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## Contested political alliances in fortress Europe: migrants and Europeans in Helon Habila's *Travellers*

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### ABSTRACT

Helon Habila's *Travellers* was written as a response to the refugee crisis in 2015, and it narrates loosely connected stories of African asylum seekers precariously travelling in Southern and Western European countries seeking shelter. This article discusses the novel's representation of Europeans and migrants acting together by drawing from Jacques Rancière's theorization of dissensus as a tool to challenge existing political hierarchies by creating new solidarities against present orders. I maintain that the novel manages to problematize the mainstream media images of immigration issues, as well as other such narrative tropes that reinforce the understanding of immigrants as Europe's others. I argue that the novel instead exposes facets of structural violence in fortress Europe as it violently suppresses immigrant voices. Along these lines, the novel is further discussed as a representative of critical art or dissensual art that not only exposes contemporary exclusionary politics, but also advances a new affective politics by actively demonstrating more democratic ways of including people without a political voice. It can thus help to reconfigure which political questions are included in public deliberations in the future and provoke new, more democratic ways of seeing immigration issues.



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This article focuses on Nigerian writer Helon Habila's novel *Travellers* (2019), which narrates loosely connected stories of asylum seekers precariously travelling in Southern and Western European countries seeking shelter. Habila's novel represents new political alliances, as people resist the nationalist and public ideologies of migrant politics and thereby introduce division into the social order. Along these lines, the article discusses attempts to create political alliances between Europeans and migrants by drawing from Rancière's theorization of dissensus as a tool to challenge existing political hierarchies in Europe by creating new solidarities against present orders.<sup>1</sup> Through the concept of dissensus, Rancière proposes an understanding of politics that enables an examination of disruptions of the existing order. However, the novel refuses to take this imagined moment of new political alliance for granted, and instead highlights the idea of Europe as

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a fortress, or as a power regime clearly mandating which solidarities are possible and which are not. I further read the novel as an example of 'dissensual' artwork, as for Ranci re art and politics are firmly connected. The novel can thus also be read as a manifestation of dissensus, and I refer to Divya Tolia-Kelly (2019), who argues that 'through aesthetics we can articulate affective politics and demonstrate new ways of "doing" democracy' (126). This is a project Habila engages in, as his novel refuses to comply with the contemporary modes of representing the subaltern, modes which often correspond to and reinforce the ways in which the asylum seekers are effectively silenced in the present order.

Habila's novel was written as a response to the refugee crisis in 2015. On 3 October 2013, over 360 African migrants died when a boat sank in front of the Italian island of Lampedusa. Helga Ramsey-Kurz (2020) states that 'wanting to offer an African perspective on the disaster, a German newspaper invited the Nigerian novelist Helon Habila, who was staying on a DAAD fellowship in Berlin at the time, to write an article' (168). Habila decided to write a novel based on the interviews he conducted. During the last ten years, 'the ongoing migrant crisis' in Europe has become an 'ethical catastrophe of historic proportion' (Kingsley 2016), as, since 2013, over 20 000 people have drowned in the Mediterranean (Ramsey-Kurz 2020, 169). At the same time, there is a strong resistance against undocumented immigrants in Europe, as negative political views on non-European immigrants prevail in many European countries. Sonia Lucarelli (2021) explains these sentiments by writing that 'in recent years a nationalistic rhetoric has been rediscovered, which views immigration as a contemporary sin threatening the purity of [European] nations, or which depicts migrants as a potential challenge to the "European way of life"' (2). In fact, since 2015, 'the EU [has] adopted a series of measures aimed at reassuring its Member States of the EU's ability to "protect" its external borders' (Lucarelli 2021, 3). Many European countries fail to fully acknowledge the plight of African and Middle-Eastern migrants.<sup>2</sup> And news media also maintains and reaffirms this discourse.<sup>3</sup> As Annabelle Wilmott (2017) writes, 'Research indicates that news images of refugees have become increasingly negative, often portraying them as either innocent victims, who lack political agency, or as security threats, with the potential to threaten the host country's national security and identity'. Habila sees a fundamental problem with this hegemonic European mindset that excludes immigrant viewpoints, and his representation of immigrant characters challenges the mainstream depictions of them.<sup>4</sup>

In the beginning of *Travellers*, the main character and narrator, a nameless Nigerian graduate student who has migrated to the US, is travelling with his African-American artist wife Gina in Europe. Gradually, he becomes more sympathetic towards the situation of asylum seekers, gets involved in their lives, and even accidentally ends up in a refugee camp when his identity gets confused with that of an undocumented immigrant. As Ramsey-Kurz (2020) has importantly noted, the protagonist undergoes a transformation process through which the privileged and cosmopolitan character 'moves from detached and helpless observations of others in distress to a more and more compassionate understanding of their stories and even to an active involvement and willing intervention on their behalf' (171). It is through the narrator's observations that the novel refuses to idealize European democracies and rather shows what they tend to exclude.

## Dissensus and the politics of aesthetics

As I mentioned above, the novel represents moments of dissensus in European political arenas. In order to understand the notion of dissensus, it is important to first discuss Rancière's understanding of consensus politics which can be challenged by dissensual practices. European consensus politics makes certain ideological settings look normal, as if there were no alternatives to the ways things are. In connection with such practices of 'normalisation,' Rancière (2004) writes about 'the distribution of the sensible,' which, as a normalizing ideology in each society, 'produces a system of self-evident facts of perception based on the set horizons and modalities of what is visible and audible as well as what can be said, thought, made and done' (85). This relates to what is considered normal and important in any given society, including the ways in which we've learnt to understand the migrant crisis, what it means, how we *can and cannot* talk about it, and how immigrants are understood as a threat to the European lifestyle. Along these lines, Rancière focuses on mainstream politics, or what he calls the 'police order,' and *the inequality it presupposes*. It is through the notion of dissensus that such an order can be challenged. Todd May (2007) explains the term 'dissensus' by writing that 'what politics accomplishes is to divide the social order, to introduce what Rancière sometimes calls a *dissensus* into it. . . . the people who are considered less than equal in a given police order no longer assent to that order; they split themselves off from it [and] introduce division into the social order' (25). Habila's novel represents accounts of such dissensual action, as the undocumented immigrant characters, along with their political allies, act against the present order.

I further suggest that the notion of dissensus also needs to be connected to the novel as a form of critical artwork, as it – along with other forms of dissensual aesthetics – attempts to 'create a fissure in the sensible order by confronting the established framework of perception' (Rancière 2004, 85). In other words, Rancière connects the discussion of the distribution of the sensible to aesthetic practices, and this also remains an important aspect to consider in connection with Habila's novel. In Rancière's theory, aesthetic practices are not necessarily politically revolutionary. On the contrary, the political realm of consensus politics and its corresponding aesthetic forms and practices are mutually informing power constellations. Tolia-Kelly (2019) writes that 'for Rancière, democracy is produced and legitimated through aesthetic practices and in turn creates the shackles that bound what can be termed aesthetics – both are morally and politically co-constructed, intertwined' (126). Thus, 'the surfaces of artistic production . . . [including written text] are critically at the heart of politics, and not simply forms which reflect or are simply illustrating a context to politics' (Tolia-Kelly 2019, 125). In that sense, we can understand how the mainstream depictions of undocumented immigrants help to maintain and reinforce the 'sensible' understanding of the immigration issues in our contemporary world of consensus politics. In fact, according to Tolia-Kelly (2019), 'this aesthetic regime orders the sensible so that art and life no longer appear separate from each other' (125). There is a risk that the mainstream media representations of the refugees as either helpless victims or potential sources of danger start looking self-evident, as the only way of depicting these 'others'. Furthermore, although there are some European literary texts sympathizing with migrants, 'precisely because of their external European authorial stance, [they] inevitably re-elaborate the figure of the migrant according to pre-existing

tropes of representation' as discussed above (Scarabicchi 2019, 183). Here we can see how artistic/literary works help to reproduce or reaffirm the political views of the police order or the mainstream society. However, the politics of aesthetics can shake these power formations as well, as 'Aesthetics, within artistic practice, can refigure the terms of the political in terms of the grammars of engagement' (Tolia-Kelly 2019, 126). Thus aesthetic practices can critically engage in public deliberations by trying to change the codes of established modes of representation.

This is crucial when we consider representations of subaltern groups, as they lack a political voice, and the pre-existing representational strategies tend to suffocate their voices further, or at least maintain the consensual understanding of them. This is a question of representational ethics, as representing the subaltern is difficult and incomplete. As García and Belén (2021) notes, 'The mediation of life narratives of human suffering raises significant ethical questions' (211). I argue that Habila's novel remains aware of its own political power as a depiction of less privileged people because the narrative voice is aware of the risks of 'speaking for others'. Rather than merely empathizing with the 'victims,' Habila turns his focus on the suffocating structures of exclusion, which are made visible in the text through depictions of dissidence. This is crucial because narrative tropes that sympathize with the victims often further support the notion of refugees as helpless others and Europeans as their potential saviours.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to this, Habila represents undocumented immigrants as characters actively seeking justice and further shows how their voices are violently shut down or systematically ignored in European settings. Habila's novel further shakes the border between us and them by representing alliances and solidarities between active rights-seekers and their sympathizers. However, an important aspect of his representational ethics concerns the ways in which these sympathizers are depicted. In other words, the novel also maintains a clear picture of their privilege. The novelist, as Gabriela Banita (2021) has noted, 'self-criticises his position as a cosmopolitan writer' by highlighting the difference between people's access to or lack of mobility (153). Taken as a whole, the novel repeatedly returns to the troubling questions of privilege and mobility, and by so doing, it refuses to engage in any form of saviour mentality, and rather highlights the shortcomings of acts of sympathizing with or representing people forced to live without legal protection. Thus, even if the main character undergoes a change in the novel, he eventually maintains his access to privilege, and it is through highlighting the main character's position that the novel explores inequalities between different groups.

Furthermore, by critiquing such representational modes in his depiction of the character Gina, who appropriates the stories of nondocumented immigrants, Habila provides commentary on compromised aesthetic projects depicting asylum seekers. Banita and Eleni Coundouriotis have both commented on the privileged nature of Afropolitan travellers in the novel – who, as cosmopolitan and wealthy Africans and African Americans – can claim the world to themselves (Banita 2021, 145; Coundouriotis 2022, 194). In Habila's novel this position is particularly represented by Gina, whose attitude towards the refugees she wants to depict in her art is condescending, as she remains firmly alienated from her subjects, whom she objectifies in her art (Ramsey-Kurz 2020, 171). Gradually the main character starts feeling more and more estranged from his wife and eventually their marriage falls apart. He later finds a new partner, a Zambian woman named Portia. As the main character

becomes estranged from his wife, who is alienated from precarious migrant lives but who aestheticises and appropriates their experiences in her art regardless, Habila makes a meta-level commentary on the politics of artistic representations of precarity. Habila's novel is anchored in political resistance, which, however, is firmly contextualized in his awareness of his own privilege, as well as some of his characters'. It is clear, then, that the character Mark's words carry a particular weight when he asks the protagonist: "what is the point of art if it is not to resist?" (61). Habila vigilantly shows that art and politics should not be considered in a simplistic way. Along these lines, not only does Habila's novel critically represent structural injustice and inequality concerning the status of undocumented immigrants in various European cities, but it also draws attention to its own representational techniques in connection with the existing traditions of depicting immigrants as 'others' both in fiction and news media.

### European consensus politics exposed

Throughout the novel, the narrator gradually grows more and more suspicious of European democracies and their ways of treating the immigrants, often arriving from former European colonies. It is hardly a coincidence that the main character is writing his dissertation on the 1884 Berlin conference, where European nations formalized African colonisation, the scramble for Africa, dividing the continent into colonies between the European countries. This colonial history creates a firm subtext for the novel as it reveals European exclusionary politics in a contemporary frame,<sup>6</sup> pinpointing European impasses throughout. This is represented in the novel, as the main character listens to the stories of immigrant experiences in Europe and witnesses demonstrations against cruel treatment of asylum seekers. In that sense the image of Europe as a cradle of democracy becomes challenged through the eyes of this traveller. The novel's representation strategies expose the shortcomings of the Habermasian understanding of deliberative democracy, which is based on the ideal of consensus that could potentially be reached through civic dialogue and communicative practices as long as the speaking subjects are also open to each other's viewpoints and remain equal to one another.<sup>7</sup> This is the ideal model of European democracies. However, as Chantal Mouffe (2013) argues, any democratic order necessarily excludes some other voices, and thus the idea of rational consensus 'is a conceptual impossibility because it presupposes the availability of a consensus without exclusion' (92). The exclusionary power formations of such consensus politics are exposed throughout the novel as it depicts the life stories of those whose voices are not included in the public deliberations, no matter how much they try. In examining these questions, I turn to Rancière's challenge to the deliberative approach, as he focuses on the exclusionary logic of consensus politics.

A strong suspicion towards the so-called European consensus democracies is highlighted already early in the novel, as the protagonist – who at this point is living a relatively privileged cosmopolitan life – learns to know a group of squatters living in an old church they've occupied. Some of these characters are European-African, others are American and some of them are undocumented immigrants. They challenge his middle-class worldview and tell him that 'They had been to Davos, and several G20 meetings all over the world,' and that they protest 'everything':

“We believe there should be an alternative to the way the world is run now,” Eric said.

“Too much money in too few hands,” Uta said.

“Millions exploited in sweatshops in Asia. Wars in Africa,” Stan said.

“This is the twenty-first century, no child should be dying from hunger or disease,” Uta said.  
(19–20)

These characters can only express their opinions at demonstrations. Through this discussion it becomes evident that some voices, opinions and antagonistic ideas are excluded from the consensual frame of European politics. The political opinions expressed in the quote above are not included in the political deliberations in the European centres; hence other forms of activism are needed to stage them. This group is addressing political wrongs that the consensual framework does not allow them to address, but their efforts to exercise voice run the risk of becoming reduced to ‘noise’ in Rancière’s sense. For Rancière, what is problematic about such a consensual order is that it is predicated on certain modes of speaking about and understanding what is important and who is to be included and what is to be excluded from the order.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the novel represents the questions that European consensus democracies fail to address: how can it be justified that the ultra-rich can remain billionaires, exploitation of sweatshop labour can continue, and children can die ‘from hunger and disease’ in the contemporary world? Voices exposing such inequalities are excluded from the consensual framework, and hence these wrongs need to be addressed in another way, i.e. in demonstrations. These demonstrations tell us something crucial about the nature of politics, as Rancière (2001) writes that ‘politics makes visible that which had no reason to be seen, it lodges one world into another’. In a consensual political framework, the political wrongs mentioned above are not problems to be actively addressed or seen. But the political act of dissensus, in this case the demonstrations, tries to make these excluded viewpoints visible. Such political action enables the possibility of radical democracy that would enable excluded voices to be heard.

Habila’s novel exposes these problems of consensus politics, which excludes antagonistic forces. However, the novel also carefully refuses to romanticize violence against the establishment, and the main character somewhat sarcastically considers the squatters to be naïve as they can momentarily engage in idealism but in the future can ‘start a family and surround themselves with the empty accoutrements of position and power, the same things they now deride’ (21). At the same time, his cynicism is also partially challenged as he realizes that unlike other people observing the surrounding political problems, the activists are at least doing something to oppose the political order that remains oppressive in many ways. Later he thinks to himself:

I realized I missed them; I missed . . . listening to them talk about everything, from global warming to despicable politicians to refugees, even when I secretly, arrogantly considered them naïve and hopelessly idealistic. Now I had to admit they were at least able to think of something, and others, apart from themselves, they were willing to throw stones at the police and even go to jail for the ideals—how many people could do that? (30)

These activists are, in fact, engaged in political action, at least for now. However, the novel subtly juxtaposes the undocumented immigrants and their situations with the position of

these activists, as it represents the impasses the immigrants face as people who *cannot* move on with their lives or opt out of the painful political battles.

Exclusionary Europeanness remains a major issue to be addressed when we talk about undocumented immigrants in Europe today. They are obviously not citizens of any European country, and hence their voices are usually excluded from public deliberations in the public sphere. In the case of the undocumented immigrants, the questions of being heard and seen are a matter of life and death – both in the novel and in our contemporary reality. As mentioned earlier, the consensus politics makes certain ideological settings look normal, as if there were no alternatives to the ways things are. This was already addressed in connection with the normalization of such inequalities as the ultra-rich keeping their wealth and sweatshops staying in business. But the same normalizing thought process can be discussed in connection with the undocumented immigrants. In connection with the migrant crisis, one could ask, for instance, how it becomes normalized as a practice that African and middle Eastern migrants are left to die in the Mediterranean. How does it become understood as an unavoidable thing to do? In the context of Europe, Nicos Trimikliniotis (2014) has written of ‘an exclusionary Europeanization . . . [which is] present at the core of European nation-states and at an EU level,’ and he further maintains that the ‘politics of racism . . . is a mainstream process, at the heart of which lies a racist ideological core in European institutions’ (80). Such drastic racist politics are depicted in Habila’s novel as well, as it shows how this racist worldview creates a normalized consensus in which the places of insiders and outsiders are clearly marked. As Swyngedouw (2018) writes, based on the work of Giorgio Agamben, such an order ‘relies on both including all in a consensual pluralist order and excluding radically those who posit themselves outside the consensus. For the latter, . . . the law is suspended; they are literally put outside the law and treated as extremists and terrorists’ (36).

Against these racist institutionalized European politics, the novel juxtaposes particularly two characters who occupy tenuous and precarious positions: Mark in Germany and Juma in the UK. Mark is one of the squatters whom the protagonist befriends early in the novel, and he is openly revolutionary, ‘hurling a stone towards the line of policemen’ (26) in a demonstration and claiming that one should “‘Resist the system”” (27). Mark is also an artist and a film student although ‘his registration had expired – something to do with school fees,’ and soon enough he is arrested by the police, and ‘things got more complicated when they discovered his visa was expired. Now it was a case for the immigration service’ (31). Later Mark’s lawyer tells the protagonist that Mark’s “‘application for visa renewal was declined”” and continues to inform him that Mark’s “‘real name is Mary”” (55). It becomes clear that Mark is escaping from his oppressive family culture in Malawi, as they don’t understand his life choices. His American girlfriend is concerned about his truly precarious situation: “‘They are going to send him back to Malawi – it is the worst thing that can happen to him. He cannot go back”” (31). Mark’s situation is truly tenuous and he is living in a state of precarity.

The demonstrations organized by the dissident actors often become violent, and the novel also shows how a ‘violent encounter remains indeed one of the few courses open for the affective staging of active discontent’ (Swyngedouw 2018, 37). Such violent encounters are represented in the novel when undocumented immigrants and their supporters have conflicts with right-wing activists and/or police, both in



Berlin and in London. One of these troubling demonstrations is depicted in Berlin, where a group of undocumented migrants, including Mark, must lodge in terrible circumstances in 'Heim,' which the protagonist refers to as 'some region of Dante's *Inferno*' (60). 'Heim' – which ironically invokes the German word for home in its name – is attacked by the police because the neighbours 'had complained to the council, they felt threatened, their daughters and sons were not safe on the streets where refugees sold drugs, and got drunk and fought' (64–5). German citizens vocalize their concerns regarding the supposedly threatening undocumented migrants, which corresponds to what Swyngedouw (2018) writes about 'xenophobic or nationalist movements [which] arise [in contemporary settings], whereby "incorrect" outsiders are violently excluded often through erecting all manner of new material, legal or other geographical barriers, walls, and camps' (36). In the novel, these unwanted outsiders have ventured too close to the core of German national 'home' and a more proper form of exclusion needs to be invented in order to keep them out. The concerns of the German citizens are indeed heard and the police arrive to help them and evict the immigrants, who are locked inside the 'Heim' and refuse to leave the place as they are not offered any other place to go to. In the novel the undocumented migrants remain the outsiders, as their voices or concerns are not registered by the establishment. They don't need to be heard.

Nevertheless, the novel also represents how the excluded group in Berlin refuses to give up but instead demands to be heard, and in fact its political sympathizers arrive as well: 'But soon activists in the city heard of the blockade and descended upon the street . . . chanting in solidarity with the inmates, shouting at the police to leave' (64–5). Once again the novel illustrates how, to quote Swyngedouw (2018): 'consensus does not equal peace or absence of fundamental conflict' (36). It is only through these demonstrations that the 'outsiders' can vocalize their opposition to the mainstream order. However, somewhat helplessly Mark's American girlfriend Lorelle and others observe the events unfold: "'On the third day, when the police got tired of the standoff and threatened to break in and drag them out, the migrants soaked their mattresses, bedding and floors in kerosene, they promised to set the building and themselves aflame. Some went to the roof and threatened to jump'" (66). The migrants perform their rights and demand to be heard. Through such an instance, the voiceless could gain voice and be heard within the given political realm. Jean-Philippe Deranty (2014) explains this by stating that 'democratic politics occurs when certain elements in society that are deemed insensible [or voiceless, merely making noise] are challenging the governing political order' (96).

At the same time, there is a fundamentally tragic element involved in this demonstration: it is only through the idea of harming oneself that a person can even possibly gain access to some rights. In her analysis of the novel, Maria López (2022) has importantly drawn from Judith Butler's reading of the interdependence of political resistance and vulnerability. She shows how vulnerability becomes a political tool, although a precarious one when Mark and later Juma put their own bodies at risk in the novel. López concludes that 'the public space is seized by those who have no right to gather there and who, by doing so, reconfigure the materiality of public space' (8). This is, in fact, the demonstrators' intent, but contra their impetus, the political demonstration doesn't shake the present order. Instead, it is in this violent encounter that Mark dies in unclear circumstances. Lorelle tells the protagonist: "'Mark was there, on the roof . . . I saw him fall, from the roof

to the concrete pavement” (66). The reader knows about Mark’s perilous situation as he cannot return to Malawi, which would happen, however, if he were caught. His position remains precarious, and it is unclear in the end whether he has jumped or been pushed to his death. Lorelle believes that he was pushed “because he was different, and even in that moment, that desperate moment, they couldn’t forget that” (67). Through Mark’s character the particularly dangerous situation of sexual minorities is exposed as he lacks protection in various ways.

The novel’s critical approach is complex, as it repeatedly draws attention to the privileges of those who can sympathize with the excluded people, but who can also walk away. This moment can be analysed as an episode of dissensus, as a group of characters – Europeans and Africans – acts together against the police and state in a moment of equality. However, whereas the undocumented immigrants have locked themselves in the ‘heim’, the police firmly keep the activists away. Lorelle later explains to the protagonist: “Already the police were throwing tear gas at the activists, warning them to keep away. They wouldn’t let us go beyond their perimeter” (65). The novel exposes the issue of how European countries decisively define the line between the activists and the asylum seekers: those who have rights and those who do not in contemporary Europe. As Swyngedouw (2022) writes, this risks turning the rights holders into ‘mere spectators of the suffering of others from the cocoon of their sanctuary spaces’ (62). Lorelle has ventured away from her ‘sanctuary space’ to support her boyfriend, and in the end has witnessed him falling to his death without being able to do anything about it. This is tragic, but the novel also clearly highlights her and the main character’s access to mobility (contra to Mark’s), as they discuss what they will do next. Habila reminds his readers of these inequalities, as the novel avoids depicting the supporters as saviours.

Later in the novel, the protagonist learns to know Juma, a Nigerian asylum seeker, in London. The same logic of the subaltern relying on self-harm as the last resort of political resistance is represented later in the novel, when Juma perishes from a hunger strike in London. Juma tells the narrator: ‘Hunger is a tool. It is power. By refusing to eat, you are telling your enemy, There is nothing you can do to me any more’ (278; see also López 2022, 8). The novel represents this moment of dissensus, which also gains media attention, as a more promising act of dissidence compared to the demonstration that leads to Mark’s death, because the latter ‘wasn’t even in the news,’ as the protagonist hopelessly concludes (66). Due to the hunger strike, Juma has been forcefully hospitalized, as ‘his health was failing’ (260). Molly, an English nurse helping Juma to escape, tells the protagonist: ‘I have lost my job already ... and I don’t care if I go to jail. I just couldn’t sit and watch them try to force-feed him with those tubes’ (261). She is part of ‘an organization, calling itself “The Guardians” ... [which] have been hiding the escaped asylum seeker [Juma] for weeks now, moving him from one safe house to another, evading the police and immigration officials. His asylum application had failed and he was about to be deported when he escaped with the help of the group, who claimed the deportation order was illegal since they had an appeal pending’ (255–56). This is the clearest example in the novel of Europeans working together with undocumented immigrants to create dissensus. Juma’s act is performative in nature, and as Swyngedouw (2018) notes: ‘The political arises ... in the act of performatively staging equality, a procedure that simultaneously makes

visible the “wrong” of the given situation and demonstrates equality’ (46). Juma’s hunger strike is a political act through which he can make the wrong, his treatment, visible and claim his equality among people who should all univocally have access to protection and shelter.

In the words of Michael Feola (2019), such ‘political action ... possesses a fundamentally generative element: radical agents become subjects in the first place by acting in excess of their “proper” place – laying claim to rights and values that have historically been inaccessible from that position’ (38). In that sense, Juma becomes visible in this political order for the first time; through his hunger strike he emerges as a subject within this field where he previously was not worthy of perception. He becomes a political subject who gains visibility through his performative act, and in fact ‘Juma appeared to be quite popular, there were dozens of articles and opinion pieces about him in the papers’ (256). The case becomes particularly visible as the news media gets involved as well: ‘There was a brief mention of Juma on the news, on Channel 4. The shadow immigration minister was condemning the Home Office’s cruel and inhumane immigration policy. ... Migrants’ rights groups were urging their members to go on hunger strike in solidarity with Juma. Inmates in detention centres all over the country were refusing to eat’ (280). Habila’s novel demonstrates this moment of dissensus, as this sudden emergence into visibility is a disruption of the distribution of the sensible. This moment has radical potential; however, the nation state, the UK, doesn’t remove its barriers. Instead, as the media coverage grows more intense, the country tries desperately to get rid of Juma, although in vain, and in the end he quietly dies at a Harmondsworth Removal Centre. As we have already seen, Habila carefully contextualizes such political action in a complex framework of refugee and asylum policies in Europe. Even if the novel represents a moment of political dissensus in the form of European and African activists coming together to help an asylum seeker, their acts do not promise an ideal, more inclusive future Europe, but instead, the contemporary European order wins and the asylum seeker dies in prison. The European and African citizens who have shown solidarity with the asylum seeker realize that they cannot change the situation. The border politics remain unchanged.

It is telling that the media’s interest in Juma’s case dies:

Liam and Molly will protest ... but eventually they stop coming ... for even the kindest and most empathetic of us can get emotionally fatigued ... The din in the media quietens. Juma sits in his cell ... his bones become as frail as twigs. One day the guards open the door and he is not there, only a pile of twigs on the floor. The cleaner comes and sweeps up the twigs and bags them into the dumpster. (295)

Particularly the ending of the novel painfully reinscribes the modes of exclusionary Europeanization. We can connect this treatment of Juma’s life and body to Mbembe’s (2003) discussion of necropolitics and necropower, which account for ... the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead* (40). More recently Mbembe (2019) has strongly criticized European immigration policies for producing ‘a peculiar carceral space in which people deemed surplus, unwanted, or illegal are governed through abdication of any responsibility for their lives and their welfare’ (97). The

utter lack of respect towards the asylum seeker's life and dead body is highlighted in the last sentence of the above quote, in which Juma's frail body is treated as trash which can be disposed of. This image sums up the shameful neglect and lack of respect shown to these humans who are strictly excluded from the present order of European nation states.

The troubling 'closure' of the novel forcefully reiterates the deeply uncomfortable reality of present orders in which some subjects freely move between borders whereas others have no access to mobility. Thus, in the novel, once again the privileged people – both Europeans and Africans – walk away, since seemingly that is their only option. This is highlighted in the notion of travelling and the idea of mobility: whereas Juma is confined in the 'prison' cell at the removal centre, the other characters are free to move and travel, and eventually leave this tragedy behind. Molly gets a new job and Liam continues his studies. And it is not surprising that after this depiction of Juma's death, the narrator tells his girlfriend, Portia, that they should leave Europe behind and go back to her home in Lusaka. López notes: 'the fact that this final journey is one back to Africa shows the failure of Europe as a place of hospitality and the long way we still have to go in order to turn Europe into a place where African migrants and refugees will be welcomed as just travellers' (7; See also Coundouriotis 2020, 193).

## Conclusion

I have here examined how the novel, as both a depiction and a manifestation of cultural dissensus, refuses to accept European consensus politics and instead emphasizes the impasses this order creates in the lives of the migrants. First, as a depiction of dissensus, Habila's novel reveals the inequality informing European consensus politics: By suggesting a radical solidarity between refugees and their European/American/African collaborators on one hand, and showing the national boundaries drastically dividing these two groups into different camps on the other hand, the novel exposes rigid borders and the havoc they create in characters' lives.

Secondly, I have suggested here that the novel embodies a manifestation of dissensus, as it 'articulate[s] affective politics and demonstrate[s] new ways of "doing" democracy' (Tolia-Kelly 2019, 126). The novel refuses to reaffirm the existing representational modes of depicting the undocumented migrants, which often comply with the order that silences this group of people. Rather than depicting undocumented immigrants as helpless victims, the novel shows their stubborn activism against suffocating boundaries, and thus depicts them as active characters trying to improve their own situation. The focus is firmly on the suffocating structures that often violently shut down refugees' or asylum seekers' attempts to claim their rights. The novel thus turns the reader's gaze back at Europe as a fortress that refuses to address these problems. Furthermore, the novel refuses to depict European and other activists sympathizing with the undocumented immigrants as heroes or saviours; rather, their access to privileges and mobility is repeatedly illustrated throughout the text.

Habila has selected a difficult theme for his novel, as the problem of representing people without political voice is a precarious and necessarily incomplete enterprise foregrounded in the privileges of the writer. Furthermore, their stories can become appropriated by artists, as is explicitly represented in the character of Gina. By maintaining an awareness of these representational pitfalls and by explicitly addressing them, Habila is

seeking new ways to represent the present European orders with their terrible impasses. Artistic enterprises such as Habila's novel, which engage in 'the dismantling of the ways we think of artistic regimes of production can contribute to a more democratic politics and aesthetics' (Tolia-Kelly 2019, 125). Dissensual art seeks to redistribute the sensible, as it is 'at points of dissensus, where the palette of sanctioned sensibilities shifts ground to be refigured to incorporate "other" sensibilities and affective expressive politics' (Tolia-Kelly 2019, 126). It can thus help to reconfigure which political questions are included in public deliberations and provoke new, more democratic ways of seeing immigration issues. In the end, I'd like to return to Mark's question, which is uttered by the character lacking legal protection and hence carries a heightened immediacy: "'what is the point of art if it is not to resist?'" (61). Habila's novel constitutes a thoughtful response to that question.

## Notes

1. Maria López (2022) has discussed some of these interactions between Europeans and Africans as moments signalling hospitality in Derridian framework.
2. However, in early June 2023, the members of EU met and agreed on 'the Pact on Migration and Asylum [in order] to reform EU asylum law' (Woollard 2023). Even if this pact was hailed in news media as a historical deal in terms of acknowledging the rights of asylum seekers, Catherine Woollard, Director of the European Council on Refugees and Exiles, claims that it fails to address real problems, as 'the reforms increase the focus at the borders'. In consequence, 'People will still arrive seeking protection in Europe but they will face a harsher system' (Woollard 2023).
3. Various studies have shown how the public media fails to do justice to immigrant experiences. See e.g. (Horsti 2016; Scarabicchi 2019). Bruce Bennett (2018) claims that 'The "refugee crisis" ... remains only intermittently visible in mainstream Northern European news media' (15). When the 'crisis' is represented in the news media, then the refugees are often pictured in a dehumanized manner. Furthermore, news media has not only witnessed these borders concerning us vs. them, but has firmly helped to produce and maintain such divisions as well (Zaborowski and Georgiou 2019, 93). Hence rather than challenging exclusionary European politics, the news media actually tends to go hand in hand with it.
4. Habila (2022) has stated that 'the global south countries are the victims of this inequality [migration crisis] ... [and] mostly it is a result of predatory and exploitative policies by multinational corporations and so-called developed countries, going back to colonialism'.
5. This humanitarian reading, with its goal of inciting empathetic responses, can also further highlight the role of a compassionate and ethically-inclined reader, whereas the migrant becomes further marginalized. Joseph Slaughter (2007) crucially emphasizes that such reading practices 'tend to coalesce in a patronizing humanitarian model of reading that effectively reinforces the disparity between rights holders and those who cannot enact their rights' (305). This entails the risk of representing once again the Europeans as the acting persons and the refugees as helpless characters.
6. Habila (2019a, 2019b) importantly points out that 'I guess we have come to associate the immigrant story with stories of black or brown people seeking refuge or opportunity in western countries. But the colonialists who went to Africa to conquer and to live there were also migrants'.
7. It is within the public sphere where such deliberations can take place. Habermas et al. (1974) defined the concept of 'public sphere' in the following manner: 'By the "public sphere" we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens ... Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, with the guarantee of freedom to express and

publish their opinions – about matters of general interest’ (Habermas, Lennox, and Lennox 1974, 49).

8. Rancière (1999) claims that ‘The problem is knowing whether the subjects who count in the interlocution “are” or “are not,” whether they are speaking or just making a noise’ (50; see also Feola 2019, 36).

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