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Death of the Emissary: Language, Metonymy, and European Complicity in Juan Diego Botto's "La carta"

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Abstract

Juan Diego Botto's 2005 monologue "La carta" explores the real-life death of Yaguine Koita and Fodé Tounkara, two Guinean boys who in 1999 died attempting to reach Europe with a letter addressed to European officials. A close reading of Botto's monologue illustrates how the letter by Yaguine and Fodé functions as an archive that explores and redefines the liminal spaces, and therefore the relationship, between Europe and Africa. The monologue and the letter elucidate the boys' position as emissaries who seek to reconcile the European continent with its complicity in the state of Africa.

More often than not, when African migrants die trying to make their way to Europe, we have no information about their reasoning for the journey across the Mediterranean. One famous exception is the case of Yaguine Koita and Fodé Tounkara, two teenage Guinean boys who snuck into the undercarriage of a Sabena Airlines

plane en route to Brussels, Belgium, in July 1999. They died in flight due to the subzero temperatures, but when their bodies were found, among their personal belongings was a letter in French addressed to “les membres et responsables d’Europe” (Delepierre 13). I propound that an analysis of this letter suggests a sufficiently diplomatic register such that the boys should be seen as emissaries, “[diplomatic representatives] on a mission to gain information, or to gain adherents to, or promote the interests of a cause” (“Emissary”). In this case, the cause is a humanitarian mission aimed at helping the children of Guinea, and Africa by extension, to gain access to education and escape poverty through reparations from Europe. Their story has served as the inspiration for several works of art, notably Juan Diego Botto’s monologue entitled “La carta,” which appears in his 2005 play *El privilegio de ser perro*. This monologue, which takes place in the plane’s undercarriage in the minutes before the boys succumb to the bitter cold, is framed around the construction of the letter as a key part of the journey. A close reading of the monologue elucidates how the letter by Yaguine and Fodé functions as an archive that explores and redefines the liminal spaces, and therefore the relationship, between Europe and Africa. The monologue and the letter elucidate the boys’ position as emissaries who seek to reconcile the European continent with its complicity in the state of Africa.

On July 28, 1999, two fourteen-year-old Guinean boys, Yaguine Koita and Fodé Tounkara, stowed away in the undercarriage of a Sabena Airlines flight from Conakry, Guinea, to Brussels, Belgium. As journalists Tim Sullivan and Raf Casert reported, “Despite the West African heat, both [boys] were wrapped in sweaters. At their sides flapped thin plastic bags jammed with birth certificates, school report cards, photographs and a letter” (“For a Pair of African Stowaways” 1). Despite evidence demonstrating that they made preparations for the cold of Europe, the boys ultimately froze to death during the journey due to the subzero temperatures in the undercarriage of the plane. Their bodies then made the intercontinental journey repeatedly for five days until they were discovered on August 2, 1999. Upon discovery, their story could have been, as Sullivan and Casert noted, “just another case of foolhardy stowaways who, had they survived, would have been bundled back to Africa without leaving a trace” (“For a Pair of African Stowaways” 1). In addition, there was an overall sense of compassion fatigue because the arrival of dead migrant bodies had already become a daily occurrence by 1999, particularly in Mediterranean nations like Spain. Compassion fatigue is a phenomenon that Susan Sontag studies in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, where she explains that, “People don’t become inured to what they are shown [. . .] because of the quantity of images dumped on them. It is passivity that dulls feeling” (102; italics mine). The inability to engage actively with the multitude of news stories about migrant crossings leaves the reader/spectator as an observer. The death of migrants was something now ingrained in European consciousness as the waves of perilous migrant crossings into Europe had been happening for several years.

Due in large part to compassion fatigue, the story of the boys’ death was initially not deemed worthy of being front-page news. Antonio Bañón Hernández outlines in *Discurso e inmigración: propuestas para el análisis* de un debate social how quickly media depictions of the boys changed in Belgium:

Esta noticia, sin embargo, tuvo dos versiones: en la primera, la prensa belga simplemente relató el suceso en espacios de segundo rango. Más tarde, al descubrirse la carta, ese mismo suceso pasó a las primeras páginas. Es decir, la presencia del texto consiguió conmover a quienes no se habían sentido afectados por el verdadero drama: la muerte por congelación de estos niños. (173–74)

The lack of reaction to the initial story of their death speaks to the repetitive media exposure to the death of migrants attempting to reach Europe. The frequency of these deaths in the media desensitizes the European consciousness toward the death of the Other. However, authorities noticed among the boys’ belongings an envelope containing a letter addressed to the members and officials of Europe and subsequently contacted the investigating judge to make the letter public. It was first published in the Belgian newspaper *Le Soir* on August 4,

1999, and within days, it was translated into a number of different languages and published in newspapers throughout Europe and the United States.

During the next several months, the story of the two boys not only spurred conversation around the humanitarian crisis in Africa, but it also shaped political discourse on African immigration to Europe. Churches, charities, and multinational organizations, such as the United Nations, campaigned for change in Africa using the boys as flag bearers of their cause (Sullivan and Casert, "Youths' Plea Galvanizes Europe"). In fact, as James G. Ferguson acknowledges:

Those who discussed the letter in Europe in the days following its discovery tended to assimilate it to the issue of debt relief; indeed, the letter was cited in this connection by actors as diverse as the radical Jubilee 2000 campaign for Third World debt cancellation and IMF president Michael Camdessus himself (who reportedly read the letter aloud to the IMF and World Bank Assembly on the occasion of announcing the Cologne Initiative for the reduction of debt to the poorest countries). (563–64)

In 2000, the Belgian Centre National de Coopération au Développement organized a petition signed by more than 2,000 people that schoolchildren from Brussels delivered to the European Parliament (Kiesel). The boys' letter thus allowed the public to engage with their story in a way that their death did not. In particular, international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund were able to use the letter as a diplomatic tool for development in Africa.

In Spain, engagement with the story assumed another layer of complexity as journalists began to criminalize the action of the boys. The boys' letter was first published in Spain on August 5, 1999, in *El País* as part of an article by Walter Oppenheimer entitled, "Conmoción en Bélgica por la carta de dos niños guineanos congelados en un avión." Although the title describes the case as upheaval over a letter, the article's subtitle, "Los fallecidos, que se colaron en el tren de aterrizaje, suplicaban ayuda a los europeos," starts the process of criminalizing and subjugating the boys. Within a matter of days, the media modified the way in which they referred to these boys as deviants, such that in less than a week, they became old news. The inurement, as Bañón Hernández adds, was crafted through media representation:

Además, los 'niños' que pasaron a 'jóvenes' finalmente fueron referidos como 'dos guineanos' en la noticia aparecida en el mismo diario el 8 de agosto procedente de la agencia AFP y titulada: 'Repatriados los cadáveres de los guineanos muertos en vuelo.' En este cambio de denominaciones se aprecia el proceso de distanciamiento afectivo conforme pasa el tiempo y la noticia deja de serlo. [. . .] La conmoción había durado seis días. (174)

This deliberate change in tone over time shifts the public perception of their death from compassion to suspicion and disregard. Their rhetorical metamorphosis from "children" to simply "two Guineans" (which could be understood as "two adult men from Guinea") strips them of the innocence of their decision to stow away in the plane. The final newspaper headline that Bañón Hernández mentions even fails to acknowledge accurately how they died. The boys' presence in the European-bound plane created the suspicion necessary to strip them of their innocence. Emphasis and blame were placed on Yaguine and Fodé for being where they should not have been, rather than on the reasons why they would stow away in a plane with a letter in the first place.

As a result of compassion fatigue and sensational media representation, the story of Yaguine and Fodé was vulnerable to becoming just another report on the fatal attempts of sub-Saharan Africans to reach Europe. However, the presence of the letter allows the conversation to pivot and forces Belgium in particular to reconcile with its colonial past. It is the letter that positions the boys as emissaries and enables us to conceptualize them as rhetorical equals to the European politicians to whom they write who are engaged in transnational discourse in which they critique the contemporary relationship between Europe and Africa. The

notion of the boys as emissaries also suggests a utility of their story that facilitates reconciliation of the artistic portrayals of their journey through the use of metonymy and mimicry.

Language as an act of critique

Beyond the media's representation of Yaguine and Fodé's journey, there have been various artistic works since 1999 that serve to keep the story alive.² Among them is Juan Diego Botto's monologue entitled "La carta" in his 2005 play *El privilegio de ser perro*. The entire play is composed of four monologues of which "La carta" is the third. The first monologue, "Definitivamente, adiós," written by renowned Argentine playwright Roberto Cossa, is the story of three generations of immigrants and the nostalgia that exists on both sides of the Atlantic (Spain and Argentina) as a result of the various cycles of immigration that have occurred throughout the twentieth century. The second monologue, "Arquímedes," is the diatribe of a Spanish immigration officer explaining why immigrants should neither enter nor stay in Spain. The fourth and final monologue, "El privilegio de ser perro," centers around a scene that the narrator witnesses while living in New York City: A homeless man in Central Park, after smoking, puts out his cigarette butts on his dog, which causes an outrage among onlookers and provokes them to attack him in defense of the dog. As an immigrant, the narrator wishes to be a dog because they have the privilege of receiving affection from human beings, no matter their breed, whereas society ostracizes him for being an immigrant. In his play, Botto aims to humanize the migratory experience and combat anti-immigrant rhetoric. In using the true story of Yaguine and Fodé as the base for "La carta," Botto establishes a link between the stage and the deadly reality often occurring in the outside world. The monologue allows the boys' letter to speak to audiences who may or may not have remembered what happened in 1999.

The basis of Botto's adaptation of the letter can be traced to Oppenheimer's aforementioned article in *El País*. One notable change is the removal of the explicit references to Guinea. Botto's omission of the boys' national identity removes the specificity of the boys themselves and alters their story to universalize the migratory experience as one common across sub-Saharan Africa.³ As Baltasar Fra-Molinero discusses in regard to the representation of African migrants in Spanish cinema, the lack of identity markers ensures that "[the] Black immigrant is not a historical individual but an avatar of the eternal African other" (157). When asked about his reasoning for writing "La carta," Botto reveals that the story of Yaguine and Fodé:

[E]ra una historia que me parecía muy conmovedora porque la carta que ellos escribieron era profundamente ingenua, muy ingenua, muy naive y era un motivo para mí de que todo Europa se avergonzara del trato que dan a los inmigrantes y del abuso que se comete con África constantemente. África es para Europa y para gran parte del hemisferio norte una gran fábrica de recursos, de materias primas y son siempre sus ciudadanos muy maltratados. (Coleman 206)

Given this description, one could be tempted to connect his monologue to colonial discourses such as *White Man's Burden*.⁴ I, however, would posit that "La carta" aims to create recognition for the conditions that push immigrants to leave their homelands and thus shame Europeans for their xenophobic and/or racist treatment of the Other.

Although Botto interprets their letter as naive, Yaguine and Fodé draft their letter using a formal diplomatic register, which signifies an engagement in mimicry to create a powerful platform upon which they speak as equals to the European officials to whom they write. Once on that platform, they are ultimately able to critique the European political consciousness for its role in the underdevelopment of Africa. As Komla Mossan Nubukpo asserts:

Interpeller le conquérant dans la langue qu'il connaît le mieux, c'est-à-dire la sienne propre, c'est imposer une limite à son pouvoir; c'est lui administrer un des soins appropriés dans le but de le guérir de la 'salutaire' amnésie stratégique grâce à laquelle il ne s'est, jusque-là, souvenu que de lui-même;

c'est, pour le colonisé, refuser de rester sagement là où le maître a bien voulu le caser; bref c'est poser un acte critique. (404)

In structuring their critique through mimetic discourse, the boys are able to challenge Europe's amnesia in regards to its colonial and neo-colonial connection to Africa. This critique would be contrary to what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues in "Can the Subaltern Speak?," stating that the subaltern subject has no voice as a result of using the colonizer's language. Furthermore, as Homi Bhabha states, "In mimicry, the representation of identity and meaning is rearticulated along the axis of metonymy. As Lacan reminds us, mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization of repression of difference, but a form of resemblance, that differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically" (128). The letter is thus a textual representation of the boys' intentionality as they assert a case for reparations that would benefit all African youth.

As emissaries, the boys function as subversives who wish to dismantle the status quo of Afro-European relations. What is evident in the original letter is a call for the European Union to understand how its colonial past continues to affect Africa and is in part responsible for the massive waves of migration into Europe today. This call is made clear in the last sentence of the original letter, which states, "Et n'oubliez pas que c'est à vous que nous devons nous plaindre de la faiblesse de notre force en Afrique" (Delepierre 13). From their letter, we understand Africa's weakness to be the result of a calculated lack of organization, which is connected to other issues they name such as education, public health, war, nutrition, and poverty. These factors are catalysts for the flow of African migrants into Europe. Thus, the boys' letter establishes a path through which Europe could rectify its colonial damage to Africa and simultaneously slow the flow of migrants.

Metonymy

In "La carta," the set is designed such that the boys are seated on a mountain of suitcases. The stage directions state, "El espectador sólo escucha a Fodé, aunque éste parece dialogar con su compañero e interacciona con él. La luz de esta pieza está muy acotada, de modo que el escenario desaparece y sólo vemos la carita del actor y parte de su cuerpo, que se pierde en las sombras" (Botto 41). The dim lighting of the stage in addition to the sounds of the engine motor begin the monologue with a bleak backdrop for Fodé's first lines, which he speaks while shivering.

The scene begins as Fodé discusses a kite that he and Yoguiné made the previous summer⁵:

Como cosas pequeñas sirven para acordarte de cosas más grandes, ¿me entiendes? Es como la cometa que hiciste el verano pasado, ¿te acuerdas? . . . Nooo, en verano, cuando fuimos a la ciudad, que encontraste un banderín de plástico con el símbolo de Europa, así, azul y con estrellas, ¿te acuerdas? Que me decías que les ponían estrellas para que el cielo los tratara con cariño. (Botto 41)

The kite functions as a metonymic symbol to create a critical exegesis of Europe. First, according to Yoguiné's interpretation, without those stars, Europe would be dark like Africa. Given this interpretation, the boys follow the shining stars of Europe to deliver their message, similar to the Three Wise Men who follow the Star of David to deliver gifts to baby Jesus. The boys, rather than bear gifts, carry the letter with a request of messianic proportions in that its fulfillment would greatly alter Africa.

Secondly, Yoguiné's interpretation of the flag's design conceives of Europe as a promised land, almost holy in significance. In fact, the flag of the European Union, derived from that of the Council of Europe, is defined through religious discourse. The official definition of the flag found on the Council of Europe's website states, "Against the background of blue sky, the stars form a circle, symbolising union. The number of stars is fixed, twelve being the symbol of perfection and completeness and bringing to mind the apostles, the sons of Jacob, the labours of Hercules, the months in the year, etc." (Council of Europe). Therefore, the blue background of the

flag could be understood to be the night sky in which the stars shine or perhaps the various bodies of water around Europe where the stars are visible across the horizon. The description of the flag segues into what Fodé considers to be a universal metonymy: the cross, “. . . y después pensé en nuestra iglesia y cómo cada vez que ves una cruz hecha con palos o cosas que se cruzan enseguida te acuerdas de la iglesia y del cura y de la misa y de Jesús. ¿Sabes lo que digo? Que son cosas pequeñas que te hacen pensar en otras más grandes” (Botto 42).⁶ Therefore, the juxtaposition of the European Union’s flag with the cross, which both hold significant symbolic weight, serves to reinforce the teenagers’ idealization of Europe as a messiah.

The presentation of cultural metonymies predicates the need for the letter. Fodé explains, “Por eso te digo que hay que escribir una carta, porque sería algo serio, algo importante. Pues, porque sí, porque se vería que no pedimos nada para nosotros sino que venimos en nombre de más gente. [. . .] Es como si fuéramos mensajeros” (Botto 42). The boys, however, are more than mere messengers. Rather, they function as emissaries as they speak directly to Europe on behalf of Africa. Fodé appears to be cognizant of the power of symbols in discussing the metonymic value of Europe, because as he explains, “Primero, porque es un documento; es algo . . . , no sé, oficial. Además es . . . [. . .]. Eso es la palabra; es un símbolo, y allí les encantan los símbolos” (Botto 42). His generalization that Europeans love symbols reflects an understanding of the image that Europeans, vis-à-vis the European Union, wish to project of themselves to the rest of the world. This image, though, is the same one they internalize and aim to transplant to their homeland via the expected response to their letter. The creation of a letter, symbolic in its own right, serves as a way to breach the European political consciousness and thus leads to an amenable reception of the letter and the plea they hope to present to the European government.

From the letter’s first words, the boys position themselves linguistically as emissaries, as they address their correspondence to the “Excelencias, señores miembros y responsables de Europa,” the leaders of the European Union referenced symbolically through its flag discussed earlier (Botto 49). Directing their letter to this group of political leaders reflects the proposition of Brinda Charry and Gitanjali Shahani:

[T]he symbolic function of the emissary is twofold, perhaps even paradoxical. In so far as he represents a certain group and serves to further a certain purpose, he stands for cultural ‘authenticity,’ the fixity of communal identity, and specific group-interest. In that he represents and serves to further communication between cultures and peoples, he also is a reminder of the possibility of cultural exchange and mobility, and the possible transformation of cultural identity that is the inevitable result of transactions with otherness and difference. (10)

The boys thus function through metonymic operations, through which their bodies and their letter speak with the hopes of creating an exchange that will further communication with Europe and transform the African continent. Although the emissary in this instance is a nonstate actor (a child), their political action nevertheless informs states through the message the letter delivers.

One must question why they choose to address all European government officials instead of those from one particular nation. The answer lies in the conceptualization of European identity in contrast to African identity in the monologue. Through the creation of the European Union, the proliferation of the euro as a transnational currency, and the creation of a continental parliament, Europe has constructed a narrative of itself as one entity. Africa, on the other hand, now composed of 55 nations, has continental organizations such as the African Union, but there has not been a push for a unified African identity since the Pan-African movement of the 1960s. The persistent image of Europe as a land of prosperity lends itself to this use of synecdoche in which nations desire to be known as part of Europe. Spain in particular in its democratic era has used this desire to be European to frame its policy in relation to other nations. As Graham and Sánchez note:

So Spain, in spite of its own long and painful history of underdevelopment, economic emigration, and otherness, far from recognizing a commonality and attempting to integrate the experience of the marginalized into its self-proclaimedly pluralistic culture, has instead assumed the stance of 'First World' Europe. It is almost as if constructing and adopting the same 'others' or outgroups as the rest were considered the hallmark of Spain's membership of the 'club.' (415)

In aligning itself with the "First World" stances of the European Union, Spain, however, finds itself in the position of being a gatekeeper of Fortress Europe.⁷ As a result, Spain remains in its role as a theoretical "Third Space" between the "First World" (Europe) and the "Third World" (Africa and the rest of the Global South), while futilely attempting to disavow its long-standing connection to the latter to be closer to the former.

Given the reference to the European Union earlier in the monologue, the boys' definition of Europe is that of the nations that belong to the European Union. Brussels is the capital of the European Union, which may explain why the two boys stowed away in that specific flight in 1999. The discussion of the European Union flag suggests that the boys knew that their chance of a response was greater if they wrote to the international body because of perceived unity among the member states of the European Union. The boys reinforce the postcolonial metonymy of Europe as a homogenous place in terms of culture and experiences. As Sabrina Brancato states, "Whiteness produces some sort of acknowledgement of a (however artificial) shared identity. Europe, in fact, is assumed to be White (not simply racially but also culturally and religiously)" (3). Similarly, in the monologue, the boys symbolize Africa, a continent often taken to be a homogenous unit, a fact which they exploit as they explain their purpose of "hablarles del objetivo de nuestro viaje y del sufrimiento que padecemos los niños y los jóvenes de África" (Botto 49). In the monologue, there is no direct reference to where the flight is going, and thus, Europe is simply a placeholder for many specific destinations. The boys speak of Europe as a homogenous unit to create a dialectical relationship between the two continents (i.e., rich vs. poor, educated vs. uneducated, white vs. black) throughout their letter, which enables the final critique.

Audiovisual reproduction of the letter on stage

Fodé's reading of the letter is the monologue's turning point in that it creates a textual and performative shift. As he changes from addressing his companion, Yoguine, to addressing the European leaders, his speech also addresses the European audience watching the play and gives the protagonist the chance to address personally the audience that the actual teenagers never had a chance to address. As the stage directions state:

Empieza a leer lo que está escribiendo. Entra una música suave de bandoneón y su voz se funda con una voz grabada que lee el mismo texto y continúa leyendo toda la carta. Ésta a su vez se proyecta sobre una lateral del escenario. Durante la lectura de la carta la luz va y viene de nuestro protagonista. Lo encontramos en distintas posiciones para marcar una suerte de varias elipsis encadenadas. (Botto 49)

The extradiegetic music from the *bandoneón* is distinct from the diegetic noise of the airplane engines we hear throughout the rest of the monologue, thus allowing Fodé to express and project his thoughts. The conversion of Fodé's corporal voice to an amplified recording captures the endemic issues that these boys represent—poverty, lack of education, nutrition, etc. The amplified voice, which drowns out the sound of the airplane motor heard through the rest of the monologue, establishes transcendence, in which the African voice booms onto the intended European audience of the letter. Meanwhile, the visual projection of the letter, which scrolls up on one of the lateral wings of the stage, reinforces that this message cannot be ignored visually or audibly. The audiovisual representation of the letter functions as a way to combat the desensitization and compassion fatigue of the spectator. All that is heard and seen is the letter, such that it becomes a character of its own and transcends the lives of the boys in the plane, similar to what happened in 1999 when the letter took a life of its own and the boys became secondary.

The letter invokes a supplicatory tone and the notion of familial ties as the boys wrote, “Les suplicamos por el amor de su continente y por el sentimiento que tienen ustedes hacia nuestro pueblo y, sobre todo, por la afinidad y el amor que tienen ustedes por sus hijos a los que aman para toda la vida” (Botto 49). There is an affective tie between Europe and Africa expressed using different nouns; the degree to which Africans are esteemed (*sentimiento*) is lesser than the esteem that Europeans have toward their own (*amor* and *afinidad*). The boys create an analogy through which Europeans should be able to see Africans and care for them as their own. The analogy therefore establishes a paternal responsibility by part of the father (Europe), rather than a charitable giving. To reinforce this familial duty, they employ sycophantic language when they state, “Además por el amor y la timidez de su creador, Dios todopoderoso, que les ha dado todas las buenas experiencias, riquezas y poderes para construir y organizar bien su continente para ser el más bello y admirable de todos” (Botto 50). According to this quote, Africans see themselves as incapable of said good experiences, riches, and power to establish a stable society. The language, “in conformity with those codes of protocol and efficacy which regulate the relationship of intermediation, offers a brutal summary of relations between Africa and the West” (Bayart and EllisBayart 264). The inferiority they project is intentional because the boys are aware of the European preconceptions of Africa and are highlighting them to provoke guilt via White Man’s Burden. This supplication invoking God reiterates the notion of Africa as figuratively and literally below Europe, thus further from God’s blessings of intelligence, wealth, and power. Given this framework, the boys reside within the bounds of neo-colonial oppression and are unwilling and unable to conceive of Africa without its ties to Europe. Once again, the metropole, Europe, is positioned as the shining star that will guide Africa to development.

Progress is only attainable through the help of Europe, “Por eso nosotros, los niños y jóvenes africanos, les pedimos hagan una gran organización eficaz para África, para permitirnos progresar” (Botto 50). This plea omits the fact that the organization of Africa was established and maintained (or rather left in disarray) by Europe very much by design through historical events such as the 1885 Partition of Africa. Therefore, asking Europe to help redevelop Africa furthers the polemic notion of Europe as a savior. It is also clear that the boys aspire to recreate Europe in Africa, “les pedimos que nos ayuden a estudiar para ser como ustedes en África” (Botto 50). The desire to be “como ustedes” could be read as an attempt to erase African identity as something that is bad and inferior, thus reaffirming what Frantz Fanon suggests when he wrote, “The Black man wants to be white” (xiii). Becoming Europeanized Africans would allow the boys to climb up to another echelon of African society, one that, in theory, would be on par with white European society. This view echoes those of scholars who argue that the boys had a “desideratum for the West” (Adeyanju and Oriola 949). However, I would argue that the letter implies otherwise for two reasons. First, the boys mention education as a major factor in their incapacity to change their livelihood, and therefore, being like Europeans would endow them with intellectual capital to foster change in their homeland. Second, the boys did not wish to stay in Europe. In fact, they knew there was the possibility of death before even arriving, hence the attention line of the envelope found on their bodies in 1999: “In case we die.”

One of the most important lines of the letter, “Por tanto, si ustedes ven que nos sacrificamos y exponemos nuestra vida, es porque se sufre demasiado en África,” not only dispels notions that the boys wanted to live in Europe, but also explains that they were sacrificing themselves for the betterment of their country and continent (Botto 50). This line in the original letter continues on to reference the need to end poverty and war, but the crucial sentiment of sacrifice is left untouched, which enables us to make a claim about the boys. It is known that the writers of the original letter were both Muslim as they each carried a green prayer book in their trousers (Sullivan and Casert “For a Pair of African Stowaways” 1). Therefore, given their religion, their journey could serve as a form of *saraka* (offering). For Sylviane Diouf, “Sadaqah are voluntary alms that the believer offers to acquire merit with Allah, to reinforce a prayer, to expiate a sin, or to conjure a potential danger. These offerings are given [. . .] whenever the believer wants to do good” (93). The boys therefore offer their bodies in exchange for positive change for their homeland. This notion fits both the original letter and Botto’s adaption

because in each case, the boys die and their death is used to promote a message regarding the state of Africa and African migration to Europe.

Mimetic rupture and European complicity

In the monologue, the letter ends with a blunt recognition of the postcolonial reality of Africa, “Y no olviden que es a ustedes a quien debemos quejarnos de la debilidad de nuestra fuerza en África” (Botto 51). However, it is the only part of the letter not read by the recording because as the stage directions note, “En este punto, la voz en off va desapareciendo y volvemos a oír a Fodé temblando de frío” (Botto 51). This purposeful divide weakens the letter’s conclusion in spite of its powerful message. Though they write that Europe can “save” Africa, the boys are conscious of Europe’s direct role in the weakening of the continent, which thus results in their necessity to address Europe “in a language that seems to insist on the responsibilities they understand to go with a higher status” (Ferguson 561). Thus, the letter should not be understood as a pathetic plea to Europe, as several scholars have alluded, because it is purposely crafted in such a way to appeal to a paternalistic Europe to have compassion for Africa. This appeal for compassion is then turned on its head via the last sentence, which directly reminds Europe that it has a responsibility to Africa as a result of colonization. Therefore, Europe’s aid would not be an act of charity, but rather a fulfillment of its postcolonial responsibility.

Until this point in the letter, the boys have exhibited a strong mimicry of diplomatic language. The letter’s last line, however, is a complete rupture from the mimetic discourse of the emissary. The very nature of mimicry depends on the relationship between the self and the Other being almost the same. Thus, in the case of these boys, it implies they created a perception of being almost European, or as Homi Bhabha puts it, “Almost the same but not quite/white” (127–28). It is in this final sentence that the boys subvert the discourse to reflect their true selves as neo-colonial subjects. They remove their mimetic mask (formed by the use of diplomatic language) that served to gain them access to the European political consciousness to make a final point regarding complicity. The last sentence acknowledges the negative image (and for the boys, the reality) of Africa and its citizens that created a self-fulfilling prophecy of underdevelopment and inferiority. The boys dare to declare themselves agents that wish to disrupt the status quo in their homeland and in Europe, which is possible because of the liminal space that the boys occupy in the plane’s undercarriage: neither in Africa nor in Europe. Furthermore, “[a]ppplied to [migrants], liminality signifies being caught between old and new surroundings. Applied to adolescents, liminality denotes a state between childhood and adulthood” (Camino 30). Because the boys are on neither continent, they are able to use the liminal space to their discursive advantage. They die in a position of limbo between emigrant and immigrant while simultaneously embodying the transition between childhood and adulthood. It is for this reason that their bodies cause such a stir in Europe.

The plane is a liminal space in which the boys are able to express their hopes for Europe and their ultimate return to Africa. In the play, Fodé imagines a future in which “‘Dos jóvenes salvan África.’ ‘Los niños que ablandaron Europa.’ Y, cuando volvamos, seremos héroes y seguro que Yashié me hace caso” (Botto 44). The two imagined newspaper headlines are the beginning of a mythologization process in which the two boys become continental legends. The use of the verbs *salvar* and *ablandar* demonstrate the power of the boys but also problematize the relationship between Africa and Europe. Similar to the newspaper articles described earlier, the choice of verbs here rather praises the boys for their risky mission, which is made clear when Fodé imagines how townspeople, especially young girls, will react to his return:

—¡Eh, Fodé! Te he visto en los periódicos.

—Sí, están muy pesados. Me piden entrevistas a todas horas.

—Gracias por lo que has hecho por nosotros.

—De nada. Ya sabes que haría cualquier cosa por mi país.

—¿Quieres dar un paseo? (Botto 44)

We see in this imagined dialogue with Yashié that Fodé's heroic diplomacy is not only appreciated by his people, but it is rewarded by affection from the girl that he likes, making the journey all the more worthwhile. As their letter indicates, the boys want to be emissaries and speak on behalf of their homeland (be it the nation or continent), and as such, the heroic return is as important as, if not more important than, the journey to Europe. Though their act of stowing away may have connotations of heroism and altruism, they are ultimately teenagers trying to help their people and better their own personal situations.

If we consider the plane to be a symbol of access and agency, the undercarriage of a plane is the perfect place for the monologue to take place because it represents the isolation and exclusion that structures the boys' journey. At one point in the monologue, they jokingly discuss their location: "Y ¿sabes qué?, cuando les veamos también les voy a pedir que pongan calefacción en los trenes de aterrizaje de los aviones, porque aquí hace un frío de morirse. Pues no, no es ninguna tontería. La gente se va a seguir colando; si esto se nos ha ocurrido a nosotros, se le ocurrirá también a más gente, y así no se puede viajar" (Botto 43). This comedic excerpt reveals another important fact: Although these boys think they may have been the first to try getting to Europe in this manner, they certainly will not be the last. Thus, making the journey more comfortable (though it is illegal) would aid in the safe passage of future migrants. Along the same lines, Fodé innocently questions the normality of migrant crossings by saying:

Si se muere tanta gente todos los días, ¿por qué hacen como si eso fuera lo anormal si en realidad es lo normal, no? Si pasa todos los días, es que es normal, es . . . [. . .] ¡Cotidiano! Eso, cotidiano. Pero ellos se hacen los que no saben nada, como que todo sigue como antes. Que hagan un puente para cruzar al otro lado, así no se ahogaría. (Botto 43–44)

The shock value that migrant deaths once had in Europe in the early 1990s is no longer the case by the time Botto debuts this play in 2005. The dead black and brown bodies washed up on the Mediterranean shores of Spain have become so commonplace that one can even find photos of beachgoers sunbathing meters away from a dead body.⁸ Rather than desensitize us, the morbid sense of normality (though contrived by the media, because most immigrants to Spain arrive via plane or bus) should inspire solutions as it did for Fodé in the play. However, the lack of compassion in society provoked by media saturation makes it difficult to understand the trauma of migration because there is no way for us to imagine the toil of such an experience, especially in the cases of fatal attempts to migrate. Though the idea of creating an actual bridge between Africa and Europe would create an easier journey for migrants, it would not change the legal or social situation once the migrants entered Europe. The boys, in not understanding the geopolitical complexities of such a bridge, create a naïve solution to what for them is a simple problem. What lies at the core of their sentiment is an innocent attempt to understand the European desensitization to the loss of foreign lives on their shores.

The reference to migrant deaths in the European waters foreshadows the eventual denouement for the boys: their death inside the plane. Their dead bodies (not shown on stage but represented by the display of news clippings projected at the end of the monologue) represent the final metonymy: death of the black migrant body as symbolic of African poverty and its repercussions. The use of the projections establishes a convergence of the fictitious and the real in which the boys' deaths combined with the letter and the revelation that this monologue is based on a true event create a dark, morbid ending in which we as spectators must recognize our role in creating the conditions that lead to migration and in turn reflect on our prejudices toward migrants.

Conclusion

Juan Diego Botto's 2005 adaptation of Yaguine and Fodé's story draws a Spanish audience to empathize with these teenage boys who lost their lives for a mission that was doomed from the start. "La carta" is a stark look into migrants' desperation and the literal and figurative frigidity of Europe and its chilling capacity to determine the life and death of African arrivals. There is clear intent on the part of Botto to establish a sense of compassion for immigrants, evidenced by the projection of news clippings, photos of the boys, and a photo of the original French letter at the end of the monologue. The story's ability to inspire the creation of artistic works, such as Botto's monologue, speaks to its importance in the overall picture of contemporary immigration to Europe. Even though the boys' clandestine methods were not unique, the discovery and publication of the letter made their story distinct. The letter gave these boys the rare opportunity to speak directly and personally to Europe in spite of their death. Although the boys were unable to deliver their message by hand, their bodies and their letter nevertheless relay a statement from Africa for Europe to admit and rectify its complicity in the state of Africa today. In doing so, Yaguine and Fodé claim "that a meaningful solution to the African crisis requires a recognition of a kind of global, supranational belonging, the sort of moral and political recognition of Africans as 'members of the new world society'" (Ferguson 564). That process of belonging, according to the boys, can only begin with European commitment to the betterment of Africa. By accepting that responsibility, there perhaps will be more compassion among Europeans for the migrants who arrive daily by land, sea, and air.

Notes

- 1 Throughout the article, both the original letter written in French by Yaguine and Fodé published by Frederic Delepierre and the theatrical adaptation of the letter in Spanish by Juan Diego Botto will be cited.
- 2 In 2004, Togolese playwright Kangni Alem wrote *Atterrissage*, which focuses on the days leading up to the plane's take-off for Brussels. In 2006, their story inspired a French film entitled *Un matin bonne heure* by Gahité Fofana. In 2008, Musa Dieng Kala produced *Dieu a-t-il quitté l'Afrique?*, a documentary motivated by the tragic story of Yaguine and Fodé, which explores the lives of five Senegalese teenagers who desire to get to Europe by whatever means possible, thus problematizing immigration from the African and Western perspectives. In 2014, Guinean recording artist Sia Tolno released a song entitled "Yaguine et Fodé," which personifies the journey of African migrants to Europe through the story of the two boys.
- 3 According to the official statistics from Spain's Instituto Nacional de Estadística, migration from sub-Saharan Africa into Spain from 2008 to the present has most often been from Senegal, Equatorial Guinea (a former Spanish colony), Nigeria, and the Gambia.
- 4 This concept derives from British writer Rudyard Kipling's 1899 poem "The White Man's Burden," in which he espouses the importance of imperialist interventions to civilize nonwhite peoples around the world.
- 5 In Botto's monologue, Yaguine is spelled Yoguiné.
- 6 It should be noted that the mention of the cross in the play is yet another adaptation of the boys' identity, as they were Muslim.
- 7 See Parvati Nair's "Europe's 'Last' Wall: Contiguity, Exchange, and Heterotopia in Ceuta, the Confluence of Spain and North Africa."
- 8 See photojournalist Javier Bauluz's blog for the photo.

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