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## Twenty-first-century African and Asian Migration to Europe and the Rise of the Ethno-topographic Narrative

### Abstract

The first two decades of the twenty-first century have witnessed a rise in the publication of narratives concerning contemporary African and Asian migration to Europe, written individually or collectively, by Asian, African and/or European authors. While scholarly attention has increasingly turned to these texts, our purpose is to further investigate them from a pan-European perspective and to propose a model for their analysis as a distinct literary genre. We therefore introduce the "ethno-topographic narrative" to define, classify and systematically analyze twenty-first-century migration narratives published in Europe in relation to theory, method, corpus, generic type, individual or collective authorship, border and periphery/center, literal and figurative spaces, and multi-voiced modes of narration, including the gaze of the migrant, among other literary and taxonomic criteria. Focusing on five representative samples from Germany, Sweden, Italy, the UK and Greece, we argue that the new geopolitically-charged genre to which these texts belong constitutes a dynamic part of European literatures that attempts to unsettle the monolithic European canon, rejecting, as it does so, the label of the "exotic" text displaying "foreign" characters. Our approach is grounded on the implications of the three components of ethno-topographic (*ethnos*, *topos*, *graphein*), which enable a tripartite form of literary analysis.

### Keywords

migration narratives, Asian and African migration, Europe, refugee and migration crisis, ethno-topographic narratives

### Cover Page Footnote

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Twenty-first-century African and Asian Migration to Europe  
and the Rise of the Ethno-topographic Narrative

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The first two decades of the twenty-first century have witnessed a rise in the publication of narratives concerning contemporary African and Asian migration to Europe, written individually or collectively, by Asian, African and/or European authors. Igiaba Scego's *Adua* (Italy), Christos Tsantis's *Migozarad* ('It will Pass,' Greece), Jenny Erpenbeck's *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen* (*Go, Went, Gone*, Germany), Mohsid Hamid's *Exit West* (UK), and Fateme Behros's *I Skuggan av Sitare* ('In the Shadow of Sitare,' Sweden) constitute only a minute part of this growing literary corpus.<sup>1</sup> While scholarly attention has increasingly turned to it, our purpose is to further investigate it from a pan-European perspective and to propose a model for its analysis as a distinct literary genre. We therefore introduce the "ethno-topographic narrative" to define, classify and systematically analyze twenty-first-century migration narratives published in Europe in relation to theory, method, corpus, generic type, individual or collective authorship, border and periphery/center, literal and figurative places, and multi-voiced modes of narration, including the gaze of the migrant, among other literary and taxonomic criteria. We argue that the new geopolitically charged genre, to which the aforementioned texts belong, constitutes a dynamic part of European literatures that attempts to unsettle the monolithic European canon, rejecting, as it does so, the label of the "exotic" text displaying "foreign" characters. Our approach to it is grounded on the implications of the three components of ethno-topographic (*ethnos*, *topos*, *graphein*), which enable a tripartite form of literary analysis.

From the Ethnographic Novel to the Ethno-topographic Narrative

The study of narrative is central in literary studies, ethnographic research, and social and political sciences because it can unveil complex perspectives on migration. Literary ethno-topographic narratives, we argue, enable nuanced understandings of contemporary African and Asian migration to Europe and of the shifting national and cultural realities accompanying it. The first component of ethnography derives from the ancient Greek ἔθνος/*ethnos* that described "a category of state which existed alongside the

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<sup>1</sup> All English translations are ours except those of *Adua* and *Go, Went, Gone*, which have English editions. In the appendix of our forthcoming book, we list more than fifty ethno-topographic narratives.

polis” without, however, having a “single form of constitution” (Hornblower and Spawforth 559). In ancient Greece, *Ethne* were diverse in form and their “status and political role . . . varied over time” (559). The *ethnos* has been “sometimes equated with primitive tribalism,” but “social and political developments from the 8th cent. BC onwards (in religion and colonization, for example),” rendered it more similar to the *polis* ‘state’ in terms of its structure and autonomy (559). In cultural anthropology the term refers to “a population group regarded as having common descent or having a common national or cultural tradition” (Simpson and Weiner). The second component of ethnography derives from the ancient Greek γράφειν/*graphein* ‘to write.’

As a discipline, ethnography employs a set of qualitative methods, including narrative research, and empirical data in its investigation of behavioral patterns and social practices of large cultural groups of people interacting over time. Ethnographic methods, texts and topics become articulated mainly in disciplines such as history, sociology, and literature (Creswell 93-94). The ethnographic novel first appeared in Europe in the early twentieth century with the goal of accurately describing “another way of life, but unlike ordinary ethnography . . . through the addition of character and plot” (Langness and Frank 18). In 1922, Alfred L. Kroeber wrote that “the fictional form of presentation . . . allows a freedom in depicting or suggesting the thoughts of the Indian, such as is impossible in a formal scientific report” (13). Towards the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, “*Etnoficción*” ‘ethnofiction’<sup>2</sup> also appeared in the Americas with the aim of mediating “the discourse of the indigenous [Amerindian] other from an ethnical-fictional perspective” (Lienhard 84) and it became a core component of *Etnoliteratura*<sup>3</sup> ‘ethnoliterature,’ a literary sub-discipline established at universities throughout Latin America. In this article, we introduce the European ethno-topographic narrative as emerging at the dawn of the twenty-first century.<sup>4</sup>

To differentiate between the ethno-topographic narrative and its literary precursors, we highlight the role of τόπος/*topos*, in the sense of place, topography and/or literary topic in relation to the respective *ethnos*—national identity/people represented through *graphein*—ways of writing. In ethnographic research, ethno-topography utilizes “space as a door into social analysis” (Castellano de Menezes et al. 3). It concerns the (spatial) “materialização das culturas e subjetividades” (Duarte 5) ‘materialization of cultures and subjectivities,’ and it requires a multi-sensory approach to *topos* that also takes into consideration the perceptions triggered by it (Carvalho 73). By applying the term ethno-topographic to literary texts, we mean to highlight the rhetorical potential of literary *topoi* and tropes, and to investigate how these

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<sup>2</sup> Not to be confused with the Anglophone ‘ethnofiction,’ which mainly refers to a mixture of documentary and fictional film within visual anthropology (Sjöberg 229-42).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, <http://etnoliteratura.udenar.edu.co/>.

<sup>4</sup> The threefold essence that typifies the ethno-topographic narrative may be applicable to the plural notion of migration narratives—national or continental.

become produced at the same time as producing newly formed and shifting global, continental, national and individual social relations.

In using the term narrative rather than novel, we mean to foreground the inclusive and pluralistic nature of this genre. While acknowledging the impact of fiction on the narrativization of contemporary Asian and African migration to Europe, we also note the genre's mediation of fact-based auto/biographical narratives, which remain silenced in mainstream media and ignored by policies that tend to produce or justify state-initiated and juridically-approved hostility, violence and xenophobia against Asian and African (irregular) migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in Europe (see Chouliaraki and Stolic 1-18).<sup>5</sup> We then explain how ethno-topographic narratives can enable a productive (con) fusion of local and global voices and of European and non-European gazes that can challenge European paradigms related to this form of migration to Europe. In illustrating how such narratives conflate (geopolitical) center and periphery, self and other, dominant and marginalized racial, national, religious and otherwise voices, thus staging both literal and metaphorical border-crossings, we situate ethno-topographic narratives in cultural and geopolitical "Third Spaces."

For Homi Bhabha, the "third" is a hybrid *topos* that "enables other positions to emerge" ("Third Space" 211). It "displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up . . . new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom," thus giving rise to "a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation" ("Third Space" 211). Such *topoi* offer opportunities "for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (Bhabha *The Location of Culture* 1-2). Writing from "Third Spaces" constitutes a "substantial intervention into those justifications of modernity—progress, homogeneity, cultural organicism, the deep nation, the long past—that rationalize the authoritarian, 'normalizing' tendencies within cultures in the name of . . . national interest" (Bhabha "Introduction" 4). In articulating migrant narrative voices, such writing entails the potential for the transfiguration of cultural hierarchies and power dynamics.

In its investigation of such literary production, our study becomes positioned in the contemporary narrative turn within migration studies (De Fina and Tseng 382). For Zeynep Şahin-Mencütek, "migration narratives" incorporate "values, interests, knowledge, and claims that explain the causes and impact of migration" ("Origin and Destination" 1) and they develop "through communicative practices including framing, codifying, selecting, omitting, and silencing in order to offer a specific view on migration or migrants or a country's migration history" ("Policy and Politics" 4). Like Şahin-Mencütek, we argue in this article that "individual migration narratives" can

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<sup>5</sup> We understand auto/biographical narratives as always-already infused with fictional elements since memories are not passive retrievals of past events as they happened, but active re-interpretations in light of later motives, interests and conditions (Smith and Watson 92).

“offer more nuanced understanding[s] of immigration and emigration experiences” (“Origin and Destination” i) than depersonalizing and often hostile policies and mainstream European media narratives. Such texts also articulate border-crossing experiences, cosmopolitan mores or multicultural/transcultural topics. For Johan Schimanski, “as [a] border-crosser crosses [a] border, new narrative borders are created and crossed in the crosser’s own story, and in the story of the border itself” (47). Consequently, ethno-topographic texts indicate how perceptions of, and narratives related to the border expand because of Europe’s refugee and migration crisis.<sup>6</sup> Simultaneously, they reveal the geopolitical nature of this so-called crisis that is “rooted in . . . fundamental divisions in Europe” and beyond, and they carry the potential of unveiling “narrative simplification[s] based on . . . essentialized understanding[s] of the relations between migration dynamics and territories,” thus foregrounding the “risks of ‘geopolitical determinism’” (Pastore 11).

We propose that in their articulations of border-crossing experiences in Europe and beyond, ethno-topographic narratives can potentially unsettle monolithic and reductionist understandings of different territories. Ferruccio Pastore, for instance, observes “a tendency” in official European narratives “to rigidly categorize countries (as both geographical and political entities) into one of the three basic ‘migration functions’ that a given territory can in theory play: as ‘sending,’ ‘receiving’ or ‘transit’ spaces” (21). The narratives investigated in this article negotiate desired “receiving” destinations such as Germany, Sweden, and pre-Brexit UK. They also display peripheral “transit” spaces within the European center, such as Greek and Italian islands and port cities. Lastly, they illustrate “sending” countries focalized through European (ignorant) hosts or African and Asian migrants. As they display shifting negotiations of *ethnos* in, and the (con) fusion of, different literary *topoi* and languages, these narratives can also reconfigure them, thus unsettling the “geopolitical determinism” (Pastore 11) that characterizes and determines European policies and politics relating to contemporary African and Asian migration to Europe.

In addition to their reconfigurations of space, we suggest that in being (co-) authored in dominant European languages that are often oppressive and hostile to African and Asian irregular migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, these narratives can also counter this linguistic oppression. By presenting their gazes, political consciousness and national consciousness, these otherwise oppressive languages become “deterritorialized” (Deleuze and Guattari 47) in the process of meaning formation both at the (co-) authoring and the reading stage. Consequently, ethno-topographic narratives can be situated alongside what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have introduced as “minor literature” (47). While at times they may fall in the trap of reproducing (geopolitical)

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<sup>6</sup> We adopt a critical standpoint to the term “crisis” that has been extensively used in “deterrence narratives,” which Elias Steinhilper and Rob J. Gruijters introduce as “the dominant discourse among European authorities and agencies such as Frontex,” leading to the understanding of refugees and migrants in Europe as an undesirable and threatening “burden” (516).

hegemonic power relations, at others, they offer opportunities for staging national consciousness that is, as Frantz Fanon writes, other than nationalism, and which “can offer an international dimension” of the nation (199). This “*international dimension*” exists “both within the margins of the nation-space and in the boundaries in-between nations and peoples” (Bhabha “Introduction” 4; emphasis in original). Ethno-topographic narratives thus illustrate how nuanced gazes at and perceptions of European nations, languages and spaces can become mediated through literary (non-) fiction.

#### *Ethnos*: Race, Ethnicity, National (Be) longing and Fluid Identity Formations

Contemporarily, *ethnos* can refer to race, ethnicity, religion and culture, *inter alia*. Distinct from “race,” “ethnicity” “has been used increasingly since 1960s to account for human variation in terms of culture, tradition, language, social patterns and ancestry” (Ashcroft et al. 80). *Ethnos* as race and/or ethnicity intersects with other identity markers such as religion, ancestry, territory, language, gender and sexuality, among others. Consequently, identity is “subject to individual and group negotiation[s] and transformation[s]” and it “changes and moves following historical and geo-political evolution and sociocultural trends” (González Ortega 3). In Erpenbeck’s and Behros’s novels, different forms of intersectionality between *ethnos* as race and/or ethnicity with gender, sexuality and religion foreground such shifting, local as well as migrant, relational masculinities and femininities from “third spaces” within Germany and Sweden, respectively.

*Go, Went, Gone*, by Erpenbeck, is based on the encounters of Richard, a German Emeritus professor of Classics, with a group of male African asylum seekers in Berlin, after he observes their occupation of Oranienplatz. As a widower who has retired from his lecturing position, Richard is initially indifferent to the refugees’ protests in demand of fair treatment; gradually, though, he becomes interested and significantly involved in their cause. In illustrating his co-existence and conversations with them, the novel presents an insightful perspective on their incomprehensible lives and their relationalities with a local host. Initially, Richard elaborates a “catalog of questions . . . to investigate how one makes the transition from a full, readily comprehensible existence to the life of a refugee” (Erpenbeck 38-39). His questions correspond to most of the aforementioned identity markers, but his ideas regarding the fixity of (national) identity collapse with the men’s responses and his reflections on the instability of his own national belonging.

When he asks a young man he romanticizes by calling Apollo where he is from, the latter responds in Italian “*Del deserto*” (50) ‘from the desert.’ Richard then asks questions regarding his country of origin and ethnic ancestry to find out that he is “from Niger,” however not “a Yoruba” as he had expected, but “a Tuareg” (51). Confronting and admitting to his ignorance about African countries and ethnic groups, the retired professor thinks of “a model of car

called Tuareg” (51) and the narrator supplements this comment by explaining that the “ancestors of the Tuareg are said to have come from today’s Syria more than three thousand years ago, perhaps even from the Caucasus, crossing Egypt to reach North Africa, which in antiquity was known as a whole as Libya” (141). In contrast to the centuries-long lineage of Apollo’s ancestry, the novel refers to the naming of Germany as such and its coming to existence as a national entity “150 years ago” (81). Richard “became a citizen of the Federal Republic of Germany . . . back when it was still accurate to call him a citizen of the German Democratic Republic,” just after the collapse of the Berlin wall (81). The short length of his own (national) belonging thus becomes juxtaposed against Apollo’s, as the narrative unsettles the stability of borders that contain and define countries.

Religion is also core for the literary formation of an instance of peaceful co-existence in Germany. Rashid, an African Muslim man from the Yoruba tribe, which is mostly constituted of Christians, explains that “a person who kills is not a Muslim” and that “Jesus is a prophet in the Quran too” (84-85). The narrator then explains that once, in his seminar entitled “Jesus, the last Greek God, [Richard] compared the scene of Jesus’s birth in the gospels of the Bible with the corresponding scene of the Quran” (85). Rather than reproducing radical differences between Islam and Christianity as those commonly found in European deterrence narratives, *Go, Went, Gone* thus points to commonalities between the two Abrahamic religions. Moving from past to narrative present, readers learn that “now Richard, an atheist with a Protestant mother, stands with his Muslim guest before the illuminated, heathen Christmas tree” (188). The novel hence presents a perspective on the German *ethnos* that emerges from an open, pluralistic, hybrid “third space” within Berlin.

In addition to religion, the novel’s references to gender and sexual desire unveil the African men’s vulnerabilities and dignities, as well as their otherwise invisible feelings and perspectives. In their conversations with Richard, who is assumed to be their “civilized” European host, an unsettling of stereotypes occurs when it comes to (threatening) masculinities as intersecting with *ethnos*. At the end of the narrative, the men talk about their relationships with women. Karon explains how he left a loved one behind. Khalil mentions that he was asked by the woman he dated to have sex with her outside of wedlock and, when he refused, she disappeared. The girls’ parents may not approve. There may be “a German boyfriend after all,” they further note, with Ithemba explaining that “nobody loves a refugee,” and Apollo clarifying that he would not marry a German woman, even if he loved her because of the possibility that she would think that he did so for “the papers” (280). While this narrative fragment illuminates these men’s otherwise unseen perspectives and struggles to preserve their dignities, it also unsettles their stereotypical perceptions as (sexually) predatory and threatening. Ithemba then asks Richard intimate questions about his dead wife that unveil her drinking problems caused by his marital infidelity and his unwillingness to have children. When he explains how he “talked her into getting rid of the[ir] child” (282) illegally when she was pregnant, and how

she almost died in the process causing him feelings of fear, embarrassment, and even hatred towards her, he becomes the antihero of the narrative in an anti-climactic exposure of his past. His encounter with the African asylum seekers unsettles hegemonic ideas about “good” European and “evil” African men and foregrounds the different ways in which Germany can become, even through this isolated incident, a pluralistic nation.

The same is true for *I Skuggan av Sitare*, a novel about an Iranian woman named Narge who migrates to Sweden with her husband and his other wife. As opposed to focusing on masculinities as intersecting with other identity markers and *ethnos*, Behros’s novel concerns the literary structuring of Iranian migrant and local femininities in Sweden. Once in Stockholm, Narge finds a letter written by Sitare, a second-generation migrant Iranian girl under twenty, explaining that she was running away to escape a marriage arranged by her father, Hussein. Sitare reminds Narge of herself since she is also marginalized in the shadow of Swedish society and of her husband. She thus decides to find the girl in the hope of also discovering her own identity. The novel is structured around two intertwined stories: Narge’s constant exploration of her double identity and her frenetic detective-like search for Sitare, who ultimately abandons her Iranian family and leads a more secular life with her boyfriend. The book displays how these two women engage in individual and collective intercultural identity negotiations as migrants in a less patriarchal European society, with its main characters negotiating ethnicity, national (un) belonging and sexual desire.

Narge, a twenty-eight-year-old Iranian and a newcomer to Stockholm, declared that “Jag är definitivt inte svensk” (Behros 25) ‘I am definitely not a Swede.’ Yet, she attends school in Stockholm “för att förbättra min svenska och lära meg mer om högtider och firandet av jul, påsk, Blåkulla och påskkäringar, valborgsmässoafton och majbrasa och midsommarfirandet” (220) ‘to improve [her] Swedish and learn more about how Swedes celebrate Christmas, the Easter’s haunted witches’ night at Blåkulla, Walpurgis Night, the Bonfire and Midsummer’s day.’ Learning Swedish and navigating through the Swedish archive of popular culture becomes her means of negotiating her way into the Swedish society. Sitare (“star” in Persian), on the other hand, abandons her family and education to escape an arranged marriage. In her only encounter with her father at a Stockholm subway station, she expresses her disregard for the values he has brought from Iran to Sweden, and her refusal to comply with wishes by agreeing to the marriage he had arranged for her. Sitare longs to lead “*det moderna livet . . . fria livet. Jag vill leva som en svensk*” (23, emphasis in the original) ‘*a modern life . . . a free life. I wanted to live like Swedes do.*’ Her father, on the contrary, preserves Iranian patriarchal traditions, among which the authority to define, control and defend his family’s *namos* ‘honor.’ By running away, Sitare dishonors and wounds her father’s integrity and signals her wish to distance herself from her familial and ethnic lineage and its traditions.

Elsa, on the other hand, a Swedish woman in her forties, tricks the Swedish health and welfare system into acknowledging her as an early-retired citizen without being sick. She lives in Märsta, a Stockholm neighborhood, where Narge, Sitare and Hussein also live, together with many other unskilled migrants and refugees from across the globe. She acts as a Big Brother regulator of migrant lives and mores, reprimanding them to duly become integrated in the Swedish culture that she takes as a model for human behavior. Simultaneously, she has a conciliatory role, functioning as an efficient mediator between cultures. For instance, she tells Hussein that Narge is single and lives with her brother and his family to veil the reality of their relationship, to which he replies: “Då måste vi hitta en bra man åt henne. Hon verka vara en fin, anständig flicka” (84) ‘Then we have to find a good husband for her. She seems to be a nice, decent girl.’ Elsa laughs, explaining that in Sweden women find their husbands on their own. In its mediation of relationalities between Swedish and Iranian migrant women, the novel illustrates how they navigate through a hybrid and shifting Swedish society, while also unsettling Western stereotypical understandings of Iranian women.

Indeed, as a secularized, well-read, middle-class Iranian, who is deeply in love with her husband Nima’s first wife, Farah, Narge displays complex intersections between Muslim femininity, sexual desire and agency. While reflecting on her complicated life and secret family situation in Stockholm, she notes that at their home, she “hade [jag] full frihet att älska min man och hans söta fruoch deras underbara barn som också hade blivit mina” (59) ‘had the freedom to love [her] husband and his sweet wife and their wonderful children who have also become [her] own,’ but she could never express this outside. “De som kände oss ute i samhället viste att jag älska min bror” (75) ‘our acquaintances only knew that Nima was my dearest brother,’ she explains, further noting that “När Nima låg bredvid meg, tänkte jag på Farah, och när han log hos Farah, tänkte jag också på Farah . . . . Oj, vad jag saknade min älskade svägerska” (78, emphasis in the original) ‘when Nima was lying next to me, I thought about Farah, and when he lay with Farah, I also thought about Farah . . . . Oh, how much I missed my beloved *sister-in-law*.’ In her word play, Narge ironically highlights her way of veiling her “illegitimate” desire. She and Farah seem to consider their loving husband an essential camouflage that allows their coexistence to align with Swedish and Iranian social and cultural appearances by veiling what is illicit in each society, namely, polygamy in Sweden and same-sex relationships in Iran.

Narge, like Elsa, learns to negotiate her identity at individual, cultural and (trans)national levels. Sitare and her father, on the other hand, struggle to stick to a cultural and national “first space” (Sweden and Iran respectively), envisioning and leading their lives on that basis. Eventually, Sitare writes a second letter explaining that she will start a new life with her boyfriend as if she were (re-) born in Sweden. Like his daughter, Hussein sticks to his “first space” (Iran), by conceding that while “heder är en del av en europeisk mans liv [:] for en muslimsk man är *namos* hela sitt existens (164) ‘honor is a part of European

man's life [;] for a Muslim man, *namos* is his whole existence.' In threatening to kill Sitare in the name of his honor, Hussein breaks Swedish laws, causing his wife's desire to help him avoid expulsion "från paradiset" (57) 'from [Sweden's] paradise.' *I Skuggan av Sitare*, then, and *Go, Went, Gone*, display the shifting, fluid, individual and collective identities of those migrating to Europe and of the local hosts. As they do so, they unsettle preconceived understandings of African and German masculinities on the one hand, and Iranian and Swedish femininities on the other, highlighting the pluralities and the hybridities of third European (inter) nations and *topoi*.

#### *Topos*: (Border) Localities, Temporalities and Literary tropes

*Topos* fosters, as mentioned, geopolitical and social relations at individual and national levels. It may point to transnational places and/or borders, to literary themes, and its connection with time may evoke utopias or dystopias. As a literary theme, *topos* refers to geopolitically oriented migration that produces memories, memoirs, and other (non-) fictional narratives. It also concerns (non-) European rural or national or transcontinental spaces like Africa, Asia and Europe, as well as real and symbolic, liquid or terrestrial borders, reception centers and refugee camps. In ethno-topographic narratives, African and Asian peripheries enter the European center and vice versa, both literally and metaphorically, foregrounding long histories of (neo-) colonial relations and interdependencies and unsettling the fixity of national borders. Spatial rhetorics are intimately linked to bodily experiences of movement and/or stillness. Past, present and future locations and temporalities become reflected through individual memories and historical, national or imperial archives, and they may include non-European spaces that are structured as real overseas colonial territories or as colonized subjects' memories transcribed in the form of utopias or dystopias. Literal and metaphorical border-crossing experiences and negotiations of (trans-)national or metropolitan urban spaces, and topics related to migrant "foreignness" that becomes juxtaposed to "belonging" and "Europeanization" are also displayed in ethno-topographic texts, which narratively produce and become produced from within "third spaces" in Europe and beyond.

*Adua*, for instance, by the Somalian-Italian Scego, presents history—"official and canonical narratives of chronological successions of events in particular locations of time and space" (Mignolo 53)—as intentionally (con) fused with the personal stories of three marginalized Somalian protagonists, who struggle through their conflictive encounters with their imperial other: Italians. Their haunted visions and memories stem from their betrayal of personal and national ideals, and they articulate their elusive ambitions of (be) longing both to the metropolitan city of Rome, the center of the Italian empire, and to colonial, peripheral Eastern African cities like Addis Ababa, Mogadishu and Magalo. *Adua* (un) weaves the history of the Italian empire (1882-

1941/1960) and that of its East African colonies (Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia), converging in its novelistic *topos* eight decades of official imperial/colonial histories inscribed both in imperial archives and in the marginalized protagonists' memories. Specifically, the novel introduces three imperial/colonial temporalities and localities in its narrative space: the second Italo-Ethiopian War (1935-36); Somalia's gradual independence from Italy between 1941 and 1960 that instituted a parliamentary democracy and ended with a military coup in 1969, and contemporary African and Asian migration flows and arrivals in Lampedusa on the way to Europe, with the exacerbation of the so-called migration and refugee crisis.

The 1896 Battle of Adwa, evoked by the novel's title, marks the defeat of Italian imperial troops by Ethiopian military forces and constitutes the historical context on which the narrative—a personal and traumatic vision of the Italian empire in Somalia—is based. *Adua* is structured around three respective *topoi* evoked by the three main characters who, as subaltern colonial subjects, have undergone racial and gendered violence and oppression both in African colonial territories and in the imperial metropolis of Rome. First, Zoppe, a Somalian imperial official working as a translator/mediator is represented as holding an alliance meeting with the Count Celestino Anselmi and an Ethiopian warlord, who supported the invasion of Italian fascists to his country in 1935 (Scego 75). Second, Adua, Zoppe's daughter, is a girl in her late adolescence, who, during the 1960s, appears “lost in [her] celluloid dreams of becoming a real movie star like Ava Gardner, Marilyn Monroe, Grace Kelly or Rita Hayworth in a utopian faraway Rome full of *la dolce vita* and cabaret” (81). Third, Ahmed is ironically called the “Titanic” by his wife, Adua, for having survived the perilous crossing of the Mediterranean to Europe, like thousands of migrants washed ashore on Lampedusa early in the twenty-first century (34-35).

*Adua* is written within the frame of modernity/coloniality.<sup>7</sup> Correspondingly, *topos* becomes connected to three different but interconnected temporalities: First, the modernity of Rome in 2015, at the peak of Europe's so-called refugee crisis, when thousands of African and Asian migrants drowned across the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean on their way to an imagined utopian promised land—Europe. Second, the modernity/coloniality of vibrant European cities like Rome, and African cities like Magalo in Somalia, which were immersed in imported grand celluloid modernity and its liberating feeling of frenzy in the 1960s. Third, Italy's imperialism/colonialism as embodied through its second invasion in Ethiopia in 1935, which led to the creation of the Italian East African imperial fascist state. Like *Adua*, *Go, Went, Gone* also recreates Germany's corresponding empire in Africa. While the former structures Italian East Africa (1882-1960) boosted by Mussolini's imperial plans (95-98,106), the latter represents German East Africa (1880-1914)

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<sup>7</sup> “Modernity” refers to “the historical process in which Europe began its progress toward world hegemony,” and its “dark side [is] coloniality” (Mignolo xiii).

established by Bismarck and promoted by the Nazis (Erpenbeck 38-40). The historiographic “macro-topos” formed in *Go, Went, Gone* includes colonial West and East African territories appropriated and legitimized by Germany through imperial land contracts, maps, laws and international treaties with other European states, as suggested by the positioning of “‘German East Africa’ on the globe” in Richard’s study, even while the retired professor “has no idea what German East Africa is called today” (Erpenbeck 37).

Our engagement with *topos* thus shows how, by unearthing the imperial/colonial histories of Italy and Germany, Scego and Erpenbeck rewrite them from the perspective of twenty-first-century European modernity. Indeed, the agencies and memories of African migrants and refugees longing for their cultures, ancestors and families, but also longing for belonging to Italy and Germany respectively, become articulated from the early-twenty-first-century centers of (former) Empires—Rome and Berlin. From the margins, these migrant memories illustrate how the current migration and refugee crisis is linked to and caused by long histories of European colonization and (neo-) imperialism, further embodying macroeconomic, hegemonic relations between Italy and Germany and their corresponding former East African colonies. Consequently, these memories also mediate asymmetrical economic relations between hegemonic metropolitan characters and geopolitically colonized bodies/subjects forced—by war and (manmade) disasters and famine—to migrate to Europe in millions at the dawn of the twenty-first century, illustrating how the periphery enters the European center, unsettling the fixity and stability of its borders. Indeed, as Richard thinks while reflecting on the African men’s protest because of their unfair treatment by the German government, “a border . . . can suddenly become visible, it can suddenly appear where a border never used to be: battles fought in recent years on the borders of Libya, or of Morocco or Niger, are now taking place in the middle of Berlin-Spandau” (209).

These characters and their navigation through different *topoi* critically illustrate the inescapable workings of modernity/coloniality. For Walter Mignolo, “modernity/coloniality are two sides of the same coin and cannot operate as two separate frames of mind: You [e.g., author, narrator and character] cannot be modern without being colonial; and if you are on the colonial side of the spectrum you have to transact with modernity; you cannot ignore it” (6-7). Hence, like real people, Scego and Erpenbeck’s colonized characters can enter and exit or be expelled from modernity (García Canclini 264-281). In *Adua*, for instance, Zoppe “was catapulted [from Somalia] to a back street of the Pratti quarter of Rome . . . He had imagined Rome to be an open-air palace, but instead it was a pisspot for dogs and humans alike” (Scego 29, 59). As such, he shows how one can be located in the enclaves of modernity/coloniality within Europe or Africa. In this sense, like *Go, Went, Gone*, *Adua* “encourages us to take seriously—at both the macroscopic and the personal levels—the hierarchies that structure social interactions, to trace their deep historical causes, and to acknowledge that no ethics is conceivable without the recognition of other desiring bodies” (Lazzari).

This is also true for *Exit West*. Hamid, a British-Pakistani author and “self-proclaimed modern-day nomad,” who “writes from a liminal or deterritorialized position,” does not name Saeed and Nadia’s hometown or country, which they flee to escape daily attacks by militants (Naydan 433). The novel guides readers to speculate about this *topos*, since despite its detailed descriptions, it could be any place in the Middle East or Africa undergoing (para-) military or terrorist attacks that force the young couple to flee through magic doors as opposed to borders, and to enter Greece, the UK and, finally, the US, to live in “the new city of Marin, on the Pacific Ocean, close to San Francisco” (Hamid 189). Saeed and Nadia reach Marin after “passing through a . . . door” in London in their attempt to escape biopolitical surveillance and racist attacks they suffered there by “nativist mobs” (189). Like Hamid, who “‘speaks back’ from the periphery of the former British Empire,” his narrator also speaks back by accounting for the protagonists’ and other migrants’ experiences of racism and nationalist violence in London (Popescu and Jahamah 127). In this sense, the “ghosts of the postcolony populate” *Exit West* as they do in *Adua and Go, Went, Gone*, showing how “the image of people fleeing former colonies is a variation on the “‘return of the repressed’ trope” (136). As they enter the text, these (colonial) subjects also populate and take up space in the (former) imperial metropolises of London, Rome, and Berlin.

Contrarily, *Migozarad* (‘It will pass’) by Tsantis, a Greek author, presents the Mediterranean border as a liquid graveyard.<sup>8</sup> *Migozarad* is based on the author’s experiences of the refugee crisis in the port city of Patras in Greece, which has witnessed an increased influx of refugees and asylum seekers, particularly from Afghanistan. Tsantis draws from research conducted between 2009-2011, from conversations with refugees and migrants, and from interpersonal relationships with migrant workers.<sup>9</sup> The liquid borderscape of the Mediterranean is presented as both place and literary trope that conflates past and present temporalities. Lefteris, the protagonist, explains that he had witnessed “δεκάδες τουμπανιασμένα πτώματα επέπλεαν στον κόλπο του Αστακού και το φεγγάρι χλωμό καθρεφτιζόταν πάνω στις ανθρώπινες σαρκές” (Tsantis, 50) ‘dozens of swollen bodies floating in the Astakos bay as the pale moon was reflected on human flesh.’ A local newspaper describes this incident as follows: “Πτώματα λαθρομεταναστών ξεβράστηκαν στις ακτές της Αιτωλοακαρνανίας κοντά στον Αστακό .... Προφανώς κάποιои πλήρωσαν με τη ζωή τους την απόπειρα να μπουν λαθραία στην πατρίδα μας” (50, emphasis in the original) ‘corpses of illegal migrants were washed ashore in Aetolia-Acarmania near Astakos .... It seems that some have paid with their lives for their attempt to illegally enter our country.’ The sea becomes filled with the dead bodies of those others, whose lives are incomprehensible, “precarious,”

<sup>8</sup> Although the text is in Greek, this title comes from a term found written on the wall of a coffee shop in Kabul, as stated in the book.

<sup>9</sup> This information derives from Michael’s personal communication with the author.

and “ungrievable” (Butler 23, 38) and their death is presented in the newspaper as a form of punishment.

This takes Lefteris back to his familial past of forced migration. He explains that “θα μπορούσε αυτή να ήταν η τύχη των δικών μου προγόνων αν ο παππούς μου δεν ήταν, το 1922, τόσο τυχερός όταν αναζητούσε κάπου στο Αιγαίο ένα φιλόξενο λιμάνι” (51) ‘this could have been the fate of my own ancestors if my grandfather hadn’t been very lucky, in 1922, when he was seeking refuge in the Aegean Sea’ upon the destruction of Asia Minor. The sea thus becomes infused with narratives of forced migration, persecution and death, conflating in a hybrid temporality and space, local and foreign, past and present, self and other. Like *Adua, Go, Went, Gone*, and *Exit West, Migozarad* also highlights how *topos* embodies narratives of migration and exile, as well as the shifting realities contemporarily occurring in Europe because of its so-called refugee and migration crisis. In so doing, all these narratives highlight the value of *graphein*—literary style and narrative (non-) fiction—for such purposes.

#### *Graphein*: Literary Style and Ways of Writing *Ethnos* and *Topos*

*Graphein*, through which *ethnos* and *topos* become articulated, refers to the diverse (sub-) genres in which a text can be written—as documentary, literary social critique, fantasy, fiction. Broadly, it refers to narratives purposefully inscribing and informing ethical and aesthetic discourses, as well as (non-) fictional themes in form and content. *Graphein* is also closely connected to Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the literary “chronotope,” whereby “time . . . thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible” and “space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (84). Generally, “plot generating chronotopes” underscore “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships” and provide “the basis for distinguishing generic types” (84, 251). Our analysis in this section aims at unpacking the role of literary chronotopes in ethno-topographic texts, at pointing to their literary value, and at illustrating how they claim space in the European literary (counter-) canon, unsettling, as they do so, European paradigms regarding contemporary African and Asian migration to Europe, and challenging hierarchies in terms of authorial agency and literary legitimacy.

The generic plurality and hybridity of the ethno-topographic narrative and its articulation of varied chronotopes, is reflected, for instance, via *Exit West*’s magical and realistic elements. With doors that transform difficult migratory journeys into instant transpositions from one place to another, thus minimizing temporal and spatial distances, the novel displays an alternative imaginative perspective on forced migration. As a “contemporary folk tale of sorts” it enables the protagonists, who would otherwise lack the degree of agency and safety they are invested with through the magic doors, to ultimately flee persecution and live safely in Marin, USA (Naydan 442). Hybridity is also

reflected in *Migozarad* linguistically through Tsantis's authorial decision to choose the term "Migozarad" (rather than a Greek one) for its title. It further becomes manifested through the book's generic plurality—a reflection, in the form of literary pastiche, of what could be understood as a diverse contemporary Greek (literary) culture and nation. The book consists of a poem and an Afghan boy's letter that function as preludes to the main narrative. It is further composed of diary entries, newspaper articles, and additional historical and archival material, all of which enable the text to foreground Western responsibilities regarding the refugee crisis. As it does so, *Migozarad* also attempts to undo injurious mainstream representations of refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants in Greece.

Bakhtin's literary chronotope, both as a unifier of "time, plot and history" (84) and as a means of "plot generating" (251) also becomes instrumental in the literary structuring of the Italian and German empires of Africa in *Adua* and *Go, Went, Gone*. In *Adua*, the literary chronotope encompasses temporalities/topographies/topics informing the novel's internal structure, plot, history/stories and narrative style. Scego uses betrayal as a literary trope/*topos* to organize the novel's structure and the placement of its three protagonists (Zoppe, Adua, Ahmed) in the three different temporalities (modern/colonial). The formation, development and fall of Italian East Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is symbolized through the main characters. Zoppe—the "traduttore-traditore" (Scego 24-35) 'translator-traitor'—is haunted by his visions of bad conscience for having helped sell his native country and its people to the Italian Empire's fascists in 1935. The discreet guilt and charm of early-twenty-first-century Italian modernity is represented by Adua, who betrayed both her father and her African nomadic family to escape to Rome in the early 1970s, thus becoming an Italian sub-citizen. Finally, the dark side of European modernity and continental nationalism—that has not been adequately dealt with—is embodied by Ahmed, a young Somalian, who landed in Lampedusa in 2015, illegally crossing to Rome afterwards to live on the streets. Adua, his older compatriot, takes him out of his precarious position and marries him only to be later betrayed by him, through his engagement in online (sexual) relations with other women, which render him a traitor of his wife and his people.

*Adua* is masterfully constructed in terms of internal structure, plot, multiple narrative voices and perspectives, historiographic spaces, tropes and styles as noted by Gretchen McCullough, who refers to it as "a lyrical novel . . . describ[ing] the cultural alienation of Somalis living in Italy." In so doing, *Adua* also bypasses Western hegemonic formations of such migrant (post-) colonial subjects. Scego's literary work has received extensive scholarly attention and international acclaim as indicated by Italian, American and, Asian literary critics (see Lavagnino 104-51; Lazzari; McCullough). However, the traditional Italian literary establishment is yet to give Scego her deserved place in the national literary canon. As Alessandra di Maio writes, even if it opens up the national canon transnationally, literature produced by "migrants from

[Italy's] former colonies and occupied territories in Africa," such as Scego's, constitutes "a form of immigration that Italy has largely yet to confront" and which it has "attempted to assimilate . . . to the more general migratory trend involving the nation" (535-36). Irrespective of this, Scego's literary work continues to expand and transform the Italian and European literary landscape.

Behros's *In the Shadow of Sitare* has received criticism similar to the rest of her literary *oeuvre* from traditional segments of the Swedish literary establishment. Her novels have been labelled by Satu Gröndahl, for instance, as "invandrar-och minoriteteslitteratur i nordisk perspektiv" (35) 'migrant and minority literature in a Nordic perspective.' For Gröndahl, as "litteratur skriven av författaren som hör till nya invandrargrupper i Sverige . . . invandrarlitteratur har ett mer dokumentariskvärde i stället för en ren litterärt värde" (35) 'literature written by new migrant authors in Sweden . . . it has a more documentary than a purely literary value.' Such comments evidence the national and continental barriers authors of African and Asian descent are at times forced to overcome in their struggle to belong to European societies, and to be recognized as essential members of national and European literary canons. On the other hand, despite having their literary quality (more easily) recognized, ethno-topographic narratives written by authors of European descent in artistic attempts to speak on behalf of African and Asian others always run the risk of objectifying and further silencing those they seek to represent (Michael and Mastilovic). This shows that the hegemonic power relations that become negotiated in the narrative realm of such texts also mark their production and their academic and popular reception.

#### Coda

In this article, we have introduced a minute sample of the ethno-topographic narrative that is gradually becoming visible in the field of European literatures, as a geopolitically informed genre that can unsettle official narratives on Europe's refugee and migration crisis. Investigating representations of *ethnos* and *topos* through *graphein*, we have shed light on (national) individual and collective identity negotiations, and on the role of *topos* in embodied migrating experiences. We have also explored the use of different literary genres and styles for nuanced representations of shifting realities and identities in European nations and cultures. We have shown how, at times, ethno-topographic narratives attempt to re-imagine and represent more inclusive versions of Europe and more effective ways through which to approach forced migration in general and Europe's so-called refugee and migration crisis in particular. Our selected corpus does not shy away from highlighting the fact that Europe has yet to find an ethical solution for this phenomenon, which is mainly caused by five centuries of Western colonial and imperial economic and political presence in Africa and Asia. It remains to be seen, however, whether the peaceful utopias and instances of co-existence

displayed in some of our selected narratives will occur in the European reality in the years ahead.

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