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African strangers, spaces of belonging and the "democracy to come" in Helon Habila's *Travellers*

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Abstract

This article analyses Helon Habila's *Travellers* (2019), focusing on its depiction of African migrants in Europe as strangers, as defined by Sara Ahmed in *Strange Encounters* (2000): those who, in spite of their proximity, are recognized as not belonging or out of place. Following Ahmed, this essay deals with the relation between space and migrant experience in Habila's novel, in which the configuration of cities such as Berlin and London and of Europe as a whole is presented as characterized by the enforcement of boundaries and spaces of belonging (Ahmed, 2000), so that the African stranger emerges as an undesirable, threatening, foreign element to be feared and expelled. On the other hand, such a logic of defensiveness, homogeneity, and exclusion is partly challenged and undermined in *Travellers* by acts of resistance carried out by both African and European characters and by acts of domestic hospitality. These acts suggest the disruption of frontiers and borders, and their corresponding sealed and homogeneous spaces (Ahmed, 2000), together with the necessity of exercising hospitality at a collective and political level. As opposed to the configuration of Europe as Fortress Europe, in which identity and community are defined in terms of affiliation to roots, homeland, or race, in *Travellers* we find thus an appeal to what Jacques Derrida has called the "democracy to come", a political, always deferred space of unconditional hospitality that opens up to the foreigner and the stranger.

Keywords

African migrants, democracy to come, Helon Habila, hospitality, migrant as stranger, migration narrative, spaces of belonging, travellers

Introduction

Helon Habila's *Travellers* (2019) contains a series of interconnected stories focusing on the lives and experiences of African migrants in different parts of Europe. As Habila himself has explained (Randol, 2019), the book has its origin in the so-called European

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migrant crisis, and more in particular, in the 2013 shipwreck that took place near the Italian island of Lampedusa and in which more than three hundred Africans drowned. In this essay I will focus on the depiction of migrant experience in Habila's text in relation to the configuration of space, which is conceptualized in two main ways. The first one corresponds to the space generated by the strict and in most cases inhumane measures of exclusion and control of migration implemented by European governments, and by the European mode of living in general. It is the space dictated by the logic of "community, the nation-State, sovereignty, borders, native soil and blood" (Derrida, 1994: 102). Within such a space of homogeneity and exclusion, African migrants in Europe are recognized as strangers, as defined by Sara Ahmed in *Strange Encounters* (2000): those who are recognized "as being out of place", a recognition that "allows both the demarcation and enforcement of the boundaries of 'this place,' as where 'we' dwell" (21–22; emphasis in the original). It is a spatial dialectic established upon the generation of boundaries, borders, and frontiers, and hence, of "bounded spaces" (22).

On the other hand, such a spatial logic of boundedness and hence separation is continually resisted and undermined in *Travellers*, which emphasizes movement between borders and the crossing of boundaries as pivotal to the experience of migration. We encounter this idea early in the novel in the description of Manu, a doctor from Libya who fled his home country with his whole family and who now works as a bouncer at a Berlin nighclub: each of Manu's face lines — we read — is "an eloquent testimony to what he had left behind, to the borders and rivers and deserts he had crossed to get to Berlin" (Habila, 2019: 5).[1] This crossing of borders — in opposition to the delimitation of a bounded space that establishes those who properly belong to a community, a city, or even a whole continent, and those who are estranged from that identity and place — also characterizes the acts of hospitality depicted in the novel, a hospitality that suggests the disruption of frontiers, and their corresponding "integrated, homogeneous, and sealed" spaces (Ahmed, 2000: 25). In this sense, I see this novel as pervaded by the spirit of what Jacques Derrida, in writings such as *Specters of Marx* (1994), *The Politics of Friendship* (2005), or *Rogues* (2005), has called the "democracy to come", which evokes a political space that opens up to the other and the stranger — the *arrivant* — together with an unconditional hospitality that goes beyond law and duty (Derrida, 2000). The tension between belonging and unbelonging, separation and hospitality that determines migrant experience is represented in Habila's novel by the Mediterranean Sea, which shows the ambivalent nature of boundaries — meant to work as sites of separation, but which may also function as porous spaces of contact — and which contains the haunting, persisting voices of those Africans who could never reach the European shore.

The migrant as stranger and the exclusion from spaces of belonging

Travellers is divided into six books. The first one takes place in Berlin, where we encounter the unnamed protagonist, a researcher of Nigerian origin who has moved to this city with his African American wife, Gina, awarded with a prestigious arts fellowship. While Gina spends her days and nights absorbed in her painting, the protagonist becomes involved with a group of African migrants, especially Mark, a transgender film student

from Malawi running away from religious zealousness in his country. In this first book, Habila — by including detailed descriptions of streets, shops, or buildings, and specific references to recognizable sites of Berlin — calls attention to the city as material reality, one in which the African migrant emerges as a "stranger" in Ahmed's terms: "the outsider inside" (2000: 3).

In her aim to resist an ontology and fetishization of the stranger, Ahmed emphasizes the "encounter" with the stranger: "the very relationships of social antagonism that produce the stranger as figure in the first place" (79), an encounter that "suggests a meeting" involving both "surprise and conflict" (6). *Travellers* opens with such an encounter, as in the very first scene of the novel, the protagonist relates his uncomfortable feeling each time that a child from the residential school in front of their house shouts "'*Schokolade! Schokolade!*'" (4) at Gina and him. Ahmed draws on Althusser's thesis about the ideological function of interpellation in order to argue how the act of hailing as a form of recognition has the function of differentiating between subjects: different subjects are assigned different values in social spaces, for example, by hailing differently those who are supposed to belong and those who are perceived as not having the right to dwell (Ahmed, 2000: 23). In the child's hailing of Gina and the protagonist as "*Schokolade*" — which recalls Frantz Fanon's well-known discussion in *Black Skin, White Masks* of a child's distressing cry to her mother, "Look, a Negro!" — their identity is conceptualized in terms of their racial difference, emerging as strangers "*already recognised as not belonging*, as being out of place" (Ahmed, 2000: 21; emphasis in original).

African migrants' condition of *not belonging* in Berlin is underlined throughout, as encapsulated in the refrain that Mark half-mockingly keeps repeating: "*Even in Berlin I miss Berlin*" (14), which conveys his feeling as an outsider even when being physically present in the German capital. This relegation to a space of non-belonging can also be found in the novel's attention to the act of walking. In her analysis of postcolonial cities, Caroline Herbert borrows Michel de Certeau's concept of the "rhetoric of walking", which she sees as prominent in many postcolonial urban narratives. In this classic study, de Certeau emphasizes how the act of walking of the city dweller resists and evades the panoptic power and authoritarian organization of the city; how "the walker transforms each spatial signifier into something else" (1984: 98). In line with de Certeau's thought, Herbert argues that postcolonial writings of the city pay attention to "those histories and bodies rendered 'invisible' or illegitimate by officious discourses of city and nation, or […] made spectral by networks and flows of global capital" (2014: 203), and to how those histories and bodies effectively remake and rewrite the city.

However, as Herbert remarks, most of these postcolonial narratives are also careful to point to the material limitations of those who inhabit the city from an experience of homelessness or migrancy, suggesting "the limits of modernist flânerie as a universally available subject position" (203). In *Travellers*, it is revealing that one of the first things that Mark and the protagonist do together is go for a walk, in which they are depicted as alien to the city life going on around them. Their exclusion and non-belonging is suggested in opposition to the easy-going movement of two ladies walking hand in hand: "They belonged to this day" (7). As a woman sits on a bench in front of the protagonist and smiles at him, only to quickly run away, he imagines the elegant conversation they may have had: "But as I watched her go, I felt the already unbridgeable gap between me and the city widen. Even if I spoke her language, the language the

city spoke, would she understand me?" (8). As argued by Ahmed, this passage shows that the position of the stranger is one calibrated upon proximity and distance (2000: 3, 12). He is the one that is near or comes too close, a figure that we face in the street and approaches us, but who at the same time must keep his distance (24, 22); strangers are those "distant others" (28).

According to Ahmed, "we need to consider how the stranger is an effect of processes of inclusion and exclusion, or incorporation and expulsion, that constitute the boundaries of bodies and communities, including communities of living (dwelling and travel), as well as epistemic communities" (6). It is the "boundaries" of these "communities of living" that *Travellers* brings to the foreground, focusing on the "processes of inclusion and exclusion" that characterize cities like Berlin. This is done by adopting a historical, multidirectional perspective through which Berlin emerges as a palimpsest containing the scars and traces of a history marked by violence and exclusion,[2] most clearly that associated with the Nazi period and the Second World War. Thus, when the protagonist becomes involved in the 1 May protests and is thrown to the ground as the protesting crowd clashes with the police, he finds himself facing a *Stolperstein* (literally "stumbling stone") with four names, a date, and a place: the names of four people who on 5 December 1944 died at the concentration camp of Sobibór (25).[3] In a previous scene, the protagonist had visited an art exhibition with the title *Apartheid, Exile and the Proletarian Internationalism* and contemplated the photographs of South African exiles in East and West Berlin in the 1970s and 1980s, "thinking how ironic history was, that they'd come for succour here, escaping persecution and apartheid, this place that a few decades earlier had been roiling with its own brand of persecution under the Nazis" (15). In these passages, the protagonist is shown as being part of a collective history of Berlin that is constituted upon processes of expulsion and exclusion, but also upon the opposite dynamic: inclusion and hospitality. They can also be read in the light of Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory, according to which different collective memories and social groups' histories of victimization come to interact in the public sphere (2009: 2–3). In this way, the act of remembrance emerges in *Travellers* as one that "cuts across and binds together diverse spatial, temporal and cultural sites" (Rothberg, 2009: 11), pointing to the interconnectedness between different histories of victimization in Europe.

At the same time, the analogy that the text creates between the situation of African migrants in twenty-first century Berlin, South African exiles during apartheid, or Jewish people persecuted by the Nazis suggests the role that migration to, from, and within Europe has always had in the history of this continent, one that is also evoked in Book 5, in which, having lost his documentation on a train journey, the protagonist finds himself deported to a refugee camp on an Italian island. Trying to help him, an Italian man, Matteo, welcomes him into his home, and during their time together, they go for a walk into town. During this walk, the urban space of this Italian town is presented as the site in which a European history of defensiveness and aggression toward the enemy without is materialized. This comes to the foreground in their visit to the local museum, which, as Matteo explains, used to be a fortress in the time of Garibaldi. In front of the museum there is the statue of a soldier on horseback, holding a sword: "The fortress juts out of the rocky ground and over the water, defiantly facing the African shore in the distance. It is

surrounded by a wall bearing gun towers at intervals, each tower has a rusty cannon facing outward, ready for the enemy to emerge, spectral, from the sea mist" (223). There is an obvious parallelism between this past fortress meant to protect Italians from the enemy coming from Africa and present-day borders aiming at controlling migration fluxes and preventing Africans from entering Europe. The museum is dedicated to military history, "a history of militarized Europe, of war and conquest and devastation" (223), a violent history of which twenty-first century European immigration policy is just a continuation.

The Italian defensive fortress facing the Mediterranean Sea stands for "the demarcation of spaces of belonging: […] the very necessity of policing the borders of knowable and inhabitable terrains" (Ahmed, 2000: 3). *Travellers* shows how this defence of borders characterizes the constitution of Europe and the configuration of the local space of European cities such as Berlin. This is seen, for instance, in the decision, on the part of the owner of the Berlin-Turkish café in Book 1 to turn away black people, accusing them of being illegal immigrants and drug dealers (24), which galvanizes the 1 May protests already referred to. After these protests, Mark's status in Berlin becomes complicated. When the police discover that his visa has expired, he is expelled from the church where he is staying, and is taken to a detention centre, from where the protagonist Mark's girlfriend Lorelle and a lawyer manage to take him out. His application for visa renewal, however, is declined and he ends up at the *Flüchtlingsheim*, the refugee centre for those waiting for the result of their asylum application. In his visit to the Heim, an abandoned school building in strikingly bad condition, and pervaded by a revolting smell, the protagonist reflects upon the irony of its name: "Heim. Home. This was the most un-homely home I had ever seen" (57). In her analysis of the contradictory ways in which home, in relation to the migrant experience, may be conceived, Ahmed points to the conception of home as "space of belonging", as a "familiar, safe and comfortable" space where the subject feels at ease (2000: 87). This is the conception of home that seems to underlie this passage from Habila's novel, a space and a condition that refugees are denied in a place perversely called "Heim".

Mark's story finishes with "the refugee riots, as the papers later dubbed it" (64). One morning the refugees wake up to find the building surrounded by buses and the police, who tell them to pack their belongings and abandon their building. According to the police, the buses will take them to another Heim outside the city, but as Lorelle tells the protagonist, they will actually be dumped "in the middle of nowhere" (65). This measure has been provoked by the neighbours' complaint to the council, which exemplifies Ahmed's argument about how "others are recognised as strangers by those who inhabit a given space, who 'make it' their own" (25), for example, a neighbourhood. As Ahmed argues, neighbourhoods imagine themselves as "pure and organic spaces" (26); a neighbourhood works as an "organic community" that is "fully integrated, homogeneous and sealed" (25). This entails a necessary "enforcement of […] boundaries" (26) so that "outsiders", conceived as "foreign agents/viruses" (25), cannot penetrate and destroy the social and moral health and well-being of the community. This is exactly the logic that seems to have motivated the neighbours' complaint in *Travellers*: "they felt threatened, their daughters and sons were not safe on the streets where refugees sold drugs, and got drunk and fought; the aliens had turned the entire street into a dumpster, trash

everywhere" (64–65). The perception of refugees as "aliens" that we find in this quote brings us back to Ahmed, who also analyses the stranger as alien. Aliens may be the ones that "hesitate at the border of the human" (2000: 3), but aliens may also be those that "hesitate at a different border" (3), the border of a nation, a city or a neighbourhood, being perceived — as suggested in *Travellers* — as a threat to the safety and cleanliness of the community.

The refugees, helped by city activists, decide to resist and barricade themselves in the building. After three days of struggle, some of them go to the roof, threatening to jump, as Mark finally does, with the text leaving it unclear whether somebody pushed him or if he did it voluntarily. Through his death, Mark comes "to embody that which must be expelled from the purified space of the community" (Ahmed, 2000: 22), and which is effectively expelled. And in this fate, he resembles Juma, whose story is told in the last book of *Travellers*. This time we encounter the protagonist in London. After his stay on the Italian island, he takes a boat to Africa and returns to his home country, Nigeria, only to leave again and travel to the United States. When he is there, he receives an email from Portia, a woman from Zambia he had met in Book 3, inviting him to spend some days with her in London. In the building where they stay, they come across a Nigerian asylum seeker — Juma — hiding from the immigration authorities and trying to escape from being deported, being helped by three British defenders of migrants' rights. As the building gets surrounded by demonstrators divided into two groups — those demanding Juma's arrest and those trying to prevent it — London emerges as being constituted by the same "processes of inclusion and exclusion" (Ahmed, 2000: 6) that we have also seen in the case of Berlin.

Juma's story exemplifies the migrant's liminal position in the public space of the city and the nation, where he is perceived as a threat and in which his presence can only be an illegal or illegitimate one. He tells the protagonist and Gina that when he first came to England, he used to take the bus at night and stay on for hours, as it was the warmest and safest place he could find, which suggests a form of occupying the public space that is "not a form of dwelling" (Ahmed, 2000: 34), but on the contrary, a non-permanent, subterranean, almost invisible presence. Juma represents the fate of the illegal migrant who, as put by Lisa Marchi, "withdraws to the margins of society, becomes gradually invisible, and is rejected by the social body of the nation" (2014: 610). This literal pushing of migrants and refugees to spaces of invisibility so that proper citizens and entire nations can forget about them is emphasized throughout the whole novel. It is the case of the refugee camp in Book 5, which hosts people arriving by boat from Africa through the Mediterranean Sea, and which is depicted as a place of desperation and death: "A week ago a man hanged himself in one of the bathrooms. Another woman went crazy and started screaming for no reason around the camp, she was subdued, but that night she stabbed herself to death. Another man managed to scale his fence and threw himself into the waves, he drowned immediately" (203). The camp, then, very much works as what Mariangela Palladino has called "islandment", the state and place in which migrants find themselves when they arrive in Europe and are taken to such a detention centre, incarcerated by both the fences of the camp and the sea, "inhabiting a liminal space in Europe but not quite so, neither geographically nor legally (2020: 395).

The novel finishes with a similar distressing image of death. Juma is finally arrested but after the plane flying him to Nigeria is refused permission to land in Abuja, he is taken back to England, where he is imprisoned at Harmondsworth Removal Centre. The protagonist imagines his days there, while those who knew him end up forgetting him. Juma will get thinner and smaller due to his hunger strike until "[o]ne day the guards open the door and he is not there, only a pile of twigs on the floor. The cleaner comes and sweeps up the twigs and bags them and throws them into the dumpster" (295). If, as we have said, the illegal migrant is condemned to invisibility, this invisibility is literally materialized into obliteration and physical disappearance at the end of *Travellers*, which thus entails the culmination of the processes of exclusion and expulsion traced in this section.

Hospitality, resistance, and the transgression of boundaries: The "democracy to come"

In the previous section, I focused on the depiction in *Travellers* of African migrants as strangers not welcomed in the European neighbourhood, city, or nation conceived as a space of belonging. I also occasionally referred to counter-processes of inclusion and incorporation, which I would like to pay more attention to now. Indeed, Habila's novel emphasizes the transgression of boundaries and generation of contact zones that migration always entails. Hence the novel's depiction of African migrants and refugees as "travellers", which, as Randol (2019) suggests in his interview of Habila, is an unusual way of referring to migrants or refugees, who "move against their wishes or will", whereas the concept of traveller tends to connote "agency" and even "recreation". Habila's answer is that he is using the word in a provocative way, with the aim of making his readers reflect upon the different ways of travelling, upon what it is that makes people travel, and also with the intention of avoiding the common stereotypes and prejudices associated with refugees. By presenting his African characters as travellers and emphasizing the particularities of their different life stories, Habila thus avoids the objectification and homogenization that often characterize representations of Africans from an Eurocentric stance.

The act of travelling — understood as the act of leaving home and undertaking a journey — also entails a movement across borders, a movement that disrupts the sealed, contained spaces described in the previous section. The figure of the traveller represents, then, the opposite movement to the organic community's attempt to prevent foreign aliens from leaking in: the traveller gestures to the movement outwards, to the encounter with whatever or whoever is on the other side, and to the transgression of borders. We find such a movement at the end of the novel. After thinking about Juma's inevitable death and disappearance in the Removal Centre, the protagonist responds to Portia's invitation to go with her to Zambia in the following terms: "Yes. Let's go" (295). This final choice to continue moving points to the ineradicability of the act of travelling: no matter how toughly nations police borders and try to contain people's movements, people will go on moving across borders, searching for a better life. At the same time, the fact that this final journey is one back to Africa shows the failure of Europe as a place of hospitality and the long way we still have to go in order to turn Europe into a place where African migrants and refugees will be welcomed as just travellers.

In *Travellers*, the acts of individual characters and small groups suggest how the configuration of Europe as Fortress Europe[4] is one to be resisted and, ideally, transformed. Thus, Mark and Juma, whom I have read mainly as representing oppression and marginality, also function in the novel as figures of resistance, which connects with Habila's emphasis throughout the novel on the voice and agency of African characters. After all, Mark dies fighting not to be expelled, and in his lifestyle, his involvement in social protests, in his conception of art, he had always shown his conviction about the need to "[r] esist the system" (27). His transgender identity, furthermore, as Habila himself has put it, can be seen as an example of the act of "crossing boundaries — that sort of changing identities" (Randol, 2019). As regards Juma, he engages in a hunger strike that he will not abandon until his death and that he conceives in the following terms: "Hunger is a tool. It is power. By refusing to eat, you are telling your enemy, There is nothing you can do to me any more" (278). Both Mark and Juma, then, carry out acts of bodily exposure — Mark by climbing to the Heim's roof, Juma by starving himself to death — that exemplify Judith Butler's, Zeynep Gambetti's, and Leticia Sabsay's argument (2016) about the interdependence of vulnerability and resistance in political agency and social action. As Butler argues, "political resistance relies fundamentally on the mobilization of vulnerability, which means that vulnerability can be a way of being exposed and agentic at the same time" (2016: 24). All through the novel, consistent attention is paid to acts of resistance and protest against immigration laws and policies, carried out by both Africans and Europeans, and many of which take the form of street demonstrations in which — following Butler's argument in "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street" (2011) — public space is seized by those who have no right to gather there and who, by doing so, reconfigure the materiality of public space, vocalizing their opposition to the legitimacy of the state. According to Butler, through this occupation of space, those excluded from the legitimized space of the polis — foreigners, the stateless — pose their "challenge in corporeal terms, which means that […] the body 'speaks' politically" (Butler, 2011). In *Travellers* this is exemplified by the man who stays up hugging a tree branch in Berlin for three days, "defying the police who had come to break up the refugee tents" (279).

In Habila's text, the reconfiguration of space from the migrant's position also takes place through acts of hospitality. As Derrida argues in his discussion of the *arrivant* in *Aporias*, the one who comes and demands hospitality "call[s] into question, to the point of annihilating or rendering indeterminate, all the distinctive signs of a prior identity, beginning with the very border that delineated a legitimate home and assured lineage, names and language, nations, families and genealogies" (1993: 34). *Travellers* is pervaded by hospitable acts in which a character literally welcomes the migrant other or stranger into his house, a domestic hospitality that highlights the importance of personal and private space in the experience of migration and suggests both the ethical and political necessity of exercising hospitality at a collective and political level. These acts also illustrate the point made by Mireille Rosello about the distinction but also unavoidable link between official immigration policies and "the daily practices of ordinary citizens who offer hospitality on a smaller scale but at a less abstract level" (2001: 6). More generally they exemplify Rosello's argument about how hospitality — understood as "an ancient classical tradition, a philosophical value, an ethical imperative, a political issue, and also a polymorphous individual practice" (6) — is at the centre of the political, social,

and economic controversies that characterize immigration issues in contemporary Europe.

In Book 1 of Habila's novel, after Mark gets out of the detention centre, the protagonist takes him to his place, knowing that it constitutes a decision that will have important consequences for him and his life: "I knew that by taking him home I was crossing a line after which it would be hard to turn back. He was now my responsibility. Whatever he did, whatever happened to him, would have a direct bearing on me and Gina" (36). This is a passage that evokes the Levinasian ethics of responsibility, which Ahmed engages with, putting the emphasis on the particular and finite encounters in which I am called on to respond to others (2000: 137–160), a particularity that *Travellers* also emphasizes.

Hospitality is also central in Book 5, in which, as pointed out above, Matteo, a local from the Italian island where boats with African migrants keep arriving, welcomes the protagonist into his house, hoping to help him recuperate his earlier self. Matteo tells him the story of a man, who is obviously Matteo himself, who came upon a woman and child lying on the seashore, and took them home with him and his father. The woman had lost her memory and as the man falls in love with her, he tells her that they had known each other and been lovers for a long time. After they get married, however, the woman recovers her memory and discovers his lie. She remembers that she separated from her husband and her daughter on a shipwreck and leaves, expecting to meet them in Berlin. Matteo's behaviour suggests the limitations and constraints that hospitality may suffer from. He is indeed a sympathetic character who does not turn his back to the suffering and tragedy going on around him. At the same time his taking advantage of his position in relation to the woman he has welcomed into his house shows how difficult it is for the host to abandon the power and authority that correspond to him as "master of the house" (Derrida, 2000: 5, *passim*), which according to Derrida is a necessary step for unconditional, absolute hospitality to take place.

In his theorization of hospitality, Derrida opposes this unconditional hospitality to a conditional one. Conditional hospitality is "circumscribed by law and duty" (Derrida, 2000: 135). As Thomson explains, it is the traditional form of hospitality that takes place between nations, states, or groups considered to be equal, and is only offered in expectation of a reciprocal act. It is, then, a limited form of hospitality based on laws that "must also enact exclusion" (2005: 90). And it is precisely the arrival of the stranger or foreigner that exposes the limits of such a form of hospitality, the foreigner conceived not as the one "provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner" but as "the absolute, unknown, anonymous other" (Derrida, 2000: 25). This absolute other demands a different form of hospitality, one which is "unconditional or hyperbolical" as it "dispenses with law, duty, or even politics" (135). This unconditional, absolute hospitality, however, constitutes an actual impossibility: "a hospitality without reserve […] is the impossible itself" (1994: 82). At the same time it works as the horizon, the promise against which actual acts of hospitality, both individual and collective, inevitably inadequate and limited, are to be measured. As Kevin O'Gorman explains, for Derrida, "conditional hospitality takes place only in the shadow of the impossibility of the ideal version" (2006: 53).

In *Travellers*, acts of conditional hospitality similarly evoke an unconditional, limitless openness of borders; a transformation through hospitality of the social and political

landscape of European cities, neighbourhoods, and Europe as whole. This is seen in Book 6, in which a small group of British citizens — "The Guardians" — defy British law by hiding Juma, moving him from one safe house to another. Thus, as opposed to the conception of Europe as Fortress Europe, *Travellers* invites us to think of a reformulation of European identity based on openess and hospitality. When Karim — a migrant who left Somalia with his wife and his five children, passing through Yemen, Syria, Turkey, Bulgaria, and finally arriving in Germany — asks the protagonist if he is "travelling in Europe" (164), the protagonist reflects that with this question, what Karim really wanted to know was "the nature of [his] relationship to Europe": "A black person's relationship with Europe would always need qualification — he or she couldn't simply be native European, there had to be an origin explanation" (164). In his rethinking of the concepts of democracy, hospitality, or friendship, Derrida precisely puts into question the kind of affiliation that depends on an affinity based on shared origins or nativity. Instead, he advocates a movement away "from the radicality of roots […] and from all forms of originary *physis*, from all the supposed resources of a force held to be authentically generative, sacred, unscathed, 'safe and sound' (*heilig*): ethnic identity, descent, family, nation, blood and soil, proper name, proper idiom, proper culture and memory" (2002: 91). The passage from *Travellers* quoted above suggests a conceptualization of European identity based on these proper and common elements, which hence exclude those whose relationship with Europe can only be one of illegitimacy and alienation.

For Derrida, it is the arrival of the foreigner that puts into question this "*schematic* of filiation" (2005: viii) emphasis in the original: "the absolute surprise of the *arrivant* from whom or from which one will not ask anything in return and who or which will not be asked to commit to the domestic contracts of any welcoming power (family, State, nation, territory, native soil or blood, language, culture in general, even humanity)" (1994: 81-82). In *Travellers*, the presence of African migrants challenges European powers and the prevailing political model, suggesting the "duty" formulated by Derrida in *Aporias*, a "duty" that "dictates opening Europe", "opening it into that which is not, never was, and never will be Europe". It is also a duty that "dictates welcoming foreigners in order not only to integrate them but to recognize and accept their alterity" (1993: 18). In *Travellers* this duty is never fully materialized as such, and hospitality only emerges in its conditional, limited form, as in the dramatic scene in which the police finally arrive and take Juma away by force, while his friends protest that "It is not right. You have no right" (280). The unconditional welcoming of the other, however, works throughout as a horizon of expectations that invites readers to reconsider the "black person's relationship with Europe (164). It also works as the promise of the democracy to come: "an experience of freedom and equality" (Derrida, 2005: 80) that goes beyond "communal belonging and sharing" (80); an experience of (impossible) justice going beyond law and economic calculation (1994: 82). This "to-come", this opening to the future, is encapsulated by the novel's last words: "Yes. Let's go" (295).[5]

Conclusions: Mediterranean entanglements

In his discussion of the figure of the *arrivant* in Derrida, Nicholas Royle pays attention to the etymology of this word: "from the old French *ariver* 'to reach the shore,' from the

Latin *ad* 'to,' rīpa 'shore'" (2003: 111). In *Travellers*, African migrants are literally depicted as *arrivants* in this sense, with the novel paying particular attention to the Mediterranean crossing as the life-risking journey that African migrants must undertake in order to reach European soil, and with the Mediterranean emerging as a symbolic and ideological space that represents the two spatial logics traced in this article.

On the one hand, the Mediterranean is indeed depicted as the "liquid frontier separating the rich north (Europe) from the poor South (North Africa, the 'Third World')" (King, 2001: 8). As a frontier, it contributes to the generation of the spaces of belonging and processes of exclusion traced in the first part of this essay. Iain Chambers has analysed this definition and regulation of the Mediterranean Sea, which is thus involved in the European process of "establish[ing] the borders between the 'inside' and the 'outside,' between belonging and expulsion", the assertion of the authority of the nation-state and the generation of "illegal" immigrants (2008: 4). From this perspective, and as shown in *Travellers*, the Mediterranean emerges as a site of death, as "the new middle passage" (9). This is seen in a especially poignant scene in Book 5 — significantly entitled "The Sea" — in which Matteo notices a line of bodies in the refugee camp, all of them with their face pressed against a fence facing the sea, waiting to listen to the voices of those who drowned. The dead in the Mediterranean are felt in even more powerful terms in the journey that the protagonist undertakes to travel back to Africa. As he falls asleep, he feels that the boat is surrounded by human bodies: "Bodies floating face-up, limbs thrashing, tiny hands reaching up to me. Hundreds of tiny hands, thousands of faces, until the surface of the water is filled with silent ghostly eyes like lamps shining at me, and arms reaching up to be grasped" (234).

Yet, precisely because, as pointed out above, the Mediterranean is a "liquid frontier" (King, 2001: 8), it can only work as a porous and permeable one: "the borders are porous, particularly so in the liquid materiality of the Mediterranean" (Chambers, 2008: 5). The logic of boundedness and separation is then challenged by one of fluidity and contact, one that is related to a different history and conceptualization of the Mediterranean, as analysed by Chambers in what he calls "a multiple Mediterranean […] where the Occident and the Orient, the North and the South, are evidently entangled in a cultural and historical net cast over centuries, even millennia" (2008: 3). Manu and Basma's story — told in a fragmented manner along the different chapters — represents this possibility of separation being transformed into entanglement. In their journey from Libya towards Europe, they promised each other that if they became separated, their meeting point would be Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin. Their boat does sink, Manu and his daughter Rachida get to Germany, and Basma emerges as the mysterious woman that Matteo welcomes into his house. When Basma recovers her memory, she leaves Italy with her son and begins their journey to Germany, while Manu and Rachida keep going to Checkpoint Charlie every Sunday expecting to meet them there.

Like the Mediterranean Sea, Checkpoint Charlie represents the ambivalent nature of borders: on the other hand, it was part of the famous Berlin Wall separating East Berlin and West Berlin; on the other, it worked as a crossing point, thus making contact between the two sides possible. Manu and Basma became separated in the Mediterranean. Their potential reunion at Checkpoint Charlie stands for the possibility of a different Europe: a Europe no longer characterized by division and separation, but by inclusion

and hospitality; a Europe to come. The fact that their reunion is not narrated, but that the possibility of their meeting again is kept open is consistent with the spirit of Derrida's "democracy to come", which "can never be made present or presented as such; the 'to-come' indicates that it is permanently deferred. Yet it provides a principle against which any state which claims to be democratic may be judged" (Thomson, 2005: 26). At the same time, their courage and determination are representative of that of countless other Africans struggling to find a better life in Europe, which must account for their presence.

As we have seen, the stories told in *Travellers* depict contemporary Europe as governed by spatial policies that turn African migrants into strangers. At the same time they show acts of resistance and hospitality by individuals and small groups that evoke the utopian spirit of Derrida's "cities of refuge" (1997), grounded on the law of unconditional hospitality to the other. The Mediterranean works as the frontier between Africa and Europe but also as the unbreakable bond between them. In *Travellers*, Europe is haunted by its *arrivants*, not only those who have managed to reach its shores, but also those who have tragically ended up at the bottom of the sea.[6] In Book 3, as Portia travels from Zambia to Switzerland, trying to discover what led her now dead brother to travel so far away from home, lines from Milton's "Lycidas" keep coming to her mind: "*He must not float upon his watery bier / Unwept, and welter to the parching wind*" (111). The image of the watery bier makes her think of "drowned bodies floating in the water" (112). Milton's famous elegy for a young British man who drowned when his ship sank in the Irish Sea becomes an elegy for all the Africans who have lost their lives on their way to Europe.

The plea in Milton's poem not to leave Lycidas "unwept" — unmourned — becomes the plea to mourn, acknowledge, and remember all those Africans who have died in the Mediterranean. Portia's appropriation of words from a canonical seventeenth-century European poem in order to mourn her African brother — as well as all present-day victims of Europe's inhumane immigration policies — suggests "the interaction of multiple, nonsynchronous spaces and times" (Rothberg, 2009: 320) in acts of remembrance, opening the Eurocentric framework of Milton's poem to the traumatic histories of pain, violence, and death that such a framework has obscured or ignored. This connects with the transnational narrative structure of the novel, in which stories from different contexts and nations — both African and European — are presented as interconnected, together with Habila's emphasis on the act of storytelling. As Ramsey-Kurz has argued, in *Travellers*, narration works "as an embodied form of sharing refugees' experiences" (2020: 170), and hence as a humanitarian and hospitable act that brings together narrators and listeners, writers and readers. In this sense, it is also important to remember that the central character, who brings all the different stories and characters together, is of Nigerian origin, so that the novel's concern with hospitality in Europe is approached from a decidedly African perspective that rules out an exclusively Eurocentric viewpoint.

Just like those Africans who have survived the journey from Africa look to the sea, expecting to hear the voices of the dead, *Travellers* urges Europe to hear the voices of its others: "Matteo imagined the voices rising from the impassive depths [...] and since they say sound never really dies, the voices must continue, diminished, inaudible to ordinary ears, but still detectable with the right listening device" (203). The voices of dead

Africans emerge as a persistent, ghostly, haunting presence. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida formulates the "almost impossible" yet necessary task of conversing with the specter: "to speak *to the* specter, to speak with it, therefore especially *to make or to let* a spirit *speak*" (1994: 11; emphasis in original). As Davis has explained, the spectre for Derrida is "the structural openness or address directed towards the living by the voices of the past or the not yet formulated possibilities of the future" (2005: 379). The voices of the African dead "must continue" (Habila, 2019: 203); they will continue to address the living in order to demand justice, "call[ing] into question […] the very border that delineated a legitimate home" (Derrida, 1993: 34) and urging us to establish new hospitable and democratic ways in which Africans and Europeans can live together.

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Notes

1. All subsequent references are to this edition of *Travellers* and will be cited parenthetically in the text.
2. In her analysis of postcolonial cities, Herbert also uses the concept of the palimpsest (2014: 206, 207) to analyse the spatial materialization in the city of collective histories, memories, and identities.
3. These *Stolpersteine* or "stumbling stones" are brass plaques planted in city streets and sidewalks which commemorate the victims of the Nazi regime.
4. "Fortress Europe" is the term often used to refer to European defensive immigration policy. See, for instance, *The Human Cost of Fortress Europe: Human Rights Violations against Migrants and Refugees at Europe's Borders* (2014), published by Amnesty International.
5. It is interesting to note that on several occasions, Derrida conceptualizes the welcoming of the other and alterity in terms of a "yes" (1992: 70, 74; 2000: 77).
6. In this use of the concept of haunting, I am inspired by Worthington's analysis (2021) of Nguyen's *The Refugees*, drawing on Derrida's "hauntology" and "spectrality". Worthington convincingly shows how in Nguyen's text Vietnamese refugees and their descendants are depicted as ghostly and haunting presences that challenge "homogenizing narratives of American democratic inclusion" (220).

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