

NEOMEDIEVALISM IN THREE CONTEMPORARY CITY NOVELS: TOBAR, ADICHIE, LEE

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In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson famously asserted that “[t]he idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation” (26). He imagined national communities organically cohering in the shared textual experiences of simultaneity provided by modern forms such as the newspaper and the realist novel. This nationalist experience of time and text emerges out of and largely replaces a pre-national medieval sensibility premised on heterogeneous populations, porous borders, and patchworks of geographical specificities. Building on Erich Auerbach’s account of the medieval focus on the eternal and “omnitemporal,” Anderson describes “simultaneity-along-time” (24) as a pre-modern spatialized perspective overwritten by the modern, nationalist “meanwhile”—or simultaneity in time. **439**

In the more than three decades since Anderson’s influential study appeared, the discourses and social restructuring associated with neoliberal globalization have assaulted the vision of the coherent nation-states that is so crucial to *Imagined Communities*. Many discussants have debated the thesis that national sovereignty has been eroded in favor of global ‘flows,’ scouring literary, filmic, and other representational works for figures that express a global imaginary. While this quest for emergent geopolitical aesthetics often stimulates vital readings of the structure and effects of social units larger than the nation-state, the accelerated and futurological tendencies of such mapping projects sometimes also obscure an inverse tendency—the revival of certain medieval figures that provide another sort of friction with a nation-state imaginary.

The contemporary medievalism traced in this essay revolves around an ideological fantasy, not a historical revival. Authenticity is not its concern, and for this reason it is best described by Umberto Eco’s neologism “neomedievalism” (61-72). As Eco

reminds us, images of the Middle Ages serve many purposes in hyperreal conditions, including anchoring tenuous national identities in a moment of “national grandeur” or lost purity (70). The proto-national imaginary associated with the medieval model of the city-state in particular creates an ideologically forceful fantasy space in narratives of modern national decline. For Eco, the postmodern *bricoleur*’s reuse of materials from the past is continuous with medieval practice, regardless of the specific political vision offered by medievalisms. Recycling medieval tropes can unsettle the developmental logic of the time-stamped national *Bildungsroman*. In both content and form, then, neomedieval narratives can generate friction with the homogeneous empty time of Anderson’s national imaginary.

440 Recently, a few scholars in international relations, such as Bruce W. Holsinger, have taken up Eco’s concept, arguing that the rise of non-state actors such as NGOs, corporate militias, and terrorist organizations signals a neomedieval tendency in world affairs. Others, such as David Graeber, identify neomedievalism as a response to the emergence of an ultra-rapid hyperbourgeoisie in postcolonial and post-Communist environments of state collapse. Neomedieval accounts position these mobile networked figures in a highly fortified, discontinuous, and heterogeneous geography of city-states. Parag Khanna briefly describes the forty city-regions that account for two-thirds of the world economy, asserting that in this highly urbanized environment super-entrepreneurs or local sovereigns may have more influence than national actors. While retaining a healthy skepticism about the demise of the nation-state, Jürgen Neyer makes a similar argument about the inability of national systems to ensure domestic safety in concentrated urban areas and tracks the corresponding rise of private security firms as well as occasional interventions into urban affairs by supra-national entities. Neomedieval elements appear, in other words, not only in the built environment of the contemporary city-state (such as the castle-like Trump Tower), but also in the juridical, military, and economic roles imagined for the city as its rulers assert their position in imperial and/or regional projects.

Cities are thus crucial to the neomedieval discussion. Historians of the Middle Ages distinguish the city-state from the commune by its rule over hinterlands; a city-state had, in essence, a foreign policy and a military as well as the capacity to extract taxes or tributes. Whether oligarchic or dynastic in their forms of internal rule, medieval urban elites were defined by their relations to rural aristocrats and the increasingly dispossessed peasantry of the hinterlands.¹ Tom Scott argues that the most enduring and successful city-states ultimately transformed trade networks into administrative and juridical units through regional leagues and confederations. It was, in Scott’s view, not the proto-democratic extension of citizenship rights to people of the hinterlands that made late medieval city-states the germ of the modern nation-state, but rather the institutional networks arising out of the regional integration of the capitalist economy. The confederation of medieval city-states prefigures, then, our contemporary global system of differentiated regional rights and profitable trade imbalances. In the neomedieval fantasy, at least, the city-state’s local

fortifications as well as its distributed networks enhance its concentrated power over economically polarized urban populations, largely bypassing the ideologies of egalitarian citizenship we might associate with the most utopian versions of the modern nation-state. The medieval city-state anticipates the inequalities of the global city described by Saskia Sassen.

Whatever its historical or geographical limitations,² this city-state imaginary has proved magnetic for contemporary American urban fiction. Many recent novels of the metropolis imagine the city as a site of social struggle—even catastrophe—and highlight the needs of an exploited urban population that are not met by the nation-state.³ Displacing depictions of the modernist city as a site of aesthetic and personal liberation through *flânerie* or inter-ethnic contact, these novels envision a condition of extreme social crisis that coheres around certain neomedieval relations, even though the costuming and characterization do not evoke the knights and princesses familiar in more recognizable forms of neomedieval fantasy. The remainder of this essay examines the central tropes of this sensibility in three celebrated works of urban fiction: Héctor Tobar's *The Tattooed Soldier* (1998), Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), and Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* (2014). Although varied in their political commitments, regional affiliations, and generic practices, these three novels share spatial and social patterns derived from a neomedieval vision of the city-state.

441

NEOMEDIEVAL SPACES I: WALLS AND GATES

In a classic essay on the medieval city, Robert Lopez identifies its two defining figures as the crossroads and the wall; these come together in early hieroglyphs for the city that place a cross within a circle. Of these two figures, however, twenty-first-century neomedievalism has been most interested in the circle or the wall. Fortifications loom large in contemporary accounts of the city, as do the keys, controls, and gates that mark passage through the walls. Medieval gates, such as London's Newgate or Ludgate, often also housed prisons, and following the plague years of the later middle ages, areas adjacent to the walls were often cleared to increase visibility and create space for environmentally or socially undesirable activities (see Nicholas 75-77). Surrounded on the outside by moats or wooden palisades as well as a one-mile cleared area (the suburban *ban mile* or *banlieu*), ringed on the inside by the poorest housing or workplaces, and punctuated by sites of risk and policing, the wall of the medieval city was a symbolic as well as a spatial force. It radiated danger, anxiety, and vulnerability.

In the twenty-first-century urban imagination, many of these functions have retained or gained power. Although American cities were not built on the architectural foundation of medieval cities and register little of this precedent in their physical environment (see Elkins and McKittrick 184), even US-based literature of

the city has been drawn to the medieval symbolism of the walled city. Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* is particularly direct in its utilization of the wall motif.

Lee's near-future dystopia begins in B-Mor, an amalgamated social space created by transplanting elements of a Chinese factory that Lee observed during the writing process to contemporary Baltimore (see Leyshon). The novel literalizes this fusion through a migration process. As described by the first-person plural narrator, the transplantation involved the "clearing and emptying" of a largely dead city and the construction of "the first truly uncontaminated grow beds—and the parallel complex of fish tanks"; this process of remapping the city—pulling the moats, as it were, inside the city walls—proceeded smoothly, as "there was very little to encounter by way of an indigenous population"—only "pockets of residents on the outskirts of what is now the heart of B-Mor" (Lee 21). After an undescribed plague or civil conflict, B-Mor's urban renewal project standardized the interior of the city, shunting the by-then "indigenous" descendants of African slaves, Central American immigrants, and
442 urban hipsters to the less desirable periphery. The moral and social risks associated with the walls around B-Mor are accentuated when Fan, the legendary heroine of the novel, leaves through the main gate. The we-narrator describes "the video archives of the feed at the main gate the day she departed," zooming in on the image of Fan "viewed slightly from above and in three-quarter profile, a small backpack slung over one shoulder, an umbrella in hand, and dressed in a bulky dark-hued counties style, so unlike the colorful loose-fitting pajama-type outfits B-Mors usually wear [...] you could see the rain coming down in drenching curtains" (37). This surveillance at the gate reminds both the residents and the rebel of the policing that encloses the city socially, as Fan moves from a realm of color and order into darkness and unpredictable storms.

Beyond city walls, the social world of Lee's novel consists of violent, primitive counties and palatial suburban communities populated by the ruling Charters. The industrial order and cheap commercial pleasures of B-Mor offer a haven from the terror of the former and the competitive pressures of the latter. Nonetheless, the system is not entirely satisfactory; inexplicable tensions arise—a frenzy of littering, occasional bursts of song, and graffiti honoring Fan and her disappeared multiracial boyfriend Reg. Echoed in several treatments of writing and self-affirming drawing that decorate imprisoning walls later in the novel, this graffiti recodes the city's fortifications from the inside. Whether spelled out in bodies on the street or anonymous writing inscribed on the wall itself, the slogans "FREE ME, REG" and "I MISS REG" make the infrastructure of Lee's neomedieval city particularly apparent (340). The lingering genetic trace of B-Mor's "indigenous population" manifested by Reg's Afro also turns this graffiti into a sign of the multicultural diversity repressed by the occupation and industrialization of the city. The city's walls become the space for the oblique recognition of the sacrifice of heterogeneity associated with hypermodernity.

Urban fortifications also feature prominently in *The Tattooed Soldier*, although from a different vantage point. Set primarily in Los Angeles in the weeks leading

up to the 1992 riots, Tobar's novel tracks the vengeance that Antonio Bernal, an undocumented and homeless Guatemalan refugee, exacts on the titular soldier, in retribution for the murder of Antonio's wife and child during the Guatemalan civil war. Antonio is first pressed up against urban walls as a middle-class literature student in Guatemala. With his future wife, Elena, he joins a garbage workers' strike that proceeds through narrow streets of the Guatemala City to "the broad plaza of the Parque Central, within sight of the National Palace" (Tobar 93-94). In this crucial scene, the palace guards storm the crowd, and the strikers flee through the narrow streets. A death squad arrives to secure the plaza and remove a fallen worker, leading Elena to imagine a day when there would be "iron cages for the ape soldiers who grabbed people from the street in broad daylight," a time that has clearly not yet arrived (95). Being held inside the walled urban space and shoved to its perimeter is highly dangerous in this novel, both in this scene of public violence and in the brutal bedroom shooting scene that provides its familial counterpart. Finally, as in *On Such a Full Sea*, murals and graffiti draw attention to the wall itself as an ambivalent signifier—especially the inspiring Che Guevara slogan that is repeated throughout the novel: "The revolutionary is guided in all his actions by great feelings of love" (90). Once more, the walls serve as signs of violent repression and illicit longing.

443

The danger of being entrapped by urban walls in these flashbacks to Guatemala is partially reversed in the Los Angeles portions of the narrative. The novel opens with a dangerous passage through the gates of the city, when Antonio and his roommate are evicted from their apartment and go to sleep under the freeway. Homelessness makes Antonio especially attentive to walls, as he constructs shelter out of blankets and cardboard. The overpasses, alleys, chain-link fences, and tunnels comprising the freeway system provide this novel with crucial figures for an urban fortification system. They divide the everyday life of legitimate work and commerce from the "negative spaces" (Song 48) of the city reserved for its migrant and racialized underclasses.⁴ "Scampering across the freeway with this impossibly heavy plastic bag," Antonio feels inauthentic and invisible, "like some Mexican comedy act, Cantinflas or Tin Tan" (Tobar 11). Crossing the threshold, he becomes a non-self forced by the city structure itself to obscure his Central American self in a Mexican masquerade that Arturo Arias describes as a form of powerlessness that makes working through the traumas of the isthmus's civil wars that much more difficult (see Arias). Passing through the gate and over the moat-like freeway into the depopulated space of the intra-urban banlieu puts Antonio at risk, much as being pressed up against the walls themselves signals danger of death, torture, and imprisonment.

Walls, gates, and moats have a somewhat less central place in the urban imaginary of Adichie's *Americanah*, but they are still present and provide an important counterpart to the related neomedieval motif of the road. Movement across borders and through the threshold of the gates is definitely of interest in Adichie's update to the migration novel. Both the primary protagonist, Ifemelu, and the secondary hero, Ifemelu's love interest Obinze, pass through gates (here, of airports), risking

imprisonment due to false identities assumed at the perimeter. Ifemelu travels from Lagos to Philadelphia, and Obinze to London, before they reunite in Lagos. The final scene of the novel leaves the couple hovering in a doorway until, in the novel's closing words, Ifemelu invites Obinze to come in. Yet, despite these familiar scenes satirizing the legal protections surrounding Anglo-American nations, US and English urban environments feel perilously permeable in *Americanah*. During their sojourns abroad, Ifemelu's and Obinze's plots both turn on moments of deep shame resulting from their wrongful interpellations as a sex worker and toilet bowl cleaner, respectively. These out-of-place migrants find insufficient shelter and asylum in a city that is fortified against rather than around them.

444 By contrast, the walled city motif is more fully and enthusiastically employed in Adichie's depictions of upper-class life in Lagos. *Americanah* describes the guarded and gated homes of the city's elites as well as the middle-class heroine's entry into these circles. On returning from her American sojourn, for example, Ifemelu passes through the sensory overload of the Lagos streets, arriving at her friend's home in "a cavalcade of large houses encircled by high walls"; welcomed back by the "gate-man," she aches "with an almost unbearable emotion that she could not name," as she begins to experience herself for the first time as an *Americanah*, a returnee (Adichie 478). Entering the city, she adopts not a new national identity but a new class status within the local pantheon. This self-transformation at the fortified gate repeats the neomedieval motif, at the same time that it is here extenuated by chains of association and lateral movements along the roads that link the walled environment to its riskier exterior.

NEOMEDIEVAL SPACES II: THE ROAD

In neomedieval fantasies, the motif of the walled city provides a figure for self-transformation—often the emergence of a second protective yet potentially imprisoning self at the threshold of exposure to a wider world. The complementary motif of the road by which travelers arrive or depart has also acquired a psychological valence in neomedieval fiction. Medieval travel narratives—whether dedicated to trade or pilgrimage—often stressed the physical hardships of a voyage by cart or pack-horse, as well as the exposure to theft, tolls, and harsh taxation posed by an overland route. Travelers moving through territories ruled by various sovereigns as well as through spaces lacking the protection of any legitimate ruler (often figured as woods) could be subjected to unpredictable local rules over the course of a journey, and the difficulties involved in maintaining the safety of one's goods and person on the road often feature prominently in historical accounts of medieval travel (see Reuter). Of course, some of the same features of heterogeneous rule and spatial differentiation could also function as benefits for socially marginal travelers (beggars, entertainers, thieves, refugees, and vagabonds) who took to the road, partially in hopes of disguising iden-

tities or simply seeking new audiences or clientele.⁵ Legends such as *Robin Hood* keep both facets of the medieval narrative of endangerment on the road in circulation.

In contemporary neomedieval novels, however, the risks of the road are less often pecuniary than social. The road remains a space of unpredictable encounters and heterogeneous temporality, but the space's greatest menace is the threat of bodily absorption into a community other than the city-state of origin. The brigands of the neomedieval road, in short, rob travelers of symbolic goods, such as self-respect and citizenship, rather than their bags of gold.

In *On Such a Full Sea*, for example, the journey into the counties brings the heroine into contact with several distinct communities—groups that seem largely unaware of each other's existence and operate without regard for a national rule of order, legality, or punishment (hence their "simultaneity-along-time"). Whether in an explanatory flashback or episodes organizing the novel's forward movement, taking refuge with strangers means risking absorption into their world—be it a hotel reminiscent of Hansel and Gretel's gingerbread cottage, a slum-like hospital, a woodland commune, a suburban family, or a neotraditional simulation of the original ethnic collective. In each encounter, Fan (who is, by profession, a diver skilled at full-body immersion) is invited, then coerced, into allegiance with her hosts. She moves from admiring the ancient canopied live oak that shelters a troupe of acrobats she meets, for example, to being welcomed into their family as yet another adopted child. "And if I don't want to stay? Fan asked. But we know you do," another child exclaims (Lee 178). This risk of incorporation via adoption acquires particular horror because it is premised on the transformation of Fan's fellow travelers into meat for guard dogs who "were silently poised, their maws slick and drooling, the muscles of their shoulders and hindquarters pulsing with anticipation" (179). The shadow of this aggressive consumption then hangs over subsequent scenes of absorption into a new family unit, rendering each coercive invitation to stay the social and symbolic equivalent of this near-cannibal encounter. As in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, Lee's neomedieval travelers risk not the missed connections or delays that plague travel organized according to modern simultaneous clock-time, but rather becoming fuel for a hungry and hostile social organism. It is their affiliation to self-generated projects and destinations that thieves aim to steal from neomedieval travelers.

In Tobar's and Adichie's novels, the road also creates biosocial hazards, although the reader's empathy is drawn toward the sensibilities of the killer and the bystander respectively. In *The Tattooed Soldier*, the streets of Los Angeles serve simultaneously as Antonio's road outside the walled cities of Guatemala and as the fortifications of the American metropolis. This eerie overdetermination explodes during the apocalyptic riots that provide cover for Antonio's assassination of Guillermo, the titular soldier. The novel first describes the riots through a mediated lens, as Guillermo watches a "picture so bright it seemed it might burn a hole in the [television] screen"; he observes cars, teens, looters, and "a circle dance of young men around a kneeling woman, forearms and biceps spitting rocks at her back. An ancient ritual, a public

stone" (Tobar 271). This "ancient" scene soon swells up to absorb Guillermo in a series of involuntary flashbacks to scenes of war. Although the riot sequence begins with statements about the events being most relevant to "the blacks," Guillermo almost immediately feels he has been overtaken by "a battle bigger than anything [he] had ever seen," a battle "being fought all over the city, by huge crowds, masses of people" (272). Hence, Antonio's pursuit and attack on Guillermo is not simply occasioned by the chaos of the street but also enabled by it. The street is the site for ancient rituals, honor killings, and retributive justice because the violence of the street (or road) creates absorbent collectives. Guillermo feels this movement as a menace, but when the novel's point of view shifts conclusively to Antonio, it is described as "a collective spirit" (281), "a street fair" (282), "a day without submissiveness" (283), and "the municipal day of vendettas" when the police stay home (284). Seen from the point of view of the homeless vagabond, the risks of the road create a hole in time, a carnivalesque inversion of order, and liberation from homogeneous national rule.

- 446** In *Americanah*, the road motif morphs into railways. A crucial turning point in the novel occurs on a Northeast Corridor train, when Ifemelu encounters Blaine, the sophisticated African-American professor who becomes her lover and opens a new window into American race relations for her. In their first meeting, she uses her "Mr. Agbo Voice," and her smalltalk follows British rather than American conventions; privately observing Blaine, Ifemelu's internal monologue describes him as "tall. A man with skin the color of gingerbread and the kind of lean, proportioned body that was perfect for a uniform, any uniform" (Adichie 217). He is the raw material of collectivity, and Ifemelu uses her recently acquired social categories to place him: "She knew right away that he was African-American. Not Caribbean, not African, not a child of immigrants from either place" (217). While Blaine immediately describes Ifemelu in modern national and class terms ("bourgie Nigerian"), she positions him in cultural terms, remarking inwardly on his use of "the kind of American English that she had just given up, the kind that made race pollsters on the telephone assume that you were white and educated" (218). She sees Blaine, in short, as assimilated, dominated not only by whiteness but also by an American black-white racial binary that aggressively insists on its own priority. Although the crisis in their relationship emerges considerably later, when Ifemelu refuses to endorse Blaine's solidarity with a working-class African-American man at Yale, the seeds of her rejection of pan-racial identification are already evident in this first encounter. Unlike Guillermo in *The Tattooed Soldier*, Ifemelu rejects absorption into the American mass; from their first encounter in transit, Blaine's uniform-ready body and collectivist sensibility are figured as "modes of conscription, not consent," to use Louis Chude-Sokei's (57) description of solidarity and diaspora in Dinaw Mengestu's 2007 novel *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears*. *Americanah* presents this intransigence first as principled self-affirmation but also, in a familial subplot, as a more difficult and unresolved possible failure on Ifemelu's part. Her refusal of solidarity with African-Americans, especially African-American men, blinds her to her young cousin's desperate needs.

“His depression is because of his experience,” she guiltily lectures her aunt, after the boy attempts suicide; “Dike would not have swallowed those pills if she had been more diligent, more awake [...] she wondered how much they had masked with all that laughter. She should have worried more,” Ifemelu concludes (Adichie 471). But, this willingness to connect, to empathize, to join the community forged on the road comes too late in the day, and it makes little impact. Rather than remaining in the US in solidarity with African or Afro-Caribbean immigrants and/or African-Americans, Ifemelu returns to Lagos, and the novel suggests a brief visit to Nigeria is sufficient to heal a suicidal young man traumatized by American race relations. Adichie’s novel elects to swerve away from racial solidarity, figuring that absorption as involuntary conscription into an American army on a death march; the excitement of encounters on the road soon fades in comparison to the appeal of the home city.

In all three novels, then, the road is unpoliced. The rule of law is explicitly suspended, and impossibly constant vigilance is required from the traveler. Consequently, another more “ancient ritual” pertains; vendettas, clan-like affiliations, and inter-group warfare predominate. The result is either a horrifying landscape of terror or a liberatory anarchistic collective, depending on your point of view. However, either way, its spatial pattern is readily distinguished from the figure of the modern national road familiar, say, from Jack Kerouac—where speed, distance, money, and other forms of standardized measurement play such a powerful role. In the neomedieval imaginary, the uneasy, spiritual vortex of the gate to the city is complemented by the risks of stops along the traveler’s road, any one of which may become involuntarily permanent. The dialectical relation between the risks taken in the city’s interior and exterior defines this neomedieval sensibility—spatially and socially.

447

NEOMEDIEVAL SOCIAL STRUCTURES

Historians of the medieval city have long stressed the dialectical interdependence of cities and the surrounding countryside. They have traced the dependence of cities on food grown outside the walls, the impact of migrants, refugees, and landless peasants seeking protection within cities, as well as the outflow of wealthier citizens buying empty estates and constructing new palaces in the countryside after the plague years, thus bolstering the power and economic might of the rural aristocracy.⁶ They have also emphasized the significance of pockets of foreigners within the cities to the maintenance of networks of trade, and highlighted the protective effects of extending citizenship to the proto-middle class burghers of the countryside. A common model of medieval social structure thus concentrates on contests between urban and rural elites, two groups whose authority was slowly redefined by their own strategic efforts to protect trade routes through regional leagues and confederations.

The neomedieval fictions examined here are organized around essentially the same social positions and, as demonstrated, largely retain the related spatial

imaginary. However, they reroute the democratization narrative. Each of the three novelists considered refuses a different piece of this script, and together all three suggest that one of the primary functions of the neomedieval city-state narrative is to short-circuit self-congratulatory confidence about the necessary emergence of modernizing nation-state initiatives. Ideologically, these texts suggest that we might view citizenship and increasingly egalitarian rights discourses of the modern era as a historical exception rather than an inevitable destination or process. They do not all applaud this narrative, but they sketch its parameters nonetheless in their rethinking of nation-state priorities.

448 The social structure of *On Such a Full Sea*, for example, is clearly divided among the urban denizens, the elite suburban Charters, and the lawless people of the counties. There is no question that the Charters have the upper hand. Their culinary tastes and health fads determine the economic activities of B-Mor; they set policies for educational testing that allows a tiny fraction of urban citizens upward mobility, and they hold the reigns of the shadowy directorate whose planning organizes the world Lee has envisioned. While the people of B-Mor experience the directorate largely in terms of policing or regulations, the Charters (especially Fan's assimilated brother Oliver) have access to directorate information, knowledge of the research protocols that govern important facilities, and social connections to this neocorporate ruling body. While they may not function as an unchecked authority within the novel's social world and do experience financial anxiety of the sort that drives Oliver's final betrayal, they clearly represent a kind of wealth, power, and mobility that far exceeds that of B-Mor, and one of their functions in the social system Lee imagines is to stimulate envy among B-Mor residents, even while their own villages reproduce simulations of the urban communalism they have renounced. The novel, in short, imagines sustained but uneven competition between urban citizens and a rural aristocracy as a productive, functional process in its own terms. This is not a process that needs to mutate into anything else.

The people of the unincorporated counties do not function as a threat to this dyad, nor are they in the process of being included in greater circles of democratic solidarity. The peasantry are essentially irrelevant to the system Lee imagines, except as a waste bucket into which less functional members of the ruling group might be dumped and as a stimulus to the fear of falling among the B-Mor residents. The world of *On Such a Full Sea* is ultimately a static dystopia with many internal moving parts. Fan's final flight from the Charters and the legend of her reunion with Reg do not signal the apocalyptic destruction of the city; instead, as in Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* or Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, it is the persistence and reproducibility of Lee's world that completes its somewhat banal ominousness. "Stay put for now. We'll find a way. You need not come back for us," reads the narrator's final exhortation (Lee 407). No rising middle class or disruptive individualism seems likely to emerge from this condition; the emergence of a modern nation-state is not "a way" out of the city in this novel. Instead, Lee's novel establishes a complex homeostasis that foresees no

particular disruptions or transformations in the future.

By contrast, Tobar's *Tattooed Soldier* places revolutionary sentiments in a much more central role, closing as it does with Antonio's meditation on his dead wife's possible reactions to the riots: "It was absurd to mistake rock throwing and looting for an act of love, but Antonio was willing to allow for the possibility. If only Elena were here, in Los Angeles. Elena would know, she would be able to give him a definite yes or no [...] If she were alive, Elena would put her arms around him and whisper all the answers in his ear" (307). But, of course, this man-whisperer has been killed, and her evaluations remain inaudible. The novel finds no collective consequence in the brief assertion of freedom in the riots, and certainly it imagines no path to citizenship for Antonio or its other refugees and migrants. Its universe is so deeply stratified that the white ruling classes are only visible to the central characters through media representations and objects, such as the American house, "room after room filled with televisions and toys, closets packed with more clothes than anyone could wear in a lifetime, a cornucopia of gadgets and appliances" that amaze the young Guillermo when he watches *E.T.* (34). Antonio, too, "had an electric idea of Los Angeles. It was a place of vibrant promises, with suntanned women in bikinis and men carrying ice chests brimming with beer" (41). Neither Guillermo nor Antonio maintains any illusion that they are or will be welcomed into a democratic embrace with these fantasy citizens in the novel. Any competition among elites is also irrelevant to them, because the primary social experience guiding the novel is the city's failure to incorporate its hinterland and thus to feed itself. Consequently, the hunger and longings of the city's residents are underscored repeatedly during the riot scenes—most notably when Guillermo witnesses the looting of a supermarket in the final moments before returning to his cinderblock apartment. "The place was about to collapse on these people," he notes; "they were going to kill themselves. And for what? For steak and chicken, oranges and fabric softener? [...] Hamburger Helper, cornflakes" (291). Tobar's city is a collapsing structure, one that fails to maintain the balance between country and city, citizens and peasants. Hence, it releases a vengeful starving peasantry rather than buying them off with limited privileges and the promise of upward mobility and legal status.

449

As noted above, Adichie's *Americanah* refuses incorporation, too. Here, however, it is the foreigner who refuses to join the city, that is, to extend the diaspora and keep trade routes among cities open. After her return to Lagos, Ifemelu spends time with the Nigeropolitan Club, a collection of self-consciously hip returnees, and while she shares some of their tastes, "this was what she hoped she had not become but feared she had" (Adichie 503). Satirizing the same elite food faddism that so interests Lee, Adichie reserves her more positive associations for "the new middle class that our democracy created" (531). Prosperous, fat, local, and happily uncool, this class is imagined as "forward-looking," and liking new things "because our best is still ahead" (539). The source of this middle-class sensibility is the "real enterprise" demonstrated by a "fried plantain hawker" Ifemelu and Obinze meet on a roadway.

“She’s selling what she makes. She’s not selling her location or the source of her oil or the name of the person that ground the beans. She’s simply selling what she makes,” Ifemelu gushes (547). This vision of local authenticity acquires value to the extent that it symbolizes resistance to the farther flung trade networks and consumption practices of Nigeropolitans and African-Americans, such as Blaine, who operate in a cultural and economic environment dominated by self-satisfied white hipsters. The explicitly middle-class entrepreneurialism endorsed in *Americanah* is hence concerned with restricting or redirecting allegiance with both the cosmopolitan urban elites and the rural aristocrats of the surrounding hinterlands (such as the wealthy white suburbanites who are depicted as always being in search of a middle-class black friend to show off). Adichie’s heroine prizes instead her status within an unconfederated city-state, and the novel happily concludes with a reunion that consolidates a middle-class position within a territorially limited city-state democracy. Any hints of south-south networking are swamped by the the failure of allegiance and a principled
 450 refusal to participate in clan networks, the two moves that generate the novel’s happy ending. The future of this “forward-looking” urban middle class, Adichie’s novel strongly suggests, lies not in solidarity across classes, nations, races, or locations but rather in inward-looking self-pride and recovery from self-hatred and shame. So, of the three novels considered here, Adichie’s neomedieval imaginary embraces the fortified city-state most unambiguously, finding in it a reprieve from the destabilizing claims on empathy and taste required by Anderson’s modern homogeneity.

THE SPACE-TIME VISION OF NEOMEDIEVALISM

The three city-novels discussed in this essay all turn away from a teleological progress narrative that celebrates the emergence and expansion of democratic citizenship toward universalizing norms. In that sense, they are not only anti-national but also anti-global. Migrant fiction (and all of these novels are of course engaged to varying degrees with the social meaning of migration) need not be transnational in its ethic, simply because crossing national borders is a condition of possibility for the narrative. Instead, as these neomedieval fictions imply, there are other alternatives to the spatial and social logic of the nation available beyond the ultra-rapid accelerated smooth spaces and satellite eye of the global.

What we see in the neomedieval novel is a patchwork of city-states, sometimes with overlapping and porous borders. Adichie, in particular, imagines simultaneous migrations through the metropolis from several directions. The resulting geography recalls Fredric Jameson’s important assertion that “today everything is about land” (130-31). While stressing the inescapable centrality of space and land in contemporary political struggles, Jameson also underlines the *neo*- elements in what is here called neomedievalism. “[T]his seeming reversion to a feudal mode of production is then mirrored in the experimentation of the economic theorists with a return to

doctrines of rent in connection with contemporary finance capital. But feudalism did not include the kind of temporal acceleration at the heart of today's reduction to the present," he writes (130). Jameson links the neofeudal politics of land to a technologically assisted acceleration to the point of near simultaneity; these are the time-space coordinates of his ontology of the present. For Jameson, this acceleration peaks in the experience of a flash: the instantaneous flash mob as well as the stock market 'flash crash' of 6 May 2010. This simultaneity fundamentally differs from Anderson's; it momentarily grasps the globe emerging out of its discontinuous patchwork into a possibly terrifying condition in which each deracinated subject is one among "billions of anonymous equals" (130), before receding into defensive tribalisms and pseudo-collectivities or, potentially, releasing a new "Jubilee" (132).

Jameson's radical acceleration to the point of singularity has a presence in each of these novels. Adichie is certainly interested in a far-reaching community of bloggers and blog readers who engage with the story Ifemelu narrates virtually on the basis of the realist action narrated in the novel. Lee's narration also features the video technology of surveillance and even a fascination with swarms and mobs that form and disperse inexplicably at several points in the novel. And Tobar unites these two figures in his highly mediated descriptions of the experience of the riots. An instantaneous simulcast of collective disruptions is necessary for each of these works. This moment briefly illuminates the social and architectural structures that each novel imagines.

451

The fact that none of these narratives fully commits to the exhilarating new globalism that Jameson imagines, collapsing instead into melancholic regret, longing, and localism, reveals the ideological limits to neomedievalism of this type. By provincializing and historicizing national progress narratives, these narratives run the risk of renouncing one of the most utopian (though obviously unfulfilled) promises of the national project—its vision of universal enfranchisement and an absolute political and social equality. Finding a narrative form adequate to that desire and simultaneously resistant to the well-documented failures of the national romance remains an urgent task for twenty-first-century writing.

NOTES

1. Thanks to my colleague Mary Campbell for pointing out that the city-state was more significant in Greece and Italy during the Middle Ages and played a smaller role in England and France.
2. The mixed reaction to Saskia Sassen's thesis about the rise of "global cities" suggests there are important questions to ask about the applicability of the city-state model to twenty-first-century conditions. For a summary of criticisms of Sassen's concept, see Mould.
3. For a handy overview of contemporary urban fiction, see Keunen.
4. Min Hyoung Song explores the "negative space" (48) figure in maps of pre-riot Los Angeles.
5. See Geremek for the function of travel of the poor; Wigelsworth for the variable toll and taxation prac-

tices; and Munby for an account of the vehicles used in medieval overland travel.

6. These are central themes in Edith Ennen's classic study *The Medieval Town*.

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