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ECOTONES OF TIME AND SPACE IN TWO WORKS BY J.M. COETZEE AND IGIABA SCEGO

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Abstract – While political discourses on the current 'migratory crisis' often take the language of ecological emergency, depicting Western states as self-sufficient ecosystems put in danger by the 'vermin' of external intruders, postcolonial writing proves crucial in reimagining frontier limbos and precarious existences as the originating centres of unprecedented transformations. Drawing on biological and cultural definitions of the "ecotone" (Haraway 2007, Morrissey 2015) and on Edward Casey's notion of spaces "in-between edges" (2008), I intend to explore two different declinations of literary ecotones centred around migrant children's experiences, namely Igiaba Scego's *La mia casa è dove sono* [Home is where I am] (2010) and J. M. Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013). The first chronicles the Scegos's diaspora from Mogadishu to Europe as well as the writer's own struggles in growing up a black Italian-born girl in 1990s Rome. The second is a dystopian fiction in which the protagonists are strangers recently arrived by boat in a posthumous dimension where all inhabitants have forgotten their past and are content with their anodyne present. Scego's memoir and Coetzee's novel provide instances of different but equally powerful literary ecotones. Whereas Coetzee's fictional text focuses on the existential and philosophical limbo of a lost child literally experiencing a new (after)life, Scego's work deals with specific objects (the home-drawn Rome-plus-Mogadishu map, Bernini's Roman sculpture of an African elephant) as objective correlatives of complex and transformative collective geographies.

Keywords: ecotones; edge effect; postcolonial literature; Igiaba Scego; J. M. Coetzee.

1. Introduction

The social construction of space and time has been theorized and variously analyzed by a conspicuous number of scholars in the fields of critical theory, philosophy as well as cultural and literary studies, at least since the momentous impact of Henri Lefebvre's work (1991; 2004). In the introduction to their 2016 volume on ecocriticism and geocriticism in literature, Robert Tally Jr. and Christine Battista write, for example, that "the places of the planet, along with their literary or cultural representations and interpretations, remain within the force-field of a profoundly material production of space, as well as a more-or-less cognizable consumption and distribution of space" (2016, p. 7). In other words, both places themselves and their representations are the products of social categories and public discourses which organize space and make it materially accessible according to the dominant understanding of power relations. As many scholars have also highlighted, such cultural and material construction, inevitably shaped by the unequal distribution of power on the global scale, has often in the course of history taken place in violent ways, and increasingly so with the onset of European colonialism. Official cartographic practices have often translated into the unilateral partition and violent appropriation of spaces that were once *terrae incognitae* (to the Western national states) or had forms of organization that the global powers did not recognize. The shapes that spaces took in historical Western maps were mostly abstract, based on the perception that the territorial *res extensa* needed to be assessed and organized by the rational control of the Cartesian geographer – a

tendency that is consistently put under scrutiny in contemporary geographic debates (Lo Presti *et al.* 2018). Mapping territories has thus resulted, in Tally and Battista's words, in "the perceived alienation of the human subject from, and within, nature, as the mapmaker is positioned outside of the geography surveyed, which then becomes an abstract space onto which are plotted abstract, geometric, or topographic figures" (2016, p. 3).

The crucial significance of maps for literature is, of course, a central preoccupation of geocritical approaches to literary studies. Historical and imaginary cartographies have famously provided the background and inspiration for foundational works of colonial literature, such as Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885), with its disquieting mapping and violent male appropriation of the so-called 'Sheba's Breasts'. Yet, maps have also been used as dis-orienting and re-orienting tools in more recent strands of literature keen on destabilizing the conventional hierarchies of the established geographic order. In this sense, postcolonial writing qualifies as a privileged dimension for alternative practices of space production and narration – and one potentially endowed with intense transformative power.

At the same time (and similarly to most postmodern writing), postcolonial literature tends to undermine the linearity of temporal conventions and especially the teleological progression of historiographical time. Just as traditional cartography has typically reduced our understanding of space to a visualization of abstract Cartesian geometry, so the conventional ways of measuring time have risked obscuring its non-calculable, lived dimension. The clock and its numbered progression have thus been taken to the task by scholars such as Lefebvre (2004), more interested in the importance of the instant – the basis for his "theory of moments" – than in a Bergsonian duration.

In this paper, I will look at two literary texts in which autonomous re-mapping and personal interpretations of space and time will be shown to have potentially liberating effects. In a context characterized by the temporal inconsistencies of 'endless' emergency discourses and by what Tally and Battista termed "cartographic anxieties", i.e. the cultural tensions originated by the increasing volatility of supposedly 'fixed' territorial and political boundaries (2016, p. 2), J. M. Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) and Igiaba Scego's *La mia casa è dove sono* [Home is where I am] (2010) address the richness and the expansive possibilities of in-between dimensions that escape traditional renditions of space and life. Both works centre around the experiences of displaced children and their families, and raise questions on the rigid ways in which collective places and routines are usually made accessible to newcomers, all the while proposing a fresher look at the relationship between margins and centres. The protagonists' gestures – those of drawing one's own map and reclaiming one's 'interstitial temporalities' – point to the postcolonial subject's right to reinvent one's physical, existential and cultural space from the shimmering perspective of lived experience in contact zones rather than from the rigid, traditional one of cartography and chronology.

2. The performativity of literature

It is important to point out that the alternative practices of place and time production and representation employed by postcolonial literature are not removed from embodied and political action. On the contrary, texts informed by geocritical, ecocritical and 'chronocritical' conscience often reveal a revolutionary potential in terms of real operational change. As Bertrand Westphal suggested with regards to place and space, fictional representations can have a literally *performative* function: they conjure up for the

reader alternative worlds that are not in any way more constructed than the existing one, and thus potentially induce people to act in the world according to different, somehow virtual but equally legitimate scenarios (Westphal 2011). In his *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*, Westphal insists that:

> fiction does not reproduce the real, but actualizes new virtualities that had remained unformulated, and that then go on to *interact* with the real according to the hypertextual logic of interfaces. […] [F]iction detects possibilities buried in the folds of the real, knowing that these folds have not been temporalized. (p. 171)

Emphasizing that the virtual possibilities evoked by fiction *materially interact* with the actual(ized) world means for Westphal that assuming literature as a mere re-presentation of the real equals ignoring entirely its phenomenological effect. Besides re-presenting, i.e. signifying some coded message, literature in fact *presents* a world in the bodily sense, and this world has affective consequences in the Spinozian and Deleuzian sense. Westphal's point is thus that a fictional place can shape people's experiences and understanding of life, just as much as place is shaped by human representations, such as cartographic practices (see also Moslund 2011).

A similar perspective could be maintained about literature dealing with the temporal order of life. Future is not, in fact, the only unfixed, undetermined dimension of time; on the contrary, past and present events could be equally seen as uncertain or debatable. Not only is memory written – and often written off – from specific angles, because of both its subjective nature and its various ideological appropriations, but past and present can generally be acted upon by us in a variety of ways, just as much as they act upon us (Wenzel in Craps et al. 2018). This is particularly true when specific strands of critical thought such as postcolonial analysis are activated. As Lorna Burns and Birgit Kaiser remarked in response to its critics, a postcolonial approach can for example act as "a differential actualization of the (virtual) past" (2012, p. 15). Rather than being limited to reading history 'as a text' – and thus risking voiding it of its material and political value – postcolonial literary criticism can thus call into question the irredeemability of a violent history. In this sense, a critical approach which is able to thematize the virtual as well as the actualized potentialities of history can be said to extend, rather than hinder, the possibilities of real change in time.

2.1. 'Edge effect' in space and time

The reciprocal quality in the costructedness of space and time has crucial consequences when considering the spaces and times narrated – as well as occupied – by postcolonial literatures. These are often articulated at the borders which are continuously produced between colonizers' and colonized cultures, metropolitan and peripheral life, dominant and marginalized languages. The dimensions embodied by this strand of literature are often seen as appearing 'at the edges' of better-known and allegedly more homogeneous worlds – their edginess frequently incorporating the negative implications that the English language associates with "edgy", or nervous, behaviours.[1] Yet, the texts analysed in this paper offer to the reader dimensions that are not technically located 'at the edges', or 'on

[1] Interestingly, nervousness has been also associated with the (post)colonial situation by Franz Fanon, whose seminal analysis of the colonized psyche in *The Wretched of the Earth* (2005 [1961]) has been famously characterized by Jean-Paul Sartre as implying that "the status of 'native' is a nervous condition" (Sartre 1961). The statement had such a lasting impact on postcolonial studies to later inspire a milestone of Anglophone African literature such as *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga (1988).

the borders', of any set of two fixed worlds. Coeztee's and Scego's works present, instead, spaces and phases in which dominant and marginalized cultures, previous and subsequent lives overlap and interact with one another with surprising and destabilizing effects. In other words, they materialize spaces and times that could be defined, following Edward Casey, as existing "in-between edges": dimensions that are neither identifiable with the spaces of homogeneous cultures or communities, nor strictly corresponding to a linear understanding of the borders – or edges – themselves. Interestingly, an analysis of such interstitial dimensions implies both an element of contact – the inter-action of different subjects in the encounter – and the opening up of an internal depth which contradicts the supposedly linear juxtaposition of surfaces. For Casey, in the condition of being "in-between edges", the "in" and the "between" are both absolutely necessary features, as the "between" (in itself only signifying the measureable distance separating two points) needs to be complemented by the "in" so as to acquire a sense of interiority or inwardness, and a feeling of "our bodily being there […] in the company of a number of other human beings and animals", as well as "a congeries of objects" (Casey 2008, pp. 6-7).

But what about the edges delimiting these spaces of in-betweenness? In Casey's elaboration, these are, quite crucially, boundaries of a *porous* nature, that are able to "take in as well as give out", and that in this sense are for him opposed to borders with their relatively fixed behaviour.[2] Such porousness of edges also allows for an innovative relation between margins and centre, or edges and in-between, a relation that is not flattened by pre-conceived schemes but takes articulated and sophisticated shapes. Far from being "merely dyadic (i.e., a matter of indifferent pairing)" or "grossly dialectical (as in Plato's or Hegel's sense of the term)", the relation between edges and the in-between is for Casey "endlessly proliferative – a matter of dynamic Becoming: of a measureless productive interplay" (Casey 2008, p. 11). In other words, the internal depth opened up by the spaces 'in between' the porous boundaries established by human conventions allows new rules of co-existence and more fluid understandings of the power relations existing in the cartographic centres.

In Casey's description, such spaces in-between edges share the characteristic richness and productiveness that many scholars have attributed to ecological, as well as cultural, ecotones. Originating from field biology, the term *ecotone* technically characterizes "the border zones between types of vegetation (such as grasslands and wetlands) where different species and ecological communities meet and interact" (Morrissey 2015, p. 668). Ecotones thus seem comparable to those "contact zones" described by Mary Louise Pratt (1992) as the spaces of often conflictive yet irreducible colonial encounters. However, while in Pratt's contact zones the encounters among "peoples geographically and historically separated […] usually "involv[e] conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (p. 6), ecotones are mostly studied as highly productive spaces, offering "an unusual combination of ecological opportunities". In their nature of transitional areas, "they often open new configurations of possibility and create 'edge effects': an *increase in the variety* of plants and animals where the two zones overlap" (Morrissey 2015, p. 668, my emphasis). Feminist philosopher and biologist Donna Haraway summarized the process of "species assemblages" happening in borderlands by recalling that outside of their normative comfort zone, species live in a different way than they do "at their centres of distribution, their population centres", so

[2] Many scholars have since contested a rigid understanding of borders. The most thorough re-elaboration of the notion of borders, in this sense, is to be found in Mezzadra and Neilson (2012).

that "in ecotones new things are happening that can't happen in the comfort zone of any of the species in question" (Haraway 2007, pp. 31-32).

2.2. Igiaba Scego's and J. M. Coetzee's literary ecotones

Such understanding of the productive new opportunities opened up by cultural ecotones is obviously crucial to the experience of migration, which entails the transitional dimension of life in-between edges *par excellence*. Both *La mia casa è dove sono* and *The Childhood of Jesus* dramatize stories of migration in which the protagonists inhabit spaces existing in the spatial or temporal folds between conventionally-identified dimensions. *La mia casa è dove sono* is a 2010 memoir by the Italian-Somali writer Igiaba Scego, whose parents were forced to flee Mogadishu after 1969, when the dictator Siad Barre seized the power and gave an ultimatum to those involved, as Scego's father, in the process of Somalia's democratic transition towards independence. Scego was born in Rome in 1974 and grew up there, the daughter of an official political refugee and thus entitled to Italian citizenship herself, but unprotected from the explicit and implicit racism of a country that, after a long history as a land of emigration, only in the 1980s started to be the destination of an increasing number of immigrants. *La mia casa è dove sono*, Scego's fourth novel, won the prestigious Mondello prize in 2011, thus helping to consolidate the national recognition that the author had started to receive (although mainly in the questionable category of 'migrant' or 'ethnic' literature) with the prize Ex&Tra assigned to her short story *Salsicce* (Scego 2005a; 2005b). The memoir opens on a scene of international family gathering at the London house of Igiaba's brother Mohammed, in which several members of the family scattered all across Europe have finally a chance to meet again. The gathering then turns into an unexpected occasion for memory digging when, under the insistence of Igiaba's young nephew, she and two siblings start to draw a map of Mogadishu based on their respective memories of the city as it was before the start of the terrible civil war that nearly destroyed it. But when her nephew asks if the sketch on the paper is of her own city, Igiaba cannot ignore that her reality is by far more complicated. Besides desperately trying to fix on paper and in her memory the places in Mogadishu that speak of intense family affects, she also needs to map Rome, the city where she was born and where she lives, and whose corners also speak of colonial violence and present conflicts. All the chapters in the novel apart from the first and the last ones are named after symbolic places in Rome or monuments associated with its history. And yet, each one of these profoundly Roman sites also tells, in Igiaba's voice, the individual story of a member of her family or the collective history of entire Somali communities of past and present times. Igiaba's doubts in her early and teenage years, her mother's nomadic childhood, her father's political dreams, her grandfather's difficult negotiation of work and ethics at the time of the Italian fascist occupation are thus evoked alongside the collective stories coming from after-independence Mogadishu or present-day Termini station in Rome.

The text I will read alongside Scego's memoir, J. M. Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), is instead a dystopian fiction whose setting is far less realistic and decidedly more abstract than that of *La mia casa è dove sono*. Yet, this work is equally set in motion by the perplexities and irreducible 'differences' of a displaced child finding his way in a foreign land, and similarly foregrounds the productive and life-shaping interaction between reality and imagination, or actualized and virtual histories. In Coetzee's work, this child and a middle-aged man who is not technically related to him have recently arrived by boat to a mysterious and apparently 'posthumous' new country where all newcomers have been shorn of their memory, taught the official and only language (Spanish), and kept in refugee camps and various waiting spaces before being allowed into

a 'standard' dwelling. Everyone is looked after by an efficient yet pervasive state bureaucracy which seems to neutralize all needs for personal initiative or variety, so that the protagonists' yearning for 'something more' that is missing will lead them to unexpected consequences. Not only in fact are they reluctant to let go of their past and to accept their newly-imposed names and language, but they also seem to be motivated by a strong need to continue their journey, in both existential and philosophical terms – in the child's case under the influence of a happily illogical Don Quixote's phantasy.

The stories of migration evoked in the two books are obviously different in terms of factuality and setting construction. If Scego's Mogadishu and Rome exist or at least have existed in similar ways as those recounted (they are, to use Westphal's terminology, "homotopic"), Coetzee's Novilla is a city which in its very name evokes fictionality (through the phonetic association with the Spanish "novella") or sheer non-existence (since "no villa" would actually mean "no city"). This is an obviously imaginary place, pertaining to the uncertain time of a 'posthumous' life. However, Coetzee's invented setting can be said to somehow re-imagine a fictional space and time, those of afterlife, that have existed for centuries in religious narrations, and that do have very serious effects on many people's way of living one's life. Such paradoxical rendition of a presumedly Christian afterlife where all sense of adventure and intensity is lost can definitely retain the performative effect that Westphal attributed to fiction, and materialize a debate on that very world that many evoke as the only ideal model to aspire to, in the same way as Scego's memoir helps to raise questions on the supposedly univocal histories that are publicly claimed for most Italian monuments and landmarks. Scego's and Coetzee's works are equally different in terms of circulation and public resonance: the oeuvre of a young Italian writer who is only now starting to be considered a legitimate part of Italian literature could hardly hope to reach the same audience of Coetzee's prize-winning and long-established canonical figure, not least because her Italian-language memoir still lacks a full translation into English.[3] And yet, both works foreground the productive interplay between past and present, or seemingly unambiguous realities and complicated alternative stories, both referencing the difficult journey of self-perception of uprooted children for whom the world does not seem to offer adequate space or time. Such different works thus interestingly weave a suggestive dialogue on what is the in-between space of migration, and on how can one uphold the agency to shape one's space and time in a continuously transforming and transformative way.

3. A Somali-Italian ecotone: *La mia casa è dove sono*

As a so-called 'hyphenated writer', part Italian part Somali, Scego is quite literally 'in-between' different spatial dimensions. However, her multilayered universe is in no sense understandable through plain discourses of here-versus-there, or urbanity-versus-exoticism. The writer herself has vocally protested the tendency of the Italian editorial market to flatten all works by writers of non-Italian origins under the paternalistic label of 'migrant literature', even though many of them, just like her, never migrated themselves.

[3] Only the first chapter of *La mia casa è dove sono* has recently appeared in an English translation by Jon R. Snyder and Megan Williamson (2019), though the academic quality of the publication (a special issue of *California Italian Studies* dedicated to the theme of "Borderless Italy") will possibly limit its circulation among readers. Of Scego's other works, English translations are available for the novels *Oltre Babilonia* (2008) and *Adua* (2015).

Their books often end up including exotic glossaries and recipes, as well as covers stereotypically juxtaposing their 'exotic' faces to a symbol of Italian culture (Brioni and Scego 2013; also see the edition of *LMCEDS* published specifically for schools). In *La mia casa è dove sono*, on the contrary, the autobiographical narrator lives in a space of in-betweenness that is not delimited by clear-cut boundaries. If Rome and Mogadishu can be taken to be the edges of this in-between, they are in no way monolithic entities with a univocal significance. They are shimmering places themselves, living of, or dying from, creative interventions or violent events, and they change in physical presence as well as in time. As they "take in" the narrator's embodied experiences or "give out" memories and voices of beloved ones, they are, in Casey's sense, "porous edges", whose margins stretch to the point of sometimes overlapping. Take for example the lines: "Rome and Mogadishu, my two cities, are like identical twins, separated at birth. One includes the other, and conversely".[4] Such overlapping does not only take place symbolically, in the narrator's perception ("in my universe of understanding").[5] On the contrary, it also happens materially, since the map of pre-war Mogadishu that Igiaba draws together with her brother, cousin and nephew then becomes the basis for her 'integrated map': a sort of multi-layered cartography where coloured post-its about symbolic places of Rome are attached all around the central drawing of Mogadishu's once glorious streets.

As Sarnelli (2016) and Paynter (2017) remarked, the significance of map drawing as a process of reclaiming and reinventing a space lost to violence is explicitly signalled in various points of the narrative.[6] Mogadishu's map has for the narrator the phenomenological power of summoning familiar scents, if, when she moves closer to the paper, she can "smell the aroma of ginger coffee and the fragrance emanating from the plates filled with *beer iyo muufo*".[7] In the original map-drawing scene the painful struggle against memory loss and historical erasure is put centre-stage, as in "We drew Maka al Murakama because our memories were fading. Our city was dead after the civil war; monuments stood destroyed, roads ripped open, souls sullied. We needed that drawing, that city of paper, to survive".[8] Later in the narrative, however, it is a metaphoric cartographic practice to be evoked as an explicit gesture of counter-narrative. As she traces the many subsequent lives lived by her mother – first a nomad child-shepherd, later an urban girl in Mogadishu, and finally a veiled refugee in hyper-catholic Rome – the narrator explicitly describes the woman's courage to adapt as an act of "re-mapping":

[4] In the original Italian, these lines read: "Roma e Mogadiscio, le mie due città, sono come gemelle siamesi separate alla nascita. L'una include l'altra e viceversa" (Scego 2010, p. 14). This and all subsequent English translations from *La mia casa è dove sono* are mine.

[5] In the original Italian: "nel mio universo di senso" (p. 14).

[6] In 2013, a few years after publishing *La mia casa è dove sono*, Scego openly traced the connections between an alternative 're-mapping' and the reclaiming of a postcolonial position in a series of American lectures based on her 2010 memoir, which she titled *My Home Is Where I Am: Re-Mapping My Afro-Italian Identity*.

[7] In the original Italian: "[Se mi avvicinavo con le narici alla carta da disegno potevo] sentire l'aroma del caffè allo zenzero e il profumino che emanavano i piatti carichi di *beer iyo muufo*" (Scego 2010, p. 35).

[8] In the original Italian: "Disegnavamo Maka al Murakama perché i nostri ricordi stavano sbiadendo. La nostra città era morta dopo la guerra civile; i monumenti distrutti, le strade squarciate, le coscienze sporcate. Avevamo bisogno di quel disegno, di quella città di carta per sopravvivere" (p. 27).

> For the third time mum had to remap her life. Yes, remapping. Not reconstructing, not renewing, but remapping. Tracing a new personal geography of hers. She had to draw new lines, new margins, other trajectories. The space around her was changing once again.[9]

The material, performative effect of (re-)mapping also emerges in one of the narrative's crucial pages, which relates how Igiaba's mother, who had suffered the practice of infibulation as customary in her community at the time of her childhood, decided that her daughter would be spared the same sufferance. It is her mother's decision, in fact, that protects the young Igiaba from social pressure when she visits Mogadishu as a child. In this sense, the narrator feels she is "a map drawn by her mother", who has "for her small part decided to change the course of history".[10]

In this in-between space whose porous edges correspond to a lived Rome and a remembered Mogadishu, there are also further, smaller in-between dimensions, sort of phenomenological ecotones that manage to trigger overlapping memories but also to multiply embodied experiences. Piazza Santa Maria della Minerva, for example, gives the title to the third chapter in the book, in which the story of Igiaba's mother is narrated. In the paragraph that describes the place, the narrator remarks that this small square is a peaceful oasis in between the chaotic and tourist-invaded Pantheon and the only intact Gothic church in Rome. The story of how the church ancient organ was robbed of its pipes, and its voice somehow muted, triggers the memory of her mother's difficult life, which has risked, as many other women's lives, to be silenced by a man-dominated violent history. Together with the painful story of the muted organ, however, the Piazza also guards the famous baby elephant designed by Gian Lorenzo Bernini as the base for the ancient Egyptian obelisk excavated nearby. Interpreted by the narrator as an African exile just as her family members, the elephant seems to her an anomaly which feels "out of place, out of time, out of everything".[11] Nonetheless, the elephant's physical presence in the heart of Rome somehow materializes the presence and embodied experience of Africans in the Italian capital, and endows the narrator with a welcoming space of friendship in the city (something which will be also experienced by the protagonist of Scego's later novel *Adua*, 2015). Moreover, the corporeal relation of Bernini's statue with its surroundings – the square, and in particular the convent towards which it is said to be intentionally showing its rear – triggers a further moment of spatial overlapping. When she had first seen the elephant as a well-informed child, who knew that elephants are African animals, the protagonist had experienced a confusion that "lasted for days" and explored the possibility that Rome might actually be located in Somalia, or the other way round: "Is then Rome in Somalia? Or is Somalia contained inside Rome? That little African elephant confounded all my certainties".[12] In other words, the new space resulting from the combination of the Piazza's monumental arrangement, historical record and individual experiences transforms its apparently homogeneous space into a cultural ecotone in which, in Pratt's words, "peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations" (1992, p. 6). While young Igiaba's experiences

[9] In the original Italian: "Per la terza volta mamma ha dovuto rimappare la sua vita. Sì, rimappare. Non ricostruire, non rinnovare, ma rimappare. Tracciare una sua nuova personale geografia. Doveva tracciare nuove linee, nuovi margini, altre parabole. Lo spazio intorno stava cambiando ancora una volta" (p. 63).

[10] In the original Italian, the complete lines are: "lei […] decise nel suo piccolo di cambiare il corso della storia. Io in un certo senso mi sento una mappa di mia madre" (p. 69).

[11] In the original Italian: "fuori luogo, fuori tempo, fuori tutto" (. 59).

[12] In the original Italian: "Allora Roma è in Somalia? O la Somalia si trova dentro Roma? Quell'elefantino africano nella città confondeva tutte le mie certezze" (pp. 59-60).

might seem suspended 'between' Somalia and Italy or Mogadishu and Rome, her strong emotional attachment to Piazza della Minerva makes her feel fully immersed 'in' it, and somehow even a *constitutive part* of it, together with the congeries of tourists, animals and monuments – especially her beloved elephant sculpture – that make up the bodily existence of the place. The encounter of dominant and marginal histories, as well as more and less visible political discourses, charge the Roman Piazza with a productive kind of energy that is able to change its inhabitants' imagination and to provide Igiaba with "one of [her] best friends in the whole Rome".[13] The protagonist thus finds that, as suggested by Haraway, "new things are happening" in this space "that cannot happen in the comfort zone of any of the [cultures] in question" (Haraway and Reti 2007, p. 32): the exiled Somalis in the square, having lost a present life in their country, become propulsive centres of infinite stories that mix up ancestral fairy tales, personal experiences and collective rites, which Roman inhabitants would never otherwise encounter.

Another of the novel's ecotones is that emerging around Termini train station, at the centre of a neighbourhood where most exiles from Somalia have rented rooms for decades, possibly deluding themselves into thinking they would soon be able to go back to their country. As she tells of how her father used to take her there to greet other political refugees, the narrator observes that Termini station is configured as a "metaphor of a suspension, of a passage between two or more worlds".[14] Her idea that from Termini "Mogadishu was behind the corner" (and that "you just needed to catch a train and fly away along the tracks of a dream" to reach it)[15] ushers the reader into the troubled reality of the contemporary 'migratory crisis'. The space of Termini station is in fact associated by Scego to the ambiguous cohabiting of Roman locals with past and new refugees, only intermittently visible, as in the exceptional case of the official funeral held in 2006 by the then-mayor of Rome Walter Veltroni for thirteen young Somali men drowned in the Mediterranean. The intermittent visibility of contemporary migrants, made alternatively superfluous or dangerous by the turns of the Italian political debate, is at least partially counterbalanced for Scego by the social rites and density of shared dreams that inhabit the Termini hub.

In short, Scego's memoir can be said to be constructed as a multi-layered map of in-between spaces, or spatial and cultural ecotones whose edges are porous and dynamic rather than linear and fixed. The multiplication of memories, from her own ones to those of family members and unrelated people in her multi-ethnic neighbourhood mirrors the multiplication of subjects entering the narration, from her close relatives to the larger Somali community in Rome, to her nomadic ancestors, to the unknown contemporary migrants. Both multiplicative dynamics constitute a cultural and social "edge-effect" (Morrissey 2015) for which an "increase in the variety" of stories attests to the eco-cultural opportunities of overlapping memories, while neutralizing the impoverishing effect of a single-handed history. The novel closes in fact with a refusal of simplified and banalized narrations. To the insistent, defining question "Who are you?" Scego only accepts to answer with a multi-layered, complicated story. This is also the story of her multiple map, which is, as she concludes, "not a coherent map": a map about "centre but

[13] In the original Italian: "uno dei miei migliori amici in tutta Roma" (Scego 2010, p. 59).
[14] In the original Italian: "metafora di una sospensione, del passaggio tra due o più mondi" (Scego 2010, p. 97).
[15] In the original Italian, the complete lines are: "[Allora Termini dava loro l'impressione che] Mogadishu fosse dietro l'angolo. Bastava prendere un treno e volare via lungo i binari di un sogno" (p. 103).

periphery as well", about "Rome but Mogadishu as well", about "Igiaba, but you as well".[16]

4. Migrating through lives: temporal 'edge effect' in *The Childhood of Jesus*

The second text under analysis, the curiously titled *The Childhood of Jesus*, was published by J. M. Coetzee in 2013, followed by the sequel *The Schooldays of Jesus* at the end of 2016 and by *The Death of Jesus*, the trilogy's conclusion, in 2019. On its appearance in press, the novel has been variously described as "puzzling", "disconcerting", "odd", and "mysterious" (Markovits 2013, Tait 2013, Oates 2013, Lo Dico 2013), undoubtedly also because of the ambiguous relation the work seems to entertain with its biblical hypotext, as well as with Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and with standard literary genres. The story involves an abstract and alienating setting that has been compared to a theatrical stage for a Beckettian play (Oates 2013). Even though referring to an entirely fictional space and time, however, the novel's meditation on migration, an issue crucial to the contemporary world, is not at all marginal. Considering that Coetzee had originally intended to publish the book "with a blank cover and a blank title page, so that only after the last page had been read would the reader meet the title" (Coetzee 2012), the referential elements telling the story of a migrant child lost in an unknown new land and misunderstood as deviant by the State had probably been conceived as equally relevant with respect to the biblical allegorical ones. The needs and hardships of refugee life are centre stage since the very first scene of the novel, in which a middle-aged man and a young child arrive at the Relocation Centre of Novilla, a city that soon reveals to be the destination of everyone who has crossed the sea at the end of the previous life. In a maze of ironic and ambiguous clues, reminiscent of Coetzee's previous engagement of the Final Judgement in *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), Novilla thus seems to be identified with the urban outpost of an afterlife dimension in which all previous languages need to be abandoned in favour of Spanish, and all memories of one's past life must necessarily disappear. The man and the child are assigned new names – Simòn and David – and an official age based on their looks (45 and 5).[17] Yet, no room seems available for them upon arrival and the Relocation Centre clerks are not particularly bothered by the newcomers' prospect of having to sleep in the open air. Nor are they moved by the two's urgent need to find David's missing mother – an element of the plot that evokes the pain of migrant children separated from their parents all while hinting at Jesus's 'irregular' family bond in the Bible.

In this 'new' life, the tense relationship between the centre – or what is established for the majority – and the margins – or what is alternatively proposed by the newcomers – is played out in ethical as well as philosophical terms. Simòn and David's integration into Novilla's apparently benign society is not, in fact, as straightforward as everyone else expects. The local inhabitants seem aware that they as well first arrived as migrants, as is clear from a few allusions to their own journey by sea and to the Spanish classes they all had to take in the refugee camps before being allowed in the city. The process of migration itself, in this case from one's previous to one's subsequent (or after-) life, should thus not

[16] In the original Italian, the concluding lines read: "Non è una mappa coerente. È centro, ma anche periferia. È Roma, ma anche Mogadishu. È Igiaba, ma siete anche voi" (Scego 2010, p. 161).

[17] Since Spanish is the only accepted language in Novilla and all names are assigned by Spanish-speaking clerks, David is most probably pronounced with a stress on the last syllable, as in the Spanish tradition.

be felt as abnormal. And yet, no one is willing to understand that newcomers might have material and existential needs exceeding the standard life and never-ending routine organized by the state. For example, the general "moderate diet" based on bread, butter and bean paste – possibly an allusion to the myths of ascetism in afterlife (Oates 2013) – seems to everyone perfectly satisfactory, whereas Simòn and David's craving for more varied and more substantial food is taken as "something outlandish that [they] have brought with [them], something that "doesn't belong" in Novilla and that they "must starve […] into submission" (Coetzee 2013, p. 37). More importantly, no one ever questions the structure and conditions of their present life in Novilla and no one seems even capable of conceiving of different experiences. When Simòn finds a job at the deck, his fellow stevedores are "friendly enough but strangely uncurious. No one asks where they come from or where they are staying" (p. 26). It is as if all possibilities of personal initiative, cultural belonging or historical experience were erased in favour of a benign, anodyne sameness. The protagonists' difference – their longings for material and existential fulfilment, their retaining of memories (albeit vague), their resistance to their newly-imposed names and languages – marks them out as irregular and deviant, and is actively (and sometimes indignantly) resisted by the locals (Mattoscio 2018). A case in point is Simòn's refusal to live out of time. Not only does the man retain shadows of memories and a "feel of residence in a body with a past, a body soaked in its past" (Coetzee 2013, p. 169), but he also continues to believe in the idea of attainable change. The stevedores' working conditions at the deck, for example, seem to him to be unnecessarily harsh, as their manual labour is not eased by the employment of any available technology. The ship they incessantly load and unload seems steeped in an archaic dimension where everything needs to be done manually not because technology is unavailable, but because otherwise there would be no other way of employing one's time. Yet when Simòn proposes to use a crane to help with work, he is met with general perplexity: no one understands his attempt to improve the workplace according to the available possibilities, as no one even conceives of the idea of a change. "This isn't a possible world", says his foreman Álvaro; "It is the only world" (p. 51).

In other words, Novilla is a dimension in which spatial and temporal edges are considered unsurmountable. The sea of one's crossing between a previous and a subsequent life is seen as an entrance-only gate that "washes [one] clean" of all past traces and surely cannot be crossed back – an erasure of memory that sounds particularly sinister for postcolonial situations. It is no coincidence that Simòn and David are the only characters in the novel who insist on mentioning their maritime crossing and the strange events that brought them together during its course. If one considers that water imagery is often a direct reference to migration and diaspora (McLeod 2004, p. 163; Gilroy 2006, p. 88), the protagonists' insistence on aquatic metaphors, both in terms of their restless attachment to past experience and as figuration of real and mystical danger, points to their reclaiming of the migrant condition and refusal to absolve their arrival country of its forgetfulness.[18] Despite being formed of migrants from previous lives, Novilla considers itself a homogeneous space where nothing should ever change, everything should always stay immobile, and spatial and temporal edges are only the starting lines to which

[18] Jennifer Rutherford also emphasized how Coetzee's characters in this novel can be seen as "the maritime refugees of today, stateless, faceless, and 'washed clean' of their past" (Rutherford 2016, p. 101). The scholar sees *The Childhood of Jesus* as demonstrating "a deepening engagement with [Australia, Coetzee's] new place, where, to recall Australian anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner's (2009) famous words, '[A] cult of forgetfulness is practiced on a national scale'" (p. 111).

everyone gives one's back. In this perspective, it is unconceivable to ever look for sense in life, because everything is felt to be exactly as it should be.

Simòn's aspirations to some kind of progress and David's quest for a future and a meaning in existence are thus ways in which they locate themselves *in-between* edges they refuse to disavow. If they are suspended 'between' a previous life they do not want to forget completely and a new dimension designed to flatten out individual experiences into a uniform standard, they also strive to live 'in' their present condition by claiming attention to their bodily needs (Simòn) or by pursuing their own way towards knowledge and meaning (David). "What are we here for, Simòn?" asks the child in their first night at the Centre. When Simòn replies that they will soon find a new place to stay, David insists:

> 'No, I mean, why are we *here*?' His gesture takes in the room, the Centre, the city of Novilla, everything.
> 'We are here to find your mother. I am here to help you'.
> 'But after we find her, what are we here for?' (p. 21).

In other words, the child insists on looking for meaning where everyone else is content with what exists. Besides often pointing out that David is not his real name and that Spanish is not the only possible language, he insists in learning to read in his own, apparently illogical way, on a copy of *Don Quixote* to which he becomes passionately attached as soon as he decides that Quixote's adventurous and poetic understanding of reality is to be preferred to the empty logical world that everyone else wants him to adhere to. In the same way, his insistence on interpreting numbers as isolated stars with no necessary order – and separated by infinite gaps through which the counter might fall – is met by the perplexity of everyone trying to teach him the basis of maths, and yet provides an ironic critique of the traditional Western obsession with clocks and numeric measurements famously questioned by Lefebvre.

David's rejection of normative logic and his simultaneous desire to understand and 'be with' all forms of life – from the beloved carthorse El Rey, to the 'devilish' thief Daga, to the goodhearted foreman Àlvaro – are concrete ways to contest the conventional dyadic relationship between a life centre interpreted as the norm and a life margin assumed as an undesirable exception. David rather strives for that "dynamic Becoming" that Casey proposed as the essential feature of a productive relationship between edges and in-between. Even when he manages to escape the correctional facility where he has been imprisoned by the school system, he embarks with his family of sorts (including his newly-found mother-figure Inès) on a venturous escape towards the "new life" (p. 320) which is still attuned to his necessity to embrace all possible strands of existence. From the dog Bolìvar to the young hitchhiker Juan, everyone is welcome in his journey across new porous borders.

The persistent 'migrant condition' of this ever-changing family is emphasized by the characteristics associated with their temporary destination, the northern city of Estrellita del Norte, which the book sequel *The Schooldays of Jesus* explicitly describes as "a city criss-crossed by the paths of immigrants" who have "lost a world [and] a language fit to evoke it" (Coetzee 2016, pp. 66-67). The endless precariousness but also potential productiveness of this condition is further apparent in *The Childhood of Jesus*'s concluding lines. When David tries to envisage their immediate future and the meaning of their journey, Simòn explains what they can expect to do upon arrival:

> We are going to find the Relocation Centre and we are going to present ourselves at the desk, you and Inès and I, and […] we are going to say *Good morning, we are new arrivals, and we are looking for somewhere to stay*.

> 'And?' [asks David].
> 'That's all. *Looking for somewhere to stay, to start our new life'"* (p. 329).

In other words, the protagonists have refused to stay in the coercively 'homogeneous' space-time of Novilla, where the edges of different possible lives are actively negated. On the contrary, they have chosen to remain 'in between' spaces and phases in Casey's sense: they are *in* movement, navigating the depth of the present with its changing trajectory and new encounters, as well as *between* past memories and new aspirations, present conditions and different possibilities. The novel's concluding scene, set in the moving car, thus actualizes what Westphal defined "new virtualities that had remained unformulated" (2011, p. 171): it presents a transient, transitory, transitional way of life in which spatiotemporal crossings never imply forgetting the past(s) and renouncing the future(s).

To conclude, both Scego's and Coetzee's works offer a look at migratory experience that questions the standard binary opposition of geo-cultural centre versus margins, and rather call our attention to the endlessly proliferative potentialities of cultural ecotones, or in-between spaces. By foregrounding the counter-mapping of postcolonial places and the right to an ever-evolving co-existence, both texts alert us to the infinite possibilities that arise in-between social and geographical edges. With boundaries turning increasingly porous and continuously changing, the current political discourses about the so-called 'migratory crisis', with their language of ecological emergency, prove particularly fraught with contradictions. If Western immigration countries interpret themselves as self-sufficient ecosystems put in danger by the 'vermin' of external intruders, they are condemning themselves to a socio-cultural scarcity that literally diminishes their life possibilities. Applying the biological concept of the ecotone to literary criticism proves, in this sense, particularly useful to sharpen the tools of postcolonial and ecocritical analysis.

Furthermore, both Scego's and Coetzee's novels provide instances of the deeply political performativity of literature, which does not merely *represent* alternative life conditions, but also manages to give the reader the *material* possibility to live and act according to those conditions. Such texts embody complex alternative worlds in which the folds of what exists are kept together with the hems and edges of what has existed or could and will exist, in spaces and times that are always somehow overlapping with the more visible and loudly narrated ones. In other words, these two texts mobilize, in very different ways and through sensibly different strategies, the affective intensity of co-existence in space and time. It is a tension that does not only impact one's imaginative dimension: on the contrary, it can rearrange a reader's world in a profoundly material way.

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