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# Review

# Review: *El Metro*

*Chad Montuori*

In Donato Ndongo Bidyogo's latest novel *El Metro* (2007), the issue of immigration becomes secondary to emigration. The fundamental question Ndongo-Bidyogo addresses is why so many young Africans try to migrate to Europe, a place where they are considered outsiders. Ndongo-Bidyogo, a product of migration from Africa to Spain, reveals the answer to this question is becoming more complex. While in 1965, at the age of fifteen, the author emigrated from Equatorial Guinea to Spain to continue his studies, many young Africans of today's generation are fleeing for a variety of reasons. Instead of settling on simple economic factors to explain migration, *El Metro* focuses on the cultural aspects of the phenomenon. Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo refuses to accept the myopic assertion that the migratory journey is a single movement in space and a single movement in time. He contradicts this simple and linear view of migration with the interrupted and fissured journey of his protagonist Lambert Obama Ondo. It is only through his travels where he gazes others and others gaze him, that he is able to pull away the multiple layers of his identity. Once he does this, a new human identity forms which reflects the new gender and ethnic codes of his two worlds.

The first chapters of the novel center on the events leading up to the fateful day when Lambert Obama Ondo decides to emigrate. It is during this first section that Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo offers an intimate glimpse of colonial Africa when the paternal Europeans seek to bring their civilization and culture to the natives. The reader benefits from the author's keen understanding of the relationship between the Europe and Africa. Ndongo-Bidyogo introduces an ambivalent Lambert who tries to reconcile the modern and traditional worlds in order to achieve a sense of who he is and who he wants to become. He feels the social pressure to maintain his masculine gender identity by adhering to the tradition of polygamy but also feels an emotional bond with his true love, Anne Mengue. Their relationship is jeopardized when his tribe's customs prevent him from marrying her because



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his father becomes involved with her mother. Ndongo–Bidyogo elucidates the difficulties of the adult male who tries to enter into manhood only to be held back by his own father. As this scenario unfolds, Lambert concludes that his only option is to emigrate. He knows that there will be pain and suffering, but decides that by emigrating he will only grow as a man. As he embarks on his journey, he is never able to erase the memories of the passionate encounters he had with Anna Mengue. Ndongo-Bidyogo characterizes their relationship in sexual terms, which for Lambert transcend time and place.

The middle portion of the journey focuses on his migratory experience to the urban areas of Cameroon and Senegal. This section is significant because it contradicts the notion that the migratory journey is a strict linear movement from Africa directly to Europe. Ndongo-Bidyogo proves that Europe is only a dot within the migration circuit that is composed of middle passages and seasonal moves, all in constant flux. It is through his travels that Lambert's ethnic and gender identity begin to undergo a transformation. Ndongo-Bidyogo is quick to criticize the Pan-African absolutist idea of unity and fraternity amongst his fellow Africans. Lambert realizes his fellow Africans perceive him as the "other" because of his place of origin. Conversely, it is precisely his "otherness" that makes him attractive to the wealthy Danielle Eboué. With their relationship, Ndongo-Bidyogo confronts the issue of sexuality and desire amongst different classes and ethnic groups. Lambert feels that his physical attraction to Danielle is not enough to sustain a relationship. Their discrete encounters come to an abrupt halt when Lambert meets Sylvie Anguesomo, a young woman from his place of origin in Cameroon. It is only after meeting Sylive, does he develop strong enough feelings to begin a serious relationship. His involvement with Sylvie also forces him to reassess his masculine gender identity and his views of the female's role in society. The reader learns how much Lambert has evolved. "A través de la experiencia de Sylvie, Obama Ondo supo que en realidad eran las mujeres las que sostenían ahora la economía y alimentaban a sus familias" (256). He eradicates the collective identity that he assigned to women as inferior beings, in favor of a new and more balanced view. But Lambert does transgress during the journey, which he attributes to the solitude of being a migrant. Ndongo-Bidyogo captures the essence of this loneliness by allowing the reader to peer into the inner consciousness of his protagonist. The desire for female companionship permeates his entire

journey and culminates with his fathering of a child. Because he must provide for his child, he decides take even more risks by immigrating to Europe.

The final leg of the journey to Europe is a manifestation of the multiple identities that he has felt since childhood. What is meaningful about his experience is that he finally understands who he is because of how others perceive him. He realizes that he will forever be labeled an outsider in the foreign world of Spain and that he must return to his homeland. He reaches a stage in his journey where he begins to mature and understand that his migratory experience is part of the larger human experience. His relationship with a white woman reflects this anti essentialist approach to look beyond the color of skin. Ndongo-Bidyogo paints a picture of potential harmony between black and white, only to have it ruined when Lambert has a chance encounter with a xenophobic group of Neo-Nazi's. The ending to the novel is so abrupt that a closer reading will be required to ensure nothing was missed. One must conclude that Ndongo-Bidyogo was trying to make a statement that events like the one he describes, occur just as suddenly, without any notice.

*El Metro* is an important literary achievement because it allows the reader to see how the migrant's journey can affect the construction of human identity. Lambert Obama Ondo's identity undergoes a transformation because of his travel experiences. He no longer views the "other" the same and he is no longer viewed by the "other" the same. Studying the migratory journey of Lambert Obama Ondo reveals a great deal about the mutability of the world. Through Lambert Obama Ondo, Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo effectively articulates a new and more powerful fragmented identity that embraces and accepts difference rather than viewing the world in rigid and collective terms.