

Humanitarianism, Neocolonialism and the Poetics of Salvation in the ‘Refugee Crisis’

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The White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice.

It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege.

(Teju Cole, @tejucole 8 March 2012)¹

On October 3, 2013, over 360 people—mainly from Eritrea, Somalia and Ghana—perished in a shipwreck just off the coast of Lampedusa, the Italian island now most associated with the arrival of boat refugees into Europe. Contemporaneously deemed the deadliest shipwreck in the Mediterranean, this tragic incident presages what is now identifiable as the current ‘refugee crisis’ in and around Europe. In response, Italian authorities called on EU countries to help manage the problem of unsafe migration from the African continent to Europe; however, less reported was the subsequent commemoration of what became known as the ‘Lampedusa disaster.’² The following year (2014), the President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, delivered a commemorative address; soon after, a plaque was lowered into the sea, onto the site of the shipwreck.³ The plaque depicts a disembodied white hand reaching down to grasp a black hand being claimed by a roiling sea, lifting it out of the abyss. Such memorialization operates in stark contrast to current EU policies, which troublingly enact regulations intended to penalize refugee-sending nations and benefit refugee-receiving

¹ Teju Cole responds with a series of seven tweets to the Kony2012 video created by Invisible Children humanitarian organisation to make Ugandan war criminal – Joseph Kony – famous and have him arrested. Cole’s tweets went viral; he then wrote a piece about his response on *The Atlantic* (21 March 2012) <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>.

² <http://reliefweb.int/report/italy/tragedy-sea-lampedusa-one-year>. Three years after the tragedy, the Italian State officially designated the 3rd October as *National Day in Memory of the Victims of Immigration* <http://www.interno.gov.it/it/notizie/3-ottobre-e-giornata-nazionale-memoria-vittime-dellimmigrazione>.

³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1NV_EjEYfQ8

countries.⁴ Notwithstanding the solemnity of commemorative event, the plaque's juxtaposition of white and black accesses a centuries-old discourse of dependency and European salvation. Such a discourse is most famously given expression in Rudyard Kipling's conceptualization of 'The White Man's burden' in his 1899 poem of the same name. In depicting white, European salvation, the Lampedusa image, perhaps unwittingly, draws a line of continuity between contemporary conceptions of humanitarian response and those colonial dependencies and power relations whose ongoing legacies are responsible for the very refugee movements being commemorated.

New dynamics of colonial legacies animate the discourse of humanitarianism and the European approach to boats at sea, which veers between salvation and abandonment. Situated within the context of these associations, this essay engages with contemporary sea-crossings (especially trans-Mediterranean migrations) by interrogating dominant discourses around rescue, salvation and abandonment in Europe. We draw on J. M. Coetzee's 2013 novel, *The Childhood of Jesus*, to explore how contemporary migration at Europe's borders – as well as the EU response to it – demands new approaches to social and political queries and the moral and ethical assumptions that underpin them: questions about humanitarianism as political practice and humanism as a set of values. Our work interrogates current humanitarian rhetoric and exposes its inextricable connections to colonial legacies. Through an analysis of *The Childhood of Jesus*, we explore alternative ways the discourse of humanitarianism can be structured beyond the terms of the salvation/abandonment paradigm, aid, and conditional hospitality to more participatory forms. This essay engages with current debates in postcolonial studies around its approach to our contemporary state of 'crisis', and

⁴ The so-called 'externalization of borders' entails delegating responsibility for the 'protection' of EU borders to non-member states. "For some years now, European governments have been using a carrot and stick approach to migration policy, including asylum policy, promising aid or visa quotas in return for readmission agreements" to developing countries outwit the EU such as Morocco, Turkey, Libya, Mali, Senegal, among others (Schuster 18).

foregrounds a postcolonial critique of Coetzee's novel as a critical tool to understand, engage with, and approach these new colonial dynamics.

Postcolonialism Today and the Mediterranean Passage

Presently, the Mediterranean is a paradigmatic site of contemporary migration. An open wound between Europe and Africa – to recall Gloria Anzaldúa's border metaphor (3) – the Mediterranean is an unnatural boundary: a place of transit, where the third world literally bleeds into the first in search of safety and shelter. Today more than ever, the Mediterranean divides one "clean and healthy visible world" from another that is "dark, diseased and invisible" (Agier 4). The UNHCR estimates that over 3000 people perished in the Mediterranean in 2014. In the last twenty years, over 25,000 people have died. According to a UN report, 2016 has been the deadliest so far.⁵ And this is only in the Mediterranean.⁶ These figures do not include crossings in the Caribbean, or from East Asia to Australia, for example. While the Mediterranean is clearly an example of current so-called irregular migrations, it also, as one case study demonstrates, lays bare the sheer scale of contemporary movement and displacement. The international political response, on the one hand, seeks to curb migration; on the other, such responses paradoxically promote rescue operations of vessels at sea with a rhetoric of salvation. Notwithstanding such seeming disconnects, colonial power relations are re-dressed as humanitarianism.

Contemporary migration is irrefutably connected with colonial histories and, in our view, postcolonial studies continues to illuminate the challenges of our contemporaneity via its implicit/overt engagement with mass displacement as one of the legacies haunting the West. However, in the fight to "combat the remnants of colonialist thinking" (Hardt & Negri

⁵ <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=55389#.WEfn-GqLSUk>

⁶ According to a 2015 Frontex Report, among a total of 280,000 migrants who reached Europe in 2014, 170,000 arrived in Italy via the central route (and 40,100 during the first five months of 2015).

137), the most recent decades have seen an increased concern over the role of postcolonial studies. In a roundtable on “The end of Postcolonial Theory”, Fernando Coronil asserts that the field “throws limited light on the world we now face” (Yaeger 636). Similarly, Susie Tharu claims that “postcolonial studies is poorly positioned and ill equipped for the complexity of the task” (644-5). Sunil Agnani observes that postcolonial – as a historical term – has failed as a reading practice and type of criticism, yet “this does not mean that the term is bankrupt. Its emptying may instead be a sign of a productive crisis from which the field [...] will benefit” (639). In the *Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, Elleke Boehmer notes the ways in which the postcolonial critique risks being “depoliticizing, even deradicalizing, in relation to the resistance it reads [...]. It draws attention away from, and pays insufficient heed to, the contexts of political struggle against empire from which the recalcitrant texts [...] emerge” (309).

In *Sortir de la grande nuit* (2013) Achille Mbembe extends his 2001 work, *On the Postcolony*, by interrogating postcolonial approaches to contemporary issues pertaining to Africa and the bankruptcy of the decolonization project. Mbembe critiques Europe’s anti-immigration apparatus and its aspiration to build impenetrable borders, a place where “the stranger represents a fatal threat to our mode of existence” (Mbembe 151).⁷ In this scenario, Mbembe portrays – in somber terms – the dilemma of many Africans: a “maddened flight” to go away at any cost and escape the “terrible alternative” of staying behind (21). A focus on displacement re-orientes the compass of postcolonial theory onto space rather than time: Mbembe identifies borders, enclosures – both spatial and cultural – as metaphors to re-set the terms of postcolonial thinking. Invoking a radicalism akin to Fanon’s, he foregrounds the politics of *déclousion* “dis-enclosure”. The term, which signifies removing closures and borders, provocatively includes the notion of *éclosion*: eruption, of something new coming

⁷ Our translation from the French.

into being (68). Dis-enclosure is mobilized to open gates; it analogously interpellates the Western archive and addresses the complexities of the postcolonial present. Such politics of disenclosure situate migrations, diasporas, dislocations and displacements as ethical, political, and social possibilities to build a global community. The critical shift envisaged by Mbembe for current postcoloniality identifies the stranger—socially, culturally, politically, and geographically -- as the very condition of disenclosure. Whilst ostensibly romanticizing the figure of the stranger as inhabiting a privileged position, Mbembe's disenclosure critique is primarily addressed to African thinkers and their role (and responsibility) as intellectuals to pave the way.

To surmise and summarize, postcolonial studies – as such criticisms make clear – must recalibrate its approach in the face of the new challenges of our contemporaneity. As Robert Young argues, “The task of the postcolonial is to make the invisible, in this sense, visible. Within academia, this task begins with the politics of knowledge, with articulating the unauthorized knowledges, and histories, of those whose knowledge is not allowed to count” (23). There is an urgent need to revisit postcolonialism and to call upon it to engage with the current migration ‘crisis’. Young advocates a “reconsideration of the role of the postcolonial in the era of the twenty-first century [...] indigenous struggles and their relation to settler colonialism, illegal migrants, and political Islam. None of these fall within the template of the classic paradigm of anticolonial struggles, but they all involve postcolonial remains ... What can be learned from them? They all invoke historical trajectories that have hitherto been scarcely visible” (22). Our approach is much indebted to Young's overall contention that “postcolonial theory can provide a theoretical and historical framework for understanding new phenomena such as the globalization of migration, and for thinking through the question of how to reformulate the emancipatory aims of anticolonial struggle outside the parameters of the nation-state. Today, it is no longer a question of a formal colonizer-colonized relation”

(27). Taken together, our reading of Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* foregrounds how a postcolonial approach to contemporary migration charts its imbrication vis-à-vis wider histories.

The White Man's Burden: Salvation and Abandonment

Kipling's sense of 'The White Man's burden' has, in recent decades, re-emerged in a different guise: the centuries-old colonial paradigm makes its return as humanitarianism in a neoliberal age of mass migration. Such colonial reiterations are manifest in a tension between two concepts: salvation and abandonment. Kipling's notion of 'the white man's burden' encapsulates the uneven power dynamics in the conception of humanitarianism as rescue and salvation. As Kipling writes:

TAKE up the White Man's burden -

Send forth the best ye breed -

Go bind your sons to exile

To serve your captives' need;

(82)

While contemporary refugee movement and management is complex and not easily divisible into a poor global south and a wealthy global north,⁸ Kipling's colonial archetype is useful as a means of interpreting and reconceptualising the dynamics of contemporary migration between South and North, wherein the journey continues to represent a "quest for a modern life in the European sense of the world" (Gikandi 630). Such hierarchical traversals mark a

⁸ It should be noted that many Syrian refugees who make it to Europe are middle-class and often wealthy and that receiving communities in southern Europe are facing economic crisis.

continuity in the uneven power dynamic between the powerful and the powerless, from the colonial to the neo-colonial contexts.

Such Janus-faced modalities are reflected in a 1979 interview with Michel Foucault in which the French philosopher comments on the Vietnamese boat people then seeking refuge in Western countries. Offering a lucid account of the complex historical and geo-political factors around mass displacement, Foucault announces that “this is not just a sequel of the past, but a presage of the future”.⁹ While exploring human displacement as strictly bound up with colonialism, his focus is firmly placed on the urgency of intervention and on salvation and abandonment:

One should not remain indifferent to historical and political analyses of the refugee problems, but what needs doing urgently is to *save* the people who are in danger. [...] No discussion about the global distribution of responsibilities, no argument about the political and economic difficulties of refugee aid can justify states in *abandoning*¹⁰ these human beings who are at death’s door.¹¹

Then, as now, boat people perishing at sea called for intervention. Yet, the salvation-abandonment paradigm frames the discourse, steering it away from the issue of responsibility. Whilst the Foucauldian lesson was situated within broader discussions on Western histories and politics and their legacies, the dominant rhetoric today is only embracing the humanitarian discourse whereby intervention is a humanitarian act, disconnected from shared historical responsibilities for human displacement. Discussing

⁹ Michel Foucault, “The refugee problem is a presage of the great migrations of the twenty first century” *Dits et écrits III 798 (271) pp 798-800*. Colin Gordon (trans.) 2015. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/michel-foucault/refugee-problem-is-presage-of-great-migrations-of-twenty-first-century>

¹⁰ Our emphasis.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

humanitarianism and dehistoricization, Correspondingly, Lisa Malkki argues that:

the problem is that the necessary delivery of relief and also long-term assistance is accompanied by a host of other, unannounced social processes and practices that are dehistoricizing. This dehistoricizing universalism creates a context in which it is difficult for people in the refugee category to be approached as historical actors rather than simply as mute victims. It can strip from them the authority to give credible narrative evidence or testimony about their own condition in politically and institutionally consequential forums (378).

The present-day white man's burden takes shape in the legal, political and humanitarian responses to migration, where the EU and member states take upon themselves to "send forth" its resources to "serve" or save its "captives". One of Teju Cole's famous tweets, conjuring up images of the colonial era, aptly summarises this sensibility: "The White Savior Industrial Complex is a valve for releasing the unbearable pressures that build in a system built on pillage" (@tejucole 8/3/2012).

The Italian 'Mare Nostrum' (2013-4) search and rescue operation in the Mediterranean is a case in point, which, in promoting the rhetoric of salvation, positions the refugee as a passive figure to be rescued. EU countries continue to position themselves as sanctuaries for those arriving at their borders – providing refuge for so-called 'genuine' refugees – even while, as in the case of the United Kingdom, they refuse to allow more than a handful to enter the country. There is a discursive contradiction in that many European countries are perceived as places of sanctuary and salvation, where one can claim refuge and asylum from persecution. But just as they may be rescued, migrants may also be abandoned by their putative saviours. The journey to Europe, and its border spaces, is what Mbembe

evocatively calls a “necropolitical” space. Not only are the waters between East Africa and Europe treacherous, but, thanks to shady deals between European and African countries, migrants can be returned to places where their rights under international law are not recognized or enforced. This constitutes a political nexus which traps migrants between death and conditional salvation, where they become – in Giorgio Agamben’s terms – at once rescuable and killable; both saved and abandoned.¹²

Mainstream critiques of human rights and humanitarianism have focused on the ways in which it “maintains hegemonic power structures by reifying categories of personhood and nationhood, based on the historical continuum of the colonialist project” (Scherr 113). Mutua argues that “the grand narrative of human rights contains a subtext that depicts an epochal contest pitting savages, on the one hand, against victims and saviours on the other” (201); the human rights corpus “falls within the historical continuum of the Eurocentric colonial project”. For Mutua, this rights-oriented discourse produces “the saviour or the redeemer, the good angel who protects, vindicates, civilizes, restrains and safeguards” (204). Gayatri Spivak’s critique of rights discourse analogously relates to the ways in which it is a neo-colonial project designed in pedagogical mode to initiate “subalterns” into a consciousness of rights and responsibilities (2005). This resonates with the idea of European salvation that we are exploring here, and the ways in which this has become entangled with its opposite: the possibility of abandonment. J. Paul Narkunas warns that in situations of permanent crisis – or “states of exception” to use Agamben’s term – human rights advocates risk colluding with hegemonic state actors who “instrumentalise human rights as operational tools for exercising power” (210). He continues: “Human rights advocates must acknowledge that their cosy relationship with powerful militaries has resulted in humanitarian interventions using the

¹² Giorgio Agamben’s conception of *homo sacer* or “bare life” focuses on those who, denied the rights-bearing status of citizenship, are subject to the state’s disciplinary procedures while having no recourse to legal rights.

language of rights to justify neocolonial projects and often intensify human suffering. The humanitarian structure, thereby, regularises the relationship of war and law and can police the human” (220). In this context, institutional responses and accountability to “the harms suffered by noncitizens caught up in the European border regime” are rooted in emergency practices handled as humanitarian work (Follis 43). Follis aptly reminds us to “focus on the fact that human rights are meant to operate where the protections of citizenship fail or do not reach. [...] human rights are intended as a backup for the domestic systems of rights, a sort of a legal parachute that ideally should open in an emergency. Real-life situations, however, notably those involving migrants, regularly test this proposition” (43).

Costas Douzinas concurs with this view in his extensive study of rights discourse, arguing that human rights “have been turned from a discourse of rebellion and dissent into that of state legitimacy” (7). Douzinas outlines how human rights and humanitarian discourses have been misused under a neoliberal agenda, so that the very rights and freedoms promised by international law are eroded in the name of humanitarian practices. Critiquing the West’s “limited conception of humanitarianism”, Kerry Bystrom observes that it cannot amount to its “responsibility to the rest of the world”, but “crucially [it] must be accompanied by a much broader conception of interrelation and responsibility” (420). The latest appropriation of humanitarian discourse is its use as justification for unethical foreign policies: an example of this being the British government’s recent fallacious logic that its withdrawal from search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean would prevent more deaths because the promise of rescue operates as a pull factor encouraging migrants to make the journey. Oscillating between salvation and abandonment, such governmental measures use the language of humanitarianism to justify hostile immigration policies.

The Conditionality of Salvation and Humanitarianism in *The Childhood of Jesus*

In his seminal work *Disasters, Relief and the Media* (1993) Jonathan Benthall offers a lucid analysis of the rhetorical and visual discourse of aid organisations; “poster campaigns in the 1960s depicting vulnerable, starving, pot-bellied children [...] characterised public perceptions of poverty and need in vast regions of the Southern hemisphere ever since” (18). The undeniable connections between humanitarianism, colonial archetypes, and what Teju Cole calls “The White Saviour Industrial Complex” are summed up in the creation of “a ‘brand image’ of African impotence and misery” (Benthall 182). Indeed, as Benthall further maintains, the “incidence of disaster, fund-raising pressures and the growing influence of advertising experts produced by 1981 perhaps the most blatant of images, the helpless hand of a dying African child clasped by a fat and healthy adult white hand”. Benthall here critiques The Save the Children poster (November 1981) ‘Sentenced to Death. Save the Innocent Children’ as “perhaps the most extreme and insensitive” among these, an image that “can justly be described as racist” (179). The plaque sunk in the seas around Italy to commemorate the 2013 Lampedusa disaster – picturing a white hand reaching down to a black hand – uncannily echoes the Save the Children poster and resonates with this long, enduring history which reifies the saviour-victim dichotomy. This commemorative image presents the idea – and ideal – of rescue and salvation and does so without reference to the entangled colonial histories and economic interdependencies that underpin current migration patterns; also absent are the potential collusions of humanitarian approaches with consolidating uneven power dynamics which further disenfranchises those groups and individuals subject to putative salvation. §

J. M. Coetzee’s enigmatic 2013 novel, *The Childhood of Jesus*, offers a commentary on the deep interconnections between concepts of salvation and abandonment within the

humanitarian paradigm. *The Childhood of Jesus* opens as a man and boy – Simón and David – arrive in the Spanish-speaking town of Novilla; the two have previously passed through a transit camp called Belstar, where they were given Spanish lessons and two “passbooks”. They appear to be refugees who travelled to Novilla by boat and the narrative thrust of the novel follows Simón’s attempts to find the five-year-old David’s mother. The novel’s setting is abstract, almost Beckettian in its lack of descriptive detail, yet there are oblique references to real places. Expressly, the transit camp ‘Belstar’ evokes the WWII camp at Bergen-Belsen and references the star of Bethlehem, which brings to full circle the narrative of Jesus’s nativity. As we will see, this nativity focus functions as a topos that cuts across the whole novel. ‘Novilla’ is a pun suggestive of the novel’s sense of placelessness, but it echoes places with similar names in Europe. Moreover, there are references to places in South America – Punto Arenas in Chile (although even here it is modified: the Chilean location is Punta Arenas) – and to crossing an ocean rather than a sea, which broadens its geographical frame of reference beyond the Mediterranean. This not-quite-European setting engages a productive ambiguity, which allows the novel to allude to, and connect with, histories of migration and diaspora and other maritime crossings such as in the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

Settled by the Novilla administration in an apartment complex, David and Simón attempt to familiarize themselves with the town and its peculiarities. Focalized through Simón’s perspective, the narrative follows his struggles to come to terms with what he sees as profound limitations of his new life in the small town. Vaguely administered along socialist lines, wherein everyone is superficially under state care, Novilla – much like a UN-run refugee camp – exists to manage rather than enrich human lives. Indeed, the provisions offered to asylum seekers assume the subsistence form of bread and water; and, Simón’s desire for visceral, carnal or philosophical engagement is met with mild disdain by his fellow

inhabitants. After he complains to his neighbour Elena about his quality of life in Novilla, she retorts:

You arrived in this country naked, with nothing to offer but the labour of your hands. You could have been turned away, but you were not: you were made welcome. You could have been abandoned under the stars, but you were not: you were given a roof over your head. You have a great deal to be thankful for. (Coetzee 127)

Elena's words here conjure up all too familiar representations of boat people, and indirectly gestures to political practices currently in operation in Europe, such as illegal 'push back' operations and the many tragic instances of left to die boats. Here, Simón is reminded that they were rescued and given shelter, but also that there was an alternative fate: abandonment. The passage focalises the dichotomy at the heart of the EU's presentist approach to migration, which occurs along a binaried axis: salvation or abandonment. In addition to tone, Elena's comment also conceptualises this dynamic through a telling grammar. Using the passive voice, she evokes a bodiless entity, which has the power either to provide shelter and food or to abandon the arrivant "under the stars." As abstract and disembodied as the white hand on the Lampedusa plaque, this powerful entity is elided syntactically: it becomes anonymous and unaccountable. Instead, the focus of Elena's lecture is on the "you" who is saved, an object of salvation reminiscent of Hannah Arendt's abstract, naked human and Agamben's characterization of forced displacement through the imaginary of "bare life".

David's and Simón's lives commence only when they are allegedly "saved." Rescued from their vessel and placed in the Belstar camp, the two are "reborn," given new names, and a new date of birth (predicated on their arrival to the camp). That David and Simón begin their lives upon camp registration suggests that a pre-requisite for shelter is a legible relinquishment of a former life, which emerges as a prominent theme throughout the novel.

One of the employees in Novilla's reception centre tells Simón that he shouldn't be seeking out David's lost mother, who is the affective embodiment of this former life: accordingly, the employee stresses, "People here have washed themselves clean of old ties. You should be doing the same: letting go of old attachments, not pursuing them" (24). This sense of "washing clean...old ties" becomes a central motif in *The Childhood of Jesus*; "washing" becomes a catchall for the disavowal of attachments, memoirs, histories, and former selves. At the same time, given the novel's provocative title, this motif strategically evokes the process of baptism in the Christian faith.¹³

Whilst baptism and water are emblematic symbols of salvation in biblical terms, soteriology points to the close relation between salvation and destruction. For instance, Judah' and Isaiah's oracles of salvation have been "reformulated as oracles of disaster in a literary context" (Rogerson & Lieu 2008, 489). Where salvation is promised, announced and anticipated, disaster is also prophesied; thus, one becomes strictly dependent on the other. This suggests a close connection between salvation and disaster at sea given that it is not only natural disaster which strikes migrants' boats, it is also (and often) the failure to intervene – the intentional abandonment – which determines salvation. Last, but certainly not least, the motif of being "washed clean" unmistakably evokes the figure of the *harraga*. Migrants who cross borders by sea are known as harragas, from the Arabic: *ḥarrāg*, meaning 'those who burn'. Such figures burn through frontiers in their journey to a new life, but they also literally burn the papers or documentation pertaining to their past lives to prevent deportation. There have also been instances of the burning of fingertips to prevent identification. The harragas' act of burning their documents before setting out on the journey entails an active renouncement of their former selves, their histories and identities, not only legally, but also

¹³ The motif of 'washing clean' significantly relates to Coetzee's earlier novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980); a comparison between the two texts is beyond the scope of this paper, yet, it is important to note *Waiting for the Barbarians* stages both washing rituals as ceremonial cleansings as well as practices of state violence where prisoners are beaten "till their backs are *washed* clean" by sweat and blood.

ontologically – their prior selves are destroyed. This destruction of the past suggests that harraga’s voyages do not anticipate return. And despite assumptions of temporariness, migrancy in *The Childhood of Jesus* is a permanent state such permanency is reflected in references to being “new” which function as beginning and ending points in the novel: “we are new arrivals, [Simón says], I am looking [...] for a place to live” (Coetzee 1); “*Good morning, we are new arrivals, and we are looking for somewhere to stay*” (329, original italics).¹⁴

Incontrovertibly, the image of the boat person or harraga permeates has become paradigmatic of today’s refugee-migrant whose ontology is troublingly confined to terms imposed by imperatives of flight. Notwithstanding such limitations, however, the nomenclature associated with “flight” can paradoxically offer migrants an agentic subjectivity in an otherwise disempowering context. In re-appropriating the anonymity conferred on refugees by the representational politics of migration, harragas tactically assert “a subjective selfhood that chooses to represent its exclusion in terms of that exclusion”; a formula that, according to David Farrier, “contests the effacement of the refugee subject by deliberately occupying that effacement, foregrounding exclusion through the anomic language of asylum” (176).

Given the novel’s title, salvation is a predictable dominant theme in *Childhood of Jesus*. Novilla as geopolitical sanctuary for those arriving by boat is multiplied by smaller narratives of salvation which connect to more complex structures of human life such as family, gender norms and spiritual redemption. Correspondingly, David is saved not only from death at sea, but also from a disconnected life without family. Simón’s quest to find David a mother sees him offering the role to a woman named Ines, whom he first spots

¹⁴ This phrase is of course a reminder of Mary and Joseph’s quest for refuge and shelter; the novel subtly maps a continuity between the archetypal celebratory narrative of refuge and the contemporary migrant figure.

playing tennis at an exclusive home just outside Novilla. Without the letter that was tied around David's neck – which is lost on the boat and “might have explained everything” (Coetzee 89)– Simón in arbitrary fashion selects David's ‘mother’. Although a resident of the ‘host’ country – hence in an ostensibly dominant position – Ines nevertheless inhabits a subaltern role as a single woman under the aegis of her brothers. In accepting motherhood, Ines is via a heteronormative logic “saved” from spinsterhood by receiving a ready-made family in an ironic echo of the Virgin Mary. Returning to the novel's title, David becomes a *de facto* saviour and redemptive Christ-like figure to those he encounters. As a son, he saves the two who informally adopt him; David also becomes obsessed with saving an old shire horse who resides on the docks; finally, he is consumed by the possibility of saving one of Simón's co-workers, Marciano, who tragically drowns.

Despite these narrational emplotments, *Childhood of Jesus* implicitly rejects the salvation/abandonment paradigm. The characters' self-identified kinship ties, which are overtly foregrounded, challenge the political apparatus which governs and regulates migration and asserts the agency of those who migrate. Addressing Ines, Simón explains: “I have always been sure – don't ask me why – that I would know David's mother when I saw her; and now that I have met you I know I was right” (94). Although she is a stranger, living a sheltered life with her two brothers in a gated community called ‘La Residencia’, Ines is, in Simón's eyes, a mother for David: “I propose that you become David's mother. [...] You and he can live together as mother and child. It can happen as soon as you like” (97). To these words, she replies: “I want him” (98). Simón's and Ines's brief exchange establishes family ties between the characters and brings about salvation for those concerned. When questioned by David on their relationship, Simón says:

There isn't a proper word for what I am to you, just there isn't a proper word for what you are to me. However, if you like, you can call me Uncle. When people say, *Who is*

he to you? You can say, He's my uncle. He is my uncle and he loves me. And I will say, He is my boy. (41, original italics)

Simón's explanation to David about what they 'are' to each other is a wonderful tale of love and kinship, but it also alludes to the inadequacies of language and normative familial ties in the face of migrants' experiences. As he puts it, "there isn't a proper word for what you are to me"; this is not only a limit in the signification of their relations, but it also raises questions about the lack of acknowledgment for non-normative kinship. McKinnon and Cannell point out that "Western understandings of kinship" (not shared cross-culturally) are built on the assumption that kinship is based on "relations of procreation and biology" (13). Re-making family ties and asserting relatedness (even where there is none) are powerful acts of agency and resistance. Simón and David defy the immigration system's rigid interpretation of families as blood ties, which are often used to triage, justify residency decisions and to repatriate. The novel defies the nation-state's fixed view of family based such ties, proposing instead an idea of family which is fluid and affiliative.

While the fabricated relationship ties between Ines, David and Simón reconfigure forms of kinship to challenge its normative forms, the active assertion of relatedness is also connected to the idea of hospitality in its contractual or conditional forms as outlined by Jacques Derrida. Derrida makes a distinction between what he sees as conditional and unconditional hospitality. The former constitutes the laws that surround the concept of hospitality such that any home – or nation – may remain sovereign. The latter, by contrast, considers the possibility of welcoming an 'absolute, unknowable other', without asking them to account for themselves, nor that they enter into a pact with the host (Derrida and Dufourmantelle). Novilla offers a form of (very) conditional hospitality to Simón and David, which involves the sacrifice of a personal history and of pleasure beyond the meeting of immediate needs for survival. Reduced to 'bare' existence on bread and water, Simón takes

the status of ‘guest’ further and beyond the conditional relation imposed by the ‘host’. Re-creating, re-making and asserting relatedness alters the conditional terms of hospitality imposed by Novilla so that the identity of ‘host’, which is based on saving and keeping alive the migrant, orphan child, is deconstructed and threatened by Simón’s and David’s refusal to accept its conditional hospitality. Once David finds and accepts his mother (and she accepts him), he is no longer an orphan, unaccompanied, migrant child. He is a child with family; hence, the ‘contract’ of hospitality is broken: there are no longer ‘hosts’ and guests’.¹⁵

History as counter-narrative to the Salvation/Abandonment Paradigm

Coetzee’s novel provocatively engages with salvation and abandonment by staging debates through the character of Simón, who questions and challenges the notion of salvation and rescue, draws connections between salvation and memory, and talks of the sacrifices his ‘new life’ entails. Addressing David he says: “I know you like to save people and that is admirable, but sometimes people don’t want to be saved” (Coetzee 189). Admonishing the child’s keen redemptive desire, Simón reminds us that being saved is not everyone’s wish, and that the choice rests with both the saviour as well as with those deemed salvable. Simón reinforces this view by engaging with David’s devotion to the story *Don Quixote*: “True, there is a man in the book who calls himself Don Quixote and saves people. But some of the people he saves don’t really want to be saved. They are happy just as they are” (268). Simón’s reference to Don Quixote’s blind conviction that there are people waiting to be saved

¹⁵ An exploration and examination of the numerous intertextual references to *Don Quixote* are beyond the scope of this paper. Yet, it is important to point out that the imagined realities built in *Don Quixote* by the famous titular character, are similarly mobilised in Coetzee’s novel by David and Simón. They construct their own reality in which they are active agents and decision makers of their own destiny: refuting the bread and water “bare life”, Simón and David profess anarchy over Novilla’s rules and, like Don Quixote, embrace the glory of (what in the eye of Novilla’s authorities is) fantasy rather than consigning themselves to the conditional hospitality granted to them.

ironically speaks back to the rhetoric of putative salvation which surrounds immigration today. This is not a suggestion that Coetzee's novel is to be read as a criticism of rescue at sea. Rather, this is a challenge to the terms which frame Western responses to contemporary mass displacements. Instead of professing (putative) salvation and abandonment in the face of boats at sea, Western discourse should instead be centred around reception, hospitality and shared responsibility. Continuing the theme of salvation, Simón confronts his friend and colleague Alvaro in a heated debate:

‘I am not trying to save you’, he says. ‘There is nothing special about me, I claim to be no one’s saviour. Like you I crossed the ocean. Like you I bring no history with me. [...] But I have not let go the idea of history, the idea of change without beginning or end. Ideas cannot be washed off us, not even by time. (136)

Echoing the Christian doctrine of salvation through rebirth that runs throughout the novel, Simón repudiates the idea that one can be “born again” here, but his criticism hits home in the context of migration, where re-birth, or being “washed clean” as the novel has it, becomes a condition of crossing, implicitly linked to policies of assimilation in multicultural Western democracies. However, there is a further irony here in Simón’s allusion to “the idea of history”: history, or a narrative of persecution, is integral to the act of claiming asylum. Refugees must carry with them a verifiable account of their reasons for fleeing and seeking asylum. Simón’s comments thus articulate the paradox that refugees are both defined by their history and at the same time must give it up completely if they are to be accepted as co-citizens. Salvation thus consists both in the articulation of a history in order to secure refuge and in the sacrifice of that history to the demands of assimilation and conformity. For Simón, however, salvation does not need to entail a repudiation of history. On the contrary, Simón

urges Alvaro and the other men not to let go of it. Salvation cannot be conceived without history:

I know we are all supposed to be washed clean by the passage here, and it is true, I don't have a great repertoire to call on. But the shadows linger nevertheless. That is what I suffer from. Except that I don't use the word *suffer*. I hold onto them, those shadows. (77)

Simón's use of the word "passage" here evokes one of the darkest pages of history – the Middle Passage of slavery – and re-inserts contemporary migration into a broader historical picture; mass displacement today is one of the many colonial legacies still at work in our contemporaneity. Simón's reference to "passage" also suggests the rite of passage connoting an induction into the Christian church through salvation by being "washed clean" at baptism. This is especially significant given the Christianizing mission of early colonialists and the pre-colonial histories and memories eclipsed by initiations into Christianity.¹⁶

In his speech Simón questions the sacrifices demanded by this induction into European salvation: he lives with and is haunted by the shadow of his lost memories and is unable to fully embrace his new identity: "Have you ever asked yourself [he wonders] whether the price we pay for this new life, the price of forgetting, may not be too high" (72). Simón points out that his new life entails forgetting – a condition imposed by the disembodied entity that rescues and administers. The problem with the rhetoric of salvation that Simón points to here is not only that it requires a pact and conforms to a set of laws – in line with Derrida's conceptualisation of conditional hospitality – but also that it positions the

¹⁶ It is worth noting, too, that many social scientists have been exploring migration as a contemporary rite of passage for young Africans Monsutti 2007; Osella *et al.* 2000; Massey *et al.* 1993; Wilson 1994; Castles 2000; Dognon 2016.

rescuer always as a saviour or benefactor: it disempowers the rescued from the outset. This focus on rescue and salvation in the midst of a so-called crisis of migration in Europe occludes the colonial ‘memories’ and histories that underpin contemporary migration.

Simón explains it like this:

I place no value on my tired old memories. I agree with you: they are just a burden.

No, it is something else that I’m reluctant to yield up: not memories themselves but the feel of residence in a body with a past, a body soaked in its past. (169)

Simón’s comment is profoundly evocative as he gestures towards the cost of European salvation on the rescued. Europe’s political focus on smugglers, push factors, government regimes in Africa and so on, redirects attention from exactly those histories that Simón feels the loss of: that is, of the dense network of historical relations that underpin current confrontations between European countries and migrants crossing their borders. As Cole has it, “what Africa needs more pressingly [...] is more equitable civic society, more robust democracy, and a fairer system of justice” (@tejucole 8/3/2012). Those “incomplete, ruptures with past structures of domination” (227), as James Clifford has it, underpin contemporary migration and to a large extent continue to regulate the relationship between the West and ‘the rest’. This is where postcolonial studies can offer novel ways to engage with and respond to dominant structures. In challenging the salvation/abandonment paradigm through its staged debates, *The Childhood of Jesus* points to the ways in which contemporary migration is not just a sociopolitical phenomenon, but one that gets to the very core of human values, ethics and humanism.

Drawing to a close, our work interrogates the ways in which postcolonial studies today can address these issues and expose what critical shifts should take place and what new

directions are needed to adequately engage with the present. As well as Clifford's "past structures of domination", the postcolonial also describes "sites of current struggle and imagined futures" (227). Contemporary migration represents a major site of current struggle and new imagined futures need to be both thought about and sought after. We mobilise postcolonial studies and urge scholarship to step beyond the limits of the field in the face of contemporary forced displacement to challenge the current humanitarian rhetoric and expose its inextricable connections to colonial legacies. This paper points to the importance of literature and the ways it helps conceptualise the complexities of the present. The Lampedusa plaque is an example of today's humanitarianism without humanity and novels like Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* reinsert humanity in the picture by proposing a counter-narrative which at once challenges the status quo and illustrates alternative ways to conceptualise and address mass displacement.

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