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Elsewhere and Here: Revisiting the Colonial Encounter from the Perspective of the Global South in *The Gurugu Pledge*

Abstract I: L'articolo presenta un'analisi del romanzo *The Gurugu Pledge* (2017) dello scrittore della Guinea Equatoriale Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel. Partendo dalle teorie sulla natura coloniale del potere sviluppate da una serie di teorici latino-americani, queste pagine sostengono che il romanzo in questione costituisce una contro-narrazione sulle masse di sfollati in Africa (immaginata soprattutto dalla prospettiva dei rifugiati stessi), oltre che un'illustrazione delle modalità in cui la razzializzazione rappresenta una delle principali eredità del colonialismo. La narrazione qui analizzata si focalizza in un luogo particolare: il Monte Gourougou (Gurugu) in Marocco che dista 2 chilometri e a 500 anni dall'enclave autonoma spagnola di Melilla, il confine più a sud dell'Unione Europea, sebbene si trovi nel continente africano. Il Monte Gourougou è il luogo dove centinaia di migranti e rifugiati dell'Africa occidentale vivono nello squallore, in attesa di un'opportunità per entrare in Europa scalando la barriera che circonda Melilla. La barriera incarna il divario narrativo tra privilegio e abiezione, tra l'occidente e i suoi 'altri'.

Abstract II: This article presents an analysis of the novel *The Gurugu Pledge* (2017) by the Equatorial Guinea writer Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel, based upon theories developed around the coloniality of power by a range of Latin American thinkers. It is argued that the novel is a counter-narrative of displacement in Africa, primarily imagined from the perspective of refugees, and an illustration of the ways in which racialisation is one of the primary legacies of colonialism. The narrative which is the focus of this article is symbolised in one particular location. Mount Gourougou (Gurugu) in Morocco is 2 kilometres and 500 years from the Spanish autonomous enclave of Melilla, the EU's southernmost border, although it is on the African continent. Mount Gourogou is the place where hundreds of West African migrants/refugees live in squalor while waiting for an opportunity to enter Europe by scaling the fence which borders Melilla. The fence epitomises the narrative divide between privilege and abjection, the West and its 'others'.

Unlike almost any other work of its kind, *The Gurugu Pledge*[1] only exists in published form as a translation into English of an unpublished collection of typed manuscripts in Spanish, the colonial language of the writer, Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel, from Equatorial Guinea. I stress 'colonial' language because the novel is an exemplary instance of decolonial thinking in which a group of refugees and migrants from Anglophone and Francophone (both terms derived from the 'New Imperialism' of the late 19th century) African countries are confined on Mount Gurugu, a volcanic mountain two kilometres southwest of Melilla, a Spanish territory in Northern Morocco: "the backdoor to cherished Europe" (GP 45). The word "cherished" is crucial because it articulates the colonised mentality which had driven the residents of Gurugu to the threshold of Europe; a mentality which is not able to envisage any other alternative to their desperate plight in their own countries, other than reaching the wealth and power of Europe. The novel reveals how exclusive this wealth and power is and shows how the journey to Europe, even if successful, may be illusory. Wordless and rendered worthless, these men and women communicate in the imposed language of the coloniser, and the camp itself is divided in ways which reflect this linguistic hegemony and discourses of power which control their subjectivities and knowledge. From these voiceless and fragmented identities, the novel opens up spaces for their stories as ways of countering the epistemic violence of Empire.

The narrative is multi-voiced with many shifts in register, tense and mode of writing. It often deploys a satiric form by magnifying the follies of those complicit with neo-colonialism into grotesque and absurd behaviour. Examples of this are the former aide of Amin bloated into obesity by greed and gluttony (leading 300 men to their deaths at the Victoria Falls), and the lengthy, and absurd, backstory of Omar Salanga, a brutal former soldier who arrives at Gurugu and continues his violence and exploitation of women. Some of the stories follow a realist trajectory, while others are more irrealist in the sense that they edge towards fable and folk tale, the tall tale, in an attempt to replicate African oral traditions. Although each character has a name and their story is distinctive, there is a sense also that both characters and stories are generic as is much in the novel. Specific incidents and journeys are illustrative, exempla in the medieval sense, as the novel has a metonymic structure. Even Melilla becomes more than a place on a map as its 'border spectacle' is not just a local staging of the Europe/Global South division but comes to synthesise the historical colonial encounter and its political, economic and cultural violence. In synoptic form it represents the fences and walls in almost 70 countries, designed to prevent the flow of migrants.

The first-person narrator opens and closes the novel but, episodically, hands over the narrative to other voices, as well as intermittently adopting both third and second person stances. The overall narrative is punctuated by speculative discourses, like the lengthy one on football in an African context (discussed below) and others which subjunctively propose dialogues between scholars who are in actuality conspicuously absent from, and uninterested in, the plight of the people in the camp. The scholars are presented as elite beneficiaries of colonialism, or neo-colonialism, immured in their academic privilege, metaphorically arguing over how many angels can dance on the head of a pin as their arguments are reduced to a similar absurdity. These imagined dialogues are one of many critiques in the text of neo-colonialism in contemporary Africa, contrasted with the immiseration of those forced to flee from their countries:

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[1] Henceforth GP followed by page reference. I should like to acknowledge the very generous editorial assistance kindly offered by Pietro Deandrea when I was incapacitated for a period during the completion of this article.

> Instead of bringing a political response to the structural causes of the poverty and destitution spreading through the African continent, and which are the result of structural adjustment policies and the neocolonial pillage of strategic resources by multinational companies, Europe continues to build barbed-wire fences. Immense strategic wealth […] is shamelessly plundered, while the victims of this, namely the great majority of Africans, are forbidden to enter the Schengen area (Lecadet 2017: 149).

Although, as I have said, the novel individualises each person's flight, it gives fictional shape to the situation of poverty and destitution described, as well as the plundering of gold, oil, and other mineral resources which have devastated the African continent and produced the perilous and tortuous journeys which have culminated in Gurugu.

The subjunctive interludes introduce an irrealist mood which contrasts sharply with the wretchedness of the indicative mood, the quotidian reality, which 'entangles' the refugees. I conflate refugee and undocumented migrant because, whatever the motivation for flight, all have been rejected, abandoned and neglected, and have become the marginalised in their country for whom leaving is the only option. The journey to the European border is not only a flight from the residues of the colonial but from what has been termed "the postcolonial neocolonised" world of the Global South (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013: 28). According to Mbembe, what he has called the "Postcolony" is a composite of past, present and the future which has created an "entanglement" which is interpenetrating and intersecting – Africa in Europe, Europe in Africa (Mbembe 2008: 4). It is this "entanglement" which the novel seeks to articulate fictionally with its allusions to the colonial past, references to the violence of neo-colonial dictatorships (with Idi Amin the paradigm case), and the fantasy of the People's Republic of Samuel Eto'o founded by "disregarded subjects" from a range of West African countries on Mount Gurugu (GP 60).

Africa is not romanticised, as is evidenced by the extended, if humorous, critique of Amin and of two disruptive figures in the camp (Omar and Aliko), nor is it simply anti-colonial, but it works with the idea of the coloniality of power:

> the heterogeneous and multiple global structures put in place over a period of 450 years did not evaporate with the […] decolonisation of the periphery over the past 50 years. We continue to live under the same "colonial power matrix" […]. We moved from a period of "global colonialism" to the current period of "global coloniality" (Grosfoguel 2007: 219).

Grosfoguel is referring primarily to Latin America but, in broad terms, much of what he says can be applied to the African continent where the "coloniality of power" can be seen as “a crucial structuring process in the modern colonial/world-system” (Grosfoguel 2007: 219-220). Notionally independent and decolonised, most African countries experience, at a range of levels – epistemological and structural – continuities from the colonial past in the form of neo-colonialism.

By way of placing the novel in its wider context of decolonial thinking, an outline of what is meant by the coloniality of power and what shaped it will be provided. In so doing, it is hoped to situate the mindset which has led to European ways of seeing refugees in particular and migrants in general. A useful starting point is Sylvia Wynter’s “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation” (2003) and Catherine Hall’s “The Racist Ideas of Slave Owners Are Still with Us Today” (2016). To speak of Eurocentrism is something of a cliché now, but in order to understand European attitudes to refugees at the level of the State and in popular terms, it is still necessary to produce an explanatory account by going back and thinking about what Wynter calls the Western bourgeois conception of the human, Man, which *overrepresents* itself as if it were the human itself. The idea of the Western European as over-representing itself as human is of value because it helps to see why refugees are seen as disposable/expendable en masse, regarded as less than human, without value. Once the idea of dehumanisation takes hold it is accompanied by impunity and indifference at the level of the State and in terms of the popular imaginary. How, otherwise, do we make sense of negative responses to the deaths of thousands of refugees at sea, and elsewhere, in recent years (more than 35,000 since 1990), and of policies of exclusion which consist of building walls and fences to keep out would-be asylum-seekers? Refugees are the modern version of Fanon’s “wretched of the earth”, as much of what he had to say about “les damnés” applies to refugees.

Any attempt to unsettle this overrepresentation necessitates an understanding of what a number of Latin American theorists (Quijano; Mignolo) have called “the coloniality of power”. In writing about displacement, generally, we need to ask ourselves why, and how, we distance ourselves from refugees, what set of values enables us to do so. One part of the answer is racialisation, one of the primary legacies of colonialism, with the idea of race – “the most efficient instrument of social domination invented in the last 500 years” (Mignolo 2007: 46). From another perspective, Catherine Hall speaks of how “in order to make money the [slave] traders had to create a new discourse on ‘race’; and the impact of those ideas needs to be remembered too” (Hall 2016: n.p.). Race as a master code, or narrative *mentalité*, has entered so deeply into common sense and daily discourse as part of the construct of the white Euro-American that the “epistemological disregard” of the Other informs all other forms of “disregard”. Global inequality is one of the root effects and premises of this racialisation and a reason why degradation, immiseration, and the violent deaths of refugees are met with indifference. They are, in Judith Butler’s words, “the ungrievable”, “lives regarded as disposable or are so stripped of value that when they are imperilled, injured or lost, they assume a social ontology that is partially constituted by that regard […] their potential loss is no occasion to mourn” (Butler 2014: 35). Systematically representing refugees as figures of lack, without worth or value, and as lives not worthy of living, derives from ideas “about racial difference that began with slavery [and were] recalibrated across the centuries to encompass other colonised subjects” (Hall 2016: n.p.).

As an imperialising force, Western Europe not only practised slavery and extensive forms of exclusion but also developed an accompanying ideological narrative related to this which persists today. As James Baldwin wrote, "the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do" (Baldwin 2016: n.p.). Nationalism, the source and corollary of imperialism, is one way in Europe in which history is still present in all we think and do. As Mbembe says, when it comes to imagining the inhumanity of foreign peoples, "race has been the ever-present shadow in Western thought and practice" (2003: 4).

Until recent years, the "wretched of the earth" would comfortably have been applied to those outside the West but neo-liberalism, austerity, and growing inequality mean that this term now also resonates within the West, hence the growth of populism, the fear of 'invasion' and the political response in the form of intensified bordering – fences, walls etc.

Refugees are seen as waste to be excluded, refuse to be discarded, unproductive lives but, at a deeper level, they symbolise a precariousness, a liminality, which serves as an unsettling, unwelcome reminder of how many lives in the privileged West are now also potentially remaindered. Refugees occupy the borderland between abandonment and value now shared by many.

Any attempt to unsettle common sense thinking about refugees confronts ideological forms of nationalism, coloniality, and the state. Overcoming prejudice towards refugees is an agonistic process, a struggle on several fronts – generational and demographic. One of the major problems to contend with is the notion of the commonality, or identity, between always-existing national subjects, a fundamental aspect of subjectivity at the level of the symbolic: a taken for granted European and white ethnicity (nativism). Refugee representations have to somehow interrupt/disrupt this "continuity" and introduce new levels of diversity and antagonism, expose the contingency and emptiness of nationalist signifiers, and to go beyond the nation to formulate other, perhaps global, but not necessarily territorial, allegiances.

In order to resist seeing the refugee as a knowing subject, with autonomy and agency, many Europeans essentialise the 'others', reduce them to a set of invariable and negative characteristics and this enables us to regard their deaths with indifference. This indifference, this disengagement and emotional disidentification can be challenged partly by coming to terms with narratives that originate beyond the coloniality of power, or which interrogate it such as *The Gurugu Pledge*. It might be argued that the refugee crisis has a lot to do with a nation, or nations, in search of its 'not self', only secure in the knowledge that 'out there' there are still the barbarians of myth, displaced from the self's identity. To dehumanise others is a form of displacement, to remove them from their identity (and 'ours') so that you can be reassured that those who drown or are killed are not your own kind, because they are sub-human. As Mbembe has pointed out:

> It is now widely acknowledged that Africa as an idea, a concept, has historically served, and continues to serve, as a polemical argument for the West's desperate desire to assert its difference from the rest of the world. In several respects, Africa still constitutes one of the metaphors through which the West represents the origins of its own norms, develops a self-image, and integrates this image into the set of signifiers asserting what it supposes to be its identity (Mbembe 2001: 2).

In the argument which follows an attempt will be made to trace the ways in which Western signifiers have so deeply imprinted themselves upon African consciousness as to thwart the development of a meaningful self-image and African identity.

Apart from these theoretical concepts, and connected to them, it is necessary to consider a range of issues related to the often reductive representation of refugees in Western discourses/texts/media – the sentimentalised, passive victim, the vulnerable person, the object of compassion – "often, they are given no story at all, reduced to a shadow that occasionally flits across European vision" (Trilling 2018: 9) – and replace these with the agential subject, the resistant activist and the newly emergent citizen. How we render the refugee "knowable" is another challenge, the challenge of representation at a time when, not only is there a lack of empathy but also a populist clamour in Europe against refugees and migrants. On the other hand, where there is humanitarian concern and sympathy, there is, as has been said, a growing focus on vulnerability, and, of course, the vulnerable have to be protected, but to see all refugees as victims, or vulnerable people, needs to be critically examined for its reductiveness and refusal of agency.

This involves a number of methodological challenges. The experience of refugees *is* unrepresentable in a sense, an unimaginable existence, and representational forms are always inadequate but this does not mean giving up on any attempt. Rather, it means the development of other lenses for perception, a greater aesthetic-political reflexivity and sensitivity, a search for new, and radical, rhetorical strategies, linguistic and stylistic resources which unsettle, defamiliarise, and disrupt expectations and preconceptions. From the standpoint of power, the historical narrative is always set in stone. Unsettling this power is the task of provocative narratives designed to rebut the defensive, and fatalist, illusionism which claims that how things are is immutable. So, the forms of representation are crucial and the central point of radical narratives is to highlight precarity and maintain that intervention in the refugee crisis is possible. By exploring the limits of sympathy, the shortcomings of the liberal claim of common humanity, and insisting on the ethical dimensions of representation, it may be possible to discover interventions in films, novels, art, music and drama which subvert the presumption of 'knowing the refugee'. *The Gurugu Pledge* is a relevant example in such a respect.

The search for what is described in the novel as a "brilliant future in Europe" (GP 25) is the product of "the colonisation of African imagination and displacement of African knowledges" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013: xi) and this is only partly ironic because it refers to the fact that "European culture was made seductive: it gave access to power […] European culture became a universal cultural model". European football, to cite an example from the novel, has today become a universal cultural model at the expense of African football. It is this continuing European hegemony which means that the "imaginary in the non-European cultures could hardly exist today and, above all, reproduce itself outside of these [colonial] relations" (Quijano 2007: 169).

The novel is constructed as an 'entanglement' of two imaginaries. One is that indicated by Quijano, the continuing seduction of Europe (*Elsewhere*), the other is the tentative and speculative emergent African imaginary proposed in the subjunctive interludes which I spoke of earlier and which the novel as a whole represents, the re-casting of an alternative

African imaginary (*Here*). *Here* is Mount Gurugu, symbolically condensing the experiences of the colonised and neocolonised African Continent; *Elsewhere* is Melilla, Europe's border with Africa in which the cartography, ideology, and coloniality of Europe are conflated:

> a space and a life where they feel they are going somewhere as opposed to nowhere, or at least, a space where the quality of their "going-ness" is better than what it is in the space they are leaving behind. More often than not, what is referred to as "voluntary migration" then is either an inability or unwillingness to endure and "wait out" a crisis of existential mobility (Hage 2009: 98).

In the novel, this waiting out forms part of its resolution. Mount Gurugu in Morocco is the site of an informal refugee camp inhabited by between 500 and 1,000 people, mainly young men, from West Africa. To screen its squalor and their shame, the men ironically name part of it "the residence". The camp is situated two kilometres from the Spanish autonomous, and anomalous, enclave of Melilla, which is on the African continent yet marks Europe's border with the Global South. It is structurally liminal but actively signified as "European", with "Europe as a master signifier in discourses of exclusion and deportation zones" (Soto Bermant 2017: 138). Melilla, with its 11-kilometre long, six-metre high, three-tiered razor wired fence, represents in microcosm the conflict of which I have been speaking, the paradigm case of the narrative encounter between entitlement and disposability: what Derek Gregory (2004) has termed "the colonial present". This representation of the border, marked by Melilla, is symbolic, physical, and historical. It was captured by Spain from the Moors in 1497 and established as a military outpost. Its CETI (Centre for the Temporary Stay of Migrants) holds hundreds of migrants/refugees. The divide between Africa and Europe here is 500 years or a twenty-minute walk for a young person.

Storytelling, playing football, scavenging for food and water, and preparing to jump the fence comprise an active existence which moves the representation of the refugee away from the object of pity, the hapless victim. They *are* victims, of repressive regimes, of hunger, war, poverty and unemployment, but the narrative reverses the European gaze and presents the active point of view of those held in time by the proximity of the fence and the desire to jump it. The temporariness, and the improvised quality, of their lives feature throughout, with men cooking food over an open fire, clothes hanging out to dry on trees, with plastic and cardboard sheets their only bedding. Men scavenging for food and water in the nearby city of Nador hover between hope and despair, death and life.

The narrative underscores the fact that lives are at risk from a number of perspectives, from the police who raid the camp and burn all the meagre possessions of the inhabitants, and also attack them, as well as the clandestine journey to the fence and the obvious hazards of the attempt to scale the fence. The shared strategy of the men is to approach the fence en masse, so as to outnumber the police. The sense of collective solidarity is shown, without sentimentality or romanticisation, as also shown is the "trial" of the men who exploited and violated a woman resident which, after much discussion, leads to a verdict which "departs from the logic of vengeance" (Mbembe 2008: 11), an important break with neo-colonial law. *The Gurugu Pledge* shows Fanon's "wretched of the earth" as subjects. The novel gives fictional form to what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013: 11) has described as "a dominant Western power backed up by Euro-American epistemologies which resulted in the colonisation of African imagination and displacement of African knowledges". The fact that everyone in the "residence" is displaced from the heart of Africa and has a past, but also speaks in French or English and is in thrall to Europe (a phone call or a letter from a European address would be a high point) articulates this hegemonic colonial legacy. The narrator comments ironically on "the brilliant future that awaited them in Europe" (GP 25). All of the people on Mount Gurugu have a life and a story which Europe cannot ignore and the novel gives them subjectivity and agency. In Mbembe's words, "the colonized person is a living, talking, conscious, active individual whose identity arises from a three-pronged movement of violation, erasure and self-writing" (Mbembe 2008: 4). The novel articulates this violation, writes against the erasure by the European gaze, and presents an opportunity for self-storying. It begins with a first-person narrator who then hands over to the stories of a range of other men, stories which are related with frequent interruptions, often witty and ribald, by the listeners. Although each story is different, there is a narrative convergence in the sense that they share a metaphorical 'neighbourhood' of displacement and deprivation, the racialisation of the Black 'other', driven from their home countries by, variously, religious bigotry, violence, poverty, hunger, superstition and lack of work. Added to this are the cronyism, violence and corruption of African dictatorships, with Idi Amin singled out as the representative, neo-colonised figure, and the more recent build-up of armaments, the desertification of Africa, the destruction of biodiversity, and the reduction of African agricultural knowledge and expertise to the service of corporate capitalism. The narrator's role is to make sure the stories will cross the sea and be told on the other shore.

The inhabitants are divided into language groups: "eat or manger according to whichever History the whites chose for you" (GP 65). The passivity of the syntax emphasises that, literally and metaphorically, these are "disregarded, discarded subjects"; they live in the colonial present. In the words of one man, "they told me I no longer have a country, that's what they said at the border: you've no country any more, now you're just black" (GP 75). This epitomises the racialised abjection, the precarity and lack of value I have been referring to. The lengthy sequence on football is of interest in envisioning an alternative to Europe:

> People played football on Gurugu to keep warm and busy, for the hours were long and football enabled them to lose track of time, but in a different set of circumstances, they'd have read all day and into the night. And in a different reality, a team of African scholars would have come to Gurugu mountain to talk to the inhabitants and ask them to comment on Peter's father's poem (GP 87).

Peter is one of the mountain dwellers whose family had lost their social status years before because his father had written a poem, in a Conceptismo (later sixteenth/early seventeenth century) Spanish style, for which he had been expelled for its supposed indecency. That the inhabitants of Gurugu would have been able to discuss such an arcane poem indicates a different, non-colonial, reality in which learning and dignity would have been possible. It also posits an image of African identity beyond the categories imposed by Europe.

The scholars did not come but had they, the narrator suggests, this positive image might have caused some of the refugees to retrace their steps and return to their country of origin.

In an earlier, and unpublished, novel, called *Ahmed the Arab, or the Desert's Embrace*, Ávila Laurel wrote of a group of African migrants who, with the help of a millionaire, founded a city in the desert. Some of the men in this novel fantasise that if they owned Mount Gurugu they could cultivate it, grow food, and become self-sufficient; in other words, produce an Africa in miniature, free from exploitation and which they would not have to leave. The republic created would be called the Republic of Samuel Eto'o (the world-famous Cameroon player) as football is the one preoccupation which distracts them from their wretchedness. The exodus of African footballers to Europe (e.g. the current 'hero' Mohammed Salah) is held up as a model of their own ambition and names of players and European clubs are reeled off like sacred icons. What these footballers have is what is known as *exit capacity*, the mobility denied to those stuck on the mountain. The narrative is critical of these models of aspiration as the only value they represent is that of the market and a focus on the exceptional; according to Ávila Laurel (2018), football has the capacity "to interfere with African lives". Football is a sustaining, if illusory, fantasy, with men keeping fit until signed by a European club, but with no ambitions to stay and play in Africa, underlining a residual colonial legacy and the persistence of colonial rhetorics and practices, including the 'importing' by European clubs of teenage footballers who are left to fend for themselves if they do not succeed. As it is, on the mountain football is the only available reality and is more than just the opium of the people, but in different circumstances, of their own choosing, other realities might have prevailed. This is one of the features of the novel: its refutation of the de-humanising colonial argument that the Africans were naturally inferior, and its gestures towards other potentialities.

The novel does not sentimentalise the figures in the camp, as blackmail and corruption are shown, and women are used and sexually abused. Compared with the journey most of the residents have endured, including violence at bandit African checkpoints, the mountain is the least racist place they have experienced, and "it's the place they live with the most dignity on their migratory journeys" in the view of the author (Ávila Laurel 2018). Despite the appalling conditions, there are traces of conviviality and reciprocity. Some of the stories told are like moral parables, they synthesise qualities or faults which are generic. For example, the illness of one of the two women featured in the text, and her subsequent miscarriage, encapsulates the shared narrative of hope, renewal and despair. What is also shared is the humiliations and terrors faced, the common perilous journey across hundreds of miles of inhospitable terrain: "the rule of thumb was that the closer you got to the gates of Europe, the more you disposed of anything linking you to a concrete African country" (GP 90). Tactically, this makes sense, but it also marks the emptying out of a *repertoire of identities* as well as the emptying out of a continent in order to go to another one. As one other person comments, "the closer we get to the finishing line, none of us is from anywhere" (GP 121). What the novel shows critically is the existence of dependent voices combined with seeds of independent thinking: "Until we show them any different, what's written in books will be what's read out on the radio, day and night" (GP 120). This is an argument for alternative voices, counter-narratives, no longer hooked on Europe.

The Gurugu pledge itself was a collective action – contrary to the individualism of neo-liberalism – an act of unified solidarity, a mass stamping on the ground prior to an attempted scaling of the fence, during which they spoke of the colonial history of Africa. The novel concludes with this scaling and demonstrates a certain generosity of spirit and evidence of a collective African identity. The Melilla Africans, the Africans in Spain, came to the fence to hail those in the act of climbing but these failed, their failure synopsised by the shape of two figures, out of the hundreds, stuck with one leg either side of the fence. In an act of self-sacrifice and altruism those who failed the climb took the two sick women to the top of the fence in the hope that they would be rescued and given medical help. This act of solidarity undercuts the patriarchy and misogyny shown earlier in the text, a form of overcoming in itself.

The final chapter – "The Beginning and the End" – departs radically from many similar narratives in that the first-person narrator steps forward to tell his own story with a very different outcome. "I'm African", he declares, and what follows is in keeping with one of the main themes of the novel: the construction of a potential African identity, complex and diverse, freed from the chains of dependence on Europe. This is a reminder that the people on Gurugu are not only, but also much more than, refugees. What they share is the lack of exit capacity, to use marketing jargon.

The ill-treatment of a fellow teacher, an albino, and the irrationality of followers of the occult who had damaged the man, caused the narrator to set out on "the long road to nowhere". On the mountain he decided, after an earlier failed attempt, not to join in the attempt to scale the fence and abandoned his quest to reach Europe. Images of Africans dead on a Spanish beach confirmed him in his decision. He reflects on the impunity with which Africans are killed in Europe and on the lack of respect for their lives: "They didn't kill you for not having papers, that was just the excuse they used" (GP 180). Symbolically, he makes his way to the mountain's southern face, to the sides that the lights of Europe do not reach and his story becomes a narrative of decolonial thinking from the Global South: "I chose the southern face, that my gaze was turned towards the River Zambezi" (GP 183). It lays bare and makes visible the European narrative of power and casts the whole preceding narrative as "a committed epistemological resistance against epistemic violence that had prevented imaginations of the world and freedom from knowledges and cosmologies of the Global South!" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013: 264). The narrator's decision to stay on the mountain is linked to the hope that he will be able "to make the story known", and perhaps inhabit a different reality which others might also strive for. The story is the one we have just read which is both a personal story and a symptomatic one generated by a critical, decolonial lens.

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