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Migration and the Dystopian Imagination of European Border Regimes

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Inward migration has long troubled the European political imagination. For example, an emphasis on fortification and low immigration was key to the civilisational fantasy of many early modern European literary Utopias. The dominant contemporary political framing of irregularised migration as a *European problem* thus leans on an imagined transnational 'European civilisation', concretised in the contemporary EU but with roots stretching back centuries. This article examines critical cultural treatments of legal and policy frameworks, grounded in a (supra-)nationalist civilisational myth, which now determine the treatment of irregularised migrants. Specifically, I examine three cultural texts (a novel, a film, and documentary artwork) produced in the years immediately preceding the development of the current Dublin III Regulation, which determines how and where asylum claims are processed in the EU. These three *realist* primary texts counter the official techno-scientific discourse of territorial integrity using science fictional narrative strategies, generic conventions, and tropes: the 2012 documentary artwork *Liquid Traces: The Left to Die Boat Case* by Forensic Architecture uses science fictional visualisations to directly confront the deadly effects of European bordering in the Mediterranean. Aki Kaurismäki's film *Le Havre* (2011), shows how twentieth-century history haunts contemporary migration fears by spatialising multiple temporalities in the titular city. Finally, Chika Unigwe's novel *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009), explores the colonial dynamics of irregularised migration and the complexities of individual agency, producing a form of critical dystopian engagement with the social and political conditions of the present without being a generic dystopia. These three texts expose the dangers and violence of European bordering, and counter the science fictional civilisational fantasies of its policies. They share an emphasis on the need for solidarity, resistance, and, via encounters with the spectral presences of Europe's past, they demand forms of historical justice which will break with contemporary dystopian conditions and the hard borders of the present.



April 4th, 1984. Last night to the flicks. All war films. One very good one of a ship full of refugees being bombed somewhere in the Mediterranean. Audience much amused by shots of a great huge fat man trying to swim away with a helicopter after him... audience shouting with laughter when he sank.

-George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1989: 10)

All communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.

-Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (2006: 6).

In George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), protagonist Winston Smith's first entry in his secret diary details nationalistic Londoners whooping along to a newsreel showing the bombing and machine gunning of refugees, strongly implied to be Jews, in the Mediterranean. The novel was written in the immediate aftermath of a war that displaced tens of millions of people across Europe and beyond. Following Benedict Anderson, what we may term the *style* of nationalism in Orwell's Oceania is especially hateful and cruel. Yet few details are given as to *why* the crowd in this scene is so amused by *these* violent deaths specifically, and refugees are not mentioned again in the novel. Today it is easy to speculate on what links might exist between steadily declining Oceanian living standards on the one hand, and the presence of refugees in an area militarily contested by the superstates of Oceania and Eurasia on the other. While Lyndsey Stonebridge offers compelling evidence to read Winston's diary entry in the historical context of the treatment of Jews attempting to reach Palestine during and after World War II by the British Royal Navy, within Orwell's story world one can well imagine refugees becoming a focal point for regime propaganda as potential enemies, a drain on limited resources, and/or as comprising a racialised demographic threat (2018: 77).¹

Anti-refugee propaganda is not present in the text. Speculating about why the Londoners are laughing is part of the creative act of reading, which here locates contemporary concerns in a literary artefact of the past. Indeed, as Stonebridge comments, 'fears of spies and terrorists smuggling themselves in refugee boats are not

¹ Stonebridge notes the British Navy intercepted dozens of boats carrying Holocaust survivors in the Mediterranean, sending them "to camps in Cyprus, Atlit in Palestine, and, infamously, back to Germany" (2018: 76). In one case, following refusal of visas even to children by the British, the wreck-like *Struma* was towed from Istanbul harbour after two months languishing there and subsequently sunk by (presumed) Soviet torpedo on 24 February 1942, with 769 passengers on board (2018: 78).

new' (2018: 77). It is not so much that Orwell is uncannily prophetic as that we can find common anxieties in the text's gaps and silences. From the vantage of the present then, the presentation of the murder of refugees seems consistent with a 'crisis' narrative about the European reception of refugees and other non-EU migrants. This narrative has its roots in the postwar years when Orwell was writing, but it has solidified since the 1990s when the EU began to construct a common system of asylum (Ammirati 2015; European Commission n.d.).

However, this narrative of crisis has often been contested. For example, Aki Kaurismäki's French language film *Le Havre* (2011) is set during the destruction of one of the 'jungle' refugee camps near Calais, an act of state violence which served only to further marginalise its inhabitants.² When a child's cry is heard inside a shipping container recently unloaded from Gabon at the port of Le Havre, we learn the police are pointing their automatic rifles at the door while the lock is cut under direct orders from the Ministry of Interior. A press photographer is on hand as the migrants sit calmly waiting inside. While Red Cross paramedics enter, teenager Idrissa Saleh (Blondin Miguel) escapes. Only quick action by a police detective prevents him being shot in the back. But in the next scene, we see a local newspaper carrying the photographer's photo of the container and questioning whether the escapee has links to al-Qaeda. Press, politicians, and state actors collude to produce a crisis story, turning a missing vulnerable child into a potential terrorist for their own ends.

Le Havre provides a useful counterpoint to Orwell's novel as it shows the solidification of political narratives in process. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, by contrast, is an ur-text for the dystopian genre, which has in turn become a ready referent and narrative framework for interpreting political events (see Stock 2018: 1-4). Such cultural texts are in turn mediated by social and political events. Strategies and tropes commonly associated with dystopias now find their way into contemporary realist fictions and documentaries too. Along with Kaurismäki's film, two other examples are examined in detail below: Forensic Architecture (FA) agency's documentary artwork *Liquid Traces: The Left to Die Boat Case* (2012) and Chika Unigwe's novel *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009). These are realist texts of migration in three different media forms, which share common thematic concerns such as foregrounding the experience of border(ed) spaces from marginalised perspectives, and formal features including a concern with testimony as a privileged discourse. They thereby produce spatial and temporal arrangements capable of a kind of critical dystopian engagement with

² A shot of a newspaper establishes the date of the story world as March 2007. On the conditions in the 'squatter camps' often referred to as 'jungles' before 2015 see Davies, Isakjee and Dhesi (2017) 1264-1266.

the social and political conditions of the present without themselves being generic dystopias. Moreover, these works use narrative strategies, conventions, and tropes commonly associated with speculative genres to engage with (the effects of) EU political thinking and policy and speak to the *style* by which Europe (conceived as a hermetic ‘civilisation’) is imagined in such discourse. All were produced during a crucial moment in the evolution of the European approach to irregularised migration, between the financial crash of 2008 and the aftermath of European intervention in Libya during the fall of Gaddafi in 2012. During this period the EU’s Dublin III Regulation was developed, which determines the jurisdiction in which asylum claims should be made and examined.³

This article begins by examining the birth of some European civilisational fantasies in Renaissance literary utopias. These humanist texts anticipate contemporary EU border policies in prescient ways because policies like Dublin III rely on an ideology of European exceptionalism. Such policies position Europe as a place of safety and enlightened liberal virtue, a destination to aspire to and not a territory to escape, eliding the dangers of European bordering both on land and sea. Determining who is a refugee and who is merely an ‘economic migrant’ becomes a burden to be bartered between member states. Liz Fekete terms such thinking ‘civilisational racism’, which ‘divides the world into a civilisational hierarchy of the enlightened West and the backward tyrannical “other”’ (2023: 5). Under such logic, the contemporary EU concretises an imagined transnational ‘European civilization’, which has roots stretching back many centuries. Following Anderson, I suggest this is part of its *style* of what we may term supra-nationalism.

I then engage with the effects of EU policies in the context of the European military intervention in Libya in 2012. Through close reading of documentary artwork by FA researchers, I argue that across Europe today the *scientific* technology of surveillance and the legal *fiction* of borders operate together in what we may term a *science fictional* strategy⁴ to produce oppressive and even life-threatening experiences for migrants in the name of a racialised and colonialist conception of ‘security’. This again forms part of Europe’s *style* of civilisational supra-nationalism. The FA’s own use of SF tropes counter official narratives and demonstrate the intended necropolitical lethality of EU

³ Dublin III Regulations were then adopted June 2013 and implemented January 2014. ‘[I]n practice... the Member State through which the asylum-seeker first entered the EU is responsible for examining their asylum claim’ (Wilkins and Macdonald: 2019).

⁴ I build here on Nadine El-Enany’s thesis in her keynote address to the September 2020 LSFRC ‘Beyond Borders’ conference, addressing ‘the science of race and the fiction of borders’. The term ‘irregularised migration’ employed throughout this article is suggested by El-Enany’s work (2020: 228).

policies in the Mediterranean at an operational level. In other words, the FA deploys SF formal conventions and strategies as a critical discourse to counter the science fictional techno-legal fantasy of supra-national 'security', which is grounded in turn in civilisational racism.

To better understand these policies at a strategic level requires unpicking the presentist, liberal view of migration as a contemporary techno-political problem that can be 'solved' with sufficient resources (devoted largely to deterrence), much as it is in classical literary utopias. In fact, the violent treatment of refugees has a long history and in the postwar era the growth of intra-European economic cooperation was itself partly a response to patterns of migration during the retreat of European empires. Kaurismäki's *Le Havre* explores how twentieth-century history haunts the present sense of crisis by re-historicising post-millennial migration fears. The film does so by spatialising the intersections of multiple temporalities.

Finally, dominant narratives about migration, especially those about 'economic migration', need to be read against the backdrop of Europe as a colonial space. This is highlighted in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009), a novel exploring the complex dynamics of agency and exploitation in the lives of four trafficked women. In these three realist primary texts, tropes and conventions drawn from speculative genres produce spatial and temporal arrangements capable of a form of critical dystopian engagement with the social and political conditions of the present, without themselves being generic dystopias. I conclude that a newly historicised view of migration, which welcomes encounters with the spectral presences of Europe's past, can lead to renewed focus on questions of justice in utopian temporalities of futurity.

Bordering utopias

Impregnable borders and fortifications abound in early modern utopias. The reader never finds out how the visitor Raphael Hathloday lands on the eponymous island of Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), but we do learn the only port is in a narrow bay full of natural hazards requiring local knowledge to navigate it, with a garrison stationed either side.⁵ In Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun* (1602), the city on a hill is fortified by multiple concentric defensive walls and visitors must undergo two months' quarantine.⁶ In Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1626) the protagonists are at first refused entry and offered supplies on condition they immediately leave. Only once they swear

⁵ On the treatment of the 'deterrent' logic of More's *Utopia* in the context of the 1980s Cold War see Marie-Claire Phélippeau, 2016: 579.

⁶ 'Nearly overwhelmed by barbarity, Campanella set up his holy city and walled it closed' (Dougherty, 1986: 313). Dougherty identifies Campanella's city with Atlantis in Plato's *Critias* (314–6).

as Christians they are not pirates or murderers are they permitted to land. Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666) has golden navy ships which can bind together in a honeycomb formation offering impregnable defence, and the emperor's land lies behind a labyrinth. In sum, early modern European utopias are well-fortified, militarised spaces with intentionally low immigration, in which homogenous cultures are clearly valued. Utopian border regimes are designed, as J.C. Davis puts it, to 'filter out the undesirable and protect utopia from contamination and corruption' (2008: 14). Exclusion is a feature not a bug. Utopians assess the character of visitors carefully, and because the visitor protagonists of canonical utopias are treated as VIP visitors, the violent, bureaucratic horror regular migrants may experience at such borders is absent.

This is not to suggest the utopian literary form is *inevitably* Euro- or white supremacist, much less that utopian thought inevitably leads to totalitarianism, as (Eurocentric) figures like Karl Popper have claimed (1966: ch. 9).⁷ On the contrary, by reconnecting literary utopias with the conditions of their production we can see how they reflect historical cultural anxieties and concerns. The detailed descriptions of defences and borders of early modern utopias are instructive as generic features in two main ways. Firstly, against the backdrop of the European Wars of Religion from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, the rise of colonial rivalry, and trans-Atlantic slavery, these texts reflect the centrality of conflict and social hierarchy to European life. The 'utopian impulse... to engage power and to imagine change' which Bill Ashcroft finds in the utopian tradition is thus circumscribed by the need to physically defend the values concretised by these ideal societies in a world marked by frequent conflict and violently hierarchical social forms (2009: 13).⁸ Secondly, the canon of European utopias is a self-reflexive intertextual tradition in which every iteration enters critical dialogue with (some of) its predecessors. As such, these texts demonstrate the virtues of enlightened exchanges of ideas about the contents of an ideal commonwealth, which are also always foundational to that commonwealth. By this logic, just as the fictional lands of *The City of the Sun* and *The Blazing World* are free from internal conflict, so too the free exchange of ideas about ideal commonwealths by Renaissance humanists like Thomas More and Desiderius Erasmus operate as a sort of ideal discourse, transcending broader social and political conflicts and disputes of the era. The utopian canon thus makes virtues of two ideas which are also at the heart of the EU, namely (1) internal free movement and exchange (of ideas, and by extension

⁷ On the ideology of the utopian form see Jameson 2005: Part 1.

⁸ On pro-colonial arguments in More's *Utopia*, see Marie-Claire Phélippeau (2022: 96).

both commerce and people) and (2) the necessity of achieving absolute control over borders, visitors, and immigration as a prerequisite to the ideal society.

It is not my purpose to establish a direct causal chain from More's *Utopia* to current EU/UK border regimes. There is however a logical resemblance (in Raymond Williams' (1977: 106) terms a *homology*) in desires Renaissance humanists and the EU share for a strong external border and internal freedom of movement. Reading the contemporary political designs of border regimes through the lens of literary utopian writing highlights how these regimes are grounded in utopian aspirations. For example, early modern utopias emphasise the technological and administrative *ingenuity* of their defence systems and border methods, including restricted ports of entry, militarisation, advanced technology and even (in *New Atlantis*) a precursor to so-called 'offshore processing'. The EU likewise deploys a staggering range of resources to try to prevent people from reaching and entering its territory, travelling through continental Europe (especially north- and westwards to the most affluent countries), or claiming asylum.⁹ The overarching strategy behind these goals is couched in the seductively technocratic terms of 'increasing efficiency and effectiveness for better migration management' ('Annual Report on Asylum and Migration 2020' 2021: 8). This apparently *enlightened* approach is then a form of instrumental thinking in which, to quote Adorno and Horkheimer, 'reason is the organ of calculation, of planning; it is neutral in regard to ends; its element is coordination' (1997: 88). The EU's European Migration Network can therefore wax lyrical about Croatia's '2021–2027 national plan for the protection of human rights and combatting discrimination' even while the Council of Europe gives financial support to the 'violent pushbacks' of migrants from the borders of Croatia to Bosnia and Serbia ('Annual Report on Asylum and Migration 2020' 2021: 10).¹⁰ The abuse of human rights as social reality and the promotion of human rights as process and discourse run along parallel lines. Both, I argue, are part of the style by which Europe imagines itself as a homogenous civilisation.

The novum and the nation

It is tempting to reach for the word 'dystopian' to describe such conditions. In 1868, while defending British colonialism, philosopher and Liberal MP J.S. Mill suggested the Conservative Government favoured an approach to Irish land tithes that was 'dystopian'

⁹ These include advanced surveillance technologies, rapidly oscillating Kafkaesque administrative burdens, a variety of forms of physical violence and the funding of states outside the EU including Turkey and Libya to (violently) prevent migrants from reaching European borders in the first place.

¹⁰ See above, note 1. Croatia is within the EU but outside the Schengen Zone.

as it was ‘too bad to be practicable’ (1868: 1517).¹¹ The current situation for irregularised migrants is similarly disastrously un-practicable, and yet so longstanding its worst excesses are often not judged newsworthy. To be sure, occasionally, ‘a news story does seem like it might rip apart a long-established narrative’, as Maya Goodfellow notes, citing the outpouring of sympathy after the image of three-year-old Alan Kurdi, who drowned in the Aegean Sea, made front pages around the world in 2015 (2019: 28). But, she continues, ‘within months, if not weeks, tabloid newspapers that were outraged by Kurdi’s death resumed normal service, running an endless stream of anti-refugee scare stories’ (*ibid.*: 28). Since 2015, UNHCR figures for the ‘Mediterranean situation’ (covering only Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta and Spain (including *Las Canarias*)) estimate 25,216 people dead or missing.¹² Orwell’s laughing cinemagoers seem less far-fetched when rare moments of sympathy punctuate a dominant discourse in which migrants are met with violence and racialised discrimination. As Isakjee et al have found, this is often justified *and encouraged* by the EU and state governments alike as necessary to the defence of liberal European values.¹³ Hence, Topak argues, whether migrants are described as ‘victims in need of humanitarian compassion’ or ‘criminals... potential terrorists or as... abusing the asylum system’ the effect is to delineate a set of discursive boundaries around ‘migrant subjectivities’ (2021: 791). These subjectivities are inevitably posited against European values and standards of living, indicating a *style of imaginary* grounded in civilisational racism: the mere presence of racialised migrants in the European polity is cause for alarm.

This sense of permanent crisis is grounded in future-facing fears, resting ‘on the premise that the future of the nation relies on continuous growth, often hingeing [sic] on the perceived threat of a demographic war between ‘native’ Europeans and immigrants, especially Muslims’ (Siddiqui 2021: 5). The dystopia is a genre especially suited to dealing, often cathartically, with these sorts of future-oriented anxieties (see Basu, Broad, and Hintz 2013: 5), and Sophie Lewis asserts that likewise cli-fi and ‘related representations of national emergencies and the apocalypse’ also often centre the patriarchal family structure in a manner conceptually linked to fascism (2022:

¹¹ Although often cited as the first use of ‘dystopia[n]’, Sargent (2010: 4) claims Henry Lewis Younger coins ‘dustopia’ in *Utopia or Apollo’s Golden Days* (1747). See also Stock (2018: 2).

¹² Calculated from figures on the UNHCR Data Portal to 21 July 2023 (total arrivals in this period were 2,337,477). Separate data on ‘Southeastern Europe’ (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia) is incomplete. The portal contains no information on crossings via Belarus into Poland, or the passage from Greece to non-EU Balkan states and then back into the Schengen Area via Croatia’s borders with Austria, Hungary, Italy, and Slovenia.

¹³ For example, ‘Our interviews with EU Commission and Frontex staff... indicate that there is widespread awareness of Croatian border violence—and so too its political role in supporting Schengen Area expansion’ (Isakjee et al. 2020: 1767).

15). Yet invoking the dystopian genre by leaning on conventions such as projecting a narrative into a future story world is not without risk to the discourse of anti-immigrant sentiment, since what Darko Suvin (1979) terms the *novum* of science fiction – the qualitatively new, inventive element of the text which moves it beyond empirical reality – as a formal strategy implicitly demonstrates existing social arrangements are historically contingent, and the world as it exists could be otherwise.¹⁴ It is therefore unsurprising the tropes and conventions of speculative fictions often appear in cultural forms like fiction, film and art to probe the contradictions of an imagined community like the EU or its constituent nation-states.

Liquid Traces: Place, Sea, History

One example of this approach is the documentary work of the Oceanographic Research Section (ORS) of the FA based at Goldsmiths, University of London. The group has used a variety of maritime records alongside witness testimony and other sources to track the effects of EU policies on migrants in the Mediterranean. Their film *Liquid Traces: The Left to Die Boat Case*, the result of a 2012 investigation and available online has also been exhibited in gallery spaces as documentary art in a more immersive format. The film reconstructs the journey of a rubber boat that left Libya during the 2011 NATO military intervention with 72 people on board. At the time, FA claim, the Libyan coast was ‘the most highly surveilled [sic] area of sea in the world’, watched by NATO using at least 38 warships, maritime patrol aircraft and remote surveillance including the AIS vessel tracking system carried by large commercial vessels and satellite-based synthetic aperture radar technology (*Liquid Traces*, 2012).¹⁵

The film comprises a single eighteen-minute image of a map on which the Mediterranean appears in deep blue. The coastline from Tunisia and the southern tip of Sardinia in the west to Greece and the western edge of Cyprus in the east are blacked out. Sicily and Lampedusa look like holes ripped in the sea, inverting the visual sense of where mappable territory lies. Dozens of fine black lines representing the flow of currents rotate in a mesmeric pattern, bringing a sense of depth to the image’s flat surface. Forensic Architecture employ a relational view of space in which, Silvana Mandolessi argues ‘place is *performed* through mobility’ (2021: 625). On FA’s inverted

¹⁴ For a discussion of narrative temporality in ‘classical’ dystopias see Stock 2016: 417. Suvin (1979: 63–84) develops a term Wegner (2014: 47–9) traces to Ernst Bloch, which for Adam Roberts names an adherence to ‘the *formal* logic of the metaphor’ (2019: 8) as a figure of difference. For a more detailed discussion of Suvin’s *novum*, form, and utopianism see Moylan (2000:45–50).

¹⁵ I first encountered this film in the exhibition *Disappearance at Sea – Mare Nostrum* (27 January – 14 May 2017) at Baltic Gallery, Gateshead.

map the sea becomes *place*, the centre of the technologically facilitated story, and the land *placeless*, pushed to the edge of the narrative.

An assemblage of testimony, statistical analysis and primary source material is shown in the vertical margins of this image. Rhythmic low rumbles and wind noise provide an immersive and tense soundscape. As the film's voiceover states, 'Despite several distress signals relaying their location, as well as repeated interactions with at least one military helicopter and a military ship, they were left to drift for 14 days. As a result of the inaction of all state actors involved, only nine of the passengers survived.' (We could – and should – add: *sixty-three passengers died*). By re-contextualising the drift as a durational experience within a busy and data rich shipping area, FA answer the question they rhetorically pose early on: 'how to reconstruct violations, when the murder weapon is the water itself?' The very existence of the data points to the culpability of NATO and EU countries, and commercial vessels.

FA have produced several similar films which index EU policies against specific maritime disasters. Typically, these films feature a time-lapse satellite map in the margins of which qualitative, quantitative and testimonial evidence appear, grounding the voiceover narrative without becoming the (literal, visual) centre of it telling. Martina Tazzioli argues 'we should not stick to the visibility of migration that is generated by state cartographies or by Frontex maps' (Tazzioli 2018: 19). These films cleverly resist such mapping, using the screen margins to literally re-frame the temporality of the disasters. The oceanic visual perspective enables FA researchers to synthesize multiple forms of evidence and fragmented perspectives utilising cross-disciplinary expertise, which is then narrativized by an omniscient narrator. The collective thereby co-opt and re-present state surveillance technologies to hold state agents accountable for their inaction.

At a formal level, the visual elements of films like *Liquid Traces* and *Death by Rescue: The Lethal Effects of Non-Assistance at Sea* resemble nothing so much as science fiction: these pieces 'build a story that would not have been possible without... technological affordances' and the *narrative* (how this series of story events is related) is likewise dependent upon digital technologies (Mandolessi 2021: 628). Following Suvin, such formal elements can therefore be named as the *novum*, mediating 'form and history' (Moylan: 2000, 49–50), and as 'a creation of historical cognition and ethics as form' (Suvin: 1979, 80). The structure of the *novum* as an science fictional critical force is deployed here against a political imaginary reliant on the legal fiction of borders and the scientific technology through which such spaces are produced (to borrow again from Nadine El-Enany). The Mediterranean is reterritorialised as a macabre scene of death, inverting the idea of the sea as an 'abyss' in which NATO, the EU and its

member states have no control over drownings. The sea is a *place*, one governed by what Achille Mbembe has termed ‘necropolitics’, or ‘contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death’ (Mbembe 2003: 39). FA show the sea as a place produced by shipping and surveillance, a ‘thick’ border much travelled and patrolled and a graveyard for hiding its victims.

The necropolitical production of death in the Mediterranean via non-assistance, and proactive violence elsewhere in and beyond EU territory, can be traced back to the birth of the European Union and, to quote El-Enany (2020: 175), ‘the colonial histories of its founding Member States, an origin story with which [the EU] has never grappled’. In 1949 when Orwell’s novel was published, European colonial states including Britain were already working to secure a ‘territorial application clause’ in the (1951) Refugee Convention (Article 40 Paragraph 1), which enabled them to withhold its application to colonial spaces as Lucy Mayblin shows (2014: 433). In the words of Isakjee et al, ‘asylum... was never designed for colonial subjects’ (2020: 1757). Moreover, the colonial possessions of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC, established 1952), predecessor to the European Economic Community (EEC, founded by the 1957 Treaty of Rome), were far larger than its six member states’ European territory, spanning the Pacific, Africa and South America.¹⁶ When the Treaty of Rome was signed during the Algerian War of Independence, El-Enany states, ‘Algeria was recognised as being part of France and Algerians were French citizens, [yet] negotiations yielded the outcome that the EEC principle of free movement of workers would not extend to Algerian workers’ (2020: 186). When Britain joined in 1973, the accession treaty noted that British ‘nationals’ (with their new European rights to free movement and non-discrimination on grounds of nationality) would explicitly exclude Commonwealth citizens. This definition was concomitantly added to UK law. The 1973 Immigration Act was the first in a series of measures restricting previously held rights of Commonwealth citizens to settle in the colonial metropole. A similar trajectory continued within the European bloc, pre-dating a point made by the narrator in *Liquid traces*, that, ‘the historical routes that connected the Mediterranean had been disrupted by the EU’s policy of closure since the end of the 80s’.

Temporal disjointedness in *Le Havre*

Dystopian approaches to temporality are well placed to understand contemporary experiences of migration in the context of the history of European migration, conflict,

¹⁶ The signatories of the 1952 and 1957 treaties were Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands and West Germany.

and refugee history. Indeed, the precarity, institutionalised racism, discrimination and surveillance which characterise experiences of many migrants mirror notable tropes of dystopian fictions. Just as such texts are deeply concerned with the processes and trajectories of history and its ‘occlusion’ by dominant forces, to understand contemporary conditions for irregularised migrants in Europe requires engaging a suppressed historical narrative (Ashcroft 2009: 9). To quote Mayblin, Wake, and Kazemi, present conditions are ‘the logical contemporary expression of historically embedded colonial/modern, racially hierarchical worldviews which have their roots in colonial enterprise’ (2020: 108).

Such contemporary expressions are interrogated in Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki’s 2011 French language film *Le Havre*, which engages dystopian tropes and conventions, spatialising multiple temporalities to historicise contemporary questions about migration. *Le Havre* tells the story of teenager Idrissa, who evades police after arriving in the city aboard a shipping container destined for London but offloaded in Le Havre by ‘computer error’. Idrissa hides with protagonist Marcel Marx (André Wilms), aided by neighbours in a working-class district of the titular city. Marx and his friends eventually help smuggle Idrissa to England to join family, banding together to provide financial support, care, and sanctuary from a heavily militarised police force.

For Jaakko Seppälä, the ‘style’ of Kaurismäki’s films create ‘a sense of day-to-day reality that is nonetheless something different than day-to-day reality as we know it’ (2015:, 22, 21). The estranging ‘otherness’ of his story worlds closely reflect their multiple co-existing temporalities. Stylistically, the lighting, colouring, mise-en-scène and grading in *Le Havre* recalls French film history from World War II through to the 1970s. Narratively, a subplot involving Marx’s wife Arletty collapsing and later miraculously recovering from an unnamed illness parodies mid-century melodrama.¹⁷ Thematically, the film reproduces patriarchal heteronormativity redolent of the 1950s (albeit that as Maud Ceuterick (2014: 82) notes, this often ‘appear[s] ironic’.) As a Finnish outsider Kaurismäki gently pokes fun at a nostalgic style of French nationalism: the focus on traditional French cultural indices like wine, bistro food, the *boulangerie* and cigarettes in the local bar borders offer a pastiche of France as a mid-century homogenous imagined community. But at crucial moments this homogeneity is undercut, as when Marx’s shoeshine colleague Chang (Quoc-Dung Nguyen), an irregularised migrant of colour from Vietnam, in the former French colony of

¹⁷ This melodrama is one way the film ‘imposes distance through an absurdist tone’ (Ceuterick 2014: 78). I am grateful to my anonymous reviewer who pointed out there are in fact two ‘miracles’ at the end of the film: in addition to Arletty’s recovery, Inspector Monet helps Idrissa escape the law.

Indochina, states, ‘the Mediterranean has more birth certificates than fish. It’s harder to deport a nameless person’, suggesting that acceptance by this community involves assimilation to the point of the effacement of non-French elements of identity. Meanwhile, occasional reminders the film is set in 2007 produce a jarring effect. For example, the shoeshine profession of Marx and Chang is an anachronism in a city where, several shots of passing feet reveal, most people wear trainers. This temporal multiplication accords with what Caroline Edwards calls ‘*non-contemporaneity*’ in contemporary novels, ‘the temporal disjointedness that marks our experience in the twenty-first century’ (2019: 9).

In *Le Havre*, this non-contemporaneity is spatialised. The eponymous setting is historically significant: sitting at the mouth of the Seine, Le Havre was one of the worst bombed French cities of WWII, with ‘150ha devastated at the end of the war’ and some 300 ships sunk in the harbour (Clout 1999: 196). It is haunted by destruction. The film’s temporal disjointedness incorporates a frayed, run-down postwar aesthetic, even reminiscent of the worldbuilding of Airstrip One (London) in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with its ‘vistas of rotting nineteenth-century houses’ and ‘bombed sites where the plaster dust swirled in the air and the willowherb straggled over the heaps of rubble’ (Orwell 1989: 5). But unlike in Orwell’s novel, the working-class characters in Kaurismäki’s film have a close sense of community and are conscious of their shared class interests.

There is something ‘knowing’ here, a sense of artifice in social relations mirroring the overall aesthetic: characters often converse between shots so artfully composed and lingering they could be still life paintings. Moreover, the film mostly avoids exterior shots of the grand re-constructed brutalist townscape designed by Auguste Perret, focusing instead on working-class interiors, homes, and bars. Post-industrial decline, the 1970s container port and contemporary oil facilities are wedged side-by-side and characters move through these spaces as if simultaneously inhabiting different eras. Kaurismäki seems to want to remind us of the contingency and openness of every historical era. This reflects a political commitment, as Kaurismäki roundly rejects the anti-utopian belief in identifying ‘realism’ with representing what merely *is* (as if what *is*, is outside of history). Put another way, this is what writers and critics like Kim Stanley Robinson (2018) and David M Bell (2017) have termed a politics of ‘anti-anti-utopia’. In Alice Bardan’s words, in *Le Havre* the imbrication of multiple temporalities in the production of space functions to ‘summon a series of spectral figures that prompt us to reflect on modes of imagination dreamt in the past that relate to the capacity to conceive of a world radically different from the one in which we currently live in’ (2020: 125). Using these *revenants* of the French experience

of occupation, resistance and smuggling, the film engages in a romantic utopianism where past and present visions of futurity collide.¹⁸

Dreaming & haunting in *On Black Sisters' Street*

The protagonists in Chika Unigwe's 2009 novel *On Black Sisters' Street* find themselves in a bind of harm and violence produced by racialised European borders comparable to Idrissa's situation in *Le Havre*. Episodic flashbacks focalised through several characters relate a narrative about the intertwining lives of four migrants who have been trafficked to Belgium by a Nigerian man named Dele, with varying degrees of agency: Chisom, who goes by the name Sisi in Belgium, escapes the grind of relative poverty and joblessness in Lagos. Efe is a vulnerable teenager targeted by a rich older man who abandons her when she becomes pregnant and needs to provide for her son. Ama is a survivor of childhood rape by the man she thought was her biological father and dreams of a more affluent life. Alek, who Dele calls Joyce, is a Sudanese refugee and survivor of gang rape who travelled to Lagos with a Nigerian member of the African Union's Peacekeeping Force she met in a refugee camp. Unlike Chisom, Efe and Ama who are working off loans from Dele, Alek's ex-fiancé pays Dele to take her to Belgium when his family refuse to let him marry her.

In Antwerp, Chisom/Sisi meets a white Belgian lover, Luc, through church. Seduced by his invocation of 'fairness' in Belgium's legal regime as guarantor of liberty, when the psychological toll of sex work overwhelms her she runs away from the house share on Zwarte Zusterstraat to his suburban home. At the text's climax the Madam's assistant finds her there and coaxes her into his car to kill her. We learn of Sisi's murder early in the text and the question of why she is murdered is more important to the plot than the identity of the killer. As Patricia Bastida-Rodríguez argues in her discussion of Sisi's wanderings, the character's mobility 'challenges Antwerp's spatial division in what can be seen as a transgression of the social order' and this is unacceptable to the Madam and Dele (2014: 212). Jairus Omuteche notes that as undocumented migrants Sisi and the other women are not permitted 'self-agency' (2014: 270). Sisi is killed because she will not accept the constraints of the spatial boundaries through which the Madam and Dele, operating within and beyond Belgium's legal system, control their workers.

The traffickers understand sovereignty in what Mbembe calls *necropolitical* terms, 'expressed predominantly as the right to kill' (2003: 16). For Mbembe, necropolitics

¹⁸ Pantet (2018) presents an interesting and helpful reading of Kaurismäki's films as comprising constellations of Foucauldian heterotopic spaces through which social outcasts move. However, this approach emphasises fragmented parts at the expense of the film's overall effect.

are tied to the historical structures of colonialism. From such a perspective, Dele and his network of European madams are part of a long history in which colonizers create a client class for the purpose of controlling and exploiting African labour. Here the choice of Antwerp as setting is significant, and not only because, by coincidence, the frame narrative in More's *Utopia* is also set in the city: as Bastida-Rodríguez reminds us, Antwerp has long been a prosperous city at the heart of European commerce, due to 'its diamond industry, the docklands, and the world of fashion' (2014: 204). These industries all have strong connections to the colonial history of Belgium and Europe more widely too.

The feeling of 'ownership' of the women enjoyed by the Madam and Dele is made possible only by the context of (post)colonial European border regimes. Their active participation and use of these necropolitical borders against the women's lives is highlighted on numerous occasions. For example, when Sisi first arrives in Antwerp the Madam sends her to attempt to claim asylum by posing as a Liberian refugee. When she returns with her refused application, the Madam (who has taken her passport) states, 'this paper is no concern of yours. All you need to know is that you're persona non grata in this country. You do not exist. Not here' (Unigwe 2010: 182).¹⁹ Knowing the arbitrary and punitive nature of the asylum system, the Madam weaponises it to make Sisi precarious, dependent and without worker's rights. She also pays regular bribes to the police to ensure her workers can never approach them. Sisi is isolated; any interaction with the police could lead to arrest and a humiliating deportation. She lacks human rights in Hannah Arendt's formulation as 'the right to have rights' (1966: 296). Sisi must participate in physically difficult labour she finds demeaning with no possibility to withdraw her previously 'freely' given consent. She tries to 'block the voices that came into her head' warning her against participating in Dele and Madam's scheme and instead to 'crowd her head with visions of a future.... With the amount of money she imagined she would earn there would be no limit to her purchasing power' (Unigwe 2010: 172). Sisi centres the abstract dream of material wealth to avoid critical reflection on how the system is stacked against her. Her murder is enabled by a state that regulates migration from African countries far more closely than it regulates procurers of sex workers.

Sisi is at the sharp end of what the *Out of the Woods* collective term 'our contemporary dystopia of border regimes' (2020: 67). As an isolated individual she must choose between two cruel fates: to remain a politically and socially *invisible* subject without

¹⁹ The Latin legal phrase is ironic here: 'persona non grata' literally means a non-pleasing character, but as a sex worker Sisi's job is to please strangers by playing a character who can fulfil sexual fantasies.

agency (see Bastida-Rodríguez 2014: 208–12 *passim*), or to face a violent death which will obliterate her subjecthood. It is a typically dystopian dilemma. By skipping between temporal frames and multiple perspectives the novel produces some of the concern with political history that characterises what I have elsewhere termed the fragmented ‘future–history’ of many dystopian fictions (see Stock 2019: 8–12). Yet this novel does not require temporal displacement into the future or other conditions of alterity that characterise dystopian fiction. *On Black Sisters’ Street* presents via realist narratives the experiences of a disparate group of subaltern women for whom Europe has a powerful and even mythical hold. Reflecting on the economic and political reality of Nigeria in the 2000s, Efe wonders, ‘Who did not want to go abroad? People were born with the ambition and people died trying to fulfil that ambition’ (Unigwe 2010: 81–82). The reality is somewhat different, however, and when Efe ‘talks of where she lives in Belgium, she describes it as a botched dream’ (2010: 24). Indeed, two poles around which the book circulates are dreaming and haunting: it is a work of phantasms conjured both from history and the psyche. Only once is Belgium’s own genocidal colonial past hinted at:

Old women would tell of when they lived in the Congo many decades ago, talk fondly of Albertville which had now been renamed something they could never remember, something African. Ask you if you spoke Lingala. What you thought of Kabila. Talk of their niece who could not have a baby and adopted a beautiful little son from Rwanda. Or Burundi (Unigwe 2010: 280).

In these Belgian suburban *fond* memories, colonial violence, domination, and anti-colonial struggles are rendered invisible (Kalemie, formerly Albertville, had a base used by both Belgian and British forces). Even the Rwandan genocide is subsumed into an opportunity for the European adoption industry. Colonial history here becomes a sort of spectral apparition or revenant in the heart of this suburban darkness.

In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida uses the figure of the specter to reconnect philosophy and history, leaning on Marx’s early critique of the Hegelian dialectic. As Moishe Postone explains in a review essay, ‘as that which is and is not, [to Derrida] the specter represents temporalities that cannot be grasped adequately in terms of present time’ (Postone 1998: 371). As a figure of what Postone labels a ‘past that has not passed’ (371) the specter may be like Hamlet’s father a revenant, troubling the finality of death or in Derrida’s words ‘a kind of ghost who comes back or who still risks coming back *post mortem*’ (Derrida 2006: 59). Sisi’s ghost returns to haunt the trafficker who ordered her murder in a similar manner. As Unigwe herself has

explained in an interview, ‘I didn’t want her agency to die with her senseless murder. I didn’t want that power taken from her... she has to punish Dele’ (in Barberán Reinares 2020: 413). The transnational flight of Sisi’s ghost back to Lagos also suggests that if Marx’s thinking continues to haunt post-Communist Europe, then the long history of colonialism also continues to haunt the relationship of Europe and Africa. Like the specter ‘stalking Europe’ in the Communist Manifesto, Sisi’s ghost invokes a concrete injustice that requires reckoning and resists a conception of the present as being permanent. Colonial relationships continue to exert their presence in the European present. The specter haunting Unigwe’s text is the ‘threat’ of accountability both for Dele and for the postcolonial Belgian state into which racialized women are so easily trafficked and killed.²⁰ Sisi’s ghost issues a decolonial demand for justice, one which could only be achieved in the context of a more *utopian* future.

Dystopian border regimes

Since the early days of the postwar era, European empires in retreat sought to place restrictions on the rights of colonial subjects to access colonial wealth and settle in the European metropole (Mayblin: 2014, El-Enany: 2020). Orwell’s dystopian vision of refugees being drowned in the Mediterranean Sea drew on the immediate plight of displaced people in the aftermath of World War II. Part of its value to contemporary readers is showing that in 1940s colonial Europe the movement of refugees could already be positioned as a crisis *for Europe* rather than for the refugees themselves. Since the founding of the EU, the terms in which European (former) empires and their European neighbours have increasingly sought to close or tighten borders has relied on a sense of crisis often situated as civilisational. This political manoeuvre inevitably draws on an ethnonationalist cultural imaginary which Liz Fekete (2023) has branded ‘civilisational racism’.

The EU concretises an imagined transnational ‘European civilisation’, with long historical roots. Among these roots are the technocratic, but often violent and exclusionary methods of bordering found in early modern European literary utopias, texts which also promote the key EU values of trade and the free exchange of intellectual ideas across the continent. I argue contemporary border regimes are ‘science fictional’ and prefigured by the utopian canon’s depictions of closed colonial spaces. These regimes are key to the experience of what *Out of the Woods* collective have termed ‘the world as critical dystopia’ (2020: 66). Unlike dystopias, the critical dystopia offers not

²⁰ For an introduction to Belgium’s genocide in the Congo, see Hochschild 2006.

only narratives of a bad place but also enclaves of prefigurative utopianism, solidarity, and hope. For Tom Moylan, ‘the renewed possibility of oppositional political movement rather than the formulation of a utopian system [is] of central concern’ to such texts (2020: 37). At their best these represent ‘the outcome of imaginative work that maps, warns, and delivers an activist hope in times that are bereft of a strong political opposition’ (Moylan 2020: 38). Although not generic dystopias, the texts explored above share with this genre an emphasis on solidarity, resistance, and the quest for justice within the dystopian conditions of the world in its present state.

Forensic Architecture’s investigations are orientated toward both political opinion and formal, legal justice and redress through existing institutions. More widely, FA have presented their investigations ‘in international courtrooms, parliamentary inquiries, United Nations (UN) assemblies, as well as in citizens’ tribunals and truth commissions’ (‘Forensic Architecture’ n.d.). One of their clear, practical goals is to hold EU politicians, bureaucrats and institutions to account. Such formal justice is important to change the ‘impracticable’ situation in which migrants continue to die or be pushed into terrifying conditions in camps at the edges of Europe and north Africa.

Both Kaurismäki’s *Le Havre* and Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street* examine the effects of borders internally within the EU. Justice here is orientated toward acknowledgement of the humanity of migrants living in difficult and precarious positions, and recognition of the ongoing effects of the long history of colonialism in Europe’s hard borders. In *Le Havre*, the spatialisation of multiple temporalities enables critical questions to be raised about how non-European migrants of colour today are treated in relation to European refugees in the mid-twentieth century. By helping Idrissa skip past the police and (hopefully) reach London, Marcel Marx and his neighbours resist the state’s power over their own lives as much as its power over irregularized migrants. In *On Black Sisters’ Street*, the surviving protagonists develop relations of care and trust through sharing their stories, which also make clear they are not *only* ‘victims’ by exploring the complexities of trafficking, agency and sex work. In one characteristically ambivalent proleptic passage, we are told Efe will eventually become a madam. She buys her own trafficked Nigerian women who ‘smiled easily’ as numbered lots in an ‘auction’ (Unigwe 2010: 278–79). The scene clearly echoes slave auctions, but the women have paid the auctioneer to get them to Belgium. In Laura Barberán Reinares words, Unigwe ‘rejects the polarised discourse that either fetishizes choice and agency or espouses clichéd images of uber-victimisation in sex trafficking contexts’ (2019: 65). The author refuses to impose either framing on her characters. Nonetheless, the precarity of the four women protagonists is clear.

Europe's necropolitical border regime prevents Efe, Sisi, Ama and Alek from accessing rights, services, security and safety. The role-playing they do in sex work mirrors the self-effacing anonymity they must adopt before the Belgian state.

The fantasy element of the legal fiction of contemporary European border regimes lies in the aspiration to successfully discriminate between what are imagined to be enlightened, civilised European citizens (implicitly coded as white and culturally Christian) on the one hand, and uncivilised, racialised non-Christian Others from beyond its borders on the other. These exclusionary political fantasies are a form of 'social dreaming', according precisely with Lyman Tower Sargent's definition of utopianism (1994: 3). It is therefore important to locate these borders and their lethal effects within a longer material and intellectual history of European exceptionalism, which *includes* the emergence of a universalist human rights discourse. The early modern social dreaming of hard borders and a homogenous citizenry has long haunted the European imagination, contributing to – though by no means determining – a style of imagined community as civilisational, one which accepts and promotes violent, discriminatory, and exclusionary policies in the name of enlightened respect for human rights. The rights of European citizens have become dependent on the violation of the rights of those deemed 'non-Europeans' as mapped in *Liquid Traces*, and as both *Le Havre* and *On Black Sisters' Street* show this is closely bound up with a colonial history that has yet to be reckoned with. Yet in these sorts of cultural imaginaries the memories and experiences of migrants call into question official narratives and point to the existence of possible alternatives. These works reflect *Out of the Woods* (2020: 69) argument that 'our dystopia is not inevitable and it does not make itself'. The telling of stories in these texts opens out new possibilities beyond the hard borders of the present.

Postscript

The genesis of ideas developed in this article occurred during the final implementation of Brexit in early 2020. Since then, migrants have begun to cross the English Channel to Britain in small boats in greater numbers. At one point, the Home Secretary flew to the Kentish coast in an RAF attack helicopter to make a speech about the 'invasion' of refugees. The Conservative UK government plan to send asylum seekers who enter the UK to Rwanda. Within the EU, the pandemic gave institutions *cart blanche* to use what Stierl and Dadusc (2022) call the 'Covid Excuse' for increasingly violent pushbacks of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea. Forensis, a Berlin based agency which uses techniques and methodologies developed by Forensic Architecture, found

in a recent investigation that ‘over 600 people drowned as a result of actions taken by the [Hellenic Coast Guard]’ aboard the *Adriana* on 14 June 2023 (Forensis). The reception of Ukrainian refugees since 2022 is in marked contrast to the treatment of non-Europeans: some twenty per cent of the approximately 6 million who have fled Ukraine are in Poland, where just a few months before the war began refugees from the Middle East and Africa were being violently forced into the forests bordering Belarus without food or shelter. Many froze to death in the winter of 2021 (Vulliamy and Glensk 2021; see also Fekete: 2023, on the treatment of Ukrainians of colour and non-Europeans fleeing Ukraine).

The texts explored in detail in this article are from ten to fifteen years before these events. They operate as counter-narratives to the ideological belief crystallised in the Dublin III Regulation that non-European irregularised migrants are an economic and social burden to be bartered between states. Against the policies of hard borders and the style of supra-nationalist thinking imaginary of Europe as a homogenous civilisation, these realist texts use critical dystopian and science fictional strategies to face revenants of the European past, including the specter of colonialism. Such historical justice demonstrates the transience and contingency of contemporary dystopian conditions. This is then to state that enacting historical justice and producing utopian futures are inexorably intertwined tasks.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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