

'n tydskrif vir afrika-letterkunde • a journal for african literature

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# Tydskrif

## VIR LETTERKUNDE

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A black and white photograph of a person's back, illuminated with gold powder, set against a dark background with a large, glowing golden orb in the upper left corner.

ghostly border-crossings



# Tydskrif VIR LETTERKUNDE

'n Tydskrif vir Afrika-letterkunde • A Journal for African Literature

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## EDITORIAL

# Introduction: ghostly borders

### **Polo B. Moji and Natasha Himmelman**

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### **Why Europe?**

In "What Is This Afro-European?" Raimi Gbdamosi (27) offers, "not quite the raw material found in Africa, but not quite the refined object from Europe either [...] [but] the product of an uncomfortable union, the poster child of an uncomfortable alliance the inheritance of an unwilling integration." The hierarchical opposition of "Africanness" and "Europeanness" in colonial discourses and their conception as being mutually exclusive in decolonial texts, such as *Decolonizing the Mind* (Ngũgĩ) seemingly preclude the 'belonging' of African and Afrodiasporic subjects in European space. Despite the ground-breaking work of scholars, such as Paul Gilroy (*The Black Atlantic; There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*), in unpacking the perceived incommensurability of Africa and Europe, it is the discourse of 'migrant crisis,' which, since the late 1990s, has depicted black and brown bodies attempting to cross Europe's maritime borders, that makes such an engagement all the more necessary. The 'migrant crisis,' which had as much, if not more, to do with the political aftermath of the 'Arab Spring' in North Africa and the Middle East, than the clandestine migration from the African continent, has resulted in the "hardening of spatial boundaries" (McKittrick). This reframes Europe's liquid maritime borders—the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea, as well as the English Channel—as 'hard' protective borders. This ideological "hardening" belies the historical porosity of these locations as part of the transatlantic slave routes, as well as the entangled histories of Southern European border locations and North Africa. 'Fortress Europe' is constructed in opposition to the televised image of the 'ghost ship' ferrying clandestine migrants to Europe's shores. In this context, a study of African and Afrodiasporic narratives of Europe—what Rami Gbdamosi calls "the poster child of [this] uncomfortable alliance"—seems a timely intervention.

## **(Re)imagining borders, mapping (un)belonging**

Despite the geographical and intellectual origin of the very concept of race in Europe, not to mention the explicitly race-based policies that characterized both its fascist regimes and its colonial empires, the continent often is marginal at best in discourses on race or racism, in particular with regard to contemporary configurations that are often closely identified with the United States as a center of both explicit race discourse and of resistance to it. (El-Tayeb xv)

As a geo-political construct, the border is signifier of separation that inflects the diasporic cartographies of home and host land, state and statelessness, documented and undocumented. To cite Katherine McKittrick, “[i]f who we see is tied up with where we see [...] then the placement of subaltern bodies deceptively hardens spatial binaries, in turn suggesting that some bodies belong, some bodies do not belong, and some bodies are out of places” (McKittrick xv). This special issue engages with African and Afrodiasporic imaginaries of the European border as a space of transnational subjectification that co-produces notions of (un)belonging and the dichotomy of inclusion/exclusion. Thus, the border is not a location (symbolic or otherwise) to be erased, rather a node of identitarian—political, socio-cultural, and historical—entanglements. Visual and literary representations of racial and ethnic minorities in Europe, in our case, African and Afrodiasporic subjects, interrogate the notion of the border—border locations, border lives, and border crossings—and foreground racially marked bodies as visual signifiers of non-belonging within the European context (El-Tayeb). From the perspective of African and Afrodiasporic literary studies, narrative form allows for the study of the modalities, technologies of movements through and across identitarian borders (such as nationality, Europeanness) by subjects of African and Afrodiasporic descent. It also allows us to consider how such literary and cultural production reconfigures geographic and social borders in terms of connection, mobility, and a political claim around belonging (or not) in European space. While one can critique the “reality of imposed or chosen ghettoized existences of African communities away of ‘home’” (Gbdamosi 28), authors such as Fatou Diome—whose televised assertion that Europe will drown alongside the shipwrecked migrants shocked French television audiences—make strong claims about their belonging in European space and racialized subjects. Fatou Diome’s *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique* (2003) (*The Belly of the Atlantic*) is one of the literary texts analyzed in this volume.

### **Haunting: the (in)visibility of blackness**

*Sur le détroit de Gibraltar, y a un jeune Noir qui pleure, un rêve qui prendra vie, une fois passé  
Gibraltar*

*Sur le détroit de Gibraltar, y a un jeune Noir qui se demande si l’histoire le retiendra comme  
celui qui portait le nom de cette montagne*

*Sur le détroit de Gibraltar, y a un jeune Noir qui meurt sa vie bête de gangsta rappeur mais  
Sur le détroit de Gibraltar, y a un jeune homme qui va naître, qui va être celui que les tours  
empêchaient d'être.*

On the strait of Gibraltar, there is a young Black man who cries, for a dream which will  
come to life, once past Gibraltar

On the strait of Gibraltar, there is a young Black man who asks himself if history will  
hold him back, as it did the one who bears the name of this mountain.

On the strait of Gibraltar, there is a young Black man who dies his savage life of a  
gangsta rapper but

On the strait of Gibraltar, there is a young man yet to be born, who will be the one the  
council flats prevented from becoming. (Abd al Malik)

The song, *Gibraltar* (2006), by Abd al Malik, a French rapper of Congolese descent, reflects this sense of being trapped in an 'in-between' or liminal space. The strait of Gibraltar is the closest point between the African and European continents—just over fourteen kilometres at its narrowest point. As a geographical location, the "rock of Tariq" (Gibraltar), also refers to the historic conquering of the Hispanic Kingdom by the Umayyad Caliphate of North Africa. This erasure of Africa from the history of Europe is linked to the contemporary figure of the migrant—"the young black man" is standing on the brink of a new life in Europe. The fate that awaits him is a ghettoized existence in the marginalized "tours" (council flats) of European cities, often inhabited by poor immigrants becoming socially invisible. The visibility of black bodies within the European space reflects the paradox of racialized (embodied) hypervisibility and social invisibility as liminal subjects. Indeed, social marginalization and historical amnesia render blackness a spectral presence in Europe, which casts African and Afrodiasporic subjects—particularly refugees and undocumented migrants—as ghostly figures. Haunting not only refers to an "invisible system of power" imposed by the sociological imaginary of a "colour-blind" Europe, it is reframed by African and Afrodiasporic narratives as something which "unlike trauma, is distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done" (Gordon xvi). The present volume presents literary and cultural forms that resist black subjects being made transparent in history and space through a hauntology of Europe by its former colonial subjects.

### **Ghostly border-crossings**

The diverse array of contributions to this issue explore African and Afrodiasporic themes of (un)belonging and black (in)visibility in direct relation to Europe's borders—and subversively through the notion of blackness as a marginalized or spectral presence, haunting European space. We see a variety of theoretical and conceptual

positions in this volume, ranging from Avery Gordon's hauntology of the sociological imaginary, Édouard Glissant's poetics of relation, Katherine McKittrick's concern with the geographies of black place(lessness) and Christina Sharpe's movement of black people in the "wake" as a phenomenon that does not exclude Europe. We see a range of approaches, including philosophical, comparative, as well as a dialogical. The types of borders under scrutiny range from linguistic to physical and ideological borders across a range of European locations—namely, Belgium, Britain, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain. Two essays notably subvert the relation between borders and national space identity by focusing on the Andalusian and the Basque areas of Spain. The extent to which Africa is evoked in the analysis of films and literary texts differs from essay to essay, yet blackness as a disruptive or haunting presence remains the central theme of the volume.

The essays explore the paradoxical *hypervisibility* of African bodies attempting to cross into Europe—figures of the documented or undocumented migrant and the refugee—and the social *invisibility* of Afrodiasporic subjects within Europe. In this regard, they challenge what Fatima el Tayeb refers to as the dogma of a "colour-blind" Europe. The first two essays, by Polo B. Moji and MaryEllen Higgins, establish the ghost as a subject of African descent and hauntology as a method that allows for the (re)imagination of Europe as an Afrodiasporic space. The two essays establish the relation between the blackness and certain forms of mobility across and within European borders: Moji examines the literary depiction of Europe as a space of erasure for historical figures of African descent through the notion of hauntology, while Higgins explores the filmic representation of Europe as space of 'asylum' within the contemporary context of African migration. Continuing in Moji's historical vein, Miguel Ángel Rosales, a Spanish filmmaker, discusses the erasure of the North African roots of Spain's flamenco dance in his 2016 documentary, *Gurumbé: Canciones de tu Memoria Negra* (Gurumbé: Afro-Andalusian memories).

The next section of the volume engages more closely with various conceptions of the border. Moses März offers an audacious reading of German border thought—migration and political communities through the philosophy of Caribbean writer, Édouard Glissant. Kedon Willis expounds on the racialized nature of European borders through a comparative study of white and Afrodiasporic experiences of Europe in novels set in the 1920s. His analysis of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* problematizes the narrative of Europe as a haven from racial segregation by highlighting the exoticisation of black women's bodies in the Danish context. Gender remains central in Dina Ligaga's essay, which examines African women's mobility in Belgium through the literary representation of sexual trafficking. This essay's interrogation of the European 'paradise' as a locus of upward social and economic mobility for African migrants is taken up by Cullen Goldblatt's article on Fatou Diome's award-winning novel, *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*. Set in the French-Francophone context, Goldblatt's

“Setting Readers at Sea” also imagines the porosity of Europe’s oceanic borders with the African continent (the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea).

In the third and final section of our special issue, ghostly border crossings are mapped through language, revealing the complex relations between place(lessness) and Afrodiasporic subjectivity. Anita Virga reveals the evolving mythology of Italian-ness that displaces blackness outside of national borders and alongside the ‘ghostly’ evolution of an Afro-Italian literature that is reshaping the national canon. Reading César Mba Abogo’s *El porteador de Marlow* (2007) (Marlow’s Boy) and Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo’s *El Metro* (2007) (The Metro), Julia Borst focuses on hispanophone African literature, considering the lived experiences of formerly colonized subjects in the Spanish metropole. A theoretically rich co-authored essay by Xin Liu and Danai Mupotsa stretches our conceptual understanding of border-crossing to conceive of the tongue as a linguistic border that keeps the African migrant ‘stammering’ in a diasporic state of alienation. The volume ends with an interview by Natasha Himmelman which explores solidarities that can be created between African writers and political minorities in Europe through the translation of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s literary works by a Basque publishing house.

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# The hauntological imaginary in Bernadine Evaristo's *Soul Tourists* (2005)

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## The hauntological imaginary in Bernadine Evaristo's *Soul Tourists* (2005)

This article examines the novel, *Soul Tourists* (2005), by Bernadine Evaristo, a black British writer of Nigerian and English descent, through the notion of hauntology. Based on the author's assertion that "her preoccupation is her DNA," I explore the novel's depiction of a black British couple—Stanley and Jessie—as they take a road trip across Europe, and the haunting of Stanley by the ghosts of black historical figures along the way. I draw on Avery Gordon's framing of hauntology as both a racialized experience of invisible power structures of oppressions and a call to action. I firstly consider Stanley and Jessie's personal histories as haunted sites of melancholia and repressed memories. I further link hauntology to the imbrication of spiritual and physical worlds through an analysis of the erased historical figures—ghosts—that speak to Stanley at various locations along their journey. Over and above the spatiotemporal (re)mapping of blackness in Europe and the challenge to the ontological definition of Europe as 'being' a space of whiteness, I relate the hauntological imaginary to a schema of black ancestry. **Keywords:** Black Britain, hauntology, Bernadine Evaristo, *Soul Tourists*, ancestors, kinship.

### Introduction

In *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe*, Fatima El Tayeb associates European space with the myth of "colour-blindness" and the "silent racializations" of minorities (El-Tayeb xvii). In Britain, this is inflected by the political legacy of the Brixton riots of the 1980s, where a combination of high unemployment, racial tensions, and aggressive urban policing led to violent confrontations between black communities and the authorities, and the prominence of black British identity politics. Of the 1980s generation of black British cultural scholars, Paul Gilroy's *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Practices of Race and Nation* (1987) questions the ideological construction of the British nation as white. His subsequent work, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (2004), reflects on Britain's melancholic longing for a hegemonic cultural past: "the life of the nation has been dominated by an inability even to face, never mind actually mourn, the profound change in circumstances and moods that followed the end of the Empire and consequent loss of imperial prestige" (Gilroy 98). I associate this "loss of imperial prestige" with a

veiled longing for a 'white' national space. In the current 'Brexit era,' precipitated by the 23 June 2016 popular vote to exit the European Union, black British identity politics have had to contend with the racialized discourse of 'migrant crises,' as well as the significant reversal of citizenship rights marked by the 2018 Windrush Scandal which exposed unethical deportations of and denial of social services to the Windrush generation—Caribbean migrants who had been encouraged to emigrate to Britain post World War II (1948–1971).

Bernadine Evaristo, a writer who identifies herself as being of Nigerian and English descent (Evaristo, "Official Website"), articulates a literary vision that engages with both Gilroy's observation of Britain's melancholia for a homogenous past, as well as its racial amnesia. Disguised as color-blindness, racial amnesia is an active process that erases the historical imbrication of Africa and its diaspora with Britain and Europe. The warped temporality created by the rising discourse of 'migrant crisis' since the 1990s locks the ethnic diversity (or 'browning') of the continent—through migration from Africa and the Middle East—in the present of apocalyptic near-future, ignoring the waves of migration that have shaped European history. In this regard, El Tayeb (xx) offers insight, "[The] active process of 'forgetting' [that] means that every acknowledgment of a non-white presence always seems to happen for the very first time [...] signifying a threatening state of exception". For Evaristo, this wilful amnesia of African history in a European context is also linked to her bi-racial identity:

I think that being English, bi-racial, and having grown up with both my parents, has in fact informed the greater project of my writing. The division between black and white is more nebulous when you are the product of an inter-racial marriage [...] but I am deeply interested in the connection between Africa and Europe and this is a dominant feature in my writing. I have thus far interrogated African history within a European/Western context, and also the past with the present, never one to the exclusion of the other. My preoccupations are in my DNA. (Collins and Evaristo 1203)

When Evaristo articulates a preoccupation with her DNA, she evokes the histories of black mobility associated with slavery and colonization (Empire), as well as the transnational affiliations created by her African and European ancestry. As Pilar Cuder-Domínguez (176–7) quite rightly points out, Evaristo's conception of her bi-racial identity is further nuanced with her acknowledgment of her mother's mixed Irish-German 'whiteness,' as well as her father's Nigerian—and former Brazilian slave—ancestry. Evaristo's novel-with-verse, *Soul Tourists*, which depicts the European road-trip of black Britons—Stanley, of Caribbean descent, and his girlfriend Jessie, of bi-racial Yorkshire and Ghanaian descent—reflects the author's stated preoccupation with the past and present of African presence in Europe. The author herself presents *Soul Tourists* as "a road journey [that is] also about ghosts of color in European history who come into their lives along the way" (Muñoz-Valdivieso and

Evaristo). These assertions facilitate an analytical approach that explicitly addresses the negotiation of race—blackness as a signifier for diverse African and Afrodiasporic identities—hidden by the language of multiculturalism and pluricultural diversity.

*Soul Tourists* depicts Stanley as a character who is haunted by the ghosts of black historical figures who have been erased from official accounts of European history. Starting with Lucy—a black Clerkenwell sex worker who is said to have inspired William Shakespeare (1564–1616)—the novel comes full circle when the ghost of Queen Charlotte of England, whose personal physician described her as having a “true mulatto face” (Evaristo, *Soul Tourists* 287), goes in search of Stanley in the novel’s epilogue. I draw upon Jacques Derrida’s (202) conception of hauntology in this study, starting with the assertion that it stretches our understanding of ontology (being): “To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology.” If the very ‘being’ of Britain and Europe is implicitly conceived of as normatively white and monocultural by the failure to ‘see’ or remember race (color-blindness), then hauntology—informed by the author’s preoccupation with her African history in Europe—necessarily raises the challenge of remembering race, blackness, and multiculturalism. It is this that informs my approach to the hauntological imaginary in *Soul Tourists* and the framing of black (in)visibility and (un)belonging as ghostly.

### **Evaristo’s hauntological imaginary**

This study relates the genesis of Evaristo’s hauntological imaginary to both her consciousness of Europe and Britain’s ‘racial amnesia’ and myth of an inclusive multiculturalism. I see her as an archaeologist, unearthing histories buried in the sands of time to shed light on the lived experiences of the present. In this regard, she responds to the quarrel that black subjects are already constructed as absence, which is reinforced by their erasure from official historical accounts:

[...] it is not so difficult to see that any people who are not graciously permitted to amend the past, or control the often barely visible structuring forces of everyday life, or who do not even secure the moderate gains from the routine amnesia, that state of temporary memory loss that feels permanent and that we all need in order to get through the days, is bound to develop a sophisticated consciousness of ghostly haunts and is bound to call for an “official inquiry” into them. (Gordon 151)

Engaging with Gordon, I read the body of Evaristo’s literary production as both a consciousness of the ghostly and a call for an ‘official inquiry.’ *Soul Tourists* is by no means the only example of the author’s engagement with the entangled histories of the African and European continent (Collins and Evaristo; McLeod; Muñoz-Valdivieso; Toplu). Indeed, Evaristo asserts that the purpose of her 2001 novel-in-

verse, *The Emperor's Babe*, was "to disrupt the notion that Britain was only populated by white people until recently" (Collins and Evaristo 1200). This work's depiction of Zuleika, a heroine of Sudanese descent in Roman-era London, is described as revealing or re-vocalizing the multi-ethnic history of the British capital city (Cuder-Domínguez; Roynon). Similarly, *Lara* (1997) explores the past, but this time through the intimate chronology of the author's family history, described by the author as a "novel-in-verse of 150 pages which spanned 150 years, three continents, and seven generations" (Collins and Evaristo 1199). *Fiction Unbound: Bernardine Evaristo* (2011) by Sebnem Tolpu offers an analysis of this semi-autobiographical novel, which was expanded and republished in 2009. The study maps the shifts that occur between the two versions (published twelve years apart), observing how expanding the novel's depiction of the mother's mixed Irish-German heritage nuances the previous version's depiction of Britain's racial intolerance to include the cultural intolerance of other European identities (Toplu 11).

Published in 2005, *Soul Tourists* has been somewhat overshadowed by the critical success of *Blonde Roots* (2008), a satirical depiction of a racially inversed transatlantic slave trade. The latter novel's depiction of the racialized traffic of white labor has been framed as dystopian (Burkitt; Newman). Judie Newman (284) observes that *Blonde Roots* enters into conversation with both the Black Atlantic scholarship of Gilroy and the transatlantic affiliations of Evaristo's own ancestry: "In her African, British, and Afro-Brazilian family history Evaristo herself encapsulates the diasporic reach of the black Atlantic." While *Soul Tourists* does not extend its geographical scope across the Atlantic Ocean like *Blonde Roots*, it does expand its focus to continental Europe (McLeod; Muñoz-Valdivieso) in a manner that *The Emperor's Babe* and *Lara* do not. John McLeod (168) relates the novel's Afro-European sensibility to the author's "distinctly continental sense of cultural plurality which shifts the ground away from the more strictly national, exclusively British focus of late-twentieth century black British." Indeed, Evaristo's evolving hauntological imaginary excavates the past in a variety of ways—personal vs. historical chronologies, fictional vs. semi-autobiographical narratives, inverted vs. (re)mapped mobilities—and *Soul Tourists* is part of a broader ontological challenge to the DNA of Europe and Britain as 'being' white and monocultural.

### **The identity politics of hauntology**

Mark Fisher ("What Is Hauntology?" 16) notes the resurgence of the term 'hauntology' in the study of film and music: "What defined this 'hauntological' confluence more than anything else was its confrontation with a cultural impasse: the failure of the future." In many ways, Brexit signals Britain's failure to imagine a future and a longing for the past, driven by what Gilroy (97) describes as "the need to get back to the place or moment before the country lost its moral and cultural bearings [...]"

Turning back in this direction is also a turning away from the perceived dangers of pluralism and from the irreversible fact of multiculturalism." Indeed, claims around British sovereignty and the attendant 'hardening' of the English Channel as a border with continental Europe are not only manifestations of a longing for past, they also betray Britain's inability to project into the future. As I write this article, we see Britain teetering indecisively on the precipice of a 'no-deal' Brexit.

'Hauntology' is, therefore, not a term that is devoid of political valency at this present juncture in British and European history. In her study of the sociological imaginary of slavery, Avery Gordon (xvi) defines the "way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life." This underpins the discourse of the 'migrant crisis' and the manner in which it frames the migrant as both the racial 'Other' and a threat to European social order. To quote Katherine McKittrick (xiv), the "where" of blackness evokes a geography that "maps the ties and tensions between material and ideological dominations and oppositional spatial practices." The paradoxical complicity of anti-immigrant discourses and the myth of a 'color-blind' and normatively white Europe can be read as an abusive system of power with real-life consequences. Indeed, Theresa May's 'hostile environment,' launched during her tenure as Home Secretary in 2013, cannot be delinked from the stripping of the Afro-Caribbean Windrush generation's citizenship rights or the aggressive urban policing practices that target black Britons. However, haunting is also a site for "producing a something-to-be-done" (Gordon xvi), which I associate with the political valency of Evaristo's hauntological imaginary as a challenge to this ideological 'hardening.'

The trope of travel in *Soul Tourists* relates the "something to be done" with spatial binaries that are hardened by preconceptions of which bodies belong where: "If who we see is tied up with where we see [...] then the placement of subaltern bodies deceptively hardens spatial binaries, in turn suggesting that some bodies belong, some bodies do not belong, and some bodies are out of place" (McKittrick xv). Stanley and Jessie's journey enables a multi-modal (re)mapping of European space that is signalled in the paratext by the cartographic 'excess' of the fifty-plus chapter headings, comprising a mixture of geographic sites (*Café Italia*, Soho), travel routes (The Freeway), temporal markers (Eighteenth Century Slave Market), and conceptual locations (The Room in Jessie's Head). While most studies of *Soul Tourists* focus their attention on the novel as bildungsroman that follows Stanley through his encounters with different ghosts along this journey, I wish to take seriously the haunting of the two protagonists—Stanley and Jessie—through their personal histories. The first part of my analysis relates haunting to melancholia—or the compulsion to repeat set patterns—through the depiction of how Stanley's parents long for 'home.' This is followed by an exploration of Jessie's memories and how running away from her past informs her compulsion to travel

across Europe in a bid to reach Australia. I conclude my analysis with the historical imaginary of Africa in Europe through the figure of the speaking ghost as an invisible ancestral presence.

### **Stanley: melancholia and the shipwrecked father**

In his geocritical approach to literature, Bertrand Westphal (21) highlights the fact that the literary engagement with space is also a question of form: “[O]ne often speaks of an aesthetic of the fragment, an aesthetic that mobilizes the blank spaces between paragraphs and operates on the real, material space of the page.” Evaristo’s earlier works, notably *Lara* and *The Emperor’s Babe*, are written as novels-in-verse, or narrative poetry. *Soul Tourists* marks a departure from that form, with the author describing it as “a novel-with-verse, which is a novel that juxtaposes prose, poetry, script-like forms and, as it happens, other non-literary forms such as relationship described through a budget” (Collins and Evaristo 1199). This form creates a fragmented narrative structure, with over fifty chapters (many just a page or two long) signalled by chapter titles that trace Stanley’s trajectory from his father’s death in London (1987) to meeting Jessie at a singles bar (1988) and embarking on a road trip with her, ending with their separation and Stanley standing alone at the edge of the Kuwaiti desert. *Soul Tourists* is topographically marked as a narrative of dislocation and fragmented subjectivity (augmented by constant shifts in focalization), reflecting a lived experience that is disjointed.

The opening chapters of the novel depict Stanley’s fractured relations with his parents, Pearline and Clasford, which I attribute to his widowed father whose melancholia permeates Stanley’s conception of home. In his study of hauntology in music, Fisher notes the use of the ‘crackle’ to evoke the sound of a vinyl record: “a sonic signature of hauntology: the use of crackle, [which] won’t allow us to fall into the illusion of presence” (Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* 18–9). We see this ‘crackle’ effect—a sonic and narrative disturbance—in the repetition of Pearline, the name of Stanley’s deceased mother, and in the distinctive layout of the text when Stanley first enters the house where his father has moved to escape the ghost of his wife:

Pearline

Whose voice still greeted him when he returned home when he returned home at  
midnight from the Working Men’s Club

*Oh! Yu remember yu have a yard?*

Pearline

who told me I’d inherited The Gift, passed down through generations of her mother’s  
family: to see what others could not

*They’ll find yu in time Stanley* (Evaristo, *Soul Tourists* 4)

The name 'Pearline' forms a litany through its repetition—ten times over two pages (4–5) in a passage characterized by a lack of punctuation. We hear Pearline's voice through the italicized words, spelt distinctively to reflect her pronunciation. Pearline may 'speak' in italics but the dissonance created by the repetition of her name is like the 'crackle' of a vinyl record—reminding us that she is not physically present. While Stanley perceives the loss of his dead mother, the parent to whom he was closest, as a ghostly presence, his father can be seen as a ghost of his former self, rendered a distant figure by the longing for 'home' despite settling in Britain.

The only son of Clasford, a qualified Caribbean chemist-turned-London-postman, Stanley is indebted to his disciplinarian father who worked hard to see his son become a university graduate and a successful banker. Titled, "The Shipwreck, 1987," the novel's first chapter depicts a decaying figure who doesn't bother to bath or clean his decaying house, literally drowning his melancholia in alcohol which is encapsulated by his accented and italicized lament, "*We doan belong ina this country ... we doan belong Stanley*" (19). He is a distant father figure who the dutiful Stanley depicts as being adrift: "I am no anchor; he is supposed to be mine, he is going, going [...]" (9). This metaphor of drowning is echoed in one of the last chapters, titled "The Ocean Floor," when Stanley spiritually 'finds' or reconnects with his paternal ancestor towards the end of his journey. As a symbol of his entrapment in the past, Clasford is buried in the suit bought when he first came to the country in 1965, a poignant reminder of his attachment to returning 'home' and perhaps a 'real' self as a qualified chemist. In this fantastical encounter with the paternal ancestor on the ocean floor, Stanley evokes his father's widowed, hermit-like existence in British space:

[...] never able to settle, even though your chosen  
country had changed, your home remained an island  
in your childhood heart [...]

This is your watery country new, Clasford, and say hello  
to my new circle of acquaintances hereabouts,  
a body of restless beings like yourself  
because you will not release me (256)

Clasford's failure to mourn the 'death' of his past self as a qualified chemist can be read as a reaction to the trauma of immigration. His longing for a past in which he was great results from Britain's own melancholic longing for the perceived 'greatness' of its imperial past. In his hermit-like existence, he is rendered invisible.

### **Jessie: memory and the (in)visible cartographies of exclusion**

If European space invests in 'whiteness' "as a tool of differentiation between insiders and outsiders" (El-Tayeb xiv), it follows that race then supersedes citizenship as a



marker of belonging. Jessie's lived experience is marked, from an early age, by a social exclusion that modulates her response to the questioning of her British citizenship:

That customs officer fingered my black  
United Kingdom passport at length,

glancing up to compare information to person,  
as if he couldn't quite believe ... something

[...]

*You Jamaican? Bob Marley? I shot the sheriff,  
Get up, stand up. No woman no ...*

'No Jamaican' *Moroccan?* 'No Moroccan.'  
Ah Brazilian! Pele best footballer in the world—

*One thousand two hundred goals—not out!*  
English, I said, as if proffering a kiss. *Really?*

[...]

He actually read the damned passport,  
Seeing as he'd spent ages looking at it (Evaristo, *Soul Tourists* 197–9)

The everyday, almost mundane, exclusions of the border locations are experienced through Jessie's voice, as the couple crosses over from European space (as defined by the European Union's border regulations) into Turkey. The above exchange with the immigration officer is presented as a series of couplets in which the Turkish border official's words are italicized. What is significant about this exchange is the official's inability to reconcile the identity represented by Jessie's British passport and the bi-racial person standing in front of him. The dissonance conveyed by "as if he couldn't quite believe ... something" seems all too familiar to Jessie who is reminded of a past incident in which her car had been strip searched for four hours as she tried to return to England by ferry from continental Europe. Conditioned by this expectation that her Britishness or Europeaness will be questioned because of her race, Jessie plays along with the ludicrous conjectures about her nationality, rather than asserting her citizenship rights. This internal cringe is all too familiar for black subjects, who are forced to negotiate Western borders, regardless of their citizenship status.

While critical readings of *Soul Tourists* (Hauthal; McLeod; Velickovic ) limit their analysis of Jessie to her role as the instigator of the couple's European road-trip, I

interpret this character as a haunted subject, running away from the ghosts of her past, a personal history marked by the absence of kin. Despite her refusal to discuss Stanley's encounters with ghost, Jessie thinks:

*Got my own ghouls, Stanley, dear—  
the nameless mother who shamelessly left me,  
the named father who could have rescued me,  
the son who selfishly deserted me— (129)*

Unlike Stanley, who at least has a familial kinship structure, Jessie has always been without a sense of place or a genealogy of belonging. This can be read through Janet Carsten's notion of "relatedness." As she explains, "It is through living and consuming together in houses that people become complete persons—that is, kin" (Carsten 310). Her memories of growing up 'homeless' in an orphanage run by nuns and eventually falling pregnant as a teenager reflect the haunting absence of kinship: "Didn't even have a pair of knickers until I was sixteen" (Evaristo, *Soul Tourists* 109). Through the men who have left her, as well as her son Terry, who disappeared to Australia and has sent a postcard after twelve-years of silence, Jessie's placelessness motivates her imagined (virtual) re-union with her long-lost son (277). More broadly, her memories of resisting the Black Consciousness movement in her twenties, because belonging to Africa provoked more questions than answers, reflects this absence of kin: "[S]o which of its cultures, thousands of tribes and languages is mine, exactly?" (198).

It is perhaps paradoxical that it is Jessie, rather than Stanley, who articulates a political claim around black bodies belonging in Europe. As she says, "I think you'll find, Stanley, that slavery and the colonies were a pipeline of liquid fertilizer pumping away into British soil [...] Think that gives us land rights, don't you?" (51–2). One could argue that she has nothing else to hold onto. Jessie's placelessness illustrates the "unresolved social violence" to which Gordon (xvi) refers when describing haunting as "those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive." However, in Jessie's case, the tenuous notion of home is related to being born and raised in Yorkshire in an environment that was hostile to her very existence. As much as she claims her Yorkshire heritage, this is undercut by her social exclusion as a mixed-race orphan and a teenage mother. In many ways, Evaristo's character has never had a map or kinship structure with which to conceive of herself as a subject with a sense of 'place.' She wanders through Europe, haunted by her memories of social exclusion. In search of her bearings, Jessie is driven by an imagined reconciliation that connotes an expectation that kinship with her son will relieve her sense of unbelonging. Jessie—a character who flees the ghosts of her personal history—may indeed act as a foil for Stanley's discovery of African ghosts in European history.

While she starts the journey with a sense of purpose, Stanley merely tags along to escape the monotony of his middle-class life. Ultimately, Jessie is merely repeating her cycle of running away from the painful memories of being without kin, while Stanley finds kin through encounters with the spiritual realm. While she is left stranded, with no real hope of reaching Australia and her only kin, Stanley's ghostly encounters symbolically reconnect him with his 'shipwrecked' paternal ancestor on the ocean floor and ultimately himself.

### **Speaking ghosts, invisible ancestors**

Despite Pearline's reference to his "gift", suggesting that he is "wonderfully *susceptible*" (Evaristo, *Soul Tourists* 287) to the spectral, Stanley does not begin his journey with the intention of finding ghosts. Significantly, his first ghostly experience occurs only after he has opened himself up to a relationship with Jessie, outside the neat confines of his somewhat sterile life as a London banker. Much has been written about the individual ghosts that Stanley encounters (McLeod; Muñoz-Valdivieso; Toplu). However, I am more interested in the temporal layering created by the hauntological imaginary. Based on Westphal's (165) assertion that: "If [...] any human space, were a megabook or a palimpsest consisting of layers of spatialized time," I read Stanley's encounters as a process of temporal 'layering,' which shifts our spatial conception of Europe as a palimpsest, or a space in which multiple histories of race and racism are rendered visible in the present. Stanley's first ghostly encounter is with Lucy, the Clerkenwell sex worker thought to be the muse for William Shakespeare's series of "Dark Lady" sonnets (127–52). This intertextual relation is created when Stanley eavesdrops on a conversation between a "dreamy-eyed poet" called William who starts to recite the opening lines of sonnet number 130:

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;  
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;  
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head (Shakespeare qtd in Evaristo, *Soul Tourists* 64)

Historical facts about Lucy's presence in England integrated into the narrative—"She cannot remember much about her village on the guinea coast, or the ship Jesus of Lubeck that brought her west in 1563" (62)—bear testimony to Evaristo's meticulous historical research. Stanley passively witnesses the interaction between his first ghosts and is surprised by his ability to enter their thoughts. He is not a spectator in his next ghostly encounter with Louise Marie-Thérèse (1664–1732), daughter of the Queen of France (wife of Louis XIV), and "pretty Negro page" (98) Nabo. Marie-Thérèse unexpectedly approaches Stanley while he explores the palace of Versailles and addresses the following words directly to him:

It is where I like to dream  
Of Mother and the African dwarf Nabo—  
Rumour had it, he was my father (92)

What follows is a temporal and narrative shift in which the reader is transported to the site of Marie-Thérèse's conception. We enter Nabo's thoughts as he hides under the bed listening as the King pays a conjugal visit to his wife. Nabo muses about his life as the queen's sexual plaything, remarking that he has once again escaped being put to death by hiding from the king in time. We learn that, "alas, *alors*," the queen falls pregnant and gives birth to a baby that has everyone gasping: "Métisse!" (Mixed-race!) (99), the child is confined to a nunnery for life and Nabo is "extinguished from *l'histoire*" (99). I relate this to Gordon's (8) definition of the ghost as "not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life." Here, Nabo's erasure from history and the secrecy surrounding the existence of Marie-Thérèse designates a site from which to launch the "official inquiry" into the historical invisibility of African history in Europe.

It is worth reiterating here, that my conception of blackness and African ancestry encompasses the diversity of Stanley's various encounters with black, bi-racial, Arabic, and North African figures, which signal a return of social figures that have been repressed (extinguished) from history. He meets Joseph Boulogne, Chevalier de Saint-George (1745–1799), the son of a French nobleman and a freed Senegalese slave, in a Parisian café aptly called "*Café des Fantômes*" (115–22). Saint-George insists that his story "must begin with my islands Guadeloupe" (115) and reveals how leading singers refused to be "*subjected to orders from a mulatto*" (120) when Louis XVI asked him to direct an opera. The nature of these encounters is always unexpected, which I link to Derrida's (11) assertion that the apparition of the spectre raises the question of repetition: "[A] spectre is always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and goings because it begins by coming back." After an encounter with Tariq ibn Ziyad, the Muslim warrior who conquered the Hispanic Kingdom with a small army in 711, "a thin, sable coloured man" (Evaristo, *Soul Tourists* 156), Stanley and Jessie's car gets stuck on a snowy road in the Alps, and they are saved (according to Stanley) by Hannibal the Great, the Carthaginian general who was considered to be one of the great military leaders in history (176–81). This marks a turning point for Stanley, both in the evolution of his affinity to the spiritual world, and his growing distance from Jessie. He tries in vain to explain this interaction to her: "When he looked at me, history ceased to exist. We were in the same place" (180) but she chooses to confine her understanding of this episode to the concrete (physical) world. I read Stanley's description through that notion that "[haunting] happens when a place is stained by time, or when a particular place becomes the site for an encounter with broken

time" (Fisher, "What is Hauntology" 19). Being helped by Hannibal transcends the separation between the invisible and the visible, or physical and spiritual realms, and frames haunting as a resistance to homogenized time and space. Therefore, this staining, or layering of space by time, resists homogenized histories of Europe as a historically homogenous space.

As Stanley becomes more attuned to "forces [...] operating in the world of the dead, invisible to the eye but still active. In this sense, the visible world of the living is closely connected to the invisible world of the dead" (Tadjo 2), he builds a stronger bridge to the spiritual realm. After the incident with Hannibal, Stanley shifts into the role of an "archaeologist" (perhaps mirroring Evaristo's own process), searching for ghosts from the past. A self-proclaimed "soul tourist" (Evaristo, *Soul Tourists* 187), he is pleased "[w]hen someone began to speak into his right ear, though there was no sensation of a body beside him" (155). As Stanley's skills in speaking with ghosts evolve, he delves into the stories of his interlocutors—notably, Alessandro de' Medici (1510–37), who describes the resistance to his being named Duke of Florence: "Why should it be him that muulaatoooo bastardooo?" (188). Next, Mary Seacole (1805–81), the Jamaican nurse who set up the "British Hotel" during the Crimean War, describes how *Punch* magazine described her as "That berry-brown face, with a kind hearts trace" (227) in a tribute to her work on the warfront. Significantly, Evaristo stages some of Stanley's encounters outside of European geographical space, stretching the continent's spatial boundaries north to Russia and south through Turkey and the Middle East, through the encounter with Abram (Ibrahim) Petrovich Hannibal (1696–1781), who was sold into slavery and brought as servant to Czar Peter and his grandson Alexander Pushkin, who wrote the book *The Negro of Peter the Great* in 1827 to honour his black ancestor (236). European space is thus depicted as a historically permeable and temporally stratified space, layered by the historical mobility of subjects from adjacent geographical regions.

While Jessie is left searching for her 'place,' Stanley's maps a cartography of his subjectivity through his discovery of spiritual African and Afrodiasporic kinship: "And there, the equatorial line across my stomach, the fuse wire, the flaming roads behind me, each detonation has made me, the phantoms that came to me and turned my world around" (281). African ancestry therefore actualizes Stanley's subjectivity in relation to history and the sociological imaginary, as depicted by the re-integration of his visible physical self and with his invisible ancestry which leaves him feeling "like a man" (282) at the end of the novel. His travelogue ends with the realization that he cannot return home (282), which I read more as the understanding that his previous notion of home has irrevocably changed than as the physical impossibility of return, a different iteration of "those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar" (Gordon xvi).

## Conclusion

In this study of the hauntological imaginary in *Soul Tourists*, I have analysed both the personal histories—hauntings—of Stanley and Jessie alongside ghosts of a repressed African history in Europe. Indeed, one can read the latter as the enactment of a call to haunt Europe with its repressed colonial and slave histories. However, reading these various iterations of haunting through the lived experiences of parental melancholia (Stanley) and an absence of kin (Jessie) relates haunting to present questions about the (un)belonging of immigrants and European subjects of African and Afrodiasporic descent. It is at this intersection of lived (physical) and psychic (spiritual) experience, that Evaristo's hauntological imaginary draws a genealogy of black (in)visibility that challenges the present "silent (and not so) silent racializations" that inflect European space and its borders at this present political moment.

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# The ghostly matter of asylum in Kivu Ruhorahoza's *A Tree Has Fallen* (*Europa*)

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## The ghostly matter of asylum in Kivu Ruhorahoza's *A Tree Has Fallen* (*Europa*)

This paper applies Avery Gordon's insights in *Ghostly Matters* to Kivu Ruhorahoza's 2019 film, *A Tree Has Fallen*, and vice-versa. For Gordon, the ghost reveals visibility itself to be "a complex system of permissions and prohibitions." The ghost is a case, as Gordon puts it, of "visible invisibility," of seeing that one is not there. In Ruhorahoza's film, the protagonist, Simon, is an African asylum seeker in the UK, now a ghost. Even before he becomes ghostly matter, Simon is already ghostly: he is held in limbo, consistently denied, deemed threatening, highly visible yet rendered invisible, a figure whose claims to a past are deemed invalid in official channels. For Gordon, the ghost is a liminal presence, "what appears dead, but is nevertheless powerfully alive." In Ruhorahoza's film, the protagonist appears to be alive, but is nevertheless powerfully dead. Gordon notes the refusal of modern social scientists to acknowledge, or to speak to ghosts: what happens when British subjects speak to its African ghosts, and vice versa? This paper investigates what the ghostly relations in the film suggest about political subjectivity, visibility, and the politics of asylum. Potentially, the essay offers a reading of what may no longer be visible in Ruhorahoza's film, as the essay was written before Ruhorahoza edited *A Tree Has Fallen*, transformed it, and re-titled it *Europa*. **Keywords:** Kivu Ruhorahoza, Avery Gordon, asylum, African cinema, *Ghostly Matters*.

For Zygmunt Bauman, our present, liquid life instils fear of an uncertain expiration date in an environment of ubiquitous disposability. The haunting fear in liquid life, Bauman asserts, is that one will not adapt adequately enough to modernity's fluctuating demands, that one will be left behind—that one will "outstay [one's] welcome" (Bauman, *Liquid Life* 3). To narrate this liquid modernity, Bauman asserts, is not to tell the story of constantly emerging beginnings, but rather to "tell the story of successive endings" (*Liquid Life* 3).

The ghost resists an ending. The story of a ghost begins with an expiration of life, an expiration of breath, but it resists its expiration date, even if the ghost is a case, as Avery Gordon (42) puts it in *Ghostly Matters*, of seeing that one is not there. For Gordon, the ghost directs attention to, among other things, "what appears dead, but is nevertheless powerfully alive." As I watched Kivu Ruhorahoza's 2018 *A Tree Has Fallen*, a film about a ghost, I wondered what the filmmaker makes of that line.



Avery's formula for the ghost—what appears dead, but is nevertheless powerfully alive—takes on another dimension in Ruhorahoza's film: its protagonist, Simon Adefolake (Oris Erhuero), appears to be very much alive—he unlocks doors with his keys, takes a shower, walks the streets, makes dinner, has sex with his lover, talks to people who see, hear, and touch him—but he is nevertheless powerfully dead. The British subjects whom Simon's ghost haunts know that he is already dead; they are aware that he is a ghost—the task of the film's British subjects is then to speak with the African ghost, to piece together the meanings of his hauntings.

*A Tree Has Fallen* is a film, in the director's parlance, about dead black men who refuse to leave.<sup>1</sup> Simon is a ghost who haunts politely, a ghost who is meant to be invisible, but who dares to reveal himself and who refuses to play dead. He evokes Gordon's interpretation of haunting, which occurs "when things are not in their assigned places, when the cracks and rigging are exposed, when the people who are meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving" (xvi). Yet even before he becomes ghostly matter, even before he inhabits the ghost's body, Simon is already ghostly: he has barely survived civil conflict; he has lost his entire family in a massacre; he seeks asylum in the UK. He is treated, as Jonathan Darling (74) notes of asylum seekers, as a "liminal presenc[e] within the nation." The asylum seeker is held in limbo by the home office, a figure held precipitously at the edge of devastation, facing oppression in the home country if deported. Simon is subject to the sovereign's expiration date, to the space of "failed" asylum. His claims are consistently denied, and his appeal drags on for ten years. He is ultimately rejected, and is classified as an illegal being.

The zone of asylum is a ghostly zone. We see, in this film (and elsewhere), that the recognition of the seeker's political subjectivity in this zone is, to adapt Gordon, *not there*. The language of asylum packages political subjectivity not as a given, but as a *thing given*, a thing offered or denied by the sovereign who decides whether a person's fears and losses are valid, whether a person's narratives are to be believed, whether to send a person back into the realm of his or her oppressors. In Ruhorahoza's film, there is a flashback to Simon's audition for the part of Shylock in a play. He performs an improvisational scene set in an immigration appeals court in which his character makes his final plea for asylum. He recites these lines: "The home office have challenged my asylum claim. They have rejected all my appeals. They have expressed significant doubts about my story. Even my name, I've been told, is possibly not mine. But your Honor, I am who I have always claimed to be." Simon then lifts his shirt to reveal the scars produced by three bullet wounds on his stomach, and where each bullet entered his body—damaging his liver, perforating his stomach, and nearly hitting his spine—suturing the performance to his own life. Simon is compelled, in a climate of suspicion and denial that circulates a "colonial-style set of assumptions about applicants' dishonesty," as Frances Webber (40) puts

it, to assure his audience that his claim is not bogus: the wounds, he adds, “are not self-inflicted.” Simon concludes with the lines, “Your honor, you can go ahead and dismiss everything that I’ve said, or you can listen to little voice of humanity deep inside of you, and give me back my life.” Political subjectivity and rights become matters to be processed by the bureaucracy—cases that can be thrown out and disposed, things subject to expiration dates. The “adjudication of asylum claims,” Elizabeth Dauphinee writes, manifests itself in “the relationship of a technology to its applications; it is the bits of paper that undergo judgment, and those that stand behind those bits of paper are denied their own faces, their own voices, their own skins. They appear before tribunals and are erased” (236); they are judged to be “ineligible for life” (237).

For Gordon, the ghost provides us with “fugitive knowledge;” the ghost reveals what Foucault referred to as subjugated knowledge, or “what official knowledge represses within its own terms, institutions, and archives” (Gordon xviii). To express subjugated knowledge is a performance of citizenship; following Jacques Rancière, Engin F. Isin and Kim Rygiel argue that political subjectivity has always been enacted by people who make claims to rights they do not currently possess. In this proposition, despite being assigned to a zone that attempts to prevent him from acting as a political subject and citizen with economic, social, and political rights, Simon’s very act of seeking rights is itself an act of political subjectivity and citizenship. Simon performs what Darling (77) refers to, in his analysis of asylum in the UK, as the “part with no part.” Simon’s protest against the subjugation of his narratives, of the suppression of his past by a home office that qualifies and disqualifies at will, a home office that can toss his claims and his rights in the dumpster, is an act of political subjectivity, an act of playing a part. However, this action, this agency in the film, has the aura of a ghostly performance, even if this scene of the audition in the film is a flashback to a moment when Simon is still alive. Simon is reduced to a supplicant pleading in a theatre for rights to be a part with a part, like an audition for existence.

The theatricality of the asylum zone plays out in the streets. One of the early figures to cross Simon’s path is a man who drapes himself in the flag of Saint George (Dimitri Lambridis). The film visually notes the anti-immigrant, fortress identity politics of Brexit in this scene. It recalls Stuart Hall’s description of a nation “haunted by the fantasy of a late return to the flag” (18). The flag is the visual incarnation of a discourse that makes particular claims to Britishness, and by extension, to resources and rights that are assumed to belong exclusively to those with legitimate claims to this version of Britishness. Simon gazes briefly at the flag-wrapped figure, who does not make eye contact. He passes Simon by as if he is invisible, as if he is not there, as if his ghost is not there. Yet Simon, and other postcolonial asylum seekers and immigrants, are very much there; they are at the core of the discourse on what it means to be British, of who is included and excluded, of who is welcome and where,



Figure 1: Man with flag of Saint George draped on his shoulders

and who has, to return to Bauman, outstayed one's welcome. While immigrants from formerly colonized spaces are depicted as "strangers at our door" (Bauman, *Strangers at Our Door*), they are not strangers to the histories of imperialism, to those ghostly, unsettled, and unsettling histories in which the question of who is host and who is guest, of who is foreign or strange, or who is allowed to make oneself at home in the world takes on multiple, entangled dimensions.<sup>2</sup> As Paul Gilroy (110) writes, the postcolonial immigrant in melancholic Europe "is here because Britain, Europe, was once out there."<sup>3</sup> And thus for Gilroy, the asylum seeker haunts, even if unwittingly: "It is the infrahuman political body of the immigrant rather than the body of the sovereign that comes to represent all the discomfiting ambiguities of the Empire's painful and shameful but apparently nonetheless exhilarating history [...] the incomers may be unwanted and feared precisely because they are the unwitting bearers of the imperial and colonial past" (110). When the flag-bearer crosses paths with the ghost, it is not a moment of *I see that you are not there*, but a moment of "I treat you as if you do not exist," a moment of refusing to come to terms, as Gordon (18) writes, the "with what modern history has rendered ghostly."

When Simon is alive, the zone of asylum is a zone of estrangement. To make a living, Simon plays the role of the sexualizable black body available for consumption in a nightclub. His arms are bound and tied in glittery ribbons; his buttocks are bare and strapped in. Through Simon's voice-over, one learns that his family was attacked and killed on a night when he was dancing. He remembers the night in a flashback in which he performs an exotic dance as women drink, laugh, converse with each other, and gaze at him in vertical lines. His gesticulating movements on the floor are reminiscent of the opening scenes in Jean-Pierre Bekolo's *Les Saignantes*.



Figure 2: Bound: dance club scene

Yet this is not the “new anatomy” of Bekolo’s oeuvre (see Omelsky). The bound and gyrating body is there, but it is not the decolonized, hyperbolized, and rebellious sex-worker/bloodette thrusting her body in a harness above the patriarch in *Les Saignantes* (see Harrow). Rather, in Ruhorahoza’s rendering, Simon’s public dance evokes an old, imprisoning mode of embodiment, one that simultaneously sexualizes and binds the black body. It is an aestheticized evocation of a bound past to the beat of techno-drumming, one that glosses over Simon’s bullet wounds, eclipses the traces of his losses and injuries, and turns it into a performance choreographed for those who pay to watch with pleasure. This scene is there not to aestheticize the bound body, but to show how aestheticization is done, how the histories of Simon’s bullet wounds and survivorhood are packaged in a spectacular ritual of pornographic, effacing entertainment.

Let’s return, then, to Gordon’s (18) question: “How do we reckon with what modern history has rendered ghostly?” Or, we might ask this question as Derrida does before Gordon, in *Spectres of Marx*: how do we apostrophize the ghost, or speak the language of the ghost? (12) In his ghostly form, Simon visits four people: Brother Joshua, who preaches in the street (Paul Morris), Simon’s former landlady Peggy (Jennie Lathan), his lover Anna (Lisa Moorish), and Bruce Warnock (Matt Ray Brown), the co-director, with Anna, of the play for which Simon auditions. Bruce, who was once Anna’s lover, stalks Anna and Simon, even following Anna to a poetry club after Simon’s death, where she reads a poem in Simon’s memory. Bruce spies on the ghost when he visits Anna; we see him gazing up to her apartment where they are having sex, and then lurking around a corner after they exit her apartment. Bruce seems to represent those in liquid modernity who channel



Figure 3: Bruce's surveillance

fears of their own pending disposability on others: after the grant proposal for his theatre project has been rejected by the Victoria Arts Fund, we see him kneel, and what look like bits of shredded paper pour out from his mouth as the text of the rejection letter scrolls on the screen. After the rejection, Bruce increasingly expresses his disdain for "others."

When Bruce addresses the topic of migration, he does not talk about Brexit or immigrants directly; instead, he talks about films. He dismisses Steven Frears' *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002), and particularly Nicolas Provost's film *L'envahisseur* (2011) (*The Invader*), as a waste of time. He tells Anna that he "hated that piece of shit" film, *The Invader* (a film about the relations between a rich woman and an undocumented African immigrant in Brussels). Bruce complains that the husband and female lead represent "everything that is wrong with Europe:" it is "sluggish, undignified, submissive." In an implicit reference to the stories of undocumented immigrants in Europe, he then asks how much of taxpayers' money has been spent on "fucking unbelievable," "tear-jerking diversity stories." As Bruce trivializes the plight of asylum seekers and others, his characterization of Europe echoes Kerry Moore's (349) analysis of discourses of asylum in the UK that position the British state as "manipulated and compromised, emasculated by the supposed 'abuse' of its immigration system and its failure to deal with an 'asylum crisis.'"

Yet Bruce's lament about what he sees as an emasculated Europe is less invested in his status as a British national than it is in another insecure attachment: losing his former lover Anna to Simon. Anna asks Bruce, "Why don't you just be honest about what it is that causes negativity and hostility toward everything that doesn't look like you?" The question remains open—Bruce may be displacing his frustration with his

insignificance in liquid modernity—but if neoliberalism posits the “free, possessive individual” as its protagonist, as Stuart Hall (10) reminds us, Bruce is ultimately a man clinging possessively to that which he cannot possess. Anna is not his—she does not belong to anyone. Later in Ruhorahoza’s film, in his ghostly form, Simon visits Bruce, who asks Simon what he wants from him, adding that the ghost has some “nerve” showing up at the door. Simon assures Bruce that he wants nothing from him, then speaks to him as if he is addressing the British sovereign about its possessive compulsions. Simon tells him,

You haven’t lost anything, Bruce. You are still the powerful one. And that is how it is going to be for a very long, long time. All of this is yours. You are still the mighty one [...] We are all just trying to survive in a world you created for us. You are still the master of all of us—the master of dreams, beliefs, and narratives. If you think about it, that is all that counts, right? Dreams, beliefs, and narratives. But enough of that. I have come to forgive you [...] for being a patriot, for reporting an immigration crime, anonymously.

Bruce then orders him: “Get out of my house.”

“Get out of my house:” words that suture the film narrative to the world just outside of the film, a world in which Prime Minister Teresa May and her supporters attempt to discourage immigration through the active production of a “hostile environment.” The appellation “environment” leaves out the human activity that deliberately renders the social environment in the “home” toxic; the home policy is one of decided unwelcoming, designed to reinforce separateness and detachment, to bar people from having bank accounts or to work, to prevent the seeker from making a living, to disallow free movement, and to generate an atmosphere of rigorous estrangement. Susan Sontag, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, imagined that photographs of distant tragedies—those tragedies from which asylum seekers try to escape—might animate in their viewers not mere sympathy, but a contemplation of how their own histories and privileges are linked to the suffering of the afflicted. In this case, when the afflicted are at the border, the regime of hostility aims to foster disregard for the pain of ‘others’ by dismissing their suffering altogether, and by disassociating the ‘home’ from politics ‘over there.’ In this theatre, ‘others’ are assigned the roles of the characters who only arrive to take. In one scene, Simon gazes at paintings in Anna’s art gallery.

He lingers over two works. In both, individual human faces are distorted beyond recognition. As Simon gazes at these works, one can perceive another painting, this one of an elephant being lifted into the air in a harness. The space of Anna’s gallery is a space of silent, visual recognition of the deliberate distortion of subjects, and in the backdrop an irony, a haunting, a reminder of the British Empire’s extraction of the resources of those distant lands, of an imperial past and postcolonial present in

which the right of the British subject to wander and to take is assumed as a given. These paintings, like the ghost, engage in a live haunting, a break with the illusion, as Gilroy (2) describes it, that “Britain has been or can be disconnected from its imperial past.” Simon studies, with a pained expression, a painting of a tortured face bound at the neck, tongue hanging out. He gazes at another work in which paint has been smeared over the eyes and mouth, wiped over with sweeping strokes of the brush. The subjects in these paintings exist, but parts of their faces have been swept away. Their faces in the frame are now estranged faces—rearranged ‘identities’—faces distorted beyond recognition. There is an irony in Simon’s ghostly performance as a live being—and those who say there is no need for him to continue acting as if he were alive—for how does this powerfully dead, ghostly performance differ from the performance of Simon’s living self, a self divested of his narratives? Indeed, as Dauphinee (236) writes, “In the [fictive] logic of the sovereign ban, death does not happen. The dead did not die if they were constituted as subjectless in the first place.”

The effacement of subjectivity, however, is not the ending. Near the film’s conclusion, Bruce enters Simon’s apartment when Simon and Anna are having sex and he shoots Simon. It appears that Bruce has shot Simon’s ghost. The ghost bleeds, but this is not the conclusion. Like the ghost, *A Tree Has Fallen* does not settle on an ending. It does not settle on the ghost’s explanations of its final visits, or its reasons for leaving and then returning, or its death. There is a resistance to the denouement, to the successive ending. If there is a settling in this ghostly narrative—a settling and not an ending—the narrative settles on the movement of ghosts. Whereas the asylum seeker is hemmed in even as he or she makes profound claims to political subjectivity, the ghost is, as Amos Tutuola’s work tells us, a wandering subject. In Achille Mbembe’s (17) meditation on Tutuola, he asserts, “there is no body except in and through movement. That is why there is no subject but a wandering one. The *wandering subject* moves from one place to another. Journey as such does not need a precise destination: the wanderer can go about as he pleases.” Mbembe’s (or Tutuola’s, if you accept the interpretation) wanderer recalls the foreign correspondents traipsing through the forests of Rwanda, who imagine themselves to be explorers in Ruhorahoza’s 2015 film, *Things of the Aimless Wanderer*. The inequities of wandering subjecthood in *A Tree Has Fallen* come to the fore: Simon’s ability to wander is only possible after death. The very first words of the film invoke a world inhabited by spirits without borders. Simon recites the poem in a voiceover, which includes this stanza:

The dead are never gone  
 They are in the paling shadow  
 They are in the thickening shadow  
 The dead are not under the water  
 They are in the rustling tree

They are in the groaning wood  
They are in the water that runs  
And the water that sleeps  
They are in the hut  
They are in the crowd  
The dead are not dead

This is Birago Diop's "Souffles," translated here by Ruhoroza himself for the film. The title can be rendered as "Spirits," and also "Breaths." We hear Simon's voice recite the poem as Anna stands silently on a rooftop; her hair moves in the wind. The poem evokes those wandering, breathing subjects, the ancestors. After his death, after the expiration of breath, Simon has the liberty to choose where he will wander, and while his remains are buried in his birthplace, he chooses to return to London. He is a dead black man who has the right to come back and to refuse to leave. As a ghost he is not only free to wander but to haunt, and as Gordon (xvi) writes, "Haunting is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with [...] or when their oppressive nature is denied." Haunting is a matter of seeing that which has been denied or reassigned out of consciousness, including the recognition of the imperial past and its enduring denial of the dignity of the formerly colonized. It is seeing that world, Simon asserts, created for us. This is a world in which, as Lucy Mayblin's (24) work on asylum shows us, "displacements resulting from colonialism and decolonisation in the past are left out of many accounts of the history of asylum policy that precede analyses of the present." In the discourse of this world, narratives of colonial and neocolonial persecution become ghostly matter: "it then also becomes logical to leave unmentioned the legacies of colonialism for refugee-producing situations, for destination country choice and for ongoing practices of border control" (24). For Simon, it is not only a matter of seeing how one is there but rendered invisible, or seeing what is supposed to be invisible, but a way of saying I have returned, I am everywhere: not only in the paling shadow, in the rustling tree, in the groaning wood, in the water that runs over the skin, in the crowd, in our intertwined histories, but at the front door, ringing the bell.

Ranci re wrote this about politics: "Politics is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems of legitimizing this distribution. I propose to give this system of distribution another name. I propose to call it *the police*" (28). If there is an alternate model for coexistence in the film that defies the social and spatial assignments managed by the police, it is the ancestors, moving. The ghost is not to be managed by any home office: can one deport an illegal ghost? Derrida (*Spectres* 11) says of the revenant, "One cannot control its comings





Figure 4: Simon at the door

and goings because it *begins by coming back*." There is an interesting divergence from what Derrida calls the specter's visor effect, that is, "we do not see who looks at us" (6). Derrida's model of the ghost is Hamlet's father whom we cannot see hidden behind his armour. Simon, in contrast, wanders in plain view; Anna feels his body against hers, he paints his former landlady's nails. What Derrida calls the ghost's "supreme insignia of power: the power to see without being seen" is stripped away.

In Ruhorahoza's incorporation of the ghost, it is not only a matter of seeing the ghost, or of following the ghost. Bruce follows the ghost in an attempt to police it. Simon the ghost, too, follows another ghostly figure on a bridge, whom he eventually loses. There is the compelling matter of speaking to the ghost, and listening to the ghost, but also of finally feeling the ghost, and of imagining how the ghost feels and is felt. This engagement in feeling begins by welcoming Simon at the door, and it is this feeling that disturbs Bruce the most. When Simon returns to Anna, she meets him at the door of her apartment. In the next scene they are naked; they have sex and his hands cling to the skin on her back; he cries holding her. The camera lingers on the skin of the lovers in an embrace. Skin is, as Marc Lafrance (9) writes, an "instrument of interpersonal engagement and exchange." During Simon's visit with Peggy, we do not see Peggy's face, initially. The first image of their meeting is a shot of their hands. Simon holds Peggy's hand and gently runs his thumb over her knuckles, over her aging skin. When we see her face she seems to hold back tears; Simon strokes her forehead. Peggy has been alone; her family exists but does not visit her. Simon prepares her a bath, soaps and runs water over her skin, washes her hair, and massages lotion on her feet. The attendance to the needs of the body and the care of the skin relay a welcoming, an intimate friendship, a way of sharing space that is felt first in the skin. Close-up scenes of Simon's tender care of Peggy's

skin occur before they exchange any words. Peggy discloses that she has missed his kindness and his home-cooked meals; Simon apologizes for leaving suddenly. She tries to assure him that it is okay; he opens a window and magically creates an image of light. They are not denied, to return to Dauphinee, their own skins. These scenes lie in a stark contrast to the dance club scene in which Simon's body and tattooed skin are put on display. In the club there is no connection, no magic between Simon and the anonymous women who smile at him during his pornographic performance, no intimate connection when a woman briefly stops her conversation to touch his skin as he dances suggestively. Also in contrast is Bruce, who protects his skin and conceals its porousness: in the final scenes, he rides about the streets fully covered in his motorcycle gear and helmet. The skin, Lafrance (9) writes, is not a mere "crude container, a one-sided shield, or an impenetrable shield." Rather, as Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey write, it "has the potential to break down the dichotomous elaborations of inside/outside, surface/depth and self-other that often permeate accounts of embodied subjectivity" (qtd in Lafrance 11). It is Simon's affectionate attachments to others, the welcome touches of the skin, that Bruce cannot manage, and tries desperately to police.

The model of the borderless world of the ancestors is likewise a stark contrast to present zones of managed, policed existence: one's belonging in the world of the ancestors is uncontested. Yet the proposition of being free to wander only after death is rather unsettling. Simon returns as a witness "from the inside of death," to adapt Dauphinee (231). He is free to wander where he pleases, but the living are still there in their ghostly zones, where they can be reduced to the status of threats, problems, frauds, financial burdens, crisis, overflow—where they can be returned to other zones, as Dauphinee writes, where they may be imprisoned, tortured, or murdered by those whom they fled in the first place. To expand upon Gordon's question, how do we reckon with the alienating zones that render living people ghostly? In the film's initial scenes after the recitation of Diop's poem about spirits, we see Simon sitting still on a train, fatigued, passing through high-rise apartment buildings, in a seat that propels him backward. There are no sounds of voices, only the motion of the train. He evokes Benjamin's angel of history, his face gazing back at the world. But he is a ghost. We cannot yet know, at this point, that he is ghostly matter.

Several claims are made upon ghosts; ghosts, too, have their assigned roles. In Derrida, "the dead are dead [...] Just because the dead no longer exist does not mean that we are done with spectres" (Derrida and Stiegler 49). For Gordon (xix), the ghost is a messenger: it reveals to us a "living inheritance." When the ghost appears, Gordon (xvi) asserts, "We are notified that what's been concealed is very much alive and present." In the film, Simon explains that after a death, one does not say that someone is dead. When one joins the other world, one says that a tree has fallen. In a similar vein, at the ending of the film, one does not speak of an ending. We hear



Figure 5: Simon on the train

Simon's voice return to Diop's "Souffles" as Anna is walking. Among the last lines are:

They are in the forest;  
They are in the house.  
The dead are not dead.  
Hear things more than beings.  
The voice of fire you can hear.  
Hear the voice of water.  
Hear the weeping bush in the wind.  
It is the breath of the ancestors.

Gordon (6) writes that "[c]ajoling is in the nature of the ghost, the very distinctions between there and not there, past and present, force and shape." The film itself is ghostly. It disorients: in one moment Simon stoops to leave flowers near an apartment building, looks up to the rooftop, and there is a cut to a view of the rooftop from below, then a cut to an image of Simon on a roof. We see him from the back, in a different coat, looking down. Is this the roof the ghost has been looking at? Did Simon jump from it in the time before? Answers are withheld. Then a cut to Anna, on a rooftop, perhaps the same one but the view has changed. She stands where we saw her before, at the beginning of the film, in the same coat. What else happens on the roof is not spoken or seen.

I am writing about a film that, at this moment, like a ghost, only a few have seen. I've seen the fifth cut. Further cuts might make some of these words on the page appear as if I have seen something that is not there. But they existed. And perhaps a new image will appear, and I will have missed it, until it appears before me. In between the writing of this piece and my "proofs," Ruhorahoza added several new

scenes to *A Tree Has Fallen*, transformed it, and re-titled it *Europa*. *Europa* is a film altered and rearranged: the story about Simon is still there, alongside an artful mix of ghostly fiction, quasi-ethnography, *explication du texte*, sociological documentary, and an autobiographical essay about an African filmmaker making a film out of Africa titled *A Tree Has Fallen*. Potentially, then, this essay offers a reading of what may no longer be visible in Ruhorahoza's film. In any event, "to write stories concerning inclusions and exclusions," Gordon (17) asserts, "is to write ghost stories." *A Tree Has Fallen* presents narratives, memories, suggestions, and omissions. A ghost story. It displays the sounds and images of wind that rustles branches, of water caressing the skin, of fires, spirits, and of breath. They are there and not there, past and present, expiring and breathing—shape, image, sound, summoning.

### Acknowledgments

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### Notes

1. From an email correspondence with the director, 2018.
2. I make a reference here to Jacques Derrida's *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond* (2000). My reading of Derrida in this instance is inspired by Joshua Mills-Knutsen's questions about hosts, guests, and foreigners in his article, "Becoming Stranger".
3. The phrase "We are here because you were there" was also articulated by Ambalavaner Sivanandan (see Younge).

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# In the tracks of the impossible

## Miguel Ángel Rosales

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### In the tracks of the impossible

Arising from experiences of slavery and exile, flamenco was strongly influenced, (re)created, and (re)imagined by black people who lived in southern Spanish cities for over 400 years. Despite consistent and intentional erasure, the fact is that between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was an important Black presence in the Iberian Peninsula. When I began research for *Gurumbé: Canciones de tu Memoria Negra* (2016) (*Gurumbé: Afro-Andalucian Memories*), I set out to reveal this history, to break this silence and expulsion that denies the history and legacy—and the humanity—of Afro-Andalusians. And under the many layers of silencing the memory of Spanish Afrodescendants, I found that Black memory had survived in the body. In flamenco, it created a discourse of resistance in the fact of the oppressors which has transcended time and history. **Keywords:** flamenco, Andalucía, Black Spain, Gurumbé.

In *Silencing the Past* (1997), Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that power has a hand in all the phases that involve the construction of the story of the past: in its sources and their selection, in their classification and organization in the archives, the interpretations by the historians of the era—often including covert censorship—and the final writing of a narrative that goes along the national interests. And it is certainly how the disappearance of Black Spanish people can be traced back to the workings of this whole complex process in the construction of Spain's official history. Acknowledging the intentional disappearance of Black history in Spain, *Gurumbé: Canciones de tu Memoria Negra* (2016) (*Gurumbé: Afro-Andalucian Memories*) works to unearth, re-member and celebrate Black Spanish memories through the lens of flamenco. While in centring Black memory in Andalucía, the film confronts Spain's racist history; at its core, *Gurumbé* is about borders. However, embracing Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), the documentary resituates flamenco within the transatlantic universe of the African diaspora.

The leading role of music and dance in many social relationships across Andalucía, or the ways in which festivals unfold in particular contexts—such as the Zambomba Christmas festivities in Jerez de la Frontera, which features in *Gurumbé*—reminds us of Seyla Benhabib's "politics of transfiguration," which "burst[s] open the utopian potential within the old" (Benhabib 13). In "emphasiz[ing] the emergence of qualitatively new needs, social relations and modes of association, which burst open the utopian potential within the old [...] utopia portray modes of friendship, solidarity

and human happiness" (13). *The Black Atlantic* mobilizes this emphasis in theorizing the African diaspora's cultural expressions. As Gilroy writes, "It points specifically to the formation of a community of needs and solidarity which is magically made audible in the music itself and palpable in the social relations of its cultural utility and reproduction" (Gilroy 37). These cultural forms are associated with collective enjoyment and a desire to invoke "new modes of friendship, happiness and solidarity" in order to overcome social oppression (38).



Figure 1: Serer celebration in Joal Faddiouth, Senegal

This is a whole shared expressive world arising from a desire for freedom that creates new ways of relating through celebration (*la fiesta*) and dance. *Gurumbé* attempts to explore this in visual language, superimposing the Serer dances from the Joal Fadiouth region of the Senegalese coast, the Zambomba from Jeréz de la Frontera, Andalusia, and the flamenco club in Seville. In these forms of social celebration (*hacer la fiesta*) there is a play in which the community gives way to individual virtuosity, each participant's unique touch—demanding with it their own place as an individual in a society which denies this—thus forming a deep bond between artist and audience, expressed through the enthusiastic cries (*el jaleo*) and rhythmic clapping (*las palmas*) of the spectator-participants, a physical language in which the body expresses itself in all its extension, in a sustained chaos, attempting to appropriate, to make its own, in the present moment, spaces denied in "real life." But also, the extreme, cathartic, tragic, and, at the same time, comic dramatization, the distortion of language into cries, the grimaces—all of this is something that, I argue, flamenco shares with the cultures of the African diaspora. Arising from experiences of slavery

and exile, flamenco was strongly influenced, (re)created, and (re)imagined by black people who lived in southern Spanish cities for over 400 years. *Gurumbé* acknowledges, reads, and resituates flamenco as one of the “jewels brought from bondage” that Gilroy (72) speaks of in *The Black Atlantic*.

### **Spanish nationalism: a bitter utopia**

The Afro-Andalucian memory referred to in the film’s English title confronts the absence of Black Spanish people in Spain’s modern history. While references to Black Spaniards can be found within the country’s archives and historical records have not been physically destroyed, until recently scholars have largely ignored such resources. Why has such research only recently surfaced?

The National-Catholic version of Spanish history taught us to see the country’s origins in the reconquest of Muslim land. This narrative relies on Christianity and *pureza de sangre*: an untouchable core identity where territory, religion, and race/culture are united. Literally meaning ‘cleanliness of blood,’ *pureza de sangre* played an important role in the modern history of the Iberian Peninsula and its colonies. Originally, referring to those considered to be ‘*Cristianos viejos*’ (Old Christians), without recent Muslim or Jewish ancestors, within the context of empire (New Spain and Portuguese India), it came to refer to those without indigenous ancestry from the Americas, Asia, or Africa. In this way, *pureza de sangre* was foundational in crafting a historical narrative that affirmed a white European identity, allowing Spain to rejoin and participate in a Western history of modernity.

Perhaps the most effective silencing technologies emerged with the great nationalist narratives of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European states. Racism rooted itself in the European academies, forging the view of the individual constructed in relation to the ‘Other,’ who was denied the status of a full human being. Within this framework, African people were denied humanity and thereby their presence in history. During this period, Spain had ‘fallen behind’ the rest of Western Europe and was desperately seeking to cleanse itself of its Jewish, Rom, Islamic, and African memories in order to present itself as a respectable white country. In turn, Islam was laundered and Orientalized, the Rom were exoticized and folklorized, and Black Spaniards were actively erased from the national memory.

To replace the Spanish Empire’s *La leyenda negra* (a supposed tendency in historical writing that demonized Spain and the Spanish Empire, its people, and its culture as uniquely cruel and bigoted), a history of Christian, civilized, evangelizing colonialism was written. Spain was able to blot out the story of the African slave trade despite having been one of its greatest promoters. Along with Portugal, it had been the first country to begin importing enslaved people and the last to abolish slavery in its colonies. For several centuries, Spain’s cities possessed the largest black and *mestizo* populations in European history, a population consisting almost entirely of enslaved people.



In the mid-twentieth century, an era of global decolonization in which communities of color and colonized people demanded and fought for civil rights and independence, Spain languished under Francisco Franco's forty-year dictatorship, a military regime that reiterated the National-Catholic version of Spain's history. And after Franco's death, at the end of the 1970s, the transition to a parliamentary monarchy under the Bourbons, which settled with the same military and political powers which had propped up the dictatorship, brought with it a generalized lack of interest in disseminating a critical vision of history. To this day, this view of Spanish history is still deeply rooted in people's minds: an idealized view of a civilizing, white and Christian Spanish Empire, which ignores the Black presence in Spain, as well as the history of Spanish colonialism.

Today Spanish nationalism suffers from a kind of schizophrenia when it looks to its periphery and confronts its irreducible diversity. It seems that the periphery makes it suffer the "anxiety of incompleteness," identified by Arjun Appadurai in *Fear of Small Numbers* (2006), defining the tragic distance from a divergent 'other' which does not allow the national self to settle into its utopia of uniformity. Historically, Spain has been constructed in terms of the struggle against its own diversity and *mestizaje*. In the symbolic realm, one of the main areas of this struggle is the south—Andalusia. In the eyes of Castilian centralism, Andalusia always has been seen as tainted by its contact with Africa and suspected of being 'impure' and not entirely 'civilized.' Its inherent mixture of peoples and cultures has always been troublesome in reinforcing Spanish nationalist imaginaries of whiteness. In response, Black memories have been deeply denied.

Despite consistent and intentional erasure, the fact is that between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was an important Black presence in the Iberian Peninsula. At times, up to fifteen percent of the population consisted of black people, mostly brought from Africa in bondage or born into slavery in Spain, perhaps the largest black population to have ever existed in European history. Yet, you will not find any records in official history or collective memory because, I would argue, of a construction of history driven by racism—a racism that was both endemic and epistemological. This racism denied enslaved people of their humanity and, with it, the possibility of being part and agents of their own historic time.

When I began the research for the film, I set out to reveal this history, to break this silence and expulsion that denies the history and legacy—and the humanity—of Afro-Andalusians. I set out to follow the traces of this memory in audiovisual language. We found, for example, that enslaved black people featured as fixed assets in the commercial transactions of the slave trade, appearing in wills and estate inventories (see *Archivo General de Indias*). To this day, on the outskirts of Seville, you can still find roads with names relating to the slave trade such as *la Cañada de los Negros*, which leads from the port of Huelva into the city and runs parallel to *la*

*Cañada de los Bueyes* and other roads whose names refer to cattle. Enslaved people were described as animals, a language that sought to justify their exploitation and use as commodities. Another example of such denials of humanity is the concept of the *pieza de ébano* (piece of ebony), a measure used to fix the prices and taxes to pay the Crown for the export of each enslaved person. Depending on health, strength, beauty (for women), and age, an enslaved person could be valued as a whole or a fraction. A small child or a person in poor health, for example, could be valued as “half a piece of ebony.”

Apart from these sources, we found many other records of Black Spaniards' presence. For instance, writing about her visit to Seville in 1575, Teresa de Jesús, a prominent Spanish mystic, nun, author, and theologian, was reportedly tormented by the Devil in the shape of an “abominable” black boy (de Jesús). Similar representations appeared in the Spanish *Siglo de Oro* (Golden Age), a period in which art and literature flourished in Spain coinciding with the political rise of the Spanish Habsburg dynasty (between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries). The stereotypical black characters appearing in many plays during this time, such as Simón Aguado's *Entremés de los Negros* (1602) and Lope de Vega's *El mayor imposible* (1647), depicted infantile, undeveloped, incomplete beings whose existence was a transition, under the guardianship of white people, towards another life, where they could find their salvation and humanity (see Fra Molinero). Across the centuries, but particularly prominent in the eighteenth century, travellers' chronicles (i.e. Washington Irving, Jean-Charles Davillier, Richard Ford), stressed the African and *mestizo* character of Seville when describing the city's atmosphere of lust and sin.

We also found many descriptions of dances, connecting Black Spanish people living in Seville with festivals in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in legal documents from the proceedings of the Inquisition, where dances deemed as obscene are described in detail. Notice that, in most cases, the Afro-Andalusian population only gets to break with their invisible condition, to be worthy of recording when their case can be used as an argument to justify their exploitation, or to entrench the prejudices at the base of power.

Once again, why have scholars largely ignored such records? Why has such research only recently surfaced? Among other reasons, a hegemonic official narrative still survives because a critical discourse started to be written very late. It is only after World War II that the first timid studies, by some European academies, began calling into question the Eurocentric history of the West and its relationships with the rest of the world and recognizing the contribution of Africans and their descendants to European economies. However, during this time, Spain was still languishing under the Franco dictatorship and its aftermath. Until the late 1950s, Spain resisted giving up this last African colonial foothold in which, in line with other European powers, it had used extreme violence to subjugate the native peoples and force them into

plantations. At the end of the 1950s, Spain, under pressure from the United Nations, integrated the colony into the state as a province, thus prolonging, through the *patronatos* system, semi-slave exploitation and strict racial segregation. This was the case until independence in 1968 after which Equatorial Guinea disappears completely from the history of modern Spain. The supposedly progressive governments of the 1980s and 1990s had no interest in the ancestral African presence in the history of Spain or its recent history of African colonization, of which Equatorial Guinea is a good example (see Nerin). It is only since the 1980s, and in only a few highly specialized areas, that we find studies revealing the slave trading past of the Spanish crown offering a different view of colonial history. Such studies are still marginalized to this day.

### Flamenco

Yet under the many layers silencing the memory of Spanish Afrodescendants, I found that this Black memory had survived in the body. In flamenco, it created a discourse of resistance in the face of the oppressors which has transcended time and history. For instance, religion—represented by the *cofradías* (religious brotherhoods) of the Andalusian Easter processions and the *romerías* (religious pilgrimages)—and the expressivity of the music and dance of flamenco have been two significant sites of confrontation and negotiation (Moreno; Ruíz Vergara). In both, the black population played an extremely important role: they were among the founders of the brotherhoods and remained as members for centuries; their contribution to the main elements in flamenco's mix of rhythms and styles was fundamental. The



Figure 2: Zambomba, a Flamenco celebration that takes place at Christmas in Jerez de la Frontera

black populations of the south of Spain and its colonies with their unacknowledged cultural heritage relocated a great part of Andalusian identity in this area of creativity and interchange of people, knowledge, and languages which Antonio García de León calls “the Afro-Andalusian Caribbean”. It was through flamenco that, in the documentary film, we could unveil new, visually powerful arguments.

The symbolic domains of ritual and festival are social energy. They create consensus, making them desired domains for centralizing powers. Powers need to contain their fluidity and tie them to its narrative. In this way, power gets to own the bases of the consensus it generates. In the case of flamenco, it also meant cleansing the *mestizo* genre. Was it a conscious silencing? Or did it happen because it was simply unthinkable at the time that the black population, which had been living in the south of Spain for so many centuries, could have played such a part in the formation of a culture being raised to the status of national heritage? After all, it was unthinkable that the enslaved black people were capable of being actors in history, let alone masters of their own fate or humanity at all for that matter. According to many of the texts circulating at the time which spoke of the African presence, I am inclined to think it was a combination of the two.

There is no space here to sum up in a few lines the process of regulation and institutionalization which, since the birth of flamenco, has attempted to force such a complex phenomenon into standardized features within which the concept of *purity* is at the core. It would be equally difficult to summarize the processes which have led to flamenco’s emergence as one of the most typical representatives of the Spanish national image. As with other hegemonic narratives, there was a tendency to see flamenco through the deeply racist ideas that nineteenth-century European academies and universities were imbued with and which served as intellectual backing for the colonization of Asia and Africa. In Spain, this was mixed with a romantic and folklorized version of the Roma people (a perverse game veering between marginalization/extermination and exotic idealization) who were accredited with the creation and safeguarding of a thousand-year-old tradition of dances and songs which had lost their ‘purity’ through contact with the modern world. Without casting any doubt over the importance of so many Roma artists in the creation of what is today flamenco, we also cannot be complicit in such a reductionist view.

The first references to flamenco as a style appear in the mid-nineteenth century. Almost as soon as it appeared, it aroused the interest of intellectuals and folklorists who approached it in the scientific spirit of the age. Thus, from very early on, flamenco was seen, from an essentialist standpoint, as a contaminated relic of the deeply-rooted art of a noble people who had succeeded in preserving the tradition over centuries. Its distance from this mythic origin was defined in terms of purity.

One of the first champions and scholars of flamenco was D. Antonio Machado Álvarez, known as “Demófilo.” He attempted, in the framework of his Krausist and

regenerationist beliefs, to rid flamenco of its negative reputation as the music of the rural 'slums' and 'hovels' and to study it in a way which would be of use: *para el conocimiento de la naturaleza y evolución del espíritu humano y de las leyes biológicas a que está sometido* (in advancing the knowledge of the evolution of the human spirit and the biological laws governing it) (Machado y Álvarez 84).

It was also Demófilo who introduced Darwin's ideas into Spain and created the first folklore societies which approached the "popular" (i.e. lower-class) styles of music from a paternalist, ethnic, and classifying standpoint which has marked the popular view of flamenco for generations, founding what became known as "flamencology." Other flamenco studies went along with the fashionable cultural theories of the times, seeking in Aryan and Indo-European roots evidence of the nobility of a culture and a people. These notions traced the origins of flamenco to India, in a colourful odyssey which was in tune with the romantic, Orientalist spirit of the French and English travellers who gave the leading role to the 'gypsies' (seen as an Orientalized stereotype). All of this is now deeply ingrained in the way most Spaniards and the world see flamenco. And yet, to cite Pedro G. Romero, flamenco has never hidden its origins. If anything, the problem has been the short-sightedness of those who approached it with the aim of studying it and, in doing so, wanted to ennoble it and sanitize its *mestizo* roots, or see it as a 'gypsy' tradition based on ethnic and racial purity (Romero). I agree more with the idea that flamenco originated around the beginnings of the nineteenth century. Emerging from impoverished urban areas, the music collaged together an extremely broad musical heritage to create a new style. What is more, like many musical genres from the African diaspora, flamenco was created in a repressive and chaotic social context and carved out a transgressive space from within the very heart of a suffocating system of oppression. Numerous historical factors point to the black African base of many of the dances which later gave rise to the flamenco rhythms and the African origins of part of its musical and physical expressiveness (see del Campo and Cáceres).

In nineteenth-century Spain, the working classes were searching for their own music, a style which would contrast with the Court and aristocracy's taste for French and Italian fashions. This was the period in which the new genre took shape, in the hands of great artists who gathered together an immense range of musical and dance heritage, and to which an African contribution was hugely important. Flamenco was created to satisfy the demand of this new audience, primarily working-class *mestizo* urban dwellers, clustered in the new economic centres—factories, mines, and ports.

Thus, there was a whole musical tradition continually changing shape in each period to give new meanings to texts, take them apart, create new forms, push them to the limits of their expressivity, and incorporate new elements. All of this turned the *tablaó* (flamenco club), the *fiesta* (popular celebration), and other places devoted to the art into theatres of freedom where bourgeois conventions were overturned, whether

aesthetic, social, or in the realm of gender roles. In the *tablao* and the *fiesta*, a space was opened up which physically defied the prevailing order where workers' bodies could express themselves freely, breaking social norms. Due to its creation of new forms on the basis of an already existing tradition, its transgressive, *mestizaje* practice, we can say that flamenco has been a modern type of music from its birth, although in direct opposition to the prevailing colonial, globalizing version of modernity.



Figure 3: Flamenco dancer, Yinka Esi Graves, performing in *Gurumbé: Canciones de tu Memoria Negra*

### *Gurumbé*

*Gurumbé* is a highly popular dance which appears in print for the first time in "*La Negrina*," composed by the early sixteenth-century Spanish musician Mateo Flecha. This piece, written to be performed at Christmas, incorporated the speech of Black Spanish people in words such as *Gurumbé*, *Sansabeya*, *alangandanga*, *bonasa*, etc., and used the combined two and three rhythms typical of African music. In the composition Flecha brought together songs and dances performed by Black Spaniards in the fifteenth century in the streets of Seville and other southern cities. But what most interests us here is that the morphemes *Guru* and *'mbe* can still be found today in words relating to many musical forms from West Africa and the African diaspora (i.e. Cumbia, Mambo). In flamenco, the expression has come to us in a group of tangos recorded in 1946 by la Niña de los Peines, with the chorus "*al guru guru*" and lyrics telling of a married man's desire for a black woman and the jealousy this arouses in his wife. Camarón de la Isla, one of the greatest flamenco artists of all time, also used "*guruguru*" in his recordings from the 1970s. I especially liked the idea of using this

word, which apart from being a first piece of evidence of African culture in Spain, follows this timeline into the twentieth century to speak to us of the indestructible memory of the African diaspora.

### Conclusion

Today a new generation of Black Spaniards in search of models and recognition finds itself living in a country which, regardless of political differences between left and right, has forgotten its history of diversity and coexistence. Moreover, a significant part of the Spanish population does not identify with an exclusive and outdated Spanish nationalism still harking back to its colonial history and chauvinist *pureza de sangre*. Furthermore, closeness to and coexistence with African people who have arrived in the latest waves of migration create new questions concerning identity and borders. We are seeking new versions of the old historic narratives on the basis of which we can call into question the confining frontiers offered by nation states: new ways of belonging and new identities to adhere to.

The forgotten history of Black Spaniards can become a means of making visible and demanding rights which, by radically calling political frontiers into question, can cast doubt on the current status quo represented by the European Union's harsh migratory laws and the razor wire fences on our borders with Africa. In rejecting these unviable policies, we must make sure that this memory does not disappear or become banalized and pressed into the service of interests akin to those which, long ago, gave rise to injustice, violence, and silence.

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# Imagining a politics of relation: Glissant's border thought and the German border

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## Imagining a politics of relation: Glissant's border thought and the German border

This study explores the theoretical and political potentials of Édouard Glissant's philosophy of relation and its approach to the issues of borders, migration, and the setup of political communities as proposed by his *pensée nouvelle de la frontière* (new border thought), against the background of the German migration crisis of 2015. The main argument of this article is that Glissant's work offers an alternative epistemological and normative framework through which the contemporary political issues arising around the phenomenon of repressive border regimes can be studied. To demonstrate this point, this article works with Glissant's border thought as an analytical lens and proposes a pathway for studying the contemporary German border regime. Particular emphasis is placed on the identification of potential areas where a Glissantian politics of relation could intervene with the goal of transforming borders from impermeable walls into points of passage. By exploring the political implications of his border thought, as well as the larger philosophical context from which it emerges, while using a transdisciplinary approach that borrows from literary and political studies, this work contributes to ongoing debates in postcolonial studies on borders and borderlessness, as well as Glissant's political legacy in the twenty-first century. **Keywords:** Édouard Glissant, politics of relation, Germany, border regime.

## Introduction

In September 2006, the Martinican poet and philosopher, Édouard Glissant (1928–2011) was invited to speak at the opening of the International Literature Festival in Berlin. In his speech, "*Éloge des différents et de la différence*," Glissant (1) spoke against the background of rising levels of xenophobia in France and what he called a common failure to practice the magnetic relation to other communities. In September 2015, almost a decade after Glissant's talk, what the media referred to as the "European migration crisis" reached Germany. In breach of the already defunct Dublin Regulation, German Chancellor Angela Merkel decided to allow millions of Syrian refugees to enter the country, creating a situation of sudden social change, preceded only by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Images of Syrian refugees walking across Hungary and Austria to reach Germany where they were frantically welcomed appeared on TV screens and newspaper front pages across the world. What became known as the German 'summer of 2015' gave reason for optimism. After more than a century of

'managed migration' that was primarily geared to fuel the growth of its own economy, it appeared as if the German state was, at last, willing to reconcile its homogeneous and monolingual sense of self with the diverse reality of an immigration country.

In the opening lines of his speech in Berlin (*Éloge*), Glissant (1; my translation) referred to immigration as the inevitable and unstoppable "encroachment of the world" (*Andrang der Welt*). As Sylvia Wynter (637–8) pointed out early on in her reading of Glissant's work, borders, blockades, and blockages can be considered to be among the "root metaphors" of this oeuvre. The philosophy of relation which Glissant developed throughout his career, culminating in his lexicon-like *Philosophie de la Relation* (2009), can be read as an invitation to cross and transform physical and imaginary boundaries and separations and to create connections between entities that are traditionally considered apart in modern Western thought. Glissant's engagement with borders ranged from the divisions between civilizations and cultures, humans, animals, and plants, to those that differentiate literary genres and written and oral languages. My interest in Glissant's approach to borders and migration or what he called his "*pensée nouvelle des frontières*" in a section of his *Philosophie de la Relation* (57–61), which I refer to here as his 'border thought,' arose in response to the 'German refugee crisis' of 2015. I explore the question of what his philosophy has to offer in an attempt to engage with this particular political event.

Thus far, the scholarly reception of Glissant's legacy as a theorist and philosopher has mainly taken place in the realm of literary and cultural studies with a strong focus on his ideas on language, identity, and creolization. Following the pioneering works of Robbie Shilliam and Neil Roberts, I would like to make the case for a renewed study of Glissant's work that focuses on his political theory. I understand Glissant's conception of the political to be primarily concerned with the quintessential political question of *who* constitutes a community and *how* this community relates to its surroundings. This understanding of the political entails a problematization of the neat distinction between culture and politics. Additionally, reading Glissant with this broader conception of the political allows for an exploration of the various political strategies he pursued in the radically changing geopolitical contexts shaping the last half of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century.

### **The German border regime**

In their engagement with the German border regime, academic studies informed by postcolonial traditions of thought appear to be closely related to a Glissantian perspective. Research in this field has focused on the institutional, structural, and cultural forms of racism underlying German society (Kilomba) and the discursive constructions of 'the Other' as the basis for a singular white and Christian German identity (Varela and Mecheril; El-Tayeb). Studies, in particular by Kien Nghi Ha, have moreover found that the genealogies underlying the formulation of contemporary

German immigration policies can be traced back to German imperial and colonial projects dating back to the nineteenth century (Ha, "Deutsche Integrationspolitik als koloniale Praxis"; "Die kolonialen Muster deutscher Arbeitsmigrationspolitik"). Another strand of scholarship has emphasized the long history of resistance against the racism perpetuated by the German border regime, particularly through self-organized migrant movements (Aikins and Bendix; Bojadžijev), that have also repeatedly highlighted the entanglements of Germany with global conflicts and structures of injustice (Dahn). Explicitly geared towards the exploration of utopian alternatives operating both within and without the existing configuration of nation-states, human rights, and the neoliberal economic system, a Glissantian perspective on the German border regime promises to enrich this body of work.

Research in the field of border studies has shown that most nation-states have no fixed external border but are in themselves complex borders that operate internally and externally (Balibar). As a case in point, Germany's external borders do not overlap with the ones of the state's territory, the European Union (EU) or the Schengen Area, but have been 'exterritorialized' through a growing number of bilateral agreements with 'third party states' that extend its southern frontier as far into Africa as the beginning of the Sahara (Luft 65). Germany plays a key role in the project of modelling the EU along the image of a gated community, where those inside enjoy free movement and security as the benefits of a global apartheid between those allowed to move and those doomed to stay or risk their lives in the process of trying to cross the borders (Mbembe 62–9). Additionally, specific laws for foreigners have turned the German border into a central aspect shaping the everyday experience of those who do not conform to the racialized norm of German citizenship, channelling their movement in ways that are designed to maintain their social status as secondary citizens (Ha, "Die kolonialen" 89). The most obvious manifestations of the internal border are the strict regulations governing the residence permit, but also the system of isolated *Flüchtlingslager* (asylum centres) and the mandatory *Residenzpflicht* (residence law), which confine the movements of refugees within the limits of the narrow district boundaries (Aikins and Bendix). The guiding rationale behind the complex disciplinary apparatus of the German border regime's surveillance—which does not exclude exceptions, as the events of 2015 have shown—is a selection mechanism geared to grant access into and movement within the country to those who contribute to the growth of the national economy (Jacoby). On a national and European level, such logic finds its discursive backing in a 'raceless racism' that defines the borders of Europe (Goldberg). While the German state and civil society were internationally lauded for making a humanitarian effort in face of the 'refugee crisis' in 2015, the celebration of its response has been criticized as cynical and amnesic in light of its overall repressive migration policy. "Soon enough the summer of grace became the autumn of rage and the winter of nightmares," writes Bonaventure Soh

Bejeng Ndikung (3), “especially for the refugees who since then have become the scapegoats of all of Germany’s problems.” A sudden rise in arson attacks on asylum centres (Aikins and Bendix) and the strengthening of right-wing nationalist groups, among them the newly-founded party, *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) (Alternative for Germany), continuing from the success of the *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes* (PEGIDA) (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West) movement, led to a major discursive shift to the right. This shift resulted in the creation of a ‘homeland ministry’ (*Bundesministerium des Innern, für Heimat und Bau*) in the coalition government formed in 2018—Germany’s own version of the French ‘wall-ministry,’ against which Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau wrote their pamphlet *Quand les murs tombent: L’identité nationale hors la loi?* in 2007.

### **Imagining a politics of relation: Glissant’s border thought and the German border regime**

As with most Glissantian concepts, anyone looking for a concise theorization of his border thought will be disappointed. To get a sense of the general direction and contour of his thinking on borders, his work needs to be read relationally, across literary genres, activism, and writing. This approach allows for connections amongst dispersed stories, approximations, comments, and poetic imagery that all relate to the question of borders and border movements. In its most overt formulations, Glissant’s border thought calls for a transformation of legal borders, operating as walls that keep out and protect against the perceived danger of a racialized Other, into permeable structures that differentiate and allow for, or rather, invite the creation of relations. Borders, in this view, no longer separate between fixed entities but between more fluid phenomena, such as rhythms, smells, ways of living, or atmospheres. In what comes closest to a definition of his ‘border thought,’ Glissant writes in *Philosophie de la Relation*:

*La pensée nouvelle des frontières: comme étant désormais l’inattendu qui distingue entre des réalités pour mieux les relier, et non plus cet impossible qui départageait entre des interdits pour mieux les renforcer. L’idée de la frontière nous aide désormais à soutenir et apprécier la saveur des différents quand ils s’apposent les uns aux autres. Passer la frontière, ce serait relier librement une vivacité du réel à une autre.*

*The new border thought:* that which, from now on, is the unforeseen that distinguishes between realities in order to better relate them, and no longer the impossible that decides between that which is forbidden to better re-enforce it. The idea of the border helps us to support and appreciate the taste of differences, when they are attached to one another. Crossing a border would be to freely relink one liveliness of the real to another. (Glissant, *Philosophie* 57, original emphasis)

Here borders remain necessary because of what Glissant perceives to be the importance of “highlighting and contrasting between different landscapes” and ways of living, as opposed to the homogenizing project of neoliberal globalization (Glissant, *Une nouvelle région du monde* 22).

Glissant’s border thought is informed by the Caribbean landscape. For instance, he points out that it would be impossible to convincingly define the borders separating the individual islands making up the Caribbean archipelago, because their borderlines would always shift with the waves of the ocean (Glissant, *Philosophie* 57–8). In a drawing titled, “*L’archipel est un passage, et non pas une mur*” (“The archipelago is a passage, and not a wall”) (see Figure 1), Glissant illustrates this view by placing several islands of the archipelago in such a way that their borders overlap at several points and are drawn with multiple, uncertain lines.

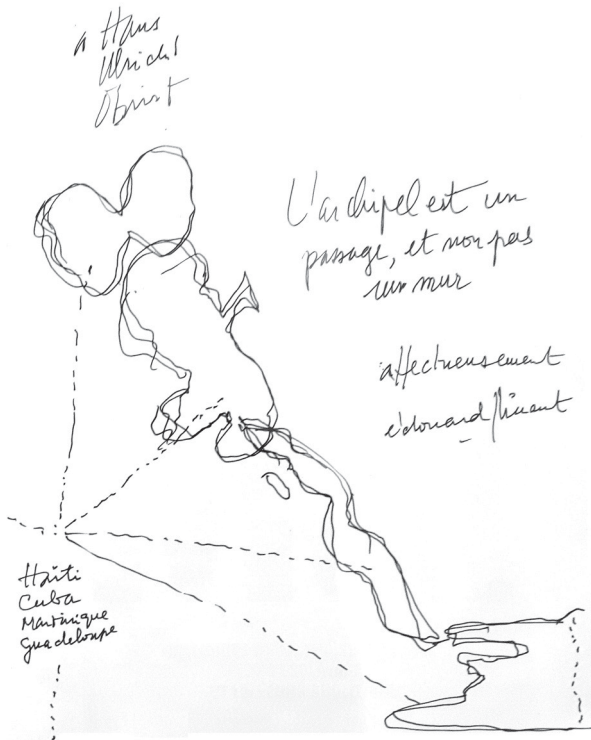


Figure 1: Glissant’s drawing. “*L’archipel est un passage, et non pas un mur*,” exhibited as part of the exhibition, *Mondialité*, in Villa Empain, Brussels 2017

The islands of this imaginary map are in direct relation with one another, an expression of what Glissant considers to be a natural Caribbean commonality due to a shared landscape, culture, and history that contradicts the geographic and political differences that persist between them as a result of different colonial projects. The notion of the archipelago is furthermore suggestive in this context since it alludes to his border thought as being invested in exploring alternative shapes for political

communities that fall outside the model of sovereign nation-states and federations.

Conceptually, Glissant's border thought is articulated primarily through his vision of the *Tout-Monde*, or whole-world, which he also imagines in the form of an archipelago and describes as a "non-universal universalism" made up of an infinity of differences undergoing constant and unpredictable changes (Glissant, *Traité du Tout-Monde* 176). Through this lens, questions pertaining to the German border regime would ask: what could be done to transform borders from walls into points of passage, enabling relations? And what other forms of political communities does Glissant's imaginary of relation enable us to envision in this context?

In addition to the general conception and normative horizon of his border thought, an engagement with his key concept of 'relation' is of crucial importance in formulating a response to these questions. In his analysis of social and political issues, Glissant has repeatedly pointed out that socio-political problems, be they conflicts, socio-economic issues, or widespread xenophobia, are tied to deeper cultural conceptions held by particular communities that inform their relations with the world. Failure to foster a relational imagination can result in a range of individual and collective psychological imbalances, translating into a collectivized fear of the Other. In my understanding, the concept of relation operates on all levels pertaining to the lives of individuals and collectives, across spatial, temporal, visible, and invisible dimensions. Its awareness of relations to all kinds of 'Others'—be they animals, plants, cultures, or humans (Glissant and Chamoiseau 25)—overcomes established categories of social analysis and opens up the mind to a whirlwind of complexities that create the sense of vertigo evoked in Glissant's definition of relation as "la quantité réalisée de toutes les différences du monde, sans qu'on puisse en excepter une seule" ("the realized quantity of all the differences of the world, without leaving out a single one") (Glissant, *Philosophie* 42, original emphasis). In addition to the general relational thrust of a Glissantian study of the German border, I will refer to a further set of concepts—"mythe fondateur" (foundation myth) and "opacité" (opacity). I use the former as a way of engaging with the historic narrative informing the contemporary German border regime, and the latter as a way of engaging with a set of cultural underpinnings. Additionally, I consider the notions of the small country and the archipelago to offer a productive political model against which current German immigration policies can be measured and alternatives to it imagined.

### Notes towards a Glissantian study of the German border regime

Due to the scope of this discussion, I am not proposing an exhaustive Glissantian study of the German border regime. The main aim of my approach is to suggest a new vocabulary and historical framework to the ongoing debate on the European migration crisis that emerges out of a study of Afrodiasporic literatures.

### *Re-relating German histories*

Glissant proposes to differentiate the narratives underlying what he calls “atavist” or “composite” countries according to whether they take the form of a “foundational myth” as Genesis or filiation, legitimizing a people’s claim to a particular territory or a “myth of elucidation” that seeks to offer an explanation for the encounter of diverse elements making up a social structure (Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du divers* 60, 62). This binary classification is connected to two opposing conceptions of identity, one informed by a thought of “single roots” that kills its surroundings, the other by what Deleuze and Guattari have termed the rhizome, which “extends by encountering other roots” (59). Whereas foundational myths operating with a single root imaginary exclude the other as participant and lead to atavist conceptions of community, myths of elucidation, which are explicitly told in relation to others, are the discursive basis underlying creolized communities (63). For Glissant (*Poétique du divers* 61), the problem therefore becomes: how can the imaginaries of the world be changed from atavistic notions of culture to creole ones?

Taking Glissant’s concept of the foundational myth as a point of departure, we can begin to study to what degree the narrative underlying the German national community suggests the existence of an atavist or creole country. As in the Martinican case, where Glissant (*Le discours antillais* 391–2) pointed out how the “African element” was systematically disavowed as a constitutive cultural part of creole culture, cases where the presence, participation, or contribution of “others” have been systematically negated or disavowed need to be analyzed. This would not only concern the presence of ‘guest workers’ arriving from Southern European countries Post-World War II, but also Polish seasonal workers at the time of the Prussian Empire, as well as people from across the globe who came to Germany through its colonial enterprises. The same goes for the acknowledgement of attempts to completely exterminate the Other from the national body, as was the case during the Holocaust. A fundamental acknowledgement of these dynamics as constitutive for a culture taking on a composite or atavist form would shape the description of the foundation myth.

Once an understanding of this official discourse has been established and certain atavist elements identified, a Glissantian approach sets out to contrast it with an account that aims at re-relating the pieces of history that have been held separate or made invisible. Outside the official discourse, the parts forming this relational account of German history have and still are being formulated, in writing and through actions. These “relational sparkles” (Chamoiseau 89) include networks of solidarity for and among refugees, large-scale demonstrations against repressive immigration policies and for the acknowledgement of the diversity of people living in the country, activist initiatives for the restitution of stolen cultural objects on display in museums and for the recognition of the genocide of the Nama and Herero and its memorialization in German history. This already-existing politics of relation takes

place in everyday interpersonal interactions, art galleries, theatres, cultural institutions fostering transnational exchanges and cultural journals. This kind of critique or counter-discourse intervenes in the existing political system with the aim of opening up the construct of German identity, from homogeneous to diverse, and its positionality in international relations, from superiority to equality, with the goal of evoking a more general shift from nation-states to relation-states.

### *Embracing the other's opacity*

A Glissantian study of the German border regime offers a second direction, which approaches the cultural question more directly as the matrix on which the historical narrative or German founding myth outlined in the previous section can be imagined and maintained. Of central importance for a cultural disposition towards relationality for Glissant is what he calls the respect for opacity. As much as the secrets guiding the events of the universe will, in the final instance, remain inexplicable, Glissant (*Nouvelle région* 187) insists that the preferences and motives behind our actions will remain essentially opaque to both the self and the other. The acceptance of the other's opacity can therefore be perceived as the precondition for developing an imaginary of relation and an awareness of the *Tout-Monde*, both on the level of the individual and the collective. Not insisting on transparency, the necessity of knowing or fully understanding the other or turning them into the same does not preclude the possibility of friendship, love, and other forms of solidarity in Glissant's view. Quite the opposite. In the same way that he insists that it is possible to like or work with someone without fully "knowing" them, he considers the "refusal of that which one does not understand" to be the quintessential disposition of racists (Glissant and Diawara 14).

In his anthropological studies concerning the contemporary global refugee crisis, Michel Agiers has attributed a frequent sense of disappointment among activists assisting refugees to a cultural disposition requiring transparency and sameness as a basis for social interaction. Perceiving 'the migrant' either through a juxtaposition of dominant and dominated individuals ("*au nom de la souffrance*," in the name of suffering), a resemblance between the self and the other ("*au nom de la ressemblance*," in the name of identity) or an aestheticization or exoticization of otherness ("*au nom de la différence*," in the name of difference), results in an absence of relationality in Agiers' view. This absence produces a shared sense of distrust and frustration on both sides (Agiers ch. 1).

In this context, a Glissantian study operates with a distinct set of normative standards for measuring the relational wealth of cultures. Against the view of culture as a static and hierarchical construct, replacing the concept of race in its classical biological form (Goldberg 334), Glissant (*Nouvelle région* 66) perceives cultures as fluid constructs and as ways of thinking and being in the world that mutually enrich one another in a



process of “changing by exchanging—without losing or denaturing oneself.” Instead of justifying an alleged cultural superiority through the economic productivity of certain countries, Glissant argues that an over-valorization of economic productivity should be replaced by valorizing the ability of particular cultures to relate to the diversity of the *Tout-Monde*. On the level of the individual, this means that the worth of human beings is not measured in economic terms or according to the ideal of the “human work machine” that works as steadily as it works intelligently (Ha, “Die kolonialen” 95). As a result, ‘foreigners’ in this kind of culture would not occupy the lowest possible socio-economic sphere, out of a fear that they “take the jobs of locals,” or be unable to fully participate economically through a lack of language proficiency. Instead, they would be given preferential treatment as newcomers and contributors to the survival of the culture that would die without their revitalizing input (Glissant and Chamoiseau 3).

### *Towards the creation of “small countries”*

Countering the atavist foundational myth and accepting the other’s opacity, as outlined in the previous two sections, already allude to alternative ways of being together that could transform contemporary border regimes into the points of passage as called for by Glissant’s border thought. In this last section, I want to pursue the exploration of its theoretical and practical potentials through Glissant’s concepts of the archipelago and the small country. Archipelagic thought perceives the world as a collection of islands that constitute a whole in which the relations between individual parts are of essential importance (Glissant, *Philosophie* 45). Glissant (45) opposes the image of the archipelago to that of a continent, the former being associated with diversity, fragmentation, and uncertainty; the latter with homogeneity, completion, and certainty. Glissant (*L’intention poétique* 153) extends his vision of the Caribbean as a political model to the world when he proclaims his “belief in the future of small countries.” Transferred to the context of borders and migration, I consider these images as not only offering a different imagination for how immigration policies within nation-states can be constructed, but also as offering a different model for political communities outside the nation-state paradigm, which I will outline below.

Working with the concepts of the archipelago, a Glissantian study of the German border regime could, as a first step, explore the ways in which national homogeneity and the perception of a political community as a closed and coherent whole is being produced. Such a study could begin by identifying particular paradigms informing the formulation of immigration policies. In the case of Germany, a recent shift from the ‘guest worker’ model to the ‘integration’ paradigm would fall into this category. The ‘guest worker’ model was maintained for more than a century in order to prevent the country from becoming an ‘immigration country’ by urging migrants to return home after a temporary contribution to the growth of the economy. According to Ha

("Die kolonialen" 64, 69), this model has its roots in a logic of the "inversion of colonial forms of expansion," in which the productivity of the Other is used without taking the risk of territorial occupation. The integration paradigm, beginning in the early 2000s, replaced the guest worker model after its alleged failure. Instead of demanding migrants to return to their countries of origin, the integration paradigm demands cultural assimilation to the national *Leitkultur* (leading culture) (Pautz), which can be translated as the imperative of turning migrants into Germans (Münkler 199). Discursively, Ha ("Die kolonialen" 91) also traces the genealogy of this model to colonial fantasies of "taming the wild" and the civilization mission, a reading which Glissant's (*Nouvelle région* 83–4) commentary on the integration of migrants in France, growing out of the French colonial doctrine of assimilation, echoes. In his *Traité du Tout-Monde*, Glissant (210) denounces the integration paradigm as a "great barbarity:"

*La créolisation n'est pas une fusion, elle requiert que chaque composante persiste, même alors qu'elle change déjà. L'intégration est un rêve centraliste et autocratique. La diversité joue dans le lieu, court sur les temps, rompt et unit les voix (les langues). Un pays qui se créolise n'est pas un pays qui s'uniformise. La cadence bariolée des populations convient à la diversité-monde. La beauté d'un pays grandit de sa multiplicité.*

Creolization is not a fusion; it requires that each of its composite parts persists, even if they are already changing. Integration is a centralist and autocratic dream. Diversity plays itself out in places, it moves with the times, breaks and unifies voices (languages). A creolizing country is not a standardizing country. The colourful cadence of populations suits the world-diversity. The beauty of a country grows out of its multiplicity.

As made explicit by this quote, Glissant's border thought problematizes the notion of integration as a violation of human dignity. For the receiving culture, it is also a self-amputation which deprives itself from potential enrichment through the engagement with others. Achieving 'real integration' in Glissant's (*Nouvelle région* 172, 207) view, requires working on the basis of acknowledging the other's opacity and the possibility of relating without submitting them to a singular cultural standard. Once the guiding rationale underlying the contemporary border regime is established, in a second step, the specific measures used to 'turn migrants into Germans' could be studied. In the German case, the two instruments that are prone to receive particular attention in this context are the 'integration course,' which requires migrants from vaguely classified non-Western countries to take up to 945 lessons of German language, law, culture, and history as a precondition for permanent residence (Ha, "Deutsche" 137), and the practice of scattering refugees across the federal states according to a strict numeric quota calculated through the number of inhabitants and tax revenue (Leitlein, *et al.*). I will here briefly focus on the second policy instrument since it links more directly to the image of the archipelago as a counter-model to

culturally homogenous nation-states. In the process of scattering newcomers across the territory, families are separated across the different federal states that make up the German Republic (*Bundesländer*) and confined to movement within its borders by a mandatory *Residenzpflicht* (Aikins and Bendix). The rationale behind this division, which goes against the preferences of the individuals and communities concerned, as well as considerations of available housing and the actual material resources of the federal states, is based on the fear of avoiding the creation of so-called “parallel societies” (*Parallelgesellschaften*). For instance, the Berlin districts of Kreuzberg and Neukölln, to which most Turkish immigrants moved in the 1960s and 1970s, are regularly referenced in public discourses as deterrence. Instead, the guiding rationale of this policy is that through a high degree of isolation of these families, their cultural differences will eventually ‘dissolve’ into the dominant culture of their surroundings. The result of the policy of scattering refugees across largely isolated rural areas is not only that sustaining community networks is made more difficult, but also that refugee camps in isolated parts of the country are particularly vulnerable to xenophobic attacks (Pro Asyl).

As pointed out above, a Glissantian politics of relation is based on the belief in the progressive force of creolization and are fundamentally opposed to an enforced cultural “fusion.” Instead of working towards a dissolution of differences, it aims to work towards supporting cultural differences, not in the form of segregation or an explicit disintegration, but as a way of supporting the vital needs of migrant communities in the form of establishing “small countries” or “parallel societies.” These would not be left to their own devices but would be provided with all the infrastructure needed in order to maintain their political, economic, and cultural networks and practices. Whether against the will of German policy makers or with their help, this process is already taking place in districts like Berlin-Neukölln and Kreuzberg, in which the second largest number of Turkish nationals after Istanbul reside. And, as a result of the ‘summer of 2015,’ new spaces within Germany will eventually accommodate “islands” largely populated by Syrian nationals.

## Conclusion

Taking up the task issued by Glissant in his 2006 Berlin speech to imagine a politics of relation, I explore border thought in response to the contemporary migration crisis and Germany’s border regime. Working with Glissant politically, translating his philosophy in such a way that it can be referred to as a tool for political analysis and for the imagination of alternative policy approaches to immigration, requires an engagement with the philosophical and conceptual foundations of his border thought and its connections to Glissant’s overall commitment to the creation of communities that are attuned to the archipelagic structure of the *Tout-Monde*.

In addition to the general normative thrust of his border thought, against which

contemporary border regimes can be measured, it is possible to identify a set of directions which a more comprehensive Glissantian study of German borders could take. Working with the concepts of the foundational myth, opacity, and the archipelago has proven to be particularly productive as ways of engaging the historical narrative, the cultural disposition, and the policy framework underlying German immigration politics. In each case, it is not only possible to sketch the contours of a Glissantian critique but also to point to practical alternatives that a politics of relation suggests, moving the utopian thrust of his border thought into the realm of the possible. When coupled with his approach to borders, Glissant's concepts of the archipelago and the small country, in particular, suggest the invention of new political formats beyond the nation-state, of which the city appears as a particularly productive space to experiment with practical expressions of a relational imaginary.

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# Unsettled intimacies: revisiting Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* through Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*

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## Unsettled intimacies: revisiting Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* through Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*

Scholars have highlighted Nella Larsen's textual interventions into aspects of Edith Wharton's major works. The interventions, they claim, not only unmask Wharton's pointed operations of erasure against people of color but, in some cases, showcase her racism. None of these works, however, devote critical analysis to the interventions staged in Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* (1913), the novel that, I argue, is her most definitive statement on the role of market-based capitalism on the fate of Western civilization. Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) shares many of *Custom's* thematic concerns. Though writing from different class and racial perspectives, both writers must account for the social developments that spilled over from the previous century to articulate their implications for their heroines in terms of marriage, family, work, divorce, sex, and race relations on a trans-Atlantic scale. However, given that *Custom* almost entirely elides the presence of people of color, assessing it alongside *Quicksand* animates the specter of colonialism that haunts the text, inviting us to remember why not all bodies, as M. Jacqui Alexander argues in "Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen," can be imagined as naturalized citizen subjects within the rubric of modern capitalism. **Keywords:** Nella Larsen, Edith Wharton, colonialism, capitalism, motherhood, racism.

## Introduction

Edith Wharton and Nella Larsen wrote during an era where both Europe and the United States grappled with the changing roles of women in society. As writers of the early twentieth-century, with significant ties to Europe that extended into their fiction, they were uniquely positioned to filter trans-Atlantic preoccupations around 'the modern woman.' In Europe, according to Gail Cunningham (1978), the "New Woman" emerged from the tumult of anti-establishment ideas during the *fin-de-siècle* period, allowing some women to feasibly envision a life outside of marriage. In the United States, technological advancements and increased job opportunities following the Civil War allowed a larger share of women to challenge the separate-spheres ideology and provided impetus for nineteenth-century feminist activism (Cott 125). It was this purported assault on marriage that posed questions for the naturalized order of the heteropatriarchal family (Cunningham 2).

Gothic literature at this time proved a fruitful arena for tackling this anxiety.

For instance, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) features Lucy who, espousing feminist ideals, is turned into a vampire, becomes wildly erotic, and preys on children. Like other gothic works that engage with themes of female agency and monstrosity, *Dracula* embodies a cultural preoccupation with an idea of change that challenges the moral, economic, and reproductive purpose of the conjugal family. It is against this backdrop that I examine the works of Wharton and Larsen. While they cannot be classified as gothic writers, they have invested key heroines with signifiers of the gothic that would pose them as perverse and a threat to their societies. Unlike the 'untraditional' women of Stoker, Wharton's and Larsen's protagonists engage in a depth of interrogation that exposes the operations of the Euro-American nation state as antithetical to women's full agency as citizens and, in Larsen's case, as constructed on the abjection of blackness. Roughly a century prior, Mary Shelley had engaged in a similar interrogation of citizenship in *Frankenstein*. In it, the scientist Victor Frankenstein creates a human from various inanimate parts that has advanced intellect but is physically freakish. The creature, shunned by a society that could not reconcile his poetic mind with his monstrous appearance, is charged by a sense of vengeance against his creator for dooming him to such an existence. By repeatedly scrutinizing the ego-driven motives of the scientist, however, Shelley undercuts a simple understanding of who is the text's real monster. In *Black Frankenstein*, Elizabeth Young taps further into the novel's colonial resonance by connecting the creature as both product and belier of European enlightenment ideals to the abjection of black bodies as intrinsic to the ontology of the modern nation state. As such, I engage with this signifier of the gothic to show how Wharton and Larsen wrote back against the concept of the subversive female to expose the Euro-American model of the nation state as the site of monstrosity.

Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* (1913) and Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) both depict willful and, at times, repellent heroines who spend significant time in both the US and Europe. The metaphoric operations of the Frankenstein story show how these women are constructed out of conflicting Euro-American ideals and are then charged by a confluence of catalytic events that crescendos into a rebellion. While this examination shifts critical attention towards the writers' maneuvers in unmasking apparatuses at work in dehumanizing the modern woman, the metaphor works on different registers along racial lines. Through *Quicksand*, the perversities of a market-obsessed society work to move *Custom's* Undine Spragg away from an ideal of citizenship with which her whiteness endows her. The biracial Helga Crane from *Quicksand*, however, is already prefigured as a non-localized Other, untethered from any stable notion of belonging, because of her brown skin and illegitimate birth. Though *Custom* almost entirely elides the presence of people color, assessing it alongside *Quicksand* animates the specter of colonialism that haunts the text.

In her essay on the cross-textual relationship between Wharton and Larsen, Emily

Orlando juxtaposes a Harlem club scene from *Twilight Sleep* (1927) and places it in direct conversation with a vaudeville scene in *Quicksand* (1928). Whereas in Wharton's (*Twilight Sleep* 147) text, narrative interest in the black performers is limited to their function as consumable objects flung about like dark fruits that gave off "crimson bursts of laughter splitting open on white teeth," in Larsen's text the reader is repeatedly led back to ponder the spectacle of cavorting black bodies as a critique of the impossibility of apolitical black presence in a white-dominated culture. In offering this 'revision,' Larsen not only 'reauthorizes' the implications of black performance as spectacle "with the kind of authority that Wharton, as a white, Europeanized American, cannot access" (Orlando 38), but also unmasks the forms of silencing and elisions that writers like Wharton engaged in to create a white-centered ideology that was supposedly race-neutral.

Orlando's analysis stands alongside a number of other scholars who have begun decrypting the racial registers of Wharton's works. In one of the earlier essays on the topic, "Edith Wharton and the Issue of Race," Elizabeth Ammons argues that the near-complete erasure of people of color masks the racial ideology of a dominant white culture, or "erasure camouflaging insistent re-inscription" (Ammons 72). Ammons engages with a familiar catalogue of Wharton's works, namely *The House of Mirth* (1905), *Summer* (1917), and *The Age of Innocence* (1920). Similarly, Hildegard Hoeller's "Invisible Blackness" unpacks Wharton's short story "Old Maid" to unravel tropes of the tragic mulatto which are overlaid on the story's three ostensibly white characters. Although Linda Dittmar's "When Privilege Is No Protection" analyzes Larsen's *Quicksand* in relation to Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, and Nick Bromell's "Reading Democratically" scrutinizes *The House of Mirth* to show its literary traces in Larsen's *Passing* (1929), very few of these critical works engage with Wharton's *Custom*. I argue that this text represents the author's most definitive stance on the United States as a vanguard global power in contradistinction to the retreating position of Western Europe. A notable exception is Stuart Hutchinson's "Sex, Race and Class in Edith Wharton." However, this overview of *Custom* stops short of the broader global and capitalist implications of movements within the novel and focuses mainly on the superficiality of the protagonist. Orlando (34) admirably teases out both the overt and not-so-overt traces of Wharton's influence on Larsen's writing, going so far as to say it shows an engagement of revisionist dialogue that "spanned the length of [Larsen's] literary career." Of particular note is her sieving of Larsen's text, particularly in her unpublished "Sank," to show evidence of appropriation of Wharton's diction. Far from accusing her of plagiarism, Orlando shows the inventiveness of Larsen's engagement with Wharton as an ironic form of critique. With this in mind, it is curious that Orlando and other scholars overlook the relation between *Custom* and *Quicksand*. The protagonists in both novels are engaged to the consumerist principles of an early twentieth-century market age and are averse to



the traditional confines of marriage. Importantly, both novels also set a significant part of their analysis against the backdrop of a European journey.

Larsen and Wharton engage in a critique of marriage as an institution of patriarchal power. Wharton's work especially unearths how trans-Atlantic capitalism colludes in solidifying an asymmetrical gender dynamic. As scholars such as Orlando have affirmed, Larsen overturns Wharton's reductive take on early twentieth-century women's concerns by illuminating the very different struggles of black women in their quest for agency and showing how those concerns refract significantly through the prism of class. However, noting *Custom's* critical plotting of marriage as indicative of the historical exchanges that bind the United States to metropolises in Europe (exchanges pertinent to the continued growth of a wealthy white elite), Wharton's curated erasure of race manifests a longing for heteronormative Anglo-Saxon values as the engineering force of this imagined community. Given the overlooked similarities existing between *Custom* and *Quicksand*, Larsen's focus on race in both the US and Europe serves as a crucial rebuttal of racial erasure in both the United States and Europe.

### **Undine Spragg: the ideal monster**

Undine Spragg evidences Wharton's most withering critique on modern societies being governed by the precepts of market economies. In Undine's desire to scale the heights of the jet-set class in both Europe and North America, she forces her father to move the family to New York, ultimately precipitating her parents' financial decline. She marries four times and is complicit in the suicide of her second husband, Ralph Marvell. In short, Undine is a monstrous character. Critical reception of the novel considered her as such upon the novel's release in 1913. *The New York Sun* called her "sexless" and "repulsive," the "ideal monster in that at no time does she betray any human feelings" and *The Nation* was pithier in its review of Undine as "a mere monster of vulgarity" (Tuttleton, *et al.* 202-4). But the critics who read Undine as a consequence of the willful autonomy of the New Woman are missing the larger critique aimed at the leisure class to which Undine belongs and the encroachment of market ideas and values within the confines of the home. In his turn-of-the-century study on social classes in the United States, Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1994) posits that the leisure-class wife's fundamental duty was to display her husband's wealth. Beyond positing the wife as ornamental chattel, the trouble with this outsized emphasis on consumerism and capital lay in the emulative desires of other social classes.

Expanding job markets and technological advancements of the last quarter of the nineteenth century led to a burgeoning middle class on both sides of the Atlantic. Businesses and large manufacturers responded with advertisements in newspapers and magazines that were reaching a larger audience. "By placing products in settings

evocative of leisure and privilege," Debra-Ann MacComb (768) explains, "advertisers addressed nonrational yearnings encouraging consumers to project themselves into the constructed frame and savor thereby a richer and fuller life." The monstrosity of Undine, on one metaphorical plane, rests in her representation as a composite of this consumerist ethos. In the novel, the character of Charles Bowen, a New York society insider who seems most attuned to the comedy of his peers, calls Undine a "monstrously perfect result of the system" (Wharton, *Custom* 147). Wharton suggests that Undine's tutelage begins at home. To understand the source of her "overflowing activity," the author tells us "the answer would have been obtained by observing her father's business life" (83). In fact, her father acts the United States-based proxy for her demands when she starts the divorce proceedings against her American husband Ralph (precipitating his suicide) from France before acquiring her European husband, Raymond de Chelles.

Undine's European adventure begins in earnest upon Ralph's death. And though her flight to Paris is meant to attract the attentions of wealthy socialite Peter Van Degen, she encounters, and eventually marries, the handsome Marquis Raymond de Chelles. The protagonist's leap from the New York machinery into Parisian nobility is in some measure meant to highlight two cultures at inverse poles—as the United States surges into the vanguard position of a new era of market societies. According to Wharton, France's resistance to subjecting its history, traditions, and familial bonds to the sterilizing precepts of a market economy makes it superior to the United States in maintaining a transmittable notion of cultural identity for future generations. Raymond proves to be a disappointment to Undine in his embodiment of a nobility that is overwhelmed by the rising tide of bourgeois capitalism. Undine's desire to appraise the fifteenth-century tapestries of Raymond's ancestral chateau crystallizes this tension. He accuses her of representing a new breed of external conquerors from "towns as flimsy as paper," where "the people are as proud of changing as we [the French] are of holding to what we have" (379). Elsewhere in the novel, however, the sustaining ties between the United States' "New-World" dynamism and France's resistance belie a neat (white) ethno-cultural disjuncture between the two national spaces. The elderly Marquise de Chelles, Raymond's father, initially opposes marriage based on the seeming incongruity between her status as a twice-divorced Baptist from the United States and the solemn moral and religious traditions of French nobility. After Ralph's death, however, Undine's newly acquired inheritance prods the family to discover "the moral and financial merits" necessary to justify the young couple's union (337). The subsequent marriage of Raymond's younger brother to a wealthy American heiress further solidifies this reciprocity as the prestige of noble European heritage is accorded in exchange for the regenerative capital of the American *nouveau-riche*. This trans-Atlantic exchange improves the market value of the Chelles' property in Paris by, among other things, outfitting it

with “electric light and heating” (350).

France’s and the United States’ ethno-cultural sensibilities are as deeply imbricated as to evoke the trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific ontology of modern capitalist economies. These are not autonomously bound to the historical material conditions within national borders but are rooted in a logic of white European hegemony that orders racial, gender, and sexual dynamics on a global scale. The presence of black bodies, and with them the history of slavery and black subjugation, is almost entirely absent from Wharton’s novel. However, this hidden history seeps symbolically from the damp walls and musty curtains of the Chelles’ feudal real-estate wealth. The tapestries Undine wants sold (and eventually acquires herself) were gifted to Raymond’s great-great grandfather by King Louis XV, whose revision of France’s *Code Noir* helped bring wealth to the French empire by solidifying a legal framework for slavery and stabilizing the infrastructure of the sugarcane plantation economy in the Caribbean colonies.

### **Helga Crane and the plight of the jungle**

If, for Wharton, the focus is the white, middle-class woman, Nella Larsen queries the existential conundrum of her black counterpart when the very fabric of the black family is already worn threadbare by the legacies of slavery and sexual exploitation. In examining the impact of the separate spheres for men and women, Amy Kaplan (582) re-evaluates the domestic sphere as indispensable to “imagining the nation as home.” Such a reconceptualizing thus collapses the separate spheres and “[white] men and women become national allies against the alien, and the determining vision is not gender but racial demarcations and otherness” (582; emphasis added). In *The Feeling of Kinship*, David Eng applies a global capitalist lens to the notion of separate spheres when accounting for the spatial dislocation of “dark bodies” from the concept of the home as metaphor for nation. On a transnational scale, the racialized economies of slavery and colonialism affected the “material consolidation of the [white] bourgeoisie as a distinct class” separate from the formerly enslaved workers who furnished their material comforts (Eng 12). The alienation of the black body has both national and transnational dimensions in Larsen’s works. In traversing the rural south, the urban north and the European metropole, she, far more explicitly than Wharton, shows how the black-diasporic body is barred from any notion of feeling at home in what are putatively liberal humanist societies. It is important to recognize that gender is inextricably linked to race in Larsen’s demarcation of otherness. The black woman confronts a specific brand of racism that, in erasing her humanity, transforms her into a different type of monster—a purely sexual one.

Anne Stavney (535) explains that, during the first decades of the twentieth century, “assertions of black female immorality, impurity and licentiousness constituted a repeated refrain in white discussions of black America.” In response to this pervasive

belief, black writers strove to reconstruct the image of the black woman, placing her as someone comfortable in the trappings of a middle-class home and firm in her moral rectitude. In *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987), Hazel Carby observes that Jesse Fauset, a prominent Harlem Renaissance writer, used her voice as a platform for fashioning a black middle-class morality that renounced the degeneracy associated with ideas of “the folk” and lionized the heteropatriarchal values of bourgeoisie. She asserts that Fauset’s *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931) moves “away from the figures of isolated unmarried mothers and daughters supporting themselves” and towards a “newly formed and respectable community as dependent wives” (Carby 167). It is precisely against this ethic that Larsen wrote *Quicksand*, illustrating that marriage and childbirth are not a panacea for the black woman, when existing social and economic conditions merely perpetuate her problems.

*Quicksand*’s protagonist Helga Crane’s implacable restlessness sees her moving from the American South to Harlem, then to Copenhagen, before returning to the United States. It is a restlessness motored by alienation as a result of various strands of racism, classism, and sexism in the European and American socio-political body. Though Helga rails against the hypocrisy of the black middle class in Naxos and Harlem, her education and social mobility place her within this bourgeois milieu. Much like *Undine*, she is not averse to the consumerist ethos of a liberal capitalist society. Helga, we are told, always “had wanted, not money, but the things which money could give, leisure, attention, beautiful surroundings. Things. Things. Things” (Larsen 69). Abandoned by her black father and unwelcomed by her white family after her mother dies, the protagonist does not have the familial network and legacies that subtend the white middle class. Helga works for money. Her bouts with poverty give her a clear-eyed perspective on the power structures that dehumanize the majority working class. For instance, Helga transforms a school in Naxos into a machine that molds black students into commodities for the labor market, “It was, Helga decided, now only a big knife with cruelly sharp edges ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern, the white man’s pattern” (8).

According to Nikhil Pal Singh’s *Black Is A Country*, a growing number of Marxist black activists in the first half of the twentieth century believed that eliminating class differentiation would solve the social problems of the black community. For Larsen, race critically intersects with class in the language of worker exploitation in fomenting entirely different concerns for black workers. Helga is denied access to jobs for which her education otherwise qualifies her. For Larsen’s protagonist, the specter of her sexuality cannot be disarticulated from her construct as a labor commodity. While interviewing for jobs in Chicago, she encounters a “few men, both white and black, [that] offer her money, but the price of the money [is] too dear;” and Helga does “not feel inclined to pay it” (Larsen 37). It is this anxiety around the formulations of her sexuality that intersect with the protagonist’s sense of racial identification. Though

Helga attempts to escape whiteness while in Harlem, she cannot escape its formulations of her as a sexually libidinous Other. Though keenly aware of the absurdities of the black bourgeoisie, as encapsulated by the character of Anne Grey (who apes white people's customs while sternly decrying all things white), she also cannot embrace the sexual autonomy of a figure like Audrey Denney, the self-assured black woman who sits at ease in a nightclub and slips freely across the line separating Harlem and white New York. Larsen dramatizes Helga's turmoil by exposing her psychological intercourse with the heady jazz music wafting through that nightclub:

She is drugged, lifted, sustained by the extraordinary music, blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by the wild, murky orchestra. The essence of life seems bodily motion. And when suddenly the music dies, she drags herself back to the present with a conscious effort and a shameful certainty that not only has she been in the jungle, but that she has enjoyed it. (61)

Helga's pre-conscience, Larsen suggests, is tied to essentialized notions of blackness—creativity, bodily abandon, and sexual expressiveness. It is significant that, during her moment of reclaiming reason, she shunts this feeling into the realm of "the jungle," appropriating (and endorsing) colonialist and white supremacist rhetoric that removes blackness from the spheres of rationality and domesticity. It is significant too that, for Helga, this place of essentialized blackness is invariably tied to the erotic. The shame she experiences here is the same that attends her sexual longing for Robert Anderson, the principal from the school in Naxos who struggles with his desire for Helga. Though previously engaged to a man who did not excite her sexually, her desire for Robert ignites in her a "primitive emotion" that leaves her "panting," "confused," and longing for escape (64).

Her inheritance from her white uncle gives her the financial resources to flee the United States but her experiences in Europe make clear that the liberal humanism that marks her as Other spans a trans-Atlantic reach deeply rooted in colonialism. The twice-divorced Undine can marry into French aristocracy, despite significant differences in religious and sexual attitudes, because her whiteness ties her to capitalist production. The jewel-encrusted hairpins and brilliant dresses add to Undine's appeal as a consumable object with a beauty "brushed by the wing of poetry" (Wharton, *Custom* 194). On the other hand, Helga's batik dresses, enameled earrings, and Manila shawls expose her as "a veritable savage" amidst the Copenhageners "who stop to stare at the queer dark creature, strange to their city" (Larsen 71). This dichotomy affirms Sandra Gilman's observation on late nineteenth-century perceptions around racialized sexuality in the arts and sciences. Whereas the body of white women could contain multiple meanings, the black woman "comes to serve as an icon for black sexuality in general" (Gilman 212).

When Helga first arrives to Europe, it is the visual and cultural antithesis of the

racialized landscapes that she has known. She rarely thinks of the United States "excepting in unfavorable contrast to Denmark" (Larsen 76). The serene lakes, charming canals, and quaint "low-lying Exchange, a picturesque structure in picturesque surroundings" (78), project a European culture scrubbed clean of the inimical differentiation that animates the terms of squalor and poverty for black citizens at home. Helga certainly feels differentiated upon arriving in Copenhagen, but her cautious befuddlement at the Danes' predisposition to emphasize (rather than pretending to ignore) her differences gives way to a full-throated endorsement that abets her sense of being born anew in the midst of their homogeneity. The Danes, she believes have "the right idea [...] Enhance what was already in one's possession. In America, Negroes sometimes talked loudly of this, but in their hearts they repudiated it" (76). This affect of renewal conjures the desires of famous black American expatriates to Europe, among them Josephine Baker, Ada "Bricktop" Smith, and Richard Wright. In speaking to these transnational longings, Paul Gilroy (19) points out that for people such as Wright, Europe offered the possibility of transcending "the restrictive bonds of ethnicity, national identification and sometimes even 'race' itself" that could prove overwhelming in the race-consciousness of the Anglophone Americas.

Still, the differentiation Helga finds refreshing at the outset of her European journey is ultimately tied to similar patterns of marginalization. The Danish women's indifference to Helga's 'alluring' exoticism when she is first introduced at an evening party thrown by her Aunt Katrina do not stem from enlightened politeness, but a deep-seated racism that marks Helga as inferior. As Larsen's protagonist surmises, "she was attractive, unusual in an exotic, almost savage way, but she wasn't one of them. She didn't at all count" (Larsen 72). Helga's initial portrait of a European utopia antithetical to the disharmony of a racially heterogeneous society may very well, as Arne Lunde and Anna Westerstal Stenport (231) charge, contradict not only the historical presence of Afro-Caribbeans in early twentieth-century Copenhagen but also "Denmark's history as a colonial power and involvement in the trans-Atlantic slave trade." However, the abjection Helga inevitably comes to feel ultimately alters how the reader initially imagines the space. This affective recalibration evokes, for instance, the history of slave trading in Danish wealth and its embodiment in the picturesque structure of the "low-lying Exchange" (Larsen 78), the Stock Exchange built in 1640 that now serves as the headquarters of the Danish Chamber of Commerce in the novel.

Racial differentiation has its most dramatic impact during Helga's visit to a vaudeville act towards the end of her European journey. Her longing to return to black Harlem is made more acute by her Danish acquaintances' orgiastic response to the black men performing minstrelsy. Their howling and screaming and clapping in response to the exaggerated twisting and cavorting of black limbs makes Helga feel exposed, ashamed, and certain that "all along they had divined [that] presence, had

known that in her was something, some characteristic, different from any that they themselves possessed" (85). And though Helga vows to embrace this difference, it also cements her status as one of immanent exile. The terms of European enlightenment, whose history is intimately tied to the functions of colonialism and that survives as the central ordering logic for Global North nations, locates the concept of blackness as an inferior Other. While for Fru Fischer, this logically renders jazz as inferior to the music of Gade and Heise (82) and registers black female bodies as the antithetical excess in relation to white European womanhood.

Similarly, Danish artist Alex Olsen's initial appraisal of Helga is purely sexual and symbolically recalls the very physical terms on which enslaved Africans were filtered into the logic of colonialism. Aunt Katrina introduces the famous artist to Helga in hopes that a connection between the two would elevate her social standing but Olsen's interest in her rests plainly in her potential as a commodity. He never addresses her, rendering her mute, and her initially frail grasp of Danish reduces his appraisal of her to an amalgam of body parts: "Superb eyes ... color ... neck column ... yellow ... hair ... alive ... wonderful" (73). Despite its positive register, it conjures the physical plane along which black bodies were welcome in the logic of colonial Europe. The portrait of her by Olsen is an aesthetic reflection of this commoditization of the black female body as a sexual object. What the artist perceives and distills as "the true Helga Crane," Helga herself sees "some disgusting sensual creature with her features" (91). The fractured psyche of the black citizen, Larsen suggests, is inevitable when her racial self is mediated through constructions of her identity by a cultural majority that stakes its normative claim on the production of alterities. Or, as Anne Hostetler (36) claims, while Helga is annoyed by such representations as Olsen's, "she cannot entirely dismiss them, for she half believes them." Speaking to the fractured psychic conditions of African Americans following the First World War, Paula Giddings (183) comments that "blacks found postwar America a hall of mirrors, where they saw their reflection first from one angle, then from another." It is out of this place of trauma and unbelonging that Larsen's protagonist voices her ultimate rebellion by refusing to participate in the contract of reproduction and futurity. Helga's question upon her return to Harlem—"Why *do* Negroes have children?" (Larsen 96)—is not naïve posturing, but a damning remark on the doomed futurity of the black-citizen body menaced by a differentiation and alienation that is fundamentally racial, and which cannot be resolved by efforts at economic parity.

## Conclusion

Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* share much in common in terms of their preoccupation with the condition of women amidst the fervent social and economic changes taking place in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries. While the resources specific to Undine (*Custom*) and Helga

(*Quicksand*) allowed each a measure of freedom and trans-Atlantic mobility not common to vast working-class populations of women in North America and Western Europe at the time, they also each served as exemplars of the structural limitations that marriage imposed on women. Wharton's concerns are, however, limited to a society of wealthy white elites that evidence, as Ammons (74) points out, her alignment of "the West" with whiteness. Helga's story thus challenges Wharton's limited outlook. Race and class, alongside gender, emerge as crucial lenses in Larsen's dialectic to assess the conditions of women. Helga, unlike Undine, must contend with the notion of being an Other within the scope of a dominant white ideology that determines the terms of cultural and capital output in both Europe and America. Larsen's abortive attempt at forging affective ties, both intimate and familial, in Denmark shows how the possibility of unambiguous assimilation into the productive avenues of Western capitalist societies are foreclosed to black women, as their structures were built and continue to thrive on the expropriation of black bodies for labor and wealth creation (and not acquisition).

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# Ambiguous agency in the vulnerable trafficked body: reading Sanusi's *Eyo* and Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*

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## Ambiguous agency in the vulnerable trafficked body: reading Sanusi's *Eyo* and Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*

The narrativization of the trafficked body in the novels of Abidemi Sanusi and Chika Unigwe allows for a contemplation of Europe in African migrant imaginaries as both promise and failure. Sanusi's *Eyo* is a narrative of a ten-year-old girl who is trafficked to the United Kingdom as a human sex slave. The novel draws attention to the tensions that define her being/unbeing in Europe and beyond, even after a brave escape from her traffickers. This precarious existence is enhanced in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, whose main characters exist in Europe selling their bodies while existing in states of continuous vulnerability. In reading these two novels side by side, this article explores the discursive meanings of trafficked bodies and how traumatic existence allows for an engagement with Europe as illusory in the imaginaries of African women who cross borders into Europe. The article argues that while the female characters are vulnerable, they retain an ambiguous agency contained within their ability to survive and remain resilient in the face of atrocities for borders crossers. The narrative form of the novel allows for an exploration of what this agency looks like in the face of extreme vulnerability. **Keywords:** trauma, trafficked body, border crossing, vulnerability, narrativity.

### The trafficked body as vulnerable?

The tendency in scholarship on human trafficking is to explore trafficked subjects within a victim-perpetrator dyad (Hodge and Lietz 163). In doing so, something is lost in the way of narrating the circumstances, memories, and experiences of those who are trafficked. The broader scholarship becomes encased in the macro-politics of rights and international law. While relevant, such scholarship overlooks the significance of narration, memory, and history pertaining to individuals affected by the trafficking enterprise. In engaging with two novels, Abidemi Sanusi's *Eyo* (2009) and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009), I explore the ambiguous agency encased within the discourse of vulnerability of the trafficked body. I delve into the narratives of the lives of five women and their entanglements with violent pasts that persist into the present. Within contexts of precarity, I consider what an 'escape' to Europe offers or promises to those who supposedly leave their problems behind. These include escape from poverty, joblessness, and violence and the pos-

sible embrace of wealth, social standing, and general wellbeing. However, the things that these women desire remain elusive because of vulnerability to violent pasts and presents. I therefore ask questions around how these women navigate the spaces they exist in, what I call ambiguous agency. I use a feminist epistemology that demands the recognition of suffering and resilience as a way of navigating extreme violence.

The vulnerability referenced above is signaled in existing scholarship on the trafficked body which, in turn, exists within broader scholarship on 'human trafficking,' a "term commonly used to describe the present-day slave trade" (Hodge and Lietz 163). Trafficking involves an element of coercion, whether economic or social (Bernhart 490). As Melynda Bernhart (490) indicates, trafficking often involves the "smuggling of migrants" in which one person pays fees to another in "order to bring him or her safely across an international border." The trafficked person in this case is traded for purposes of exploitation of their labor, often against their will (Bernhart 490-1). Human trafficking is, in essence, about supply and demand, an essential aspect of what was termed "the white slave trade" in the late nineteenth and twentieth century (Monzini 3). In the two novels that I consider in this article, I read trafficking as moving beyond mere smuggling (aiding a person across an international border for a fee) to include the sustained exploitative relationship that ensues once the person trafficked crosses the border. That relationship is one of power, with the trafficked person becoming dependent on the trafficker for their wellbeing and livelihood. The exploitative relationship is also often one in which the trafficked person has no clear means of escape or ability to return home (place of origin). Among several tactics, the trafficker often holds the trafficked person hostage, requiring a form of payment, usually a large sum of money. The trafficker will also often hold on to the trafficked person's documentation, such as a passport, to prevent the trafficked person from leaving. Given that the trafficked person is a source of income for those who benefit from their labor, a desire by the trafficked person to leave might elicit some form of response from the trafficker, including punishment and, sometimes, even murder. This form of control renders the trafficked body vulnerable in many ways.

I explore this vulnerability against a broader background of memory and narration of violence. In doing this, I trouble the meaning of vulnerability and create possibilities for engaging with the lives of those who are trafficked in ways that render them present and visible. I also engage ideas of survival and resistance within these extreme conditions. I take vulnerability to mean exposure to danger, hurt, pain, and violence. Yet, I read vulnerability as a form of action for survival and protest. Vulnerability would here suggest a discomfort, a troubling, a form of knowing, a facing of fears, and a form of protest. Judith Butler (32–62), in her chapter on "survivability, vulnerability and affect," urges us to think of vulnerability as an opportunity to resist the precarity of life. Exposing the body to vulnerability makes it possible to expose oneself to pain and other affects. A form of questioning is born out of taking risks

and being unsettled in the face of violence. If being vulnerable allows one to gather the will to live, survive, and endure, then reading the trafficked body as a marker of survival is a way of unthinking a narrative of victimhood in which the trafficked body is invariably caught.

My reading does not in any way negate the violence that happens upon the trafficked body in the novels. The presence of violence in fact signals what Saidiya Hartman (4) terms “the terror of the mundane” in which subjection penetrates the essence of being human. As Hartman has argued, the focus on the shocking spectacle of violence is not particularly helpful as it simply reiterates and makes familiar a violation of human rights. What is perhaps necessary is a refocus on the ordinary to investigate what that terror looks like and how those involved respond to that terror. Hartman is concerned with the idea of subjection and critically engages with how even the very ideas of pleasure and will reiterate dominant ideologies. Hartman is useful in thinking about the ambiguity of agency in this case as it appears impossible to think of trafficked bodies as having any form of agency. Yet, they survive. It is therefore useful to think about a methodological shift that acknowledges the place of affective modes of encounter and experiences as guiding principles into reading both novels. I try to resist falling into the trap of reading Eyo, Sisi, Ama, Efe, and Joyce as objects for mapping the terrain of vulnerability. I recognize their located/spatial experiences as modes of reading the violence around them. On this, I echo Danai Mupotsa’s (“If I could write this in fire/ African feminist ethics for research in Africa”) call for a feminist epistemology in order to avoid essentialist and oversimplified analyses of black women’s identity. Rather, as she suggests, a theoretical standpoint that does the work of centralizing a marginal figure inevitably encourages a reading against dominant perceptions.

Theoretically, I recognize Butler’s argument of vulnerability as an opportunity to rethink politics of victimhood, recognizing the body’s ability to exist within an already warped system. She argues, for instance, that as a precariat, one is already exposed to neoliberal systems that violate one’s right to live a comfortable, violence-free life. She, however, adds that the layer of symbolic systems that guide and discipline identity add to layers of violence, and that before one can resist these, one has to be vulnerable to their existence. In many ways, Butler rethinks vulnerability not necessarily as a weakness, or a position of permanent victimization, but also through the lens of effort and solidarity, as a place of resistance. It is not a place of passivity, but a place from which resistance can be launched. It is a refusal to remain continuously vulnerable to harm. In addition, it is useful to think of vulnerability not as something to overcome, but as a space for mobilizing (political) action. For the embodied subject, this action can come in the form of exercising speech, but also having knowledge (knowing/seeing as a form of resistance); it can come through mere refusals to remain in positions of continuous victimhood and helplessness. It is a refusal to succumb to the horrors of trauma suffered.

Butler's position as recounted above, however, is optimistic. In cases where social, economic, and political conditions make it impossible to resist, such a position makes it cruel to hope for change. It is important to recognize this moment as embedded in the idea of agency. In *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Lauren Berlant eloquently reminds us that it is important to configure our optimism for change and a better future through imagination and fantasy, something that can help to recalibrate our hopes and desires. For Berlant (122), while it is possible to tell narratives of violence as something that happens to "us," "stories we tell about how subjectivity takes shape must also represent our involvement with the pain and error, the bad memory and mental lag, that also shape our desire's perverse, twisted [...] indirect routes to pleasure and survival." She suggests taking note of the dreams, the concerns, the pain, the pleasure, and other ordinary attachments that make it possible to navigate the present.

I hope to tease out some of the thoughts outlined above through a reading of *Eyo* and *On Black Sisters' Street* in order to engage with the complexities of African women who travel to Europe with and through their bodies. These are women who, willingly or unwillingly, become trapped in the horrors of human trafficking. *Eyo*, for instance, is sent to the UK to serve as a nanny by her father with the aid of his friend. Unfortunately, the violent context in which she exists comes undone, and she ends up becoming a sex slave. Throughout her travels, *Eyo* is never in control of her body. As a child, she remains vulnerable to all forms of violence because of this lack of autonomy. A man called Dele, who promises them a life of plenty, lures the women in Unigwe's novel, *Sisi, Ama, Efe, and Joyce*, to Europe. While three of them (except *Joyce*) go to Europe willingly, they are hopeful for a dream that will take them away from the squalor and indignity of their respective present existence. In each case, the violence of poverty and sexual attacks, as well as the sheer dominance of patriarchal power, define the past contexts from which they come. Traveling to Europe, rather than alleviate the violence, brings it into sharp focus. From the isolated existence that these foreign bodies are thrown into, to physical harm, to the quiet threat of *Madam, Dele, and Segun* who want their cut in the trafficking trade, these women seem to be unable to imagine alternative presents and possibilities for other lives. Indeed, when *Dele* orders the murder of *Sisi*, it is to make his mark as the puppet master and to remind those who work for him to never cross him. In this extreme context, what does survival and resilience look like?

### **Escaping precarious pasts**

Literature on violence against women and children suggests that it occurs principally because of the subordinated positions of the victims (Watts and Zimmerman 1232). Violence renders bodies vulnerable and open to abuse. The sheer ability to survive and continue to live, in full recognition of what the trauma means on one's body, is extremely important. Feminist scholarship encourages a culture of nam-

ing and exploring the pain and violence as a form of public therapy. The work of black feminists such as bell hooks (*Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984) and *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, (1994)); Patricia Hill Collins (*Black Feminist Thought* (1990)); and Pumla Gqola (*Rape: A South African Nightmare* (2015) and *Reflecting Rogue: Inside the Mind of a Feminist* (2017)), to name a few, give us vocabulary for thinking about alternative epistemologies which encourages new formulations for thinking about knowledge. Using Black feminist phenomenology, I engage with the context in which violence shapes the lives of the characters in the novels that I review.

Though told in the third person, *Eyo* centers around a ten-year-old girl, whose multiple experiences of violence form the core of the novel's narrative. It is clear from the onset that the writer needs to latch the reader onto excessive emotion of pain and violence and to evoke these as the framework for reading the novel. The exercise of writing *Eyo*, for Sanusi, is seemingly an exercise of exploring deep feelings about an issue of great concern to her. One senses the urgency and emotional investment with which Sanusi as a writer embeds the novel. The writing and the novel become a "corporeal activity," to follow Elspeth Probyn's (76) argument, in which the author emphasizes questions of ethical responsibility in readers who engage with the text. This is reiterated in Sanusi's (n. p.) opening excerpt at the beginning of the novel, aptly titled, "A word from the author," in which she declares that *Eyo* is her way of drawing attention "to the twin issues of child trafficking and sex slavery in the United Kingdom." In the same excerpt, she pleads with the reader to "do something. Keep an eye out" for the "thousands of Eyos in Europe" (n. p). This is a book unapologetically laden with emotion. Wanting to go beyond a mere recounting of statistical fact, the author chooses narrative, through which she explores and exploits the emotional milieu, in order to obtain the most possible reaction from her readers.

To draw the reader in, Sanusi begins by mapping out the violent context of *Eyo*'s background. This importantly provokes the shape that Europe takes later on in the novel. Rather than presenting it as a clear-cut safe haven away from the violence, the author builds up a narrative that prepares the reader for the harrowing reality that *Eyo* finds herself in when she travels from Africa to the UK. Right from the beginning, *Eyo* is presented as a young girl child in perpetual risk of male-inflicted violence. Her body is always already open to forms of violence, through physical touch, lewd looks, and verbal abuses. However, because of her precarious existence in a poverty-stricken location in Nigeria, it is difficult to isolate male violence as the only form of violence that happens to her. Her mother and other women also exist within what both poverty and patriarchal power can do to a woman's body and, in essence, their own participation in *Eyo*'s violence and violations cannot be taken lightly or dismissed.

The hyper-patriarchal setup of *Eyo*'s violent background is a way for the reader to consume her story. The reader first encounters the protagonist in the context of

child labor, for instance. Not only is she out of school, she is selling ice water placed on a tray on her head on a hot dusty day in the middle of a busy city center. She is also caring for her eight-year-old brother, Lanre. The contrast between the two children is sharp, and even though they are two years apart in age, Eyo has the responsibilities of an adult. Lanre is the absentminded little boy who, despite helping his sister to sell ice water, is constantly thinking of ways to escape from her, in search of a good game to play. He is airy and childlike whereas, we are told, she is reed thin but strong with the “tenacity of a warrior queen from days past” (3). Already, from the beginning, Eyo is presented as a once-child, a warrior, strong, beyond her body.

The novel significantly signals the co-existence of violence and tenacity as a way of embracing the desire for survival in Eyo. It also introduces us to Eyo’s versions of justice and hope in a terrain that is so deeply embedded in violence it is impossible to apply rational thinking to it. Her first violent encounter in the novel is with a man who wants to steal the money she has made selling ice. While Lanre’s instinct is to run (typical behavior for a child who is scared), Eyo’s reaction is surprising: “You will kill me first!” (5), she says to the man, pushing him. For her, “the thought of going home empty handed and facing her father gave her the strength of Samson” (5). Immediately after, she screams, and a crowd quickly forms, subjecting the man to a horrible form of mob justice. As the man is being burnt to death, Eyo continues selling her ice water, untouched by the screams coming from the man. This is a form of justice for her. Here, it is evident that Eyo is so familiar with violence (even death) that she can push it aside and continue with her chores. This could be a moment in which the novelist demonstrates an over-exposure to trauma, but it could also suggest a way in which Eyo has learned to navigate life’s precariousness, taking justice in whichever form it comes. I also want to suggest that this is a moment in which Eyo turns into herself for strength. It is her way of looking at life more broadly and of refusing to accept the finality of violence, in many ways feeding into a broader discourse of refusal in which “rational” thinking is circumvented and denied finality (Magano; Mupotsa, “Being/Becoming an Undutiful Daughter: Thinking as a Practice of Freedom”).

Whether speaking on the subject of the undutiful daughter or the queer body in African literature, the work of Mupotsa and Thato Magano suggest a politics of refusal of what circulates as complete and rational in African literature and cultures. It is to be willful, as Sara Ahmed argues in *Willful Subjects* (2014). Eyo refuses to deal with the obvious trauma of a man being killed in front of her. In fact, we are made aware that she does not process the trauma at all. While trauma studies suggest that problematic social behavior can be traced back to moments of trauma, in this case we see Eyo navigating the traumatic space by refusing to engage with it, thereby allowing herself to continue to exist in her own world. She refuses to take on the excess violence of the moment. Importantly, the author does not return to this moment as

having any discernible effect on Eyo. Nevertheless, I also want to maintain that this violent moment presents as a part of the context of violence in which the protagonist must exist and that she has merely developed tools for surviving it.

This opening moment is crucial in thinking about how Eyo controls her vulnerability, namely, in ways that enable her survival. When she gets home, the first person she encounters is the landlord, lying down on a bench outside, looking at her and her brother, "through hooded eyes" (Sanusi 9). The novel suggests that the landlord is potentially hazardous to the children. Eyo has learned to avoid the landlord. We also learn that at one moment when she is alone in the house, the landlord sees it as an opportunity to attack her. However, a neighbor sees him and raises alarm. In many ways, the protagonist is able to navigate the violence around her through her own tactics of survival, but also through the help of female neighbors who are aware of her vulnerable body. Indeed, the men in the novel constantly prey on her. In one scene, for instance, we learn that her father routinely rapes her. She has learned to avoid him by sometimes pretending to be asleep. Her father, figuring out the tactic, threatens to rape her little sister instead. This prompts Eyo to 'agree' to being raped. She finds that she has to negotiate her vulnerability, and she sometimes tries to control it.

Unigwe's characters in *On Black Sisters' Street* are older and their vulnerability presents differently to Eyo's. All the women in the novel, except Joyce, travel to Europe willingly. The women all go through a man called Dede, who is in charge of trafficking women, hoping for a better life, to Europe. Unigwe deals with commonly circulated themes of the Nigerian novel: poverty, collapsed state, aspirations, and the desire for a better life. Her novel is about selling dreams and fantasies. However, unlike Berlant's idea of fantasy as something owned and personalized, the fantasy that the character Dele sells in the novel is one generated by a greedy system that has little to no care for the lives of those involved (Berlant 1). This is perhaps why Sisi feels like a prisoner in Europe and takes to creating her own fantasies of what an alternative life looks like for her. It is why Joyce, Efe, and Ama choose to pointedly detach their lives in Europe from their lives in Nigeria. Dede's fantasy is an elusive promise, a "cruel optimism" to quote Berlant, as it presents something that is unachievable yet presents as a possible promise. In Europe, the women realize that they are being held captive by a trade that prevents them from feeling human, making the fantasy of the good life seem feeble and unrealistic.

Sisi is a university graduate with a business degree whose dreams of becoming rich and helping her parents out of poverty are thwarted by political corruption in Nigeria. According to her, Nigeria is not a place from which to dream. She has the responsibility of looking after her parents, who make it clear that she is their last hope to live a decent life. Her lover, Peter, a clerk in a government office, is burdened with taking care of all his siblings, as well as his parents. The weight of it all is too



much for Sisi and, as she puts it, "Peter's life was a cul-de-sac" (Sanusi 27). Leaving Lagos is, for her, a form of escape from being stuck. When Sisi meets a young woman at a salon, she is excited to find out that she can leave for Europe and earn a living there. Dele, the man in charge of the young woman, immediately offers Sisi an opportunity. Though suspicious, she sees this as her only opportunity out of feeling stuck in Lagos. Europe becomes her future.

Like Sisi, Efe sees Europe as a haven for multiple freedoms. Having fallen pregnant at the age of sixteen, Efe imagines Europe as offering her a second chance at life. Efe's mother dies and her father spirals into alcoholism, leaving her to act as parent to her siblings. She soon develops a relationship with a rich older man, Titus, to help supplement the little money she gets from her father. She falls pregnant and Titus abandons her and the child. Efe drops out of school to tend to her family and to take care of her son, all the while being shunned by her neighbors. She meets Dele when he offers her a cleaning job at his firm. Not long after, he asks her to travel to Belgium, "Next door to London" (Unigwe 81), and she agrees. As Monzini has shown, women who sometimes find themselves in conditions of slavery are lured into it because of extreme poverty. Once again, Nigeria is painted as a hopeless place, where only people with money have control. Belgium is where she would earn "easy money" (84).

While Sisi's and Efe's contexts offer an opportunity to think about questions of poverty, dignity, and a refusal to settle for a life of hopelessness, Ama and Joyce have much more violent pasts. Ama is a rape survivor, having been raped by her father from the ages of eight to thirteen. Her father is a respected pastor whose rigid religious routines stand in contrast with his violent behavior towards a little child. He only stops the rape when she begins having her period, in a way erasing the possibility of detecting his violence. As a child, Ama wills her mother to see her pain and confusion, but her mother refuses. Much like Eyo's mother, there is a possibility that her mother is aware of the abuse but chooses not to confront her husband for fear of losing her livelihood. Unigwe presents this scenario as both violent and ordinary. Ama's life is tainted because of something that should not have happened. Yet, her mother's reaction is a reminder of how much this remains a part of everyday reality. Indeed, she blames her daughter for stirring trouble and is quick to help find an alternative home for her in the city. Ama's life is in essence one that she wishes she could escape. She desires a new future, and given her background, Europe presents an opportunity.

Joyce, like Ama, is also a victim of atrocious violence. At the age of fifteen, Joyce and her family are caught in a civil war in which *Janjaweed* militia murders them in front of her. She is gang raped and left unconscious. However, she makes her way to a refugee camp where she meets and falls in love with a Nigerian soldier, Polycarp. Being Sudanese, Joyce is aware of her foreignness, but hangs on to the love she has

for Polycarp as a way of healing herself from her past. Polycarp's family is, however, extremely xenophobic and unwelcoming. As a solution, Polycarp introduces Joyce to Dele, promising her a new start in Europe as a well-paid nanny. Joyce leaves for Belgium and feels completely betrayed by Polycarp when she finds out what she is meant to actually do in Belgium. Later in the novel, she reflects on this betrayal as possibly the worst in her life. Considering everything else she has been through, this sense of betrayal seems acute.

Poverty and violence, therefore, form the basis from which all five women find themselves in Europe. The women travel because of the hopelessness of their current contexts. Without a doubt, all five women hope for a better life. However, none of them are in control of their own bodies, exposing them to all forms of injustice.

### **Europe: a fragile, claustrophobic reality**

Europe presents as a claustrophobic reality through the eyes of the characters in the two novels under review. The claustrophobic sensation is born out of how these women experience Europe from small rooms, airports, and embassies. Eyo's airport experience on her way to England is one of curious wonder laced with fear. Despite the violence of her context, her home is familiar to her, while Europe presents as an unknown future. Her attitude towards Europe is therefore tentative. On the one hand, she is distressed by the fact that her parents have forced her to leave home, but on the other, she feels that Europe will give her what she has never had—a good education, money, and a good life. In other words, she feels as though she will be a child again and that she will have a chance to grow up in a relatively stable environment in Europe. This space of hope is important, especially because her reality is anything but hopeful. The protagonist learns quickly that her life in England will be a continuation of the life she led in Nigeria. Sam, the man who picks her up from the airport, places a knowing hand on Eyo's thigh even before she arrives in her new home, giving her a clear sense that he sees her as a sex object. Beyond sexual violence, she encounters the wrath of Lola, Sam's wife, who puts her to work the minute she arrives in her house. Soon, Eyo is routinely beaten for unintentional errors and misunderstandings and, at times, locked up in small rooms as punishment for "disobedience."

Eyo sees Europe as an illusion through the lives of Sam and Lola's children. Tolu is her agemate while Joshua is Lanre's agemate. She sees what her life could be. However, the adults are blind to the same. Sam sees a potential sex slave, while Lola sees her as a source of cheap labor. In order to maximize Eyo's value, both Sam and Lola begin to outsource her services. Lola starts running a day care center from her home, urging her friends to bring their children so that Eyo can look after them for a fee. Naturally, she does not receive any payments. Sam rapes the girl multiple times, subsequently pimping her to his friends in return for some money. In this way, Eyo

gets pregnant and miscarries. At that moment, we learn that Lola knew what was going on and said nothing. Her rage is directed at Eyo, whose physical body suffers from beatings from both Sam and Lola. During the day, the girl continues to work as a nanny and housemaid. This theme of the vulnerable, unprotected child shapes the novel. In the second part of the book titled, "African Lolita," sensing that their nosy neighbor might draw attention to the sex slave in their home, Sam 'donates' Eyo to the Big Madame, a human smuggler who makes money pimping the bodies of women from Africa. Because of Eyo's age, Big Madame does not feel compelled to care for her in any way beyond making sure she is fed and clothed for her customers.

I want to argue that Eyo's treatment, while harsh, is not out of script with the manner in which trafficked bodies are already pre-conceived. Paola Monzini engages extensively with the formula used by traffickers to create human slaves. Because the human body inherently rejects the possibility of being forced into action, it has to be broken. In the case of Sanusi's protagonist, this is done through physical and emotional abuse. While the adults recognize the fragility of Eyo's body, they see it as a possibility to break her into conformity.

For the women in Unigwe's novel, the reality is equally disappointing. Sisi, for instance, panicking about paying Dele back, forces herself to deal with the pain of having sex with strangers. Indeed, her first client rapes her, a harrowing experience. Sisi resolves to never allow herself to feel the pain again and prepares herself mentally to withstand the experiences.

### **The reassurance of narrativity: unpacking subjectivity?**

In her analysis of *On Black Sisters' Street*, Daria Tunca (n. p.) categorizes the narrative's characters as both subjected to their condition, but also agentic. She discusses the task of balancing the narrative between the two positions and comments on how the author, using narrative fragmentation, achieves a nuanced engagement with human trafficking. Narrative, as Tunca (n. p.) argues, enables exploration of humanity and its many complexities. It is from this location that one can rethink vulnerability as a trope in the two novels. Feminist theorists identify vulnerability as a feminized concept associated with weakness and dependency (Gilson 71). Vulnerability can, however, be used to "think about alternative ways of theorizing the harms of rape" (Gilson 71). As Gilson shows, to recognize vulnerability necessitates more responsibility and responsiveness towards those who are harmed. It also exposes systems of dominance, such as those pointed out by Butler and Hagelin. Moreover, I like the idea of shared vulnerabilities that Gilson gestures towards, in which she argues that this becomes a basis for ethical responsiveness but also a reckoning of one's own vulnerabilities. According to her, human beings seek justice because we are affected and made to feel sorrow, concern, and empathy (Gilson72). Social justice is born out of that moment. The vulnerable subject is not merely a tool for research, but a call to action.

Here, I cite the work of feminists who argue for a re-theorization of violence of vulnerable bodies outside of a discourse of the familiar. In her book on rape, Gqola speaks about the location of rape in discourse in which focus on the victim has rendered the act of rape meaningless. She examines the ways rape exists within “cycles of complicity,” which make it difficult to hold perpetrators accountable for their actions (Gqola, *Rape* 7). Through direct engagement with rape as it circulates in public, feminists can begin the work of dismantling power structures that sustain the act. In a similar vein, I find the work of Hartman useful in this regard. Hartman argues that the focus on the violence of slavery as spectacular is not helpful. I find, in both works, a need to name and engage with the violence, not as spectacular but as part of the systemic violence that shapes it. I suggest in this paper that exploring incidences of narrative rupture occurs when we catch glimpses of characters’ thoughts, fantasies, wishes, feelings, and other affects.

Eyo’s encounters with violence can be defamiliarized if the focus of analysis is placed on her as a subject rather than a victim. Her responses to violence are useful ways of working through this. It is important for the reader to recognize moments of pain rather than merely the action itself. The novelist, for instance, invites the reader to envision the moment of pain of a miscarriage after one of Eyo’s encounters with Sam’s friend. The doctor who attends to her makes explicit the horror of the situation, but she remains quiet and trapped in her broken body. Such moments offer space for reflection on what such violent acts mean and help to name what the violent act is in its brutality. When Ama is raped by her father, her innocence as a child is juxtaposed against the violence enacted on her. The reader is presented with the violent moment through Ama’s responses to the pain. She takes to speaking to an imaginary friend and to finding a way to protect herself from the horrors of the experience. Merely eight years old, she does not fully comprehend what has happened to her. She, however, is clear on the rules. She does not tell. However, through narrative, we are privy to this moment of intense pain, and her response to that pain allows us insight into the impossibility of that moment. Here, we are placed in close quarters with the perpetrator of the violence and are able to engage with what that violence means to the child. In Joyce’s case, her response to her family being murdered is to lash out. However, this is short-lived as the men jeeringly rape her as a way of showing her her place. She turns into herself at that moment, refusing to engage with those around her, learning new ways of being human in these extreme conditions. Polycarp becomes one avenue through which she rediscovers herself; an avenue that she discovers is unstable. Pain becomes an avenue through which the characters can re-think their existence. Indeed, it is from a place of pain that Sisi develops an ability to dream. In Belgium, for instance, she goes on long walks, pretending to be a rich tourist from elsewhere and imagining a life that continues to elude her. These trips reassure her of her humanity and give her a chance

to recoup her lost dignity. When she discovers that Segun, the house handyman, had overheard her pretend to be a tourist on one occasion, she is so embarrassed that she cannot speak of the incident with the other women. These dreams of hers are also a source of hope for a better life.

Within the context I have painted above, what does it take to refuse to remain scared? In her chapter, "Unmaking vulnerability," Sarah Hagelin remarks that patriarchal culture teaches women and children's bodies to remain scared in order to avoid injury. Interestingly, the human body suffers pain, regardless of what body it is: male or female. What is it that gives men the courage to experience pain but not women? To be vulnerable means to remain compliant to a system that purports to protect. However, what if that system is the one that causes the pain in the first place? Hagelin considers what happens when pain does not rob a woman of her subjectivity. If vulnerability is "a system of beliefs, images and narratives that imply a capacity to be harmed" (Hagelin 3), how can we think around it to find and understand ways in which the female body continues to survive? For her, to live (continue to breathe) becomes an act of refusal.

The authors' ability to evoke feelings of helplessness, disgust, confusion, terror, horror, and pain is precisely the key to understanding the forms of social action they intend to provoke. In a section on women and dignity, Chielozona Eze argues that the characters in Unigwe's novel make political and moral demands on readers. For Eze, it is important to pay attention to the manner in which the characters attempt to recoup their dignity. Through Sisi, this is achieved through the way in which the narrative centers around her pain, while at the same time, weaving in her hopes and dreams. For Eze (97), Sisi embodies a "yearning for a world in which people treat one another in dignity."

In *Eyo*, moments of reprieve are extremely rare. However, the final chapters of the novel are worth pondering. After the protagonist returns home from Europe, she realizes her father no longer lives at home. It dawns on her that her mother has finally taken action after her father started the rape ritual on Eyo's little sister, Sade. This is a tense moment for Eyo. With utter shock and horror, she asks her mother, "[W]hy didn't you say something when you knew he was doing it to me?" (Sanusi 333). The sense of betrayal is evident in her voice, but she is also grateful that her father is no longer a part of her new reality. Sanusi uses such moments of helplessness to heighten awareness of the child's female body in a world of violent men. However, the helplessness is often followed by action.

Other glimpses of hope exist in *Eyo*. A character called Bola, a woman whose husband in Nigeria convinces her to leave her children to travel to Europe to become a sex worker so they can earn money to feed the family, takes pity on Eyo and strives to make the latter's existence marginally better. While Bola is 'saved' from a harsh life by Big Madame who helps her travel to Europe, she sees the injustice that Eyo

and Nkem, two young girls, endure in the Big Madame's brothel. She tries to fight it, attempting to reason with the Madame about the unethical situation. She takes Eyo under her wing and teaches her to read. She teaches her to smile again and to imagine a different life. Indeed, leaving the house after marrying a white man (one of her customers), she returns for Eyo to save her from that life, only to find out that Big Madame has given the girl away for free to a street pimp named Johnny. Apart from Bola, Father Stephen, a catholic priest who works with street-based sex workers, notices Eyo and tries to save her. At 14, Eyo does not trust strangers. Besides, Johnny watches her like a hawk and does not allow her to chat with anyone. Eventually, she manages to escape and run to the church for refuge.

The narratives, though offering glimpses of hope, also show the hopelessness of the lives of sex slaves in Europe. Eyo returns home only for her family to send her back to Europe because of poverty. Sisi is murdered when she tries to escape to lead an easier life. Efe, Ama, and Joyce remain under Dele's employ until their bills are paid. The three women find ways of living their dreams later, but these lives are marked with deep pain and violence.

## Conclusion

I explore the idea of vulnerability not merely as a way of engaging with victimhood, but as a narrative device through which subjectivity and agency can be understood. This agency is tentative and ambiguous as it exists within continued subjection. Reading this agency through the migratory body, I signal the inability of these bodies to settle, at home or in Europe. They are in constant motion, as a way of navigating the violence. Movement to and from Europe shows a search for stability that is never there. We see this starkly in the concluding chapters of the two novels. Eyo returns home, only to realize she no longer has space there, and makes the decision to return to Europe, willingly this time, as a sex slave. Sisi is murdered because of her refusal to continue working as a sex slave. Her search for stability leads to her murder. We are told that the other women, Ama, Joyce, and Efe, eventually return to Nigeria, but remain caught up in the industry in many ways. Even Ama, who opens up restaurants and schools for girls, is still marred by her past. To represent the trafficked body means to contend with the constant process of being a migrant, of never quite belonging. It is to be content with finding agency in unfamiliar places and catching glimpses of hope.

Looking at the lives of five female characters, I consider the meaning of present-day slavery and the ways in which this is navigated by those who seem to have no hope. Narrative, I argue, provides a space for reflection through which memory of the violence that shapes the past is allowed into the present. These memories shape resilience and allow for the characters to live through the indignities of their respective trafficked contexts. I use a predominantly black feminist epistemology to consider

the intersections of poverty, gender, and sexuality and how these inform an understanding of women's pain. The authors, Unigwe and Sanusi, use narrative to provoke moral and political action. While Sanusi's work is overtly ethically driven, Unigwe asks for a more nuanced understanding of the conditions in which the women exist. Such a nuanced reading, she seems to suggest, offers an opportunity for deep reflection on the complexity of human lives in conditions of precarious existence.

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# Setting readers at sea: Fatou Diome's *Ventre de l'Atlantique*

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## Setting readers at sea: Fatou Diome's *Ventre de l'Atlantique*

Fatou Diome's first novel, *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* (2003), can be read as a work of migrant literature in which the Atlantic figures as a separating expanse beholden to a single past, that of the Atlantic Slave Trade. The ocean divides contemporary African migrants to Europe from the continent, as it did enslaved Africans taken forcibly to the Americas; it consumes a returned impoverished migrant, as it swallowed those who did not survive the Middle Passage. Yet for the authorial protagonist, Salie, and her island home, the Senegalese fishing village of Niodior, the Atlantic evokes multiple histories and experiences. This ocean is a place of freedom, as well as its absence; of daily sustenance, as well as migration; of life, as well as death; of postcolonial violence, as well as the violence of the Trade. The novel's Atlantic, like the text as a whole, alludes to many pasts and, at times, abandons the dualities of place, race, and gender that organize most contemporary discourse about migration and oppression. Passages of opaque desire and oblique critique diverge from a dichotomous geography of continents and subject positions. Where Salie and Niodior emerge uncontained by categories inherited from colonial discourses, there are intimations of what genuinely postcolonial freedom might be. **Keywords:** diaspora, Senegalese literature, Fatou Diome, Atlantic, postcoloniality, freedom.

In Fatou Diome's first novel, *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* (The Belly of the Atlantic), the authorial protagonist recounts her childhood in the Senegalese island village of Niodior. Salie, herself a writer, narrates from the vantage point of her early twenty-first century Strasbourg present, the same historical location in which the novel, published in 2003, was written. Both narrative and novel are thus produced within an Afro-European diaspora, and migration to Europe, experienced and desired, is one of its central subjects.

Salie's emigration is motivated by a desire for freedom, she tells us, and the story she writes is one that is saturated with freedom's opposite: the racist oppression of African people, past and present, and the prejudices of her insular patriarchal home community. Niodior's inhabitants are trapped within an oppressive patriarchal social structure, as well as within neocolonial economic dynamics that impoverish the island

and compel villagers to leave—or dream of leaving—for a life of success and plenty in Europe. The young sons of Niodior, notable among them, Salie's football fanatic younger brother, long to leave (at least one, we learn, did leave) for a life of professional football in France. Salie's own departure is primarily propelled by the pain of having been a relatively powerless outsider because of her sex and the circumstances of her birth: her father was not from Niodior and she was born out of wedlock.

Through an episodic narrative of her early life, we learn how Salie came to choose "exile"—that is, her adult life as a domestic worker and struggling writer in France. Yet stories of Salie's early life—she is raised by her devoted grandmother and taught to love the written word by the village's sole school teacher, a Monsieur Ndétare still beloved to Salie—compose a relatively small portion of the novel. They are far outweighed by scenes of her diasporic present, an account of her recent visit home and, most voluminously, by a collection of intersecting biographical stories, both mythical and historical, each centred on a different Niodior resident.

From these, readers learn how village life, which the narrator characterizes as "traditional" and "African," discards, into the Atlantic, those who do not obey its social strictures, and often imprisons even those who do. Long ago in Niodior, two young lovers, lacking social sanction to marry, drowned themselves in the sea. Villagers say that the two transformed into dolphins and, today still, they care for the village's unwanted infants who, cast into the sea to die, themselves transform into young dolphins. Well within living memory, Moussa, a young man recruited to play football in France, returns home penniless and ashamed. Ostracized as a failure and then baselessly suspected of a homosexual relationship with Ndétare, the village's resident "stranger," he commits suicide by drowning. Ndétare's single love affair, with a young woman ordered by her father to marry a powerful older man, produces an (illegitimate) child whom her father kills and throws in the sea. Ndétare helps the woman make an escape by sea; she is never seen again.

The Atlantic receives the human evidence of unacceptable desire. It also, sometimes, makes possible the liberation of those whose desires, like those of Salie herself, the village either condemns or cannot contain. Salie portrays her exilic condition, that of a writer who is fully at home nowhere but in her writing, as a variety of maritime suicide—"j'ai pris ma barque et fait de mes valises des écrins d'ombre. L'exile, c'est mon suicide géographique" (I took my boat and turned by suitcases into shadow boxes. Exile is my geographical suicide) (262) – albeit one motivated by her desire to write and to be free.<sup>1</sup> Salie's Atlantic, the location of several kinds of death, is also a place of life. On the novel's final page, she compares herself to algae drifting in the Atlantic. A writer at home and free nowhere but on the page, she is always at sea:

*Aucun filet ne saura empêcher les algues de l'Atlantique de voguer et de tirer leur saveur des eaux qu'elles traversent [...] Partir, vivre libre et mourir, comme une algue de l'Atlantique.*

No fishing net can prevent the seaweed of the Atlantic from drifting, nor from absorbing the flavors of the waters it passes through [...] To leave, to live in freedom, and to die, like seaweed in the Atlantic. (296)

The Atlantic of Diomé's novel is not only a figurative location within Salie's account of her exilic itinerary and it is not solely the chasm into which Niodior discards the lovers (and infants) it condemns. This Atlantic also sometimes figures as a separating expanse beholden to a single past: the ocean divides contemporary African migrants to Europe from the continent, as it did enslaved Africans taken forcibly to the Americas. Diomé's novel has been chiefly read as a work of migrant literature (Adesanmi; Dobie and Saunders; Diouf; Nganang) and this reading is supported by the novel's engagement with the Middle Passage past. Postcolonial African migration is equated with the Atlantic Slave Trade and passages explicitly identify contemporary European sex tourism in Africa and the present-day European "trade" in African football players with the historical Trade.<sup>2</sup> In this identification, categories of continent, race, and gender are self-evident and transcend historical change.

Other parts of the novel, often didactic passages that explain African or female experience, produce similarly essentialist understandings of place and selfhood. One such passage, lodged within Salie's account of a recent visit home, illustrates the limitations produced by this sometime-employment of binary conceptions of continent, gender, and race. Fleeing the suffocating suspicions and judgements of Niodior in search of a few days of holiday, Salie goes to the nearby seaside town of Mbour. Out on an evening walk, she comes upon the drumming and singing that announce a traditional wrestling match and, within the novel, occasion Salie's explanation of what it means to be an African woman:

*Aucune fille d'Afrique, même après de longues années d'absence, ne peut rester froide au son du tam-tam. Il s'infiltré en vous, tel du beurre de karité dans un bol de riz chaud, et vous fait vibrer de l'intérieur. La danse devient alors un réflexe: elle ne s'apprend pas, car elle est sensation [...] La tête vrillée par ce son ancestrale, les pieds enfoncés dans le sable froid des soirs côtiers, on ne saurait mieux s'imbiber de la sève de l'Afrique. C'est comme une communion venue du plus profond des âges [...] aucun savoir-faire technique ou chimique ne saura jamais extirper de notre âme la veine rythmique qui bondit dès la première résonance du djembe. Raison et sensibilité ne s'excluent point. Malgré les coups assenés par l'Histoire, ce rythme demeure, et avec lui notre africanité, n'en déplaie aux prêcheurs de tout bord. Ah! comme il était bon d'être là! Je suis heureuse, heureuse, heureuse! répétais-je.*

No daughter of Africa, even after long years of absence, can remain unmoved by the sound of the tam-tam. It seeps into you like shea butter in a bowl of hot rice and makes you vibrate from the inside. Dance thus becomes a reflex; it cannot be learned, because it is sensation [...] Head twisting from this ancestral sound, feet sunk into the

cool sand of coastal evenings, there is no better way to imbibe Africa's sap. It is like a communion originating in the most distant of ages [...] no technological or chemical know-how could ever excise the vein of rhythm from our soul, a vein which pulses at the djembe's first note. Reason and emotion (*sensibilité*) are not mutually exclusive. Despite the assaults of History, rhythm remains, and with it our *africanité*, whatever preachers from all corners might think. Oh! How good it is to be here! I am happy, happy, happy, I repeated. (Diome 225)

Readers—"you"—are invited to identify with this "daughter of Africa." We learn that to be a female child of the continent is inextricably, even essentially, connected to drumming, dancing, and a specific—necessarily raced and gendered—experience of embodiment. Dancing is akin to a bodily reflex; not only can it not be learned, it is sensation itself. A daughter of Africa is she who, permeated by its sound, dances to the beating of tam-tams; the continent's life force is found in the drum beat that vibrates within her dancing body. African rhythm and movement compose an ancient communion that transcends historical change and refutes whatever objections might be brought to the notion of *africanité*, an African essence.

Our narrator poses an oblique challenge to Léopold Sédar Senghor's infamous statement regarding the continental distribution of rationality and soul—"L'émotion est nègre, comme la raison est hellène" (Emotion is *nègre*, as reason is Hellenic) (Senghor 295)—only to abandon that challenge. Found in Senghor's first theoretical articulation of Negritude, the 1939 essay "*Ce que l'homme noir apporte*", the sentence has become a shorthand that, in the eyes of Negritude's critics, encapsulates the essentialism, even racism, of the movement and its most famous 'father.'<sup>3</sup> Readers might expect our narrator to pursue the implications of her pointed allusion. Yet she does not, as if the 'African' content of dancing and drumming cannot be handled except through a lexicon of authenticity. The sentences which follow, like many articulations of Senghorian Negritude itself, seem concerned only with a particularly African spiritual and cultural essence.

Despite the exuberant lexicon and the implied invitation to readers to share in an experience of passionate embodiment, the account lacks the specificity and immediacy found in passages of the novel that are not 'about' either Africa or gender. Compressed into two rhetorical poles—of womanhood and Africa—Salie's bodily experience is conveyed in a well-worn vocabulary of gendered African authenticity. While the description seems intended to transport the reader, just as Salie herself has ostensibly been transported, it does not transmit the intensity and complexity of a particular interior experience.

Where, however, the novel diverges from a dichotomous geography of continents, ideas, and subject positions, experiences of desire and freedom emerge, uncontained by binary categories of race, place, and gender inherited from colonial discourses.

In the opacity of these passages, in which little is explained, the Trade is nowhere referenced and “Africa” is not defined. There is an oblique critique of the long afterlife of colonialism and intimations of how desire, uncorralled by the ostensible poles of gender, race, and continent, might feel.

Readers enter *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique* through a televised soccer game. The novel begins in excited staccato tones that alternately suggest an enraptured television sports commentator and an engrossed spectator:

*Plus vite! Mais le vent a tourné: maintenant, le ballon vise l’entrejambe de Toledo, le goal italien.  
Oh! mon Dieu, faites quelque chose!*

Faster! But the wind has changed direction: now the ball is heading between the legs of the Italian keeper, Toledo. Oh, my God, do something! (11)

It is only in reading the subsequent paragraph that readers can surmise that these two seemingly distinct narrative voices, one energetically descriptive, one energetically supplicant, belong to a single narrator, an ‘I’ not yet named, raced, gendered, or otherwise socially located, watching a television screen:

*Devant ma télévision, je saute du canapé et allonge un violent coup de pied. Aie, la table! Je voulais courir avec la balle, aider Maldini à la récupérer, l’escorter, lui permettre de traverser la moitié du terrain afin d’aller la loger au fond des buts adverses. Mais mon coup de pied n’a servi qu’ à renverser mon thé refroidi sur la moquette. A cet instant précis, j’imagine les Italiens tendus, aussi raides que les fossiles humains de Pompéi. Je ne sais pas pourquoi on serre les fesses quand le ballon s’approche des buts.*

In front of my television, I leap from the sofa and perform a violent kick. Ow, the table! I wanted to run with the ball, to help Maldini get it, to allow him to cross half the field with it, in order to sink it into the opponent’s goal. But my kick served only spill my cold tea on the carpet. At the precise instant, I imagine the tensed Italians, rigid as the human fossils of Pompei. I don’t know why one tightens one’s buttocks when the ball approaches the goal. (11–2)

The television provokes not only our narrator’s emotional engagement, but her corporeal engagement as well. She is a spectator, but one whose body nonetheless joins with the action of the soccer match, entering into the televised mediation of a geographically remote event—only to encounter her own table in her misplaced effort to assist this mysterious Maldini. We know nothing of this over-enthused spectator (we do not yet know that ‘she’ is ‘she’); we cannot guess at the source of her passion for the game and for, it seems, Maldini. It does seem clear, however, that we are witnessing a scene of fanatical football spectatorship. Yet the paragraph’s final sentence upends even this tenuous understanding. It has the straightforward and unpolished quality of a child’s uncertainty, at odds with the voice of an apparently

adult narrator. Who is this adult who wonders, in the midst of the game, about the basics of physical response? Why, suddenly, an inquiry about “tightening buttocks?”

The desire to prevent or facilitate the scoring of goals and an identification with the player prompts a bodily response in our spectator. The desire to assist that player leads to the unanticipated connection of her foot with her table. Yet the reference to buttocks tightening in anticipation evokes sexual desire and thus foregrounds still unanswerable questions about the narrator’s gender and the character of the narrator’s bodily involvement and passion. Readerly curiosity heightens: what is ‘really’ going on here?

While readers know this narrator’s immediate preoccupation (the football game), we know little else and must, for a little while, content ourselves with this information. The passage thus grants the as-yet-unknown narrator an opacity that readings often deny to African literary characters. Édouard Glissant (in *Poetics of Relation*) famously theorized a “right to opacity.” Tobias Warner has written about the opacity that dominant feminist readings of Mariama Bâ’s *Une si longue lettre* (1979) (*So Long a Letter*) refuse Ramatoulaye, the novel’s narrator and fictive author, arguing that this opacity-denying interpretation is part of the condition under which Bâ’s (African) novel has been included in the canon of World Literature (Warner). Reading of this contemporary novel, authored by Bâ’s compatriot, centres contemporary migration and, sometimes with it, the history of the Middle Passage, which Diome’s novel, particularly its Atlantic, also evokes. These readings attend to some of the many apparently transparent passages, in which the narrator announces, names, and explains; the novel’s particularly opaque, albeit brief, inception has received little, if any, critical attention.

Just as readerly speculation begins to surface, the narrator addresses us directly:

*Pourquoi je vous raconte tout ça? J’adore le foot? Pas tant que ça. Alors je suis amoureuse de Maldini? Mais non! Je ne suis pas folle à ce point quand-même.*

Why am I telling you all this? I adore soccer? Not all that much. Then, am I in love with Maldini? No! I’m not crazy to that extent. (Diome 12)

We learn of an ostensibly transparent gender identity (woman) and learn of one reason (sexual desire) that does not account for her passionate engagement with televised soccer. With the feminine gendering of “in love” (*amoureuse*), we learn that the spectator is a woman. She summons the predictable spectre of heterosexual desire, only to discount the absurdity of such desire to explain her avid relationship with Maldini—or, equally accurately, to explain the passion of her relationship with the television that transmits his game into her living room.

A sentence finally moors the scene and the reader to a date and a particular moment in football history: “*Le 29 juin 2000, je regarde la Coupe d’Europe de football. L’Italie*

*affronte les Pays-Bas en demi-finale. Mes yeux fixent la television, mon coeur contemple d'autres horizons*" (June 29<sup>th</sup> 2000, I am watching the European Cup. Italy faces the Netherlands in the semi-finals. My eyes fix upon the television, my heart contemplates other horizons) (13). We are offered some pieces of anchoring context; yet, once again, we are set at sea. The final sentence reminds us that more fundamental information remains elusive: we still do not understand the character of the desire which has infused this scene. If the desire is not erotic, nor propelled by a passion for the game itself, what sort of desire is it? If its object is not Maldini, or the beautiful game itself, then what could it be? Where, on which horizons, has this heart set its gaze?

The subsequent sentences offer an elliptical response. As the eyes watch a televised European match, the heart travels to the island of Niodior:

*Là-bas, depuis des siècles, des hommes sont pendus à un bout de terre, l'île de Niodior. Accrochés à la gencive de l'Atlantique, tels des résidus de repas, ils attendent, resignés, que la prochaine vague les emporte ou leur laisse la vie sauve.*

Over there, for centuries, men hang suspended from a bit of land, the island of Niodior. Stuck like the remains of a meal to the Atlantic's gums, they wait, resigned, for the next wave to take them or to leave them with their lives. (13)

Thus, the reader is introduced to Salie's home village, the place where, it soon becomes clear, a young man has also been watching the game. By this account, it is a place barely located in the world, belonging perhaps more to the sea than to the land, its inhabitants likened to the detritus of a meal, awaiting their fate; sooner or later, they will be swallowed by a ravenous Atlantic. The narrator quickly returns us to the present of her living room and television screen before departing once again for an imagined Niodior:

*La bruit de la télévision me sort de ma rêverie. Chaque fois que les reporters crient le nom de Maldini, un visage se dessine sur l'écran. A quelques milles kilomètres de mon salon, à l'autre bout de la Terre, au Sénégal, là-bas, sur cette île à peine assez grande pour héberger un stade, j'imagine un jeune homme rivé devant une télévision de fortune pour suivre le même match que moi ... Battements de coeur, souffles, gestes de joie ou de désarroi, tous nos signes émotionnels sont synchronisés la durée d'un match, car nous courons derrière le même homme: Paulo Maldini.*

The television noise pulls me out of my daydream. Each time that reporters shout Maldini's name, a face appears on the screen. Several thousand kilometres from my living room, on the other side of the Earth, over there, in Senegal, on that island barely large enough to hold a stadium, I imagine a young man riveted before a makeshift television, following the same match as I am [...] Thudding heart, breaths, gestures of joy or distress, for the duration of a match, all our emotional expressions are synchronized because we are chasing after the same man: Paulo Maldini. (15)

The television collapses not only the distance between narrator and soccer game; it also mediates the vaster distance between Salie, in her Strasbourg living room, and the young man on the island not large enough to host a stadium. It is no longer a matter of an ambiguous collapsing or merging of two bodies, that of our narrator and Maldini. There is a third, albeit imagined, person in what is now, it seems, a triangulation. Is this the lover? Perhaps the true object of the intense physical engagement so evident in the novel's second passage?

Ambiguity of desire and relationship, if not of the gender of the two bodies in question, is again before the reader. The novel's opening sequence, in which our protagonist—not yet named, raced, gendered, or located in place and time—watches Maldini play televised soccer, forces readers to experience an opacity that is often denied to African characters and literature. One effect is that we are confronted with the possibility that binary categories of woman/man, black/white, Africa/Europe inherited from colonial discourses, which inform much of the novel, as they do the world outside of it, do not fully explain the complexity of our world, neither our experiences of embodiment, gender, and desire nor colonial and ongoing violence.

*L'un d'eux reste muet, concentré sur les images. Le buste projeté vers l'écran, son regard se faufile entre les têtes. Les mâchoires serrées, seuls les quelques mouvements désordonnés qui lui échappent disent la passion qui l'habite. Au premier tackle de Maldini, spontanément, son pied soulève l'arrière-train du garçon accroupi devant lui. La victime se retourne, furieuse, mais, voyant le visage absorbé de l'auteur du coup, n'escompte aucune excuse et se réinstalle un peu plus loin.*

One of them remains silent, intent upon the television images. Torso jutting towards the screen, gaze weaves between the heads. Jaw clenched, only a few random movements escape his control and express the passion that inhabits him. At Maldini's first tackle, his foot spontaneously lifts the backside of the boy crouched in front of him. The victim turns around, furious, but seeing the absorbed expression on the face of the responsible party, expected no apology, and reestablished himself a little further away. (16–7)

Like our first spectator, watching alone in her living room, the young man's engagement is total. Television connects the two, as does the particular intensity of their spectatorship. Until a power outage prematurely concludes the televised game in Niodior, they watch the same game, at the same time, with identical, intensely embodied, attention. Like the woman before a French TV screen, the young man unconsciously attempts to physically participate in the game he is viewing. Unlike the foot of the first spectator, however, his foot encounters the body of his understanding neighbor, not an inanimate table.

These paired scenes of television spectatorship provide information; they allow



readers to understand how the protagonist is linked to her place of origin, and they permit the novel to introduce and develop the sibling relationship that will remain central to the narrative. They also serve to define and distinguish two locations and experiences. Niodior is densely social and materially impoverished, while Strasbourg is relatively socially isolated and materially comfortable. For our spectator in Niodior, the televised game links him to his favourite player, whose name he has borne for years, and to his own dream of moving to Europe to play professionally. The television in the Strasbourg flat occupies a different function for its resident. Her love for Niodior and for the young soccer fanatic, her brother, passes by way of a game played in Spain and its star Italian defender.

However, these descriptions perform an additional function. They open a space of opacity and ambiguity that exists alongside the narrator's explanatory accounts of her circumstances and history. Transmitting an event taking place in a third location, the television occasions an intense embodied identificatory desire (never further explained or defined) that traverses the distance between two locations. Viewership thus triangulates and complicates what would otherwise be a linear trajectory between social and geographical poles.

A recalled Senegalese television broadcast and Salie's commentary upon its reception in Niodior similarly provide an occasion for readerly questioning and critique:

*L'avion présidentiel a décollé de l'aéroport international de Dakar, ce matin à 8 heures. En effet, le Père-de-la-nation, accompagné de notre aimable ministre de l'Équipement, inaugure aujourd'hui à Tambacounda, une pompe d'eau offerte par nos amis les Japonais. En fin de journée, Son Excellence, monsieur le Premier ministre, s'est rendu au port autonome de Dakar pour réceptionner un cargo de riz offerte par la France, afin de secourir les populations de l'intérieur du pays touchées par la sécheresse. La France, un grand pays ami de longue date, fait savoir, par la voix de son ministre des Affaires étrangères qu'elle s'apprête à reconsidérer prochainement la dette du Sénégal [...]*

The president's airplane landed at Dakar's international airport this morning at eight o'clock. Today in Tambacounda, the Father-of-the-Nation, accompanied by our beloved Minister of Infrastructure, inaugurated a water pump, a gift from our friends, the Japanese. At the day's conclusion, His Excellence, the Prime Minister, was found at Dakar's autonomous port in order to receive a shipment of rice from France intended to rescue inland communities affected by the drought. France, an old friend, made it known, through her Minister of Foreign Affairs, that she is preparing to reexamine Senegal's debt [...] (56–7)

The ironies do not require elaboration to be palpable to the reader. In this news broadcast from the 1970s, from Salie's childhood, the former colonial power and current lender is cast as an "old friend," steadfast in its generosity. Rice, indigenous to West

Africa and cultivated in Senegal, nonetheless arrives from abroad. The national news is more preoccupied with the apparent altruism of other nations, “the Japanese,” in addition to *La France*, than with the resources and perspectives of Senegalese people.

The chasm between the news and its Niodior listeners is clear from what we learn of the broadcast’s local reception. A Sereer audience, which does not include French speakers, watches the evening news on the state-run station, on Niodior’s sole television, the recent acquisition of the villager who becomes relatively rich after years working in Paris. The wealth and mobility of the president and the *Premier ministre*, the language of the broadcast and the broadcaster’s location in Dakar all contribute to the vast distance between the world of the viewers and that of the broadcast’s content. Indeed, Niodior’s television broadcast interpreter, one of the village’s few French speakers at the time, does not manage to provoke much response from the local audience, so distant is it from their experience. Salie makes this clear, with wry concision: “*Ici, on n’a pas besoin d’une pompe à eau, même japonaise*” (Here we have no need for a water pump, even a Japanese one) (58).

What follows is a vision of independence and freedom unlike any other in the novel. Niodior, initially introduced as a bit of land, “*un bout de terre*,” on which its passive inhabitants are glued, just as bits of food adhere to one’s gums after eating, is almost immediately presented for a second time. It is a place of lack, an island barely large enough to host a soccer stadium. Yet here, in an entirely unexpected turn of tone and narrative trajectory, Niodior is presented again. On this occasion, the island appears independent and self-sufficient, a *de facto* republic of its own and a place of abundance:

*Nichée au coeur de l’océan Atlantique, L’île de Niodior dispose d’une nappe phreatique qui semble inépuisable; un petit nombre de puits alimente tout le village. Il suffit de creuser quatre à cinq mètres pour voir jaillir une eau de source, fraîche et limpide, filtrée par le grain fin du sable. Nul n’attend non plus quelques kilos de riz français; cultivateurs, éleveurs et pêcheurs, ces insulaires sont autosuffisants et ne demandent rien à personne. Ils auraient pu, s’ils avaient voulu, ériger leur mini-république au sein de la République sénégalaise, et le gouvernement ne se serait rendu compte de rien [...] Le président Père-de-la-nation n’a qu’a offrir sa paternité à qui la lui demande, ici personne n’attend rien de sa tutelle.*

Nestled into the heart of the Atlantic Ocean, the Island of Niodior possesses a seemingly limitless supply of underground water: a small number of wells nourish the whole village. One need only dig down four to five meters in order for water to flow, crystalline and fresh, filtered by the fine-grained sand. Nor is anyone waiting for a few kilos of French rice; farmers, pastoralists, and fishermen, these islanders are self-sufficient and ask nothing from no one. They could have, had they wanted, founded their mini-republic in the heart of the Republic of Senegal, and the government would have noticed nothing [...] The president, Father-of-the-Nation, need offer his paternity

only to those who request it; here no one expects anything from his care. (58–9)

Here the Atlantic does not appear as a cavernous being, possessed only of mouth and stomach. “Belly” or “abdomen,” a “*ventre*” can contain not only a stomach, but also a womb, and it is the latter which this passage suggests. *Niché(e)*, “nestled,” is also the adjective that describes the pre-natal Salie curled in her mother’s “belly” — “*un mystère niché dans son ventre*” (a mystery nestled in her belly) (82). Nested into a heart-nook of the Atlantic, Niodior is akin to a foetus within a mother’s body, an apt metaphor for a village of fishermen who depend upon the ocean for their sustenance. Here Niodior, rather than a location of lack and imprisonment, is cast as a place of abundance. The Atlantic, rather than a ravenous pit into which the dead are discarded, appears as the source of life.

Moreover, Niodior, unlike the nation that Senghor has ‘fathered,’ could possess genuine independence. The most famous ‘father’ of Negritude was also the first president of Senegal. He remains unnamed, but his identity is clear, and his State is the object of a forceful, if slightly oblique, critique. Senghor’s Senegal is neo-colonial. It is neither truly independent nor free, and his paternal “care” is neither wanted nor needed in Niodior. On the island, the essential pre-conditions for postcolonial freedom are present, and Senghor’s Senegal may as well be another country. The village possesses not only adequate but plentiful food and fresh water, and villagers are confidently self-sufficient. French rice is unnecessary and water abundant. It is not the imagined drought-stricken Sahelian country where, according to the ‘First World,’ desperate populations rely on the generous aid of their Northern brethren. Niodior is not only a place of abundance and self-sufficiency, nourished by the sea, it also exists as a state of political independence and democracy, albeit in the conditional past tense.

Here are the few, perhaps only, instances of the word “republic” in the novel, and the only occasion that the narrator raises, as if in passing, the idea that economic independence is an essential pre-condition for substantive sovereignty and freedom. The passage thus powerfully evokes the material conditions that genuinely *postcolonial* political freedom would require and, in the energetic ease of its prose and in the abundance that it summons, creates a visceral, if brief, experience of liberation. In its precise and attentive description of past and possible plentitude, it opens, for this reader at least, a small space of freedom.

For Patrice Nganang, Diomé’s novel is joined to a history of forced migration and freedom’s opposite. He views *Ventre de l’Atlantique* as part of an African literature of emigration that continues a literary tradition inaugurated by the earliest Anglophone slave narrative.<sup>4</sup> However, in Nganang’s *Manifeste d’une nouvelle littérature africaine* (2007) (Manifesto for a New African Literature), the novel also figures as literary heir to a very different text, Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (1939) (Notebook

of a Return to the Native Land). Césaire's surrealist *Cahier* ends with an unrealized return to origins that is seemingly impossible. The poem concludes inconclusively, at sea, and with a word for movement so non-linear and indeterminate that it prompts Césaire's own neologism—"reversion."

*Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* offers us a marine territory of longing and imagination that is integral to the experience of migration and that is also (if only briefly and at intervals) uncorralled by oppositions that do not do justice to the complexity of the narrator's own diasporic experience.

A critical engagement with freedom, as well as intense evocations of it, is found where we might least expect it—in passages which neither thematize oppression nor articulate historical experience through the binary terms often employed to challenge it. At times, Diome's novel does what Césaire's surrealist poem does: it invites us to think of ourselves outside of the words and possibilities inherited from colonial discourses. Where the novel leaves its readers at sea, in the Atlantic, it asks us to imagine what genuinely *postcolonial* freedom might be.

If, alongside the Atlantic of the Trade and postcolonial Afro-European migration, we foreground the Atlantic of Salie's island village and her particular "exile," we encounter an ocean that swallows those whose desires and social experiences that neither colonial nor postcolonial orders have publicly tolerated. We also find an Atlantic that has nourished living desire, feeding a could-have-been island republic and giving our writer-narrator an exilic freedom. In this Atlantic, we glimpse, almost touch, subjectivities and political possibilities ungoverned by the categories that European colonialism created.

## Notes

1. All translations into English are my own.
2. Salie says, for example:

*Pour mesdames les touristes venues réveiller leurs corps en carence d'hormones, pas d'inquiétude : en échange de quelques billets, d'une chaîne ou d'une montre même pas en or, un étalon posera ses plaques de chocolat sur leurs seins flasques.*

As for Mesdames Touristes come to reawaken their bodies in a cascade of hormones, not to worry; in exchange for a few bills, a necklace or a watch, not even of gold, a stallion will place his chocolate slabs on their slack breasts. (Diome 231)

White women tourists come to Senegal for cheap exotic encounters with young African men who they approach as virile stallions, possessed not of discreet human parts but of chocolate slabs. In Salie's configuring of the encounter, both parties are objectified but only one, the white woman with her flaccid breasts, is endowed with human traits. Racist dehumanization evokes the Trade, as does the exchange of mere trinkets for access to African bodies. In the present, so the passage implies, the historical Trade finds an equivalent in a different kind of buying of black people. The trade in football players is a theme through much of the novel, one which perhaps culminates in the sarcastic announcement found in its final pages. Salie declares 2002 to be "*l'année internationale de la lutte contre la colonisation sportive et la traite des footeux!*" (the international year of struggle against the colonisation of athletics and the trade in footballers!) (281–2).

3. Souleymane Bachir Diagne describes this much-cited sentence as Senghor's immature formulation of Negritude and argues that it does not represent Senghor's Negritude thought, particularly in its more developed forms.
4. Readings of the novel sometimes echo this identification. For example, Nganang places Diome's novel within a long African literary tradition of emigration that begins with Olaudah Equiano's memoir, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789), a text of forced Middle Passage migration: "*Le ventre de l'Atlantique de Fatou Diome ne continue donc que le tangage du bateau que cette narration fondatrice signifie*" (Fatou Diome's *Belly of the Atlantic* thus simply continues the pitching and heaving of the boat [the slave ship] which this foundational narrative constitutes) (Nganang 234–5).

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# African “ghosts” and the myth of “Italianness”: the presence of migrant writers in Italian literature

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## **African “ghosts” and the myth of “Italianness”: the presence of migrant writers in Italian literature**

In this article, I analyze the cultural meaning of the emergence of an African migrant literature in Italy at the beginning of the 1990s and its presence today. I put this emergence in dialogue with the construction of Italian identity as white. Through a brief historical account of how this social construction came into being, I verify how African migrant literature contests this (de)racialized myth of “Italianness.” Using Gordon’s concept of “haunting,” I argue that African literature within Italian literature can be read as a manifestation of ghosts: the appearance of a presence that has always been there but was repressed by hegemonic discourses. African literature not only works against subalternity, but also reveals whiteness as imagined and acknowledges a colonial past that has been deleted from the public remembrance. Despite such work, African migrant authors today are still writing against the paradigm of the “arrival,” asking: who is Italian? Who can represent Italian citizens? **Keywords:** Italian migrant writers, Italian identity, black Italians, African migration to Italy.

## **Introduction**

Given its geographical position at the center of the Mediterranean Sea, Italy is an unavoidable crossroads of peoples and cultures. Over the centuries, this locatedness has brought different influences to the peninsula. However, despite the creolizations of cultures and people, visible in every aspect of Italian life—from food to language, architecture to religious practices, and beliefs—official public discourse in Italy relies on the culturally constructed myth of a homogenous identity, recognized as white, heterosexual, and Catholic. After a long tradition of being a country of emigration, Italy became a destination for immigrants at the beginning of the 1990s. The unprecedented numbers of new immigrants from Africa and South America have forced Italian society to reconsider its own identity. On the one hand, migrants became increasingly visible over the years, especially within national cultural production, evidenced in the country’s flourishing literary production. On the other hand, Italian society at large responded to such visibility by reaffirming a closed and narrow

idea of an *italianità* (Italianness) based on whiteness and Catholicism.

Public debates have repeatedly reiterated the otherness of the black body even when that body is born and raised in Italy—notable examples include Mario Balotelli, a black Italian soccer star born in Palermo, who plays for the national team. In recent times, the definition of Italian citizenship has also attracted public attention. In a context of rising nationalism, a 2013 amendment—the “Dispositions on the Conferral of Citizenship” bill—proposed by the Italian political left was unsuccessful. This would have extended citizenship rights to the children of migrants born in Italy, whereas the current *jus sanguis* framework does not. Accordingly, citizenship can be only obtained if one is descendent of an Italian citizen who is born in Italy. Migrants and their descendants are subject to a law resembling “*homo sacer*,” described by Agamben (12) as:

An obscure figure of archaic Roman law, in which human life is included in the juridical order [ordinamento] solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed), has thus offered the key by which not only the sacred tests of sovereignty but also the very codes of political power will unveil their mysteries.

*Homo sacer* is therefore someone whose physical body is within the borders of society but whose juridical body is outside human and divine laws. In the case of migrants, they are subject to Italian laws without being fully recognized as part of society. In the case of undocumented immigrants, this condition is exacerbated by the fact that they do not have the rights to be within the borders of the country because their entry into the country was criminalized in 2009, under the Bossi-Fini Law. Undocumented immigrants are an extreme case which prompts physical removal from society and confinement to Temporary Detention Centers (CTP)—previously called Identification and Expulsion Centers (CIE)—before deportation. Whether documented or undocumented, the migrant condition continuously pushes against both the geographical and identitarian borders of a country attempting to expel the Other.

The ‘scandal’ of a black Italian is therefore the failure to conceive of an Italian person who might have a different racial identity and/or religious belief—the Other. Since the 1990s Italians have been increasingly confronted with the “evaporated” or lost possibilities of creating a racially inclusive *italianità*. While waves of migration move this Other towards the center of the Italian public imaginary, the Other also moves the society towards the border, bringing to light the inherent contradictions of a normalized white Italian identity. However, as Bouchard (45) states, “mainstream Italy remains trapped in discourses and practices of exclusions that reveal the resilience of nationalist and imperial agendas and the strength and power of the legal and political institutions over human life.” This tension can be seen in literary studies where works by black Italians are variously labeled migrant, postcolonial, second generation, italophone, transcultural, multicultural, creole, or Afro-Italian

literature (Mengozi). This paper explores how the myth of Italianness as whiteness is disrupted by the literary and cultural production of black subjects in Italy.

### ***Italianità: whiteness and the myth of Italianness***

After many centuries of being the exotic Other within Europe, Italy embarked on the project of constituting itself as a white European country, like France and Germany, upon becoming a unified country in 1861. In order to achieve this aspiration, it moved its political and cultural center to the North, erasing the South and the Mediterranean as part of its national identity. Such erasure was made possible because of the power of the Northern monarchy of the Savoy, based in Piedmont. As leader of the Unification, the Savoy annexed the independent Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, which occupied the southern regions of the peninsula from South Latium to Sicily. In the pursuit of a free-trade economy and to raise revenues to offset the hefty cost incurred during unification, the House of Savoy developed a colonial relationship with the newly-annexed territories through taxation, economic protectionism, and a compulsory military conscription that lasted five years (Finley, *et al*; Duggan; Riall). The process of unification was a process of internal colonization which gave rise to the development of racial discourses aimed at representing the Southern population of Italy as inferior (Cazzato).

Colonial practices ushered in by the modernizing liberal Savoyards went in tandem with a hegemonic national discourse that represented the South as an exotic and bizarre land, very often compared to Africa and Turkey and, more generally, described in a manner that reproduced the rhetoric of the European colonization of Africa, Asia, and the Americas. The South was a colony to be tamed and civilized, a place of barbarism, irrationality, and backwardness as opposed to the civilized and progressive North. At the end of the nineteenth century, intellectuals such as Cesare Lombroso and Alfredo Niceforo further reified Southern difference through resilient discourse of racial inferiority. Established within the framework of biology, phrenology, anthropology, and criminology, this discourse would turn Southern difference into an unredeemable ontology, an 'essence' impermeable to historical change. Lombroso, the founder of criminal anthropology, elaborated a theory according to which the Southerners were ethnically inferior, providing 'scientific proof' with the skull measurements of Southern 'brigands.' In his most famous work, *Luomo delinquente* (1896), Lombroso expressed his conviction that the delinquent is genetically atavistic and primitive and, therefore, inherently inclined to criminal behavior. In this way, he derived analogies between what he referred to as delinquents, savages, and prehistoric races, identifying African and Eastern elements that made Southern Italians more prone to commit crimes. Ultimately, Lombroso divided the Italian population into two races, Northern and Southern, while Niceforo elaborated the racial theory of the two civilizations—as a superior



Northern Italian one and an inferior Southern Italian one. The anthropologist makes a distinction between the two geographical areas of the peninsula with the intent of demonstrating the inferiority of the southern and island populations. Referring to the Italian South, he writes: "*Qui l'Italia moderna ha un'alta missione da compiere e una grande colonia da civilizzare*" (Here modern Italy has a high mission to fulfil and a great colony to civilize) (Niceforo 6; translation mine).

According to Pugliese (3), "The deployment of the loaded signifier 'Africa,' as the lens through which the South was rendered intelligible for Northerners, marks how the question of Italy was, from the very moment of unification, already racialized by a geopolitical fault line that split the peninsula and its islands along a black/white axis." In this way, Italy created an internal Other. Southern populations were depicted as darker than Northern populations, which represented the normatively white Italian citizen. Italy became 'white' and, hence, European. At the end of the nineteenth century, the country's colonial enterprise outside its national borders reinforced this racial discourse by shifting the Other from the Southern Mediterranean subject (within the national border) to the African 'native' (outside the border). As Giuliani (2) puts it, "the assignment of a precise color (from a darker nuance than white to black) to the internal/colonial Other implicitly produces the racial identity of the Self." This construction of the Self as white therefore depended on the 'negative' contrast with the non-white.

Fascism, which pursued a strong nationalistic project, moved blackness outside Italy's national borders. Even if the South of Italy still remained inferior, fascist propaganda operated in the direction of 'whitening' the South in order to create a sense of *italianità* defined in relation to the Other—now the colonial body—who was darker, less civilized, and ultimately inferior. It is important to recognize that racial discourses created during the colonial period and strengthened by fascism are still present and accepted in today's public discourse. Romeo (221) describes this 'whitening' as "racial evaporation"—"the presence of something that has momentarily become invisible but has not disappeared." What has been erased is a multiracial presence, an integral part of Italian identity since the birth of the new state. This "evaporation" enabled the construction of a white space that resembled and, therefore, could compete with northern Europe.

Whiteness has therefore become a normalized identity in Italy. Everything that is not white is viewed as different, as possessing the mark of differentiation. Whiteness is seen as non-ethnic. It is what O'Leary (100) defines as "banal whiteness"—"rendered as the unmarked racial identity and reproduced in mundane ways rather than in explicitly racist discourse." When an entire society views itself as white, it activates a white supremacist logic that validates its superiority over others and demands the expulsion of everything that threatens its own white image.

## Migrant and Afro-Italian literature

The birth of Italian migrant literature is often related to an episode which occurred in the summer of 1989—the gang murder of a black South African migrant, Jerry Essan Masslo, who was a worker in the tomato fields in Villa Literno, in the Campania region (Parati, “Italophone voices”). This event shocked Italy into acknowledging the presence of migrants on its soil and the exploitation linked to them. This era correlates with the immigrants in the 1990s—and media images of undocumented migrants often crossing the Mediterranean Sea under very dangerous conditions.

While originally largely autobiographical, texts written by migrants or by descendants of migrants have come to be a force in the Italian literary tradition, challenging the definition of this national canon. Interestingly, most first-wave migrant authors in the 1990s came from non-Italian speaker contexts (mainly from the Francophone and Lusophone countries), making Italian an intermediate language which was not necessarily loaded with colonial references. Pap Kouma’s *Io, venditore di elefanti. Una vita per forza fra Dakar, Parigi e Milano* (1990) (*I was an Elephant Salesman: Adventures between Dakar, Paris and Milan*), co-written with Oreste Pivetta, and *La promessa di Hamadi* (1991) (*Hamadi’s Promise*) by Saidou Moussa Ba and Alessandro Micheletti are examples of this collaborative initial phase between a migrant author and an Italian author. These collaborative efforts illustrate the sense of urgency to tell the migrant story even when the Italian language was still not completely ‘mastered.’ However, the autobiographical nature of these narratives and the collaboration with an Italian author meant that critics underestimated their literary value. As Di Maio (129) argues, “Reading these texts as mere ‘documents’ rather than as ‘monuments’ hides an otherwise clear attempt of marginalization.” Indeed, considering these texts as purely documentary (or of ethnographic value) and denying their place in the realm of literature can be seen as a strategy of marginalization.

The so-called first generation of migrant authors focused on representing and speaking for themselves—albeit through the pen of an Italian co-writer. The work of Senegalese author, Pap Kouma, makes this intervention. *Io, venditore di elefanti*, written with Oreste Pivetta Kouma, became a best seller (Di Maio 125), allowing Kouma to carve out a career as an author. The book, which has become one of the reference points for Italian migrant literature, is a personal account of his first years in Italy as an undocumented migrant, selling crafts to Italians in the streets of cities during winter or on the beaches during summer. It opens:

*Vengo dal Senegal. Ho fatto il venditore e vi racconterò che cosa mi è successo. È un mestiere difficile, per gente che ha costanza e una gran forza d’animo, perché bisogna usare le gambe e insistere, insistere anche se tutte le porte ti vengono sbattute in faccia.* (Kouma, *Io, venditore di elefanti* 11)

I come from Senegal. I used to be a salesman. Let me tell you everything I’ve been

through. It's a hard job, selling, only for the toughest souls in this world. You can't be the type to give up easily. You have to use your legs and be insistent—even if they slam every door in your face. (Khouma, *I was an Elephant Salesman* 11)]

There is an urgency to narrate that emerges clearly from the plain but firm affirmation; "Let me tell you everything I've been through," followed by the listing of facts: "I come from Senegal," "I used to be a salesman," etc. Before any intellectualization on the condition of being an 'illegal' immigrant in Italy, Khouma needs to narrate what happened, the facts, the actions, what it is to be an African immigrant in Italy. I read this as the necessity to be seen, the necessity of the marginal Other to move towards the center of Italian society and have the possibility of speaking from there.

This movement to the center can be related to the "evaporated" presence that whiteness denies, a kind of ghost that is made invisible but whose presence can be felt. It is what Gordon (xvi) describes as "haunting:" "Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present and the future. These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view." What I am arguing here is that the writing of Khouma during the 1990s operated as the "social ghosts" referred to by Gordon. It is the surfacing of something "repressed or blocked from view," but that has always been there.

Similarly, in *La promessa di Hamadi*, the author presents the need to narrate the plight of Senegalese brothers immigrating to Italy. Published in 1991, it centers the stories of two brothers, both undocumented migrants, who emerge as 'ghosts' within Italian society. Hamadi emigrates to Italy and Semba decides to follow him after dreaming that he is in danger. The story is narrated by Hamadi, but it is about Semba's quest to find his brother, which becomes a quest for his own identity.

The novel's introductory passage is an invitation and a poetic invocation to be listened to. The words are directed to Maali, a woman who Semba has asked to predict his future before leaving Senegal. However, in a performative way, it is directed to the Italian reader:

*Ascoltami, Maali, ascolta la mia voce.  
Parla di noi a Mamadu, il più vecchio dei griots,  
l'ultimo custode della memoria dei nostri popoli.*

[...]

*Anche la storia di mio fratello Semba  
vorrei che non andasse perdura,  
la storia del suo lungo viaggio per ritrovarmi,  
la storia del nostro ultimo incontro.*

*Vorrei essere un griot per conservarla,  
raccontarla, salvarla dall'oblio.  
Ascoltami, Maali, ascolta la mia voce. (Micheletti 3)*

Listen to me, Maali, listen to my voice.  
Speak of us to Mamadu, the eldest of the *griots*,  
the last custodian of the memory of our people.

[...]

And I would also like the story  
of my brother Semba not to be lost,  
the story of his long voyage to find me,  
the story of our last encounter.  
I would like to be a *griot* to preserve it,  
retell it, save it from oblivion.

Listen to me, Maali, listen to my voice. (Parati, *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back  
in a Destination Culture* 79)

Privileging the oral/aural, the writer insists that this is not just a story, but it is a story that needs to be listened to. By introducing the presence of the *griot*, the writer also brings Senegalese oral tradition and collective identity into Italian literature. Returning to Gordon's notion of the "social ghost," we can say that this voice is a manifestation of repressed blackness in the Italian space.

Parati (*Migration Italy* 50) defines the emergence of migrant literature as a social and political act of "recolouring" the culture by talking back: "To recolour the Italian national identity in this context means to respond, by talking back, to an ideologically motivated attempt to homogenize Italian identity and defend it from the 'Other.'" Similarly, Di Maio (127) writes:

Claiming for themselves the right to speak with their own voices, to tell their stories from their own standpoints, and to write the history to which they have been contributing participants, these writers re-manipulate and revolt against the narratives created on and about them. With the force of their own creative imaginations, they portray their own experiences as African migrants to Italy, thereby appropriating the reins of the nation's discourse on immigration. From narrative objects, they have made themselves narrative subjects.

For migrant writers to speak for themselves and to tell their own stories is not only an act of talking back or opposing mainstream discourse, but also represents 'ghosts' reappearing within Italian society. These narratives evoke repressed colonial pasts

and an Italian identity deeply entangled with both Africa and an internal racialized Other. Migrants who relate a racialized experience of Italy are not only representing themselves and their presence today, but also Italian memories and histories that have been intentionally forgotten and repressed.

Even if the first migrant writers were not necessarily from former Italian colonies, the experience and the past they were exposing on the Italian stage were a hint that Italy, too, not unrelated to a colonial past. This process of colonial remembrance becomes more evident in the works of the following generation of writers. A so-called second generation of African authors that emerged in the new millennium have moved away from the autobiographical form and no longer write with a collaborator. Written in Italian, these narratives imagine black characters who speak Italian and live in Italy or between Italy and other African countries. This growing literary universe includes authors such as Igiaba Scego (*Rhoda* (2004), *Oltre Babilonia* (2008), *La mia casa è dove sono* (2010), *Adua* (2015)); Cristina Uba Ali Farah (*Madre piccola* (2007) and *Il comandante del fiume* (2014)); Gabriella Ghermandi (*Regina di fiori e di perle* (2007)); and Amara Lakhous (*Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio* (2006), *Divorzio all'islamica a viale Marconi* (2010), *Un pirata piccolo piccolo* (2011), *Contesa per un maialino italianissimo a San Salvario* (2013), and *La zingarata della verginella di Via Ormea*). Despite the growth of black Italian literature, for many Italians who view themselves as white, such black authors cannot be Italian. This refusal or failure to expand *italianità* to include black voices reveals the fear of “‘what if’ scenarios: namely, what happens to Europe if these people stay?” (El-Tayeb xii). By focusing on the moment of the arrival of migrants, normative discourses obscure the realization that migrants have been in Italy for generations and that the country has already changed. According to Lombardi-Diop (170), “for second-generation writers, who are now mastering the language, the issue is today more subtle and yet daunting: how to make their presence visible not only within Italian society, but also within the text, in order to escape the accusation of mimicry of Italianness.” In representing the daily lives and stories of black Italians, second generation migrant writers implicitly ask: who is Italian? Who is entitled to represent Italian citizens? The ‘invisible’ Other is now becoming visible and the repressed identities are making their appearance on the surface of the Italian one, to such an extent that black Italians can claim a place within the national canon of Italian literature. The initial marginality of the first-generation documented or undocumented migrant located at the border has evolved into a movement towards the center of the Italian literary canon by second-generation authors.

### **Afro-Italianness in popular culture**

Black Italians have not only gained prominence and visibility in literature, but also in popular culture. For instance, in 2016, Ghali released his first single, *Ninna Nanna*,

through Spotify and immediately became a huge success, establishing a new record of streaming in Italy. In 2017, he published his first album, *Album*. Despite the playful tone, many of his songs contain serious references to being Italian but perceived as a foreigner. In *Cara Italia* (Dear Italy), released as a single at the beginning of 2018, he sings:

*C'è chi ha la mente chiusa ed è rimasto indietro  
Come al Medioevo  
Il giornale ne abusa, parla dello straniero come fosse un alieno  
Senza passaporto, in cerca di denaro*

[...]

*Oh eh oh, quando mi dicono: "Vai a casa!"  
Oh eh oh, rispondo: "Sono già qua"  
Oh eh oh, io t.v.b. cara Italia  
Oh eh oh, sei la mia dolce metà.*

Someone has a closed mind and has remained behind  
As in the Middle Ages  
The newspaper abuses it, it talks about the foreigner as an alien  
Without a passport, looking for money

[...]

*Oh eh oh, when they tell me: "Go home!"  
Oh eh oh, I answer: "I'm already here"  
Oh eh oh, I love you dear Italy  
Oh eh oh, you're my sweetheart. (Ghali)*

The focus shifts from the urgency of being heard to being recognized as Italian without negating difference. The Italian hip-hop artist Tommy Kuti deals with similar topics. In the 2018 song *Afroitaliano* (Afro-Italian), he demands to be recognized as both Italian and African without having to choose between the two and without establishing a hierarchy.

In the realm of cinema, Fred Kuwornu's work reflects on the representation of black people on Italian movie screens. His 2016 documentary, *Blaxploitalian. One hundred years of Afro-stories in Italian cinema*, analyzes the presence of black people on the Italian screen since the silent era. Kuwornu's documentary exposes the racial politics of blackness in Italian cinema. Indeed, on the official website the director states: "Modern-day Italy is racially diverse, yet, if you find it difficult to find noteworthy Black characters in American cinema [...] it is ten times worse in Italy and throughout

Europe" (Kuwornu). The documentary shows that black Italian actors are consistently offered stereotypical roles (i.e. the immigrant, the prostitute, the drug dealer). Despite being born and/or raised in Italy and speaking with an Italian regional accent, they are asked to imitate foreign accents and play non-Italian characters. Kuwornu does not represent black people as marginalized or seeking recognition, rather his work centers blackness and acknowledges black experiences as integral to Italian identity. Second generation migrant writers often craft their work in similar ways, creating black Italian characters who are fully immersed within popular culture. This normalization of blackness contests dominant racialized imaginaries and subverts the idea of *italianità* as white and European.

Kuwornu's forthcoming project is called "*Blaq Italiano*" (Black Italian), a title that plays with the pronunciation of the English word "black." A series of three-minute videoclips from this project has already been shared through Facebook. Each video contains an interview with a black Italian, either living in Italy or abroad. Interviewees present themselves and some aspects of their lives. The aim is to resemanticize black Italians within the Italian framework and to move away from the association between blackness and undocumented immigrant as threatening to society or in need of rescue. It is worth noting that popular culture is therefore moving along the same lines as second-generation literature in the representation of black Italians with, however, a much stronger impact on the everyday man.

### Conclusion

As Lombardi-Diop and Romeo (428) affirm, "The social diversity that new migrants and second generations contribute to creating translates into a cultural production that simultaneously constitutes part of Italian culture and challenges traditional understanding of it, fostering a notion of national identity and culture rooted in transnationalism and dis-homogeneity." Italian society is haunted precisely because it is still failing to reach an understanding of itself as a transnational and dis-homogenous society. While repeated images of black immigrants on the sea reinforce the connection between blackness and foreignness, literary and cultural production by black Italians offers a different image, the one linked to the colonial past and the multiple identities that has always characterized Italians but has been repressed since the unification of the country. What has been haunting Italian identity since the foundation of the state in 1861 is now embodied by the black Italian, a real presence that is increasingly difficult to ignore in both literary and popular culture.

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# (Im)mobilities and migration in the work of César Mba Abogo and Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo

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## (Im)mobilities and migration in the work of César Mba Abogo and Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo

Many literary texts written by authors of African origin in the Spanish language engage with the experience of migration and of living in a European society that marginalizes and homogenizes migrants as the 'African Other.' Rather than reproduce stereotypical images of African migrants, these texts challenge a biased debate on migration to Europe, offering an alternative vision of a complex phenomenon. In these texts, migrants are individuals whose mobility is restricted because they are subjected to processes of Othering, which confine them to the margins of Spanish society, raising issues of mobility in/justice and forced im/mobilities related to hegemonic power relations, coloniality, and race. Privileging the perspective of African migrant subjects in creating new imaginaries of migration to Europe, this article examines the mobilities paradigm in the context of transnational migration in a postcolonial era and discusses the potential of literary texts to unsilence 'immobile voices.' Through this lens, I offer readings of César Mba Abogo's *El Porteador de Marlow: Canción negra sin color* (2007) and Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo's *El Metro* (2007), grounding my scholarship in Equatoguinean literature and contemporary hispanophone African literature. **Keywords:** César Mba Abogo, Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo, African migration, Equatorial Guinea, mobility studies, African literature in Spanish.

## Introduction

In 2016, I visited Koyo Kouoh's "Streamlines: Oceans, Global Trade and Migration" in Hamburg, Germany. Bringing together fifteen projects by artists from different countries, the exhibition focuses on the ocean as both a space of global mobility of people, as well as products, in the past and present, and a space where social, political, and economic inequalities become manifest (Luckow). Transnational and transoceanic migratory flows are one of the main topics addressed in the exhibition. For instance, Bouchra Khalili's "The Constellations" (2011) consists of blue maps that translate migrants' journeys into abstract, nomadic travel routes; routes that, resembling the constellation of stars, contest normative geography and erase boundaries (Khalili). Kader Attia's "La Mer Morte" (2015) (The Dead Sea), an installation of ap-

proximately 300 pieces of used clothing on a floor, as if washed up on a shore (Attia), evokes the many victims that have died in the Mediterranean. The work speaks to the 'European refugee crisis,' a phenomenon that was at its peak at the time of the exhibition. These artist interventions reflect one of the exhibition's main aims: to draw a critical image of migrant movements and mobilities, emphasizing the complexity and precariousness of their stories, as well as the geopolitical entanglements of the causes and effects of transnational migration.

Building on and in solidarity with this critical focus, I offer readings of César Mba Abogo's *El Porteador de Marlow: Canción negra sin color* (Marlow's Boy: Black Song Without Color) and Donato Ndong-Bidyogo's *El Metro* (The Metro), situating these texts (both published in 2007) as narratives of migration and mobilities in Equatoguinean literature and contemporary hispanophone African literature. These texts overhaul current stereotypical images of African migrants, which characterize an ongoing debate in Western societies and media. Rather than reproducing stereotypes, Mba Abogo's and Ndong-Bidyogo's respective works write back to a biased vision of African and Afrodescendant people by raising issues of mobility in/justice, of forced in/mobilities, and their relationship with hegemonic power in a modern/colonial world. Examining the mobilities paradigm in the context of transnational migration in a postcolonial era, I discuss the potential of literary texts in unsilencing 'immobile voices,' voices that create new imaginaries of migration to Europe.

Many texts (testimonial and fictional) written by authors of African origin in the Spanish language represent migrants as people whose mobility is restricted because they are subjected to processes of othering which confines them to the margins of Spanish society.<sup>1</sup> In this vein, the short story and poem collection, *El Porteador de Marlow*, clearly references Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), substituting the Eurocentric perspective of Joseph Conrad's narrator with an African migrants' view, unveiling hitherto silenced narratives of mobility and immobility.

Similarly, *El Metro* centers the topic of undocumented migration through the life story of its protagonist, Lambert Obama Ondo, echoing the author's short stories "El Sueño" (1973) (The Dream) and "La Travesía" (1977) (The Crossing) (for an overview of Ndong-Bidyogo's writing, see Otabela Mewolo, *Literatura*; Ugarte; Koné). While in his first two novels—*Tinieblas de tu memoria negra* (1987) (Shadows of your Black Memory) and *Los poderes de la tempestad* (1997) (The Powers of the Storm)—the author primarily focuses on his native Equatorial Guinea's history, colonial and dictatorial violence, questions of exile and return as well as on the situatedness of African societies between tradition and modernity, *El Metro* explicitly approaches the topic of undocumented migration through the life story of the protagonist Lambert Obama Ondo.

In his book *Africans in Europe*, based on the experience of Equatoguinean exiles and emigrants in Spain, Michael Ugarte coins the neologism "eximile" to capture

the complexity of people's journeys and 'decisions' to leave. He points out (2, 8) that a dichotomous distinction between exile as an (politically motivated) involuntary condition and emigration as a (economically motivated) chosen condition does not seize postcolonial realities in which both concepts, instead, tend to be overlapping. The mobilities paradigm allows us to precisely grasp and substantiate these complex entanglements of voluntary and involuntary movements or fixities. This article firstly elucidates a few facts about the mobilities paradigm and its significance with respect to transnational migration in a postcolonial context before offering a reading of migrants' im/mobilities in Mba Abogo's and Ndong-Bidyogo's texts.

### **Im/mobilities in times of transnational movements**

After the turn of the millennium, mobility has become a prominent paradigm in social sciences (Ohnmacht, *et al.* 10), one that centers the movements of people, ideas, objects, and information, as well as the mobility systems that shape our daily social life and relations (Urry 17). As John Urry (3) says, "[I]t sometimes seems as if all the world is on the move." And yet, the so-called 'mobility turn' is not only about being more mobile in an age of global movements and technological innovations. It also takes into account the ambiguity of the concept: "issues of movement and non-movement, of forced movement and of chosen fixity" (Ohnmacht, *et al.* 11; Urry 17). Or, as Mimi Sheller puts it in an interview, the issue of "mobility justice" as a category refers to "the power differentials that come into play [...] and the different affordances that different people are able to make use of, or appropriate, in becoming mobile or not" (Ferry and Sheller n. p.). In this context, some studies introduce the concept of 'motility' that refers to mobility or network capital (Urry 38) and the "capacities, competencies and choices" (Sheller 49) to (not) move; that is the range of possible mobilities or the decision of which options one realizes and which not (Sheller 49; Ohnmacht, *et al.* 12).

This ambiguity becomes all the more important if we think about mobility in a post/colonial context of global migration and thus discuss subaltern mobilities on a South-North axis (Fortier; Sheller 49; Urry 8). For if we consider the inconsistencies of globalization itself—having led to a free flow of goods, capital, information, and so on but not necessarily of people (Pécoud and Guchteneire 13)—it becomes evident that freedom of movement still is a privilege. As Urry (51) argues, movement and, in particular, unforced movement and the option to stay, "is power." Yet, because of precarious situations in countries of origin, migrants from the global south often cannot choose to stay. Even after leaving their countries of origin, their movements might be restricted, the result of border regimes that seek to deny access to those who are ascribed racialized identities and/or to limited social mobility within host societies (Seiler 101; Urry 36). As Hannah Cross elaborates (119–20), the migration regimes of European Union countries such as Spain are highly ambivalent and 'selective;' they

appreciate undocumented migrants as a cheap labor force but, at the same time, confine mobility. For example, undocumented migrants are “restricted to unwanted, unskilled work” (115), regardless of training or education. Furthermore, legislation contributes to the systematic criminalization of migrants, reinforcing national and extranational imaginaries of dangerous trespassers that are perceived as a threat to host societies (Kunz and Leinonen 155).

Keeping in mind these hegemonic power relations in a modern/colonial world, recent studies argue that ‘mobility capital’ is unequally distributed on both national and global levels (Cross 10; Nicholson and Sheller 3; Ohnmacht, *et al.* 13–5). However, while inequalities depend on wealth, prestige, and economic power, constructed categories of difference, such as gender, sexuality, age, dis/ability, and race, overdetermine material realities. Thus, to understand the (non)movements of migrants from Africa, and the global south in general, we have to consider the intersections of mobility and race that impose particular restrictions on (access to) mobility. Race, as Cotten Seiler (98) explains, “has historically functioned and continues to function as an inhibitor or enabler of a given subject’s spatial (and, consequently, socioeconomic) mobility.” Coloniality has consequently turned and turns migrants from the global south into racialized bodies whose “whiteness (or proximity to it)” (98) determines their power to (not) move (Seiler 98; Urry 48, 52).

Through this lens, literary and mobility studies can engage in a productive conversation. Capable of drafting alternative images and imaginaries of migration, literary texts have the potential to unsilence voices that, due to hierarchical knowledge regimes, are systematically immobilized. Such imaginaries can challenge prevailing Eurocentric discourses that, according to Anne-Marie Fortier (69; emphasis mine), depicts a “movement of large numbers of *nameless bodies* [...] [that] *objectifies migrants*, with little specificities about their decisions, the conditions of migration, etc.” And thus, in accordance with a “colonialist logic of the past,” “perpetuat[es] the myth of uniformity that defines” these migrants (Montuori 45, 63).

### **César Mba Abogo’s *El Porteador de Marlow: canción negra sin color***

In *El Porteador de Marlow*, Mba Abogo presents a heterogeneous picture of African migration to Europe, illuminating the phenomenon in its ambiguity. Consisting of more than 50 short narratives and lyrical texts, the text evokes a collective of perspectives that represent individual stories, de-anonymizing migration. At the same time, this multitude of texts sheds light on different aspects of the desire for and the experience of migration. It is this polyphonic structure that unveils the phenomenon of migration in all its complexity and contextualizes the migratory flows arriving in Europe into a wider context (Borst 95). However, although Mba Abogo’s texts centre on movement, a close reading demonstrates how the subjects’ respective and collective mobilities are continuously challenged and constricted.

Many of the narratives in *El Porteador de Marlow* describe a strong desire to leave postcolonial African realities, often characterized by precarious living conditions, imminent threats of violence, and an overall lack of future prospects (Berástegui Wood 97; López Rodríguez 90). They describe migration not as a voluntary decision but as a necessity, challenging prejudiced narratives that imagine African migrants as manipulative, driven by selfish desires to profit from ‘European generosity.’ In “*El país en el que lo redondo es cuadrado y los peces vuelan*” (The Country in which the Circular is Square and where Fishes Fly), Europe as a promised land is demystified, for the protagonist, Rey, soon realizes that, by accepting his aunt’s invitation to follow her to Europe, he is pursuing a utopian dream:

*Sus sueños serían derribados en Europa, uno a uno serían descargados a la realidad como puras frustraciones.*

His dreams would be demolished in Europe; one by one, they would be discharged into reality like sheer frustrations. (Mba Abogo 34)<sup>2</sup>

The protagonist fears not only leaving behind his loved ones but also losing his identity as a self-determined subject. He worries that “[e]n Europa no sólo sería negro, sería también africano” (in Europe he would not only be Black, he would also be African) (34). Rey acknowledges the epistemological meanings of “negro” and “africano” in Europe, how the white gaze dehumanizes black subjects, marking black bodies as migrants and refugees. Despite this knowledge, despite *sueños derribados* (demolished dreams), he lacks the option of *not moving*—“No le quedaba más remedio, tenía que irse” (He had no other option but to leave) (35).

*El Porteador de Marlow* also centers experiences of involuntary fixity, resulting from prevented and interrupted movements, as well as unattainability. Accordingly, many texts describe the necessity of escaping a situation of hopelessness as an option that is not to be taken for granted. In “*La rubia y el Porsche*” (The Blonde and the Porsche)—a story about the illusions and the disillusionment of a group of adolescents who, having turned into “*refugiados mentales*” (16), keep dreaming of a life elsewhere—mobility is shown as a privilege not accessible to everyone:

*Otros apenas pudieron alejarse unos centímetros, se quedaron atrapados en la banalidad, ahogándose en sufrimientos insustanciales, expuestos al hambre, a la enfermedad, despedazados por el grito irreverente que les golpeaba desde dentro.*

Others could hardly move away some centimeters, they were trapped in the banality, drowning themselves in insubstantial sufferings, exposed to hunger, to disease, torn to shreds by the irreverent cry that was hitting them from deep inside. (16)

The anonymous characters described are as immobilized as their life stories, excluded

from a discussion of migration to Europe.

*"En algún lugar bajo el Atlántico"* (Somewhere Below the Atlantic), a title that unmistakably alludes to the dangerous journey that countless migrants from Africa venture through in order to reach European soil, echoes the deaths of enslaved Africans who died during the Middle Passage, resituating migration (Borst 43). In Mba Abogo's text, deceased African migrants are given a voice through which they tell their stories. The drowned, first-person narrator retrospectively explains that he dreamt of offering a better life to his family, who had stayed behind. Simultaneously, his individual dream is multiplied by the narrator's evocation of all the other *"muchos párpados [que se cerraban] aquí abajo"* (many eyelids shut down here) (59). That these victims, suffering from precarious mobilities, have neither a locally fixed tomb nor a place where their stories are to be told, is emblemized in the title of another text in the collection entitled *"Cenotafio"* (36). A cenotaph is an empty tomb for someone who is buried elsewhere. This title can be read as a reminder that we need to create an archive for the memory of those whose lives are lost on their journey to Europe. Literature can provide this archive.

Finally, Mba Abogo's writing shows that movements across physical borders lead, again, to an immobility that is strongly connected to the African migrant's position as the 'Black Other,' a condition that the book's documented migrants share with the undocumented characters (Berástegui Wood 98). In the story, "What a wonderful world," it is the white gaze that establishes alterity and creates blackness as a category of non-belonging. The title, in English, further emphasizes the dark irony between Europe as paradise and the lived experience of black life in Europe, which the author represents as one of solitude and exclusion:

*Como siempre, la respuesta a tantas miradas malévolas estaba en el tono de su piel. Inmigración, inseguridad ciudadana, caníbales, ola de calor africano, etc.*

Like always, the answer to so many malevolent looks was in the color of his skin. Immigration, citizen insecurity, cannibals, African heat wave, etc. (Mba Abogo 58)

The protagonist's position as a social outsider is emphasized when Nguema is compared to a white young man sleeping on a bench next to him who, despite being drunk and having vomit on his face, is spared society's discriminating gaze. As the text acknowledges, this man is *"sangre de su sangre y carne de su carne"* (blood of their blood, flesh of their flesh) while Nguema, being one of *"Los Condenados de la Tierra"* (The Condemned of the Earth) (55), is perceived as a racialized body and therefore denied social affiliation.

Likewise, the short story, *"Me han hecho la vida más cansada y pesada"* (They Made My Life More Tiresome and More Tedious), offers insight into undocumented migrants and their social immobility within Europe. The protagonist, Héctor, is

confronted with a double position of exclusion, as undocumented migrant and as African. He is 'outside,' cut off by the "*feroz alambrada de la ilegalidad*" (fierce wire fence of illegality) (46). In the reader's imagination, this vivid metaphor invokes images of the Spanish border fences of Ceuta and Melilla, symbols of Europe's tendency to seal off its borders. Mba Abogo deftly connects this physical border crossing with the insurmountable symbolic border that exists in people's minds. Perceived as the 'Black Other,' Héctor fulfills a predetermined social role shaped according to racist perceptions of black migrants from Africa:

*Él era el negro y se había creado el trabajo en negro para los negros. Se hizo pasar por analfabeto, se ofreció para trabajar durante un periodo de prueba sin cobrar [...]*

He was the Black and black labour had been made for Blacks. He managed to pass for an illiterate; he offered to work for a trial period with no earnings [...] (Mba Abogo 46)

*El Porteador de Marlow* illustrates a migrant experience of making oneself invisible in order to survive, to make a living; it is a way of being that demands voicelessness. In the final scene of "*Me han hecho la vida más cansada y pesada*," Nguema wants to call his mother to tell her about his sorrows but does not have the money to make a phone call. There is nothing left for him but to pick up the receiver and voice his despair into the void (47), a metaphor that vividly alludes to all the lost and unheard words about the coloniality of migration, words that can be symbolically intercepted and immortalized through literature.

### **Donato Ndong-Bidyogo's *El Metro***

In contrast to Mba Abogo's collective of perspectives, Ndong-Bidyogo's novel *El Metro* focuses on one main character, Lambert Obama Ondo. In response to the dangerous political and the precarious economic situation in his native Cameroon, he traverses a continually interrupted and dangerous journey until he reaches Spain. As scholars such as Ugarte or Mahan Ellison state in their analyses of the novel, a crucial accomplishment of the narrative lies in the fact that it triggers a change of perspective with regard to Spain's rather "monological" (Ugarte 78) debate about immigration, tackling the phenomenon from the migrant's point of view (Ellison 163; Ugarte 77). Thus, as Ellison (163) states, its "representation of the African immigrant humanizes what is so often caricatured stereotype in popular discourse."

The text retraces the protagonist's life story from his birth to his adulthood and his premature death. Of the novel's nineteen chapters, twelve are set in Cameroon, two describe the protagonist's journey from Cameroon via Senegal to the Canary Islands, and five chapters portray his life on the Canary Islands and continental Spain (Ellison 164; Mewolo and Abena 143). At first sight, migration might seem like one stage in Lambert's life. However, as the narration unfolds it becomes clear that

the actual event of transnational border-crossing is the climax of a whole series of protagonist movements that are initiated by diverse situations of plight and distress (Arbeláez 1043).

Initially, archaic traditions and the elders' disapproval of the main character's relationship to a young woman, Anne Mengue, make him leave his native village for the capital Yaoundé. Then, economic hardship and arbitrary political violence in postcolonial Cameroon force him to migrate, first to the port city of Douala and then to hide as an undocumented migrant in a container ship that is supposed to take him to Europe. However, the protagonist is intercepted and ends up in Senegal, where he leads an undocumented life and is imprisoned for several months. Finally, Lambert Obama Ondo succeeds in getting a faked passport and boarding a plane to Morocco, from where smugglers take him to the territory of the Western Sahara. From there, he takes a small boat and reaches the Canary Islands as one of the few passengers who survive a tragedy at sea. After being stuck there for a while, bureaucratic coincidence results in the protagonist finally being sent off to mainland Spain. Moving back and forth between Murcia and Madrid, desperately trying to make a living in clandestineness, in the end the protagonist finds a violent death in Madrid, where he is murdered by a group of neo-Nazis. As we can see, the reasons for Obama Ondo's movements are multiple; they reach from archaic traditions and economic hardship to arbitrary political violence in postcolonial African societies and the precariousness of an undocumented life.

These continuous movements exemplify what Cross (8) refers to when she describes migration from Western African countries as often "unorganized journeys," for their frequently "stepwise migration [...] is characterized by a contradictory mixture of coercion, compulsion and repression combined with choice, opportunity and mobility." Moreover, she confirms a central question is what "enables" (11) migrants to effectively leave, for "[t]he expansion of possibilities [...] lends itself not to a borderless world but, instead, to one with an unprecedented number of checkpoints and frontiers" (131). Likewise, Lambert does not freely choose when to leave and where to go. Rather, his mobility is described as overdetermined by external political, economic, social, and cultural constraints. Contrary to stereotypical perceptions of emigration that assume that African migrants choose to leave to improve their lives, Ndongo-Bidyogo's novel shows his readers that migrant subjects are forced to move in order to survive, as Ugarte argues in his reading of the text (80, 82). In many cases, Lambert seems to be moved like a pawn by those in power—a corrupt African leader who depletes the country's economy, human traffickers who arbitrarily schedule the protagonist's movements through the African continent, or European businessmen for whom African laborers are merely disposable commodities that can easily be replaced. The novel gives us a sweeping critique of actors that represent different systems of oppression and exploitation by constraining freedom of choice and movement.



By emphasizing the life stories that precede Lambert's departure to Europe, as well as the entangled histories of Africa and Europe, the author calls on his readers to take up a more complex perspective on transnational migration. He reminds us to think critically about the causes, and not only the effects, of transnational migration. He challenges us to consider Europe's responsibility for a colonial legacy that becomes manifest in neocolonialist politics, particularly in the current oppression of African citizens by African elites who succeed(ed) European colonizers in positions of hegemonic power (Gorroño; Ndongo-Bidyogo, *El Metro* 192, 199; Ugarte 82).

Having a closer look at the novel's structure, the experience of migrating to Spain frames *El Metro*. Anticipating Lambert's life as an undocumented migrant in Spain, a life that finds a violent end in the final chapter, the novel is a retrospective that chronologically traces the protagonist's journey to Spain. One can read this circular structure as an allusion to the inevitability of the protagonist's fate, one that emphasizes the fact that the protagonist is *not* free to choose when, where, or how to move. For instance, Ndongo-Bidyogo illustrates this immobility rather vividly:

*La mayoría de sus descubrimientos en ese lado del mundo habitado por los blancos eran inaccesibles para él, y [...] reconocía que, por más selvas, desiertos y mares que hubiese atravesado, jamás llegaría a disfrutar de tanto portento como a diario contemplaban atónitos sus ojos luminosos, intensamente negros.*

The majority of his discoveries in that side of the world inhabited by white people were inaccessible to him and [...] he recognized that, no matter how many forests, deserts and oceans he could have crossed, he would never get to enjoy all these marvels that his bright, intensely black eyes contemplated and astonished every day. (Ndongo-Bidyogo, *El Metro* 14)

Both framing chapters, the first and the last, are set in the Madrilenian Metro, a highly symbolical place and the novel's eponym. Highly symbolic, but just as ambivalent, it is described as a symbol for technological innovations and a progressive society—one that, according to the novel, could serve as a role model for postcolonial African leaders—as a space of mobility and passage that creates a homogeneous mass of commuters. However, the metro also constitutes a space of solitude and despair; it is where Lambert realizes that he does not, and cannot, participate in this space (Arbeláez 1050; Ndongo-Bidyogo, *El Metro* 284–90). Here the role of undocumented migrants is emblemized by a meaningful spatial metaphor. While Spaniards move through the underground corridors of the metro station, as a vendor of pirate copies, the protagonist maintains a static position in the middle of the flow of metro users. This image portrays Lambert as excluded and (socially) immobile (Ndongo-Bidyogo, *El Metro* 336–7). The metro simultaneously represents a space where African migrant subjects stand out from an anonymous mass because of their blackness. It is within

this space of hypervisibility and invisibility that the protagonist is murdered by a group of neo-Nazis. The metro in Ndongo-Bidyogo's novel can also be read as a 'non-place' (*non-lieu*) according to Marc Augé (Arbeláez 1050–5; Chiodaroli 187–90): being a place of transit that the individual does not seize and where they stay anonymous and solitary, the metro station in Ndongo-Bidyogo's text represents the protagonist's situation of continuous transit and of non-arrival. Similarly, Ugarte (82) argues that the space of the metro evokes images of unfamiliarity and strangeness.

A central strategy of Ndongo's novel is to contrast the movement of some to the fixity of others. On his journey to Europe, Lambert meets many characters whose movements come to a standstill. At times, this standstill is the result of the character's demise, while sometimes the characters lack the necessary means to continue their journey. Just as the main character leaves behind his kin, the narration leaves behind many life stories that remain unfinished (229–30; 257–61; 265–8). The potential of a literary text is that it can 'de-immobilize' or 're-mobilize' stories and carry voices across borders. *El Metro's* narrator unveils untold stories and their silencing. While dying, the protagonist imagines hearing his grandfather's voice saying, "*y tu muerte no será una muerte anónima*" (and your death will not be an anonymous death) (342). These words echo the end of chapter one (18) and, once again, emphasize the circularity of the narration. They demonstrate the potential of the literary text in subverting the anonymity of undocumented migration and challenging the solitude of nameless victims, offering "*el consuelo de ser llorado[s]*" (the comfort to be mourned) (219).

Furthermore, Ndongo-Bidyogo's novel strongly represents the dichotomy between 'male mobility' and 'female fixity,' highlighting African women's double marginalization. As María Lugones (742) theorizes, the modern/colonial gender system is based on a biologically motivated dimorphism and a patriarchal viewpoint that doubly oppresses non-Western women, for it establishes asymmetric power structures based on intersecting mechanisms of discrimination, specifically race and gender. Depicting a patriarchal African society in which women are consistently portrayed as submissive, unprivileged, or dependent on men, the novel reveals the female African subject as more vulnerable and less mobile than men (Celaya; Clarsen 96; Montuori).

Thus, while Lambert keeps moving in search of a better future, women are left behind. Twice, the protagonist impregnates a woman and then leaves: his childhood sweetheart, Anne Mengue, and his girlfriend in Yaoundé, Sylvie Anguesomo. As the novel illustrates, these women do not have the option to move on; they stay behind, negotiating a context in which they lack prospects and face marginalization as single mothers. Their only option is to agree to new dependencies, dependencies on men. As the protagonist derogatorily explains, after his departure, Sylvie seems to turn into "*una buscablancos*" (a looking-for-white) to find a new breadwinner (Ndongo-Bidyogo, *El Metro* 310). And before the protagonist succeeds in borrowing a dowry to marry her, Sylvie's parents begin to coerce her into an arranged marriage (329).

Similarly, Anne's options are limited. Keen to rebel against "a gendered system that subordinates females" (Montuori 55), her rebellion finds its expression in the narrative structure as well, a structure that, several times, repeats the expression "*estaba harta de*" (she was fed up with) (Ndongo-Bidyogo, *El Metro* 205). Anne dreams of a better life for herself and her daughter, one free from male oppression (205). Yet, she does not dispose of the necessary means to pursue this dream. Instead, "*el sueño se convirtió en pesadilla*" (the dream turned into a nightmare) (207), as she ends up in the city of Douala as a sex worker oppressed by the pimp Marcel Nosécuantos (206).

Anne's fate reminds us of other female characters in the novel, such as the Equatoguinean migrant Nene Paula who, during and after migration, also suffers from abuse, isolation, and dependency on men (Ndongo-Bidyogo, *El metro* 146–8; Montuori 50–2). Furthermore, on his journey to Europe, Lambert stands in line at a beach together with other undocumented migrants who are inclined to make use of the services of some African women who engage in sex work as a means to secure their passage on a boat to the Canary Islands (251–2). This scene illustrates clearly assigned positions of power and powerlessness due to gender hierarchies that persist within migrant communities. Strikingly, these women are not offered a proper voice in the novel. Their fate is mediated by the protagonist's hegemonic male gaze, being one of those who take part in abusing these women's marginalized position by giving in to their own sexual cravings. Thus, the novel does not extend a position of subjectivity to these female characters, for, when they drown—with many others—in visual range of the 'promised land' of the Canary Islands (267), they directly turn from 'consumable bodies' to 'dead bodies.' Just as these women's stories are lost, Anne's traces vanish within the narration and both the main character and the reader can only speculate about her fate. A letter from home lets Lambert know that Anne has disappeared, and that people assume she succeeded in breaking free of her pimp and moving on towards Europe (328). Yet, keeping in mind the fates of the women who participate in sex work on the beach and then drown unmasks this hope as an illusion; the female African migrant's emancipation from male oppression during her journey, as well as the success of her journey, seem highly questionable.

Moreover, women's marginal position is once again reflected in the narrative structure. The novel is narrated by an omniscient heterodiegetic narrator who frequently adopts the protagonist's perspective, using the technique of the interior monologue to unfold the protagonist's thoughts (Ellison 165; Ugarte 84–5). Thus, the text is dominated by a male perspective that rarely offers insight into the grievances of female characters. There are few examples where Ndongo-Bidyogo's novel transcends this perspective. However, in chapter thirteen, the heterodiegetic narrator gives an account of Anne's path to sex work and, focalizing her perspective, reveals her personal thoughts on the oppression of women in African societies (205–6). Correspondingly, the narrative structure symbolically expresses female immobility: most of the time,

women's stories are narrated extraneously, through a male-centered perspective and, even when a female voice rises for a very short moment within the narration, as in the example mentioned above, it immediately gets lost again in such a way that one never conclusively knows what really happened to Anne or her daughter.

## Conclusion

Mba Abogo's and Ndongo-Bidyogo's texts emphasize the ambivalence of the mobilities paradigm in an era of transnational migration. They portray mobility and immobility as related to asymmetrical, hegemonic, and racialized power positions that constrict African migratory movements. Reading *El Porteador de Marlow* and *El Metro* through the lens of the mobilities paradigm demonstrates literature's potential in laying open the complexity of African migration to Europe by embracing questions of voluntary and involuntary mobilities and fixities. Both texts address questions of geographical, socioeconomic, and epistemic borders. Accordingly, they tackle the impenetrability not only of national territories but also of national communities and cultures which marginalize African migrants and create areas of restricted mobility. By disclosing this ambivalence, literature is able to make a valuable contribution to the current discussion on migration to Europe and transnational mobility as it unveils life stories that, otherwise, remain hidden, challenging what European societies think they know about those who arrive on European shores.

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## Notes

1. Examples of testimonial and fictional texts that address the highly restricted mobilities of African migrants and the new forms of exclusion, injustice, and invisibility that often follow migration are Mamadou Dia's *3052—Persiguiendo un sueño* (Pursuing a Dream), Patrick Lambal's and Jordi Tomàs i Guilera's *El pescador que volía anar al país dels blancs* (The Fisherman who Wanted to Travel to the Country of the Whites), Despin Tchoumke's *Camaleón: la España del extranjero*, as well as Francisco Zamora Lobo's *El Caimán de Kaduna* (The Caiman of Kaduna), Víctor Omgbá's *Cañal sin salida* (Alley without an Exit), and Inongo Vi-Makomè's *Nativas* (Natives), to name but a few. At this point, one needs to emphasize that, although certain advertising efforts in the publishing industry and a predominant, biased vision of African immigrants as undocumented refugees might lead one to assume otherwise, migration as a phenomenon addressed by hispanophone authors covers a much broader spectrum of migratory experiences: it ranges from undocumented migration to political exile and stays in European countries for educational training or professional reasons and it embraces narratives that tackle life in the host society after migration as well (Brancato 11).
2. All translations of citations into English are mine.

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# Stammering tongue

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## Stammering tongue

'Stammering tongue' is the governing metaphor we offer in our reading of the border. The border, we read as a central technique of both the modern state and the violence that produces it. Our project is a diffractive encounter with the modality of implicating and complicating reading and writing. The paper offers a reading of two recent texts, Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* that draws from the metaphor/practice of the Middle Passage to offer "The Wake," "The Ship," "The Hold," and "The Weather," to theorize black violability, black death, and black living. We read Sharpe beside Jasbir K. Puar's *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* where she uses the notion of debility to stress the relations between harm, gender, race, war, and labor. We offer the 'stammering tongue,' in pursuit of a conversation between ourselves, Sharpe, and Puar. The stammering tongue is a racialized, sexualized border that produces (im)possible readings and utterances. We frame the stammering tongue as one that turns to negativity and reclaims lack to generate potentiality from that lack. **Keywords:** the wake, debility, Christina Sharpe, Jasbir Puar, tongue, accent, middle passage.

## Stammering, parched and trilling tongues

Instead of listening to my fellow presenters' presentations, I find myself rehearsing quietly the pronunciation of the word tongue. Tongue is the most important word for my dissertation which examines the ways in which race comes to matter in the context of Finnish language acquisition among adult migrants in Finland. My interest in tongue lies not only in the relation between mother tongue, identity, and the political economy of language, but also in the actual bodily practices of learning to speak the host country language. For example, as an adult language learner, I find it difficult to speak Finnish, especially the Finnish trill or the rolling r. The key to achieve the rolling r is the activation of the tongue tip in the form of a series of very rapid tap-like closures. For me, like many other Chinese speakers, this exercise of the tongue feels almost impossible. The /r/ becomes pronounced as /l/, which is typically

perceived of as the marker/identifier of the Chinese accent. Finding in the practices of rolling r the possibility of rethinking the materiality of race, I use the term ‘trilling race’ as the title of my dissertation (Liu). It is not surprising that I often need to talk about tongue(s) in my presentations. However, even till now, I still can’t correctly pronounce it.

“/tʌŋ/”?

“/tɔŋ/”?

“/tuhŋ/”?

My fellow presenter is summing up her presentation. I panic. Typing the word tongue into dictionary.com for the 1000<sup>th</sup> time and putting the headphone earbud in one of my ears, “/tʌŋ/,” I listen and repeat the pronunciation quietly. Time splits. It moves forward according to the conference schedule. Tick tack, time is linear and calculated according to homogenous numerical units of measurement—second, minute, hour. At the same *time*, time jumps up and down, folds in and out, throws itself up and swallows itself in. Time breaks and is broken in and as the repetition of tongue (“/tʌŋ/”).

Thought that English gave me a power that I can’t reach  
Hoped that English would be the language that I can master  
Carefully chosen, meticulously practiced  
Yet my unruly Korean accent in English disclosed soon  
After passing a few seconds  
My accented tongue sticking out of its own will against my arduous efforts  
too much foreign touch, translated into *untamable and uncivilized—*  
*grocery, nail salon, fish market* English in the United States.

[...]

time passed like this  
speechless always belated  
sigh  
breathlessly  
bodies without words  
words emptied of bodies  
when words fail to fill her bodies  
she seeks to fill the word in her mouth  
an imaginary thing is inserted into the mouth  
she craves for the food, American food  
becomes her *shameful secret and love object*



[...]

the shame of my inadequate English

the shame of being silenced and voiceless along with other women

the shame of *hal-mo-ni* who could not go back to hometown after serving sexual slavery

the shame of *o-mo-ni* who utterly evacuated her mind including the memory of her baby who was left behind for adoption

those shameful memories are surfaced through my parched tongue

echoing the pains of unclaimed experiences. (Kim 39–41; emphasis in original)

In her essay, “The Parched Tongue,” Hosu Kim *re-members* the displaced, unrecognized, and disjoined memories and bodies of Korean and diasporic subjects at different temporalities: “a Korean foreign student’s loss of verbal capacity in words, a mother’s memory of the Korean War, and a mother’s loss of memory about the baby she left behind, juxtaposed in the form of craving for foods—binge eating and American chocolate bars” (34). Echoing the reworking of ‘memorying’ as the disjuncture between history and memory in Mupotsa’s account below, I use the term ‘re-member’ here to underscore the ways in which such a disjuncture takes bodily felt manifestations as the simultaneous displacement and relocation of tongue(s).

For example, in Kim’s poem, the sense of shame and dis-ease felt by virtue of her accent is translated into the dissonance between her desire of speaking perfect English and the wilfulness of mother and othered tongues. Such a dissonance is further transvaluated into the gap between the English language that signifies capacity and upward mobility and the (accented) English language as markers of dis-ability and immobility, as well as between *the ongoing and yet discontinuous* process of displacement and ‘memorying’—memories that are never simply or absolutely forgotten or recorded—that is felt as lack and excess, and the desire of and demand for self-presence, wholeness, location, and identity (for example the shame of her accent—the always more and less than the proper English speaking body—translates into not only silence but also the craving and appetite for consuming American food).

The broken tongue is displaced on and through and traverses multiple registers: the linguistic, the kinaesthetic, the aural, the alimentary, the symbolic, and the socio-political. And yet, *at the same time*, it is contained and re-located in, on, and outside the constitutive edge of racial capitalism, as the racialised, gendered, sexualized (m) other. For Kim, the double movement of displacement and relocation means that the parched tongue is the site of repression and transformation. In what follows, I consider this double movement through questions of debility and border.

In her recent book *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity and Disability*, Jasbir Puar triangulates the opposition between disability and capacity through the notion of debility. As Puar (xvii) makes clear, “Debility addresses injury and bodily exclusion

that are endemic rather than epidemic or exceptional, and reflects a need for rethinking overarching structures of working, schooling, and living rather than relying on rights frames to provide accommodationist solutions." For Puar, the political and analytical frameworks that focus on questions of rights and identity run the risk of obscuring the debilitation of certain bodies and populations that is the condition of possibility of disability empowerment. As she writes, "The biopolitical distribution between disability as an exceptional accident or misfortune, and the proliferation of debilitation as war, as imperialism, as durational death, is largely maintained through disability rights frameworks" (66).

On this account, debility is not an identity category, whose reference can be located in and as a property of the body. Rather, it is (im)proper, and (non)locatable. It confounds, all the while makes possible, the imagined integral bodies of the individual speaking subject. In view of this, debility resonates with what Danai Mupotsa calls, in the next section, "Country Games, middle passages and anagrammatical blackness," the translation process without an originary whole and pure language, with the breathlessness Mupotsa feels in the name diaspora, with the plural spaces of national commitment that confound the linearity of history that Mupotsa finds in NoViolet Bulawayo's novel, with the dissolved languages and broken tongues that characterise the transnational subjectification process as Mupotsa identifies in diasporic literatures, with the breathlessness that Kim feels as the radical emptiness and excess of words and bodies, with the repetition of accented /tʌŋ/, /tɒŋ/, /tuhŋg/ through, in and as my tongue, with the internal dehiscence of the tongue whose histories of oppression and wilfulness are heard and re-membered as the (in)audible stories of the (m)other(ed) tongue(s) across time and space. It is important to note that these resonances do not imply absolute translatability, where an instance perfectly mirrors another. Rather, the resonances are echoes of stammering speeches, songs, screams, silences, and sounds of swallowing and chewing, that interrupt, merge with, and perhaps even cancel out each other. Speaking in tongues is thus a refusal to the flattening out of differences in the name of inclusion, and an insistence on thinking through (im)possibilities as a political and ethical endeavor.

Importantly, the notion of debility affords an account of the bodies and populations that are not recognized as disabled or able-bodied, but challenge the very binary of disability and capacity. It follows then that interventions of and contestations against modalities of debilitation necessitate a shift from a mere focus on the hierarchical valuation of disabilities, to how processes of debilitation condition and are produced in imperialism, colonialism, and capitalist global expansion. Moreover, debility, conceived of as the in-between space, also troubles the opposition between life and death that informs biopolitical and necropolitical frameworks. As Puar (137) shows in examining Israeli state practices of occupation and settler colonialism, deliberate maiming that produces, sustains, and proliferates debilitated populations

is “a status unto itself.” That is, its aim is not simply making live, making die, letting live, or letting die, but to pre-emptively make impossible resistance of, and profiting from, the debilitated.

Moreover, such a reconsideration of the question of life and death also provides alternative spatiotemporal frameworks for investigating the banal lived experiences of exclusion and degradation. That is, modalities of suffering that do not fit the frameworks of liberal rights politics or the progressive temporality of nationalism, but are obscured *and* required by global regimes of exploitation and inequality. This is all the more important in contemporary disaster capitalism, in which relations of power are elided, and differences flattened out, in the apocalyptic narratives of the extinction of the ‘we’—(hu)Man. In the context of ecological and economic crisis, the received notion of scarcity actually justifies, reinforces, and escalates forms of division between bodies that are considered worthy and populations deemed disposable. The temporality of disaster capitalism is prehensive, pre-emptive, and epidemic, informed by the received notion of death as the exceptional event at the end of life, and more specifically, the way of life of certain rather than other populations. In contrast, debility accounts for the non-linear, dispersed, banal, and affective.

This non-linearity and banality of debility is made palpable in the tongue that is broken and parched. In Kim’s poem, for example, histories of displacement and oppression and contemporary racism are intertwined and translated into shameful accent, suffocating silence, uncontrollable appetite, blushed skin, as well as injured and bruised tongues. These quotidian lived experiences are typically shadowed and replaced by tales of progressive transnationalism. For example, Cael M. Keegan observes the usage of English in dialogues between characters in the popular Netflix series *Sense8*, which is among the first TV shows that feature trans characters played by trans actors. The main characters located in different parts of the world are affectively bonded and are able to share skills, perceptions, and communicate through time and space. And yet, despite the emphasis on trans-aesthetics that challenges various boundaries, as well as classed, racialised, sexualized, and gendered differences, this show uses predominantly English in dialogues. As Keegan (609) writes,

By evacuating the lingual history of global colonization from the text, the program inadvertently suggests that English is a sort of psychic language that sensates share through the development of a “tongue” that transcends racialized embodiment itself. Linguistic friction—the way in which language difference sticks in the engine of globalized secular humanism—is disappeared.

In Keegan’s account, the tongue becomes a prosthesis that transforms racialized bodies into exceptional transnormative bodies. The tongue “pieces” rather than passes. Following Puar (46), I understand piecing as “the commodification not of wholeness of rehabilitation but of plasticity, crafting parts from wholes, bodies without and

with new organs. Piecing thus appears transgressive when in fact it is constitutive not only of transnormativity but also of aspects of neoliberal market economies." In light of this, it could be asked which tongues are debilitated and broken and which tongues are capacitated and incorporated in and as the body of futurity. And further, how the former conditions and is required by the latter.

In the Finnish context, for example, the language skill of immigrants is considered as both a problem of, and a solution to integration. Most Finnish integration programmes for immigrants last 240 days and focus on Finnish language acquisition. However, according to the recent parliament audit committee report, some integration processes take five to seven years or even longer. Even in cases where one has quickly learned the Finnish language, the 'problem' of accents continues to function as a marker for foreignness and/as incapacity, and justifies, for example, labor market discrimination. In many cases, immigrants are asked to take other educational programs or take temporary low-paid training practices (in order to secure subsidies) after they have completed the integration program. In public discussions and political debates in Finland, the should-be integrated immigrants are said to be trapped in a vicious circle. That is, the lack of good Finnish skill is the obstacle to enter the labor market, but the workplace is considered as the best and sometimes the only place to practice Finnish. In view of this, the integration process could be considered as the in-between space of debilitation and containment, whose border is felt in and through the accented tongue—always excessive and lacking.

The tongue as a border could be read in terms of everyday bordering. As Nira Yuval-Davis, Georgie Wemyss, and Kathryn Cassidy (2) write: "Everyday 'bordering and ordering' practices create and recreate new social-cultural boundaries which are spatial in nature [...] [and] are, in principle being carried out by anyone anywhere—government agencies, private companies and individual citizens." And as Gargi Bhattacharyya makes clear, these borders typically fold together economic interests and cultural identities, and are constitutive of anti-migrant and anti-minority discourses in the contemporary world. In the case of accented speaking subjects, the broken tongue registers the "cut of and for racism" and of the "different spatializing regimes of the body" (Puar 55), which intersects with the process through which capitalism establishes differential access to economic activity and resources.

Viewing bordering practices in terms of differentiation more generally, it is important to note that the process of severing the inside from the outside, and self from other, goes hand in hand with practices of differentiation and fragmentation within. As Puar (21–2) writes,

Intense oscillation occurs between the following: subject/object construction and micro-states of differentiation; difference between and difference within; the policing of profile and the patrolling of affect; will and capacity; agency and affect; subject and body.

Puar's observation of the imbricated workings of discipline and control societies is echoed in Bhattacharyya's (3551) assertion of the ways in which the "machinic fragmentation" is coupled with the "attempt to fix and order bodies under the gaze of securitizing processes." The parched and broken tongue functions both as a border and as the process of fragmentation and dispersion that supplement the operation of borders, all the while as it undoes any received wholeness, such as the wholeness of language, of the tongue, of the body. Importantly, as Puar and Bhattacharyya both suggest, insofar as racism, imperialism, and capitalism operate through the differentiation of populations, the double process of locating/bordering and displacing/dispersing that takes the shape of the stammering tongue presents both the inescapability of racial capitalism and its limitations. Recall that in Kim's poem, the shameful of the "unruly Korean accent" is felt as a border filled with suffocating silence and emptiness. It is the sedimented effect of histories of racialization and oppression that contours the body and demarcates its inside from its outside. And yet, the shameful (m)other tongue also disintegrates itself and dissolves the bodily, spatial, and temporal boundaries so that the other (m)other(ed) tongues are re-membered.

From a slightly different perspective, however, it seems that racial capitalism is inescapable, for it remains unclear whether and how disjointed moments such as the stammer of the tongue disrupts the workings of differentiation, exploitation, expropriation, and extraction, and to what extent. Critically engaging with post-Fordist debt economy and consumerism, Bhattacharyya (3317–26) notes that capitalism of our time brings together coercion and desire "so that fear and the wish to escape become so intertwined and mutually confirming that they often cannot be distinguished." But perhaps the question whether and how to transform racial capitalism, understood as the enactment of what racial capitalism is *not*, needs to be reconsidered. For Puar, thinking through debility is precisely to rework the oppositional logic that informs the prescriptive politics of liberal rights frameworks and to imagine the political otherwise.

### **Country Games, middle passages, and anagrammatical blackness**

Diaspora is a name that I inherited one time I visited home in the early 2000s. I was at a bar talking to an old friend from high school, when a man who had been listening to us hailed me by that name, "*Iwe* (you), Diaspora!" I left Zimbabwe to study in the United States when I was sixteen years old. By the time that I was eight (then living in neighboring Botswana with my family), I understood that while I was from Zimbabwe, my world and its aspirations would be larger than those borders. My father directed aspirations in my direction that would lead me elsewhere, always and it did not seem particularly unpatriotic to imagine a life in Europe, or the United States as a part of what it means to also be upwardly mobile and totally national in the 1980s and 1990s.

In the opening pages of her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), Christina Sharpe offers a definition of opportunity that I felt, in my gut, as a key relationship to borders within such a national frame:

*Opportunity*: from the Latin *Ob-*, meaning “toward,” and *portu(m)*, meaning “port:” What is opportunity in the wake, and how is opportunity always framed? This, of course, is not wholly, or even largely, a Black US phenomenon. This kind of movement happens all over the Black diaspora from and in the Caribbean and the continent to the metropole, the US great migrations of the early to mid-twentieth century that saw millions of Black people moving from the South to the North, and those people on the move in the contemporary from points all over the African continent to other points on the continent and also to Germany, Greece, Lampedusa. Like many of these Black people on the move, my parents discovered that things were *not* better in this “new world:” the subjections of constant and overt racism and isolation continued. (Sharpe 3–4)

The well-canonized account in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* (1988) offers a lens into this relation to national space and time. The protagonist Tambudzai and her cousin/mirror Nyasha, experience a way of being in place, and not in place through various geographies or borders of lived and discursive experience. The border here, a set of complexities and opportunities related to “colonial education, class formation, and traditional patriarchy” that materialize in “Nyasha’s anorexic body [which] remains the tragic junction between discourse and its embodiment” (Musila 51). The connections between Nyasha’s experience of language and material of her body reveal the connections Xin Liu makes between language and the mattering of race. First published in 1988, the Zimbabwean nation seemed bound geographically through the discursive attachments that Katherine McKittrick (xi) describes as those that prioritise “stasis and physicality, [as] the idea that space ‘just is,’” and towards an optimistic progressive relation to time.

It is from this place that I would like to consider “the wake,” what Sharpe offers us as a problem for thought, of thinking as caring, or of “work that insists and performs that thinking needs care” (5). From this premise, *In the Wake* opens with a personal account of Sharpe’s (8) life as “the personal here connect[s] the social forces of a particular family’s being in the wake to those of all Black people in the wake,” and the personal in this book is offered through Saidiya Hartman’s (7) notion of the “autobiographical example,” which is “to tell a story capable of engaging and countering the violence of abstraction.”

The wake, as I hear Sharpe presents us with a set of temporal relations against the geography of national time. For instance, when Sharpe (9) writes that “in the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always to rupture the present,” this statement is reminiscent of Pumla Gqola’s attention to how collective memory is made and used; as Gqola (7) adds, “the relationship of historiography to memory is one

of containments: history is always part of memory whilst history delineates a certain kind of knowledge system within the terrain of memory." I use re-memorying through Gqola's (8) visit of Toni Morrison's play with the word memory, "reassembled in [Morrison's] 're-memory' or 'memorying,' where events and knowledges are 'memoried,' 'memoryed,' 'remembered' and 're-memoried.' Morrison's word range implies a much wider field than simply collection, recollection and recalling, and it is in itself a commentary on the (dis)junctures between memory and history, working as it does not only against forgetting but also what Gqola calls 'unremembering.'"

Country Game is something that I grew up playing with my cousins at our grandmother's house. My sisters and cousins and I would draw large circles into the earth with sticks, under the avocado tree. We played for hours, competing with the names America, Russia, China, Zambia. Gogo would shout for us to play more quietly, since the large tree stood adjacent to the back rooms where her lodgers lived. I had forgotten about this game, until I was teaching NoViolet Bulawayo's novel, *We Need New Names* (2013), in an undergraduate course on the ways power appears or is performed in post-independence Africa. The novel is told from the perspective of children in an unnamed country that looks a lot like Zimbabwe. The protagonist, Darling, and the other children named Bastard, Chipso, Godknows, Sbho, and Stina have been moved into an informal settlement called Paradise, giving the reader the sense that this book set in Zimbabwe, against the backdrop of Operation Murambatsvina, when in 2005 the government cleared people out of urban areas from their homes and businesses in an effort to 'clean up' the cities (see Vambe). There is historical precedent for operations like this from the colonial period (see Barnes), so rather than to view this as an event, it seems better to consider Operation Murambatsvina as a "status unto itself," continuous with the logics of the ongoingness of settler colonialism as articulated by Xin Liu. The children now live in shacks in Paradise, and they all talk about the futures they imagine, as they steal guavas to eat from the neighboring suburb named Budapest.

Bulawayo's novel has received some criticism because of the ways that she represents the crisis in Zimbabwe (see Ndlovu), and in particular in the ways the perspective of these children and their language is framed. Silindiwe Sibanda goes as far as saying that the novel relies on racist stereotypes of black abjection. For me, the scenes Sibanda describes instead are a status unto itself, and it is also precisely in the scenes Sibanda references that the critical sharpness of the children's commentary swallows language against flat illustrations of a racist stereotype. Critics, most of all, note that the novel is characteristic of what has been described as 'Third Generation African Literature' with its emphasis on "diasporic identity, migration, transnationality, globalization and a diminished concern with the colonial past" (Krishnan 74). For Madhu Krishnan, it is not a severing from the colonial past, or a lack of national commitment as she understands it, but rather that this generation

of writers present us with “plural space of national commitment” (74) and a “variability of modes of engagement with the imagined community of the nation” (94). This plural space is already evident in the ways the children speak; their language is ‘broken’ and ‘parched’ in the ways that Xin Liu describes. Making reference to the opening line of a poem in Kim’s (39) essay, “The Parched Tongue”—“Thought that English gave me a power that I can’t reach”—Xin Liu’s parched tongue is the double movement of displacement and relocation; is the double movement of repression and transformation.

This plural space responds to “our narratively condemned status” (Wynter 70), in the ways that it potentially wakes us up. For Sharpe (14), “*To be ‘in’ the wake, to occupy that grammar, [where] [...] rather than seeking resolution to blackness’s ongoing and irresolvable abjection one might approach Black being in the wake as a form of consciousness*” (emphasis in original). In Sharpe’s (16) sense, the/these plural spaces of the wake, the ship, the hold, and the weather, are what enables us to “recognize the ways that we are constituted through and by continued vulnerability to overwhelming force though not *only* to ourselves and to each other *by* that force.”

The middle section of *We Need New Names* is a very short chapter, a middle passage of sorts between Darling’s life in Zimbabwe and her life in the United States titled “How They Left” that begins:

Look at them leaving in droves, the children of the land, just look at them leaving in droves. Those with nothing are crossing borders. Those with strength are crossing borders. Those with ambitions are crossing borders. Those with hopes are crossing borders. Those with loss are crossing borders. Those in pain are crossing borders. Moving, running, emigrating, going, deserting, walking, quitting, flying, fleeing—to all over, to countries near and far, to countries unheard of, to countries whose names they cannot pronounce. They are leaving in droves. (Bulawayo 145)

This middle passage has been at the heart of some of Bulawayo’s keenest critics (see Harris), as it makes the central event of the novel the border between Darling’s life in Zimbabwe and her life in the United States. As a question of form, the centrality of this event has been meant that the novel has been understood to fit the description of the “extroverted African novel” (see Julien).

One of the interesting aspects of form in the middle passage of Bulawayo’s novel is that, unlike the dialogue between the children, or the accounts of experience we hear in Darling’s narrative voice, “How They Left” is written in the third person and the language is not broken. The second half of the novel takes a more autobiographical tone from Darling’s perspective: here her tongue is parched, her tenacity subdued. Yet, more generally, the broken tongue seems a feature of the Middle Passage. I am thinking about the Middle Passage, through the lens of the *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the Africa, written by Himself* (1789), where in



his account of the middle passage on the ship the loss of mother tongue is continuous with his subjection into chattel, a disorienting loss of the self; but also a practice of tongues that shapes the form of the slave narrative/autobiography.

As Lisa Lowe (46) contends, the relationship between liberalism and colonialism produced literary and cultural genres and the autobiography and novel both play important work in “mediating and resolving liberalism’s contradictions.” The autobiography, as Lowe notes, is the liberal genre par excellence. While articulating the loss of freedom/loss of tongue, Olaudah Equiano/Gustavas Vassa’s narrative:

stylized the so-called transition from slavery to freedom and dramatized a conversion from chattel to liberal subject that once negotiated the voices of abolitionism and slave resistance and mediated the logics of coloniality in which trade in people and goods connected Africa, plantation Virginia, the colonial West Indies, and metropolitan England. It exemplified a fluency in the languages for defining and delimiting humanity, from liberal political philosophy and Christian theology, to the mathematical reason necessary for economy, trade and navigation. (48–9)

The narrative achieves this, but also presents moments of metalepsis, which are “moments when there is an interruption of one time by another, when there is a transgression between the ‘world *in* which one tells and the world *of* which one tells,’” (Genette 54; emphasis in original). Lowe’s analysis is the present time/place of ‘Europe,’ as she maps the emergence of an Anglo-American empire, in the work’s examination of the relationships between Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas.

In the chapter, “The Hold,” Sharpe draws the connection between the tongue and this middle passage, through her reading of the M. NourbeSe Phillip’s book-long poem *Zong!* (2008), which retells the story of the 150 Africans who were massacred on 29 November 1871 by order of the captain of the ship named Zong. On the ship there is a failing, ripping apart of language:

Language has deserted the tongue that is thirsty, it has deserted the tongues of those captive on board because the slave ship *Zong* whose acquisition of new languages articulates the language of violence in the hold; the tongue struggles to form the new language; the consonants, vowels, and syllables spread across the page. [...] Language disintegrates. Thirst dissolves language. (Sharpe 69)

The ‘Middle Passage’ and the slave ship are the scenes for the invention and articulation of Black modernity as it has most authoritatively been presented in Paul Gilroy’s 1993 account. Scholars like Yogita Goyal note the ways that, in this account, the territory of Africa itself is not only written out of the emergence of Black modernity, specifically prioritising the territory of the north Atlantic, but another effect is that the emergence of the African novel is also restricted not only to the national imaginary, but to a geography bound to that history. That is, the territory of the African novel, as

an articulation of an African modernity, not only inherits a well-critiqued heterosexist masculinity in its form (see Osinubi), but the “narrative romance” (in Scott’s terms) of the borders of the nation in the most recent events of anti-colonial struggles are articulated as the legitimate space/time of the nation. Diaspora, in the name of this account of the middle passage, is that which is beyond those borders of territory.

In Sharpe’s (70) ‘hold,’ it is departures and arrivals, where language breaks, like in the case of Equiano/Vassa that those in those territories, or time/spaces of diaspora, where we experience the “residence time of the hold, its long *durée*.” Sharpe (70) continues, “the first language the keepers of the hold use on the captives is the language of violence: the language of sore and heat, the language of the gun and the gun butt, the foot and the fist, the knife and the throwing overboard. And in the hold, mouths open, say, thirsty.” “The Hold” is the story of *Zong!* as it is also the story of Calais (71–2), is the belly of the ship, and the birth canal, also placed in prison cells in Lilongwe (76), is a geography of the middle passage that skips over the dominance of Gilroy’s territory, just as it closes Europe’s territory and the history of its containments. As Sharpe (83) offers in this chapter, “the hold as it appears in Calais, Toronto, New York City, Haiti, Lampedusa, Tripoli, Sierra Leone, Bayreuth, and so on.” Sharpe’s hold articulates the middle passage as Paradise, as Budapest, and as DestroyedMichygen.

*We Need New Names* is a novel about thirsty tongues and dissolved language, in the way that Polo Moji (180) reads it as a novel that helps us to define transnational subjectification as a translational process. She offers the leitmotif of [re]naming, which is her method for reading the broken English in the novel. Moji also notes Bulawayo’s own re-naming, as she grew up as Elizabeth Tshele in Zimbabwe, re-naming herself NoViolet (the ‘no’ connoting ‘with’ in Ndebele, Violet the name of her mother) Bulawayo (the second largest city in Zimbabwe, where she grew up). These translations, Moji (189) argues, articulate the “dissonance of being trapped in a never-ending process of translation.”

Xin Liu draws the connection between the shameful accent and Kim’s relationship to food, this mirroring the hunger in Dangarembga’s Nyasha. In Darling’s case, even while in America, her memories of Paradise fill all the spaces of her present, so even when she describes how much food there is to eat, she doesn’t feel the same hunger and talks about filling her stomach with guavas still, like in Paradise. Instead she fills herself with TV, so on days off of school she sits with her cousin TK and watches pornography while Aunt Fostalina and Uncle Kojo are at work. The television seems to act in the place that food plays in Kim, and how Darling collaborates with the ways that her tongue marks her difference. Across the cases of Nyasha, Darling, and Kim, there is a collaboration with the body, which in Lauren Berlant’s (136) words “makes it a gift that keeps on giving. But gives only to her, meanwhile confirming its social negation with bodily grossness. That the two negatives of solipsism and

hideousness do not make a positive here means that the rhythm of this process sets up an alternative way for self-interpretation to make something of negation." Darling's stammering is present before and after the geography of Paradise; it is a mapping of Zimbabwean/diaspora that confronts the territory of the African novel, in a logic that outruns some of its readers.

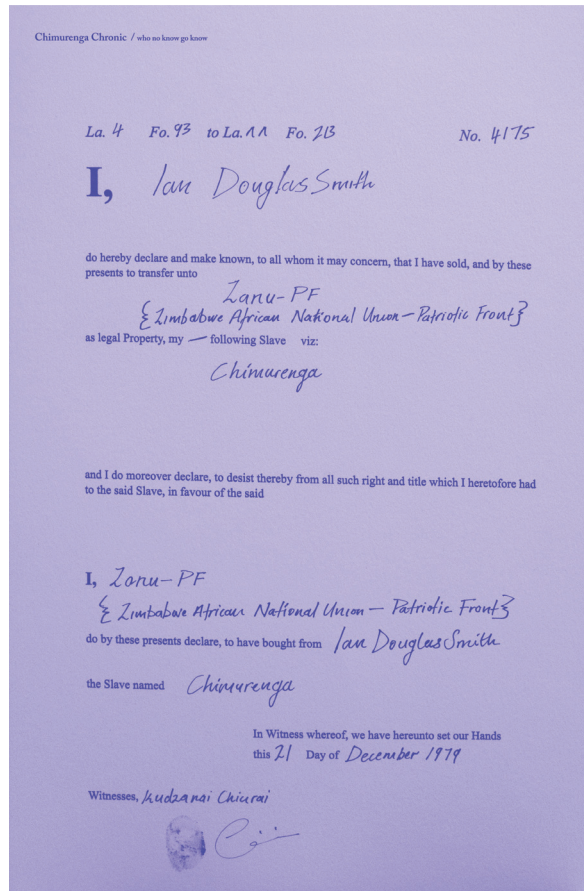


Figure 1: Cover, *Chimurenga Chronic* April 2018, Kudzanai Chiurai

In 2018, the *Chimurenga Chronic*, a Pan-African literary magazine, published an issue, here a collective account, or re-memorying of the coup-not-coup titled *The Invention of Zimbabwe*. The cover of the issue is a 'map' made up by Zimbabwean artist Kudzanai Chiurai, whose work is often multimedia, but also often includes photographic forms (see Figure 1). The image is a form Chiurai found in the national archives in Cape Town. The form does the work of re-memorying the history of slavery in the Cape Colony, but also re-articulates the national territory

with its reminders about movements of bodies and objects prior to the national moments and their territorial boundaries in Southern Africa. Chiurai fills in the form, in an act of annotation/redaction to re-mark, or re-stage the territory of Zimbabwe's national romance. Chiurai's revised contract, to mark/map the moment of Zimbabwe's independence revises an event that is most often marked in relation to a transfer of land as property, to that of the figure of the Slave. The Slave here is Chimurenga, the name given to the various anti-colonial movements that led up to the declaration of an independent state—but also to the various moments of revising nationalist history since. Chiurai's comment here is on the hijacking of Chimurenga by ZANU-PF. The contract is signed between individuals, so all, excluding the subject the Slave who is bought and sold, speak collective wishes (for imperialism, for freedom, for failure) in the subject 'I.' In my understanding, colonialism's imperative to turn the relation between land and persons to a relation of property, has had the effect of then turning the relation of person to a property relation, which is at the heart of liberalism's goal/assumption and articulation of freedom. Chiurai gives us the Slave/Chimurenga who does not speak in this contract rather than the country as our territory. Chiurai's map splits time, folds it, jumps it, and swallows it in Xin Liu's terms.

I find Chiurai's map and its subject, the Slave, to share a connection with what Sharpe (76) describes when she notes that blackness is anagrammatical: "That is, we can see moments when blackness opens up into the anagrammatical in the literal sense as when 'a word, phrase, or name is formed by rearranging the letters of another' (citing the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online*). Chiurai rearranges with this form, in the ways that Sharpe describes, revising this contract to make absent, make present the things we are not allowed to read about the nation and its time. This contract fits Sharpe's (20–1) description of the "orthography of the wake" an orthography that "makes the domination in/visible and not/visceral. This orthography is an instance of what [she] is calling the Weather; it registers and produces the conventions of antiblackness in the present and into the future." Chiurai's work in this example avoids the photograph of Africans that are often annotated with a note that responds to "a dehumaning photography [...] [where here] annotation appears like that asterisk, which itself an annotation mark, that marks the trans\*formation into ontological blackness" (116). Chiurai here annotates and redacts, in the ways that asks us to see and read otherwise, "toward reading and seeing something in excess of what is caught in the frame" (117).

Rudo Mudiwa's essay, "Feeling Precarious," begins with her account of being watched by riot police in Harare in August of 2016. That day, just as crowds have been gathering in protest in 2019, people were gathered to protest the difficult conditions they were facing. As they marched towards the Minister of Finance, people were singing Chimurenga songs:

the songs allow us to rupture space and time, placing us in the bodies of young guerrillas in the 1960s who anticipated their deaths far away from home as they fought to bring the new nation into being. And then we travel further back into time and chant Nehanda's mythical last words as she died at the hands of the British South Africa Company in 1898: "Tora gidi uzvitonge." Pick up the gun so you can rule yourself. (Mudiwa 80)

The riot police would later meet them with tear gas and batons against the flesh. In September that same year she was in a kombi, the driver playing Biggie Smalls on his radio. The driver suddenly felt suspicious about "the amount of people he saw standing around [...] He shook his head and muttered, 'Ka weather aka kanokonze-resa' [This weather will cause something to happen]" (85).

"Ka-Weather" was that sign in the stomach that gave him a sense of what was to follow, of knowledge the driver had imprinted on the flesh as Mudiwa describes it. Mudiwa's reflections are written besides four images from Chiurai's work, *Revelations* (2011), where men as guerrillas/Chimurenga stand in shiny spectacular ruins, images that mirror the forms of ordinary/not ordinary violence that is structured into Bulawayo's novel. Across their account they speak an "archive of breathlessness" (Sharpe 109) that I feel in my name, "Diaspora." As Sharpe (109) offers, wake work is aspiration, where aspiration is defined

in the complementary senses of the word: the withdrawal of fluid from the body *and* the taking in of foreign matter (usually fluid) into the lungs with the respiratory current, *and* as *audible breath* that accompanies or comprises a speech sound. Aspiration here, doubles, trebles in the same way that with the addition of an exclamation point [...] that exclamation point breaks the word into song/ moan/ chant/ shout/ breath.

Bulawayo's use of the child aspires in this way, it is the perspective of the child, it redacts in this way.

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# INTERVIEW

## Translation as conversation: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o in Euskara

### Natasha Himmelman & Fernando Barrena

Natasha Himmelman *es una investigadora y educadora puertorriqueña/Latinx cuir*. She is currently based at the University of the Witwatersrand’s Department of African Literature.

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Fernando Barrena is an accomplished translator. He was part of the first editorial team at Txalaparta, an independent Basque publishing house where he worked as Euskara Editor.

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In 2018, from the Nuyorican Poets Café to the Auckland Writers Festival, we celebrated Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. And before the year came to a close, James Currey released *Ngũgĩ: Reflections on His Life of Writing* (2018), edited by Simon Gikandi and Ndirangu Wachanga. Indeed, it seems that honoring eight decades of the esteemed author could not be contained within a single year. Celebrations have continued into 2019, particularly with Ngũgĩ’s return to Kenya and the launch of his 34<sup>th</sup> book, *Kenda Mũiyũru: Rũgano rwa Gikũyũ na Mũmbi* (2019) (*The Perfect Nine: The Story of Gikuyu and Mumbi*). 2018 also marked 30 years of Txalaparta, “*una editorial vasca, libre e independiente*” (a Basque publisher, free and independent) (Txalaparta).<sup>1</sup> Based in Navarre and committed to “*la soberanía cultural e informativa de nuestro país, Euskal Herria*” (the cultural and knowledge sovereignty of Euskal Herria), the independent publisher works “*ser altavoz de cualquier creación literaria que mejore la relación entre los pueblos del mundo, que ayude a transformar la realidad, que guarde la memoria histórica, que abra caminos a la diversidad, a las utopías*” (to amplify any literary work that improves the relationship between the villages of the world, that helps to transform reality, that safeguards historical memory, that opens pathways to diversity, to utopias) (Txalaparta). It is this commitment and vision that inspired Txalaparta to publish an Euskara translation of Ngũgĩ’s *Weep Not, Child* (1964)—*Negarrik ez, haurra* (1994).

This year, we celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that translation. Fernando Barrena remembers his time as Txalaparta editor and translator, speaking with excitement about his introduction to Ngũgĩ’s work and African literature. With humor, he locates this labor at a time before social media, describing a kind of intellectual and cultural isolation that inspired a commitment to bring ideas, experiences, and knowledges to the Spanish market and to Euskal Herria.

Joining Txalaparta’s founders—José Mari Esparza and Juanjo Marco—as Euskara Editor, Barrena was part of the first editorial team. The publisher describes these early years, explaining:

*En aquel tiempo, levanta una editorial comprometida, progresista, independiente y vasco no*

*era fácil. La transición había hecho desaparecer muchos sellos comprometidos con lo social y lo político, y el mercado del libro se iba concentrando en cada vez menos manos. De las librerías habían desaparecido hasta los libros del Che Guevara. En el Estado apenas había libros vascos. A eso había que sumar la situación política vasca y las consecuencias de apostar por un relato propio: procesos judiciales, multas, biocots, amenazas [...]*

At that time, launching a committed, progressive, independent, and Basque publishing house was not easy. The transition meant that many socially and politically committed presses had disappeared and that increasingly, the book market became concentrated into few hands. The books of Che Guevara had disappeared from bookstores. In Spain, there were hardly any Basque books. In addition, the Basque political situation and the consequences of betting on our own story: judicial processes, fines, boycotts, threats [...] (Txalaparta)

In response to this multi-layered and, many times, oppressive context, Txalaparta imagined new ways to engage and build its readership.

Today it has published nearly one thousand titles in Euskara and Castellano —“*libros que cambian personas que cambian el mundo*” (books that change people that change the world) (Txalaparta). Their catalogue includes work by African authors such as Samir Amin, Amílcar Cabral, Paulina Chiziane, Nawal el Saadawi, Ellen Kuzwayo, and Naguib Mahfouz (Txalaparta). Their dedication to translation legitimizes ways of being and knowing that resist a single, coherent or monolithic national subjectivity. And, in the case of Euskara in particular, translation has the potential to undercut the notion of a united (European) Spain.

Famously, in “A Statement” prefacing *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngũgĩ (xiii) announced his “farewell to English,” hopeful that with “the age-old medium of translation [he] shall be able to continue dialogue with all.” Over the years, he has reconceived, reassessed, experimented, and reaffirmed his commitment to translation in his work. As Director of the International Center for Writing and Translation (ICWT) at the University of California, Irvine, he worked with writers, scholars, artists, and translators, imagining what “translation as conversation” could look like (Rodrigues 162). Txalaparta’s work demonstrates what is possible.

NH: *How did Txalaparta decide to translate and work with African literature in general and Ngũgĩ’s work in particular?*

PB: We became aware of the richness of African literature through contacts we, as publishers, made at the Frankfurt Book fair in the early nineties. We became familiar with writers like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Artur Pestana (Pepetela), Ken Saro-Wiwa, Ellen Kuzwayo, Chinua Achebe, Naguib Mahfuz, Nadine Gordimer, Bessie Head [...]



We became familiar with these authors after our first trips to the Frankfurt Fair. After that, we went to London, to Charing Cross, and visited the excellent bookstores there. There were dozens of authors published in English that were completely unknown to the Basque and Spanish public. I remember that we came back home with dozens of books. I must underline that this happened at the beginning of the nineties: no internet, no mobiles [...]

NH: *In Negarrik ez, haurra, who did you imagine as your audience? What role do you think the publisher has in determining audience?*

PB: My audience is Basque speakers interested in postcolonial literature, particularly African literature.

Txalaparta is a progressive publisher that works with authors that offer more than good writing. As a result, it is a referential publisher for those looking for literature and writers engaged with progressive values.

Txalaparta's audience is a good one for Ngũgĩ's work and its message, quite similar to Ngũgĩ's audience.

NH: *In the same year that Weep Not, Child was published in Euskara, Txalaparta published Devil on the Cross in Castellano. Why do you think Weep Not, Child was chosen for translation into Euskara?*

PB: I think that the storytelling with *Weep Not, Child* is quite a universal story. It powerfully reflects the profound effects of colonization, especially in the history of education and the profound effects colonial education has on people.

While the situation here is completely different, some concepts reflected in the work are universal, and we thought that they were going to be very well understood by our public, which strongly values education. Even under Franco's dictatorship before 1975, there was a strong movement here that stood for education in Basque. The will of the people sought an education of our own, an education offered in the local language, in Basque, and then the education that should be based in the Basque curricula, you know? *Weep Not, Child* is focused very much on education and this was one of the points that made us aware of the viability of this book and its potential to be well understood by the reader.

Overall, the struggle that appears among the main characters in the book is quite universal and we were confident that it would speak to our readers.

NH: *In many ways, Txalaparta's commitment to translation speaks to discussions about language in African literature. Ngũgĩ's works, in particular, privileges translation. Are you familiar with these conversations? How do you think it might resonate with your Euskara-language audiences?*

PB: Well, it is the same debate all around the world when small local languages strive to survive by confronting imperial languages like English, French, Spanish, or others. The Basque community has also confronted this big debate: is literature written in Spanish by Basques, Basque literature itself? How can you struggle against the power of an overwhelming language like Spanish from the weaker compared wealth of the Basque language (600 000 speakers)?

I think with regard to the need for postcolonial thinking in language and cultural matters, Ngũgĩ's *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986), which is also translated into Basque, is a landmark in this debate. His approach has been widely followed by Basque language activists who feel that it is an issue that applies to linguistics but also politics and individual and collective rights.

When *Decolonizing the Mind* was published here in the Basque Country, there was a review of the book in the newspaper that opened a small debate between different people on the principle ideas of Ngũgĩ's work. It was used to discuss a debate that has been part of our culture for years; it is a debate that we have ourselves. We are living in the middle of the powerful Spanish State in the south and the powerful French State in the north. In comparison, we are a small community in terms of inhabitants, language, culture, and so on. Some writers here are defending, or *were* defending at that moment, that if a Basque writer writes in Castellano, that literature cannot be considered Basque but is rather Spanish literature written by a Basque author. On the other hand, some writers argued for the inclusion of literature made by a Basque person, whether it be in Spanish or French. Focusing on the benefit of the integration of different visions within Basque culture, these writers asserted that there is more to gain from a more open understanding of how and what defines Basque literature. It is a very interesting discussion, and there's significant overlap with Ngũgĩ's approach and some of the central ideas in *Decolonizing the Mind*.

NH: *Given the significance of language in education and Basque literature, how does this orientation influence your translation of Ngũgĩ's novel?*

PB: Every language, and particularly small ones, brings its own cosmology. Basque cosmology offers the translation as a cultural bridge for the Basque reader.

In my own praxis, I focused on gathering information about the author, the work, and the historical context. Through my research, I became very sympathetic to Ngũgĩ's point of view, and I'd say that more than language, my connection to his stance was more influential to the final art.

NH: *Recognizing the diversity within Basque, are there other languages, like Biscayan or Gipuzkoan, in your translation?*

PB: No. Most of the translation work into Basque is done into “standard” or “unified” Basque. *Negarrik ez, haurra* is not an exception.

NH: *Celebrating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of your translation and 30 years of Txalaparta, how do you think perceptions of Africa have changed over the years?*

PB: The African continent is not far from here. You have to cross southbound on the Spanish State and in 1000 kilometers you can be in Africa, across the Strait of Gibraltar. Because of that proximity, we have thousands of people who have come here in the last years from North Africa, mainly people from Morocco and Algeria.

Therefore, I would say that it is quite normal and familiar to know people from Morocco or Algeria. But I would say that despite knowing that people from North Africa are Africans and we know they come from North Africa, they do not represent what we have been trained to imagine as “African.” Within this imaginary, “black” itself means “African.” Of course, everybody knows that an Egyptian is an African or an Algerian is an African or a Sahrawi is an African, but it’s not the same.

I am 53 and I remember when we were children and when we saw somebody black in the street. I remember that my brother asked if that man was made of chocolate. We didn’t know there were black people. I would say that for the last decade, a lot of black people have come from different places, particularly Senegal and Equatorial Guinea. And yet, it’s quite a new thing—the presence of blackness here.

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### Notes

1. All translations into English are by Natasha Himmelman.

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### **Die laksman se dogter.**

Gerda Taljaard.

Kaapstad: Penguin Random House

Suid-Afrika, 2017. 270 pp.

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ePub: 978-1-4859-0312-3.

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Dit is haas onmoontlik om 'n verwickelde boek soos *Die laksman se dogter* deur Gerda Taljaard te parafraseer: deels raaiselfiksie, deels probleemroman, deels "weird fiction" (aldus Cochrane), deels familiesage, en deels "huishoudelike noir" (vergelyk Steinmair). Een manier om die roman te beskryf, is as 'n soeke na "*closure*". Rosaria Roux probeer sin maak van haar dogter, Annalisa, se skynbare selfdood. Was daar egter vuilspel betrokke? Is Annalisa dalk eerder vermoor? Leef sy selfs nog en is almal net 'n rat voor die oë gedraai?

Annalisa was 'n rebelse digter en rockster—'n fantastiese soort kruising tussen Ingrid Jonker en Pussy Riot, die Russies-feministiese punkgroep. Rosaria wonder in een stadium: "Wie is hierdie klein hedonistiese fascis?" (53), want Annalisa was ook 'n heroïenverslaafde. Dwelms sou uiteindelik die bron van talle verwyte en die groeiende verwydering

tussen haar en Rosaria word. Dit is veral pynlik om Annalisa se stelselmatige inploffing deur die oë van die moeder te sien uitspeel. Ek dink, om die ouer van 'n dwelmafhanglike te wees, is op sigself 'n soort hel, en Taljaard hanteer hierdie uiters sensitiewe onderwerp met groot deernis.

Ná haar sensasionele dood op die ouderdom van 27, word Annalisa (ofte wel "Dynamite", soos wat sy op die verhoog bekend gestaan het) tot die status van kultusfiguur verhef. Dit plaas haar, interessant genoeg, ook binne die sogenaamde "Forever 27 Club" wat bekendes soos Kurt Cobain, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix en Amy Winehouse insluit. Aan die hand van Dynamite se lewe, tragies kortgeknip, lewer die roman dus fel kritiek op die moordende rol van die media en die yslike tol wat roem dikwels van jongmense in die kalklig eis.

"LSD" verwys nie net na die dwelm-middel nie, dit is ook Annalisa se spitsvondige bynaam vir haar ma: 'n afkorting vir "Laksman Se Dogter" (28). Rosaria se pa was naamlik 'n tronkdokter wat soms die doodskoot vir terdood-veroordeeldes moes toedien. (Die eintlike beul was oom Karel de Swardt. Sy gestremde dogter, Hestertjie, met haar

bonatuurlike vermoëns van genesing (202), herinner onwillekeurig aan die film, *The Green Mile*.)

Die idee van laksmanenskap staan dus sentraal. Rosaria speel self later die rol van “laksman”: Sy pas eutanase op haar eie moeder toe (126–7) en oorweeg dit in een stadium baie sterk om dieselfde vir haar dogter te doen (254–5). Een van die interessantste aspekte van *Die Laksman se dogter*, is trouens die dwingende etiese vraagstukke betreffende selfdood, doodstraf, aborsie, en genadedood wat daarin geopper word.

Die dood is ’n konstante teenwoordigheid, ’n onheilspellende skadu, wat oor alles hang. (Eintlik hang dit oor Taljaard se hele oeuvre.) Vergelyk ook die motto, ’n aanhaling uit Ian McEwan se *The Cement Garden*: “At the back of my mind I had a sense of us sitting about waiting for some terrible event, and then I would remember that it had already happened.” Daardie vae onheilsgevoel bly ’n mens by, lank nadat die boek neergesit is.

Alhoewel *Die Laksman se Dogter* tematies betreklik swaar is, word dit met heelwat humor getemper. Vergelyk byvoorbeeld die biologiese take wat Rosaria moet nasien (“’n *Slak is bisexual en het ’n penis en ’n fagina*”) (23); die watervlek teen Rosaria se plafon wat op ’n druppel lyk soos Margaret Thatcher, “kompleet met blomkoolhaarstyl en overbite” (17) en ’n bondeltjie hondemis wat “merkwaardig baie soos die Taalmonument” lyk (237); die siniele Ouma By en haar vloekende spreeku (34); ’n “whites only” bordeel in Alexandra (169); Annalisa se ironiese

vraag, “Wie de fok is Johanna Brandt?” (73), wat later geëggo word wanneer iemand droogweg vra: “Wie de fok is Annalisa Roux?” (265).

Annalisa se dood dwing Rosaria om teen wil en dank haar komplekse familieverlede te konfronteer, en wanneer Marcella—die kleindogter waarvan Rosaria salig onbewus was—eendag uit die bloute in haar sorg beland (157), word ’n verdere laag by dié familierelaas gevoeg. Die stelletjie matrosjkapoppies wat Marcella vir Kersfees kry (219) word dus ’n betekenisvolle metafoor: nog ’n generasie, nog ’n laksman se dogter.

Die wyse waarop Rosaria se herinneringe en terugflitse telkens, naatloos, in haar eerstepersoonsvertelling ingevleg word, is werklik indrukwekkend. Bowenal is *Die laksman se dogter* ’n ryk, diggeweefde tapisserie van beelding. Daar is, eerstens, die deurlopende voëlmotief (waarvoor die keurige omslag reeds ’n belangrike betekenisdraende sleutel is, en waarmee die uitgewer gerus gelukkigewens kan word); menige simboliese verwysings na bome, blomme en plante (vernaam die verpletterende plataanboom wat destyds op Rosaria se ouerhuis geval het); ’n hele menagerie van diere insluitende Elvis, Annalisa se geliefde swart Labrador (167), Zamalek, Marcella se “larger than life” Great Dane (157), Asjas, Rosaria se kat (185), Beavis, ’n makgemaakte nonnetjiesuil (189), en Olga, die inwonende reënspinnekop (218); asook talle kosbeskrywings (veral Italiaanse kos—vergeelyk die roerende toneel (99–100) waarin haar Italiaanse nonna vir Rosaria ’n kosbare truffel braai.)

Verder is daar Rosaria se onaardse, dikwels makabere, nagmerries (7, 47–8, 105, 243–4) en plek-plek prikkelende musiekbeskrywings: Op bladsy 72 word ’n album van Grofgeskut (dit is die naam van Annalisa se rock-orkester) byvoorbeeld soos volg beskryf: “Sommige liedjies was nagmerrieagtig, ander eufories mooi en nostalgies, party karnavalesk en bedrieglik eenvoudig.”

My een minskule punt van kritiek is gerig op Vladlena, die Russiese vrou van Wim, Rosaria se eksman/Annalisa se pa. Dit is myns insiens onwaarskynlik dat ’n intelligente, sorgsame pa en minnaar soos Wim vir homself ’n internetbruid deur RussianCupid.com sou bestel het (93), en Vladlena skyn nie regtig noodsaaklik te wees vir die ontplooiing van die verhaal nie.

*Die laksman se dogter* is nietemin boeiend, fassinerend en meesterlik aanmekeerbaar. Dit is daarom geen verrassing nie—en uiters verblydend—dat die roman in 2018 met die kykNET-Rapport-filmprys vereer is (*LitNet*).

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#### Liefde in die tyd van die internet.

Fransi Phillips.

Kaapstad: Queillerie, 2018. 216 pp.

ISBN 9780795801686.

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“*Wat doen ek nou?*” vra die hoofkarakter Hanna in die laaste kwart van Fransi Phillips se nuwe roman. “*Jy ondergaan daardie ding wat optimistiese resesente karakterontwikkeling noem*, antwoord Phillips” (171). Dit is inderdaad wat gebeur, en die optimistiese resesent wonder wat sy self nog oor die roman kan sê, want Phillips ontnem die resesent van heelwat van haar argumentatiewe ammunisie deur haar inmenging in die teks. Fransi Phillips is op verskillende maniere aanwesig in haar roman—as outeur van die teks maar ook as ’n karakter wat interaksie het met die ander karakters, hulle aanmoedig en in die steek laat. Sy jok oor haar karakters, kla byvoorbeeld dat sy “nog nooit sulke kak hoofkarakters in ’n boek gehad (het) nie” (195), maar spot ook met haarself. Sy noem haarself “die middelmatige skrywer Fransi Phillips wie se bek so groot is op Facebook (21)” en terselfdertyd verwoord die karakter van Wolf<sup>79</sup> haar politieke oortuigings.

*Liefde in die tyd van die internet* speel met die formule van romantiese fiksie en word in die ondertitel ’n stadsprokie genoem, maar dit kan net so goed ook as ’n komplekse postmodernistiese

roman bekend staan. Daar is heelwat intertekstuele verwysings in en om die boek. Die titel laat ons natuurlik aan die roman van García Marquez dink en ook ander werke van Marquez word in die roman bespreek, saam met die klassieke Engelse outeurs. Daar is ook sekere parallelle met die roman *Super sad true love story* van die Russies-Amerikaanse skrywer Gary Shteyngart (2010), wat net soos Phillips met die grense van genres en lesersverwagtinge kan speel.

Die hoofkarakter Hanna—weer 'n Mélisande-tipe—is lief vir alles Belle Époque en dink haar siel sou beter gevaar in daardie tydperk. Daar is ooreenkomste met van Phillips se ander karakters en ook dalk met die skrywer self. Op 'n gegewe moment wonder Hanna “vir 'n oomblik hoekom Phillips haar nog nie met die karakter Mélisande uit Maeterlinck se *Pelléas et Mélisande* vergelyk het nie, iets wat sy tot vervelens toe met al haar vroulike karakters doen” (158). Opnuut 'n opmerking wat die optimistiese resensent sou gemaak het maar nou nie meer kan nie. Hanna het lang rooi hare, dra Doc Martensskoene en ouderwetse klere wat sy met antieke juwele kombineer. Aan die begin van die roman vind ons Hanna in 'n amper-slawe-verhouding met 'n prokureur wat haar oordag as persoonlike assistent betaal en snags misbruik vir sy gewelddadige seksfantasieë. “Die shrink probeer tevergeefs om vir Hanna te oortuig dat sy nie 'n hoer is nie,” (7) lui die eerste sin van die roman. Die hulpeloosheid van Hanna laat die leser nogal dink aan Anastasia Steele, en die

mans wat sy kies (of wat Phillips vir haar kies) is nie ver van die manipulerende Mr. Grey af nie.

Maar toe besluit Hanna om uit hierdie situasie te ontsnap en Engels as 'n vreemde taal te gaan aanbied in Rusland. Sy slaag daarin om die prokureur vir die kursus te laat betaal en gebruik sy verloofring om 'n vliegkaartjie te koop. Dis egter nie lank nie voor Hanna weer in 'n onewewigtige verhouding betrokke raak met 'n dominante man. Wolf79, vir wie sy lesse in General English en Business English deur Skype aanbied, is 'n skeepsmagnaat van Sochi wat sprekend soos Rudolf Nureyev lyk en geoefende Margaret Thatcher-Engels praat (72). Hy is gewoon daaraan om besluite te neem vir almal en probleme met sy vuiste op te los. Dit duur nie lank nie voor hulle in 'n verhouding is en Wolf79 soos 'n egte Russiese macho man besluite neem vir en oor Hanna: “nou moet jy op die leerbank gaan lê, want ek wou altyd 'n vrou steek wat niks anders as so 'n slawe-armband aanhet nie, en jy is daardie vrou” (150).

*Liefde in die tyd van die internet* is 'n humoristiese boek vol absurditeite. Een van die bronne van hilariteit is die oorfloed Russiese stereotipes. Daar is oral ikone, matryoshkas, samowars, pelsmusse, woude, wilde honde, Fabergé-eiers, kerkklokke, en babushkas wat goed in die metrostasies verkoop. Wanneer Hanna verkoue kry, gee die dokter Anatoly Panteleev vir haar “vier botteltjies vodka met bitter kruie wat sy moet gorrel maar nie moet insluk nie voordat sy weet hoe om vodka te drink

nie" (113). Phillips maak gebruik van bestaande feite, plekke en mense en skep 'n heeltemal nuwe wêreld waar realiteit, surrealiteit en fiksie saamsmelt. Hanna self sê sy voel "onwerklik, soos in 'n flik of 'n storie" (151).

Dit alles word geskryf in 'n eienaardige kombinasie van gesproke Afrikaans (met heelwat vloekwoorde) en 'n ryk woordeskat. Phillips maak gebruik van onmoontlike vergelykings en vreemde uitdrukings wat nog verder die surrealistiese beelde wat sy vir haar lesers skep, benadruk. Sy beskryf die omgewing in Moskou byvoorbeeld as "'n soort polsende ritme wat effens vinniger is as die maatslag van Barok-musiek, gebaseer op die klop van perdehoewe wat 'n koets trek" (144–5).

Die roman is slim, snaaks en lees maklik, maar partykeer kry 'n mens die gevoel dat dit net te veel is, en dat die filosofie in die weg kom van die storie.

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## Ys.

Rudie van Rensburg.  
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Ys (2018) is Rudie van Rensburg se sesde bydrae tot die steeds groeiende genre van misdaadfiksie in Afrikaans.

Die proloog dek met die intrapslag die tafel: 'n Onbekende man word die slagoffer van 'n sluipmoordaanval, iewers naby die Noordpool (vergelyk proloog). Dit skep onmiddellik 'n onweerstaanbare raaisel: die leser wonder wie hy is/was, en waarheen die "bloedspoor" sal lei. 'n Lyk op die eerste bladsy is tipies van die konvensionele speurverhaal, maar Ys kan miskien meer geredelik as spanningsfiksie getipeer word aangesien die identiteit en motiewe van die skurke relatief kort daarna verklap word.

Die proloog sluit ook aan by die romantitel en wys vooruit na die sentrale tema of aktualiteit van ekologiese bewaring, spesifiek die bedreiging van die Arktiese ysvelde weens onverantwoordelike mynbedrywighede. Soos verwag kan word, is "ys" 'n herhalende motief en die bron van talle woordspelings, vergelyk "op 'n ysige afstand" (41), "yskoud" (257), "ysige beklemming" (265), "stukkie ys" (347), en "yslike skandaal" (349). Ys-verwysings is gelukkig dun genoeg gesaai dat dit nie hinder nie.

Intussen bevind die helde hulle aan die anderkant van die aardbol: Kaptein Kassie Kasselmann, wie se allitererende naam aan lesers van Van Rensburg se werk bekend sal wees, en sy jarelange kollega, sersant Rooi Els, is een van drie speurduo's by die nuutgevormde "Spookeenheid" van die SAPD. Hul nuwe bevelvoerder, brigadier Shaheena Fortuin, is aanvanklik skepties oor Kassie en Kie. se vermoëns, maar sy word verkeerd bewys.

Een les wat Ys inhou, is trouens om



nie 'n boek op sy baadjie te takseer nie, want agter Kassie se vaal voorkoms skuil 'n kranige speurder: Shaheena beskou dalk Kassie se turkoois sweetpak as "die lelikste klere wat sy in haar hele lewe gesien het" (230), maar hy en Rooi los uiteindelik nie net die saak op nie, hulle red ook haar lewe. Kassie deel verder sekere ooreenkomste met die argetipiese hardebaardspeurder soos sy beskeie, stoïsynse houding en sy wrang, humoristiese *one liners*: "'Fok jou arm,' sê Kassie" (323); "Dis 'n bleddie understatement" (325); "Wat 'n moerse seldsame verskynsel is, wil Kassie sê, maar hy hou hom in" (327).

Myns insiens is dit veral die ryk versameling skurke en booswigte wat die kollig steel, en wie se paaië op verrassende wyses kruis. Daar is eerstens die gewetenlose Amerikaanse senator, Jack MacArthur, wat sterk herinner aan die ewe magshonger Frank Underwood van die televisiereeks, *House of Cards*. Soos Underwood, skroom MacArthur nie om sy teenstanders koelbloedig uit die weg te ruim nie. MacArthur se sogenaamde *enforcer* is Willie Nel, voorheen 'n kolonel in die Skerpioene. Nel word Kaapstad toe gestuur om een van die dorings in MacArthur se vlees, 'n ekologiese kampvegter, te gaan "uithaal" (10). Nel betrek een van sy ou trawante, ene "Viking", wat op sy beurt op die knoppie van Elton Fortuin druk. Laasgenoemde is toevallig ook die eggenoot van Shaheena Fortuin, die Spookeenheid se bevelvoerder, en dit sorg vir buitengewone huishoudelike konflik.

Die "vuilwerk" word afgewentel na 'n stomme tronkvoël, pas vrygelaat, met die naam Frankie Kriel. Frankie word deur Nel en sy trawante ontvoer, afgepers en gedwing om die snellerman te wees in hierdie huurmoord. Dinge loop egter skeef, en Frankie slaan op die vlug. Frankie word aanvanklik as 'n soort ongelukkige "antiheld" geskets, en die leser is geneig om met hom te simpatiseer, maar later word sy donker verlede en bedenklike patologie ontbloot (304). Dit is een van vele onverwagse kinkels in dié verhaal, en 'n geslaagde afleidingstruuk. Wat miskien minder geslaagd is, is die terloopse romanse tussen Frankie en Tersia, die jong vrou by wie hy op een stadium skuiling vind, vernaam die ietwat geforseerde intimiteit tussen hulle (vergeelyk 199 en 233).

Dan is daar ook die voormalige diepseeduiker, Hasie Haasbroek, bedags 'n versorger vir sy kwadruplegiese vrou en snags 'n maaier van menslike organe. Hasie en sy kettingsaag (sigself 'n kragtige simbool van geweld wat assosiasies met *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* uit die vorige eeu oproep) verleen aan die roman 'n grieselige, *noir*-element en sorg vir sommige van die ontstellendste, maar onvergeetlikste, beskrywings daarin. Vergelyk byvoorbeeld die gruwelike eerste klimakstoneel (283–7).

Die proloog demonstreer ook reeds iets van Van Rensburg se besondere vertelstyl wat in 'n groot mate draai om die effektiewe gebruik van perspektiefwisseling (in hierdie geval, word die moordtoneel byvoorbeeld treffend vanuit die oogpunt van die

slagoffer weergegee). Die gereelde wisseling van die fokaliseringpunt bring deurgaans 'n snelle, byna filmiese, pas mee en bewerkstellig talle voorbeelde van dramatiese ironie waarop veel van die spanning in *Ys* geskoei is. Voorbeelde van sodanige dramatiese ironie sluit in: Elton Fortuin se betrokkenheid by die komplot terwyl Shaheena blind is daarvoor (126, 155); Hasie Haasbroek se vrou wat glo "sy pad hemel toe is geplavei" (116), maar onbewus is daarvan dat hy snags mense jag; Frankie Kriel wat volmoed is dat hy sy vrou kan red, maar nie weet dat Sue reeds dood is nie (231).

'n Hiperrealistiese aanslag is dikwels kenmerkend van populêre misdaadfiksie, en *Ys* skyn hiermee akkoord te gaan. Vergelyk byvoorbeeld die volgende gedetailleerde beskrywing:

'n Kelner met tamatiesousvlekke op sy wit baadjie bring hulle bestelling. MacArthur neem 'n groot hap van sy worsbroodjie. Soms loop in twee dun straatjies uit sy mondhoëke aan weerskante van sy ken af. Hy vee dit met 'n papierservet af, maar 'n dun streep sous bly op 'n bolwang agter. (8–9)

MacArthur se slordige eetgewoontes is irrelevant in terme van plotontwikkeling, maar dit dra wel by tot die totstandkoming van 'n realistiese fiksionele wêreld en die tydelike opheffing van die leser se ongeloof (in Coleridge se terme, die "willing suspension of disbelief"). In hierdie opsig, is dit dus moeilik om te verstaan waarom die outeur/redakteur dit nodig geag het om MacArthur se direkte rede in Afrikaans te vertaal.

Dieselfde geld MacArthur se e-posse aan die begin van hoofstuk 2 tot 10. Dit beroof myns insiens die karakter van 'n meer natuurlike idiolek en doen afbreuk aan die *verisimilitude* van die roman.

*Ys* is nietemin 'n feesmaal vir die liefhebber van spanningsfiksie, en 'n welkome toevoeging tot die genre in Afrikaans.

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**Asof geen berge ooit hier gewoon het nie.**  
Pieter Odendaal.

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Pieter Odendaal is reeds geruime tyd betrokke by verskillende poësieprojekte waaronder die InZync Sessions in Kaya-mandi, Stellenbosch. Laasgenoemde is 'n ruimte waar digters die geleentheid kry om tussen ander op te tree voor 'n gehoor en die krag van hulle poëtiese oortuiging te toets aan die reaksie wat hulle ontlok. Dit is dus 'n plek waar 'n digter onmiddellike terugvoer kry en ook belangrike lesse kan leer oor die praktiese waarde van poësie.

Iets van hierdie aanvoeling vir poësie wat 'opgevoer' word voor 'n gehoor en die konneksie met 'n groter gemeenskap van digters voel 'n mens aan by die lees van die gedigte in sy debuutbundel *Asof geen berge ooit hier gewoon het nie* wat in 2018 verskyn het. Die digter betuig by

wyse van direkte en indirekte verwysing sy skatpligtigheid teenoor digters soos Keorapetse Kgositsile, Antjie Krog, Wopko Jensma, Koleka Putuma en ander. In die gedig "Bra Willie", geskryf by die dood van Kgositsile, huldig hy hom as digter wat met "die grasieuse middelvinger van [sy] mond" en "die vuiste van [sy] werkwoorde" geprotesteer het teen onreg. As teenprestasie bied hy dan sy eie "inverted-coconut-gedig" as 'n "vlammende offer" vir sy gestorwe voorganger.

Die vlam van protes flikker dan ook op verskillende plekke in die bundel. In die gedig "gebed" (wat aangebied word as "performance vir mond en mic") word daar met striemende sarkasme gepraat word van die "vetgatkonings / wat dans op die mure van uitsluiting" (iets wat herinner aan die vroeë Breytenbach wat in die bundel *Kouevuur* sy misnoeë met die "Rykman Besitter Belêer Fascis" en "vetvrot Politikus" te kenne gegee het). Die tema word voortgesit in die verwysing na protesbewegings soos #feesmustfall en gekonsolideer in die gedig "In praise of protest" in die bundel se laaste afdeling. Hier word geskryf oor die belangrikheid van protes; die spreker sê dat daar 'n "afgrond moontlikhede" voor sy geslag lê en dat hulle die ploegvore is van die nuwe grond wat "aan die gebore" is. Vir hom is protes noodsaaklik in die verkenning van nuwe moontlikhede vir die toekoms en is poësie een van die werktuie waardeur dit gedoen kan word: "ons betoog vorentoe / beoog 'n nuwe wêreld / wat nog in taal moet ontvlam".

Bogenoemde gedigte kom uit die

bundel se eerste en laaste afdelings, beide met dieselfde smagtende vraag as titel: "re mang?" (wie is ons?). Die eerste afdeling begin met twee gedigte, die eerste in Afrikaans en die tweede in Engels, wat duidelik op mekaar gerig is. In "die aand toe die see gesing het" verrys daar 'n visioen van 'n "generasie stilgemaaktes al die pad / terug tot by autshumao" wat uit die see uit opstaan. In die daaropvolgende gedig "reaching shore" word die beeld gebruik van mense wat deur verskillende seestrome na dieselfde strand gebring is waar hulle hulle velle en velkleure afskud: "let's kick off our fins / zip open our skins like wetsuits", lui die eerste reëls van die gedig waarin daar verder verwys word na die luister na mekaar se verhale rondom 'n vuur op die strand. Ook die ander gedigte in die eerste afdeling spreek van 'n soeke na 'n identiteit wat die saamwees met ander sal akkommodeer (byvoorbeeld "as die wêreld einde se kant toe staan").

Die twee afdeling rig die fokus op die mens se verhouding met die aarde. Dit is duidelik dat die prioriteite van hierdie digter anders lê as vir voorgangers soos Van Wyk Louw en Opperman wanneer hy begin met 'n aanhaling deur Toast Coetzer: "destyds het ouens soos van wyk louw en opperman nice gedigte oor die natuur geskryf ons het nie tyd vir sulke kak nie". Die toon van die gedigte in hierdie afdeling het inderdaad 'n dringendheid genoodsaak deur die mens se disrespek vir en verrinnewering van die planeet en sy nie-menslike bewoners. In die eerste gedig "heil die planetêre skeppers" word daar byvoorbeeld hulde

betoon aan die plante wat “die lug / vir ons lange voorberei het” en wie se “uitasem ons in” is.

Dit is opvallend dat die mens enersyds in hierdie afdeling geplaas word teen die agtergrond van ’n geskiedenis van miljoene jare en andersyds waargeneem word met ’n byna miskroskopiese blik. In die gedig “eersteriver” word die rivier se geskiedenis vanaf die paleolitiese tyd via die koloniale tydperk tot by die hede gevolg en in “as jy agteruit swem” word daar gedink oor wat die mens kan leer van die selakant wat in die dieptes gebly het toe ander lewensvorme geëvolueer het. Hierteenoor verwys die gedig “aan ’n bewoner van 2050” na elemente soos die son wat die mens se lewe beïnvloed, maar soem dit ook in op dit wat op sellulêre vlak in die mens se liggaam gebeur (“elke sel is ’n jaartparty / waarheen die hele buurt genooi is”). Die gedig se konklusie is dat die mens homself ontkoppel het (“ons is uitgeplug uit die lewe”) van die groot interaktiewe en intergekonnekteerde musiek van mikrobies, plante, diere en natuurelemente wat hom aan die lewe hou.

Dié afdeling bevat ook interessante vorm-eksperimente soos in “die aarde is ’n klein ritseling vlerke (cutting up Rimbaud during COP23)” wat gebruik maak van die “gedigmaak-masjiene” wat op [languageisavirus.com](http://languageisavirus.com) te vind is. Hier kan jy ’n stuk teks invoer en spesifiseer watter tegnieke die ‘masjiën’ van die tegnologie daarop moet uitvoer om ’n nuwe teks te genereer. In hierdie geval word ’n liriese gedig oor die aarde onderbreek deur die soort frases wat by COP23 (die VN se

beraad oor klimaatsverandering in 2017) opgeklink het, soos byvoorbeeld “*stop Adani stop fracking*”, “*there is no planet B*” en “*silence is consent*”.

Waar die eerste twee afdelings van die bundel en ook die vyfde een die fokus plaas op die openbare domein is die blik in afdelings drie en vier gerig op die privaat lewe. Die derde afdeling, “voor ons deurskynend word”, bevat gedigte wat handel oor die spreker se familie en sy grootwordjare binne ’n bepaalde familie. Hier vind ’n mens deernisvolle gedigte oor die spreker in die gedigte se oupa, ma, pa en sussie. Die afdeling begin met ’n gedig “vir Oupa Piet, dood voor ek gebore is” waarin die spreker die verbintenis met sy voorouers (“ek dra my voorouers op my gesig”) en hulle s’n met hom (“sodat hulle wat nie meer hulle is nie / hulself deur my oë / in die wind kan ken”) verklaar. Die gedigte teken verder in enkele trekke die geskiedenis van die gesin se saamwees soos bepaal deur die land se geskiedenis (“16 Desember 2009”, “noord-namibië”), die lesse in intimiteit wat die spreker van sy ma geleer het (“skielik spring ek 20 jaar terug”), die manlike rites van grootword (“inisië”), ensomeer. Die slotgedigte in hierdie afdeling is na binne gekeer in dié sin dat dit handel oor ’n uitmergelende depressie, met as hoogtepunt van die groep “sy oë rus sonder” met die mooi motto uit Gil Scott-Heron wat lui “*don’t give up it’s time to stop your falling*”.

Die titel van die vierde afdeling is “as al my lovers” wat ’n duidelike sein gee dat dit in hierdie afdeling sal gaan oor liefde en seksuele identiteit. Die huiwerende manier waarop hierdie

identiteit opgevoer en ontwikkel word, kom mooi na vore in “some jocks have tutus” waarin die spreker van sy skooljare sê: “ek het my fynbesnaardheid defiantly perform” en “ek het my met dieselfde asem / geteken en uitgevee”. Eweneens boeiend is “ek skryf hierdie gedig” wat in Afrikaans geskryf word vir ’n geliefde wat nie die taal verstaan nie, ’n mooi metafoor vir die wyse waarop ’n gedig tegelykertyd kan kommunikeer en ontwyk. Ook in hierdie afdeling blyk dit hoeseer die private en intieme vermeng is met die publieke en politieke. Die gedig “ons wou net peoples wees” bestaan byvoorbeeld uit ’n *remix* van whatsapp chat-fragmente wat twee geliefdes tydens die “#feesmustfall”-beweging in 2015 aan mekaar gestuur het.

Soos reeds genoem, hervat die laaste afdeling deur die herhaling van die titel “re mang?” die temas van die eerste afdeling. Hiermee suggereer die spreker in die bundel dat die soeke na ’n antwoord op die vraag “wie is ons?” nie maklik af te handel is nie. Dié afdeling hervat ook die patroon van protes en verset. Die gedig “for mzanzi” is ’n voorbeeld van “found poetry”, saamgestel uit kommentare op ’n news24-artikel. Dit is ’n skokkende bevestiging van die onbegrip tussen mense van verskillende oortuigings en neem uiteindelik die toon van ’n klaaglied daarvoor aan. Hierteenoor is die gedig “Hulle—’n duet” ’n uitgesproke poging om die stemme van die land en die wêreld te laat saamsing in die duet wat begin as ’n vorm van onbegrip en uitsluiting (oms krywings van “hulle”), maar dan uitloop in ’n poging om die boodskap in

verskillende tale te vertaal.

Die bundel eindig met ’n kort liriese gedig oor ’n wandeltog in die berge buitekant McGregor waartydens die stappers “uitgevee” word wanneer hulle in ’n “wasemsee” van wolke instap. Dieselfde gebeur met die landskap rondom hulle waarin die bergpieke beurtelings uitstaan teen die blou lug en dan weer verdwyn onder die wolke “asof geen berge ooit hier gewoon het nie”. Die epifaniese moment waarop die bundel eindig, sê iets van die voortdurende transformasies van alle aardse verskynsels.

Odendaal se debuut vertel dus van ’n spesifieke persoon se ervarings in ’n bepaalde sosiopolitieke konteks en tydsgewrig, maar plaas dit teen die groter agtergrond van die planeet en die geskiedenis van die kosmos. Die bundel is nie net bewus van die sosiale, politieke en omgewingsvraagstukke waarmee Suid-Afrika en die groter wêreld te kampe het nie, maar is ook ingestel op die moontlikhede wat juis die poësie bied om dit op kreatiewe wyse te ondervra. Sy bewustheid van die poësie as medium wat beide geskryf en opgevoer kan word, is duidelik in die verse se gevoeligheid vir klank, ritme en metrum. Dit is ’n poësie wat beide naby en ver kyk, wat beide daver en fluister.

As sodanig verteenwoordig Odendaal se afgeronde debuut een van die belangrikste toetredes tot die Suid-Afrikaanse letterkunde in 2018.

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## Doodmenslik.

W. L. van der Merwe.

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Dit is wel waar dat *Doodmenslik* van W. L. van der Merwe meestal gaan oor God en die dood, die oorbenuite tematiek van veral die ouer Afrikaanse poësie, maar gelukkig bied hierdie debuut vir die liefhebber van die digkuns ook veel meer. Indrukke oor Nederland, die erotiese liefde, familieverbintnisse en nadenke oor die digterlike werkzaamheid verryk die tematiese verskeidenheid van hierdie netjiese debuutbundel.

W. L. van der Merwe is 'n godsdiensfilosoof by die Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam en het steeds 'n verbintenis met die Universiteit Stellenbosch waar hy ook deelgeneem het aan D. J. Opperman se letterkundige laboratorium en aan die magisterkursus in kreatiewe skryfkuns onder leiding van Marlene van Niekerk en Willem Anker. As digter publiseer hy reeds enkele verse in *Nuwe stemme* 3. In die lig van sy opmerklike digterlike bydraes vantevore was dit 'n blink gedagte om *Doodmenslik* te open met "voortaan", die eenvoudige maar meevoerende gedig waarin die titel van die bundel vervat is en wat deur Laurinda Hofmeyr getoonset is en deur Laurika Rauch aan 'n wyer gehoor bekend gestel is:

voortaan sal ek winterskemers  
vleilangs loop  
en droë takkies van geraamtestruike  
stroop

wilgers sal gekruisig aan die hemel  
hang  
en ek sal doodmenslik na jou terug-  
verlang

soos na die somerse rinkink van vinke  
in palmiet  
en die onbeholpe liefde van wilde-  
ganse tussen riet

In die lig van Van der Merwe se belesenheid op die gebied van die godsdiensfilosofie is dit begryplik die afdeling verse met 'n religieuse inslag verskeie hoogtepunte oplewer waaronder "kapelaansdiens", "stasiemeester", "vier vrae" en die onthutsende maar nietemin voortrefflike gedig "my godsbegrip":

die god wat ek aanbid  
is 'n varkie met 'n snoet  
sy ogies is so git  
ek voer hom vet  
en braai hom op my spit

Die onrein vark van die Ou Testament word hier die god wat aanbid word, maar steeds 'n onaansienlike snoet het en boonop kyk met onheilspellende ogies van git. Die aanbiddende ek voer sy varkgod vet deur hom te vereer en te bewierook, maar uiteindelik is dit hierdie godjie wat soos 'n speenvarkie-Jesus aan die spit geryg word vir 'n uiteindelijke nagmaal van verslinding deur die mens. Hierdie wrang samevattende visie op die Christelike godsdiens spreek van 'n diepe sinisme oor die eie geloofsbeoefening wat allermens van glorie en deurstraalde ekstase spreek. So ook is "kapelaansdiens" onwrikbaar daarop gerig om die

morele vertwyfeling van die godsdienaar tydens die grensoorlog in Namibië en Angola aan die lig te bring. Die kapelaan is getuie van die ergste wreedheid van sy medesoldate wat hulle verlustig in die doodmaak van 'n kind wat waatlemoen gesteel het. Boonop is hy een van die "kapelane met pistole / by wie dit hoort in oorlog/om lewe wat alreeds/vernietig is / met 'n genadeskoot te blus".

Die erotiese liefde, wat van oudsher 'n noue en verwickelde verbintenis met die religie het, is die fokus in geslaagde gedigte soos "my tjello", "'n Nuwe Testament", "middeljarig in Athene" en "troos en hoop" in die slotafdeling van *Doodmenslik*. Met fyn humor skryf Van der Merwe oor die kontraste en ooreenkomste tussen die middeljarige erotiek en die lyflike oorgawe van jong minnaars in "middeljarig in Athene". Die gedig begin soos volg:

jong paartjies jaag op bromfietsse  
deur die strate van Athene

met sy koperbruin lyf en wapperende  
kuif  
is hy Apollo  
en styf teen sy rug, ene broekie-en-  
bene,  
sit sy Helene  
oorgehaal vir nog 'n nag van fuif en  
rave  
en ritteldans voor Bacchus en Aphro-  
dite  
in die Wasteland club waar almal  
mag paar  
sonder enige beswaar

Meegevoer deur hierdie lewensgenieting

"kruie" die spreker en sy middeljarige vrou na 'n behoedsame en ietwat meer getemperde aangryping van hulle seksuele drif in 'n omgewing waar heidense luste en Christelike stigtelikheid klaarblyklik naasmekaar bestaan.

In "geurige gedig" skryf die digter hoe die "ryme" gladder begin vloei as hy ruik hoe sy vrou met geurige bestanddele 'n maaltyd voorberei. Dit is jammer dat die nadruk op rym in hierdie bundel soms te sterk is al sorg dit in baie gevalle vir 'n goeie musikale samehang. In die Engelse gedig "running out of time" doen die oordadige rym beslis afbreuk aan die geheel. 'n Verdere irritasie in *Doodmenslik* is die byhaal van oorbodige poëtikale kommentaar in gedigte wat in werklikheid reeds genoeg diepgang en oortuigingskrag besit. Die geforseerde poëtikale slot van "koning in my kasteel" is een voorbeeld van hierdie oordadige wil om vir die leser rymend daaraan te herinner dat hier 'n digter aan die woord is:

en as ek in my hubris  
soos Nietzsche op die rooi tapyt wil pis  
het ek die laaste sin gestig  
van my gedig

Daar is enkele spel- en taalfoute wat tydens die redigeringsproses oor die hoof gesien is, soos byvoorbeeld die gebruik van "wie" in plaas van "wat" in "'n ruimteman soos Gagarin / wie God nie in sy uitspansel kon sien" in die gedig "wie was jy?" en die vermoedelik verkeerde spelling van "syn" as "sein" in "kremasie II". In die geheel beskou, is *Doodmenslik* egter 'n gawe debuteer wat onderhoudend

uiging gee aan 'n digterlike visie “wat hou van wat afstootlik is” (“koning in my kasteel”) en nie daarvoor terugdeins om die doodmenslikheid van verderf te verreken binne 'n lewenskouing wat eweneens sterk van die goddelike bewus is nie.

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**Die helaasheid van die dinge.**

Dimitri Verhulst. Uit die Nederlands vertaal deur Daniel Hugo.

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*Die helaasheid van die dinge*, die semi-outobiografiese roman waarin die Vlaamse skrywer Dimitri Verhulst verskeie grepe uit sy onstabiele kinderjare uitbeeld, is die eerste van sy werke wat in Afrikaans vertaal word. Uit die oogpunt van 'n uitgewer is dit 'n vanselfsprekende keuse om in hulle publikasielys op te neem: nie alleen is dit 'n topverkoper deur 'n bekroonde en gevestigde skrywer in sy tuisland nie—Verhulst word gereken as een van die belangrikste hedendaagse Belgiese skrywers—maar verskeie vertalings en ook Felix van Groeningen se 2009-filmverwerking daarvan, *The Misfortunates*, het internasionale sukses behaal.

Die verhaal, wat oorspronklik in 2006 verskyn het, is tydloos en steeds so gewild in die Lae Lande dat dit in

2018 gebundel is as deel van 'n Verhulst-drieluik. Dit is al vergelyk met *Angela's Ashes* van Frank McCourt, en hier ter plaatse roep dit die karakters, sosiale omstandighede en galgehumor van Marlene van Niekerk se *Triomf* op. Op die agterplat word dit aangebied as Verhulst se “skreeusnaakse afrekening met die dorp van sy jeug”, maar soos met *Triomf* van Marlene van Niekerk is dit nie die tipe boek wat 'n mens “geniet” nie. Verhulst skryf: “'n Goor bestaan is maklik beskryfbaar” (14)—en dit doen hy op briljante wyse in kleur en geur. Om egter soveel ellende te aanskou, is nie maklik nie, en boonop kan die Belgiese volksheid daarvan Afrikaanse lesers dalk meer as 'n tikkie ongemak besorg. Wanneer Verhulst se beskaafde niggie op die toneel verskyn en haar kritiese blik 'n spieël vir al hulle goorheid word, raak hulle sêlf ongemaklik met hulle bestaan en begin om hulle te skaam vir baie dinge, onder andere vir “ons dronk gesingery, ons vieslike taalgebruik, ons braaksel en die toenemende besoeke van die polisie en balju. Ons skaam ons, maar ons doen niks daaraan nie” (13).

Ofskoon die teks ooreenkomste met die *misery memoir*-genre toon, word die spanning tussen feit en fiksie reeds voelbaar wanneer hy die boek ter nagedagtenis van sy ouma opdra, “wat haar die verleentheid wou bespaar en gesterf het terwyl ek die laaste bladsye van die manuskrip voltooi het”, maar dan direk daaronder verklaar dat “(d)ie moontlike ooreenkoms van sekere karakters in hierdie boek met bestaande persone berus op louter mensekennis”.



Dat die Verhulst-familie besonder ongelukkig was met hulle uitbeelding, het sy oom, Karel Verhulst, oftewel nonkel Potrel, nie daarvan weerhou om die buurtkafee wat hy saam met sy vriendin bedryf, na “Bij Sofie en Potrel” te herdoop nie.

Met die lees van die Nederlandse bronteks het ek my telkens vasgeloop in eiesoortige uitdrukkings—selfs ná maande in die hart van Vlaandere—en ek het besef dit moes vir die vertaler groot uitdagings ingehou het. Tydens ’n gesprek by die Universiteit Gent op 26 Oktober 2018 tussen Daniel Hugo en twee Vlaamse skrywers wie se werk hy ook onlangs vertaal het, naamlik Stefan Hertmans (*Oorlog en terpentyn*) en Tom Lanoye (*Gelukkige slawe*), het hy erken dat dit vir hom moeiliker is om Vlaamse skrywers te vertaal as Nederlandse skrywers, omdat Vlaams soveel van Standaardnederlands afwyk. Die sosiale implikasies van dialek word duidelik wanneer die Verhulsts by ’n Iranese paartjie aanklop nadat die balju hulle TV gekonfiskeer het. Hulle besef dat die vreemdelinge se Nederlands, hoe vars aangeleer dit ook is, suiwer is en “nou sal ons self aksentloos moet praat” (71). Dit is bykans onmoontlik om die dialekverskille in Afrikaans oor te dra, soos dit ook onmoontlik is om die reikwydte van Vlaamse en Nederlandse kru taal in Afrikaans te ewenaar—die Afrikaanse teks word dus in ’n sekere sin outomaties ontsmet. In hierdie opsig kom Hugo se skerpsinnigheid wat kenmerkend van sy eie poësie is, dikwels handig te pas om vir sulke verliese te

probeer vergoed. Dit is tog jammer dat tipiese Vlaamse woorde soos “nonkel”, “amai”, “allez” en “pils” nie behou is nie—dit is myns insiens grootliks waarin die plaaslike kleur van die teks opgesluit is. Die groot waarde van vertalings lê juis daarin dat dit lesers aan vreemde plekke en kulture blootstel en sodoende hulle ervaringsveld verruim. Afrikaanse lesers word dalk nie genoeg in hierdie opsig uitgedaag nie, vandaar die gespook om ’n vertaalkultuur te vestig.

Om hierby aan te sluit, was dit opmerklik dat Protea Boekhuis nou, anders as in die verlede, nie die vertaler se naam op die voorblad aandui nie, terwyl dit ook nie op die uitgewer se webwerf verskyn nie. Dit is ook die geval met Adriaan van Dis se *Ek kom terug* wat in dieselfde maand as *Helaasheid* verskyn het. Dit is teenstrydig met die algemene tendens om vertalers meer sigbaarheid te gee soos wat begrip toeneem vir die omvang van hulle rol in die vertaalproses en die resepsie van die vertaalde werke.

In ’n land waar daar dikwels nie onderskeid tussen ryk en arm getref kan word nie, word hierdie verhaal van die (manlike) sukkelaars van Vlaandere vertel vanuit die perspektief van iemand wat bo sy omstandighede uitgestyg het—of het hy? Vroulike karakters wat sleutelrolle in sy lewe gespeel het—hetsy as die moeder wat te wyte aan sy moeilike geboorte die trotse houer van ’n piepiekaart met verskeie twyfelagtige voordele geword het, of die ouma wat toe nie nét haar seuns se vloerlap was nie—bly egter eendimensionele karakters. Maar binne die bestek van slegs 180

bladsy sny dit onthutsend dig teen die been en laat die leser met groot deernis vir die randfigure in die samelewing en die helaasheid van hulle dinge.

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**El Negro en ek**

Frank Westerman. Uit Nederlands vertaal deur Daniel Hugo. Pretoria: Protea Boekhuis, 2017. 239 pp. ISBN 978-1-4853-0753-2.

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Frank Westerman se *El Negro en Ek* kan gelees word as 'n reisverhaal, speurverhaal en outobiografie. Reeds in die proloog word die drama verhoog deur die uiteinde van die soektog na die herkoms van 'n onbekende, opgestopte Afrikaan, bekend as "El Negro" uit te beeld. DNA-toetse in 'n kliniese laboratorium vorm 'n spannende kontras met die persoonlike toon van die daaropvolgende eerste hoofstuk. Tydens 'n rylooptog as 'n jong man in Spanje, het Westerman in 'n museum in die dorpie Banyoles, 'n ontmoeting wat 'n lewenslange indruk op hom laat:

Anderkant 'n klimwand met mensape en die skelet van 'n gorilla verander ons vrolikheid in 'n huiwerige rilling. Daar staan hy: die opgestopte neger van Banyoles. Spies in die

regterhand, skild in die linkerhand. Waaksaam en effens gebukkend met opgetrekte skouers. Halfkaal, met net 'n raffia-hooftooisel en 'n harige, oranje gekleurde lendedoekie [...]. Hy staan in 'n glaskas, in die middel van die vloer. Op sy voetstuk is 'n plaatjie vasgeskroef: BOESMAN UIT DIE KALAHARI. (17)

*El negro en ek* vertel die verhaal van sy soektog na die oorsprong van die man wat opgestop vertoon word en die omswerwinge van beide "El Negro" se oorskot en Westerman self.

Die vertaling behou 'n Nederlandse karakter deur, byvoorbeeld, minder algemene woorde soos "etmaal" en "weids" te gebruik in plaas van kontemporêre Afrikaanse eweknieë. Die effek hiervan is nie noodwendig steurend nie, die vervreemdende woorde vestig juis telkens die Suid-Afrikaanse leser se aandag daarop dat die boek vanuit die ervaringsveld van 'n Europeër geskryf is. Die vertaling behou die klank van Westerman se stem, wat gepas is vir 'n werk waarin die verteller sy identiteit en perspektief telkens ontleed en bevraagteken.

Die "Ek" in *El Negro en ek* dui nie bloot aan dat die skrywer 'n verbintenis met die opgestopte man voel nie, maar ook dat die boek oor homself gaan. Dit kan gelees word as 'n soort dubbele biografie, waarin die skrywer die spore van sy eie bewuswording en identiteitsvorming naloop in die skryf van 'n "postume biografie" (94) van 'n naamlose man. Die relaas van sy omswerwinge as student,

navorsers, besproeiingsdeskundige en later joernalis en skrywer, doen aan by 'n verskeidenheid haltes. Die leser is nooit seker watter wêrelddeel in die volgende afdeling van die boek sal verskyn nie. Westerman se gedetailleerde beskrywings van ruimtes so verskillend soos die agterkamers van museums en die berghange van Peru skep deurgaans 'n besondere atmosfeer. Die vertelling bied 'n verrassende toer deur lande so uiteenlopend soos Jamaika, Sierra Leone, Peru, Spanje en Suid-Afrika. Deur 'n groot verskeidenheid voormalige koloniale gebiede in te sluit, slaag hy daarin om verskeie kwessies, soos rassisme, met bykomende diepte en verskeidenheid uit te beeld. Myns insiens is dit een van die boek se sterk punte.

Die persoonlike aspek van hierdie soektog oorheers en die verteller bied dikwels sy indrukke aan as die van 'n weetgierige buitestander. Saam met vrae oor die naamlose slagoffer se identiteit, stel hy deurgaans vrae oor sy eie voornemens, optrede, reaksies en aktiwiteite—veral binne sy beroepswêreld. Die toon waarmee hy na ontwikkelingswerk, waaraan hy self 'n deel van sy lewe gewy het, verwys as “goedbedoelde getjommel” (95) herinner aan Paul Theroux se gevolgtrekking aan die einde van sy reisverhaal deur Afrika, *Dark Star Safari* (Houghton, 2002).

Nie net die naamlose “El Negro” nie, maar ook die verhale van ander slagoffers word ingesluit, soos die verteller toenemend bewus word van die omvang van sulke vergrype. Aan die einde van die boek sluit Westerman

'n “Verantwoording” in waarin hy ook verskeie werke met soortgelyke temas soos die verhaal van Sarah Baartman lys waarmee die leser hierdie werk sou kon vergelyk. Hy noem ook die enkele werke wat “El Negro” self as onderwerp neem, soos Caitlin Davies se *The Return of El Negro* (Penguin, 2003).

Wat populêre wetenskaps-geskiedskrywing wat die gedaante van 'n speurtog aanneem betref, was dit vir my interessant om *El Negro en ek* te lees kort ná Stephen Greenblatt se *The Swerve. How the Renaissance began* (Random House, 2011), wat die impak en geskiedenis van 'n enkele antieke gedig naloop—sowel as die soektog na 'n verlore dokument. Adam Cruise se *King Solomon and the Showman. The Search for Africa's Lost City* (Tafelberg, 2016) bied een moontlikheid vir 'n vergelyking wat boeke betref waarin 'n persoonlike reis, spruitend uit 'n jongmens se fassinatie, deel vorm van 'n speurtog deur die koloniale tydperk in Suider-Afrika. Vanuit 'n vergelykende oogpunt is dit ook interessant om hierdie boek te lees teen die agtergrond van boeke wat die leefwêreld en werksywyses van natuurwetenskaplike navorsers, avonturiers, handelaars, versamelaars en reisigers—veral gedurende die koloniale tydperk—vanuit 'n hedendagse invalshoek op 'n aanskoulike wyse aanbied. Andrea Wulff se *The Invention of Nature* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), oor Alexander von Humboldt, beskryf byvoorbeeld in fyn besonderhede hoe Humboldt en sy tydgenote hulle botaniese vondse opgeteken, beskryf, verpak en vervoer het. Boeke soos dié

van Westerman dra daartoe by om die aandag te vestig op die wyses waarop die mens en menslike oorskot binne hierdie mileu betrag en behandel is.

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### **Die storie van Afrikaans uit Europa en van Afrika: Deel 1.**

W. A. M. Carstens en E. H. Raidt.  
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Met hierdie omvattende publikasie *Die storie van Afrikaans uit Europa en van Afrika; die biografie van 'n taal*, open Carstens en Raidt as outeurs 'n besondere venster vir 'n blik op die voor- en lewensgeskiedenis van Afrikaans. Beide skrywers stel dit ter aanvang dat hulle op verskillende punte in hul akademiese lewens gevoel het dat daar 'n behoefte was aan 'n bron van hierdie aard. Carstens verwys na sy lang akademiese loopbaan, eie publikasies en belewing van die groei in literatuur oor Afrikaans. Hy wys daarop dat die taal 'n besondere geskiedenis het, maar terselfdertyd ook, soos enige ander taal, onderhewig is aan 'n voortdurende proses van verandering wat nie net op taalpolitieke vlak nie, maar ook op taalstrukturele vlak uitspeel.

Raidt het 'n behoefte aan 'n toeganklike bron vir studente oor die

geskiedenis aangevoel wat gelei het tot haar werk *Afrikaans en sy Europese verlede* wat in 1991 'n derde hersiene en uitgebreide uitgawe beleef het. Hierdie werk vind ook nou grotendeels plek binne die groter raamwerk van *Die storie van Afrikaans*.

Die outeurs stel dit verder dat hierdie storie vertel word aan die hand van "grondige navorsing oor gebeure, tendense en patrone in die verloop van Afrikaans se 'lewe', van toe en ook van nou." (18). Die diepgang van hierdie werk spreek baie duidelik uit die indrukwekkende bronnelys en eindnotas wat op sigself 120 bladsye beslaan asook internet-bronverwysings wat te vinde is op die boek se webtuiste (Carstens en Raidt). As sodanig kan hierdie werk waarskynlik as ensiklopedies van aard beskou word waar dit alreeds gepubliseerde kennis saamvat binne 'n bepaalde storie. Gegewe die omvang van 'n werk van hierdie aard, is dit dan ook nie vreemd dat een volume, in hierdie geval *Deel 1: Die Europese Geskiedenis van Afrikaans* (639 bladsye), nie die volle 'storie' kan vertel nie en dat 'n verdere opvolgvolume nodig is. Die outeurs verwys dan ook na 'n tweede boek: "[s]aam beskou, word in die twee boeke die storie toegelig van 'n taal wat in Europa gegrond is (boek 1), maar wat in Afrika 'n volwaardige taal kom word het (boek 2)." (16). Die voorlopige hoofstukindeling van Boek 2 (31) handel oor prosesse rakende die groei en vorming van Afrikaans tot en met sienings oor die status van Afrikaans in die 21<sup>ste</sup> eeu.

Hierdie werk is kennelik gerig op 'n

wye leserspubliek en nie noodwendig spesialiste nie; Carstens verwys na “potensiële lesers—wie hulle ookal mag wees (kundiges, leke)” (20). Die werk word aangebied in ’n gemaklike leesstyl met kruisverwysings en verwysings na eindnotas waar nodig.

*Deel 1* bestaan uit elf hoofstukke wat elk ’n afsonderlike doelstelling bevat alvorens die inhoud volg. Elke hoofstuk word afgesluit met ’n samevatting (of vooruitskouing in hoofstuk 1) en aanvullende bronnelyste. Die werk bevat ’n lys van 27 kaarte wat onder meer taalverspreiding in Afrika en Europa aandui, asook ’n volledige inhoudsregister wat verwysings vergemaklik. Die uitgebreide lys eindnotas vir elke hoofstuk bied ’n goeie verwysingsraamwerk, nie net ter ondersteuning van sienings in die betrokke hoofstuk nie, maar ook as bronne vir verdere navorsing.

Hoofstuk 1 handel oor *Die eksterne geskiedenis van Afrikaans*, waarin terminologiese onderskeide toegelig word. Die konsep taal word verduidelik sowel as die onderskeid tussen diachroniese en sinchroniese benaderings tot die studie van taal. ’n Onderskeid word verder gemaak tussen die interne en eksterne geskiedenis van Afrikaans, wat respektiewelik verwys na historiese taalkunde en taalgeskiedenis. Hierdie eerste boek fokus slegs “op die eksterne storie van Afrikaans se verlede” (7).

Hoofstuk 2 het as titel “Agtergrond tot die studie van Afrikaans: die ontwikkeling van die taalkunde as wetenskap”.

Hierdie hoofstuk is informatief van aard en gee veel aandag aan die opkoms en ontwikkeling van historiese en vergelykende taalkunde. ’n Uitvoerige oorsig word gegee oor identifiseerbare tydperke vanaf die “Oudheid”, oor die Middeleeue en Renaissance, die oorgang van die 18<sup>de</sup> na 19<sup>de</sup> eeu, tot en met die 20<sup>ste</sup> eeu. Hierdie oorsig word ryklik geïllustreer met sketse van bekende taalkundiges en hul werke in veral die 19de en 20<sup>ste</sup> eeu. Gegewe egter die fokus van hierdie boek op Afrikaans as sodanig, en die vraag wat die outeurs self stel, naamlik “Deur watter prosesse en fases het die besondere taal (in hierdie geval Afrikaans) gegaan om die taal te wees wat dit vandag is?” (27), sou die sinvolheid van hierdie hoofstuk (of deel daarvan) waarskynlik bevraagteken kon word. Dit dien weliswaar ’n eksplisiete doel om die groei van taalkunde as wetenskap te boekstaaf, maar minder so om al die inligting relevant vir agtergrond tot die studie van Afrikaans te maak. Die vroeëre stelling dat “Gesamentlik vertel die twee boeke die geskiedenis van Afrikaans sedert die tyd lank voor Christus (tussen 5000—7000 jaar gelede in Europa) en die fase waarin Afrikaans vandag is (aan die begin van die 21<sup>ste</sup> eeu in Afrika)” (27), klink gewoon asof dit die insluiting van hierdie betrokke hoofstuk wil regverdig, ongeag die veel latere chronologiese verskyning van Afrikaans in hierdie proses.

Hoofstuk 3 handel oor die wese van taal asook oor die aantal gebruikers van verskillende tale en die problematiek verbonde aan getalle. Sienings oor

sogenaamde lewende en dooie tale, asook die benamings van tale en dialekte word aan die orde gestel. Hierdie hoofstuk is goed gedokumenteer en bevat interessante statistiek oor die verspreiding van tale in globale konteks wat dan sinvol deur die skrywers geïnterpreteer word. Die rol van Engels as wêreldtaal word krities ontleed terwyl 'n besinning oor die eise van die 21<sup>ste</sup> eeu as afsluiting dien.

Hoofstuk 4 handel oor die klassifikasie van tale en kriteria vir sodanige klassifikasies. Spesifieke aandag word gegee aan, respektiewelik geografiese, etnografiese, genealogiese en tipografiese indelings. Elk van hierdie klassifikasie-metodes word krities bespreek met volledige verwysings na verskillende wêreldtale en in historiese perspektief geplaas. Hierdie is hoofstuk is uiters omvattend met besondere klem op genealogiese taalklassifikasie en toegelig met konkrete ooreenstemmende voorbeelde uit verskillende tale. Toepaslike diagramme van verskillende samehangende taalgroeperings word aangebied met die plek van Afrikaans duidelik aangestip. Die potensiële rol van korpuslinguistiek en rekenaar-matige verwerking van taal en taalstrukture word ten slotte uitgelig om moontlike oplossings te bied vir onbeantwoorde vrae op hierdie gebied.

Hoofstukke 5, 6 en 7 handel respektiewelik oor die plek van Afrikaans in die Indo-Europese taalfamilie, die Germaanse taalfamilie en dan meer genuanseerd binne die Wes-Germaanse taalfamilie. 'n Interessante beskrywing

van aspekte van die Indo-Europese taalgroep, wat die verdeling in Satem- en Centum-tale insluit is nodig geag omdat dit deur die outeurs beskou word as deel van die "bloedlyn van Afrikaans" (179). Die groei van die Germaanse taalgroep as komende vanuit die Centum-tale word onder andere bespreek. Germaanse volksverhuising word toegelig met 'n kaart wat geografiese verspreiding aandui. Talle interessante voorbeelde word aangebied van Latynse invloed op die Germaanse woordeskat. Gebaseer op verskillende bronne maak die outeurs dan ook afleidings van die kenmerke van die "primitiewe Germaanse oervolk" (194). Die kenmerke van "Oergermaans" (198–201) wat klankverskuiwings, aksent-verskuiwing asook grammatikale veranderinge insluit word bespreek en gemotiveer teen die agtergrond van ontlukende Nederlands. Hoofstuk 7 handel in meer besonderhede oor, respektiewelik, Noord- en Wes-Germaans en bied 'n insiggewende bespreking van die rol en belang van Goties in die studie van tale uit die Germaanse taalgroep. 'n Aangepaste skematiese diagram van Raidt bied 'n goeie samevattende oorsig oor die besprekings in hierdie, asook voorafgaande hoofstukke.

Hoofstuk 8 bied 'n oorsig oor die pad na Nederlands oor Oud-Nederlands en Middelnederlands heen. Dit bespreek ontwikkelingsfasies, die aard van die bevolking, 'n verskeidenheid Nederfrankiese tekste, asook die invloed van vreemde tale op Oud-Nederlands. 'n Verskeidenheid literêre en ander Middelnederlandse tekste word

aangebied en bespreek; vele van hierdie tekste is nie onbekend aan studente in kursusse in Afrikaans en Nederlands nie.

Hoofstuk 9 fokus op die ontwikkeling van Nederlands in die sestiende en sewentiende eeu en op die ontstaan van Standaardnederlands, waar aandag onder andere gegee word aan die rol van prominente grammatici. Verskillende stylsoorte word beskryf en die bestaan van 'n formele Hollandse amptenaarstaal aan die Kaap ten tye van Jan van Riebeeck se vestiging word gemeld: "Op hierdie punt het die skeiding tussen Nederlands en Afrikaans gekom en die twee sustertale op twee kontinente elkeen 'n eie pad begin loop: Nederlands in Europa en Afrikaans in Afrika" (346).

Hoofstuk 10 word deur die skrywers as 'n "moeilike hoofstuk" (Eindnoot 1, 509) beskou waarvoor hulle sekere medewerkers bedank. In hierdie hoofstuk word aandag gegee aan die "geografiese, kulturele en historiese konteks waarbinne Nederlands ontwikkel en gebruik word", asook "Nederlands vandag" (349). Vele foto's (onder meer van die koningshuise) wat die algemene lewe in Nederland weergee asook geografiese detail en toeristiese beskrywings (veral van dorpe in Nederland en België), vul 'n groot deel van hierdie hoofstuk. Net soos in die geval met hoofstuk 2, is die inligting wat hier verskaf word interessant en dalk bruikbaar vir die leek, maar wyk ook af van die aanvanklike doelstelling: *die storie van Afrikaans*. Dit word 'n vraag of hierdie besonderhede noodwendig in 'n werk van hierdie aard pas. In afdeling 3 (401) van hierdie hoofstuk word Afrikaans

egter weer betrek by die bespreking en word die boikot teen Suid-Afrika en Afrikaans gedokumenteerd asook wedersydse taalbevorderingsaksies beskryf. Die hoofstuk word afgesluit met 'n bruikbare lys van taalverskille tussen Afrikaans en Nederlands.

Hoofstuk 11 handel oor die rol van taalverandering in die ontwikkeling en vorming van Afrikaans en bied 'n deeglike bespreking van 19 verskillende teorieë/benaderings oor die ontstaan van die taal. Besondere aandag word gegee aan die kreoliseringsdebat en Afrikaans wat duidelik nog ruimte bied vir verdere navorsing soos aangetoon. In hul eie benadering ondersteun die skrywers 'n natuurlike taalveranderingsproses (486) en bied 'n omvattende beskrywing van die aard van taalverandering vanaf Nederlands na Afrikaans aan. Hierdie beskrywing verwys in 'n groot mate na sienings en voorbeelde van 'n wye spektrum navorsers van Nederlands en Afrikaans en bied besonder interessante gegewens op leksikale, foneties-fonologiese, morfologiese en sintaktiese vlakke. Die hoofstuk word afgesluit met 'n sinvolle bespreking oor taalkontak en beïnvloeding asook taalverstoring waarna die skrywers dit stel dat "die ontwikkeling van Afrikaans as die produk van (i) normale taalverandering, (ii) beïnvloeding van taalkontak en (iii) taalverstoring gesien [moet] word" (485). Hierdie byna vanselfsprekende siening word egter besonder volledig toegelig en gemotiveer en dra by tot 'n meer geopende venster oor die ontstaan van Afrikaans.

Hierdie boek is 'n hoogs-verdienselike werk wat inderdaad die storie vertel van Afrikaans se wortels in Europa. Die werk spreek van besondere aandag aan detail op verskillende vlakke en dra die inhoud van taalkundige en taalhistoriese terme gemaklik en verstaanbaar oor aan 'n wye leserskorps. Die *Storie van Afrikaans (Deel 1)* maak 'n besondere en tydige bydrae tot die literatuur oor Afrikaans se ontstaansgeskiedenis terwyl die verskyning van Boek 2 met belangstelling afgewag word.

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