

Afropean Journeys: A Conversation with E.C. Osondu

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Born and raised in Nigeria, E.C. Osondu lives in the United States, where he is a Professor of English and Creative Writing at Providence College, in Rhode Island. He debuted with the short story collection *Voice of America* (2010), followed by the novel *This House is Not for Sale* (2015) and *Alien Stories* (2020). He has won several awards, including the prestigious Caine Prize for African Writing, the Allen and Nirelle Galson Prize for Fiction, the Pushcart Prize, and the BOA Short Fiction Prize. His latest novel, *When the Sky is Ready the Stars Will Appear* was first published in translation in Italy with the title *Quando il cielo vuole spuntano le stelle* (transl. by Gioia Guerzoni, Postface by Alessandra Di Maio, Francesco Brioschi Editore, 2020). One year later, the original version of the novel was published in Nigeria (Ouida 2021).

The novel tells in first person the compelling tale of an African boy's journey towards Rome in search of a better life. His dreams of reaching Italy are ignited when Bros, an older friend from his village, returns home from the Eternal City laden with gifts and alluring stories. But it is only when soldiers from the Seven Men Army descend on the village scouting for recruits that he decides to leave, as the young men of Gulu Station must face conscription or flee. Armed with little more than the stories heard from Bros, guided by the words of wisdom of the late Nene, the blind woman who takes care of him after his parents die, the narrator takes his first step towards realizing his dreams embarking on his journey North. He crosses the desert



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and the sea together with a group of young people whom he meets on the road. His perilous journey reminds us of those undertaken by the myriad of young Africans who have crossed the Black Mediterranean in the past decades. But Osondu's fictional story offers us a reversed perspective from what we usually hear and watch in the Western media, with their focus on the last leg of the trip – the landing in Europe. Osondu's novel is about the full experience of the journey, from departure to arrival, which readers follow through the protagonist's candid eyes and voice.

What follows is an excerpt of a conversation I had with E.C. Osondu on May 24, 2021 – the first the author granted in Italy, a few months after *Quando il cielo vuole spuntano le stelle* was published. It was conducted within the context of "Afropean Bridges", a series of Virtual Dialogues organized by Shaul Bassi, Vittorio Longhi and Igiaba Scego for the Humanities and Social Change Centre at the University of Venice Ca' Foscari.¹

ALESSANDRA DI MAIO Welcome, E.C. Osondu, and thank you for accepting to discuss with me your latest novel, *Quando il cielo vuole spuntano le stelle*. You have lived in the United States for quite a few years but you are originally from Nigeria. How did you end up living in Rhode Island?

E.C. OSONDU I came to the United States principally to attend graduate school. I went to Syracuse University, in New York State, where I had the privilege of studying Creative Writing with George Saunders, Mary Gaitskill, Amy Hempel, Arthur Flowers, Christopher Kennedy – writers I had heard about and whom I wanted to study with. After Syracuse, I taught at the University of Maryland, College Park, and a few other couple of places, until I got a tenure-track position at Providence College, in Rhode Island.

DI MAIO The protagonist of your recent novel also leaves his African hometown – not for the United States but for Europe, more precisely, for Rome. His story reminds us of the young people from different parts of Africa who come to Italy hoping to fulfill their dreams. Despite its fable-like tone, the plot is so realistic that one wonders if it is autobiographical or based on the real life of someone close to you.

OSONDU You might think that since I am a professor in the United States, I probably migrated through a different route, that I didn't have to go through the harrowing route that some other

¹ The video with the full interview is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qMtcX-M40Tg>.

people take. But I have to say that I do share some things with the young protagonists in this novel. Let me even back up a bit. It's interesting that when we think of characters like this, and when we think of migration today, we think of it in one direction only - from Africa to the West. We don't think of it in the direction of those whom we learned about in elementary school, who also moved, but in a different direction. Those people were called *explorers* - like Vasco da Gama, for instance. But who were these people? They were also adventurous young people - men, for the most part - who had heard of certain exotic places, who had an idea, a picture, of what these exotic places were like, who were seeking their fortune, who had people to impress, who wanted to see other parts of the world, who were bitten by the wanderlust bug. They also wanted to see how other people lived, explore other geographies, locales, places. So, they got on their boats - on their very large, colourful, do-sondurated boats - and they moved in the direction of Africa. They were seeking their fortune. Some of them were people who were principally after money. Some of them were seeking knowledge. Some of them were seeking experience. But definitely, there was this mental picture that they all had from the map that said there'd be dragons. So, some of them also wanted to know if this continent was really filled with dragons. And they came. When they came, they were not seen as 'exploiters'. They were not given a cold welcome. They were not seen as people who had come to destroy, to loot, even though many of them came with this exploitative tendency. They were welcomed. Actually, there was no rule, no Customs nor Immigration Officers telling these *explorers* not to come to Africa.

We tend to forget that, and so we talk about migration today as if it has always been in one direction. But before many of the ancestors of these people who are moving today were born, there had been a huge move from Europe to other parts of the world, including Africa - even more so. Europeans were looking for spices, resources, for the exoticism of Africa, or for all of that. So again, you might say we are part of that long line, we are all connected. Those who moved to Africa and those moving to Europe had dreams. Each one of them has mental pictures of what the other place looks like.

It is also possible that before coming here even I had a mental picture of what the United States looked like - how is the country going to welcome me, I wondered. Is my mental picture the same as the physical picture? I tell people that when I was a kid, I used to look at picture postcards with scenes of people wearing black turtlenecks, of couples in the snow, and it all looked so wonderful, so picturesque. But when you are actually

walking to campus up the hill at Syracuse in the snow, with your turtleneck, it is not as beautiful as it is on a postcard. It's a totally different experience.

This is to say, my novel might not be directly autobiographical but there's so much that I share, that I have in common, with the young men and women in it. We come from the same long line of people *who set out at dawn*, as it were.

DI MAIO The so-called American dream in this novel becomes an 'Italian dream'. This tickles the curiosity of Italian readers, so much that the novel was published in Italian first.

OSONDU This novel is really a love letter to Rome so, besides the politics and the technicalities of publishing, it's not surprising that it was first published in Italian. The original version in English is coming out next year. The novel's first line - "The first time I heard of Rome I thought it was a place in heaven" - kind of sets the tone of the entire book, because the narrator has this naïve, perfect picture of Rome in his mind. He has a perfect view of what Rome is like. So that's where he sets out to go to - all the way from Gulu Station to Rome. It's not surprising, then, that the novel first found life in Italy.

DI MAIO Have you ever been to Rome?

OSONDU Not at all! I've not even passed through Rome. I passed through most parts of Europe, but not through Rome. My greatest fear is that the first day I arrive in Rome, it is not going to be the same thing I imagined in this novel. But then that's also beautiful, because it is the same thing that happens with my main character: Rome of the imaginary and the real Rome turn out to be two totally different things.

DI MAIO The full incipit reads: "The first time I heard of Rome I thought it was a place in heaven. You know, like Jerusalem, Israel, Syria, Jordan, Abyssinia and those types of places you only hear their names in the holy books". There is an almost sacred aspect in your prose, and a sense of sacredness in the story, that seems to be connected to its young protagonist, who manages to get to the heart of things with lightness, candour. Why did you leave him unnamed?

OSONDU Because he represents so many. He represents the legion. He's not only one individual. He represents the sensibility of most of those who have this picture of the other part of the world. He has this idea of parts of Europe being heaven-like - precisely like the heavenly Jerusalem, which differs from the earthly Jerusalem.

I'm excited that you've done some work on Tutuola, because my hero has a lot of things in common with Tutuola's heroes who are always on a quest - and Tutuola of course is mining from African, Nigerian, Yoruba oral storytelling tradition. My protagonist is on a journey, like most characters in literature, even more so in African oral storytelling. He's on a journey to learn. It's a journey of discovery - a discovery of the self and of the world around him. We see him moving, like other literary heroes, whether he is a palm-wine drinker in search of his dead tapster, or Gilgamesh who searches for immortality. The very same thread runs through these stories - protagonists searching for the self, and for meaning in the world around them. My unnamed hero represents more a type than an individual. We all set out with dreams like he does. Of course, reality would eventually shock us back into a reappraisal, but it's more important to set out with dreams, because that's what makes you go, that's what makes you move. If you are not setting out with a dream, then you probably will not even leave at all.

DI MAIO Dreams are as sacred as journeys, aren't they? It seems to me there is a sacred element in every journey - definitely in this, where your protagonist seems to go through a rite of initiation.

OSONDU As the poet Delmore Schwartz says, from dreams begin responsibilities...

DI MAIO You don't give a name nor an age to your protagonist. I'm tempted to ask you how old you imagine him to be... In fact, does it even matter to imagine how old he is?

OSONDU It does matter. We tend to equate age and wisdom. My protagonist is very adventurous. He couldn't have been more than 18. He must have been 16 when he set out on his journey. But he is very wise. There is a Western concept of school as a place where you go to learn art, music, literature, where you go to hear stories. But do not forget that for us Africans, it starts differently. It doesn't start with a book and a classroom. It actually starts from home. Take, for example, the idea of storytelling. The boy probably has never read a novel in his life but he lives with Nene, his grandmother, this old, wise, nearly blind woman who is like an oracle of sorts and who speaks in words of wisdom. She just spits knowledge. She is not capable of saying anything that is not wise, or profound, and so that is his first school. There is this thing that Nene does, for instance - Nene wants him out of the house because he's being a nuisance. What does she do? She doesn't say: "Get out of the house, I need some space". Instead, she sends him on what we will call a wild goose chase. She says: "Go to this person's mom

and ask her to give you this object called talantolo". The moment he gets there and tells that lady: "Nene said you should give me this object", the lady says: "Sit down". Because that's the code, the lady already knows. That's what you do to a child that is giving you too much trouble. The lady says: "Just wait, I'll look for it". After a while, the lady says: "Oh, I forgot! Someone came to borrow it. Go to this person's mom and she's going to give it to you". And he keeps going on this wild goose chase, until, ultimately, he's tired, worn out. So he goes back home and says: "Nene, none of those people gave me the talantolo". And she says: "Don't worry". That's something you do to a kid who is giving you too much trouble, so they can give you some space. You see the teaching right there? You see everything that's embodied in that? It is storytelling, it is philosophy, it is child psychology, it's all of that - and the boy didn't have to go to school to learn that. That's something he picks up right there from his grandmother. Grandparents of course are usually a repository of knowledge. They are a way for people to learn, a way for us to learn stories, to pick up proverbs, skills, that kind of knowledge. It's not surprising that the boy knows so much even at such a young age.

DI MAIO Something that really strikes me about this novel is the way Gulu Station society is portrayed. Europeans - definitely Italians - tend to think African kids arriving in Europe leave behind very unhappy places. Here we have a completely different story. Gulu Station is far from being wealthy, but it is a well-ordered world. Happiness is part of it. There are many positive examples in the community. Nene is a mother, a grandmother and even an oracle to the boy. Bros is a grown-up man who moves to Rome but remains in love with Miss Koi-Koi, the village teacher. When he visits his hometown, he sends the boy to give her gifts.

OSONDU Bros is an interesting fellow! Bros brings the outside world to Gulu Station. He brings the TV, the generator, the FI- LA shirts, boxes for younger brothers and sisters. He brings the outside world to Gulu Station and suddenly the narrator's eyes are open. There's a different world out there - different from Nene's world, different from the world the boy knows. Yet, despite the fact that Bros has been all over - he's been to Europe, made money, has become very comfortable - he still sees that there is some kind of essence in the village. In the village there's this woman, who's a school teacher, whom he has been in love with. So he comes back for her. Also, Bros is the one who sows the seed in our narrator and says: "Whenever you are in Rome, knock on my door and you're going to be welcome". Let's not



Figure 1 Cover of the novel by E.C. Osondu, *Quando il cielo vuole spuntano le stelle* (Italian edition)

say how that's played out! Bros is a bridge that straddles these two worlds - he still has one leg in Gulu Station and the other leg in Rome. So he brings the opportunity for this young narrator to see the world of Rome, while still being grounded in the world of Gulu Station.

DI MAIO I like the image of having one leg in one place and one leg in another place.

OSONDU It's even the case for me. Even after so many years in the US, Nigeria is still very much home to me. You carry it around



Figure 2 E.C. Osondu in conversation with Alessandra Di Maio for the Afropean Bridges series

with you. You carry it, as if you're still living in Nigeria, and it's an insane and weighty thing. You think about the exchange rates! You always put things side by side – how does it taste, how does this smell, how is this different...

DI MAIO Earlier you mentioned Amos Tutuola, the first African writer who merged oral tradition into written literature in a colonial language. There is a pedagogical aspect in Tutuola's stories, yet they are entertaining. This is the same kind of aesthetic pleasure that we find in reading your novel. On the one hand we find references to magic creatures, proverbs guide the young man through his journey, etc. On the other hand, realistic characters such as Abdu, Anyi, Ayira, Zaaïd, Qadir make us grieve, hope, dream. One is a child soldier, one wants to escape a forced marriage, another dreams of being a football player, etc. Their journey is an individual as much as a collective experience. In Italy, however, we tend to have only one view of this journey and we use just one word for the newcomers – *stranieri*, 'strangers'. But who's a stranger in this world?

OSONDU That's a very interesting question. I'm happy you introduced this word, because in the Igbo worldview, one of the things that are said in jest – but also seriously! – is that if you arrive in a remote village and you don't find an Igbo man, you don't stay there, you just run away. You know, Igbos are probably the most migratory of all ethnic groups in, and within, Nigeria. In Igbo, we have a famous proverb – I can't translate it properly into English but in a rough translation it would sound like: "If you are a traveler, or a stranger, you must work hard not to make enemies". Growing up with my parents, one of the things that my mom always did – which I found very strange – was that no matter how much food there was, whether it was much or whether it was little, she would always leave some. I'd say: "Why are you leaving some?" and she'd say: "Well, suppose we get a

visitor, a stranger, what are they going to eat?”. As a child, I found that very strange, because as a child you’re essentially a very selfish being – people don’t talk about it, but that’s all you are, children are not typically altruistic, which is why they have to be taught to share when they go to preschool. As a child, I always wondered, why are we leaving anything for strangers? Why are we leaving anything for visitors who may never come? But there is also that ingrained notion that I inculcated very quickly, and many people of my generation did, that you must treat strangers with kindness, with generosity. You must look out for them. Because you will be a stranger somewhere, someday, so always leave some food, just in case a stranger who has not eaten comes along. It’s part of the culture. I don’t know if there is an equivalent in other cultures – especially in the West. What I know is that I’ve always liked to look at Western oral storytelling as well, at Western oral literature, and there is one story that has always struck me, that of the grasshopper and the ant. The grasshopper is playful, frittering away everything, enjoying the summer, and then when the winter months came, the grasshopper did not keep anything for itself. It did not preserve, it did not conserve anything, so the grasshopper dies. But the ant that had conserved and preserved stuff was able to survive. Well, because we live in a place where it is summer all the time, is it possible that we are like the grasshopper? Is it possible that for the European mind, especially those coming from the cold climate, have learned to conserve? Self-preservation first.

The idea of the stranger and the visitor – the way it is seen in my part of the world is very different from the way it’s here. We were taught to impress the visitor, to embrace the stranger, to welcome him. Which is why the *explorers* who went to Africa were welcomed. They were not attacked. They were welcomed. They were just seen as strange, different people, but the world allows for all kinds of strangeness and all kinds of difference. Even if their religion was different, well that’s the way they worshipped their god, that’s fine. So that was the way it was viewed.

Moving a little bit to theory now – the way migration has been theorized strips the migrants of their individuality. This was something I had at the back of my mind when I was writing this book. Not that I theorized it much, but it does appear that migrants are usually seen as a type, a huddled mass of migrants on a boat. They are seen as illiterate, or not so literate, young men and women who are coming to this place because they’ve seen the lights and they want to grab what we have. But when you decide to break them up into individuals, you’ll find that it might not actually be such a huddled mass, as much as they are

named *Ayira*, *Zaaid*, etc. These are people coming from different backgrounds, with different dreams. That's why individuation was something that I thought was important to do in this book.

DI MAIO A final observation about your use of language in the novel. It is masterful, inventive, so beautiful. You've got the sensibility of a modern, contemporary writer but, again, I can hear the storytelling tradition at the same time. The use of proverbs in the novel is quite fascinating. Is the title a proverb, or is it one of Nene's pearls of wisdom?

OSONDU I think it's probably a mixture of both, it is about readiness, it's just about the timing being right. But no, it is not an African proverb. It's something that I came up with.

DI MAIO Maybe it will become an African proverb.

OSONDU I hope so! Perhaps already an African proverb as we speak [Laughs].

DI MAIO Thank you so much, E.C. Osondu. Rome is waiting for you!