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Precarity in Transit: *Travellers* by Helon Habila

Helga Ramsey-Kurz

This article offers a reading of Helon Habila’s latest novel *Travellers*, which was inspired by the onset of the so-called European refugee crisis in 2013. The essay pays special attention to the embodied act of narration and its exploitation by Habila as a mode of cultivating a compassionate understanding of forcibly displaced persons and their often precarious lives in prolonged transit. The analysis follows Butler’s idea of narrative as a mode, on the one hand, of humanising lives violently erased, as they all too often are in the event of involuntary migration, and, on the other, of restoring to “the ethically conscious” world their “capacity to mourn”, where it has been undermined by the systematic denial of human suffering by the nation state and dominant asylum discourse. Theoretical as this approach may appear at first glance, the essay’s goal is to demonstrate that, for Habila’s protagonist, learning to listen to other people’s stories properly and compassionately means to distance himself from the abstract projections of refugee subjecthood he himself endorses as the cosmopolitan intellectual he represents at the outset.

**Keywords:** Helon Habila; *Travellers*; Butler; refugee; narration; cosmopolitan intellectual

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All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them. (Isak Dinesen quoted by Hannah Arendt 1958: 175)

On 3 October 2013 a boat with African migrants sank in the Mediterranean. Over 360 persons drowned off the coast of the island of Lampedusa. Their bodies were bedded in coffins and these arrayed in straight rows in a hangar at Lampedusa’s Airport – with a rose on each and the image of a teddy bear on four smaller coffins holding the corpses of children. The President of the European Council, Manuel Barroso, and the Italian Prime Minister, Enrico Letta, travelled to the island and Letta announced that a state funeral would be held for the deceased migrants. Apparently, there was need for a public mourning, for a gesture of recognition with which ownership could be taken of the deaths as a tragedy that was also Europe’s. Up until this incident most of Europe had failed to take note of the immigration flows with which its southern states were contending (Davies 2013). Yet, for a brief moment, the large number of drownings had made it impossible to pass over the desperation that was driving people to leave their home countries and risk everything for a life – for life – elsewhere. Wanting to offer an African perspective on the disaster, a German newspaper invited the Nigerian novelist Helon Habila, who was staying on a DAAD fellowship in Berlin at the time, to write an article. Habila complied and began to interview refugees, activists, members of NGOs and social workers (Randol 2019). His fourth novel *Travellers* (2019) is the result of this work.¹

The book was received with enthusiasm when it appeared in June 2019. Reviewers lauded it for its “powerful commentary on displacement” (Tsipane 2019), its “bravura exploration of the refugee crisis”, and its “serious, soulful, arms-wide engagement with one of the most acute human concerns

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of our age” (Docx 2019). Apart from a testimony to Habila’s achievement, the almost unanimous and emphatic praise the novel garnered is, arguably, also symptomatic of a deeply felt need among the “ethically conscious world” (Bauman 1998: 76) for texts demonstrating and asserting the human ability to respond to the fates of forcibly displaced persons with more compassion than the current treatment of refugees by Western nation states reflects and the resultant dominant refugee discourse allows. Despite a fast growing body of writing for, about and by involuntary migrants, this need abides and has intensified in light of the current catastrophic dearth of morally acceptable solutions to forced displacement and the humanitarian disasters ensuing from it. Though less conspicuous than the racist and xenophobic resentment thriving in the absence of such solutions, moral concern is mounting amongst large parts of receiving societies witnessing the implementation of ever stricter, ever more rigorous measures of exclusion by their governments under the pretext of protecting citizens and refugees alike from the hazards of uncontrolled migration. Corresponding warnings that the West’s, and in particular Europe’s, immigration policies would lead to “a profound moral crisis” (Chomsky 2016), to an “ethical catastrophe of historic proportion” (Kingsley 2016) have been hitting home time and again in the past years as the number of migrants drowning in the Mediterranean has been climbing to over 20 000 since 2013. No state funerals were organised for any of these casualties. Often there were no coffins either. There did not have to be as in many cases the bodies of the drowned had not been retrieved. Rendered invisible, the deceased had, in Judith Butler’s terms, “fallen outside the ‘human’” (Butler 2004: 32), “suffered the violence of derealisation” (33) and become “ungrievable” (35).

The repudiation of mourning by successful removal of “those lives we have eradicated” (Butler 2004: xviii) from sight may breed fantasies of self-mastery and effectively reinvigorate dreams of an orderly and just world. Yet this is, as Butler argues in Precarious Life, only a transient effect:

If violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated. But they have a strange way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again). They cannot be mourned because they are always already lost or rather, never “were”, and they must be killed, since they seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness. Violence renews itself in the face of the apparent inexhaustibility of its object. The derealization of the “Other” means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral. (33–4)

The continued spectral presence of unmourned Others, Butler suggests, works as a nagging reminder of our implication in their suffering and of our failure to duly apprehend their vulnerability. More than that, in neglecting to grieve the loss of our Others, we deny ourselves the experience of “the fundamental sociality of life” and the opportunity to furnish a sense of political community with which to resist the inhumanities we are forced to witness (22, 28). “Certain faces must be admitted into public view, must be seen and heard”, Butler therefore insists, “for some keener sense of the value of life, all life, to take hold”, adding that “without the capacity to mourn, we lose that keener sense of life we need in order to oppose violence” (xvii–xix).

It is in stories testifying to extreme violence that Butler sees this “keener sense of the value of life” come to the fore with a doubly humanising effect: not only can such stories undo the erasure of violated lives and restore them as grievable; they also help the ethically conscious who allow themselves to be interpellated as witnesses and mourners to understand “the conditions under which a grievable life is established and maintained” (38). Indeed, stories of lives in extreme precarity “provide the narrative means by which the human in its grievability is established” (38, emphasis added). For Butler, then, the function of narrative extends beyond the remembrance of acts of violence and the humanisation of vilified subjects. It also encompasses the empowerment of those responsive to the violence they witness, albeit from a distance. This is crucial with regard
to the narration of refugees’ experiences, compassionate response to which has been impeded somewhat in recent years by both the routine “commodification of distant suffering” (Whitlock 2015: 191) and the distortions of narratives of prosecution coerced by asylum granting authorities and their acceptance only of certain accounts as valid corroboration of asylum claims (Woolley 2017). In light of such developments, it is easy to question the efficacy of narrative as a form of political intervention in support of refugees, yet all the more necessary to register and understand how attempts at just such intervention persist, producing diverse forms of collaborative telling with and for refugees. Cases in point range from such story collections as The Ungrateful Refugee compiled by Dina Nayeri from memories of her own escape from Iran as a child and interviews with persons detained as refugees now, to the memoir, No Friend But the Mountains, which the Kurdish journalist, Behrouz Bouchani, composed as text messages secretly sent to his translator, Omid Tofighian, in Melbourne. They include Letters to Nauru, documenting a correspondence between asylum seekers held as part of the Pacific Solution and their advocates on the Australian mainland, as well as the three volumes of Refugee Tales that have emerged from an outreach project launched by the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group in protest against indefinite detention of undocumented migrants in the UK.

In different ways, they all testify to “the double value of refugee writing” which, for Tom Cheesman, resides in the fact that creative writing offers refugees the opportunity “to work through personal traumas, and to communicate with the world as individuals” (2007: 7). Similarly, Gillian Whitlock validates the preservation of refugees’ experiences in narrative form as a powerful way of “humanising[c] categories of people whose experiences are frequently unseen and unheard” (2007: 3). Brant et al. support this view, asserting that writing by and in collaboration with refugees is essentially “an act of reappropriation”, of reclaiming the voice of disempowered subjects and of exposing “the continuing and evolving forms of the colonial gaze that permeates the discourse of forced migration” (2017: 627). Beyond this, a new awareness of the very act of narration as an embodied form of sharing refugees’ experiences has taken shape, contributing to a reconsideration of the very act of storytelling as one that “compels us to enter into a dialogue of equals through one of the strongest forces by which selfhood can be asserted: the narrative” (Brant et al. 2017: 627). For narration, “as a mode of communication, and as a form of understanding the world and ultimately ourselves”, consistently brings to the fore what Bakhtin called the “unrealized surplus of humanness” (Brockmeier and Carbaugh 2001: 1). This is in line with how Ali Smith imagines storytelling can be, and, in the case of the Refugee Tales project she has spearheaded, is, a joint endeavour of resistance:

The telling of stories is an act of profound hospitality. It always has been. Story is an ancient form of generosity, an ancient form that will tell us everything we need to know about the contemporary world. Story has always been a welcoming-in, is always one way or another a hospitable meeting of the needs of others, and a porous artform where sympathy and empathy are only the beginning of things. The individual selves we all are meet and transform into something open and communal. […] We will tell it like it is, and we will work towards the better imagined. (Smith 2016)

The “better imagined” Smith envisages here constitutes an alternative to the narratives generated and perpetuated by the dominant asylum discourse. As Agnes Woolley has argued, these allow only for an idealised version of refugeehood to gather visibility (and, by inference, grievability). Helon Habila’s novel Travellers opposes the truth regimes dictating such narratives in a manner perhaps even more explicitly focussed on telling than Woolley has shown other recent writings to militate against “asylum stories”. Travellers leaves these and the official protocols of telling on which they hinge largely unmentioned and instead narrates, in fact even dramatises, completely different instances of storytelling, instances that confirm Butler’s idea
of narration as a fundamentally humanitarian gesture. They show how storytelling can facilitate recognition and compassionate understanding across divides traditionally presumed to separate and distance people. Indeed, in Travellers, narration does not only undo this distance, it also brings narrators and listeners, writers and readers closer together and thus creates the proximity that, according to Butler, is necessary for humans to take responsibility for others and honour “principles of bodily integrity, nonviolence, and territorial or property rights claims” (2012: 135). In other words, Travellers performs what Butler describes as “a particular form of ethical solicitation”,

one that compels us to negotiate questions of proximity and distance. They implicitly formulate ethical quandaries: Is what is happening so far from me that I can bear no responsibility for it? Is what is happening so close to me that I cannot bear having to take responsibility for it? If I myself did not make this suffering, am I still in some other sense responsible to it? (135)

These are precisely the questions Habila’s protagonist at first fails, then learns to ask himself as he moves from detached and helpless observations of others in distress to a more and more compassionate understanding of their stories and even to an active involvement and willing intervention on their behalf, which at the very end of the novel takes the form of deeply sympathetic and intensely imaginative narration. In tracing this development, the following will focus less on how the individual stories of migration told in Travellers solicit the reader’s compassion than on how these stories interrelate and affect the protagonist’s perception of refugees. It will examine how the story of him hearing, relating to and retelling the stories of others answers the question to which Butler’s abiding preoccupation with compassion takes her in her 2012 essay “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation”, where she asks “whether any of us have the capacity or inclination to respond ethically to suffering at a distance and what makes that ethical encounter possible, when it does take place” (2012: 134).

The large ‘cast’ of storytellers presented and the broad range of storytelling incidents recounted in Travellers make for a differentiated answer to this question. They suggest that, for Habila, compassion is not so much a matter of “inclination” or of an innate “capacity” to respond to the suffering of others, as an acquired ability, laboriously honed in the process of a gradual “working towards the better imagined”. Significantly, for the writer and academic, Habila, this process seems to entail, more than anything else, an engagement with one’s fellow beings that is unimpeded by the intellectual hubris he ascribes to cosmopolitan intellectuals in his novel. Like Simon Gikandi’s, Habila’s self-critical appraisal of their attitude towards others is that, in claiming to speak for them, they “elide the circumstances by which the majority of the ex-colonial enters the world system, as refugees or illegal aliens” (Gikandi 2010: 34). This holds true of Habila’s protagonist, an unnamed Nigerian intellectual based in the US, and his wife, Gina, a painter who has been awarded a fellowship to work in Berlin. Travellers opens after their arrival in Germany where Gina has just begun to work on a set of six portraits of persons she considers to be “real migrants” (Habila 2019: 4). The fact that she intends to call her polyptych “Travellers” is ironic. As it turns out, the migrants she paints are, with the exception of one, not the same as the migrants whose stories the novel relates, also in six separate, yet carefully interconnected “books”. Whereas these reveal the sad realities of forced migration, Gina’s portraits mirror her detachment from these realities. Symptomatically, all she looks out for when casting her models are faces that are neither “too young” nor “too smooth”, nor “lack[ing] the character only time and experience brings” (4–5). Unable to see how each of the refugees she is painting is, in Gikandi’s words, “the Other of the cosmopolitan” (2010: 26), not even interested in their stories, Gina uses their images to project her own sorrow onto them. This dawns on the protagonist at a first showing of her work where he recognises that what Gina’s paintings speak of is not her sitters’ displacement, but her own after the stillbirth of their child a few months earlier.
Her memory of this loss drowns out the losses any of her models have suffered, such that even the sadness captured in Gina’s portrait of the Eritrean Manu remains a puzzle to the protagonist. “A good likeness”, he compliments Manu on the painting, thinking to himself that it lets Manu look “thoughtful, a little tired, but filled with gravitas, like a defeated king amidst the ruins of his palace” (Habila 2019: 40). Yet, like his wife, he does not bother to try and learn more about him either – an omission effectively accentuated by way of a shift of the narrative perspective Habila contrives in the subsequent book to reveal to the reader that Manu has lost his wife and son during their passage across the Mediterranean. A number of instances follow that further cast into relief Gina’s and the protagonist’s utter lack of awareness of the precarious situations in which other African migrants find themselves in Berlin. Typically, when the protagonist befriends a Malawian film student it takes a while before he reads the signs of Mark’s desolation correctly and grasps that the young man is in trouble. Due to the expiry of his visa Mark has been classed an asylum seeker and placed in a refugee hostel. Naively confident that he can help, the protagonist goes to visit him there, but instantly feels put off as he enters the place. He has the impression that he has descended into Dante’s Inferno as he walks through what is an abandoned school building – most of its windows without panes or boarded up with plywood, its entrance breathing a revolting fetid smell, its corridors littered with trash and broken furniture. With horror, he takes in the red and grimy faces of its inhabitants, sucking greedily from cans of beer, registers the scrawny chest of a man dressed in a towel, notices legs hanging over the sides of tattered mattresses, and before he has found his friend decides, “I think I’ve seen enough” (59) and leaves.

Not long afterwards the protagonist learns of riots at the hostel and a siege by the police during which Mark was killed. The refugees, he is told, climbed onto the roof of the building. Mark was one of them, waving and shouting until someone pushed him. That the protagonist is implicated in Mark’s death by default need not be stated for the reader to understand his subsequent decision to separate from Gina and the circle of cosmopolitan sophisticates of which she has become a part. In the five books that follow they retain only a vague presence as an obscure global phenomenon briefly embodied by the Zambian poet James Kariku, whose daughter the protagonist meets and spontaneously joins on a trip to Switzerland. From her he learns of the life her father enjoyed as a celebrated “professional exile” (134) without his family in London. “He went from fellowship to fellowship, from asylum city to asylum city. All over Europe”, Portia remembers,

And they loved him, even though he hadn’t written a book in over twenty years. He gave comments after every coup in Africa, on every civil war that broke out, every uprising, every plane crash. He was the Africa expert. He wrote fiery opinion pieces in newspapers attacking the government in Zambia, even though by now the government and most of the country had forgotten who he was. But in Europe he was a hero, telling truth to power. They called him the conscience of Africa. My father ate it up.

Different, less conceited persons begin to interest the protagonist as he continues his travels across Europe. Their stories gather more and more reality the further he moves away from the postcolonial elites to which he belonged by dint of his migration to the US, his work as an academic and his marriage to Gina. As if to atone for his failure to take proper note of Mark’s vulnerability, the protagonist starts to listen attentively to what these other travellers, moving less freely than he can and burdened with appalling traumas, have to tell him. As a result of his attention, the stories he hears change. While Mark’s remains an incomplete collage of fragments that have surfaced in random conversations, more and more densely knit and carefully deliberated narratives follow. One is recounted as the elaborate confession of a murder, another formulated as a father’s lament about his and his son’s painful odyssey through Europe. Yet another story about a
mother and her child washed up on the shore of an Italian island is told in the style of a fairy tale. Book six, finally, contains a narration composed in writing. It reaches the protagonist in the form of a letter and offers a refugee’s detailed personal account of his flight from Nigeria to England, his failed deportation back to Africa and detention in the UK. The document is a statement against the refugee Juma’s erasure by the British state, relating how he asserts his agency by choosing a self-imposed precarity and going on hunger strike in protest against the dehumanising treatment of his case by the authorities. Importantly, it is also a testimony that would not have been written without the protagonist’s prompting. “Why did you leave Nigeria?” is the simple question he asks Juma weeks earlier, eliciting a first unrestrained telling of what Zambelli calls “unfettered refugee speech” (2017: 41):

The stories kept coming, discursively, randomly. He sat on the couch, the blanket draped over his lap covering his knobby knees and shrunken calves. The sentences tumbled out and it was nothing short of fascinating that so many words could be coming out of his small frame. (Habila 2019: 278)

There are other occasions in the novel when the protagonist’s interest in other travellers encourages them to speak as they would in “the all-important encounter between the asylum seeker and the host State” (Zambelli 2017: 11), but freely and unafraid to give expression to both their vulnerability and endurance. Increasingly, the compassion they still manage to show for others inspires compassion in the protagonist. The Somali Karim, for instance, finds room in his harrowing tale of his own troubles to note that he has seen people suffer much more than he has, and to recall a woman and her daughter whom he met in a forest on the Turkish border:

They are looking around, and I ask her can I help you, are you in trouble? She say she was looking for her husband grave. He died when they tried to cross into Bulgaria with human smugglers. He just fall down and died. The smugglers help her quickly bury him in the sand. That was many days ago, but she came back because she kept thinking of him. […] Now they look for the grave and she can’t find it […]. She go from one little place that look like grave, then she begin to pray, then she go to another pile of sand […]. Sometimes while praying she forget what she is doing and she begin to fall asleep because she is so tired and she didn’t sleep for many days, then she will start again, then she will forget the words and she will start to cry. (173)

Karim’s caring remembrance of the widow lost in her search for her husband’s grave captivates the protagonist. “Outside, night had leaped onto the landscape”, he recalls about the train journey to Frankfurt during which he met Karim, “and we could be anywhere, Turkey, Syria, Yemen, Germany, it didn’t matter. What mattered was to hear what happened next. I wanted to know” (177). This is a new impulse in the protagonist, a sign of his growing awareness of the importance of acknowledging other people’s humanity by listening to their stories. Shortly before they have to part, Karim finishes his narrative with the remark that he no longer knows what to do. “His eyes searched mine in the gloomy carriage”, the protagonist realises, “and I saw the hunger on his face. He was hungry for hope, hungry for a break” (191). With this sudden deep understanding of another’s troubles, he leaves Karim to change trains, still unaware that within the hours to follow he will find himself more completely in Karim’s place than he would ever have expected. Waiting for his connection to Berlin he suddenly realises that he has left his bag and papers with Karim and, seized by panic, accidentally boards a train scheduled to take undocumented migrants to Italy.

Months have passed when the next part of the novel opens to show the protagonist from a distance as a man standing alone by the fence of a refugee centre on an island in southern Italy, “staring into the water, quiet and motionless” (203). The director of the centre has assisted him in filing a complaint against his classification as an undocumented migrant. Yet without
papers, the authorities seem unable to help. With his story thus annulled, the protagonist seems without an identity. In surrender to the near-cancellation of his existence, he has retreated into complete inaction and even stopped communicating with others. “He seems to have lost all will to live”, the director tells his friend Matteo. “He is ill. You see how he looks. I have seen people like that. They grow apathetic, they withdraw, they neglect their health, and they die” (206). However, after this brief caesura, the protagonist resumes his narrative. “Who is to say if I am not dead already”, he asks, as if speaking from an underworld worse than the inferno he thought he had entered when looking for Mark in the refugee hostel in Berlin. “[T]he people around me could be shadows, wraiths, like me. If I am alive, then I am barely alive. Barely walking, mostly standing and staring at the water” (208). After having been passed from camp to camp and seen the desolation of so many “travellers”, he seems unable to reconnect to his former life, nor to the world outside the camp. “I pretend not to see them”, he says of the camp director and Matteo, who keep coming to talk to him, “and finally they turn and they leave” (208). Even so, his reluctance to speak is not a sign of total defeat, but rather an expression of his “horror, shame and victimization” and as such an all too typical and telling aspect of refugee speech (Zambelli 2017: 17). What he would like to communicate to the director, if he could, is that he believes he has “all the time in the world” to think and decide if he wants “to go out there, to live, or to wait here and embrace whatever comes” (Habila 2019: 208). He even feels that if he waits long enough something would be revealed to him, someone would step up to him, “a familiar face, a total stranger, a child, a man, a woman”, and they would say, “Listen. And they would tell me a story, a fable, a secret, something so pithy, so profound, that it is worth the wait. Listen, they would say, listen carefully” (208).

It takes some time for this telling to finally happen when the protagonist accepts an invitation to stay with Matteo, the local painter, not of pictures, though, but of houses. Unlike Gina, Matteo is neither an artist nor a cosmopolitan intellectual, yet as a local who has never left the island, knows far more about refugees than the protagonist’s wife. For decades he has been watching the island change with the arrival of more and more refugees, observing how it started to run out of space and to “smell of misery and despair” (200). Like most islanders, he has often volunteered in the camp and become used to the sight of “women and children dehydrated from their long ordeal on the sea”, “stretched out on cots and hooked to drips for rehydration” (201). “It was never a pretty sight”, we learn:

some had feet rotting in their wet shoes, some had shit and vomit caked to their skin and hair, some were delirious with fright from being trapped between dead bodies for days in the boat — pregnant women had to be checked to see if the baby was still alive, or not, in which case emergency caesarean sections were performed right there on the floor […] (201–2)

With the experience of such scenes, Matteo comes to meet the protagonist and immediately understands his complete forlornness. One day he decides to tell him his story. “Think of it as a fairy tale”, he starts. “Once upon a time a man came upon a woman lying on the seashore, half-covered by the foaming waves. A mermaid, he thought” (211). The man obviously is Matteo, who also finds a child not far from the woman, and when she awakes, discovers that all she can remember is her son’s name. He takes both of them to his house and lets them stay with him and his father. Before long he falls in love with her and persuades her that they have known each other for years and would have married, had her father consented. Trusting him, the woman accepts his story, accepts the name, Sophia, Matteo gives her and even accepts his proposal. However, months after their hasty wedding, she regains her memory and is shattered by the discovery of Matteo’s betrayal. Recalling a shipwreck in which she and her son were separated from her
daughter and her husband, she leaves, knowing that, if still alive, Rachida and Manu (the same Manu who used to be sitting for Gina) will be waiting for her in Berlin.

In comparison to Gina’s appropriation of her sitters’ displacement, Matteo’s self-interested presumption to forge a new identity and life for Basma appears, if not forgivable, at least comprehensible as an act of affection and caring. “He is a good man, even if a little unusual”, the protagonist concludes, “and I owe my life to him” (233). It is true that with his story Matteo has given the protagonist a new lease of life along with the knowledge that his old life with Gina is over. He therefore asks Matteo to take him across the Mediterranean, not to the mainland so he may return to Germany, but to Tunisia so he can make his way back to Nigeria. During the passage he briefly falls asleep and, dreaming of a mass drowning, feels a compassion that surpasses even God’s:

A restless, writhing motion fills the water. Fish. A school of them in a feeding frenzy, but when I bend closer, my face almost touching the water, I see they are not fish, they are human. Bodies floating face-up, limbs threshing, tiny hands reaching up to me. Hundreds of tiny hands, thousands of faces, until the surface of the water is filled with silent ghostly eyes like lamps shining at me and arms reaching up to be grasped; they float amidst a debris of personal belongings, toys, shoes, shirts, and family pictures all slowly sinking into a bottomless Mediterranean. I drift past, and they drift past, and God drifts past, paring His nails. I pull back, tears on my face. I had not thought death had undone so many. I repeat the line over and over, rolling it over my tongue like a prayer, till my whisper turns into a scream. (234)

After mourning the forgotten travellers he has met in his dream, the protagonist reaches the coast of Tunisia and “with a mighty heave” the sea spews him onto land. He feels “[his] eyes and ears and mouth filled with briny seawater” and senses that “underneath [him] is the firm African soil” (235). He has finally found his bearings. Overwhelmed by emotions, he staggers to his feet and looks back to sea, “but there is nothing to see”, he notes, “only mist and black rushing water” (235).

The moment of the protagonist’s rebirth, which coincides with a sudden complete eclipse of Europe, marks not a forgetting of all the suffering he has seen on his travels but a repositioning that allows him to relate to the stories of forcibly displaced Others in a new way – a way deeply compassionate and imaginative at once. This becomes manifest in the vision he conjures after reading the letter the starving Juma sends him from a “removal centre” in the UK:

I thought of Juma in his tiny cell at Harmondsworth Removal Centre, perhaps reading, drifting in and out of sleep, too weak to stay awake for long. Liam and Molly will keep visiting him […] Juma’s voice has grown hoarser and flimsier, and the visitors have to draw nearer to hear him. […] He takes a tiny sip, wetting his chapped, shaking lips. Then the lucidity leaves his eyes and they leave him. The next time they come the officials deny them entry. […] The din in the media quietens. Juma sits in his cell, thirsting for mother’s milk, unable to eat anything else, he shrinks, he regresses, back to childhood, curled up in a corner foetus-like, his flesh withers, his bones become as frail as twigs. One day the guards open the door and he is not there, only a pile of twigs on the floor. The cleaner comes and sweeps up the twigs and bags them and throws them into the dumpster. (294–5)

With this, the protagonist’s labours “towards the better imagined” have been accomplished. His final vision brings to the fore a new mode of telling he has managed to cultivate, one that distinguishes his narrative from all other tales he has heard. It does not serve to appropriate and reiterate an Other’s story, nor to replace it. Following Juma’s own account, it does not presume to speak on his behalf. Rather it honours Juma’s persistent resistance by prolonging it beyond the point where Juma is physically unable to speak for himself. In keeping alive the memory of his dying, it defies his erasure by the British nation state, but also resists the constraints that Juma’s death in isolation and witnessed by no one puts on mourning him. Quite paradoxically,
it is the image of Juma disintegrating into a pile of twigs on the floor that, as a perfect epitomisation of his vulnerability, recuperates his visibility to intensely humanising effect. Pictured in terms beyond the command of the incarcerating authorities, Juma’s exit thus becomes itself an expression of grief that affords “that keener sense of life” Butler believes we need to experience in order to oppose violence.

Notes on Contributor

Helga Ramsey-Kurz is a professor of English literature at the University of Innsbruck, Austria, where she teaches and does research on postcolonial theory and writing. Her publications focus especially on migration and socioeconomic inequality. In recent years her main research interests have been life writing by and for refugees and literary treatments of wealth. Her books include The Non-Literate Other (2011), Uncommon Wealths in Postcolonial Fiction (2017, edited with Melissa Kennedy) and Fluchtgeschichten – Refugee Narratives (2020, edited with Gilles Reckinger).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note

1. For Habila, this was at the very height of the so-called European refugee crisis (Randol 2019), even though the accepted understanding is that this crisis peaked in 2015 after a dramatic surge in arrivals of immigrants from Syria and the Middle East. Habila’s explicit deviation from this understanding may well be interpreted as an intentional gesture in reaction to the abrupt shift of public, media, scholarly and even artistic attention away from African refugees in the past years (Walt 2015).

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