that seems to illustrate certain conflicted attitudes of some African Americans toward Africans and a mythologizing that can occur. You fall for an African American woman in college who is studying African history and seems attracted to your African identity and you take her home. You're driving down Crenshaw Blvd. in South Central LA and you hit the area that for her is the ghetto and right there the relationship's done for her. You have now become a ghetto child. It was really painful to read that.

Chude-Sokei: The memoir is a story of relentless assimilation and the failures of assimilation, not assimilation into white America, but assimilation into a world that is multiply Black. For example, moving from Jamaica to the United States, the goal was to become a Black American. But coming to Black America, which I suggest in the book is a separate country, you discover that there are multiple spaces within it. And one of those spaces is marked by class in an area that was no longer a neighborhood. It was the hood. It wasn't Inglewood, it was the Wood. The idea that we were in South Central LA, *the ghetto*, was a shock to my family because we thought we were in paradise compared to where we were from. So, when I went to university, being seen by Black people at university as from the hood, that was another challenge of assimilation.

The idea was that American Blacks are empowered by their particular history to silence those other diasporic histories in the name of solidarity.

To this woman, I had apparently assimilated into ghetto culture without knowing it, which meant that I was no longer African. Suddenly all of my eccentricities that she had thought charming and she could tolerate because I didn't know better—like being into David Bowie and reading science fiction—these things meant I was foreign and didn't know the rules of Black America. Once she



Nyugen Smith, *Afrofewcharizm in Full Swing* (2016). Collage on paper, 17 x 11 inches.

discovered I grew up in this neighborhood, for me to be doing these things was a complex form of political betrayal. The authority to determine who was in or out of the racial community was on her. Even though I lived there, I'm the one whose Blackness is in question.

Gleibermann: The gulf between your immigrant family and Black America is stark, but while they can keep their distance and remain insulated, you are thrown into an African American world in school and in the streets. I was struck by how your struggle to define your relationship to the African American community growing up in South Central is built around establishing a sense of masculinity. Your family is demanding that you demonstrate your separateness, for example, by keeping your Jamaican accent strong, while that identity lowers status in your social world because status depends on performing the rites of African American masculinity.

Chude-Sokei: It's a story of coming of age in the 80s and the 90s. As a child in Jamaica, our sense of African American identity was from watching TV, which meant Black men with afros and swagger. This is a young boy whose definition of freedom and power is not unconventional. It's men because men are not so present in his social world. My father had been killed. When I arrive in Los Angeles, I'm happy because finally I have an uncle. But I arrived in gang territory. I arrived when Black masculinity is undergoing that gangsta hip-hop transformation and becomes very public, visible and loud. So that becomes the definition of manhood for me. In going to college, the definition of radical politics is also masculinized, tough dudes in dreadlocks playing the drums and speaking truth to power in these masculine tones. It's completely circumscribed for women. Men and masculinity are the dominant modes of African American identity. In the memoir, there are some notable male figures, but not that many. Much of the narrative is about men that are absent, not because of jail, necessarily, or conventional American notions of Black male absence or violence, but because of the Nigerian civil war, because of different migration patterns and uncles that were under house arrest in West Africa. So, those kinds of influences informed this young man's obsession with masculinity, which then causes him to be blind to or to misread the power of femininity around him.

Gleibermann: It also seems to me that the African American masculinity is very specifically LA, because we do have regional cultures in this country. The 80s and 90s is the gangsta era with a hard core and rather rigid sense of masculinity. There doesn't appear to be room for you to bring in a Jamaican element. There could have been a Jamaican form. Dancehall is

super masculine today. But for you to have a Jamaican accent at that time is almost inherently demasculinizing.

Chude-Sokei: Had this book been about New York or Atlanta or DC, it would be an entirely different experience. Living in LA at that time, there was very little external Black immigrant culture to latch onto. It is very much an LA book and I want to emphasize that. In this context African or immigrant identity is not seen as Black.

Gleibermann: In your narrative, the next iteration of this cultural balancing act is embodied in college where you are straddling the Black Student Association and the African Student Association, which are not particularly fraternal with each other. And at one point, you muse that you're grateful not to have to also deal with a Caribbean student organization.

Chude-Sokei: This is a story about the emergence of racial consciousness from someone straddling these cultural contexts. By making it a coming-of-age story, I could be very frank about things I did not understand at the time. I get to college in the 80s after growing up in the hood, as it were. I played football, got my ass beat by thugs on the street, did my share of beating and had friends get killed and go to prison. Then I go to college and gangsta hip hop starts to mutate into conscious rap. The Afrocentric stuff starts to pop up. The reggae-rasta thing becomes much more a part of hip-hop and, of course, the South African divestment movement. These diasporic issues were on campus, but it became clear to me that Black pride and pan-African solidarity need not exist exclusive from prejudice against other African and Black peoples. I'm learning in college that African Americans can be proud of Africa, wear African medallions, listen to drum circles and grow dreadlocks, but will not date Africans! [laughs]. The idea was that American Blacks are empowered by their particular history to silence those other diasporic histories in the name of solidarity. I wanted to narrate this without judgment, so people can understand that for someone coming to terms with this experience, while at the same time studying what will become critical race theory and Fanon and also being a part of Black activism in Los Angeles and being committed to anti-racist politics, I'm negotiating xenophobic culture in the Black anti-racist movement.

Gleibermann: On the lighter side, when you were much younger, and something also pointedly illustrative of the differences between Black immigrant and African American realities, is the experience of the n-word. One of the funniest moments in the memoir for me is when you are in elementary school and a white kid calls you the n-word and you don't understand what's going on. You go home and tell your family and they tell you go back

to him and say, “I am not a slave, my father was not a slave, my grandfather was not a slave, etc ... We came to this country by choice.” And then in the hallway you provoke him to say it again and when he says it, in the text you say, “I was elated” because now you’re going to launch your pride speech. It’s such a great moment of irony, that if you’re African American you are never going to be elated or anything close to it, but as an immigrant, coming from a place where it doesn’t have the same baggage, at least not at that point in time it doesn’t, it’s a completely different story.

Chude-Sokei: As my memoir narrates, my family had this conversation on these differences every Sunday. This is how I grew up. But many people in the Black American intellectual world have exhibited some real discomfort with this intra-racial critique and have been resistant to that perspective. It doesn’t operate within the expectations of America’s racial debate. I thought to go public in a memoir would make a broader conversation of it because I know people outside the academic world are eager to have that conversation.

Gleibermann: One of the most striking ironies among many in the story is that African Americans label cultural trends alien to them as “white,” including even non-American Black culture like reggae. And so, by that logic, Black immigrants aren’t even Black.

Chude-Sokei: Again, this is a very LA book in the 80s and 90s. It is specific to this time and place. This whole notion of acting white is something I’ve been continuing to write about, especially because so much of it was theorized by Ogbu, the Nigerian anthropologist. Rather than fall into the cliché that acting white is a sign of something wrong with African American intellectual culture, it’s less about whites being more intellectual or more well-read or more sophisticated. I don’t believe my Black peers believed that, especially since, as I point out in the book, the few white kids at our schools were in gifted classes, but we thought they were in those classes because they couldn’t hang on the court or out in public. Gifted meant they were fragile, and they were being protected by the school. “Acting white” became less about whiteness and more about otherness. It was a way to describe that which was not their own space culturally. This was just as painful for me to know.

Gleibermann: And your great uncle, Irving, actually perceives African Americans to have more connection to whites than to Black immigrants because he senses there is a certain shared intimate wound of history, meaning the deep history of slavery and legacies of racism that fuse Black and white in this country. That thought, by the way, reminds me of Baldwin, who wrote about the inextricable destiny of Black and white America.



Nyugen Smith, *Another Day by the River* (2019). Collage on grey toned paper, 11 x 8.5 inches.

They—African-Americans and whites—can’t see anyone but each other. And that was a sign of intimacy for Uncle Irving, not love, but intimacy.

Chude-Sokei: Baldwin uses the language of intimacy. He says, and people still feel discomfort at the end of *The Fire Next Time*, when he says we must come together like lovers. Well, my great uncle Irving, representing a number of Jamaican immigrants from my family, with slavery in his blood and in his thinking about the world, but not with minority status, was seeing

that African Americans and whites were unable to see the rest of us as Black immigrants. He’s saying they care about us only insofar as we can help them make their claims about politics, oppression and slavery. They—African-Americans and whites—can’t see anyone but each other. And that was a sign of intimacy for Uncle Irving, not love, but intimacy. If Baldwin is asking white Americans to look deep into themselves to understand their relationship to race and to African Americans, my uncle is the immigrant asking African Americans to look within themselves to explore some of their relationships to immigrants and others as well.

Gleibermann: Your coming-of-age struggle is about navigating through the conflicts of Jamaican, Nigerian and African American worlds, but beyond racial issues, it also fits into a larger American literary tradition of the immigrant narrative that explores geographic and existential dislocation and the experience of betweenness. Your displacement seems magnified by your being doubly displaced and coming from a supposed homeland in Biafra, that, like your father himself, has been erased. It seems almost surreal to you, being labeled the mythical “first son of the first son.” All you have of Biafra are macabre photographs.

Chude-Sokei: You mention being doubly displaced. Many Africans now stop in two or three countries before they arrive here, for example, moving from Uganda to a refugee camp in Kenya to London for a while and then to Minnesota. I think that has transformed how we understand the immigrant narrative. We also have people going back and forth a lot more than they did in the past. So, the American narrative is now also a transnational narrative. The memoir is also telling a relentlessly migratory narrative. Becoming American and becoming Black in the United States is now filtered through other spaces. In the early part of the 20th century, and even the middle part of the 20th century, going back home never happened or was too expensive or took too long to do. Now it’s much easier. People send their kids back all the time. For punishment they send you back “home” for the summer.

There's a new kind of African ethnicity that emerges when they don't feel they have to choose between black and white. My experience of the newer generations is that there is less of the alienation culturally.

Gleibermann: The old, traditional American dream immigrant narrative is that you come here, you stay here, you make it here. It is interesting to see more recently these more fluid narratives back and forth. I think of Junot Díaz who is going back and forth between the Dominican Republic or even Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*, which is also about a return. Moving into talking about fiction, certain authors you treat in "The Newly Black Americans" article, including the Nigerians' Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Teju Cole, explore African immigrant characters who find African Americans inscrutable and have little relationship to them or may even disdain them. I also recently went back to Mbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* and was amazed to find that the Cameroonian immigrant protagonists live in Harlem and yet the story has barely any hint of African American presence. Do you see any kind of counternarrative to this alienation, where there are more engaged connections between Black immigrant and African American communities?

Chude-Sokei: Mbue's book is not atypical of contemporary African writing around Black immigrants in America where there is either a tiptoeing around African Americans or a desire to identify a distinction or confusion, or, as you say, an inscrutability in terms of how they read each other. Immigrants may land in Harlem or South Central, LA, but you can create a cultural space that is almost myopic and so you may not interact. So, when you tell the story, you may not, either deliberately or accidentally, include the African American presence. But there are all kinds of presences that are not in these books, Latino, Asian-American. It's in so many of these books that these absences have got to be seen as a central theme.

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Gleibermann: I think *Americanah* is distinctive for how it looks at the relationships between communities. The main character, Ifemelu, is deeply engaged in Black America and yet she has a lot of ambivalence. Her romantic relationship with an African American academic seems to play out cultural disjunctions between Nigerians and African Americans, though in some ways it's as much about his being American and a Yale academic as it is about being African American. Like he eats tempeh and does yoga, neither of which she can stand. And in the blog that Ifemelu writes, she pokes fun at various African American cultural features, though she spares Nigerians and

whites no less. In one cheeky blog entry, she lists all the rules non-American Blacks supposedly need to know, like “the nod,” that if you’re Black and you are in a white space and another Black person nods at you, you must nod back.

Chude-Sokei: Trying to get the memoir published up until *Americanah* was a distressing experience because publishers and agents were saying we don’t know if people are interested in African immigrants and their view of race in America. We don’t know how to sell it or how people are going to take it. And then *Americanah* exploded and Teju Cole’s *Open City* and other books. It was just a matter of time. But as someone coming out of the Black scholarly world, it told me that there’s a wider American and global reading audience for this topic than there is in the academic world. The transnational tensions in the diaspora are something my colleagues don’t really want to engage. The success of these books confirmed for me that the academic world may not be happy about it, but America and the world seems hungry to have a conversation about it. And it gave permission for white Americans to say hey, Nigerians are different from African Americans. The fact that her boyfriend is an academic is crucial to the narrative because I think there is a real tension between the Black academic world dealing with these issues and a broader cultural context that is really much more engaged with them. With *Americanah* I think people appreciated this gentle, external view of the foibles of African American and white American cultures. And I thought somebody just needs to go blood deep. I’m encountering African immigrants who are reading these books as I teach them and they’re saying why are they so soft? This is really hard for us. This is traumatic. I’ve had African students say we are not sure if it’s white racism or African American prejudice that’s worse or whether they work together. These books don’t actually say anything directly about that.

Gleibermann: In academia the whole concept of Black Studies seems to be evolving, even the names of the programs. Are we going to be Africana studies or African American studies or African diaspora studies? It’s almost a symbol of the struggle that’s going on to figure out what does it mean to be Black in America when you have these huge communities. A particularly interesting question is how the tensions play out in Hollywood where it’s iconically embodied in the debate over whether Black non-Americans should be playing American historical characters. Should Daniel Kaluuya be playing Fred Hampton? There was controversy around Cynthia Erivo, a British actress of Nigerian descent, playing Harriet Tubman. In Ava Duvernay’s *Selma*, David Oyelowo and Carmen Ejogo, both British and of Nigerian



Nyugen Smith, Coat of Arms (2016). Collage on paper, 11 x 8.5 inches.

descent, play Martin Luther King and Coretta Scott King. That's got to be the prime example.

Chude-Sokei: What's happening in Hollywood is a public, pop culture version of what's happening in universities. Some Africans hated *Black Panther* because there's a built-up resentment that says why does everything ultimately have to get filtered through Black American thinking and music and art and culture? But they feel they can't really say it because it will be seen as divisive because Wakanda triggered a whole history of how African Americans romanticize Africa.

Gleibermann: I read a great piece by a Nigerian professor of literature at the University of Wisconsin named Ainehi Edozior who talked about how *Black Panther* was constructed through an American gaze, not as much an African American gaze. My sense is from reading and listening and talking to people in the African American community that this is potentially triggering for an African American person to hear from a Nigerian, that they are looking at *Black Panther* or some other work of art more as an American in some ways than as a Black person. That may not sit well because then you are being identified with white America.

Chude-Sokei: The difficulty is can we critique it without being seen as either divisive or supporting racism or white supremacy? And a lot of Africans feel like those two responses are ways of preventing critique. A lot of African Americans since African immigrants and their children

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have started to make a cultural place for themselves in the United States have doubled down on a sense of patrimony, and I think a lot of other Blacks are surprised that there's a lot of patriotic intensity to this doubling down. That's why the people who are most hostile to these British or British-Nigerian actors is the ADOS (American Descendants of Slavery)

movement. ADOS is an increasingly militant African American political movement that is tripling down on African descendants of slaves being distinct from African immigrants and Caribbean immigrants and who see African and Caribbean immigrants as threatening to what African Americans deserve. In Hollywood they've attacked Daniel Kaluuya and all these actors, and they've attacked Black intellectuals of Caribbean and African descent and one of the leaders of this movement has been very public about her Trump sympathies because of the anti-immigrant stance. They kind of dominate Twitter. They're kind of a troll phenomenon. But they're a growing force in the public conversation about who deserves to represent Blackness in America. This kind of thing is

becoming harder and harder to ignore. The argument that the book tries to narrate is that if indeed America is to be minority white by 2049, the mythical date that the left is looking forward to and the right is terrified by, I predict that African American culture will undergo a real transformation in terms of what Blackness means due to all of the Black immigrants, particularly with the Nigerians and others making such a big impact in higher education, IT, law and medicine, professions that are being changed by the numbers of West African immigrants and their children. This is something really momentous, but it's not being paid attention to other than in moments when people are saying we have to stop affirmative action as it applies to Black immigrants or we have to critique African diaspora studies if Black immigrants are taking it over. Black immigrants are just desperate to have this conversation. They want light brought to the topic because there is a good deal of tension. The question is how do we have these conversations so that Black communities can be critiqued without divisiveness? The discourse of immigration, no matter who we're talking about always generates a sense of crisis around resources, whether it's true or not. The question continues: if affirmative action is meant to address the legacy of slavery and institutional racism, should those resources be shared with African immigrant students who statistically outperform not just African Americans, but white Americans in the universities? It's been silenced a bit. I always think of Obama as a very important moment that sutured some of these questions and, of course, the last four years of ideological and economic precarity has shifted people away from the issue. But it's coming back, especially in the wake of the Asian American affirmative action case at Harvard and in Hollywood.

Gleibermann: You tend to emphasize the tensions between communities, but on the opposite side, there is a vision of a true unity or interconnection in the diaspora. Some people would critique you and say you're coming down on the negative side because of your personal experience. I wonder if you see music as an arena where diasporic community-building is happening in the U.S., with Jamaican dancehall, West African Afrobeats and Afro-Latin hip-hop artists collaborating with African American artists? The cynical way of looking at it, though, would be to say the Americans are cherry-picking off the successes of these non-American artists more than collaborating equally. I don't know if you want to wade into Beyoncé and *Black is King*.

Chude-Sokei: I came to problematizing the relationships through music. It was through being involved in reggae that I got into pan-Africanism. It was through the Rastafari that I got involved in a diasporic vision, which is why the memoir does talk about what it was like to

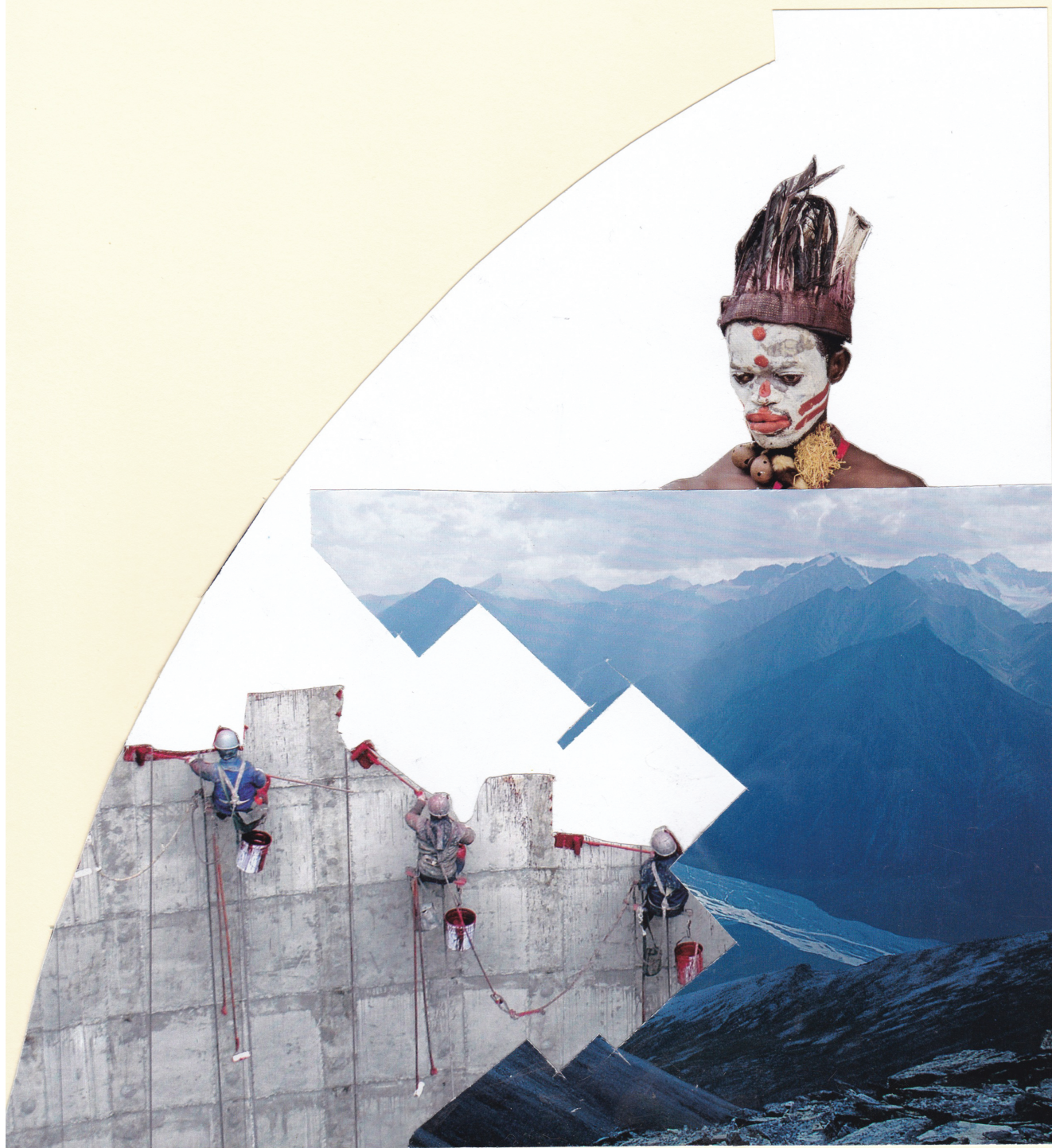
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arrive in Jamaica just when they're getting conscious about Africa. But they are also quite hostile to African immigrants. The celebration of unity in music is not incompatible with prejudices against a people. Music is magic and because it's magic, it's easily a place where you falsify reality, and you falsify it in a beautiful, poetic way and it sustains you. Music gives

us a sense of possibility even if capitalism is the dominant system structuring these relationships. Sure, it's kind of about cherry-picking, but that's how music works. I have no problem with appropriation. But there's a sense of possibility in music that we should take seriously and transfer to the work on the ground in terms of building community and cross-cultural solidarity. The assumption of racial solidarity does us damage. And it maintains hierarchies within the diaspora. Those power differentials flip by the way. It's not just that African Americans are always dominant. Nigerians and Black immigrants also have privileges at times.

Gleibermann: How do you see the evolution of pan-African expression looking back to the 1960s when there was strong African American identification with Africa, African support for the Civil Rights movement, African Americans inspired by African decolonization, the anti-apartheid struggle, and the internationalist Black Power movement?

Chude-Sokei: The difference between earlier generations that engaged Africa and the Caribbean, complete with contradictions, is they tried hard to do some work. I think the new generations assume solidarity. They don't work for it because to work for solidarity is to recognize that the new generations of people coming from Africa are not the same people who came in the 40s and 50s or during decolonization. Their relationship to race and ethnicity is entirely different and that has not been engaged. And there is a profound difference between Africa and African people. The romance for Africa and the identification with Africa is not incompatible with ethnocentrism and xenophobia against the people from Africa. My particular muse is attuned to gaps, silences, confusion, contradiction, hypocrisy, drama. Many other scholars and writers in the diaspora still work really hard to show sutures, blends, solidarity. The language of solidarity is the default expectation of Black intellectuals and scholars. My ear is uniquely situated to eavesdrop on multiple conversations that a lot of my colleagues don't have access to. These are conversations about Africans talking about Jamaicans and Jamaicans talking about Nigerians or Black British family



Nyugen Smith, ..see dem a come (2013). Collage on paper; 9 x 8.25 inches.

members talking about those darn African Americans. And that back and forth for me is very exciting, although it's very traumatic for some. It's emblematic of larger conversations of the Black diaspora that we're not allowed to have because of this compulsory narrative of Black solidarity that is understandable because of the legacy of pan-Africanism. But in America, it's used to silence criticism.

Gleibermann: Do you believe in the idea of the Diaspora as not simply a demographic and a geographic condition, but as an expression of something deeper? Philosophically, there are people who look at phenomena in terms of particulars, the messiness, the soupiness. And there are other people who see a transcendent, deep Jungian collective unconscious something that's running through. From my perspective being Jewish, with the Jewish diaspora you have the same question. Is there some kind of Jewishness that transcends? Yes, there is a religion and a text, but are we just a bunch of people who have that common background? Other than that is there anything in common between me and a Jewish guy in Morocco who speaks Arabic?

Chude-Sokei: I believe that we can create that in art and music, and I believe that some individuals feel it in the way that some believe in

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God and some don't. But do I think there's anything beyond this incredible dispersal that produces all kinds of interesting combinations? I'm just interested in the combinations. I find that exciting. Those combinations need not operate according to some logic because the logic is usually top down, and it's usually American. One of the most fascinating things I get to live through is that every statement that's diasporic, whether it's academic or literary or popular culture, I get to hear multiple views from the Jamaicans, the Nigerians, the British. It's the joy of who I am, but they're rarely on the same page.

Gleibermann: I'm also interested in what you think of the idea of the Afropolitan that Taiye Selasi described in the early 2000s, which affirms a kind of urban, global African hybridity? It seems that concept has a class basis to it, referring to the socially mobile, highly educated and cosmopolitan elite with disposable income that gets educated and goes clubbing in Berlin, London and New York as well as Accra and Lagos.

Chude-Sokei: Selasi's term has always generated a lot of critique. It's like a lot of critique you get when you hear about the Asian American minority myth, that, hey, not all of us are that way. Of course, part of the idea of any model is that not everyone is that way. Afropolitan has generated that kind of resistance among largely intellectual and academic Africans who are concerned with how you represent the numbers of Africans all over the world. Do you represent them as privileged or as struggling against racism and colonialism simultaneously? I like Afropolitan because it's a kind of shamelessly privileged statement. It's a culture that acknowledges itself as privileged and a product of diaspora. They went to Harvard, and they work for international law firms in London and have lovers in Berlin and then they go back to Lagos, which has a whole infrastructure for these folks. So, it's authentic. The challenge, though, is trying to articulate a radical politics based on Black diaspora when they are dealing with Black privilege. The political question of authenticity is about who gets to represent the totality.

Gleibermann: What I'm learning today is that anytime you assume or express a social reality as a unity, it immediately brings to the fore the tensions of class or other power differentials because unity presumes equality and that is not the case. So, you are really tapping into that issue because of course immigration is also a class issue.

Chude-Sokei: One of the things as an immigrant that you are attuned to is that racism is asymmetrical. But the dominant language we use to deal with racism is not asymmetrical. We are trying to say usually that working-class Black suffering and middle-class Black suffering can be covered by one discourse. I don't know that that is true. And as immigrants, our experience of racism and our responses to racism are at times very different from those of African Americans. It's a more complicated narrative than the one we have been advancing since 1965. 🌐