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## Zombified mobilities: clandestine Afro-European journeys in J. R. Essomba's *Le paradis du nord* and Caryl Phillips's *A Distant Shore*

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### ABSTRACT

During the so-called migrant crisis, African clandestine migrants and asylum seekers have frequently been represented as invaders trying to enter Europe in order to destroy its cultural, social, political, and economic integrity. The figure of the clandestine migrant shares similarities with that of the zombie: both represent a contagious alterity that should be excluded from the community. In order to fully understand the migrant/zombie parallel, it has to be acknowledged that, unlike its contemporary popular culture adaptation, the Haitian zombie is a product of slavery, and hence not a perpetrator but itself a victim. This article analyses two novels, J. R. Essomba's *Le paradis du nord* and Caryl Phillips's *A Distant Shore*, by drawing on the different aspects of the zombie figure in order to elucidate the texts' representations of contemporary clandestine migrant mobilities. My reading traces the texts' links between clandestine migrants' mobile conditions and the zombie figure through imagery revolving around the loss of identity and emotion, hiding, confinement, darkness, and death. The roots of zombified mobilities lie in the travellers' precarious lives in their failed postcolonial states, and the Europe they pursue is a destination of non-arrival unable to save them from zombification.

### KEYWORDS

Borders; Caryl Phillips; clandestine migration; J.R. Essomba; Europe; mobility; zombies

Anonymous masses trying to invade Fortress Europe: this is how undocumented migrants entering the continent through its Southern borders have frequently been represented during the so-called migrant crisis. This imagery, focusing on a fort defending itself against 'flows' of migrants that pose a threat to its cultural, social, political, and economic integrity, represents what Papastergiadis (2006, 429) refers to as 'the invasion complex', which is a discourse that relies on the notion of the border. One key function of the border is 'to link the regulation of mobility to identity and territory: to link who one is to location, and in so doing policing national borders around identities' (Mountz 2013, 256). The figure of the clandestine migrant is interesting from the perspective of the border not only because it embodies aspirational border crossings, but also because the migrant can itself be considered an abject border figure (Papastergiadis 2006, 429).

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The clandestine migrant, the refugee, or the asylum seeker is an embodiment of what Agamben (1998) has called '*homo sacer*', a subject that does not enjoy the protection of the nation-state, and is hence reduced to mere biological life – bare life or *zoe* as Agamben calls it.<sup>1</sup> Due to their lack of protection both in their home countries and in the pursued destinations, the clandestine migrant/refugee/asylum seeker is doomed to 'inhabit the discarded regions of the abject' (Chambers 2008, 3).

The image of migrants as fearsome invaders (Zembylas 2010, 32–33) and embodiments of bare life evokes another abject border figure from contemporary popular culture: the zombie. As Stratton (2011, 265) argues, zombies' characteristics share similarities with the ways in which displaced people are represented. Stratton (2011, 266) posits that the recent upsurge of zombies in popular culture is related to the anxieties that undocumented migration generates in Western societies. As a metaphor for the clandestine migrant, the zombie builds on racial Otherness as 'the white "citizen-subject" is opposed against non-white life, bare life, *zombie* life [...] which must always be kept quarantined, if not actively eradicated and destroyed' (Canavan 2010, 433). The threat of contamination is manifest in the current 'migrant crisis' in which migrants, like zombies, are represented as predators ready to 'devour' European societies and to turn them into the failed states the migrants have fled from (Chambers 2008, 13; Papastergiadis 2009, 162; Zembylas 2010, 33). By replicating contemporary popular culture's conception of the zombie, these 'invasion complex' discourses are rather straightforward in their way of differentiating victims from perpetrators (see Fischer-Hornung and Mueller 2016, 3).

It should, however, be noted that the popular culture zombie as a flesh-eating monster that seeks to destroy 'innocent' communities is a relatively recent adaptation of the historical zombie figure – a forebear with whom it does not seem to have much in common (Glover 2017, 252). The historical zombie figure, who travelled on slave ships from Sub-Saharan Africa to sugarcane plantations in the Caribbean and Haiti in particular<sup>2</sup> (Lauro 2015, 8, 16), is a victim, not a perpetrator. The Haitian zombie is 'an apathetic nonperson, condemned to wander aimlessly or to serve the interests of the evil sorcerer responsible for its degradation' (Glover 2017, 215). In short, slavery and the violence that slavery entailed find their embodiment in the Haitian zombie figure (Pokornowski 2016, 2, 7).<sup>3</sup>

Today's zombie and its Haitian predecessor differ from each other because of their positions at the opposite ends on the perpetrator/victim nexus. The aspect of slavery that characterizes the Haitian zombie does not seem to have any relevance to its contemporary adaptation, which has been unraced (Glover 2017, 251; Hurley 2015, 312–313; Pokornowski 2016, 2). It is symptomatic of this obliteration of the zombie's initial context of emergence that today's popular culture zombies seem to 'appear all of a sudden and out of nowhere' (Glover 2017, 253) – much like the 'flows' of migrants, for that matter. Yet, as Kaiama L. Glover argues, a closer look at today's zombie reveals its link to the Haitian zombie as well as to the processes of Othering and abjection of Africa and, lately, to contemporary coerced migration (2017, 251, 253). The zombie, who has travelled from Sub-Saharan Africa to Haiti, and then to Hollywood from where it has gone global (Fischer-Hornung and Mueller 2016; Lauro 2015), has come full circle in how it now symbolizes African clandestine mobilities.

In this article, I adopt the zombie metaphor to my reading of two novels representing clandestine Afro-European<sup>4</sup> journeys, namely J. R. Essomba's *Le paradis du nord* (1996) and Caryl Phillips's<sup>5</sup> *A Distant Shore* (2004) – texts that remain topical in the current 'migrant

crisis' context. Essomba's Jojo and Charlie are Cameroonian economic migrants, while Gabriel in Phillips's novel is an asylum seeker – and a former rebel army soldier – escaping persecution in an unnamed Sub-Saharan African country. The protagonists are what Leanne Weber and Sharon Pickering would refer to as 'illegalized travellers' – a term that draws attention to the power structures that operate at the border in order to differentiate unwanted arrivals from the welcomed ones, but also one that emphasizes the aspect of journeying that migration entails (2011, 4). Neither of these texts is a 'zombie novel' in the sense that the characters are not actually zombies or even explicitly compared to them.<sup>6</sup> Rather, I use the zombie figure as a lens through which to read the novels' representations of clandestine mobilities. My analysis draws on both the Haitian zombie and its contemporary adaptation in order to elucidate the novels' representations of clandestine migrant mobilities and the discourses that revolve around these mobilities in the context of the 'migrant crisis'. In other words, I use the metaphor to analyse the zombie-migrant as a threatening alterity, but also – and more importantly – as a victim of unending abjection, alienation, and dehumanization.

My reading traces the links that the texts establish between clandestine migrants' mobile conditions and the zombie figure through imagery revolving around the loss of identity and emotion, hiding, confinement, darkness, and death. This imagery forms the texts' poetics of zombified migrant mobility that conveys the travellers' zombification. By zombification I refer to the way in which the novels' travellers turn into zombie-like dehumanized, alienated figures who lack agency,<sup>7</sup> emotion, and identity; oscillate between life and death; are represented as threatening invaders in anti-migration discourses, and for whom Europe remains a destination of non-arrival. I want to highlight the *interrupted* character of clandestine migrant mobilities and the risk of *non-arrival* they entail (see Mainwaring and Bridgen 2016, 243–247; Toivanen 2016). Such an approach pays attention to very concrete forms of mobility that travel to and across the border necessitates (see Mainwaring and Bridgen 2016, 247).<sup>8</sup> The idea of mobility as a limbo of non-arrival highlights the continuum of unliveability that informs the protagonists' lives in their failed postcolonial nation-states and that follows them to Europe. As a result of these journeys of non-arrival, the protagonists are 'condamnés à fuir éternellement' (Essomba 1996, 42) 'doomed to flee forever.'<sup>9</sup>

As Sarah Juliet Lauro's study (2015) demonstrates, the zombie is itself a migrant. Mobility is therefore a feature that connects the zombie to contemporary African illegalized travellers. As a result of its global migration, it can be argued that the zombie can no longer be considered to represent any specific cultural/ historical context (Lauro 2015, 15) – indeed, it is the zombie's global character and its 'protean [...] metaphorical potential' (Glover 2017, 251) that make it a figure that can be easily adopted to different cultural contexts.<sup>10</sup> For my analysis, the aptness of the zombie metaphor lies in that it allows for an understanding of Afro-European borderscapes as death zones (see also Weber and Pickering 2011). Moreover, it is illustrative not only of the anxieties that clandestine migrants generate in European citizen-subjects, but also of how they perceive themselves (see Papastergiadis 2009, 158). One of the advantages of the zombie metaphor for my analysis is that it highlights the parallel between contemporary illegalized migrant mobilities and the Middle Passage. As such, the zombie allows for an in-depth understanding of the 'migrant crisis' by linking it to a wider historical context of Afro-alterity and abjection (Glover 2017, 251, 253).

## Tropes of zombifying mobilities: hiding, confinement, dehumanization, and darkness

The so-called migrant crisis has shown that the idea of freedom of movement that is central for the European Union is built on the 'organized exclusion of others forced to move around as migrants, refugees, or illegal aliens' (Verstraete 2010, 98). As borders are protected against illegalized travellers, who are frequently conceived as 'mute objects of a feared alterity' (Chambers 2008, 10), aspiring migrants resort to risky mobile practices in order to get to and across the border (Weber and Pickering 2011). In their article on the mobility/immobility nexus that characterizes clandestine migrant travel, Noelle Bridgen and Āetta Mainwaring (2016, 416–417) employ the notion of *matryoshka* journeys to refer to the concealment strategies that clandestine migrants adopt. Like the hollow Russian dolls, nesting other dolls within them, the metaphor of the *matryoshka* journey conveys the idea of how clandestine migrants' journeys include elements of layering. Clandestine mobilities consist of 'journeys within journeys' in the sense that the travellers are 'taking meandering routes away from their destination or waiting for opportune travel conditions, [and that they] strategically forfeit [...] control over their own body in transit' (Bridgen and Mainwaring 2016, 416). In practice, *matryoshka* journeys are strategies to avoid deportation (Bridgen and Mainwaring 2016, 416).

I would like to take the concept of *matryoshka* journeying a step further and claim that these strategies can be understood as zombifying practices as they entail the loss of mastery over one's mobility and, at worst, the loss of one's life. The uncomfortable, cramped conditions of clandestine travel evoke a parallel with Middle Passage journeys on slave ships which were regularly conceived as coffins or floating tombs (see Chassot 2015, 90). Other common features include the lack of light, dullness, and the way in which the travellers are reduced to material without subjectivity (see Chassot 2015, 93, 97–98). These elements, as Chassot (2015) points out, make the metaphor of the living death particularly appropriate for representing Middle Passage journeys and also, by extension, contemporary clandestine migrant mobilities as Essomba's and Phillips' texts suggest.

The tropes of hiding and confinement, which convey the loss of agency and vulnerability, are articulately present in Essomba's and Phillips's novels. *Le paradis du nord* features a prelude to Jojo's and Charlie's zombifying journeying as the two friends lie confined in the ceiling structures of a store where they are hiding until the closing time in order to steal the money kept in the premises. The narrative's way of representing the protagonists hiding in cramped spaces even *prior* to their journey suggests that the roots of their zombification lie in their unliveable lives in the failed postcolonial state. The cramped space of the ceiling structure is a metaphor for 'l'horizon bouché' (17) ('the obstructed horizon') of the unliveability and lack of prospects that Cameroon represents to them.

Limited space and restricted mobility underline the travellers' physical, embodied existence, and thus highlight the way in which clandestine mobility further reduces the travellers, like the victims of the Middle Passage, to bare life. Scenes of immobility and hiding in cramped spaces while travelling recur throughout Essomba's novel. The first leg of the journey consists of travelling on a cargo ship transporting bananas and coffee. Jojo and Charlie board the ship in barrels supposed to contain water. By associating the travellers

with consumables, the narrative highlights the clandestine journey's dehumanizing effect, 'underscores the neo-colonial relationships that continue to shape the postcolonial African environment', and in this way, evokes slavery (Knox 2016, 212). The slavery analogy is stressed as the captain threatens to throw the clandestine travellers overboard if they do not follow his orders. After crossing the Straits of Gibraltar, a smuggler hides the travellers under a fake structure in his lorry. In this cramped space, Jojo and Charlie travel lying down on their backs like corpses in a coffin or slaves in a slave ship. The fact that the vehicle transports oranges further underlines the travellers' association with consumables destined for the European market. In so doing, the narrative suggests that the zombified travellers are victims and objects to be consumed – and exploited as labourers as the novel later points out – and not the flesh-eaters as represented by anti-migration discourses.

As in the case of Essomba's travellers, in Phillips's novel, vulnerability and limited mobility inform Gabriel's journey before it has even started. Hiding in a cupboard, he witnesses his family members being raped and killed by soldiers. When he gets out of his hideout, he moves like a living dead: 'His legs and arms are stiff, and he walks with difficulty' (85). This passage already announces that the roots of his zombification lie in his experiences of unliveable life in his homeland, a failed postcolonial state; the continuum of zombification is later underlined as Gabriel keeps 'hiding behind th[e] blinds' (19) in his new home village. The journey towards Europe begins in a lorry in which the clandestine travellers are gathered 'like cargo' and are told to 'lie down flat and be quiet' (94). Just as in Essomba's novel, the travellers are not only reduced to objects to be transported, but also made to lie down like corpses, quiet and motionless, which emphasizes the journey's 'dull [...] rhythm' (97). In this way, the narrative not only underlines the link between the travelling conditions of clandestine migrants and the victims of the Middle Passage (Bekers 2016, 259–260; Bonnici 2012, 285; Ledent 2007, 81; Sharpe 2009, 99),<sup>11</sup> but also associates illegalized travellers with the living dead. Dehumanization, confinement, and the dullness that is generated by the feeling of being on a never-ending journey are features of zombified mobilities in the Middle Passage context as well as in contemporary clandestine travel.

On the plane to Europe, the clandestine migrants travel again as cargo, sitting on the floor, and once they are approaching the Channel Tunnel, the smugglers take them to a railway bridge from which they are supposed to jump onto the roof of the cargo wagons. When the travellers express their disbelief, the smuggler exclaims, 'Did you expect to travel in the train?' (126), which suggests that clandestine travellers are worth less than cargo; their bodies do not even have the object value that slaves' bodies had for traffickers. The zombifying quality of the journey finds its ultimate symbol in Gabriel's leg that is wounded during the sea crossing so that upon his arrival in the UK, he limps. Again, the trope of the wounded leg embodies the key features of zombified travel: vulnerability and lack of mastery over one's mobility. As an allusion to the shambling walk of the living dead, the limping leg highlights the travellers' abject corporeality and the idea of zombification as a continuum that follows them from their home countries to Europe.

Besides the cramped spaces to which the characters are confined like corpses, both novels use darkness as a central trope of clandestine zombifying mobilities. Darkness is a relevant zombie trope not only because of its associations with death and horror, but also because it evokes the lack of light in the slave ship hold (see Chassot 2015, 97). In Phillips's novel, Gabriel's journey is pronouncedly marked by darkness: he leaves his home

town during the night. The truck transporting the exiles arrives at the airport when it is dark, and when the plane takes off, Gabriel looks out of the window, seeing nothing but 'blackness' (99). When the plane lands, it is again dark. Darkness conveys the idea of an unknown destination, the 'disorientation and uncertainties' that inform the itinerary (Bekers 2016, 259), and alienation. Significantly enough, Gabriel's body becomes so accustomed to darkness that in the daylight, his eyes hurt and 'his pupils feel as if they have shrunk' (103). In this darkness that characterizes Gabriel's journeying, the unique glimpses of light come in the form of city lights shining in the distance every now and then. These lights punctuate the journey and symbolize not only the hope of arrival, but also a welcoming space that promises to save the zombified travellers from what seems to be an unending predicament. Eventually, it turns out that the darkness prevails even in the alleged safe haven: what Gabriel sees in the UK is 'the black English sky' (273) and London through the tinted windows of a police car (162). That the darkness does not loosen its grip in the pursued destination suggests, yet again, that the clandestine traveller is doomed to a perpetual state of zombification.

Just like Phillips's Gabriel, Essomba's Jojo and Charlie travel in the dark. They cross the final leg of the journey to Gibraltar by swimming, and orient themselves towards the shore with the help of a spot of light that their smuggler flashes as a signal. Significantly enough, this flash of light – symbolizing the fainting horizon of hope – disappears from sight for a moment, causing panic in the aspiring border crossers swimming in the dark, cold sea. The dying light, as Katelyn Knox argues, establishes a parallel between contemporary clandestine travellers' risky sea crossings and the bodies of enslaved Africans thrown overboard in the context of transatlantic slave trade: 'The extinguished lantern ensures that no one can witness their fate; their history will always be defined by incompleteness' (2016, 213). Indeed, while Jojo and Charlie make it to the opposite shore, some of their anonymous travelling companions are less lucky and drown in the Mediterranean like many real-life aspiring border-crossers today.

### **Not feeling it: lost selves, lost emotions, non-arrivals**

The zombie is an empty shell, symbolically filled with darkness as it lacks identity and emotions (Kordas 2011, 20). The loss of identity is a feature that links the zombie to illegalized travellers (Papastergiadis 2009, 149), and further ties these two to slavery. While slaves lost their identities through the act of being renamed by their owners, clandestine migrants frequently get rid of their identity documents in order to complicate potential deportation processes. In Phillips's novel, Gabriel 'reinvent[s] himself as Solomon Bartholomew' (Bekers 2016, 261) at the threshold of his new life in Northern England. The reason for his change of identity is that, soon after his arrival in the UK, he is accused of raping a teenager. His case is so widely mediatized in Southern England that his legal assistant advises him to leave the region and adopt a new name. The loss of one's identity in this sense does not depend on the traveller's will, but represents a loss of agency entailed by the zombifying journey. In a refugee camp in France, Gabriel sees other aspiring migrants in a light that reflects mainstream Western media's perceptions of them as mere faceless masses of 'sullen people' constituting a 'scene of lethargic misery' (123). Here, Gabriel observes the zombiesque qualities of his fellow travellers and also in that way, identifies himself in this alienating image. The zombiesque, alienating loss of



emotion is particularly articulate in the beginning of the novel which narrates Solomon's life in his new home village. Solomon is portrayed as an automaton, washing and polishing his car 'oblivious to everything around him' (31), as his neighbour and friend Dorothy, a white middle-aged Briton, observes. His way of driving his car is equally 'neat and careful' (16). Solomon's existence seems somehow tuned down, and when he laughs, he laughs without emotion and inappropriately as in the passage in which he tells Dorothy about the anonymous threatening letters he receives. His lack of emotion results from his traumatizing experiences, but it is also something that his search for safe haven has necessitated. As the narrator puts it, in Gabriel's new life, 'There can be no sentiment' (94).

*A Distant Shore* features several passages that open with Gabriel suddenly regaining consciousness (see also Woolley 2014, 64) in the way of a zombie oscillating between life and death. The narrative records his 'drifting in and out of consciousness' (120) during the journey, and at one point he is no longer sure whether he is alive or in 'the underworld' (136). The loss of the self and emotions are present in his 'inability to communicate successfully' (Ledent 2004, 153), which, as Papastergiadis (2009, 150, 162) argues, is a feature that underlines the migrant-zombie parallel. When Gabriel is interviewed by his lawyer during the rape charges episode, he cannot answer as 'his mind blocks the question [s]', leaving him 'star[ing] blankly at the lawyer' (114), which can be read as an allusion to the empty zombie gaze (see Swanson 2015). As Ledent (2004, 155) has noted, this lack of feeling manifests itself in the 'emotionless, occasionally report-like third-person narrative' that depicts his journey to Europe. The clandestine journey, itself motivated by experiences of violence – as a victim and as a perpetrator – has generated a loss of emotion and self, and turned the traveller into a zombie who no longer feels and is unsure whether he is dead or alive.

In Essomba's novel, the travellers get rid of their identifications before reaching the Spanish coast in order to be able to 'jouer les amnésiques' (44) ('pretend to be amnesiacs') in case they are arrested by border patrols. Besides this very concrete loss of identity, it is worth noticing that their 'transformation' starts when they are preparing or starting their journey. This is conveyed in the narrative's way of naming the travellers so as to reflect their actions and how they are perceived by others. The first transformation occurs when the aspiring migrants steal the money with which they have planned to finance their journey. Here, the narrative refers to them as 'les deux voleurs' (27, 28) ('the two thieves'), highlighting the morally problematic foundation on which their journey is based. Besides stealing the money, the men end up killing a guard. Charlie thinks the killing is a necessary sacrifice, but for Jojo, it is an alarming sign of what is coming ahead. The next transformation is marked by their turning into 'clandestins' ('clandestine migrants') (45) and 'étrangers' ('foreigners') (48), which conveys the loss of identity that the journey generates. Further, the fact that the travellers are not only victims but also themselves perpetrators highlights the complexity of their situation. It underlines the vulnerability of the zombie and the thinness of the line between the perpetrator and the victim. The same can be observed in Phillips's novel: Gabriel is not only escaping genocidal violence back home and racist violence in the UK; as a soldier of a rebel army, he has been involved in brutalities, and opportunistically has killed his friend to steal his savings to finance the journey. Moreover, the narrative remains ambiguous whether there is any substance in the rape charges (Ellis 2013, 419). In this way, the novel draws a complex portrait



of the protagonist instead of representing him as an innocent victim: the two sides of the zombie are present.

In *Le paradis du nord*, the zombifying aspect of clandestine journeying articulates itself in the loss of emotion and consciousness. During their journey from Spain to Southern France, Jojo and Charlie hide in a lorry. This inhuman travelling condition makes Jojo mad, but he forces himself to master his rage, after which he loses consciousness. When they finally arrive in France, Jojo and Charlie meet two Cameroonian smugglers who are supposed to drive them to Paris. Here, the narrative portrays yet another scene of loss of consciousness as the smugglers drug the travellers. Once Jojo comes to, he finds himself in an abandoned car in a desert underground parking lot. For a moment, Jojo is not sure if Charlie is still alive as he does not wake up. The whole journey is marked by the oscillation between consciousness and unconsciousness, the necessity to hide one's emotions, loss of agency, and the uncertainty whether one is dead or alive, which lead to 'une grande lassitude' (124) ('an immense weariness').

An important dimension in the idea of zombies as figures 'lacking interior, lacking mind' (Canavan 2010, 437) is that the horror lies less in the zombie itself than in the acknowledgement that there is a master behind the zombie. Here, the difference between popular culture zombie and its Haitian forebear becomes obvious. While today's zombie is characterized by the threat of violence and contamination, its Haitian predecessor is defined by its being a victim of unending slavery: in its passivity, the zombie is 'a pitiable being – a shell of its formerly human self' (Glover 2017, 251). Essomba's and Phillips's characters' are of course not victims of slavery or sorcery *per se*. The roots of their metaphorical enslavement lie in the way in which their journeys are motivated by their experiences of an unliveable life in their home countries. The force that keeps these 'rejects of failed states' (Gikandi 2010, 23) moving is the idea of Europe as a place that can render their lives liveable. In short, clandestine mobilities of such underprivileged Africans represent 'an attempt to escape both poverty and alterity, [and it is] predicated on the belief that their salvation [can] only come from Europe' (Gikandi 2001, 631). It is their failed postcolonial states, embodying a 'narrative of poverty, of failed nationalism, of death' (Gikandi 2001, 639) that push them towards the mirage of Europe. While in Essomba's novel, the idea of Europe as a place capable of transforming their unliveable lives into an existence worth living is captured in the paradise trope, Phillips's novel resorts to the notion of safe haven. Europe is a place where they can be respected, unlike in their own 'stinking countr [ies]' (124) where they do not even respect themselves (134), as posited respectively by a smuggler and Gabriel's travelling companion in *A Distant Shore*.

Yet, the arrival in paradise or safe haven is deferred to such an extent that the existence of the very destination is called into doubt. Essomba's characters lead a shadow existence outside society, which represents a continuation of their zombifying travelling conditions. Jojo's perpetual zombification finds its symbol in the squat in which he lives with other undocumented African migrants. The abandoned house is a cave-like place with no light or warmth and with an overwhelming smell of mould around. The inhabitants enter the house through a ventilation conduct after dark. The squat is associated with death; a tomb accommodating zombie-migrants. The person who introduces Jojo to the squat rejoices having a new inhabitant as more people means more warmth, which underlines the bare life existence of the clandestine migrants. There are no real encounters between clandestine migrants and French citizen-subjects – even fellow Africans run away

from the potentially contagious zombie-migrants ‘comme s[’ils] avaient la peste’ (77) (‘as if they had the plague’). Europe’s failure to save the protagonist from zombification reaches its culmination in the end of the novel where Jojo is on trial for drug dealing – a criminal activity in which he became involved without knowing it, lacking mastery over his own destiny as he is.<sup>12</sup> While the novel’s ending resists closure in the sense that the reader does not know whether Jojo will be convicted, his emotionless and speechless resignation in the face of the situation represents a death blow to his ideas of Europe as paradise and thus seal his zombification.

When it comes to Gabriel’s and other asylum seekers’ expectations of what Europe and the UK can offer them, it is clear that their ideas of finding a safe haven are on a collision course with reality. In a seedy pub in London, Gabriel states that ‘This is not the England that he thought he was travelling to’ (176). In his new home village, Gabriel receives insult letters with razor blades and dog excrement: ‘This is England,’ he says, ‘What kind of a place did I come to?’ (40–41). While he manages to establish some friendships, the narrative simultaneously highlights that ‘xenophobic impulses can spread in a community, even to those who profess not to “personally” subscribe to them’ (McCluskey 2013, 7). In both novels, then, Europe as paradise or safe haven is a destination of non-arrival that condemns the zombified travellers into a limbo of unliveable life.

### Eliminating the zombie

Today’s popular culture perceives zombies as brainless hordes that invade and contaminate ‘innocent’ communities. It is their ‘contagious alterity’ that zombie discourses use as ‘justification for self-defensive violence’ (Pokornowski 2016, 6). The ‘narrative structure of violence in zombie fictions’ shares similarities to how violence against racialized subjects is justified in different contemporary contexts (Pokornowski 2016, 6). According to this logic, migrant-zombies trying to enter Europe have to be eliminated before they destroy the continent with their ‘contagious blackness’ (Glover 2017, 253). This is a logic that revolves around the idea of vulnerability, for as Pokornowski (2016, 3) posits,

the relegation of individuals [...] to zones of indistinction and bare life at once makes those people vulnerable – they are prone to suffer violence – and also uses their vulnerability as a justification to do violence to them and maintain their vulnerable status.

Essentially, this vicious circle is motivated by the disconcerting acknowledgement that ‘zombies are like us enough to turn us into them’ (Glover 2017, 255).

The fatal culmination of Gabriel’s/Solomon’s journey at the hands of a group of skinheads is a prototype of the zombie violence narrative. The skinheads follow him during his evening walks in the vicinity, and the situation escalates so that Solomon gets killed. It is noteworthy that by the time that Solomon is killed he has finally started to claim some agency and his new environment as his home. In short, there are signs that his zombification is, to a certain extent, loosening its grip. Besides his walks, the fact that he now has his driver’s licence and a car suggests that he masters his mobility – an element that also features in Essomba’s novel in which, towards the end, Jojo is taking driving lessons. However, as in popular zombie apocalypse narratives, there is always the possibility that the zombie will return; this is what happens in Phillips’s novel. When the girlfriend of one of the killers tells Dorothy what happened to Solomon, she describes how the

attackers 'just wanted to have some fun' by taking the reluctant, roped Solomon down to the canal in the back of a van (54), which evokes his experiences of reduced space and lack of agency during the clandestine journey. When the attackers open the van door, Solomon, according to the girl, 'went nuts [...] and started to attack [his tormentors] like a madman' (54). 'It was scary', the girl goes on, 'and he was shouting and carrying on, and then he had a go at Paul. The others grabbed him and then Paul bricked him' (54). The girl's account of the events represents Solomon as the aggressor against whom the others had to defend themselves: '[H]e was terrifying. I thought he was gonna kill them' (54). The girl keeps repeating words such as 'mad', 'nuts', and 'terrifying', which suggests that Solomon was no longer in control of himself. Even the term 'self-defence' (54) features in her account of the events. In this way, Solomon's vulnerability becomes the ultimate justification for violence under the pretext of self-defence. The notion of self-defence resurfaces later when Dorothy talks about Solomon's death with the bartender of the village pub. The bartender maintains that among the villagers, 'there's not one [...] capable of harming anybody' (48) and that 'We don't have murderers here' (49). These words suggest that if Solomon has been killed, it must have been a reaction to something he had initiated.

The element of contamination characteristic of zombie narratives manifests itself in the aftermath of Solomon's death. Dorothy is shocked by his killing, and her frustration leads her to pay respect to his memory by polishing his car – the only thing he seemed to care about as it is the symbol of his (eventually fragile) mastery over his own mobility. She copies his gestures and is so immersed in the polishing that she does not notice that a group of villagers – referred to as 'them' in the text – are staring at her in the distance. The atmosphere in the passage is menacing, with the horde of anonymous villagers staring at Dorothy who keeps on polishing Solomon's car. By adopting Solomon's gestures, it is as if Dorothy – who does not quite belong to the village either – had been contaminated by his zombiesque manners, with the silently menacing villagers ready to attack her under the pretext of self-defence. The situation defuses as Dorothy stops polishing the car. She starts to suffer from mental problems which culminate in a brawl with homeless people and which, as her doctor says, is 'just not you' (66). This suggests that the villagers think that her budding friendship with Solomon has transformed her into someone – *something* – else. Yet, rather than merely showing how white citizen-subjects perceive the migrant-zombie as a contagious alterity, the passage points to the fact that the zombie is disconcertingly similar to the white citizen-subject in order to be able to contaminate it. The threat of violence that the horde of villagers express towards Dorothy demonstrates how easily 'innocent' victims turn into perpetrators themselves.

In *Le paradis du nord*, Charlie is shot to death by police officers chasing the two migrants. Jojo manages to escape and learns only later about his friend's death and that it is represented as a case of 'légitime défense' (95) ('legitimate defence') in the newspapers. While Charlie's death can be seen as a typical act of self-defence against zombies, a more interesting manifestation of the necessity to eliminate the zombie in the novel is the zombie's desire for self-destruction once they have lost their 'faith in the dream of becoming one with the [host] society' (Papastergiadis 2009, 158). This impulse is expressed in a passage in which Jojo and Charlie search for a place to sleep on their first night in the streets of Paris. Approaching a cemetery, Jojo wonders if they could sleep there – the allusion to 'resting in peace' is one of the first signs of his self-destructive tendencies and

desire to escape the limbo of unliveable life. In the aftermath of Charlie's killing, Jojo runs away from the police and sees no other option to than to jump into 'les eaux noires de la Seine' (85) ('the black water of Seine'). Swimming under water, Jojo is overwhelmed by weariness: without Charlie, he feels lost. It is at this moment that he starts to think that 'Ce serait tellement simple si tout s'arrêtait ... Ne plus vivre, ne plus courir, ne plus souffrir, mourir. Oui, c'était ça la solution: mourir!' (86) ('It would be so much easier if everything just stopped ... No longer live, run, suffer; just die. Yes, the solution was to die!'). A suicidal impulse takes over Jojo; he lets himself sink and stops breathing, but eventually his feet meet the ground and he sees stairs rising from the river. His suicidal thoughts come back later as he witnesses the suicide of Prosper, one of the clandestine migrants of the squat. Observing the corps, a feeling of weariness ['une grande lassitude' (124)] takes hold of him again, and he is about to swallow the pills that he finds in Prosper's hand, when Anselme, another occupant of the squat, stops him. Later, when Jojo visits the Eiffel tower with Anselme, he states at the top of the tower: 'Si quelqu'un se jette d'ici, il n'a aucune chance de survivre' (128) ('If someone threw himself down from here, there's no chance he could survive'). Jojo's enduring suicidal impulses betray his desire to self-destroy the zombie that he has become and to escape the border condition that being one entails.

The self-destructive impulse is also present in *A Distant Shore*, in which Gabriel, exhausted by the clandestine journey and disappointed with England, observes the 'blackness' of the river Thames, wondering 'what it would be like to drop down into the cool water' and whether 'he might find peace in the silence and stillness that lay beneath London's silvery vein' (168–169). Death by drowning and the potential 'peace' it is supposed to bring evoke the destiny of one of Gabriel's co-travellers: a Chinese man who drowned during the sea crossing from France to the UK. The idea of finding peace in death seems to be simultaneously disturbing and comforting – something that Gabriel does not quite want to contemplate. The trope of drowning in Phillips's novel reinforces the parallel between contemporary clandestine migrant mobilities and the Middle Passage (Sharpe 2009, 100; Tournay-Theodotou 2012, 294). To link these contemporary and historical sea crossings to the former colonial capital of London and the river Thames – or the Seine as in Essomba's novel – posits 'European rivers as contested sites where imperial history lurks just beneath the surface', as Knox (2016, 203) argues. Simultaneously, these liquid parallels suggest that the conditions that define undocumented migrants' clandestine journeys persist in the destination. From this perspective, it is not insignificant that Gabriel/Solomon, having survived a risky sea crossing and the impulse to drown himself in Thames, is killed near the canal in his home village.

Both novels suggest that if it is not the community of white citizen-subjects who eliminates the zombie migrant, it is the wearing effect of zombifying travel that makes clandestine migrants want to eliminate themselves. However, as zombies do not master their own acts, they cannot really decide to end their lives either. This is the case of both Essomba's and Phillips's zombified travellers: despite their suicidal tendencies, it is ultimately the community that takes action to get rid of them. Solomon is killed and Jojo most probably quarantined through imprisonment, although the lack of closure in Essomba's novel keeps the reader in suspense by leaving open the possibility of the zombie's return.

## Conclusion

My adoption of the zombie metaphor to the analysis of Essomba's and Phillips's novels demonstrates that both texts resort to imagery revolving around the loss of identity and emotion, darkness, hiding, confinement, and death in their representations of clandestine Afro-European mobilities. This imagery forms the novels' poetics of zombified mobilities. Both texts portray Europe as a destination of non-arrival, which conveys the idea of zombification as a continuum: the impossibility of escape is the tragedy that lies at the core of zombified Afro-European mobilities.

The complexity of the zombie metaphor allows for an in-depth understanding of Afro-European clandestine migrant mobilities. While the popular culture zombie conveys the idea of an abject, contagious alterity that resonates with anti-migration discourses, the figure's Haitian forebear draws attention to the zombie's victimhood and servitude. The dimension of slavery that is central in the Haitian zombie links the conditions of contemporary clandestine migrant mobilities to Middle Passage journeys. In this way, the zombie metaphor demonstrates how Essomba's and Phillips's representations of illegalized travellers' Afro-European journeys spring from a wider historical context of racialized abjection, violence, and horror.

## Notes

1. Agamben's concept of bare life has been criticized for its incapacity to take into account of the possibility of resistance unlike Foucault's theories on biopower (Zembylas 2010, 41). The concept has therefore its limitations when it comes to mapping out expressions of agency in the context of refugeedom.
2. The Haitian zombie's raw material can be traced back to Central West African seventeenth-century folk beliefs. However, being based on oral folklore, the details about the myth's creation can no longer be recovered (Lauro 2015 8, 15).
3. While the zombie's position between life and death condemns it into perpetual slavery, this border state can simultaneously be seen as a ground for rebellion (Fischer-Hornung and Mueller 2016, 6; Lauro 2015, 16–17). The idea of revolt implied in the zombie results from its link to the Haitian revolution as 'living death in the zombie represents revolutions that have not completely succeeded' (Lauro 2015, 7).
4. The term 'Afro-European' is well adapted for analysing cross-border mobilities between Africa and Europe: it captures the idea entanglement that characterizes the history and the present of the two continents (Brancato 2008, 2).
5. Caryl Phillips was born in St. Kitts and grew up in the UK and is not an 'African writer' *per se*. However, because of his affiliation to the Caribbean, the author can be considered as a writer of the historical African diaspora. Moreover, the events of *A Distant Shore* are partly set in an unnamed African country and the main character is an African man seeking asylum in Europe. As such, the text contributes to the literary imaginary of clandestine Afro-European travel.
6. On actual zombie figures in Haitian literature, see Swanson 2014 and 2015. For a metaphorical reading, see Romdhani 2015.
7. When it comes to the revolt that the zombie figure embodies (Lauro 2015, 16–17), my reading of the two novels' clandestine migrant mobilities is not optimistic but emphasizes their enslaving, zombifying elements. While it is important to acknowledge that even in the most abject conditions there is room at least for some agency, I think that suicide or the 'ability' to cause terror in citizen-subjects lack true empowering potential for the clandestine travellers themselves. 'Choosing' a suicide does not really allow for imagining future emancipation.
8. Analysing clandestine migration from the perspective of mobility is a topical critical endeavour as asylum and refugee travel is one of the most important 'forms of travel practice in the contemporary world' (Urry 2007, 10; 263).

9. Translations from Essomba's novel are mine.
10. Despite its metaphorical flexibility, the zombie is a folkloric figure that has emerged from a specific historical and cultural context. There are, therefore, some limits for applying the figure to a reading of African and Afrodiasporic literary texts that do not feature 'real' zombies. The notion of sorcery is one of them. Further, the slavery analogy is metaphorical as the novels' clandestine travellers are not slaves *per se*.
11. The Middle Passage parallel is further highlighted in Phillips's novel through its intertextual links to Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* (Ledent 2007, 81).
12. Jojo's job as a drug dealer (without himself knowing it) draws attention to the way in which (undocumented) migrants form a cheap and flexible work force, which renders them vulnerable to exploitation (Bauder 2006, 4). The zombie analogy here is clear; zombies (like migrants) can be considered to be 'ideal workers' because of their servility (Kordas 2011, 21).

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