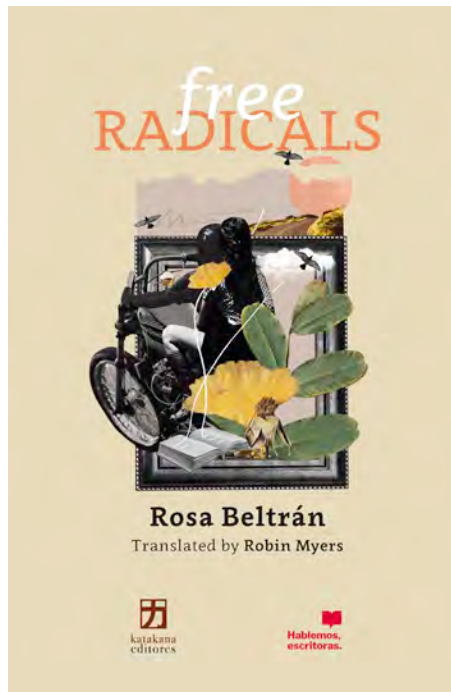


use of breaks to the fourth wall. By elegant, minimal prose devoid of overt acrobatics, and beauty preserved in the rhythm of each complex revelation, the world of the novel is made both vividly real and hauntingly symbolic.



*Free Radicals* may be a novel, but it's also a *bitácora de recuerdos*, a dossier of clues to broader realities, a record of absences, of lack, of empty emotional spaces. Blur-paced, exciting, and full of concrete, physical action, it's a repository for the abstract, internal flow of thought and for the burrowed history that serves as background to each discovery Beltrán describes as "a concave mirror we stare into, hoping to find ourselves."

Impossibly enough, it's also high drama, from murders and kidnappings to deceit and upheaval. Along for the ride, women are judged as good or bad by their responses, so conditioned in advance that it is impossible to reach answers for the many questions this story brings up: What must women do to survive a world in which they've been guests, and not always by choice? How can girls go through childhood while suspecting dark and dangerous forces at play all around? How can they become whole young women when childhood suspicions turn out to be prophecies? How can we be women when violence mutates into a force that exiles our loved ones?

It's hard to write about this book without wanting to reveal every wonderful thing about it. But I won't. Just know that before the last page, you will know everything: the story of each of these women—mother, daughter, and granddaughter—the story of every woman. Maybe, too, yourself included.

Anjanette Delgado  
Miami

## NOO SARO-WIWA

### *Black Ghosts: A Journey into the Lives of Africans in China*

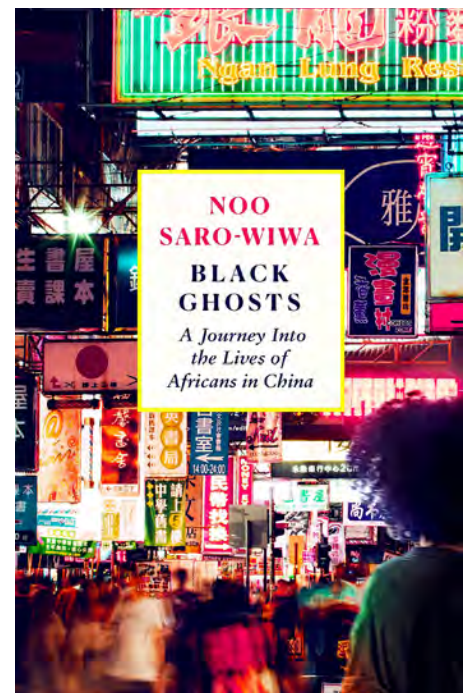
London. Canongate Books. 2023.  
256 pages.

AT SOME POINT, you may have traveled or lived in Asia and noticed in a particular neighborhood or area that there's a significant number of African residents. Or perhaps during the height of Covid-19, you would have heard of African nationals mistreated and evicted from their homes in China. But little is known from an African person's perspective about living in China. How many of us can say we've gone to China and really talked to the many Africans living there? On the surface, Noo Saro-Wiwa answers this overarching question in her second book, *Black Ghosts*. But when you dig a little deeper, you'll read how the annals of history have affected an African's perception of their hometown in comparison to China and the prejudice they face in the country.

I've personally wondered about these communities when I traveled to Hong Kong and Taiwan, the closest I could get to China, strolling past the Chungking Mansion in Tsim Sha Tsui and seeing many around the Taipei 101 area at night. *Black Ghosts* opened my eyes to why this is the norm and why being an African immigrant living in China is like playing the game of life on hard mode. The first stop is Guangzhou, also known as China's "Chocolate City," where Saro-Wiwa spends most of her time. Africans and Chinese locals blended into the neighborhoods of Xiaobei, Sanyuanli, and Guangyuan Li Xu (aka Guangyuan

West Road) with a mix of visa overstayers and business owners on trips walking the same streets.

Based on conversations Saro-Wiwa has with people in the area like Emmanuel and Tayo, this appears to be the norm. Both bring up the reality of how relations between their countries really affect a citizen's freedom to travel or reside there. While unmarried Americans can get a ten-year visa due to US-China relations, Nigerians like Emmanuel and Tayo have to pay a monthly visa of £100, excluding the train or bus fare for renewal. Even if they marry a Chinese citizen, they're only entitled to a one-year visa. It's a one-way trip to China, and they may not see their family or friends ever again unless they have the finances to go back to Africa.



Emmanuel is one of many Nigerians who studied, then moved to China to play football, but, sadly, suffered an injury. Eight years later, he now sells VPNs and can only stay in the area, never traveling because of mandatory passport ID checks and only roaming the streets at night. On the other hand, Tayo, a Nigerian woman who has a multifaceted enterprise, travels back and forth to trade. Tayo answers the question as to why so few African women reside in China. Because many African women are business owners on short buying trips, it's led men within the city to assume Saro-Wiwa



is a call girl when she goes to the local bars, restaurants, and clubs. Tayo mentions that back home in Nigeria, particularly within the Igbo tribe, the women are more likely to be sent to school, get married, and become the managing director (MD) of their husband's company.

Interracial dating within the country has led to racial tensions between people. According to Ghanaian author Emmanuel John Hevi, who writes about student life in China, interracial dating escalated onto university campuses and fed (loosely) into the Tiananmen Square protest and massacre in 1989. Men like Stanley also date but see the lack of women from African countries as a “women shortage” epidemic; Stanley only dates Chinese women even though they're not his preference.

Returning to the Guangzhou chapter one last time, this was one of my favorite chapters as it compared how Africans lived versus non-Africans like Jianbo, his husband Thomas, and their friends. What's also noticeable about these people is the comfort of knowing that their livelihoods are secure—living by the riverside promenade, clubbing on the weekend, with high-paying jobs to fund their lifestyle. It was as different as night and day. There were also people who had to pretend to be another nationality like Suzy, a twenty-three-year-old Kenyan. She had to pretend to be American to get an English teaching job but, unlike most Africans, enjoyed life in China.

Saro-Wiwa traveled for five months to speak with members within the African community across China and Hong Kong. I admired her bravery in navigating cities and areas with little Mandarin skills and the confidence she had to talk to locals despite the dangers in a land where Black women like her are not the majority.

*Black Ghosts* is not your average travelogue. It's an extraordinary read with a mix of opinions and information about why Africans live and work in subpar conditions in China. It helps readers to understand a little more about their presence in the country and to sympathize with their fight to keep living in a foreign land, despite the government's lack of support for them.

Nyasha Oliver  
London

## MARGARET MEYER *The Witching Tide*

New York. Scribner. 2023. 336 pages.

**TO BE PUBLICLY VILIFIED**, have your innocence questioned, and your life taken away is a scary position to be in. There's a tension in the world today, whereby a simple accusation of possible wrongdoing can capsize your life before you even have the opportunity to protest your innocence or have the accusation investigated. People have developed a mob mentality; we are instantly quick to feed into paranoia and perpetuate negative stories about others who may not share the same ideas, politics, or religious affiliations. Perceived difference is a reason to believe others are here to curse our own existence; much like the women living in Europe and the UK in the seventeenth century, whose mere existence was risky business during the height of the witch trials. A sly word to a neighbor, an awkward limp, or one too many moles on the body could have easily gotten a woman sent to the gallows accused of being a witch.

In her debut novel, *The Witching Tide*, Margaret Meyer viscerally captures that fear of living on the edge while almost every woman around you is being accused of heinous crimes. Inspired by the seventeenth-century East Anglia witch hunts purported by the infamous witch hunter Matthew Hopkins, *The Witching Tide* is set in the fictional town of Cleftwater, where protagonist Martha Hallybread finds herself in the middle of a terrifying witch hunt as accusations fly and fear takes hold of her friends and neighbors at the behest of a stranger, a witch hunter. Hopkins himself is believed to have executed about three hundred women accused of practicing witchcraft between 1644 and 1646. His menacing character is re-created in Meyer's story, who swoops in on the unsuspecting town and turns the inhabitants against one another. “We got no witches in Cleftwater. Leastways, we had none, until the witch man came,” says one of the accused women.

The once close-knit community descends into chaos as prejudice, paranoia, and misogyny consume them and they

question the purity of their own neighbors. But not just any neighbors—primarily the women. There's no real evidence to suggest the accused women indulge in any witchcraft, but with the arrival of the witch hunter, “A mole a few days ago was just that. Now it's seen as the mark of the devil because one person in authority says so.”

Meyer's development of Martha as the protagonist for a fear-driven story like this is a good choice. As if being a woman in the 1600s wasn't arduous enough, having this horror unfurl through the eyes of a mute, middle-aged, woman with no family, and even less power as a servant, brings a heightened level of terror to the novel.

Martha is a well-known and well-liked healer and midwife in the parochial town, and as a live-in servant to a respected merchant named Kit and his wife, Agnes, she garners a certain level of favor. But all the good she did for the people of Cleftwater is forgotten the moment she's placed in the spotlight during the trials. Her strange way of life (no husband or children), her inability to speak, and her proximity to babies who die suddenly cast her as an enemy. She is a woman of faith, but as the witch hunts grow more perilous, Martha's faith, loyalty, and sanity are tested.

In her debut, Meyer takes us on a wonderful—even though gory at times—ride, but the story results in an unsatisfactory ending. There's no discernible growth or changes in Martha or the people of Cleftwater after such a horrid ordeal. Additionally, nothing substantial is added to the witch lit literary canon. Instead, I was left wondering, Why do men hate women to the point of insanity?

Keishel A. Williams  
Brooklyn

