

***Between Starshine and Clay: Conversations from the African Diaspora*, by Sarah Ladipo Manyika. London: Footnote Press, 2022, 288 pp.**

 Sandra Sousa

Department of Modern Languages & Literatures
University of Central Florida, Orlando, USA
Sandra.Sousa@ucf.edu

I have never met Sarah Ladipo Manyika, but in a sense I feel like I know her, like she is some type of soul sister living on the other coast of this country where we both have now resided for more than two decades. I am aware that this is an imperfect way to begin what I intend to be a review of her latest book, *Between Starshine and Clay: Conversations from the African Diaspora* (2022). Nonetheless, I am compelled today to be more personal and break some of the rules of sometimes-too-strict academic writing for an academia that “is neither a neutral space nor simply a space of knowledge and wisdom, of science and scholarship, but also a space of v-i-o-l-e-n-c-e,” where black discourses have consistently been placed at the margins, “as deviating knowledge”, “unscientific” because “personal” and “subjective,” as Grada Kilomba asserts in *Plantation Memories: Episodes of Everyday Racism* (2008, 26). Perhaps here I want to pay a humble homage to a writer that I have come to admire not only for her writing skills as a novelist, but for the humanity and kindness shown through her work and with the human beings that share this planet with her.

Sarah loves stories. As she mentions in “Notes of a Native Daughter,” the introduction of *Between Starshine and Clay*, “Wondering about other people’s life stories is what I do. I have lived on three continents and find that my eye is constantly drawn to stories of people in Africa and in its diaspora, whether recent or hundreds of years removed” (2022, 1).

At some point in the past, I came across Manyika’s second novel *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun* (2016) and I entered what was for me an unknown world. Perhaps because Dr Morayo Da Silva, the main character of the novel, is a retired English literature teacher, I began to be more curious about Nigeria and other parts of Africa as well as the African Diaspora, since up until the moment I had been immersed only with Lusophone Africa.

And then in *Between Starshine and Clay* we meet Willard Harris, the first African American Director of Nurses at a hospital in San Francisco in 1964. On one of those random encounters in life, Manyika met her book’s character in real life, one that actually surpasses fiction: Harris, at age ninety-seven, still busy and working, taking swimming and piano lessons. It reminded me of the epigraph of João Ubaldo Ribeiro’s *Viva o Povo Brasileiro*, an epic narrative of a people in search

of their identity and affirmation: “O segredo da Verdade é o seguinte: não existem fatos, só existem histórias.” *Starshine and Clay* could probably stand wholly on this principle. Arguably in one of the most beautiful chapters of *Starshine and Clay*, we read about Manyika’s friendship with this special African American woman who has lived more than a century through the country’s changes and is one of the living symbols of dignified survival against white bigotry. *Starshine and Clay* is in itself an explosion of intermingled African lives and stories which form the substance of Sarah’s life and (non-)fictional work.

Sarah Ladipo Manyika grew up in Jos, in northern Nigeria, to a Nigerian father and English mother, and has lived in Kenya, France and the UK. She currently lives in the United States. She is the author of two novels: the first, *In Dependence*, published in the UK in 2008, in Nigeria in 2009, and in the US in 2011; and the second, *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun*, came out in 2016 by the Nigerian publisher Cassava Republic Press. *Between Starshine and Clay: Conversations from the African Diaspora*, her most recent book, falls into a different category: a compilation of essays on her meetings with some distinguished black figures and of interviews made to some of those who, despite their skin color, have risen, defied the bonds of white supremacy, and become impactful in our societies, within and beyond the geographical borders of Africa. They are twelve people who have reached the top in fields ranging from literature and the arts in general, to politics. They have, at least, two things in common: they have all told stories and/or uncovered collected and curated histories, and they have all contributed to change and progress; twelve people “who have been a source of inspiration to [Sarah] in [her] search for perspective and hope” (2022, 3). As Sarah mentions in the book’s introduction, “This book is a celebration of personal and collective stories, of histories, of people making a way where there seems to be no way, making a difference, making history. It’s a celebration of the joy that comes despite the hurdles and barriers meant to discourage, dishearten or destroy” (*ibidem*).

Between Starshine and Clay is a book that breaks the boundaries of what we got used to know as a biographical genre since in it we find a bit of every literary genre. The interviewees, which are divided into three sections – curators, creators, changemakers – are people such as Toni Morrison, Wole Soyinka, Henry Louis Gates, Jr, Margaret Busby, Michelle Obama, Cory Booker, to name here just half of them. In the three main sections, we find “subdivisions”: some are essays derived from “Meetings” with the Black figures, others are “Conversations” in which we have the more traditional question-answer style. For all of them, the reader is given a brief biography.

Manyika’s autobiographical story, which she tells in “Notes of a Native Daughter,” and which works as the book’s introduction, is obviously intertwined with the stories of the people that she interviewed as well as with that of the broader history of African people. As we move with her from Nigeria to England, France, Zimbabwe, and America, a common thread is emphasized: skin color,

which continues to be a marker of hierarchy, otherness and difference, setting people apart and creating inhumane forms of violence such as killings, imprisonments, or “simply” lack of access to education, health, housing, food and jobs. In sum, Manyika exposes structural, institutional and everyday racism that society insists on ignoring and pretending that it does not exist. It is everywhere, and it is not a hoax, it is more like a plague.

Between Starshine and Clay is certainly a timely book. In the past few years, we have observed the rise of white supremacy, which many (including me) hoped had been eradicated. I have learned quickly that no, it was only laying low and shockingly was just waiting to be given the power to come out in full strength; shockingly too, we have been taken back to a time – the pre-civil rights era – that was supposed to stay where it was supposed to: in the past. In every conversation in *Between Starshine and Clay* we read the stories of those who can’t or couldn’t conform to segregation and institutional racism, who fought and keep on fighting for social justice. As I was reading the interviews with Toni Morrison, with Claudia Rankine, and Wole Soyinka, Ta-Nehisi Coates’s words in *We Were Eight Years in Power* came to mind. He writes: “In our present time, to express the view of the enslaved – [...] – is to compromise the comfortable narrative” (2018, 80). The voices that we hear in *Between Starshine and Clay* are of those, including the author’s, who refuse to compromise with the *comfortable narrative*, who have dedicated their lives to the dream of another country(ies), who won’t stop because there is something called hope. They are restless and ceaseless in their beliefs that captivity within despotic white supremacy can end.

Manyika’s *Between Starshine and Clay* is also a book that unveils a journey across continents. Here we can see one of its unique characteristics. The book is a step further to bridge the historical sense of alienation. Its distinctiveness also comes from the fact that, by bringing together exceptional individuals in a book, it reminds us that it is a myth to believe that it only takes one person to make a change. The type of change that results in equality requires much more than that.

Between Starshine and Clay ends with a story titled “The White Continent,” which in itself could be interpreted as ironic. It tells the story of her journey through the South Pole after being invited to join an expedition. In one of her descriptions of this unique adventure, she reminds us that we can’t escape fear, since it comes in many forms, types, shapes and colors (2022, 244-245). And it is because of fear that we need to hear/read more stories and learn from them and, perhaps, make some of those stories our own, erasing differences, creating solidarity. Maybe then, the fear of the other, the one that does not look exactly like us, but becomes different through processes of discrimination, will dissipate.

Between Starshine and Clay also makes a claim like that of Grada Kilomba’s, i.e., a call for an “epistemology that includes the personal and the subjective as part of academic discourse, for we all speak from a specific time and place, from a specific history and reality—there are no neutral discourses” (Kilomba 2008, 30).

Manyika's book embodies a call for black discourse to be placed at the center, that transgresses the language of classic scholarship as evidenced not only, but also by the use of the biographical genre at another level, the level of scholarship's decolonization.

I have never heard Sarah's voice, but the sound of her words always resonates deeply in me, giving me hope for a better, more equitable future for Africans and their sons and daughters in the Diaspora. Her books keep reminding me that I still have a long journey ahead of me, one of learning.

References

- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. 2018. *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy*. New York: One World.
- Kilomba, Grada. 2008. *Plantation Memories. Episodes of Everyday Racism*. Münster: Unrast Verlag.
- Manyika, Sarah Ladipo. 2019. *In Dependence*. Abuja, Nigeria: Cassava Republic Press.
- Manyika, Sarah Ladipo. 2017. *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun*. Abuja, Nigeria: Cassava Republic Press.
- Manyika, Sarah Ladipo. 2022. *Between Starshine and Clay: Conversations from the African Diaspora*. London: Footnote Press.
- Ribeiro, João Ubaldo. 2005 [1984]. *Viva o Povo Brasileiro*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Nova Fronteira.

How to cite this text

[Chicago Style]

Sousa, Sandra. 2023. "Book review: *Between Starshine and Clay: Conversations from the African Diaspora*, by Sarah Ladipo Manyika. London: Footnote Press, 2022." *ex æquo* 47: 242-245. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22355/exaequo.2023.47.17>

[APA Style – adapted]

Sousa, Sandra (2023). Book review: *Between Starshine and Clay: Conversations from the African Diaspora*, by Sarah Ladipo Manyika. London: Footnote Press, 2022. *ex æquo*, 47, 242-245. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22355/exaequo.2023.47.17>



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits noncommercial reproduction and distribution of the work, in any medium, provided the original work is not altered or transformed in any way, and that the work is properly cited. For commercial re-use, please contact apem1991@gmail.com