

## EDITORIAL

# Introduction: ghostly borders

### Polo B. Moji and Natasha Himmelman

Polo Belina Moji is Senior Lecturer in English literature at the University of Cape Town. Her current research focuses on Francophone Afro-European literary and cultural production.

Email: polo.moji@uct.ac.za

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9109-3075>

Natasha Himmelman is currently based at the University of the Witwatersrand's Department of African Literature.

Email: natasha.himmelman@wits.ac.za

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4538-5461>

DOI 10.17159/2309-9070/tvl.v.56i1.6265

### Why Europe?

In "What Is This AfroEuropean?" Raimi Gbdamosi (27) offers, "not quite the raw material found in Africa, but not quite the refined object from Europe either [...] [but] the product of an uncomfortable union, the poster child of an uncomfortable alliance the inheritance of an unwilling integration." The hierarchical opposition of "Africanness" and "Europeanness" in colonial discourses and their conception as being mutually exclusive in decolonial texts, such as *Decolonizing the Mind* (Ngũgĩ) seemingly preclude the 'belonging' of African and Afro diasporic subjects in European space. Despite the ground-breaking work of scholars, such as Paul Gilroy (*The Black Atlantic; There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*), in unpacking the perceived incommensurability of Africa and Europe, it is the discourse of 'migrant crisis,' which, since the late 1990s, has depicted black and brown bodies attempting to cross Europe's maritime borders, that makes such an engagement all the more necessary. The 'migrant crisis,' which had as much, if not more, to do with the political aftermath of the 'Arab Spring' in North Africa and the Middle East, than the clandestine migration from the African continent, has resulted in the "hardening of spatial boundaries" (McKittrick). This reframes Europe's liquid maritime borders—the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea, as well as the English Channel—as 'hard' protective borders. This ideological "hardening" belies the historical porosity of these locations as part of the transatlantic slave routes, as well as the entangled histories of Southern European border locations and North Africa. 'Fortress Europe' is constructed in opposition to the televised image of the 'ghost ship' ferrying clandestine migrants to Europe's shores. In this context, a study of African and Afro diasporic narratives of Europe—what Rami Gbdamosi calls "the poster child of [this] uncomfortable alliance"—seems a timely intervention.

## **(Re)imagining borders, mapping (un)belonging**

Despite the geographical and intellectual origin of the very concept of race in Europe, not to mention the explicitly race-based policies that characterized both its fascist regimes and its colonial empires, the continent often is marginal at best in discourses on race or racism, in particular with regard to contemporary configurations that are often closely identified with the United States as a center of both explicit race discourse and of resistance to it. (El-Tayeb xv)

As a geo-political construct, the border is signifier of separation that inflects the diasporic cartographies of home and host land, state and statelessness, documented and undocumented. To cite Katherine McKittrick, “[i]f who we see is tied up with where we see [...] then the placement of subaltern bodies deceptively hardens spatial binaries, in turn suggesting that some bodies belong, some bodies do not belong, and some bodies are out of places” (McKittrick xv). This special issue engages with African and Afro diasporic imaginaries of the European border as a space of transnational subjectification that co-produces notions of (un)belonging and the dichotomy of inclusion/exclusion. Thus, the border is not a location (symbolic or otherwise) to be erased, rather a node of identitarian—political, socio-cultural, and historical—entanglements. Visual and literary representations of racial and ethnic minorities in Europe, in our case, African and Afro diasporic subjects, interrogate the notion of the border—border locations, border lives, and border crossings—and foreground racially marked bodies as visual signifiers of non-belonging within the European context (El-Tayeb). From the perspective of African and Afro diasporic literary studies, narrative form allows for the study of the modalities, technologies of movements through and across identitarian borders (such as nationality, Europeaness) by subjects of African and Afro diasporic descent. It also allows us to consider how such literary and cultural production reconfigures geographic and social borders in terms of connection, mobility, and a political claim around belonging (or not) in European space. While one can critique the “reality of imposed or chosen ghettoized existences of African communities away of ‘home’” (Gbdamosi 28), authors such as Fatou Diome—whose televised assertion that Europe will drown alongside the shipwrecked migrants shocked French television audiences—make strong claims about their belonging in European space and racialized subjects. Fatou Diome’s *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique* (2003) (The Belly of the Atlantic) is one of the literary texts analyzed in this volume.

## **Haunting: the (in)visibility of blackness**

*Sur le détroit de Gibraltar, y a un jeune Noir qui pleure, un rêve qui prendra vie, une fois passé  
Gibraltar*

*Sur le détroit de Gibraltar, y a un jeune Noir qui se demande si l’histoire le retiendra comme  
celui qui portait le nom de cette montagne*

*Sur le détroit de Gibraltar, y a un jeune Noir qui meurt sa vie bête de gangsta rappeur mais  
Sur le détroit de Gibraltar, y a un jeune homme qui va naître, qui va être celui que les tours  
empêchaient d'être.*

On the strait of Gibraltar, there is a young Black man who cries, for a dream which will come to life, once past Gibraltar

On the strait of Gibraltar, there is a young Black man who asks himself if history will hold him back, as it did the one who bears the name of this mountain.

On the strait of Gibraltar, there is a young Black man who dies his savage life of a gangsta rapper but

On the strait of Gibraltar, there is a young man yet to be born, who will be the one the council flats prevented from becoming. (Abd al Malik)

The song, *Gibraltar* (2006), by Abd al Malik, a French rapper of Congolese descent, reflects this sense of being trapped in an ‘in-between’ or liminal space. The strait of Gibraltar is the closest point between the African and European continents—just over fourteen kilometres at its narrowest point. As a geographical location, the “rock of Tariq” (Gibraltar), also refers to the historic conquering of the Hispanic Kingdom by the Umayyad Caliphate of North Africa. This erasure of Africa from the history of Europe is linked to the contemporary figure of the migrant—the young black man” is standing on the brink of a new life in Europe. The fate that awaits him is a ghettoized existence in the marginalized “tours” (council flats) of European cities, often inhabited by poor immigrants becoming socially invisible. The visuality of black bodies within the European space reflects the paradox of racialized (embodied) hypervisibility and social invisibility as liminal subjects. Indeed, social marginalization and historical amnesia render blackness a spectral presence in Europe, which casts African and Afro diasporic subjects—particularly refugees and undocumented migrants—as ghostly figures. Haunting not only refers to an “invisible system of power” imposed by the sociological imaginary of a “colour-blind” Europe, it is reframed by African and Afro diasporic narratives as something which “unlike trauma, is distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done” (Gordon xvi). The present volume presents literary and cultural forms that resist black subjects being made transparent in history and space through a hauntology of Europe by its former colonial subjects.

### **Ghostly border-crossings**

The diverse array of contributions to this issue explore African and Afro diasporic themes of (un)belonging and black (in)visibility in direct relation to Europe’s borders—and subversively through the notion of blackness as a marginalized or spectral presence, haunting European space. We see a variety of theoretical and conceptual

positions in this volume, ranging from Avery Gordon's hauntology of the sociological imaginary, Édouard Glissant's poetics of relation, Katherine McKittrick's concern with the geographies of black place(lessness) and Christina Sharpe's movement of black people in the "wake" as a phenomenon that does not exclude Europe. We see a range of approaches, including philosophical, comparative, as well as a dialogical. The types of borders under scrutiny range from linguistic to physical and ideological borders across a range of European locations—namely, Belgium, Britain, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain. Two essays notably subvert the relation between borders and national space identity by focusing on the Andalusian and the Basque areas of Spain. The extent to which Africa is evoked in the analysis of films and literary texts differs from essay to essay, yet blackness as a disruptive or haunting presence remains the central theme of the volume.

The essays explore the paradoxical *hypervisibility* of African bodies attempting to cross into Europe—figures of the documented or undocumented migrant and the refugee—and the social *invisibility* of Afro diasporic subjects within Europe. In this regard, they challenge what Fatima el Tayeb refers to as the dogma of a "colour-blind" Europe. The first two essays, by Polo B. Moji and MaryEllen Higgins, establish the ghost as a subject of African descent and hauntology as a method that allows for the (re)imagination of Europe as an Afro diasporic space. The two essays establish the relation between the blackness and certain forms of mobility across and within European borders: Moji examines the literary depiction of Europe as a space of erasure for historical figures of African descent through the notion of hauntology, while Higgins explores the filmic representation of Europe as space of 'asylum' within the contemporary context of African migration. Continuing in Moji's historical vein, Miguel Ángel Rosales, a Spanish filmmaker, discusses the erasure of the North African roots of Spain's flamenco dance in his 2016 documentary, *Gurumbé: Canciones de tu Memoria Negra* (*Gurumbé: Afro-Andalucian memories*).

The next section of the volume engages more closely with various conceptions of the border. Moses März offers an audacious reading of German border thought—migration and political communities through the philosophy of Caribbean writer, Édouard Glissant. Kedon Willis expounds on the racialized nature of European borders through a comparative study of white and Afro diasporic experiences of Europe in novels set in the 1920s. His analysis of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* problematizes the narrative of Europe as a haven from racial segregation by highlighting the exoticisation of black women's bodies in the Danish context. Gender remains central in Dina Ligaga's essay, which examines African women's mobility in Belgium through the literary representation of sexual trafficking. This essay's interrogation of the European 'paradise' as a locus of upward social and economic mobility for African migrants is taken up by Cullen Goldblatt's article on Fatou Diome's award-winning novel, *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*. Set in the French-Francophone context, Goldblatt's

“Setting Readers at Sea” also imagines the porosity of Europe’s oceanic borders with the African continent (the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea).

In the third and final section of our special issue, ghostly border crossings are mapped through language, revealing the complex relations between place(lessness) and Afro diasporic subjectivity. Anita Virga reveals the evolving mythology of Italianness that displaces blackness outside of national borders and alongside the ‘ghostly’ evolution of an Afro-Italian literature that is reshaping the national canon. Reading César Mba Abogo’s *El porteador de Marlow* (2007) (Marlow’s Boy) and Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo’s *El Metro* (2007) (The Metro), Julia Borst focuses on hispanophone African literature, considering the lived experiences of formerly colonized subjects in the Spanish metropole. A theoretically rich co-authored essay by Xin Liu and Danai Mupotsa stretches our conceptual understanding of border-crossing to conceive of the tongue as a linguistic border that keeps the African migrant ‘stammering’ in a diasporic state of alienation. The volume ends with an interview by Natasha Himelman which explores solidarities that can be created between African writers and political minorities in Europe through the translation of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s literary works by a Basque publishing house.

### **Acknowledgements**

This thematic issue has evolved from a panel at the titled “Remapping Borders: Diasporic Entanglements and the Relocation of Afro-European Agency,” presented at the sixth biennial AfroEuropeans Conference (Finland, 2017). It would not have been possible without the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Research Support for Younger Scholars on the Wits Staff (2016–2017), awarded to Polo B. Moji.

The editors would like to thank Jacomien van Niekerk, Hien Willemse, and the editorial committee of *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* for their intellectual generosity and support. We would also like to thank the following colleagues whose thoughtful engagement with the articles was evident in their peer review reports: Mara Boccacio (University of Cape Town), Victoria Collis Buthelezi (University of Johannesburg), Jeffrey Coleman (Marquette University), Pilar Cuder Domínguez (Huelva University), Anna-Marie de Beer (University of Pretoria), Harry Garuba (University of Cape Town), Mandisa Haarhoff (University of Cape Town), Anette Horn (University of the Witwatersrand), Anna-Marie Jansen van Vuuren (University of Johannesburg), Innocentia Mhlambi (University of the Witwatersrand), Khwezi Mkhize (University of the Witwatersrand), John Mugabi (Kenyatta University), Sofia Muñoz-Valdivieso (Universidad de Málaga), Eddie Ombagi (University of the Witwatersrand), Maria Recuenc Penalver (University of Cape Town), Martin Repinecz (University of San Diego), Nereida Ripero-Muñiz (University of the Witwatersrand), Elisa Guadalupe Rizo (Iowa State University), Sebnem Toplu (Ege University), Hedley Twidle (University of Cape Town), Haakayoo Zoggyie (Morehouse College), and Timothy Sean

Wright (Bilkent University). The editors are particularly grateful to Yomaira Figueroa, Marta Garrich, Adam Lifshey, and Keyan Tomaselli for their invaluable advice and assistance.

#### Works Cited

Al Malik, Abd. *Gibraltar. Atmosphériques/Universal*, 12 June 2006.

El-Tayeb, Fatima. *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe*. U of Minnesota P, 2011.

Gbdamosi, Raimi. "What Is This AfroEuropean?" *AfroEurope@n Configurations: Reading and Projects*. Ed. Sabrina Brancato. Cambridge U P, 2011.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Double Consciousness and Modernity*. Harvard U P, 1993.

\_\_\_\_\_. *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*. Routledge, 2013.

Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Trans. Betsy Wing. U of Michigan P, 1997.

Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. U of Minnesota P, 2008.

McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. U of Minnesota P, 2006.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. James Currey, 1986.

Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke U P, 2016.