

# Depicting the Black African Refugee in *The Jungle* by Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the depiction of black African refugees in *The Jungle*, a 2017 play by two young British playwrights, Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson. *The Jungle* is a theatrical recreation of the lives of refugees from the migrant camp in Calais, from which hundreds of refugees made – and still make – often fatal attempts to enter the UK through the Channel Tunnel. The graphic images of the squalid living conditions of its residents – many of them from Africa – dominated the news, as did the dramatic manner in which the camp was dismantled in 2016. This paper is interested in the textual gestures and representational decisions of the playwrights in the written play that provide clues to the possible ways in which black Africans are thought of and constructed in the minds of Europeans. In this way, this inquiry contributes to analysing literary engagements with contemporary African migration to Europe provided from European points of view.

## KEYWORDS

Africa, black, migration, refugee “crisis”, Europe, Joe Murphy, Joe Robertson, *The Jungle*

In an intense scene in the Calais-based play *The Jungle* (2017), a Sudanese refugee bares his badly scarred body to a curious British volunteer telling her – indeed, showing her – that there are things she cannot know about him and his journey from Darfur, through the Sahara Desert and war-torn Libya, across the Mediterranean Sea and through a number of European countries before arriving in France. The play’s European volunteers, who are apparently drawn to the refugee camp by the plight of the refugees, eventually realise that despite their empathy, they are unable to truly grasp the traumas of the refugees. This realisation of the untranslatable, unspeakable and inexpressible nature of the refugees’ experiences is demonstrated in the way the playwrights draw attention to the limits of the volunteers’ ability to comprehend the experiences of the refugees. It also manifests in the limited involvement of the former in the play’s foregrounding of the lived experiences, voices, dialogues as well as personal and collective stories of the refugees. This results in what I call a compelling form of self-representation whereby the playwrights deploy the refugees themselves in their own portrayal, which I argue, becomes the play’s dominant and effective technique of character delineation. In this paper, I use the aforementioned scene as a point of departure to interrogate the depiction of the play’s black African refugees. The purpose is to identify the ways in which the black African refugee figures in the European imagination against the backdrop of the “European migrant crisis” of 2015/16, given that black Africans still constitute a significant proportion of recent refugee movement.

In what ways, if there are, is the black African refugee imagined as different from, or the same as, other refugees mostly from the Middle East? And to what extent does the perception of the black African refugee rely on the representational arsenal and imaginative codes that populate the colonial canon? In interrogating this reimagining of the black African refugee in particular, and Africa in general, I am interested in the textual gestures and representational decisions of the playwrights in the written play that provide clues to the ways in which black Africans are thought of, perceived and constructed in the minds of Europeans, whether consciously or subconsciously. What can this play reveal about what transpires in the minds of ordinary Europeans when they encounter an African refugee – whether physically in a public space, or mentally in a work of fiction or in media reports – especially in the context of what has repeatedly been called the European refugee “crisis”?<sup>1</sup> During such an encounter, what images, knowledge and associations are conjured? What do European hosts expect from the Africans in terms of behaviour, culture, aspirations and motivations? And why do the hosts have such expectations? I wish

to identify and explore the imaginative processes that are set in motion on these occasions as well as their historical, philosophical and socio-cultural assumptions and influences. I am interested in the nuances that an exploration of a complex contemporary imagination might reveal in excess of, and to provide texture to, the often inflexible statistics generated from quantitative inquiries on the phenomenon of resurgent refugee movements into Europe.<sup>2</sup>

The migration of Africans to North America and Europe has long been a major topos in African writing and is foregrounded in a number of well-known texts from the past two decades.<sup>3</sup> Mobility within Africa and the rest of the Global South is also receiving significant attention by novelists and critics with the migration to South Africa by Africans from other parts of the continent having become more pronounced since the late 1990s. However, these works are largely, if not exclusively, by writers of African origin who have either moved to the West or who share their time between their home countries and their new bases overseas. Furthermore, these works tend to provide readers with a view of the West in the imagination of the African diaspora. There is therefore a significant gap in representations of Africans in the West by Western writers, apart from the avalanche of media and policy reports, research projects, fact-based documentaries and expert analyses resulting from recent waves of migration and refugee movement to the West. Texts such as *The Jungle*, published by Faber and Faber in 2017, Jenny Erpenbeck's novel *Go Went Gone* (2015) and York-Fabian Raab's feature film "Borga" (2021) follow the experiences of refugees in Europe and are presented to readers, audiences and viewers by Europeans – whether correctly or incorrectly – writing from European perspectives.

Set in early 2016, *The Jungle*, by British playwrights and theatre practitioners Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson, tells the story of several thousand refugees from the Middle East and Africa cramped into what was Europe's largest informal refugee camp, based in Calais, France. Just over 30 kilometres from Dover in England, Calais is a transit point for refugees who want to smuggle themselves across the Channel into the UK. The Jungle camp started in early 2015 and was demolished by the French authorities in October 2016.<sup>4</sup> As its population grew and migrant flows intensified, the Jungle attracted a lot of media attention as well as interest from NGOs and volunteers, many of them from the UK. Murphy and Robertson themselves spent seven months in the camp as volunteers; here, they established the Good Chance Theatre company, reportedly to create "a space for refugees at the camp to express themselves through the arts" (Ross 2017, n.p.).

The cast of *The Jungle* includes four black African refugees, one of whom (twenty-eight-year-old Helene) is from Eritrea, while the others (thirty-five-year-old Mohammed, seventeen-year-old Okot and twenty-five-year-old Omar) are Sudanese men. There are another eight refugees of Middle Eastern origin – three Afghans, two Syrians, one each from Iraq and Iran, plus a character who says he is from Kurdistan. The rest of the cast are two French nationals (an unnamed official and volunteer Henri, who is in his twenties) and five volunteers from the UK: eighteen-year-old Beth, who runs a make-shift school in the camp; fifty-year-old Paula, who cares for the six-year-old Syrian refugee, Amal; an eighteen-year-old Etonian named Sam, who leads efforts to plan and rebuild the camp's burnt shacks; as well as Boxer (in his forties) and Derek (in his fifties), who assist in the camp in different ways.

The play opens in medias res with the refugees and volunteers in a highly charged discussion of how to respond jointly to an eviction notice from the French authorities. As the meeting includes a census of residents with almost all the characters present, the first of seven acts provides the reader with a sense of the composition of the community, the different roles of the diverse characters and hints at intercommunal tensions, including the general distrust of the Europeans often felt by the refugees. Their palpable distress at the prospect of yet another forced relocation is intensified by the news of the violent death of one of the camp's more entertaining residents, fifteen-year-old Norullah from Afghanistan, who died on the motorway while attempting the often fatal trip across the Channel to the UK.

Through minimal action, limited stage directions and a skilful combination of generous, often lyrical dialogues with spells of epic-style flashback narratives, the precarious lived experiences of the refugees – their fears, hopes, alliances and rivalries – unfold across the six acts that follow. We also encounter the motives, insecurities and doubts of the Europeans as well as their fraught relations with the refugees, mostly through their conversations with the refugee “leaders”, chief of whom is Salar, the unofficial head of the Afghan community and owner of the restaurant where most of the community meetings take place.<sup>5</sup> Interactions between refugees and volunteers on the one hand, and among members of each group on the other, provide a powerful backdrop for the play's major strategy of characterisation, which, as noted above, invokes the individual voices of the protagonists and allows them to define themselves with little or no demonstrable inhibitions. These “showing-rather-than-telling” techniques, though basic to the mode of drama, are effectively employed to situate the refugees as insiders while the European volunteers

and audiences are positioned as outsiders in the world of the Jungle. In this way, possible slippages between the views of characters interacting with one another and telling their own stories in the play and the probable intentions or views of the playwrights are mitigated, if not eliminated. Furthermore, the outsiders' imaginaries of the black African refugee are unsettled, problematised and opened up to internal, reflexive critique, as we find during some encounters between UK volunteer Beth and Okot, discussed in detail later in the article. One of the most poignant of these is Beth's attempt to correct Okot's use of prepositions: "*From* her", she says, to which Okot responds firmly, "No. *For* her" (Murphy and Robertson 60; original emphasis), thereby challenging Beth's assumptions about his English-language proficiency.

Fact and fiction are seamlessly blended in the play's recreation of life in the camp to re-enact the tensions and textures of the life of the refugee, who, despite being a subject on the peripheries of contemporary European society, continues to figure problematically in its social, political and cultural imagination. In this article, I demonstrate how the scarred body of the Sudanese refugee functions as an embodiment of the historical experiences of the mobile black African subject, whom, I argue, operates as the enduring and archetypical Other of the modern Western self. I focus first on the earlier mentioned scene in which Okot, an unaccompanied refugee from Darfur, recounts his ordeal to an inquisitive Beth, who is concerned about Okot's welfare and tries (but fails) to get him smuggled into the UK in a truck. I analyse the exchange between Beth and Okot (joined by the other refugees), arguing that it is an effective form of self-representation that highlights the limits of the representation of the ineffable essence of the Other. Furthermore, I examine the ways in which the play's default way of identifying characters and the representation of relationships between characters contribute to its overall portrayal, not only of the black African refugee but also of the African continent in general.

The attempt by two European playwrights to provide understandings of the social experiences and psychological inner states of non-European subjects in delicate socio-political circumstances necessarily evokes a long history of contested cultural accounts of the latter by Europeans. Important examples in the domain of literature include Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (extensively invoked in *The Jungle*) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe (1977) famously attacked as being racist. Most of these works adopted motifs and images from the narratives of explorers, missionaries and merchants and largely assume ethnographic and anthropological

forms. Those accounts, which are often associated with certain socio-cultural and colonialist agendas, are replete with stereotypes, clichés and outright misrepresentations that testify to James Clifford’s observation of the “*inherently* partial, committed and incomplete” nature of ethnographic writings (7; my emphasis). These considerations are pertinent to the present analysis of *The Jungle*, given its reliance on realist techniques. It needs to be said, however, that the play cannot be called an ethnographic project per se, and that I do not necessarily adduce any overt socio-political commitments to the playwrights. My point here is similar to the questions of authenticity and translatability raised by Alex Robert Ross. According to Ross, a conversation with Murphy and Robertson revealed their discomfort about their stay in the camp; or rather, their inability to stay in the camp for more than a few weeks as planned. After one of them took ill and was hospitalised, they decided to move to a nearby rented caravan from where they commuted to the camp for several months. It is important therefore to examine how they were able to translate and represent phenomena to which they only had limited and indirect access, and which they could largely only observe from a distance – both literally and figuratively.

Along these lines, Paula G. Rubel and Abraham Rosman describe literary and ethnographic translators not only as mediators “between the local society and the outside world” but also as “outsiders and marginals” who are in a position to either “clarify or obfuscate” (16) the realities of the local society through the imagery they create and portray to the outside world. The success of the translator is thus made possible, according to Michael Herzfeld, by “an imaginative act of empathy with informants” (190) in the local society. These are the roles played partly by Murphy and Robertson and which they invest their fictional volunteers with. This is significant because, in terms of the play’s mission to explore the lives of the refugees, the roles of the volunteers are, of course, crucially different from those of the refugees, even though both are characters in the play. While the latter can be likened to the local informants (the “insiders”) in the matrix of an ethnographic encounter, the former, as interlocutors from outside the world of the refugees, are part of the playwrights’ system of translating knowledge about the camp and the refugees to audiences and readers.

In performing these roles, the playwrights and the in-story volunteers, demonstrably conscious of their distance from the world of the refugees, adopt a technique whereby they yield a significant part of the depiction to the refugees in an apparent attempt to provide convincing representations of that world. In doing so however, the volunteers are careful not to

assimilate them completely in the meaning-making process. Rather, certain representational functions are delegated to the refugees resulting in what I will call a form of collective self-representation. But before proceeding with a detailed analysis of how this works in the text, it is important to distinguish between my idea of collective self-representation and Herzfeld's use of "collective representation" (110). Herzfeld is concerned with the totalising impulse of ethnographic representations in which discrete individual features and acts are often portrayed as communal.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, I am interested in the ways in which Murphy and Robertson yield or delegate important parts of the play's depiction of the refugees to the refugees themselves as a group.

The best example of self-representation in the play is found in the fifth act, where Okot gives Beth a narrative of his flight from Darfur to Calais. This is when Beth rescues him from a detention centre after he got injured and was arrested for another failed attempt to jump into a moving UK-bound vehicle on the dangerous motorway. Injured and depressed, the usually reticent Okot is encouraged to share his burdens by telling his story because, as Safi, the refugee from Syria, advises, "[t]alking sometime helps" (Murphy and Robertson 74). But before beginning, Okot asks Safi: "If I talk to her. You think she would understand?" Then Okot goes back and forth with Beth on what she could possibly know about the different stages of his journey, and at a point she says, "I didn't mean that [I know]. I mean I can imagine" (75). These exchanges strike at the heart of crucial questions of ontological and epistemological assumptions, not least of which are the vexed problems of representation, (un)communicability and (un)translatability. When Okot asks Beth, "What do you know of me?" (75), he is addressing the difficulty of bridging the vast gulf between the world he comes from and that of Beth. This relates not only to the apparent differences of language, culture, history, cosmology and frames of reference, but also to the usually opaque and nuanced sensibilities and imaginaries encoded in and obfuscated by the limited codes of translation available in encounters between hosts and refugees, such as those dramatised in *The Jungle*.

Before starting his story, Okot takes off his shirt revealing that his "*whole body is badly scarred*" (74; original emphasis). In this way, his body becomes a powerful text and the scars themselves are transformed into inscriptions that can be understood metaphorically for the ways in which they "provoke, enable, shape, and constrain what is conceived and said, and what is brought into relation" as well as how they operate "in the wider symbolic, discursive, and political economic context" (Fortun ix). As with Fortun, Kathryn A. Burnett and Mary Holmes have explored the

human body and its scars as historical sites where the meaning – both real and imagined – of a person’s past and present may be constructed. The scar presents “an opportunity for meaningful reflection” on the location of the individual “in particular environments and within memorable social relationships” and provides “a medium by which the body ‘speaks’ through its coded and signified aspects; bodies speak ‘social codes’ and are therefore ‘intextuated’ and ‘narrativised’” (Burnett and Holmes 21–22). Through the metaphoric medium of Okot’s body, the play offers a powerful representation of a historicised ontology of the black African refugee. Okot’s scars trigger memories of his individual flight through sites of war, conflict and tragedy, while simultaneously recalling the wider histories of the trans-Saharan slave routes and the large-scale displacement of black people over the centuries. Okot’s scarred body can thus be understood in terms of what Burnett and Holmes describe as “a cultural legacy of inherit[ed] [trauma]” (22) and an embodiment of the collective experiences of generations of mobile black African subjects, the enduring archetypical Other of Western modernism.

In this sense, the figure of Okot is akin to that of Sethe in Toni Morrison’s award-winning novel *Beloved*. The mark of slavery on Sethe’s body has become an iconic example of the symbolic links between corporeality, bodily inscriptions and memory, as well as those between testimony and the representation of trauma (see Felman; Caruth).<sup>7</sup> But it is important to note that there is a slight but significant difference in the way Okot (and the refugees) experience trauma as it is represented in *The Jungle*. In *Beloved*, as in most psychoanalytic and literary theorisations, trauma is represented as an aftermath of the event and as an experience of the survivor (see Freud). It is in this regard that Cathy Caruth, writing more generally, describes “the story of trauma [...] as the narrative of a belated experience” (7) and its perpetual impact on survivors. By contrast, the characters in *The Jungle* cannot be said to be survivors in the real sense of the word, neither are the violent events they experienced simply incidents from their distant pasts. Rather, they can more correctly be seen as victims whose experiences of trauma are linked to both past and ongoing events, as represented by Okot’s scars and injuries.

As Roberta Culbertson observes, such injuries are experienced “in patterns of consciousness below the everyday and the constructions of language” (170). Similarly, Marianne Hirsch highlights the fact that the same mark or scar by which the body of the victim is objectified (as a slave or a concentration camp prisoner, for example) “is enclosed within the boundaries of the skin” and is thus “ultimately and utterly private and incommunicable” (72). But while the mark of the slave and concentration

camp prisoner has been made visible via multiple forms of memorialisation and testimony, it can be argued that those of contemporary African refugees remain largely, if not entirely, invisible – except in works of literature. This is where Okot’s iterative account might be understood as a deliberate narrative technique that attempts to foreground some of the details of the series of traumatic events that continue to define the black African refugee. For this reason, it is important in the analysis of Okot’s narrative, to invoke some amount of historical detail (even if cursorily) in order to give texture to the events associated with his ongoing trauma. In this way, this paper hopes to demonstrate a grasp of the complex ontology of the refugee that goes beyond the predictable media headlines whose effects have served European political agendas, whether intentionally or not.

Okot’s narrative is unveiled as a collective experience in a hotel room in Act Five, in a conversation that follows his release, with Beth’s help, from arrest in the Tunnel, where he had apparently gone to attempt a crossing to the UK:

- Okot** A man arrives who I have never seen before. My mother says he is my uncle. She give him \$400. All the money she has. She has nothing more.
- I think of her watching the video. I am pressed against ground, the stone cuts into my back.
- She will be crying. She has nothing more, she cannot pay. I think of her watching the video.
- Second death.
- Pause.*
- Safi** Finally you are taken to the boats, yes?
- Okot** Yes.
- Safi** The coastguard has been paid. The local militia. Was it a big boat?
- Okot** Small boat.
- Safi** Rubber?
- Okot** Yes.
- Safi** A zodiac. Fifty people. You are given a package with a balloon to put your phone in, GPS device, a life jacket.

- Salar** If you are lucky.
- Safi** You hope the life jacket is real.
- Salar** You pray the life jacket is real.
- Ali** Real or not, fifteen dinar for package.
- Okot** I am in first boat.
- Safi** The first?
- Norullah** Big problem.
- Okot** We go out to bigger boat.
- Ali** A fishing trawler. Fifteen meters long. Wooden. Strong.
- Yasin** But old.
- Safi** Painted black so the coastguard can't see.
- Okot** The less money you pay, the worse your place on the boat. Pay what you can. Now you know.
- Beth** Yes. Now I know.
- Safi** Rich people go on top deck.
- Mohammed** Poor people go underneath. Below sea level. In the hold.
- Okot** I am pushed down near engine. It is going in my face.
- Safi** The zodiacs keep coming. This boat is for two hundred people.
- Maz** Here there are seven hundred.
- Hamid** Nine hundred.
- Omid** Fifteen hundred.
- Okot** People on top of people on top of people  
(79–80)

Okot's narrative consists of two parts: a beginning where he is the sole narrator and a later part, where the other refugees present join in and contribute to the story. What begins as a personal story therefore becomes a collective one. It is an intensely lyrical and evocative performance, which includes singing and a prayer.

Okot begins his account with a brief mention of the genocide of black people in his home region of Darfur, which started in 2003. By 2010, the conflict had killed about 300 000 people and displaced close to three million by 2010, and it is still ongoing in 2022.<sup>8</sup> Long before 2003, however, Darfur and its surrounding areas had been engaged in deadly conflicts involving its mostly black agriculturalist populations and people from the northern parts of Sudan who are mostly Muslim Arabs. According to Noah R. Bassil, these conflicts are linked to the protracted struggle of the people of Darfur with the postcolonial Sudanese ruling elites in Khartoum for inclusion and recognition in the nation. Furthermore, the entire Sudan was involved in a twenty-one-year civil war between its northern and southern parts that ended in a 2005 agreement which resulted in the formation of the new state of South Sudan in 2011 (see Bassil). South Sudan has been in a civil war of its own since 2013 and the separate country of Sudan witnessed a bloody revolution in 2019 (see Berridge). This is an extremely brief summary of the long and complicated histories of layers of unending civil strife encoded in Okot's scarred body, but it is an important part of the backstory to the large contingent of Sudanese migrants and refugees not only in Calais but in camps in many other parts of Africa and Europe especially in neighbouring Chad, where up to 25 000 live in a single camp.

Thus Okot's questioning of what Beth knows about Darfur can be read as a cryptic reference either to the ignorance of most westerners about the lives of refugees and non-westerners in general or the incommunicability of vastly different conditions, consciousnesses and frames of reference. Okot then talks about his challenging journey through the Sahara, emphasising in particular how Libya poses "[b]ig problems for black people" (Murphy and Robertson 76; my emphasis). Whether intentionally or not, these words represent the play's most poignant reference to the problematic heritage of the black body, in at least two ways: First, the grossly underreported targeting of black Libyans, especially when the town of Tawergha was sacked in September 2011 during the country's civil war (see Stephen);<sup>9</sup> and second, the slave markets in war-torn Libya where black people are auctioned, a story first reported by CNN in November 2017. The victims are of course largely people like Okot fleeing from parts of sub-Saharan Africa and heading to North Africa for a chance to enter Europe via the Mediterranean crossing. Following a clampdown by the Libyan Coast Guard, human traffickers resorted to selling their prospective passengers, who are routinely tortured and deprived of food. Describing scenes reminiscent of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the report notes that "inside the slave auctions it's like we've stepped back in time. The only thing missing is the shackles around the migrants' wrists and ankles" (CNN).

Even without them, one of the victims is quoted as saying, “If you look at most of the people here, if you check your bodies, you see the marks. They are beaten, mutilated.” It is in one of these slave-holding centres that Okot has some of his more intense untranslatable experiences.

Thus, the significance of the Libyan experiences of Okot, typical of many other black refugees, transcends contemporary events and re-inscribes, through the scars on his body, generations and iterations of extreme mass violence against and displacement of black bodies. In addition to the slave auctions mentioned above, Okot’s inscriptions – both his bodily marks and the lyrical narratives in which he is joined by the other refugees in the room – invoke multiple and repeated histories of anti-black racism in different places and times. The uncovering of Okot’s scarred body can be read as an act of representation that constructs an ontology of the black African refugee in which various layers of consciousness and experience are concurrently brought together. In this way, the play’s overall representation of trauma exceeds the received idea of the belated and recurring effect of a bygone event on the survivor. According to Okot, the black African refugee (and non-European refugees) is not a survivor, but someone who moves from one iteration of violence, displacement and violation to another; as he comments, one who “dies many times” (74).

But the above is not the only way the refugees are represented in the play. There is a sense in which the predominantly non-descriptive nature by which characters are identified can be interpreted as a form of self-representation since it appears to minimise the role of ascription by exogenous agents in the delineation of the refugees. In the character list, each refugee and volunteer is introduced with only two descriptors (in addition to their names) – age and nationality. And for some of the characters, such as Ali, the age given is imprecise (“thirties”) without any modifier to even indicate on which side of the thirties he is. Gender is also not mentioned, meaning that the reader or audience member is left to figure things out from the name or from the dialogue and action. When a census of the camp is taken for the purpose of writing a protest letter to the authorities, it is only three items that are provided – name, nationality and length of stay in the camp. Significantly, this information is relayed directly by the refugees themselves rather than being supplied by a volunteer or in the stage directions. Furthermore, the organisation of the camp according to countries of origin in the play was the actual practice in the camp and not something made up by the playwrights. Throughout the play, stage directions are largely scanty and do not include expository information on any refugee nor do they include individual personality traits – whether physical or otherwise. Indeed, it is only on one occasion that a character –

namely, six-year-old Little Amal – is identified in a descriptive way, in this case by the redundant term “young girl”.

In regard to the religious affiliations of the refugees, however, the play’s mode of character delineation is not necessarily one of self-representation even though it is revealed within the overarching framework of minimal ascription. It is important first that all thirteen refugees are shown to be religiously inclined but perhaps more significant that only one of them (Helene) is Christian. On Christmas Day, it is only the mawkish antics of British volunteer Boxer that come close to Christian observance in the camp. By contrast, there are several scenes that feature Islamic acts of worship, including the burial rites for Norullah who dies on the motorway, the sounding of the customary call to prayer as well as references to “the Prophet” and the Sunni and Shia Muslim sects. Three of the five African refugees (Okot, Omar and Mohammed, who all speak Arabic and are from Sudan) are apparently Muslims, while Helene from Eritrea is the leader of the church mentioned in the play. The playwrights’ choice of Islam as the dominant religion of the refugees might be a reflection of the actual demographics of the camp, whose residents came mostly from such Muslim-majority countries as Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Sudan (see Bucciarelli; Galpin). This has a crucial implication for the ways in which not only Middle Eastern but also black African refugees are perceived in Europe, given that most sub-Saharan African countries do not actually have majority-Muslim populations. Indeed, statistics show that Muslims constituted only 43.3% of the population of sub-Saharan Africa by 2010 (Kettani) whereas 54% of this region were Christian (Jacobsen).<sup>10</sup> Since there is a close link between Islamophobia and anti-immigrant xenophobic sentiments across Europe and the West (see Perocco; Creighton and Jamal), it could be that some of the animus directed towards black African refugees results from the wrong assumption that they are all Muslims. The significance of this is that it echoes some of the problematic undifferentiated ways in which Africa and its Africans have been known to be imagined within European narratives dating from colonial times.

The apparent effect of the play’s generally minimalist approach to character delineation is that the bulk of the representation of the five black refugees (individually and collectively) is bound up in the overall portrayal of all the play’s refugees. This means that, to a large extent, the meaning to be made of the lives of the black Africans in *The Jungle* may come from observing the depiction of all of the refugees in the camp. But it may also mean, on the face of it, that the playwrights do not necessarily imagine the black refugees in ways that are different from how the others are imagined. It could further mean that even if the playwrights imagined

them differently, the playwrights do not consider the putative difference relevant to the play's aesthetic or discursive objectives. Yet this minimalist character delineation actually echoes the practice in many colonial-era narratives in which non-European characters are mostly portrayed in rudimentary, one-dimensional ways that tend to strip characters of depth, flair and agency. My suggestion is that this is a plausible strategy by which the playwrights try to compensate for the distance between them and the world of the refugee camp. If this is the case, deliberately limiting themselves to the more rudimentary attributes of that world may enable the playwrights to minimise instances of arbitrary and subjective ascription, thereby mitigating the dangers of problematical representations. All this may – on the face of it – be understood as a means of increasing the chance of a more realist and effective, or perhaps less mediated, portrayal overall, as is suggested by Act One, in which Paula takes a census of the camp:

- Paula** Salar, I need your information.
- Salar** Salar Malikzai. Thirty-two years old. I come from Afghanistan. I have been here eleven months.
- [...]
- Paula** Mohammed?
- Mohammed** Mohammed Abboud. Thirty-five. I'm from Sudan. Been here eleven months.
- [...]
- Paula** Helene?
- Helene** Helene Gibrikane. Twenty-eight. From Eritrea. Been here eleven months.
- (14)

However, limited stage directions do not mean that there are no background stories about the refugees, because there is actually some exposition on about half of the refugees, including two of the black Africans, Okot and Helene. We learn that despite growing up in war-ravaged and poverty-stricken Darfur, Okot has a mother who “lives with books” and taught him to speak “really good” English. Helene, whose sister is a civil engineer in Eritrea, does not come from a desperate socio-economic background and her flight from home was due rather to the political situation in her country. With these two stories, the play makes an apparent departure from

Western clichés about African refugees and migrants as desperate people whose home societies have been completely devastated by internecine war, abject poverty, famine, disease and a total lack of socio-economic opportunities.

But at the same time, it is significant to scrutinise the context in which each exposition is made in order to foreground the volunteers' interventions in constructing the meaning that can be made of the refugees' experiences. Okot's English-language skills, for example, come to light in his interactions with Beth, who runs the camp's makeshift school. Despite being only a year older than Okot, Beth is the one who teaches him and others at the school. Not only that, she projects herself as his guardian and pays the enormous sum of €1 500 for him to be smuggled to England across the Channel, although it is not known whether the attempt is successful or not. While Beth is obviously impressed by Okot's English, it is not quite clear why:

**Okot** I have one dream only. To stand on white cliffs of Dover and see Jungle this big ...

**Beth** Inshallah.

**Okot** (*impressed*) Inshallah.

**Beth** Your English is really good.

**Okot** My mother taught me. She always tells me words are important. I learn for her.

**Beth** *From* her.

**Okot** No. *For* her.

(60)

Are Okot's language skills actually exceptional, or is it because Okot's academic and intellectual capacity seem to be higher than what Beth would imagine of an African refugee? While we cannot know exactly what her expectations are and why, her reaction brings to mind a controversial issue that is especially evident in multi-racial educational contexts. In her influential article "Confronting the Racism of Low Expectations", Julie Landsman lists some of the assumptions often made of black students: "that they cannot do the work assigned, that they do not come from a functional family, and even – tucked back in a teacher's subconscious – that they are innately less intelligent than their white peers" (28). She notes that black students in white-dominated schools could easily be "objects of curiosity or condescension and victims of low expectations", recalling that

a white teacher-in-training admitted to once thinking that “all black people were stupid because they let themselves be slaves.” One of the questions Landsman asks – namely, how notions of giftedness and intelligence are defined – is key to exploring why Beth is impressed by Okot in the way she is.

However, to say that the play is successful in combating negative stereotypes of the African refugee does not mean that its authors are immune to this tendency. For example, in a conversation with Ross, Robertson notes of the camp:

“It was cold and horrible and the conditions were terrible,” Robertson says. But those living there persisted. “They were already building shops and restaurants and barber shops. The kind of structures of a proto-society. They were creating things to help and allow them to get by and to help them survive in this horrible place.”

Here again, as in the case with Beth, what might pass – on the face of it – as well-intentioned commendation of the resourcefulness of the refugees might also possibly reflect subconscious preconceptions about them. In the first place, the rudimentary commercial activities mentioned here are not strange to refugee communities. Furthermore, likening communal life in the camp to a proto-society might be problematical even though the term can also be interpreted in a non-prejudicial sense. This is because of its use in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Western anthropological and ethnographic discourses to describe societies deemed to be socio-culturally and evolutionarily underdeveloped. A snippet of the connotations of this pejorative term is shown here in one of the works of James G. Frazer, an influential British social anthropologist of the time:

Men in the making lived in a society in the making which ethnographers often call as “The Primitive human horde” or “*Proto-society*.” Proto-society existed as an enormous mass of specific proto-societies – individual Primitive hordes. Each of these hordes was nothing but a primitive community in the making of *Proto-community*. Proto-society existed as a totality of proto-communities.

(46; original emphasis)

According to Ross, before their arrival there, the playwrights had expected that life in the camp would be overdetermined by the struggle for survival but were surprised that “things were lively. We found people

who just wanted to talk and wanted to sing and wanted to dance – all these different cultures and traditions” (n.p.). It is difficult to understand why the playwrights would be surprised that the refugees would want to talk, sing and dance in the camp, given that these activities are among the most common means by which refugees deal with the trauma and stressors of their displacement. Focusing on refugees fleeing conflict in developing countries, Khalifa Alfadhli and John Drury show how music, dance and activities play a major role in building solidarity and re-negotiating identities even among those living in camps. There is therefore a sense in which the playwrights’ seeming surprise at the socio-economic activities in the camp might reflect certain assumptions about the ontology of refugees and/or non-Europeans, including entrenched colonial ideas of non-Europeans as culturally undeveloped and inferior (see Achebe).

This leads to the earlier-mentioned exchange in the play between UK volunteer Paula and Helene over Helene’s reasons for migrating. Helene accuses Paula of suggesting that she is an economic migrant. Given that Helene was not in economic distress before leaving Eritrea, Paula says her coming all the way from Italy to the camp in the attempt to get to the UK is a matter of choice. Helene insists that she “didn’t choose [her] life” after asking Paula a question that goes unanswered: “I did not want this to happen for me so am I not still refugee?” (Murphy and Robertson 91). This unresolved argument raises several questions, one of which is the vexed issue of claims about the ontology of refugees and migrants as well as the political and legal discourses arising from those assumptions. These are highly contested issues that are outside the scope of this inquiry. However, the play self-consciously enacts an important aspect of these contestations that enables scrutiny of the role of volunteers in the way African and other non-European refugees are defined and imagined by their European hosts.

Paula’s suggestion that Helene is an economic migrant and therefore probably not a genuine refugee echoes allegations of asylum fraud often levelled against refugees by mostly nationalist and right-wing politicians and their supporters. The populist former deputy Prime Minister of Italy Matteo Salvini, who sponsored several anti-refugee legislations in his country, often spoke out against what he called “fake refugees” (Smith n.p). For his part, former British Home Secretary Sajid Javid invokes European refugee legislations to question refugees such as Helene and others in *The Jungle* trying to cross from Calais to the UK: “You are coming from France, which is a safe country. In almost every case you are claiming asylum in the UK but if you were a real, genuine asylum-seeker then you could have done that in another safe country” (Smith n.p.). Helene’s disagreement with Paula can be interpreted as a rejection

of these dominant legal and political constructions of refugee ontology. By defending her choice to flee Eritrea and insisting that leaving Italy where refugees are treated “[l]ike animals” was not a choice, she counters the prevailing ways in which refugees are defined not only in legal and political discourses, but also by the sometimes infantilising humanitarian narratives of NGOs and volunteers typified by characters such as Paula.

Helene’s act of self-defence provides yet another illustration of the play’s competent deployment of the voices, self-definition and lived experiences of the black African refugees in their representation. This specific encounter highlights the ways in which interactions and debates between the two groups of protagonists – refugees and volunteers – as well as among members of each group enable inquiry into the possible stereotypical perspectives and imaginaries of refugees held by their European hosts. Furthermore, the enactment of these contestations illustrates the limits and pitfalls of exogenous constructs of refugees. In the ways discussed above, the play successfully enables a form of self-representation of the refugees which is based far more on their own individual and collective narratives as well as the intimate humanistic aspects of their aspirations, fears and experiences. In doing so, *The Jungle* self-consciously avoids exogenous constructs that tend ultimately, whether by design or default, to recycle clichés and stereotypes which might ingratiate prejudices and promote problematic political agendas, as has been the case with some historical and cultural accounts.

#### NOTES

1. Larkan and Murphy call it a “border crisis” (1), while De Genova (2018) calls it “an historical moment of *racial crisis*” (1769; original emphasis).

2. The play premiered at London’s Young Vic theatre in December 2018 as a co-production with the National Theatre and had successful runs in New York and San Francisco (see Gardner and St. Ann’s Warehouse). Exploring the performance of the play as an immersive theatre and its reception by audiences in London and New York is key to a comprehensive understanding of its representational features. This is, however, outside the scope of the present discussion due partly to limitations of space and partly to my limited interest in the textual (scripted) aspects of just one set of the protagonists.

3. Examples include Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013), NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* (2012) and Teju Cole’s *Open City* (2011).

4. Herzfeld distinguishes ethnographic translation from literary translation, though he accepts that ethnographic and literary accounts are both “representational

genres” (110). However, this differentiation is irrelevant to my purposes of the present inquiry.

5. Perhaps the camp’s most high-profile visitor was the late A. A. Gill, a food critic who famously gave a four-star rating to the real-life Afghan restaurant that features in the play. Gill’s review was published in the UK’s *Sunday Times* in February 2016.

6. See Idris; and BBC. After several years of low-level violence, a surge in fighting resulting in the fresh displacement of thousands of people was reported in July 2021 (see Kansara). This comes two full years after a peace deal was signed to end the revolution in 2019.

7. Significantly, the Greek root of the word trauma literally means a wound inflicted on the body.

8. The text cited here is a reprint of the original. Frazer died in 1941.

9. The war, which began in 2011, ended with a ceasefire in October 2020 and the formation of an interim unity government in March 2021.

10. A Pew Research Centre study of 2015 reports higher numbers for the Christian population – 63% in 2010 and projected to be 59% by 2050, compared to 30% for Muslims in 2010 and 35% projected for 2050.

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