



The Cosmopolitan's Other through the Cosmopolitan's Gaze: Refugee Representation in Helon Habila's *Travellers*

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The article tackles the problem of refugees' representation by the cosmopolitans making up the postcolonial elite and the tension that such an operation engenders. Thereby, it offers a reading of Helon Habila's *Travellers* (2019), which depicts the encounter between the cosmopolitan protagonist and a number of refugees trying to make a new life in the city of Berlin. Employing Gikandi's critique of the cosmopolitan elitism characterising postcolonialism and its non-relation to the refugees' life experiences in *Between Roots and Routes* (2010), it will be argued that the novel explicitly presents what Durrant (2020) calls "the failure of registration" of the refugee life from a position of privilege. By rendering this occlusion visible, the author's representation tries to escape the danger of eliding the voices of the people represented.

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Introduction

The recent withdrawal of the American troops from Afghanistan has revived the so-called refugee crisis debate and aroused once again Fortress Europe's worries. This anxiety echoes in the recent years trend of growing nationalism in the Global North: from UK's Brexit to USA's "Make America Great Again" to the Italian politician Salvini blocking migrants at sea. Even institutional debates have witnessed an oscillation from refugee dehumanisation to a humanisation, only with paternalistic nuances, if any (Kirkwood 2017). According to Sam Durrant (2020), current nationalism tackles the anxieties engendered by financial globalisation. The replacement of the nation with capital leads to anxiety due to the inescapable vulnerability of its citizens and the incapacity of the nation to protect them. Nevertheless, this anxiety is paradoxically redirected towards the symptoms of globalisation, i.e. "on to labour, on to the bodies" in movement, and not to its causes (Durrant 2020, 610). However, the desire to subvert the dominant media refugee discourse characterised, according to Brant, Heinrich, and Soeting (2017), by "the continuing and evolving forms of the colonial gaze" is innate to several literary works. The expanding corpus of texts offering a varied perspective on migration has made the use of the label "refugee literature" possible (Gallien 2018). Given that, its plexus with the field of postcolonial studies poses a crucial concern for scholars. If for David Farrier, the in-betweenness of refugees is "a scandal for postcolonial studies" (2011, 8), Claire Gallien still roots for their founding principle: their ability to "intervene in and disrupt the power dynamics" (2018, 724).

Among the varying opinions on the matter, as the most influential texts categorised as refugee literature are written by writers who are not refugees themselves, a *fil rouge* is easily traceable among scholars: their apprehension for the ethics of representation.¹ This issue is associated with the literary market broadly and what Susanne Gehrman calls "marketability of Afropolitan authors" (2016, 6) specifically. By "Afropolitan authors", the scholar embraces Taiye Selasi's definition of Afropolitanism (2005) and refers to diasporic African authors, settled in the West, who consequently have conspicuous access to the literary market. To this end, searching for an alleged authenticity, western media often ask these diasporic intellectuals to express themselves on issues regarding their place of origin. These opinions become fashionable within academic circles, and the people articulating them become spokespeople. Such is the vivid case of the German magazine asking the Nigerian writer Helon Habila for the African perspective on the tragic 2013 shipwreck leaving 360 migrants dead off the Lampedusa coast.² The gap between the writer, living in the USA, and the stateless refugees is discernible in the former's need to educate himself about the latter through interviews. These interviews are the source of inspiration for *Travellers* (2019), a novel narrating the encounter between the narrator, the figure of the Cosmopolitan *par*

¹ Although I am conscious of the historicity of the term (see Gallien 2018b) and the impact of using various categories such as refugees, migrants and asylum seekers can have on these people's claim to international protection (see Crawley and Skleparis 2018), in this article, I decided to respect Gikandi's (2010) and Durrant's terminology (2020) and employ the term refugee in a broad sense to include not only people granted international protection but also those seeking it.

² Helon Habila is a Nigerian novelist, poet, journalist and professor of creative writing who lives in the USA. For his writing, he has won several prizes, among which the renowned Caine Prize in 2001. Particularly interested in social problems, he tackled the so-called migration crisis in *Travellers* (2019). The novel, whose initial title was intended to be *The Fortress*, recounts the lives of a number of diverse migrants whose stories intertwine in the city of Berlin. The protagonist, a nameless Nigerian academic, is the thread that links all characters.

excellence,³ and a series of diverse migrants. This encounter and its ciphered anxiety with the question of representation are the themes of this article. The article aims to depict how the novel registers what Durrant (2020) dubs “the failure of registration” of the refugee life from a perspective of privilege. Accordingly, the author’s representation tries to escape from the danger, defined by Samuel Gikandi (2010), of eliding the voices of the people represented. The analysis will be initiated by putting into relation the Cosmopolitan and the refugee figures. Then, it will focus on the ethics of representation that this relationship entails.

The Cosmopolitan (and the Afropolitan) vs. the Refugee

In “Open/Closed Cities: Cosmopolitan melancholia and the disavowal of refugee life” (2020), Durrant criticises Bhabha’s self-identification with those migrants experiencing the “moment of scattering” (Bhabha 1990, 291) and underlines the intellectual’s disregard of his privilege as part of the elite. A similar expunction can be observable in a 2013 article for the *Guardian* written by Selasi, who, along with Achille Mbembe, is usually considered to have coined the term Afropolitanism. In this article, she recounts an event:

A waitress, passing me, nodded with meaning and I nodded equally meaningfully back, in that gentle way in which brown people often acknowledge each other’s presence. The instant’s exchange reminded me of what I often overlook: *my minority status*. (Selasi 2013, n. p.; my emphasis).

In this passage, Selasi ignores any notion of intersectionality by levelling social class fully. For this reason, Afropolitanism drew a plethora of criticism to the extent that some rejected the label altogether (Tveit 2013 and Dabiri 2016). Even though Gehrman summarises the concept of Afropolitanism as “Cosmopolitanism with African roots” (2016, 61), its entanglement with neoliberal capitalistic infrastructure was accentuated by many scholars for “(1) its elitism/class bias, (2) its apoliticalness and (3) its commodification” (Gehrman 2016, 62). The Afropolitans, “the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you”, unique for their “funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes” (Selasi 2005, n.p.), portray only a tiny fraction of African emigrants. Notwithstanding Mbembe’s philosophical redirection of the concept of Afropolitanism (2007), adding philosophical and ethical depth, a considerable contradiction persists. As Dustin Crowley remarks, “its postnational ideal [...] is revealed to be an effect of the nation, granted unevenly through mechanisms of legality and free movement” (2018, 126). The freedom of movement is granted by the same national structure cosmopolitans and Afropolitans disdain. Albeit materialistic as this approach may unfold, this contradiction is the Achilles’ heel of Cosmopolitanism and its African declination, Afropolitanism.

Opposing to Bhabha and Selasi’s blindness towards privileged structures, Gikandi’s “Between Routes and Roots” (2010) depicts an (auto-)criticism of his privileged position and potentially the entire postcolonial elite. His analysis, employing binarisms such as “roots and routes, refugees and elites, and globalisation and Cosmopolitanism” (31), initiates from a simple remark. When facing refugees, he has to acknowledge that “[he

³ In this article, I decided to confine the discourse around Cosmopolitanism to the recent debates within postcolonial studies. For a broad historical framework of the term, see Durrant 2020.

has] nothing in common with these people" and that "[they] do not share a common critical discourse or set of cultural values" (23). Instead, Gikandi identifies as a cosmopolitan: a label I also decided to adopt in this article to describe those individuals with a propensity towards difference, and "an orientation, willingness to engage with the Other", yet always having an available exit from such an engagement (Hannerz 1990, 239).

Displacement is a critical trait defining both the refugee and the cosmopolitan. However, if for the latter it represents a "form of recognition" (Gikandi 2010, 24) and the access point to Appiah's global tribe (2006, xiii), displacement is for the refugee the entry point to Mbembe's "death-worlds" (2003, 40). Notwithstanding the distance between the two categories, postcolonial studies have long symbolised the latter (or the migrant in general). As Ferrier reflects, for instance, postcolonial scholars such as Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall have fought nationalism's ideals of fixed belonging through deploying "a form of root-less/route-oriented [...] belonging" (2011, 2) and hybridity. In contrast, Bhabha (1994) has highlighted the momentousness of the margin as a site for resistance. Moreover, the migrant tends to be used as an epitome for our age: Rushdie defines the migrant as "the archetypal figure" (2002, 415), and Said alludes to the "age of the refugee" (2000, 174). Even though the latter urges against an aestheticisation of exile since it might cause the banalisation of "its mutilations" and "the losses it inflicts on those who suffer them" (Said 2000, 138), his approach still mirrors what Ferrier defines as "the dominant postcolonial emphasis on the creative potential of migrancy to unsettle fixed notions of boundaries and belonging" (2011, 2). Although this battle might be laudable, it may also de-historicise the figure of the migrant; more dangerously, it depends on an equation of unequal migration processes, not differentiating between voluntary exiles and displaced individuals (Gallien 2018).

Ferrier calls the proclivity of postcolonial studies "to thematize the liberatory aspects of displacement" (2011, 3) a textualist approach. He juxtaposes the materialist perspective, favouring an engagement with the genuine experiences of displaced individuals. The works of scholars such as Andrew Smith, Aijaz Ahmad, and Neil Lazarus represent this current. They counterpose a vision of the interstices as the "smooth space' of productivity and difference" typical of the 1990s, to one of "detention and exclusion through inclusion" (Farrier 2011, 7). In this perspective, Gikandi's refusal to romanticise the refugee figure (2010) seems to avoid the perils of a putative textualist approach. Instead, he accentuates the relevance of recognising Cosmopolitanism's implication in disparity, exclusion and privilege structures. As Durrant (2020) notes, the distancing from the celebratory conception of Cosmopolitanism is evident in Gikandi's readaptation of Bhabha's formulation which refers to the migrant as "the mote in the eye of history, its blind spot that will not let the nationalist gaze settle centrally" (Bhabha 1994, 318). Differently, for Gikandi the "mote in the eye of Cosmopolitanism" (2010, 23) is the refugee. Thus, the refugee is completely excluded from the cosmopolitan discourse and, since "the refugee is the Other of the Cosmopolitan" (26), Gikandi proposes a contrapuntal reading:

[...] a discourse of Cosmopolitanism remains incomplete unless we read the redemptive narrative of being global in a contrapuntal relation with the narrative of statelessness and, by reproduction, of locality, where we least expect it, in the metropolis. (26)

Set in Berlin and portraying the encounter between cosmopolitan(s) and refugee(s), the local and the global, Helon Habila's novel *Travellers* seems to be the perfect *locus* to which this reading can be applied.

The Ethics of Representation

Travellers' criticism of the non-relation between the cosmopolitan and the refugee also implicates the act of representation. Helon Habila seems aware that when “non-migrants talk in place of, or with, refugees”, there exists a need for a “sustained vigilance regarding the ethics and politics of representation” (Gallien 2018b, 745). Hence, as will be seen later, the author enriches the novel with deliberations on this issue, materialising in characters and narrative techniques.

As already mentioned, the literary market's role is predominant in privileging specific individuals (i.e. cosmopolitans) at the expense of genuine refugees. The author did not conceal the market's demand and pressure to elaborate on particular issues, occurring on two different occasions. Firstly, in 2007, a British film company asked him to write a script for a movie – later metamorphosed into the novel *Oil on Water* (2010) – about the violence of the oil industry in the Niger Delta (Habila 2019b). The author recalls his hesitation:

I told the film company that I wasn't really a script writer [...] but they said it didn't matter, and that what they really wanted was a story-line by a Nigerian author. Again, I protested that I wasn't really from the Niger Delta, but in the end I gave them their script. (Habila 2019b, 1)

The British film company's desire for authenticity proves to be superficial, concealing ethnic and class differences. Being aware of these gaps, the author tried to fill them by interviewing people residing in the Delta. This *modus operandi* also characterises the origin of *Travellers*. In that case, the Western media's desire for a Nigerian perspective on a current event such as the Nigerian oil industry translated into a search for a boarder “African perspective” on the Lampedusa migrant shipwreck, which on 3 October 2013 left more than 360 migrants dead (Habila 2019c). The tragedy had a massive impact on the media, and, briefly, there was the desire to avoid more deaths. Thus, Italy initiated a short-lived military and humanitarian operation, *Mare Nostrum*, to rescue migrants at sea. Shortly after, a German newspaper commissioned the writer and journalist Habila to pen an article about the disaster. Then, as the author was in Berlin for a DAAD fellowship, he began his research in the German capital “interviewing African migrants [...] hanging out with them” (Habila 2019d, n.p.).

Yet, notwithstanding the willingness to produce an accurate representation, it is crucial to remember that “representing her who cannot represent herself” is the “original act of erasure” (Cherniavsky 2011, 153). This aporia is also the emphasis of one of the pillars of postcolonialism, i.e. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay *Can the subaltern speak?* (1988), where the scholar indirectly stresses the implication of Western intellectuals in silencing the subalterns. Through the marginalisation of their voices within Western discourse, subalterns suffer from epistemic violence. Such a process can come to the fore even when intellectuals intend well, including specific leftist intellectuals – from Marx and Foucault to Deleuze and Derrida – whom Spivak criticises for their imbrication within western interests. Thus, epistemic violence is always a peril followed by the process of representing the other.

Years later, Spivak once again returns to the topic of representation. Nonetheless, if in *Can the subaltern speak?* (1988) the subaltern are under a magnifying glass, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999) tackles the figure of the native informant, i.e. the source of information during the colonial time of the Western ethnographer producing commentary on the Other. The native informant's voice, comprising an integral part of the text, is eclipsed or "foreclosed", to use Spivak's psychoanalytic terminology. Hence, if the subaltern did not speak, the native informant does talk, but s/he is made invisible and vanishes within the ethnographer's text. However, the native informant's act of complicity in the constitution of Western discourse is an established fact. This complicity, specifically relevant to the present article, is beyond the colonial context and percolates into the current capitalist era. Within the present framework, intellectuals in the Global South and part of the Western postcolonial elite might wonder if their work resonates with the native informants. Specifically, if they "museumize" or exoticise their national origin, two processes that are acclaimed within white capitalist culture, as Spivak (1999, 398) reminds us.

Gikandi reverberates Spivak's preoccupation when arguing that in case the character is a cosmopolitan, his claim to speak about and for the refugees might cause the "eli[sion] of the circumstances by which the majority of the ex-colonial[s] enter [...] the world system" (Gikandi 2010, 34). Even so, according to Spivak (1988), to dismiss representation is equivalent to reiterating the work of ideology in the crudest sense. A practicable alternative route suggested by Durrant might include focussing on "the failure of registration" of the refugee life from the Cosmopolitan's position of privilege (2020, 615). According to the scholar, "this self-critical recognition" can be "potentially ethical" and it can

acquire [...] a specifically political valency if it can recognise the way in which its failure of registration is produced by the structures of state formation and global capital that underwrite the privileged lifestyle of the Cosmopolitan and occlude the lives of the stateless. (615)

My reading of *Travellers* suggests that although the protagonist and partial narrator develops a refugee consciousness and attempts to distance himself from abstract projections – as Helga Ramsey-Kurz (2020) maintains –, the novel is dotted with reminders of the discrepancy between the two figures and of the fact that the protagonist cannot fully register refugee life. Indeed, specifically, when he retraces their path, the structural disparity between them is more pronounced than ever.

Travellers

The author's original intention was to "do justice to the people who entrusted [him] and [go] beyond the statistics and the headlines" (Habila 2019e, n.p.). The round of interviews conducted by Habila developed into a novel, in which the narrative intertwines several accounts of migrants that are at first sight unrelated. The narrative is characterised by oscillation between a first-person narrator, the unnamed protagonist epitomising the cosmopolitan, and a third-person narration heavily focalised through the eyes of different asylum seekers. Besides Juma's letter, refugees' accounts are always filtered through either the protagonist or the third-person narrator.

The protagonist could be seen as an *alter-ego* of the writer because both are Nigerian men living in the US, briefly moving to Berlin thanks to a fellowship. However, if the author was awarded a DAAD fellowship in real life, in the novel, the arrival in the

German capital is granted by Gina, the protagonist's wife, recipient of the Zimmer fellowship. Being a painter, she is one of the members of the cultural elite, who together with other individuals such as the protagonist and the Zambian exiled poet generate representations of voiceless people. The novel's criticism of this operation is entrenched in the fact that these representations are either contaminated, as in Gina's portraits, or anachronistic, as in the poet's case. The only ambivalent representation is produced by the protagonist.

Gina's project consists in realising a polyptych, entitled "Travellers", comprising a series of portraits depicting "real migrants" (Habila 2019, 4). Nevertheless, her representation appears distorted from the inception as the sitters undergo a strict selection procedure. According to the protagonist, his wife's models have to portray the prototype of the migrant, i.e. respect specific criteria such as being "prematurely old" with a lined face, "testimony to what [one] has left behind", with "dry and scaly" hands with "nails chipped" (5). Deciding who the "real migrants" are, Gina mirrors the determination process of refugee status that migrants have to experience to be eligible for international protection. Also, the painter's problematic representation is further aggravated because she overwrites the migrants. Indeed, once the canvases are displayed, the protagonist notices the substantial amendment introduced by his wife. The face of a "broken child" (40) held by his mother is actually superimposed by that of a white one that they both used to see when passing by a "motherless children's home", always shouting "Schokolade" to them (41). Yet, his face gets fuzzier in the following sketches to the extent that it becomes "generic, genderless, neither white nor black", "anyone's child" (41). Interestingly, Ramsey-Kurz (2020) interprets the indistinctiveness of the child as projecting Gina's own sorrow for losing her baby. Still, it could also be an incentive for addressees to transfer their anxieties and identify with migrants. Although this operation might seem ethical at first sight, the aim seems to engender a connection between "us" (the cosmopolitans) and "them" (the refugees) and encourage empathy. As Kirkwood (2017) noticed *in vita reali*, this humanisation risks strengthening paternalistic relations. Furthermore, the problematic nature of representing the other to typify oneself has long been discussed. In a lecture at the University of Massachusetts, the world-famous Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe (1978) delivered a harsh criticism of *Heart of Darkness*, demanding its elimination from the Western canon. Conrad is accused of racism and of using the image of Africa to tackle that of Europe.

The discrepancy between the cosmopolitan painter and the represented refugees is epitomised by the context, emphasising the commodification of the latter's sorrows. The international elite artists admire refugees' portraits; they sip wine and make small talk and assumptions while immersed in their privileges. And, even though the elite claim to represent voiceless people, in reality, they do not truly listen to them as in Mark's case, an asylum seeker, a friend of the protagonist. Moreover, they feel uncomfortable when Mark recounts his experience with racism in "the most liberal and welcoming of all European cities" (42). The gap between the two categories is blatant. As Gikandi notes, the "elites are, by virtue of their class, position and education, the major beneficiaries of the projects of decolonization" (2010, 29), while the failure of such a project falls back on the shoulders of the masses. For Gikandi, "elites profited (directly or indirectly) from the inequalities and corruption of the postcolonial state" (29), and this opportunism also intrudes the diasporic experience. Within the international context, Gina's representation of the refugees wins her a place within the elite. Therefore, the

engagement with the Other is not only “enabled by [her] own position of privilege” (Gikandi 2010, 32), but it is also a requirement securing that position.

What is evident in Gina's portraits is her desire not to contradict people's expectations and mental images of migrants and the insurmountable gap between the representer and the represented. These issues return in the depiction of another character: James Kariku, the Zambian poet living almost all his entire life in exile. However, in this case, the object of representation is the African continent as a whole. Even though Zambia “had forgotten who he was”, in Europe, he is the “African expert [...] a hero, telling [the] truth to power” (Habla 2019, 135), and that is the very reason his comment after every coup is sought-after. While reading about James Kariku, it is difficult not to link Europe's image and demands towards the fictional poet to the above-cited episode in which the German magazine asked Habla for an “African perspective” on the Lampedusa shipwreck. Thus, not interpreting the figure of the poet as (self-)criticism of his own role as an intellectual is difficult.

Readers meet the poet through his daughter's words, Portia, who eventually initiates a romantic relationship with the protagonist. She recounts when her father was an idealistic young intellectual and political opponent to Kaunda's dictatorship. Being incarcerated, he had to go with his family into exile in the UK, where, while his wife misses her home country, he “settle[s]” into a new home (133). Hence, even after his wife returns, although “he could have returned home anytime he wanted”, he chooses a “professional exile” (134), transitioning from fellowship to fellowship. According to the writer, this attitude depicts a dissociative mechanism, as per the trauma of being incarcerated for his political writing (Habla 2019e). Yet, notwithstanding his aversion for Zambia and the neglect of a reality no longer belonging to him, he keeps representing the continent through his speeches. Thus, he addresses African nationalism and Pan-Africanism “that sometime, long ago, meant something but are now void” (140). Hence, if not entirely false, his representation is at least anachronistic.

Unlike Gina and James Kariku, Ramsey-Kurz (2020) argues that, as the narrative progresses, the protagonist learns appropriately and compassionately to listen to refugees' stories and contrast his own narrative with theirs. According to the scholar, the protagonist's moral development is produced by the physical separation from the circle of cosmopolitans around which he initially revolves. Although I agree that the protagonist withdraws from the abstract projections of the refugee, the generated representation is ambivalent as is also his position towards the structural disparity of cosmopolitanism.

At the beginning of the novel, he criticises the circle of intellectuals to which his wife Gina belongs. As mentioned, he frowns on the criteria she uses to choose “real migrants” (4) for her portraits. He thinks that he is somewhat superior to the elite members: the “self-centred, overambitious classmates back in graduate school” and “Gina's oversensitive, even narcissistic fellow Zimmer artists” (30). If the protagonist can perceive their involvement within the *status quo* since, as the postcolonial elite that Gikandi criticizes, they are “a major component of the American and European high culture” (Gikandi 2010, 33), he cannot acknowledge that the same is valid for his own *persona*. In contrast, the protagonist is under the illusion that he is different from the people he condemns and that he genuinely ‘sees’ others. When he meets Mark (one of Gina's aspiring sitters that she rejects), the protagonist is intrigued by him: “I might have sensed [...] something unusual” (5). Nevertheless, as a cosmopolitan, the engagement with the Other has always a safe exit, if necessary (Hannerz 1990), and the

protagonist is always conscious of this possibility. When he meets Karim, a man wanting to tell his story, he knows that he “could always feign sleepiness if it got boring” (167). Nonetheless, when Mark is at odds, as when the church where he lives has been raided by the police, he simply decides to leave him there: “I was tired, sore, and all I wanted was to get home, take a shower, and crawl into bed” (28).

Worse yet, the protagonist repudiates Mark’s vulnerability to become, in Agamben’s terms (2008), a non-citizen. His representation of Mark accentuates the inconsistency with the refugee’s abstract projections he has in mind. Also, Mark and his friends’ ideas and battles are downgraded as naïve reveries:

How long before they saw the world as it is [...] how long before they moved out of their crumbling ivory tower and joined the rest of humanity swimming in what Flaubert described as a river of shit relentlessly washing away at the foundation of every ivory tower ever built?” (Habla 2019, 19)

From within what Durrant described as “the uninterrogated position of cosmopolitan privilege” (2020, 613), the protagonist disavows his enmeshment in constructing such “ivory towers” and projects all his anxieties about the cosmopolitan position onto Mark. Thus, the protagonist’s behaviour recalls Durrant’s reflections on the impossibility of the cosmopolitan to avow the precarity of refugee life “because it threatens to reveal the instability of the citizenship underwriting cosmopolitan privilege” and the easiness with which “a citizen can become a non-citizen” (Durrant 2020, 608). Furthermore, the disavowal of the refugee is further exacerbated by the cosmopolitan’s implication within structures of exploitation, which produce the same metamorphosis from citizen to a non-citizen despite the cosmopolitan desire to engage with the Other. Therefore, according to Durrant (2020), cosmopolitanism is implicated in the structures of disparity simultaneously engendering its privilege and the refugees’ precarity. However, the latter’s vulnerability is disputed by cosmopolitanism.

Nevertheless, if Mark’s death makes it difficult to deny his vulnerability completely, the other refugees’ stories unfolding later render this process impossible. Yet, I am not convinced that, as Ramsey-Kurz asserts, the protagonist “distinguishes his narrative from all other tales he has heard” (2020, 175). Briefly, he finds himself in the shoes of the Other – the refugee – because he has forgotten the bag with all his documents on the train where he met Karim. What is worse, tricked by his resemblance to a random man, the protagonist jumps aboard “the wrong train” (Habla 2019, 192), carrying undocumented migrants to Italy, the first country of asylum. On that train, encircled by jammed people and babies crying, the protagonist completely relinquishes his desire to fight and does not realize that a way out is available to him, unlike the other passengers on that train.

When the narrative shifts from the protagonist’s monologue to third-person narration, he is shown in a refugee camp “staring into the water, quiet and motionless” (Habla 2019, 203). After the initial confusion and legal administrative obstacles, the camp director assists him and, then, he is free to go. However, “he has nowhere to go”, or more precisely, “he wants to go nowhere” (205): staying at the camp is his decision. Even though he suffers from what appear as signs of depression, differently from the voiceless undocumented migrants, he can reclaim his own voice. Accordingly, his narrative supplants the third-person narration again, enabling readers to learn his motivation for such a decision.

I am trying to decide if I want to go out there, to live, or to wait here and embrace whatever comes. [...] I feel if I wait here long enough, presently something would be revealed to me, someone would step up to me [...] and they would say, Listen. And they would tell me a story, a fable, a secret something so pithy, so profound, that it is worth the wait. (208)

Nonetheless, what the protagonist does not remember is how many times people such as Manu, Karim and Mark approached him and told him their own stories, in fragmentary bits or entirely.

Still, the fable he awaits comes shortly after. Matteo, a local painter, often volunteering at the camp, decides to help the protagonist and invites at his home. Matteo opens up to the protagonist and starts to recount his story, "a fairy tale": "Once upon a time a man came upon a woman lying on the seashore, half-covered by the foaming waves. A mermaid, he thought" (211). The woman could recall neither her identity nor her story. All she could perceive was that she was the mother of the little boy on the beach close to her. The fairy tale turns out to be a tragedy, an act of violence and erasure for the woman. Indeed, Matteo, after finding them, desperately falls in love with the woman and, intimidated by the very idea of losing her, persuades her to believe that they have been lovers for years. He even gives her a name: Sophia. Matteo's happy ending – their marriage – is tainted when the woman recollects her memory and remembers that her name is Basma. She already has a husband and a daughter –whom readers and the protagonist have already encountered in the novel. Although the protagonist's thought goes to Manu and his daughter Rachida, every Sunday waiting for Basma at Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin, he almost justifies Matteo's actions as a sign of his affection for the woman: "He is a good man" (233). Yet, being a good person and having noble intentions do not necessarily mean making ethical choices, the novel seems to imply.

Woken up from his lethargy; after the conclusion of the story, the protagonist decides to embrace the traumatic experiences of the displaced people. He encounters them through a reverse journey across the Mediterranean to Nigeria via Tunisia. On the boat, he falls asleep and dreams of a mass drowning:

A restless, writhing motion fills the water. Fish. [...] but when I bend closer [...] I see they are not fish, they are human. 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; they float amidst a debris of personal belongings, toys, shoes, shirts, and family pictures all slowly sinking into a bottomless Mediterranean. I drift past, and they drift past, and God drifts past, paring His nails. I pull back, tears on my face. *I had not thought death had undone so many.* I repeat the line over and over, rolling it over my tongue like a prayer, till my whisper turns into a scream. (234)

However, this dream remains just that, a hallucination. The protagonist is safe, and his prayer, a quotation from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* indirectly quoting Dante's *Inferno*,⁴ comes from that cosmopolitan life securing his protection. As it turns out, the subsequent part of the novel opens to show the protagonist between the USA and London, embarked on the cosmopolitan life he previously (yet not fully) rejected. He

⁴ Dante's line that inspires T.S. Eliot is "e dietro le venia sì lunga tratta/di gente, ch'i' non averei creduto/che morte tanta n'avesse disfatta" (Canto 3, 55-57).

finally gets his PhD diploma, finalises his divorce and re-encounters Portia, with whom he decides to start a new life in Zambia.

In London, he briefly encounters Juma, an asylum seeker starting a hunger strike to protest against British expulsion procedures. This occasion offers the opportunity to show the contradictions of a system making grandiose declarations about democracy and peace and, concurrently, being ready to erase individuals. Nonetheless, the protagonist fails to leave the last word to Juma through his letter. The novel ends with his oscillation between going to Zambia and his fantasy about Juma's death in the cell, where the latter is incarcerated:

Juma sits in his cell, thirsting for mother's milk, unable to eat anything else, he shrinks, he regresses, back to childhood, curled up in a corner foetus-like, his flesh withers, his bones become as frail as twigs. One 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)

The description of Juma's imagined death is pursued by the protagonist's answer to Portia "Yes, let's go" (295), strongly epitomising the gap and disparity between the two men "produced by the structures of state formation and global capital that underwrite the privileged lifestyle of the cosmopolitan and occlude the lives of the stateless (Durrant 2020, 615).

The arguably impossible task of representing the refugee experience, ostensible in the narrative, reverberates in *Travellers* since the novel itself is the product of the process of representation. Indeed, like the cosmopolitan protagonist, the author describes refugees in the novel. His "uneasiness" towards this portrayal process perceptible throughout the entire narrative is embodied by the title of the novel – *Travellers* – that, as already articulated, synchronises with the title of the portrait series painted by Gina. As her representation of refugees is partial and tainted, selecting the very same title for his novel, the author seems to acknowledge the limitation of his representation and self-criticises his position as a cosmopolitan writer. With the title, the author seems to self-sabotage his representation of the refugees and to underline that the novel has to be read as "a" representation as partial and tainted as that offered by Gina. It is this acknowledgement, or "this self-critical recognition" using Durrant's formulation (2020, 615) that renders the representation included in *Travellers* ethical.

Conclusion

This article has affirmed that Helon Habila's *Travellers* focusses on the challenging relationship between the cosmopolitan and the refugee and the failure of the former to genuinely represent the latter. Three representations offered in the novel have been analysed, corroborating this thesis. Yet, one may rightly argue that the protagonist cannot be confounded with the writer. However, the title chosen by the author seems to indicate that, as suggested by Durrant (2020) in his reading of Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011), "there is no position external from cosmopolitanism" from which a critique can be concocted. Although it is true that "Migrant, refugee, émigré, expatriate" are terms that can "limit and confine" as the author articulates, the idea that we are all in the same boat because "in the end, we are all travelling" (Habila 2019e) obfuscates the disparity among different paths. Paradoxically, however, it is this occlusion that the novel can represent.

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