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The Unattainable Mediterranean: Arrested Clandestine Odysseys in Sefi Atta's "Twilight Trek" and Marie NDiaye's Trois femmes puissantes

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Abstract:
Sub-Saharan African aspiring migrants, pursuing their clandestine odysseys through the Sahara towards the Mediterranean, seem far removed from the figure of the upwardly mobile migrant paradigmatized by postcolonial theory. The attempt to migrate illegally represents a very precarious and time-consuming form of mobility where the itinerary is subject to continuous revision, and reaching the destination is never obvious. The present article analyzes Sefi Atta’s short story “Twilight Trek” (2009) and the third part of Marie NDiaye’s triptych *Trois femmes puissantes* (2010) and their representations of these vulnerable African odysseys in which the climax of the migratory endeavor, arrival in Europe, remains out of the protagonists’ reach. By focusing on tropes pertaining to identity, mobility, slavery, and storytelling, this article draws attention to the manner in which the text corpus conveys the idea of the precariousness of the arrested migratory endeavor and the limits set to the mobile position of the underprivileged travelers.

From the European anti-immigration perspective, the mediatized images of African illegal migrants crammed onto rickety boats on the Mediterranean or crossing the fences in the Spanish enclaves embody the idea of how some forms of mobility become defined as “threatening, transgressive, and abject” (Creswell 178) in globalized postcoloniality. The faceless and nameless masses of aspiring African migrants, “mute objects of a feared alterity” (Chambers 10), are seen as unwanted invaders,
a threat to Europe’s cultural, social and economic integrity. They do not seem to be linked to Europe anyhow, despite the fact that the two continents’ histories are profoundly entangled in terms of slave trade, colonialism and development aid (see Olaussen ix). Nor are the geographic boundaries of the two continents particularly evident either, as the case of the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in Morocco suggests: such places are concrete examples of “Africa in Europe and Europe in Africa” (Thomas, Africa 163; emphasis original). Yet, the frontier represented by the Mediterranean has become a “materialization of authority” that wishes to freeze the two continents’ entanglement and the diversity it has generated “into quarantined realms” (Chambers 3, 6). Indeed, as not only individual nations but also the European Union as a whole has taken concrete measures to regulate and control mobility on its (fluid) borders, the concept of “fortress Europe” has become particularly pertinent in recent years (see Thomas, “Fortress”)¹. If Fortress Europe perceives contemporary boat people as a threat, liberal and humanitarian discourses, on the other hand, see them in a very different light: they wish to restore the humanity of the aspiring immigrants (Zembylas 31). This implies that the clandestine travelers are seen mainly as victims to be pitied.

Shifting perspective, the meaning of the mediatized images of clandestine travelers changes. When these images are exposed to the gaze of those who nurture hopes of emigrating, the clandestine travelers entering European territory could be conceived as the lucky ones; as those who have arrived. From this perspective, the boundary embodied by the Mediterranean represents an opportunity, and those who have reached Europe are far from victims. With respect to these multiple readings, it is helpful to understand the Mediterranean as “a privileged site for exploring global dynamics, containing both proximity and distance, constituting a link but also an obstacle and barrier”, as Dominic Thomas notes (Africa 162). Illegal immigration from Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe by sea has been narrativized in recent African and African diasporic fiction, for example by Fatou Diome in her novel *Celles qui attendent* (2010) and Fabienne Kanor in her recent work *Faire l’aventure* (2013).² In this fictional context, the attempt to migrate illegally is represented as a
very specific, precarious and time-consuming form of mobility where the initial itinerary is subject to continuous revision and the destination may remain unattainable despite all the resources invested.

In this article, I analyze Sefi Atta’s short story “Twilight Trek” (2010), together with the third section of Marie NDiaye’s triptych novel *Trois femmes puissantes* (2009), by focusing on how they represent the precarious itineraries of aspiring illegal migrants from the African continent toward Europe. In both texts under examination, the travelers come from Sub-Saharan Africa; in NDiaye’s text, the point of departure is Senegal, whereas in Atta’s short story, the protagonist’s national affiliation is most likely Nigeria. The travelers’ destination is Europe, supposedly reached through the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in Morocco or by traversing the Mediterranean, much in the spirit of “Barcelone ou la mort” as articulated by Senegalese emigrants in Fatou Diome’s *Celtes qui attendent* (117). Unlike the aforementioned novels, Diome’s *Celtes qui attendent* and Kanor’s *Faire l’aventure*, in which the central characters succeed in their attempt to reach continental Europe by maritime travel and become representatives of what Achille Mbembe would call practical cosmopolitanism (109), Atta’s and NDiaye’s texts foreground journeys that fail at reaching their destination. The texts do not focus on the arrival in the European territory – frequently imagined as an El Dorado in the aspiring African migrant imaginary (Thomas, *Africa* 162) – and the hardships encountered there. Instead, they address an aspect of the African clandestine odyssey that is less visible and spectacle-like from the European perspective, which tends to be obsessed with “the macabre effects of the clandestine passages […] that enflame fears of conquest” (Abderrezak 467). The aspect in question is the risky travel through the desert to the Spanish enclaves and the Mediterranean shores. These are physical frontiers that truly challenge the “freedom of movement” of these traveling subjects, exemplifying how in the contemporary globalized world, the right to be mobile “increasingly runs up against borders, confines, and controls of a profound ‘unfreedom’” (Chambers 3).
As several scholars have pointed out, the figure of the upwardly mobile migrant – a traveler who has reached their destination – has become the paradigmatic representative of the postcolonial condition (see, e.g. Boehmer 229-233; Krishnaswamy; Smith). Recently, researchers of African literatures have also started to pay attention to forms of mobility other than migration. Such a shift of emphasis can be observed, for instance, in Aedín Ni Loingsigh’s study *Postcolonial Eyes: Intercontinental Travel in Francophone African Literature* (2009), where Loingsigh distances herself from the concept of migrancy and reads literary representations of African mobilities in terms of travel writing; in the same vein, Mahriana Rofheart’s *Shifting Perceptions of Migration in Senegalese Literature, Film, and Social Media* (2014) considers mobility from the perspective of African localities and emigration. Further, the ways in which class differences mark different forms of mobility has been increasingly acknowledged in the field of postcolonial literary studies, where more emphasis has been placed on the analysis of such underprivileged forms of mobility as refugeedom, asylumseeking, and illegal immigration (see, e.g. Abderrezak; Calargé; Helff; Nyman; Omuteche). Still, certain forms of mobility tend to remain overshadowed. A case in point is intra-continental travel, as Sydoine Moudoma Moudoma has pointed out (1). The precarious, arrested odysseys across the Sahara narrativized by Atta and NDiaye can be classified as intra-continental travel, but there is a certain twist to this: their unattainable destination is actually extra-continental.

Indeed, in Atta’s and NDiaye’s stories, the climax of the migratory endeavor, arrival in Europe, remains out of the protagonists’ reach. Instead, their mobility is characterized by a stagnation that is a rather bleak manifestation of those postcolonial theoretical concepts that convey an “optimistic and celebratory view of globalization” such as liminality, hybridity or in-between-ness (see Gikandi 610). The characters seem trapped in spaces supposed to be only temporary, intermediate stopping points, such as immigration camps where they stay “without […] recognition beyond that of being a nameless guest worker or ‘illegal’ immigrant, condemned to inhabit the discarded regions of the abject” (Chambers 3). In fact, Atta’s and NDiaye’s protagonists may not
even qualify as illegal immigrants since they fail to reach Europe. With regard to the postponed nature of their mobility, it is significant that both Atta’s and NDiaye’s protagonists’ odysseys come to their end at an immigration camp; an intermediate stopping point becomes the destination itself. The immigration camp is a powerful metaphor for the abject stagnation-in-movement sort of condition to which the protagonists’ mobility is eventually reduced. To pay attention to such arrested forms of mobility that remain relatively invisible in the field of postcolonial literary studies obliges us to acknowledge the diversity of contemporary African mobilities, as well as the fact that not all travel is straight-forward and unimpeded.

Being written by authors with their unique styles, it is not surprising that the narrative voices of “Twilight Trek” and Trois femmes puissantes differ significantly from each other. In Atta’s short story, there is a humorous undercurrent in the narrative tone – typical of that author’s style in general – which conveys not only a light-hearted overall impression, but also subjects the protagonist-narrator to mockery. NDiaye’s lyrical narrative voice, on the other hand, captures the struggle and isolation that the protagonist endures, while also conveying NDiaye’s “fondness of the unreal” with its mythical and fairytale-like elements (Asibong, “Spectacle” 396). Despite these differences, the manner in which both these texts represent the Afro-Mediterranean do share interesting similarities in terms of their imagery. Similar tropes pertaining to identity, mobility, slavery, and clandestine travelogues recur throughout the texts. Together, these tropes form, first of all, an imagery that captures the vulnerable essence of the clandestine odysseys. Secondly, they also draw attention to how the context of mobility obstructs the agency and identity of the travelers so that their conviction to be the self-made heroes or heroines of their own story is strongly problematized questioned. In this sense, Atta’s and NDiaye’s texts can be read as tragedies, defined by David Scott as follows:

In tragedy we […] see the ways in which acting in the world obliges us to expose ourselves to conditions and consequences not entirely of our own choosing. Tragedy
The tragic quality of the texts under analysis is a feature that, for most parts, only the reader can perceive; the protagonists themselves refuse to see the limits of their agency. The narratives draw the reader’s attention to the contextual factors that both limit and produce contemporary African clandestine mobile subjectivities. For instance, the texts establish an uneasy parallel between the transatlantic slave trade and the characters’ clandestine odysseys. At the same time, however, the characters may embrace the possibility of having their proper identities erased, which can certainly be read as a form of creativity within the restrictions imposed by the context. Moreover, the fact that the camps where the protagonists’ journeys stop are set up by the aspiring migrants themselves betrays the complexities that mark the clandestine traveling position.

Before turning to the analysis of the texts, it must be briefly noted that the categorization of Marie NDiaye as an “African writer” and *Trois femmes puissantes* as an “African novel” that this article performs is admittedly somewhat problematic. Of course, the transnationalization of the African literary enterprise has complicated such classifications for most “African” authors, but in NDiaye’s case, the question seems to be even more complex. Earlier in her career NDiaye – a daughter of a white French mother and a black Senegalese father, born and raised in France – was eager to dissociate herself from “Africanness” (Asibong, *Marie* 6-8; Moudileno, "Fame" 70; Thomas, *Africa* 142). Such avoidance of ethnic labeling also marks her production in the 1980s and 1990s, and it was not until the novel *Rosie Carpe* in 2001 that NDiaye’s texts became more explicit in their representations of “black” subjects (Asibong, *Marie* 30; Moudileno, “Excellent”). The shift “towards the provision of shapes, names and signifiers for those aspects of existence which had previously eluded representation provides opportunities for a more directly politicized and therapeutic writing”, as Andrew Asibong suggests (*Marie* 73). It is also against this backdrop that
*Trois femmes puissantes* can be seen as NDiaye’s most “African” novel (Moudileno, “Fame” 72; see also Thomas, *Africa* 114).

A similar transition can be observed in NDiaye’s authorial image. As Lydie Moudileno puts it, the author now “finds herself […] in a position to allow the postcolonial origin to find its way back into her private and professional identity” (“Fame” 70). This transition “from blank to black” (Asibong, “Spectacle” 389) is far from unproblematic. As Andrew Asibong convincingly argues, *Trois femmes puissantes* marks “NDiaye’s first real failure to win (the perhaps impossible) game of nuanced cultural representation on her own terms” (“Spectacle” 392) – and this partly because of the exoticizing dimensions in the novel’s marketing process and reception. While one can easily agree with Asibong on the necessity to challenge the conception of *Trois femmes puissantes* as “a single, coherent, realistic novel ‘about’ ‘strong’ ‘African’ ‘women’” (“Spectacle” 388), it should be noted that the novel does not actively resist being read as an African diasporic text. The text articulates an awareness of the complicated entanglements of Africa and Europe, acknowledging that, as Alain Mabanckou has put it, “Africa is no longer solely in Africa” (87; emphasis original). Indeed, all three stories of the novel are subtly set against the backdrop of transnational, Afro-European mobility from colonial times to today while foregrounding the interior worlds of the respective protagonists (Toivanen). The final part is a relevant and aesthetically accomplished text narrativizing a topical issue related to global migrations in the Afro-European context of the Mediterranean. *Trois femmes puissantes* may be a problematic work in the context of NDiaye’s entire production not only because of its “exoticizing” potential resulting from the novel’s allusions to “Africa” and its ethnically identified characters, but above all in how it has been marketed as “African” (Asibong “Spectacle”; see also Asibong, *Marie* 100-101; Burnautzki). However, instead of reading *Trois femmes puissantes* against the backdrop of NDiaye’s earlier work and positions, the aim of the present article is to read the third story of her triptych together with
Atta’s short story in order to analyze the way each respectively addresses the very specific theme of arrested clandestine odysseys.

ERASED IDENTITIES

Falsified travel documents are an essential element in clandestine travel, and they feature in NDiaye’s and Atta’s fictional illegal itineraries, as well. Forged passports not only produce new identities, but also erase the original ones. In Atta’s short story, the young protagonist-narrator hides his true identity not only from his co-travelers, but also from the reader. In the opening sentence, he is introduced to the reader in terms of who his newly acquired fake passport claims him to be, but who he is not in reality: “[M]y name is not Jean-Luc, I’m not from Mali and I’m definitely no Francophone African” (81). As the story evolves, the reader learns more about the protagonist, but it is noteworthy that any information that would be relevant from the perspective of a (genuine) identity document, such as name, age, or nationality, is not shared. While he is from an Anglophone country that is probably Nigeria, he also distances himself from this national affiliation by claiming that “Nigerians are an arrogant lot” (90). If the protagonist is indeed Nigerian, this ironic distance from his national identity stems from his being of mixed-origin, which renders him less “African” than his black compatriots. To share with the reader only incorrect personal details written on a falsified passport is a narrative strategy that highlights the vacillating nature of a mobile clandestine identity, fruit of a dubious creativity.

While the narrator refuses to unveil his true identity, he nevertheless identifies himself as one of the “illegals” (81). To refer to the illegals in the first person plural signals that the narrator embraces this newly discovered, yet ephemeral, collective identity. By including himself in the anonymous crowd of “illegals” and referring to “Africans like us” (81), the narrator voluntarily identifies himself in the banal imagery of illegal migrants as non-persons (see Lombardi-Diop 165). There is an element of light-heartedness in his appropriation of such rather degrading identification
that suggests a certain level of subversion: by turning an appellation invested with negative meanings into an ironic term of self-identification, the narrator claims at least some level of discursive power. Yet, interestingly enough, the protagonist also draws an ironic picture of his travel companions. When traveling in a truck that is supposed to take him across the desert, he reduces his fellow-travelers to a list of caricatures: “[P]assenger one, tattered shoes; two, greasy skullcap; three, lopsided headscarf; four, chapped lips; five, gold chain and red eyes. Nothing new” (84). In his description, the other passengers are a mess of disconnected body parts and ragged clothing – with the exception of the fifth passenger who wears a gold chain; possibly a petty criminal like the protagonist himself. In so doing, the narrator adds an ironic, self-aware twist to the stereotypical picture of illegal African migrants.

The narrator also suffers from confusion concerning his gender and sexual identities which motivates his odyssey. This confusion stems from the protagonist’s childhood when his prostitute mother dressed him up like a girl and tried to pimp him to a man with a taste for “light-skinned boys” (82). This confusion haunts the protagonist later in life. For instance, when he embezzled the money he gained from drug trafficking, his boss threatened to send a gang to rape and kill him: “Death I could live with, but I couldn’t afford to be tampered with like that, against my will” (81). He also fantasizes about “prov[ing] [his] manhood” (86) with Patience, a Cameroonian prostitute he acquaints in the course of his journey. He tries to mask his sexual confusion and lack of experience by talking about himself as if he were an accomplished womanizer, using terms like “pretty chick” (83) and arguing that he “like[s] his women African” (90). Patience belittles the narrator’s bluster and claims to be old enough to be his mother, in addition to which the self-claimed boss of the immigration camp refers to Patience as the narrator’s “mummy” (97). This suggests that pursuing the clandestine odyssey may not be enough to, so to speak, make a man out of the protagonist. The gender complexity aspect is interesting in the sense
that in the real-life context, African clandestine migration is also coded mainly as a masculine endeavor.

The naive and slightly contemptuous narrator sees the traveling endeavor as an adventure. He has relatively dispassionate plans to become a soccer player and “getting a white woman” (86) once he arrives in Europe. The fact that the boys with whom he used to play football mocked his talents by calling him Pele [sic] and that the narrator does not even seem to recognize the name of one of the most iconic football players, suggests that he is probably not a great player or even really that much of a football fan. This exposes the shallowness of his alleged professional pursuit, as well as the fact that he is an economic migrant par excellence. In light of his gender/sexual confusion, the protagonist’s aim to immigrate to Europe represents an attempt to rid himself of his identity crisis: he sees European immigration as offering the potential to pursue dreams of a sports career and white women, stereotypical elements in the construction of hegemonic (black) masculinity. In this sense, it can be argued that the planned clandestine journey to Europe is not uniquely an instance of erasure of identity (falsified passport), but also one of regaining identity (heterosexual masculinity). To be duped by a woman at the end of the story constitutes a serious setback for the protagonist’s masculine endeavor: “real” men are supposed to be adventuresome in El Dorado, not held captive in a state of stagnation.

In the third section of NDiaye’s triptych, the protagonist struggles against the erasure of her identity. Khady Demba refuses to acknowledge her abjection in the eyes of others. She wants to be a subject named Khady Demba, not some childless widow in a society in which motherhood is the measure of a woman’s worth; a prostitute suffering from venereal diseases; nor an illegal invader trying to enter European soil (Toivanen 14). This refusal constitutes the strength of Khady Demba to which the novel’s title alludes. Yet, at the same time, this refusal is also a marker of her inability to “engage successfully with the world around [her]” (Ledent 108) – a feature that Bénédicte Ledent attributes to the narrative style of NDiaye’s novel’s, which also has an effect on
the thematic axis. As critics have observed, the narrative’s repetition of the name “Khady Demba” functions as a means of highlighting the protagonist’s singularity and humanity (Jordan 272-273; Ledent 106; Moudileno, “Puissance” 69-70) as a consequence of which “the identity of Khady Demba is never called into question” (Parent 85; my translation). This is a particularly powerful narrative strategy, especially considered against the backdrop of illegal migrancy whereby the migrant’s original identity is often erased along with identity documents. By repeating the protagonist’s name in its entirety, the narrative conveys the idea that illegals do have individual faces, names, and histories despite the fact that from the perspective of European border control, they are reduced to a menacing, anonymous crowd of non-persons without rights; a mere biological life, that is (see Papastergiadis 435). From this viewpoint, NDiaye’s story can be seen as “humanizing individual and collective experience” in the Afro-European context of clandestine mobility – an ethical effort Dominic Thomas calls for (Africa 163, 168). Such an effort, according to Hakim Abderrezak, is at the core of the political engagement of the literary genre of “illiterature” focusing on illegal migrancy across the Mediterranean (467). Yet, one may also raise the question of whether NDiaye’s or Atta’s protagonists even asked to be “humanized”. Khady Demba’s unconditional refusal to subject her “true” identity to erasure suggests that she rejects our (“us” here referring to privileged readers) benevolent humanitarian feelings of pity. In a similar vein, the ironic way Atta’s protagonist embraces his clandestine anonymity vitiates any attempt to see him as a victim. However, Khady Demba’s refusal to subject her identity to erasure can also be read as an instance of a deceptive “strength”. As Anne Martine Parent aptly suggests, maybe Khady’s identity is not called into question simply because there is no one to do so, given her extreme isolation and exclusion from familial and social structures (87-88). This not only invites the reader to see the tragic essence of Khady’s “strength” and, indeed, the tragedy of her refusal of empathy. Khady Demba insists on being the hero of her own travelogue even when the idea of free-willing agency is so obviously compromised due to the nature of her illegal traveling pursuit. In this sense, the text
invites the reader to think about the “limits of empathy” (see Thomas, Africa 166). Moreover, as Andrew Asibong points out, Khady’s “strength” is “so blandly and skimpily drawn” that it ends up being unconvincing (Marie 102). Reading Trois femmes puissantes against the context of NDiaye’s previous work marked by what he calls blankness, Asibong also finds it “problematic […] how much the figure of the dark-skinned Khady Demba is made to ‘carry’, in terms of physical destruction and accompanying ideological ‘optimism’” (Marie 103). According to Asibong, as a result of this combination of excessive suffering and “strength”, the figure of Khady ends up being a mere “condescendingly Africanized […] projection” (Marie 103). Indeed, the contradiction and excess disturb the reader’s empathetic aspirations. As a fictional construct, the figure of Khady Demba may not be as “sincere” as it first seems: by mimicking the stereotypical image of “the African woman” as both excessively suffering and excessively strong, it may actually be interpreted to expose and challenge the stereotype itself. This way, it also puts a well-intentioned reader’s empathy to the test. Atta’s text also points out the limits of imagining oneself in another’s shoes, so to speak. Atta’s “hero” does not engender feelings of empathy in the reader, nor does the narrative romanitcize or heroize him as an aspiring illegal migrant. Both NDiaye’s and Atta’s texts go beyond the agenda of “humanizing” aspiring illegal migrants and lead the reader to a disturbing terrain where such benevolent intentions and feelings are challenged or rejected outright.

With regard to the protagonist’s struggle against the erasure of identity, it is logical that when she receives a forged passport bearing the name “Bintou Thiam” from her travel companion, she feels that her subjectivity is jeopardized: “Elle se sentit fugacement redevenir faible, tributable de la détermination et des connaissances d’autrui comme des intentions indécélables qu’on nourrissait à son propos” (291) “She felt fleetingly that she was becoming feeble again and subject to the decisions, knowledge and indiscernible intentions of others” (254). Unlike Atta’s narrator whose identity relies on the false personal details in his passport, for NDiaye’s protagonist, “Bintou Thiam” is not an identity that will be embraced or assumed. Significantly, the
name “Bintou Thiam” surfaces only once. This conveys the idea of an available new identity that the protagonist rejects without a second thought. By rejecting this new identity, the protagonist symbolically refuses being identified as an illegal migrant, a faceless African intruder in the eyes of Europe. In this she differs significantly from Atta’s protagonist.

While she actively refuses to subject her identity to erasure, it must acknowledged that her journey is marked throughout by unintentionality and dependence on others’ actions: Khady Demba is on the move because it is so decided by her relatives, and she relies on her travel companion’s goodwill and knowledge when it comes to making the travel arrangements. By embodying such contradictions, the figure of Khady draws the reader’s attention to the complexities of the clandestine African journey which is as much about intentional choices as it is about coincidence. Due to the complexity marking the figure of Khady, the narrative refuses to represent aspiring African migrants either as mere victims or agents of their own destinies. In this respect, NDiaye’s story is a vehicle of a very similar message to Atta’s, whose protagonist is eventually forced to recognize the obstacles placed along the path of what he first considered his heroic masculine odyssey. In short, neither of the characters can easily be classified as either hero or victim.

The erasure of identity that marks the clandestine condition is also conveyed in the NDiaye’s portrayal of Khady’s travel companions. With the exception of Lamine, the rest of the aspiring migrants with whom Khady travels are represented as a faceless crowd. After betraying Khady by stealing her money, even Lamine becomes a faceless and nameless memory in the protagonist’s mind (308, 313) – an erased identity he concretely assumes later, when he makes his way to France as a paperless immigrant. The other travelers are depicted as “visages gommés par le soir, sans âge ni traits” (275) “faces erased by the evening, without age or features”.5 The protagonist is unwilling to identify herself in their anonymity, and there seems to be only a trivial connection between herself and the others. There is an instance when she momentarily recognizes
her own condition in that of the other travelers: “[E]lle ressemblait maintenant de plus en plus à ces êtres égarés, faméliques, aux gestes lents” (310) “she now looked more and more like the lost, sluggish, scrawny creatures” (271). This perception places the focus on the pure corporeal materiality of their existence, and thus resonates with stereotypical representations of illegal migrants as a mere anonymous mass of biological life (see Papastergiadis 435). Still, she is quick to differentiate herself from their anonymous predicament reduced to a tormented corporeality; she has an identity to assume: “Entre eux et moi, quelle différence essentielle ? […] C’est que je suis, moi, Khady Demba !” (310) “Between them and me, what difference, basically? […] That’s because I’m me, Khady Demba!” (271)

METONYMIES OF TRAVEL: SHOES, TRUCKS, AND BOATS

As Atta’s and NDiaye’s texts portray similar clandestine itineraries, the tropes of mobility they employ also have a lot in common. Both texts exhibit a set of metonymies of mobility pertaining to human travel, including shoes (flip-flops and sneakers), trucks, and boats. In Atta’s short story, the narrator-protagonist has enough money to pay for his voyage through the desert, so his sneakers are not his main vehicle of transport until he has to cross a mountain in order to get to the immigration camp in Tangiers. It is revealing of his economic resources that it is only at this point that he has sore feet. He removes his sneakers once he and Patience are installed in their tent. While the pair of sneakers is not that important a vehicle for movement, they nevertheless play a central role in the protagonist’s mobility, as he hides his money in them. The fact that he feels obliged to sleep with his sneakers on is a powerful metaphor for the precarious nature of his journey that may stagnate at any moment. He pays for Patience’s boat ride to Spain, revealing to her his money stash. They agree that Patience will go to Tangiers to find a smuggler, but she never returns, leaving the protagonist with “too much space” in his sneakers (97). Toward the end of the story, when the protagonist finally fathoms Patience’s betrayal, he notices a solitary sandal drifting among the
discarded objects left behind in the camp by travelers who are still able to continue their journey. The apparent fragility of the odd sandal symbolizes the protagonist’s arrested and now horizonless odyssey: without his savings, he is just as vulnerable to the odyssey’s risks as bare feet in a pair of flip-flops. The discarded sandal, but also to a certain extent, the sneaker emptied of its contents, can be read as what Jopi Nyman has referred to as the symbolic expression of liminality typical to narratives of forced migration (250-215). Symbolic liminality is a notion that captures the “sense of exile and exhaustion [that] creates an uncanny sense of in-betweenness” (Nyman 251). The sneakers end up embodying the precarious nature of the traveling endeavor rather than symbolizing movement itself.

A more central role as a trope of mobility is accorded to the truck. The aspiring migrants have paid desert nomads to drive them across the Sahara in “small trucks with tarpaulin covers” (84). The tarpaulin covers, together with the guides’ warnings about the potential dangers of the journey, such as bandits and fatal breakdowns, convey the impression of the precariousness of the attempt. Simultaneously, however, the passengers seem convinced that they will reach their destination, as reflected in the narrator’s comment that they do not “scramble” for the trucks since they “all believe [they]’ll get in one way or another” (84). After traveling for two days, the protagonist observes deserted trucks stuck in the sand, and starts to doubt whether they will get to Morocco after all.

When they finally reach the immigration camp near Tangiers, the need for a new vehicle arises. The narrator climbs a cliff with Obazee, a self-proclaimed camp boss, in order to witness the geographical nearness of Spain. Indeed, the Strait of Gibraltar, and even to a greater extent, the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in Morocco, are examples of the “interpenetration between Africa in Europe and Europe in Africa” (Thomas, Africa 163; emphasis original). To be able to “see Spain” (92) does not mean, however, that “El Dorado” (92) will be reachable, as the protagonist will soon learn not only from Obazee but also from his own experience. The boat trope
becomes relevant when Obazee presents the narrator with the options for reaching Spain – either by land through Ceuta or by sea through the strait of Gibraltar. At this point, as the protagonist still has all his finances, crossing the sea does not seem to be an insurmountable effort to him; he can even afford to select the safest means of transportation available. With all the money stored in his sneakers, the Mediterranean is no obstacle, but the logical next step in the protagonist’s seemingly unlikely plan to become a football star in Europe. When he is finally forced to admit to himself that Patience has betrayed his confidence, he expresses the wish: “I hope she drowns” (98) – words whose cruel irony is evident in light of the humanitarian catastrophe currently taking place on the Mediterranean. The stolen finances condemn the protagonist to stagnation, a state already being experienced by other aspiring migrants who have been living in the camp for several years. This is a condition that seems impossible for the protagonist to grasp. The boat that the protagonist fails to catch is symbolic of his arrested mobility.

Unlike Atta’s protagonist, Khady Demba is initially supposed to travel by boat on the Atlantic Ocean in order to reach North Africa or the Canary Islands like many Senegalese aspiring migrants in a real-life context. This plan, imposed on the protagonist by her relatives, is compromised as soon as Khady realizes the unsound condition of the boat. Escaping this boat journey represents an instance of Khady’s momentary initiative – for which she is immediately punished, since she hurts her leg on a protruding nail. This causes a calf wound which will torment her for the remainder of her odyssey. The protagonist’s escape from the boat can be interpreted as a rejection of the Middle Passage parallel (see Lombardi-Diop), and the sudden joy she feels for having taken such an initiative conveys the notion of agency, although admittedly a very fragile one.

The most central trope of mobility in NDiaye’s story are shoes: flip-flop sandals and sneakers. When the smuggler comes for Khady, Khady’s unpreparedness for the odyssey that lies ahead is symbolized not only in her meagre baggage, but also in the cheap sandals on her feet.
When compared with the bright white, comfortable pair of sneakers that the smuggler wears, Khady’s flip-flops betray the precarious nature of her mobility: Khady is “malhabile et trébuchante dans ses tongues plastique rose tandis qu’il semblait rebondir sur les semelles épaisses et légères de ses chaussures de sport” (261) “tottering clumsily in her pink plastic flip-flops while he seemed to leap along on the light thick soles of his trainers” (229). She is at pains to follow the smuggler’s effortless pace, “les orteils recroquevillés au bout de ses tong pour les garder aux pieds” (265) “gripping the end of her flip-flops with her toes to stop them falling off” (232). Yet, in the course of the boat episode the vulnerability of her journey is even further emphasized as she suddenly realizes she has lost her sandals.

As the comparison between Khady’s cheap sandals/bare feet and the sneakers of the smuggler suggests, in addition to the class aspect, shoes are also invested with gendered meanings: informed men in sneakers guide ignorant women in flip-flops. The gender dimension is further stressed when Lamine features in the story, wearing a pair of sneakers just as the smuggler. To wear sneakers signals a less precarious mobile subjectivity than that of Khady; indeed, it is eventually Lamine who makes his way to Europe, whereas Khady perishes in her attempt to cross the fence in the Spanish enclaves. Still, it must be stressed that there is a certain shallowness to the masculine identity Lamine embraces. His voice sounds childish to Khady’s ear, and he is frequently referred to as a boy. In this sense, both Atta’s and NDiaye’s male characters are portrayed lacking the hegemonic masculinity to which they so eagerly aspire, with their female travel companions representing their mother figures.

The ostensible ease of Lamine’s journey is challenged during the truck ride through the Sahara. The trucks are described as overcrowded and uncomfortable as they cross the desert and the badly maintained roads. The truck is suddenly stopped by soldiers requesting bribes. Dissatisfied with the sum of money Lamine gives them, the soldiers cut off the soles of his sneakers to access his savings, and the boy’s feet are cut in the course of this action. This incident suggests
that Lamine’s journey is equally marked by a vulnerability that he tries to hide by resorting to the hegemonic masculine identity he has adopted to impress Khady. Once the travel companions have lost their savings, the narrative highlights the precariousness of their odyssey by drawing attention to their staggering pace caused by their wounded feet:

[I]ls avaient erré, boitant l’un et l’autre de deux manières différentes (le garçon s’efforçant de ne pas poser sur le sol que la trance extérieure de ses pieds, elle, Khady, évitant de prendre appui sur sa jambe malade et avançant par sautillements irréguliers) (302).

They had […] wandered around, both limping in different ways (he trying to put only the outer edge of his feet on the ground, she, hopping irregularly along, trying not to put her weight on her lame leg) (263).

When Khady and Lamine get stuck in a desert town where Khady ends up working as a prostitute, the woman who features as her madam attends to Khady’s calf wound. The fact that the wound does not heal, despite her ministrations, points to a reading in which the madam’s complicity in Khady’s vulnerable mobility must be taken into account. In this respect, Shirley Jordan’s interpretation, according to which Khady’s wound symbolizes the shameful conditions of illegal migrants on the Mediterranean, and for which Western readers should feel responsible (271), seems insufficient. Khady’s calf wound – the symbol of her precarious mobile position – equally captures the low value that is accorded underprivileged female subjects on the African continent itself (Toivanen 13).

THE PATHS TO SLAVERY ARE PAVED WITH SAND AND SEA

The elements of sand and sea that recur in the text corpus are central metaphors for the different phases of the odyssey. Sand, as a metonymy for land and the African continent, is contrasted to sea and the new horizons reached through the mobility it embodies. Together, the imagery of sand and
sea also evokes an uneasy historical analogy. According to Cristina Lombardi-Diop, “the circulation across the Mediterranean of African migrants, as well as their enslavement and trafficking, activates a parallel circulation of images and memories of the Atlantic Middle Passage” (163). Both Atta’s and NDiaye’s texts allude to the slavery analogy.

Atta invests sand with negative connotations. For the narrator, the desert the “illegals” are obliged to cross is a “godforsaken place”, with sand entering his body through his eyes, nostrils, and even his “ass” (84-85). Sand is associated with desert nomads toward whom the narrator expresses contempt: for him, their way of life is backward and in total contradiction to his dreams of an extravagant diasporic life. Crossing the desert is a necessary evil on his itinerary, but even when the protagonist sees the Mediterranean for the first time, the sand continues to cling to him. The short story ends with the portrayal of the protagonist pointlessly waiting for Patience’s return, shivering in the winds that “carry sand and salt” (98). Salt, obviously, embodies the idea of the closeness of the sea, and could hence be interpreted as a symbol of freedom. However, it can only be read as such from the limited perspective of the narrator. The reader, in contrast, is invited to identify the historical parallel motivating the sea trope in a way that sets the protagonist’s odyssey in a wider context and challenges his self-perception as the unquestionable hero of his own travelogue. The conflicting forces of sand and salt are a metaphor for the protagonist’s postponed mobility: he is captive in the in-between space of the immigration camp, an “anteroom to Hell” (89).

“Twilight Trek” explicitly refers to the historical parallel with the slave trade. Patience informs the narrator: “You know […], I heard that this is the same route that the Arabs used to traffic African slaves in the olden days” (85). The narrator, however, dismisses the analogy by stating, “Who cares?” (85) – a comment that reflects his naive and erroneous self-perception as omnipotent hero of his own story. The words, “Who cares”, can also be read as a warning against establishing too hasty a parallel between contemporary clandestine migration and slavery. While human trafficking and exploitation certainly do form a central aspect of contemporary clandestine
mobility – Patience having been recruited as a prostitute in Rome attests to this – the narrative also makes an effort not to represent the aspiring migrants as mere helpless victims, either. Much like the protagonist himself, there are also opportunists among them; economic migrants motivated by the “desire of Europe” (see Withol de Wenden in Calargé 3). In this way, the narrative complicates the establishment of any all-too-easy analogy between the Middle Passage and its contemporary Mediterranean counterpart.

As NDiaye’s narrative perspective relies on a protagonist who is on the move despite herself, and who does not have an inkling about her destination or its itinerary, sand and sea do not have articulate meanings as such for her. The slavery connotation is not overtly addressed, but can nevertheless be inferred in between the lines. The sea features in the story only briefly, during the boat incidence. By escaping the unsound boat, Khady seems to erase the link between her own travelogue and that of the victims of the transatlantic slave trade. Lamine performs a similar act by refusing to travel across the Atlantic Ocean. In the boat episode, the sea is not represented as hostile or violent, but is simply cold in contrast to the warmness of the sand, which is telling of the protagonist’s unawareness of the journey’s risks. Still, the protagonist seems relieved after having escaped maritime travel, and rubs “ses doigts dans le sable, longuement” (283) “sand on her fingers for a long while” (248) as if sand was a comforting element of stability. Such an impression is, however, deceptive since for the rest of the story, sand is invested with negative connotations emphasizing the protagonist’s precarious mobility. The sand trope becomes predominant in the desert town passage, as Khady and Lamine become, in a way, prisoners of the sand. While the protagonist manages to shake the sand out of her hair and clothes, she seems to be unable to keep it out of the wound in her calf; it is as if the sand were eating her alive. Indeed, the sand is described as bloodthirsty: when Lamine has his feet cut, Khady observes “deux filets de sang couler sous ses chaussures, aussitôt bus par la poussière” (299) “two thin lines of blood running into the dust under his shoes” (261). The omnipresence of the sand and its persistence in Khady’s wound in particular
can be read as a symbol of the context limiting the protagonist’s mobile subjectivity beyond her intentions.

While the slavery aspect is not explicitly addressed and the protagonist fails to acknowledge the limitations placed on her mobile subjectivity, the narrative constructs an implicit link between slavery and such contemporary African odysseys as the one pursued by Khady and Lamine. In the first instance, the link can be observed in Khady’s case. She is forced into prostitution in the desert town. Here, prostitution is represented as a form of human trafficking, with the madam taking advantage of Khady’s vulnerable position. The fact that the madam traffics her to other aspiring illegal migrants stuck in the desert town underscores the gendered dimensions of clandestine African mobilities. Moreover, Khady’s bleak destiny draws the reader’s attention to how clandestine African travelers are subjected to contemporary forms of slavery not only in Europe, but also on the African continent. Thus, the narrative also draws an analogy to Africans’ complicity in the transatlantic slave trade.

The second instance of contemporary slavery features in a closing paragraph entitled “contrepoint”, a brief sketch of the condition of illegal African migrants in France, making their livelihood doing unofficial, low-paid, menial jobs and living in overcrowded apartments with other illegals. Yet, it is also noteworthy that the words, “il lui rendait grâce” (315) “He would then give thanks to her” (277) indicate that Lamine is grateful to Khady for what he considers her sacrifice for him. This suggests that Lamine may not even perceive his undocumented condition as a form of slavery, but rather thinks of himself as fortunate enough to have made it to Europe. Lamine’s reasoning that reaching Europe is worth risking his life, as well as his gratitude to Khady for having been able to immigrate illegally, resonates with a rather grim example of the “desire of Europe” (see Withol de Wenden in Calargé 3) discussed by Simon Gikandi in his article “Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality”. Here, Gikandi refers to an incident wherein the corpses of two Ghanaian boys were found in the cargo hold of a plane in Brussels in 1998. The boys left behind a
message in which they explained their desperate action, suggesting, as Gikandi puts it, that “their salvation could only come from that Europe which, only two generations earlier, black nationalists such as Jomo Kenyatta and Aimé Césaire had declared to be the major threat to the prosperity and well-being of Africa” (611). Gikandi points out that underprivileged African aspiring immigrants, such as these two boys, dream of a European identity that is constructed on colonialist and Eurocentric biases, instead of embracing the “cultural hybridity” celebrated by postcolonial theoretical discourses (610-611). Indeed, the representations of the dreams of a diasporic life in Europe as cherished by the clandestine African travelers in the Atta and NDiaye texts, as well as the bleak realizations of their in-between condition, attest to the discrepancy between theory and reality observed by Gikandi.

CLANDESTINE TRAVELOGUES

In the literary African migrant imaginary, Europe represents “an economic Eldorado” (Thomas 144) that must be reached regardless of the price to be paid. The El Dorado is imagined unrealistically; an image which is diffused by different media. The illusory accounts of the dream continent are further fueled by the stories told by revenants – figures such as l’homme de Barbès in Fatou Diome’s *Le ventre de l’Atlantique* or Moki in Alain Mabanckou’s *Bleu-Blanc-Rouge*. Illegal odysseys through the Sahara generate stories about the journey’s potential obstacles as well as the often undertaken practices to facilitate reaching one’s destination. While in both texts under consideration Europe is imagined only vaguely, the different phases and aspects of the odyssey itself seem to be more clearly mapped out. Knowledge is based on hearsay and the stories told by those who have already experienced the journey, potentially failing at the attempt. The essence of these stories can be more fully appreciated when comparing clandestine journeys with privileged forms of travel such as tourism or business travel. While the tourist or the business traveler can find reliable, official information about their itinerary with little effort, the clandestine traveler must rely
on rather speculative knowledge when planning their itinerary. Both narratives reflect that informal knowledge, Atta’s more explicitly than NDiaye’s.

Stories about contemporary African clandestine odysseys feature as *mise en abyme* in “Twilight Trek”. These grim stories, forming “a modern African exodus” (93), are articulated by the narrator’s late mother, whose presence haunts the narrator’s dreams. The mother is a storyteller, whose tales warn the listener about illegal African migrants who are reduced to performing menial jobs in the “Promised Land” (86), or perish in their pursuit. One such story warns of African men who “will marry any sort of woman” (86) for the sake of a residence permit – men whom the mother considers “whitewashed African[s]” (87), hoping her son will never end up like that. The mother’s warning portrayal of a castrated African masculinity seems particularly threatening to the narrator for whom the entire odyssey is essentially about reconciling his gender and sexual identity conflict.

In the last dream featured in the story, the mother recites a long list depicting the bleak destinies of Sub-Saharan African clandestine migrants who have either been repatriated, linger in a state of stagnation caused by the immigration policy limbo, or lost their lives during their risky odyssey. When the protagonist realizes that he has been duped by Patience, he becomes the material of such hopeless legends himself. With respect to the widely circulated information concerning the risks of the clandestine odyssey, it is surprising that the protagonist has dismissed outright the probability that the journey may last several years. Until he reaches the immigration camp, he is under the impression that the Mediterranean crossing will not pose any challenge to him. His failure to acknowledge the importance of the Mediterranean as a barrier imparts the protagonist’s self-perception as the unquestionable hero of his own story. While initially, the protagonist’s mother claimed that the grim stories of clandestine mobility should be compiled in a book in order to teach Africans about their pasts, she later changes her mind: “Who wants to save such stories for posterity? [They] are worse than any nightmares” (94). These words suggest that the protagonist
will finish as one of those faceless and nameless black bodies, much like any other illegal African migrant, and that his story is not even worth telling: his tragedy has already been told over and over again. Yet, it should also be highlighted that the bleak travelogues articulated by the protagonist’s mother give voice to the sheer diversity of clandestine African mobility. Among the unfortunate travelers, there are opportunistic economic migrants such as the protagonist, but also those who are escaping war and persecution. In this sense, the mother’s suggestion that the stories should not be compiled seems problematic, if not tragic: not all stories are the same.

As the protagonist of Trois femmes puissantes is an outsider in her own travelogue in the sense that she is on the move despite herself and has no clear idea of what her destination holds for her, allusions to stories about the journey told by other travelers do not feature as explicitly here as in Atta’s short story. However, the figure of Lamine embodies what can be read as a carrier of knowledge based on the commonly shared clandestine travelogues. For Lamine, the goal of the journey is very clear: he wants to reach Europe. Otherwise, he is as good as dead. He is portrayed as someone who is “au courant des choses” (287) “au fait with things” (251), meaning that he possesses the necessary information for executing the planned itinerary. Lamine seems to have a realistic picture of the journey’s duration: “[L]e voyage pouvait durer des mois, des années, ainsi que cela s’était passé pour un voisin de Lamine qui n’avait gagné Europe […] qu’au bout de cinq ans après son départ de la maison” (289) “the journey could take months, even years, as it had for a neighbor of Lamine’s who had only reached Europe […] five whole years after leaving home” (253). When Lamine shares with Khady his information about the itinerary they envisage, there is a surprising determination in his accounts, given that his knowledge is merely speculative. He should know where to buy a fake passport; he refuses to travel by sea; and, finally, he acknowledges the fact that the journey through the desert takes more time, but that at the end of it, there is “un certain endroit qu’il faudrait escalader pour se retrouver en Europe” (289) “a certain place where you had to climb to get into Europe” (253).
The knowledge Lamine possesses, no matter how speculative, allows him to adopt a hegemonic masculine identity. When the soldiers steal the travel companions’ money, their journey comes to a sudden end. This moment of humiliation compromises Lamine’s masculine role as the one in charge of the effortless course of the journey. His humiliation is further increased as Khady unwittingly adopts the masculine role of the provider – albeit by prostituting herself. This humiliating blow to the boy’s gendered identity evokes the destiny of Atta’s protagonist’s in the immigration camp after Patience’s betrayal. Khady feels sorry for him in his humiliation, but at the same time seems surprised that despite all Lamine’s knowledge concerning “des obstacles et des dangers de la route” (301) “the obstacles and dangers likely to be met with on the road” (263), they find themselves at an impasse. Consequently, the reliability of the information Lamine has acquired is challenged. This is, once again, a feature that emphasizes the vulnerable character of the pursued odyssey.

CONCLUSION

The figure of the migrant has been paradigmatized in postcolonial theoretical discussions, and it has also been the focus of much attention in literary analysis. Atta’s and NDiaye’s stories foreground contemporary African mobility wherein the migrant status is certainly pursued, but remains far from being achieved. Their protagonists’ planned itineraries turn out to be abortive, and throughout their journeys, they end up in rather lackluster conditions of liminality condemning them to a state of stagnation-in-movement. As such, they do not even qualify as illegal immigrants: the climax of the migratory odyssey remains out of their reach.

As my analysis of Atta’s “Twilight Trek” and the third section of NDiaye’s Trois femmes puissantes suggests, the two texts make use of tropes that convey, firstly the precarious nature of the clandestine African traveling endeavor, and, secondly, the idea that the characters’ mobility is set in a context the limits of which challenge their conviction that they are the heroes
and heroines of their own travelogues. In this sense, Atta’s and NDiaye’s stories have a tragic element to them. I focused on four different aspects that recur in the text corpus: erased identities, metonymies of mobility, the slavery analogy, and clandestine travelogues. Atta’s and NDiaye’s works’ use of tropes of mobility convey the precarious nature of clandestine African odysseys through the Sahara towards the Mediterranean shores. Shoes, flip-flops and sneakers in particular, are infused with powerful symbolic meanings. In the course of clandestine journeying, the identities of the travelers tend to be erased. Atta’s and NDiaye’s characters’ reactions against this erasure vary from ironic acceptance to outright refusal. Both stories also draw attention to the transatlantic slavery parallel, with differing levels of explicitness. While the reader is invited to construct an analogy between the past and the present, Atta’s and NDiaye’s protagonists seem to ignore the parallel and turn a blind eye to the discomfiting fact that the contexts set such restrictions on their mobile position that they can hardly be seen as freewheeling agents of their own travelogue. The last common aspect analyzed pertains to the knowledge that the travelers possess while in the planning stages of their itineraries. This knowledge is based on the stories told by other travelers. Possessing such knowledge allows the traveler to gain masculine authority (the clandestine odyssey being typically a masculine endeavor), but when things do not go as planned, this authority is quickly compromised. Thus, in addition to conveying the idea of the vulnerable nature of these contemporary clandestine African odysseys and the fact that the travelers’ mobility is at risk of becoming arrested at any moment, Atta’s and NDiaye’s texts also attest to the gendered aspects informing the attempted Saharan and Mediterranean crossings. The texts’ representations of African clandestine mobility vitiates stereotypical European conceptions of these underprivileged travelers as either threats to Europe’s integrity or as victims in need of having their humanity restored. All in all, “Twilight Trek” and Trois femmes puissantes give voice to the precariousness and complexity of this very particular form of contemporary African mobility.
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On the EU scale, these mechanisms include, for instance, EUROSUR surveillance which aims at preventing illegal migration and maximizing the benefits of migration; the European pact on Immigration and Asylum which aims at enhancing a common immigration policy; and FRONTEX which establishes and promotes a common border management strategy and strategies of repatriation of illegals (Thomas, “Fortress” 457-458). As Thomas maintains, these exclusionary mechanisms play a role in the construction of “a sense of shared [European] identity”: they “have fastened on the non-Europeanness of Third Country Nationals or non-EU foreign
nationals rather than circumscribing the contours of an identity through recourse to affirmative points of commonality” (“Fortress” 447).

2 In Moroccan literature, the question of Mediterranean crossings has been widely addressed since the 1990s. According to Hakim Abderrezak, such literary works form a “particular sub-genre of migrant literature” (462) which he calls “illiterature”. Hakim cites an extensive list of literary texts belonging to this genre. While Sub-Saharan African (diasporic) literatures frequently discuss illegitimate mobilities and migrancy, the loci of the texts is not that often the Mediterranean.

3 Scott understands tragedy as a mode of emplotment particularly illustrative of the postcolonial era which has witnessed the loss of credibility of romantic anti-colonial narratives of vindication, promising a new beginning beyond the grip of colonialism. According to Scott, “the mode of emplotment of tragedy comports better [than romance] with a time of postcolonial crisis in which old horizons have collapsed and new ones have not yet taken shape” (168). This element of uncertainty characterizes the texts under examination.

4 In Georgio Agamben’s terminology, the figure of the refugee (or in this case, illegal migrant arriving in European territory), is a contemporary embodiment of the “homo sacer”, “a subject in Roman law who has committed a particular crime that renders him or her outside the rule of law that has been defined for citizens. Being situated outside this system, the homo sacer loses all value: he or she is not even worthy of sacrifice. The existence of the homo sacer is reduced to mere biological life” (Papastergiadis 435).

5 The paragraph in which the quote should feature is omitted from the English translation of the novel used in the article. The translation of this quote is therefore mine.