DE GRUYTER

POSTCOLONIAL THEORY AND CRISIS

Edited by Paulo de Medeiros and Sandra Ponzanesi

CULTURE & CONFLICT

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Postcolonial Theory and Crisis

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Postcolonial Theory and Crisis

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Paulo de Medeiros and Sandra Ponzanesi

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Alessandra Di Maio

Coming of Age Across the Central Mediterranean Route: E.C. Osondu's *When the Sky is Ready the Stars Will Appear*

Abstract: In the past decades, the Central Mediterranean Route connecting Africa to Europe has been crossed mainly by young people who, independently from what they are leaving behind, look for better life conditions and alleged democracy in the West. Concerned with border control and humanitarian policies, Western dominant narratives focus on the migrant vs. refugee categorization (see Hamlin 2021), often neglecting the fact that for these young Africans the "Mediterranean Passage" (Portelli 1999) is also an initiation journey. E.C. Osondu's coming-of-age novel *When the Sky is Ready the Stars Will Appear* (2021) reminds us that behind every journey there are individuals with their dreams, hopes, troubles and ambitions. Its protagonist, an orphan from an unspecified African village, decides to leave home to reach the city of his dreams: Rome. In his odyssey, we recognize the voyage of the young people who cross the "Black Mediterranean" (Di Maio 2012) but also the story of any young man eager to get to know the world.

Keywords: Migrant/refugee crises, Central Mediterranean Route, Black Mediterranean, African Diaspora, African literature, E.C. Osondu

1 Beyond binaries: Migrant vs. refugee

Today, the concept of the refugee as distinct from other migrants looms large. Immigration laws worldwide tend to propose a migrant vs. refugee dichotomy by viewing migrants as voluntary, often economically motivated, individuals who can be legitimately excluded by potential host states, while refugees, forced to leave their homeland for political reasons or other force majeure causes, are allowed to cross borders under the protection of international laws. As Rebecca Hamlin argues in her book *Crossings: How We Label and React to People on the Move* (2021), everything we know about people who decide to move from one world region to another suggests that border crossing is far more nuanced, and complicated, than any binary can encompass. By analyzing cases of various "border crises" across Europe, the Middle East, North America and South America, Hamlin contends that the migrant/refugee binary is not just an innocuous shorthand. Indeed, its power stems from the way in which it is painted as apolitical.

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The binary, she argues, is a dangerous “legal fiction,” politically constructed with the ultimate goal of making harsh border control measures more ethically palatable to the public (Hamlin 2021: 1–24).

The binary appears even more incongruous when applied to the uncountable, undocumented people who cross the so-called Central Mediterranean Route linking Africa to Europe via Italy.[1] Still talked about as an emergency, the “burning” (Pandolfo 2007) of the Mediterranean has been going on for decades. If Human Rights Watch describes it as “the world’s deadliest migration route” and talks about a “Mediterranean migration crisis,” other international organizations, including the UNHCR, report that “Europe is living through a maritime refugee crisis.” One wonders, with Hamlin, whether the opposition migrant/refugee can be at all applicable in Mediterranean S&R operations aimed at rescuing people at sea, whose legal status is clearly unknown.

The majority of people making the Mediterranean crossing are young, more often than not minors, who, independently from what they are leaving behind – whether dire economic circumstances, ethnic or religious persecutions, or civil wars – look for better life conditions and alleged democracy in Europe. Upon arrival, they are temporarily kept in “reception centers” actually functioning as penitentiaries, and only later, if deemed fit, can they apply for asylum, when they are not repatriated. Several, on the other hand, literally travel off the radar and are not traceable. Focusing on the legal aspects of their experience, in any case judged ‘illegal’ by Fortress Europe – which hasn’t yet found a way to implement humanitarian corridors or legalize the crossing – mass-mediated dominant narratives in the West tend to neglect that for these young people traversing the Mediterranean is also an initiation journey, the beginning of a new life.

2 E.C. Osondu’s *When the Sky Is Ready the Stars Will Appear*

Literature comes to the aid, reminding us that those who cross the sea are human beings, not numbers, despite the counting incessantly offered by the media, which often represent them as indistinct masses of nameless, voiceless black bodies, whose life stories begin in the heart of the Mediterranean. In particular, E.C. Osondu’s coming of age novel *When the Sky is Ready the Stars Will Appear*

1 Formal updated reports on the Central Mediterranean Route are provided by the EU via FRONTEX, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency.

(2021) reminds us that behind every journey there are young individuals with their dreams, hopes, ambitions, troubles. Published first in its Italian translation in 2020,[2] and then in the original English by the Nigerian publisher Ouida in 2021,[3] Osondu's novel tells the fictional story of an orphan who decides to leave his African village to reach the city of his dreams – Rome. In his odyssey, which we follow step by step, we recognize the voyage of the young Africans who cross the Central Mediterranean Route but also the story of any young man eager to get to know the world. Contrarily to what we usually hear from the media, where the focus is always on the receiving end of the voyage, in the novel we follow the story of the full journey – a fictional one, in this case – in first person, through the eyes and the voice of the boy who makes it. Thus, Osondu's novel tells us the other side of the story, from a point of view to which Europeans are not commonly exposed – the point of view of an African boy. Toppling over the dominant Western perspective, the novel reminds us that those who make the crossing leave behind roots, possessions and relationships, but carry with them unique and unreplaceable life stories, made up of dreams, desires, and needs.

The novel recounts in thirty-four short chapters the vicissitudes of an African teenager who chooses to leave his home and country to seek a better future in Italy. Of him we know neither his name, age nor nationality. His village, Gulu Station, a figment of the author's imagination, resembles any small West African village where people live making ends meet, but where the smooth flow of daily life ensures stability. The young man narrates his story in the first person, from his own point of view, with the idiosyncrasies and the sense of wonder typical of his age. Left an orphan, he recounts being placed in the care of Nene, an older lady who welcomes him like a son. Mild-mannered, his strength lies in his ability to ask questions, as he repeats at several points in the story, because "one who asks questions never gets lost." (Osondu 2021: 44). His voice is sweet, innocent, optimistic, sometimes soft and sometimes restless, like that of many teenagers with high hopes. Always ready to ask and above all able to listen, his is a welcoming voice that resonates as a sounding board for the voices of the community, especially for Nene's wise words, which guide him on his journey towards the future. It is Nene who utters the title phrase, indicating that there is a time for everything. Nene offers slightly different variations of the phrase, as befits storytelling: "You will go on your journey but it is not time yet. When the sky is ready that is when the moon appears, never before." (Osondu 2021: 27). The narrative is peppered with

2 E.C. Osondu (2020) *Quando il cielo vuole spuntano le stelle* (trans. G. Guerzoni).

3 Forthcoming in the USA, the novel has been published in the original English only in Nigeria so far. E.C. Osondu (2021) *When the Sky is Ready the Stars Will Appear* (Lagos: Ouida). All quotations from the novel in the article refer to this edition.

proverbs, sayings, legends, sounds and smells of childhood in Gulu Station, which stands as a symbol of a continent with ancient traditions, but headed toward a global destiny marked by diaspora. Although the name of the town is a sign of unfulfilled, colonial promise – Gulu Station has never had a train station – life flows in an orderly fashion.

> Gulu Station only has one of everything: one place of worship, one store, one cripple who is also the Gulu Station cobbler. We had a single Madman named Jagga who was famous for his words of wisdom. [. . .] When it was rumored that another citizen of Gulu Station was about to go mad, Jagga warned the man to hang on to his sanity. In Jagga's view, Gulu Station was too small a village to accommodate two mad people. In Gulu Station, we all know each other. We make it a point to mind each other's business. We are not happy all the time but we are not sad all the time either. But then, who in this world wants to be happy or sad all the time? (Osondu 2021: 12)

Everything has a role and a *raison d'être* in the village, but resources are scarce and therefore so is the chance for young people to realize their dreams. This is why the protagonist, like others of his own age, decides to leave in search of a better world. His highest aspiration is to reach Rome, known worldwide for its beauty, whose language he pretends to know how to speak: "Ah, Roma, *bella, bella, bellissimo*" (Osondu 2021: 111). Conversing with his fellow travellers, he repeats: "Rome is *bella*. In fact, Rome is more than *bella*, it is *bellisimo*" (134), making once again the same grammatical gender mistake (*bella* is correctly feminine, its absolute superlative form *bellissimo* is masculine). His lie is short-lived: "'But what about their language?' someone asked. I twisted and turned. What did I know about the language aside from *bella* and *bellisimo*?" (137).

> "See, *bella*, means beautiful in the language of Rome, but not just any kind of beauty. You see, the language of Rome is so deep, everything has a unique meaning. This beauty we are talking about here is not the type of beauty you see, for instance, in the sky when the sun is setting. No, this type of beauty refers to the beauty of a woman. So, Rome is beautiful like a beautiful woman," I explained. (Osondu 2021: 130)

It is the protagonist's older friend Bros, who had moved there years before and made his fortune, who tells him about Rome. Whenever Bros returns to visit Gulu Station wearing the latest fashionable clothes, he brings gifts, money and delicacies for everyone: "Bros brought dance and music with him like we have never experienced before. There was a lot of food. A cow was slaughtered and the aroma of fried meat hit every nose in Gulu Station." (Osondu 2021: 4) Rome is the protagonist's dream city because of its beauty, which in the eyes of a teenager takes on the appearance of a desirable woman, fantastic automobiles and a world champion football team:

> "Everything that you have in other places they have it in Rome. They have cars that fly. When the car gets to a flooded part of the road it merely lifts itself up and flies off to the other side. They make the fastest cars in the world. They have so many football clubs and football stars; they have also won the World Cup four times. Each loss was because the Pope did not bless their team to give other countries a chance to win," I said. (Osondu 2021: 131)

Rome is not only the *dolce vita*, it is also the city of the Pope, second only to God. As a result, the young man imagines it as a heavenly city. "The first time I heard of Rome I thought it was a place in heaven," reads the novel's incipit. "You know those places in heaven like Jerusalem, Israel, Syria, Jordan, Abyssinia and those types of places you only hear their names in the holy books" (Osondu 2021: 3). The narrator seems to suggest that sacredness transcends individual religions, as well as their internal divisions. It unites people, whether they are Catholics like himself, Copts, Muslims, or Jews. Sacredness is a quality intrinsic to man, who reveals it in sacred scriptures and practices it through a set of rituals, building places of worship and holy cities. The protagonist's journey takes on a sacred character and becomes a pilgrimage. Symbolically, it is a journey to heaven – past the purgatory of the crossing, as we will see. The protagonist will embark not only in a dinghy ("This was a balloon with an outboard engine," 152) but also on a spiritual quest that will culminate in his arrival at the coveted papal seat.

> The Pope lives in Rome. Rome is his hometown just as heaven is God's hometown. Now, you all know that after God the next in line is the Pope so, living in Rome is like living in heaven. Everything that happens in heaven, happens in Rome, but on a smaller scale. (Osondu 2021: 135)

Language, too, takes on a sacred, divine dimension, as befits a budding storyteller who, by telling us his story and the stages of his journey, makes narrative one of the main instruments of his formation. For him, Italian is a mystery to explore, a means of knowledge, and the language of faith – in god, in salvation, and in a better, hopeful future: "The language of Rome is no ordinary human language. It is the language that the Pope speaks. It is the language that they speak in heaven." (Osondu 2021: 137).

3 Migration, childhood, human rights

The tone of Osondu's novel is as far removed as one can imagine from that of the international mass media, whose language rages cruelly over the count of the dead and survivors, the policies of so-called reception centers, military operations and repatriations. In this coming of age novel, in which the journey is first and foremost that of a boy like so many in search of himself and a place in the world,

the tone is fairytale-like, the language a melody, the prose terse, the adventure a parable of life. This is not the first literary work in which the author – an established writer of Ibo lineage whose biography has nothing to do with that of his protagonist – takes on the voice and gaze of a young man grappling with the experience of displacement, a notion that encompasses those of mobility, migration, expatriation, asylum, refuge and exile. His multi-award-winning short story *Waiting*, published first by the prestigious journal *Guernica* in 2008 and then in his *Voice of America* short-story collection (2010), tells of a group of young boys who have fled the killing fields of war and are taken into a refugee camp. For a whole day they await the arrival of a photographer invited by the Red Cross to take their pictures so that some foreign families can choose and adopt them. In his debut novel, *This House Is Not for Sale* (2015), the complex figure of a grandfather is observed and told from the point of view of his grandchildren. He is an African patriarch who owns the family home where everyone can find a place and protection but must be subject to his rule. However, in *When the Sky is Ready the Stars Will Appear*, Osondu touches chords that resonate closely with us. He does so with a delicacy that reflects the vulnerability of those who make a risky journey from Africa to Italy which not everyone survives. On the other hand, he emphasizes the sacredness of an age – adolescence – that should be protected not only by our common sense of humanity, but also by the international community, as enshrined in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948). If the latter reminds us that "All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection,"[4] the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*, already proposed in 1924 and officially approved by the UN in 1959, reiterates the concept, articulating it in ten fundamental principles that develop the assumption of the Preamble: "Mankind owes to the child the best it has to give."[5] Nationality, which is never indicated in the novel – neither for the protagonist nor for any other character – cannot serve as a discriminator. The first principle of the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child* states that: "The child shall enjoy all the rights set forth in this Declaration [. . .] without distinction or discrimination on account of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin." Principle 8 summarizes that "The child shall in all circumstances be among the first to receive protection and relief." In his essay "Cultural Absolutes and Relativisms: The Dignity and Sacredness of Human Life," written in the

4 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), article 25, comma 2.

5 *Declaration of the Rights of the Child* (1959), Preamble. The Declaration was the basis of the *Convention of the Rights of the Child* adopted by the UN General Assembly 30 years later, on 20 November 1989, entering into force on 2 September 1990.

wake of the tragic massacre at the Chechen kindergarten in Beslan, Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka asserts:

> The robbery of youth of their humanity is a perversion that the world should no longer be content to tolerate. Of all the crimes against humanity, this, surely, is the greatest perversion, one which, if I were theologically inclined, I would regard as the deadliest of the deadly sins, the sure guarantee the place of the adult world in eternal perdition of its collective soul. (Soyinka 2010)

4 The wake in the Black Mediterranean

When the Sky is Ready the Stars Will Appear is a reflection on the age of innocence and on the collective need to protect it, at any times in history and especially in times of crisis – the Mediterranean crisis, specifically. Through the central figure of its protagonist/narrator on whom the entire narrative pivots, the novel reminds us that it is mostly the young, if not the very young, who cross what I have elsewhere called the "Black Mediterranean" (Di Maio 2021; Di Maio 2012). This definition of mine draws inspiration from the Black Atlantic theory of sociologist Paul Gilroy (1993), who recognizes the triangular ocean route connecting Europe, Africa and America during the slave trade as the foundational basis of modern pre-capitalist society. The Black Mediterranean, traversed by Africans of various nationalities on an extremely risky journey, is the continuation of that history. The crossing of the sea that separates and unites Africa and Europe – a crossing carefully kept illegal by Fortress Europe – perpetuates a history based on what contemporary political, legal and cultural discourse describes as major violations of human rights. Nevertheless, the recent Afro-Mediterranean developments of this history lie at the basis of one of the main economic axes of global capitalism. It is not coincidental that Alessandro Portelli, in a volume on the history of the Middle Passage and its representation in the African American imaginary, introduces the concept of "Mediterranean Passage" (Portelli 1999), later taken up by geographer Russell King in a collective study of contemporary migration in Southern Europe (King 2001). Migration is not slavery, the Afro-Mediterranean Passage is not the Atlantic Middle Passage. However, the Libyan human auctions documented by CNN (2017),[6] the exploitation of African migrant farm workers in the Italian fields, the young victims of sex trafficking who populate European streets are grafted upon the very same history. Iain Chambers clarifies: "Slavery and racial capitalism, as so many modern black writers and

6 See the CNN reportage "Freedom for Sale" by Nima Elbagir et al.

critics teach us, is not back there. It both constitutes and ghosts the ongoing formation of the present where black deaths at sea fold into a time that is still now. We are still in that wave. If there is no longer the juridical recognition of slave property, what today exists runs that system a close second" (Chambers 2021: 299). As in the era of the Black Atlantic, in the era of the Black Mediterranean, Western prosperity is based on the exploitation of cheap labor coming from Africa, and on the abuse of the human and natural resources of a continent first massively colonized by European powers, then partly controlled by U.S. economic domination, now joined by China which does business in Africa reaping staggering profits. The migrations, forced or voluntary, that have marked the African continent are linked to this long historical process unfolding from the modern age to the present day. In this regard, African-American scholar Christina Sharpe speaks of a "grammar" of "wake" as a defining feature of the African diaspora, whose trauma of slavery has not yet been overcome but instead is repeated through contemporary, life-threatening migrations (Sharpe 2016). She proposes multiple definitions of "wake" through her text, making clear they should be all read as "a reminder, a refrain, and more" (135). She explains:

> Keeping each of the definitions of wake in mind, I want to think and argue for one aspect of Black being in the wake as consciousness and to propose that to be *in* the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding. *To be* "in" the wake, to occupy that grammar, the infinitive, might provide another way of theorizing [. . .]. I argue that rather than seeking a resolution to blackness's ongoing and irresolvable abjection, one might approach Black being in the wake as a form of *consciousness*. (Sharpe 2016: 13–14, Author's italics)

5 Gulu Station

In Osondu's novel, the sense of wake is narratively counterbalanced by the hope that accompanies departure. This burden of expectation on the part of those crossing the sea is perhaps the trait that most differentiates the story of the Middle Passage from that of the Mediterranean Passage – except both, more often than not, end for the unfortunate in the experience of the "abyss."[7] "If you are not setting out with a dream, then you probably will not even leave at all," the writer argued during

7 For a definition of the abyss "three times linked to the unknown" in the Middle Passage, see Edouard Glissant 1997, in particular the section "The Open Boat," 5–9. Not incidentally, one of the chapters of Osondus' novel carries the same title ("Open Boat," 147–152) and describes the final leg of the protagonist's sea-crossing ("We were almost drowning at this point, tossed back and

a public dialog held as part of the Venetian *Afropean Bridges* lectures (Osondu in Di Maio 2023). Unlike most Nigerian diaspora novels, in Osondu's text the action does not take place in the country of destination, but first in the homeland, before the protagonist's decision to leave, and then during the journey first by land and then by sea. Only the last brief chapter is devoted to his arrival in Rome. The choice of destination is inspired by the tales of the "Italian dream" told by Bros, who wants to take to Rome as his wife Miss Koi Koi, the village schoolmistress. He woos her with love letters and gifts, thanks to the intercession of the young boy. However, the urgency to leave is triggered by the death of Nene, when "The Seven Men Army" (Osondu 2021: 39) arrive in the village, trying to recruit children and boys to be trained in guerrilla warfare.

> The people of Gulu Station knew that either way this meant trouble. If you were with them and the government found out that they had recruited people to fight from Gulu Station, the entire village would be punished if not wiped out. If on the other hand we did not join them then, they were definitely going to attack us at some point. The elders put their heads together and told the members of the Seven Men Army to come back in a week's time for an answer (. . .). What the elders decided to do was quite a big risk but it was a third way and the brave thing to do. They called all of us young men together and asked us to take off. We were asked to leave, to go far, to disappear from Gulu Station and go as far away as we possibly could. (. . .) I realized that the sky was telling me that it was ready for the moon to appear. It was time for me to start my journey to Rome. That night I gathered the few items I had in a pillowcase and left Gulu Station. I did not look back. I could not look back because I knew that to look back was to be transformed into a pillar of stone. (Osondu 2021: 42–43)

The biblical reference to the wife of Lot, grandson of Abraham and himself a patriarch, lends a mythical tone to the story. It is recounted in *Genesis* that the woman, never named, as she was fleeing with her family from the city of Sodom about to be destroyed, turned to look at it, disobeying the command, and was therefore turned into a pillar of salt. The young protagonist, nameless like Lot's wife, manages to escape the pressures of the Seven Men Army who have come to recruit the children of Gulu Station thanks to the guidance of the elders – in traditional African societies, they are holders of wisdom, and as such are called upon to adjudicate moral, ethical, religious, legal, administrative and judicial issues. Heeding the moral of Lot and his family's tale, which as a devout Catholic he certainly remembers at the appropriate time, the boy leaves his village behind without looking back, taking part at that precise moment in an exodus that has its archetype in the biblical one. We readers do not witness gory scenes of war, duress or proscription. But we understand the threat of what is about to happen, or

forth by the angry waters. We thought it was over. Their boats were made flimsy on purpose so boat and cargo could be abandoned without a backward glance." Osondu 2021: 151).

could happen, in Gulu Station. It is at that instant that the young man, already eager to travel to his beloved and idealized Rome, becomes a refugee running away from a looming conflict, and from the imminent danger of slaughter. He is forced to flee from those who threaten his "dignity and sacredness" – as Soyinka (2010) puts it – and that of his peers. However, the young protagonist/narrator never uses the word "refugee," with which, readers can assume, he is not even familiar, just like he never uses the word "migrant" when he dreams to travel to Rome. History befalls on him. Gulu Station, Osondu says in an interview, "is the story of Africa." (Osondu in Oyegbile 2022). His protagonist, the author explains, "represents so many. He represents the legion. He's not only one individual. He represents the sensibility of most of those who have this picture of the other part of the world. He is a representative of this idea of parts of Europe being heaven-like" (Osondu in Di Maio 2023; Osondu in Di Maio 2023: 50).

The indeterminacy of the protagonist's identity is representative of an experience shared by so many African youths, regardless of their nation of origin. In a well-known study on the "fictive states" recurring in many contemporary African novels, some of them now classics, Neil Ten Kortenaar explains that in these texts the narrative horizon moves from the village to the continent, bypassing the nation (Ten Kortenaar 2000). This is a literary device, according to Kortenaar, that, while it allows authors to focus on the universal trait of the story they wish to portray, it also inherently criticizes the arbitrariness of national boundaries born of colonialism and maintained even after independence (236). Whether fleeing from the rumblings of a civil war or responding to a wanderlust that prompts new experiences across borders and inner exploration, or both, the migratory experience of the novel's young protagonist, the central pivot of the story, reveals once again how travel, whatever form it takes, remains a favored literary *topos* of the *Bildungsroman*. The fact that even Gulu Station is a fictional village, a metaphor for a postcolonial and, at the same time, ancient African world, as its name well reflects, emphasizes the symbolic value of the story. The old village of Gulu took on the designation "Station" after the arrival of the white man.

> Gulu Station was named years ago when the railway line was about to be laid by a white man called Surveyor Milliken. Back then, our village was only known as Gulu village. When he stopped by our village, he was asked what he and his team were looking for. He responded by saying they were looking at the possibility of making our village one of the places where the train stopped as it made its journey up north.
>
> "So this will mean that our little village will become Gulu Station and no longer "the ordinary Gulu village that it used to be?," the villagers asked. [. . .]

> "That is a possibility. It could or it could not," he said and put his white helmet back on top of his head. He could not recall a day he was not feeling hot or sweating in this muggy continent. (Osondu 2021: 10–11)

6 The journey

The journey in *When the Sky is Ready the Stars Will Appear* is not only an individual but also a collective adventure. The protagonist sets forth alone but soon meets other young people who become his travel companions. There are those who set out on the road out of need, like Ayira. She wants to provide financial help to her family, even though the boys laugh at her behind her back, with typical adolescent cruelty, because she can neither read nor write and they fear that "she will not even get to Europe before she starts selling her body." (Osondu 2021: 74). Those who dream of becoming famous football players, such as Anyi, who aspires to play for a major European team. Those who wish to be reunited with their loved ones who have already left, like Abdu, who wants to join Halima and win her heart, despite the fact that she "had thrown his love back at him as if it was a piece of rotten mango." (64). And those who are fleeing war, like Zaaid, who is trying to escape his traumatic past as a child soldier. Each of the four central chapters in the novel is dedicated to the protagonist's traveling companions, as if to signify that community always plays a central role on any life journey. Although we learn their names, we are not told where each of them comes from, but we do know that they all share the same destination: Europe, whatever the country. For some it is Germany, for others Italy, for still others a large undefined country with its precious metal currency. For all, however, the real goal is the realization of a dream.

> "I am Nene's son. That is what everyone calls me."
> "I am Anyi."
> "I am Ayira."
> "I am Tafiq."
> "I am Abdu."
> "And where are you headed?"
> "The same place as you."
> "And how do you know where I am headed?"
> "How will I not know? Look at your backpack. Look at your cap. Look at your restless eyes. Your eyes are no longer on your head they are on the road." (Osondu 2021: 61–62)

Travel is an initiation rite that marks their growth, the passage from adolescence to adulthood. It is a succession of encounters, gazes, a blur of faces, landscapes, climates, languages, prayers, customs, and names that reveal religious and cultural affiliations. The only one who remains nameless is the protagonist: "Nene's

son." In the face of a person's proper name that is never revealed, his unquestionably African parentage is emphasized – the name Nene, Yinka Olatunbosun explains, is an affectionate nickname for 'mother' in many African regions, and carries literary resonance: "Quite oddly familiar too is the author's character-naming. Nene as a substitute for 'Mother' or 'Mama' is reminiscent of Wole Soyinka's Wild Christian character in the 1981 memoir *Aké: The Years of Childhood*" (Olatunbosun 2022).

To travel is to learn about the world, to cross its borders, to begin to understand its characteristics and even inequalities.

> As I made my way to Rome, I began to notice the differences in the houses I encountered.
>
> You could tell the difference between the houses of those whose sons and daughters had gone through the desert and ocean to the other side of the world, from those who had nobody over there. The first difference was the shiny coat of paint. Their houses were no longer covered with red dust. The colours were never muted, quiet, or unobtrusive. They screamed, proclaiming that there was someone across the ocean who made the old house look younger.
>
> You could also tell from the deep growl of the giant electric generators that usually sat in a shed like a giant male cow. This generator was not the puny type from China that could only power a few light bulbs. It sat there, hunched over, belching out smoke and electricity, casting out the darkness and – spreading light. (Osondu 2021: 48)

Through the eyes and words of the protagonist, who gradually gains awareness of his surroundings, Osondu denounces a neo-colonial, capitalist economic system based on remittances. According to the World Bank, money sent home by migrants working abroad constitutes, along with international aid, one of the largest flows of funds to African countries. However, it is doubtful that these remittances promote social equality, and equal opportunities for all. The Africa traversed by the young narrator reveals deep discrepancies and proves to be very real, despite its imaginary map. The essence of the story is in this dichotomy between a continent at the mercy of a global capitalist system – the same one that produces migratory flows and forces Africa into diaspora – and a fictional village concretely regulated by ancient norms and customs passed down orally. Neil Ten Kortenaar explains that often in contemporary African literature tales from folk tradition combine with Marxist-style allegory – he considers Ngugi wa Thiong'o *Matigari*, a substantial novel set in an East Africa with an imaginary yet recognizable geography, an exemplary case. In the scholar's opinion, this leads readers to believe that the action is taking place in a specific and recognizable post-independence country, with the knowledge, however, that this same story is taking place in all African countries (Ten Kortenaar 2000: 242–243). Osondu's *When the Sky is Ready the Stars Will Appear* seems to fit in this genre. While Gulu Station is depicted as a specific, albeit fictional, village, it resembles, and becomes a metaphor for, any contemporary

West African, or even African, village, rooted in local traditions but aspiring to a global future.

7 The power of storyteling

Storytelling is an undisputed tradition in all African cultures. As Chinua Achebe explains by referring to Nigerian author Amos Tutuola, whose works mark the passage from oral to written literature, it is "an ancient oral, and moral, tradition" (Achebe 1988). In African societies, storytelling is an edifying and entertaining activity. It is not surprising, then, that travel in Osondu's novel is also an experience punctuated by storytelling, because it is only by exchanging stories that travelers overcome loneliness, resist, and survive. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that the protagonist and his fellows will have to face a series of trials. Theirs is an arduous, albeit indispensable, journey into the unknown. Despite the difficulties, however, their experience is narrated with a delicacy that spares us readers from the accounts of trauma and violence generally described in the media, which tend, consciously or unconsciously, to dehumanize those who undertake the journey, placing the emphasis on the mass migration phenomenon rather than on individual experiences. At each stage, the very human characters of this novel share memories, anecdotes, dreams, true or invented stories to conquer fear, to deceive the waiting, to imagine the inscrutable that awaits them, and to shape hope. Despite the differences, the young travelers feel bound by a single destiny that will nevertheless end up separating them across the sea.

> We were all different. Some were dark. Some were fair. Some were tall and one of us looked like a little old man. We spoke different languages but we all also spoke the common language of the people on the road. We knew that as travelers we must speak kindness and could not afford to make enemies.
>
> And as we waited for the sun to go down so we could start heading up in the truck Ayira, Abdu, Tafiq and me Nene's son began to tell each other the stories of our lives before we got here. (Osondu 2021: 62–63)

Telling stories provides a form of solidarity during the journey. To travel means to cross borders, which in the eyes of a boy from a land-locked village are physical rather than national. Yet the boy has his destination clear in mind. In an attempt to mentally map out the route he needs to follow to get to Rome, he carefully looks back at the map given to him by Bros.

> I looked at the map. It contained roads, mountains, hills, rivers, gullies, sand, more sand, plenty of sand, unending sand and plenty of sand after the unending sand. There were very

> few trees. The sun hung at the center of the sky, constantly looking down angrily. (Osondu 2021: 24)

Although it is never referred to by its geographic toponym, in keeping with the choice of the unspoken that underlies the entire novel, the highly recognizable Sahara is a hostile, fearsome space that must be ‘conquered’ (“In my imagination, a crowd with cold water and fruit in a bowl would welcome us when we arrived [. . .] and congratulate us for conquering the desert,” 97). Crossing it on a truck is as dreadful. The chapter titled “The Desert” opens with a scene from a tale of terror.

> Even before I saw the desert, stories about the desert filled my ears like the desert sand. Many compared the desert to the sea, but made of sand. Deep and mysterious, it was both a way, a road, a passage that sometimes led to death. Many were its terrors and secrets. Its belly was cavernous and huge, always hungry, never full. (Osondu 2021: 51)

The desert, a mysterious landscape that only those who truly know it do not fear, is the keeper of a wealth of stories from African oral traditions. The protagonist relates the tale of the man dying of thirst who is approached by a merchant who tries to sell him a necktie. The man, thirsty and exhausted from his long journey, pushes him away, annoyed by his insistence – “Trust me,” the seller tells him, “you need the necktie.” (Osondu 2021: 52). But the man does not trust him, until, on the verge of death, he spots the *Oasis Tavern*, where, however, they will not let him in because customers are required to wear ties. The laws of the desert, like its inhabitants, real and fantastic, can be ruthless.

The tie-merchant in the novel calls to mind the “strange creatures” based on the Yoruba folktales that people Amos Tutuola’s narratives. In an interview, Osondu tells of Tutuola’s influence on his fiction. His own main character, he confesses, is indebted to the palm-wine drinkard of the Yoruba author, whose novel by the same title is now considered a classic of African literature.[8] Tutuola’s protagonist, also unnamed, sets out for the Dead’s Town to retrieve his beloved and efficient palm-wine tapster, who died falling from a tree while collecting the sap needed to ferment palm wine. The vicissitudes the drinkard will undergo to be reunited with the tapster correspond to those narrated in a very rich body of traditional Youruba folktales and other oral narrative forms. Osondu explains that even the *Bildung* of the young protagonist of his own novel owes much to the stories he hears from an early age in Gulu Station, especially from the mouth of Nene, the nearly blind, big-hearted elderly woman of infinite and graceful wis-

8 Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, first published in London by Faber & Faber in 1952, with a Preface by Dylan Thomas, is widely considered the first African literary text in English.

dom who acts as his mother after he becomes an orphan. Nene is mother, grandmother, oracle, voice of the community. Once she is united with the ancestors, it is the memory of her words that will accompany the boy on the journey, and guide him through the hardships. It is certainly because of the lessons Nene has taught him that the protagonist, despite his young age, turns out to be so wise. In the traditional society of Gulu Station, schooling is not available to all, it is a privilege of the few. But this does not prevent families from providing education for their children.

The “talantolo” episode is proof of this (Osondu 2021: 17–21). At a time when the boy is being particularly grumpy, in order to get rid of him for a while and at the same time teach him a lesson, Nene sends him to a neighbor to ask her if he can borrow a “talantolo,” an object the young man has never heard of. The neighbor, taking the hint, sends him to a friend, saying that she has already lent it to another boy. The friend repeats the same excuse to him, until Nene, seeing him return home exhausted and empty-handed, reveals to him that in fact, behind that mysterious object is just an old method of getting rid of a troublesome son for a few hours. “Although E.C Osondu’s work is situated in a contemporary African setting,” Olatunbosun argues, “it explores the use of traditional encrypted messaging which parents, particularly mothers, use to create a communal system of punishment for a child who has misbehaved. ‘Talantolo’ has its equivalent in many other African cultures” (Olatunbosun 2022). Asked about this expedient, Osondu further explains that the “talantolo,” called by different names in different languages, can be considered a useful tool for soothing adolescent turmoil by childhood psychologists, a means of knowledge with ontological properties by philosophers, but for traditional storytellers like Nene, it is an educational device that can provide a moral lesson. The education of the young protagonist of the novel is imparted by the proverbs of his grandmother, the tales of the elders, and the other numerous forms of the oral tradition handed down by the Gulu Station community. Not being able to receive a proper school education does not mean remaining ignorant when one has access to alternative forms of knowledge whose value is collectively recognized: “Grandparents are usually a repository of knowledge, like a way for people to learn, a way for us to learn stories, to pick up proverbs, to pick up skills. It’s not surprising that the novel’s protagonist knows so much even at that age.” (Osondu 2023).

8 “The Country of Rumors”

Storytelling helps overcome the most difficult trials and survive. It is an age-old literary trope, whether it is defeating the plague (like in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*), appeasing the whims of a king (*The Arabian Nights*), or crossing the desert and then the sea, as in this case. Leaving the Sahara behind, the fellow travelers arrive in an unspecified coastal country identifiable as Libya. Fantasizing about the destination of one’s dreams – whether it be Germany, Rome, or a yearned for European Union – makes up for a tough stop in a land that seems ruled by violence, crime, and chaos.

> While we waited for the coast to clear, we played a game. In this game, we became the country we hoped to live in and made a case for this country. The rule was to tell a good story about our chosen country and make it attractive for our listeners. (Osondu 2021: 123)

Across the journey, the narrator listens to, and tells, different stories, always succeeding in grasping the meaning of the words of those he meets, even if he does not necessarily know their languages. In the coastal country, instead, he finds himself besieged by voices harbingers of violence that overwhelm him without producing meaning. Bullying, abuse, and blackmail are the order of the day. Along with his fellow travelers, he is approached by a compatriot who turns out to be a drug courier. Later, a group of “thin men with eyes that burned and glowed even in the semi-darkness,” who “smelled like The Seven Men Army” (Osondu 2021: 111), try to dissuade the young men from embarking, offering to hire them as mercenaries in a civil war they call a revolution – “Join the Revolution They Said” is the title of the chapter. The young man is disoriented by contrasting voices that confuse him, making him falter (“I was worried that I would be showing ingratitude to my host if I stood up to leave abruptly. I hesitated.” 108). Once again, it is Nene’s words that suggests the way out, urging him not to give in to the temptation to stay in that transit country a day longer than necessary (“I heard Nene’s voice. She warned me against joining a war that would never end. It would only land me in an underground prison where I would be tortured daily. That was not why I had crossed valleys, hills, and deserts.” 113). This is the only section of the novel that takes on a realistic, chronicle-like approach, nevertheless rendered fairy-tale-like by the iteration of the same formula at each beginning of the paragraph: “There were rumours.” Besides emphasizing the gravity of what happens in the “Country of Rumours” (96), where meaningful, sense-making sound is replaced by cacophony, the repetition of this phrase, as is the case in fairy tales, helps the young narrator to remember, and tell, his story.

> There were rumours of abductions by those who they said did not like the color of our skins and wanted us to work as slaves. These were the most frightening rumours (. . .) There were also rumours of abductors who kidnapped you and handed you a Nokia cellphone to call your family, and tell them to wire down money quickly otherwise they would kill you. There were rumours that they had actually killed people whose family could not pay up. (p. 64)

> There were rumours that giant doors were going to be shut in our faces soon: the routes through the sea from this particular part of the country would soon be closed, we heard. It was rumoured that they would soon build a wall over the sea through which no one could cross. (Osondu 2021: 97)

> There were rumours that the government was going to acquire military ships that would patrol the waters round the clock. The ships were said to be so powerful, they created waves that overturned the smugglers' tiny boats, and drowned all their passengers. They said that unlike the ships on the other side, these ships never rescued drowning passengers. (p. 64)

On the chessboard of the Black Mediterranean, Libya and Italy, linked by a common colonial past and a long history of trade partnership, play a central role, representing starting and ending points of the Central Mediterranean Route. In her book *Guests and Aliens*, sociologist Saskia Sassen explains that migrations never happen by chance, the trajectories do not turn out to be accidental, they are always well structured (Sassen 1999: 155). Although the young protagonist of Osondu's novel has no political awareness of this fact, he has practical experience of it. And he tells us about it.

> We were thankful for the sea; without the sea how could we go to the place with the magical lights, the place with the clean and shining streets? [. . .] We were thankful for the sea because the sea connected all of us. As we used to ask – if the Creator did not want us to go to the place with the shining lights nothing would have connected our world with that world. Not sea. Not sand. (Osondu p. 144)

9 The final passage

Although in the "Country of Rumours" everything is prosaic, material, dreary, the prospect of the imminent crossing to the land of his dreams allows the narrator to recover the spiritual nature and the more intimate aspects of his journey. Upon embarkation, however, the ideal once again gives way to the real.

> When they told me we would have to cross the sea in a boat to get to Rome, I was a little worried. Yes, I had never seen anything as lovely as the blue sea but, I was worried about safety. I became more worried when I saw the boats. In the old World Atlas back in Gulu

> Station, I had seen the huge boats in which the Portuguese came to our land. They were mighty and shaped like giant birds. The boats had faces with noses and mouths and looked like they owned the water. The boat we would use to cross the sea to Rome looked like the kind of thing you poured water into to bath little baby. (Osondu 138)

In the postcolonial, neo-colonial, only partially decolonized world, power structures and dynamics mirror, and continue, those imposed by European colonialism in Africa. One of the most symbolic vectors that connects the history of the Black Mediterranean to that of the Black Atlantic is the boat (Gilroy 1993; Sharpe 2016: 25–62). The ramshackle dinghies and decrepit makeshift boats that – when it goes well – bring migrants to the other side of the Mediterranean have nothing of the sturdy sailing ships with which Europeans had arrived in Africa centuries earlier, sailing in the opposite direction. Nor do they compare to the merchants' slave-ships that brought young enslaved African to the Americas through the centuries. Yet even an old floating wreck takes on an epic dimension when it serves to make a risky, heroic crossing in the name of hope, a better future, and a reunion with the divine. Paradise is awaiting. Except then it remains to be found out whether it is in fact paradise, or merely a new beginning, a new road to walk on.

> The water was cold. We had to get in before we climbed the ladder leading to the rescue boats waiting for us. It did not feel like the same water we had been on during our entire journey. It was soft blue, calm and less angry. We wondered if the people we would meet would be like the water. We were hopeful. If you do not travel with hope, you journeyed in vain. (Osondu 2021: 153)

> At first sight, Rome actually did look like it was in heaven to me. (156)

> I too began to do as the people of Rome were doing.
> I began to walk (167)

The autobiographical fairy tale told by the young protagonist of *When the Sky is Ready the Stars Will Appear* can be read as a historically-plausible, realistic, fictional account of the Black Mediterranean – a "fact-fiction (faction) novel", Oaikhena suggests (2022) – but also as a spiritual, moral, mythical, sacred, epic parable. It tells a story that concerns us all closely and that marks, for better or worse, our time, while reminding us that the current Mediterranean crisis is only the last chapter of a longer, unended historical narrative whose central notion remains the wake. In Sharpe's words, "Living in the wake on a global level means living the disastrous time and effects of continued marked migrations, Mediterranean and Caribbean disasters, trans-American and trans-African migration, structural adjustment imposed by the International Monetary Fund that continues imperialisms/colonialism, and more." (2016: 15). Finally, the adventures of the boy from Gulu Station mirror a

global society in which migration, an impulse as old as the world, remains an enigma, and in which every migrant, or refugee, African or not, always seeks a route, oute, a direction, a landing, while carrying a bundle of life lived.

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