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Narrating into Europe: Female Migrant Writers' Voice and Representation

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Narrating into Europe: Female Migrant Writers' Voice and Representation

This paper engages with Zadie Smith's *The Embassy of Cambodia* and Najat El Hachmi's *L'últim patriarca*, which thematise what Stuart Hall has called being "in but not of" Europe. These narratives capture the changes brought to Europe by migration and globalization, embodied by the young female protagonists. As literary works, they capture in narrative form the difficulties of carving out a space for migrant women in contemporary Europe and suggest that engaging with the major challenges coming to Europe today through narrative is one way to stake a position. Only after rewriting the story can female migrants embrace Europe.

Un récit « dans, mais pas de » l'Europe : La voix et la représentation des écrivaines migrantes

Cet article étudie *The Embassy of Cambodia* de Zadie Smith et *L'últim patriarca* de Najat El Hachmi, qui thématisent ce que Stuart Hall appelle "être dans, mais pas de l'Europe". À travers des protagonistes qui sont toutes les deux des jeunes femmes, ces récits capturent et illustrent les changements en Europe amenés par les migrations et la mondialisation. En tant qu'œuvres littéraires, à travers le récit, ces fictions exemplifient la difficulté qu'ont les femmes migrantes à trouver leur place dans l'Europe contemporaine, et suggèrent que le récit est un moyen de prendre position et de s'engager vis-à-vis des défis majeurs que présente cette Europe. Ce n'est qu'en réécrivant l'histoire que les femmes migrantes peuvent, finalement, l'embrasser.

Narrating into Europe: Female Migrant Writers' Voice and Representation

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The need for a, potentially *new*, narrative for Europe is fuelled by a sense of crisis, as the editors of this special issue make clear in their introduction (see also Boletsi, 2016; Van Weyenberg, 2016). In these times, it is unclear what are or can be the legitimacy and affective force of the European Union (EU). Since the end of the Second World War more than seven decades ago, Europe has slowly but steadily integrated its political and economic systems, to the point that almost every country on the continent is either an EU member state or somehow entangled in its programmes and schemes. This cooperation has changed the face of the continent, symbolised perhaps most forcefully by the largescale dissolution of its internal borders following the Schengen Treaty.

Europeanisation is, however, but one of the ways in which Europe has changed during the past few decades (see Harmsen and Wilson, 2000). At the same time, the period since the fall of the Berlin Wall has seen various (global) trends coming together and reinforcing each other; since the 1990s, globalisation, digitisation and migration have gone hand in hand to change the relationships between people, place and politics. The communities that can now be imagined, to echo Benedict Anderson's (2006) well-known phrase, are a whole lot different than they used to be. If print capitalism was central to the development of the modern nation-state Anderson traced through Europe's mediaeval and early modern period, today other phrases, such as "digital capitalism" (Schiller, 1999), might be more apt. Regardless of whether we choose to refer to our times as such, it is impossible not to notice how new, digital media have transformed the ease and the means with which people can communicate with others – and, thus, how and where they can form new groups, or sustain old ones. Similarly, continued migration into Europe, and the transnational networks this movement of people creates, decentre and even bypass nation-states (Bernal, 2014; Leurs, 2015). I do not wish to go more in depth on these points; rather, I wish to signal here briefly how the validity and position of the nation-state in contemporary Europe are questioned both

in the abstract, in the form of Europeanisation and globalisation processes, and via very concrete practices, as for instance migration.

It is on the latter point I want to expand in my contribution to this special issue. More specifically, I want to take a closer look at the novel *L'últim patriarca* (*The Last Patriarch*, 2010 [2008]) by Najat El Hachmi and at Zadie Smith's novella *The Embassy of Cambodia* (2013).¹ Both women are the product of twentieth-century migration to Europe: El Hachmi moved with her family from Morocco to Catalonia, Spain in 1987 (when she was eight years old), while Smith's mother migrated from Jamaica to the United Kingdom in 1969 (six years before Smith herself was born). At the same time, through their literary work both writers imagine and creatively give shape to a Europe of migration and connections. Both works discussed here comment upon Europe's changing power dynamics in our globalising present. They do so in three interlocking ways. On a first level, the works make visible and articulate immigrants' experience in contemporary Europe. As such, they contribute to what Gurminder Bhambra (2009) has called "understanding Europe in times of the postcolonial": their presence reminds of the entanglements of Europe with "non-Europe", which are central to its constitution today. Secondly, the narratives thematise issues of voice and representation, asking questions about who gets to speak and weigh in on important matters. And lastly, the act of writing these stories is in each case also a rewriting, whether of histories, identities or literary canons. Smith and El Hachmi ask who is allowed to tell which stories and from where, thus adapting the narrative of Europe to bring it into a new, cosmopolitan present. Read together, they show that while obtaining a voice is often the result of radical contingencies, these processes are also outspokenly political. When it comes to the question who gets to tell contemporary Europe's narratives, there is no neutral ground.

Narrative, Identity, Representation

It was the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur who expanded upon Hannah Arendt's differentiation in *The Human Condition* between the "who" and "what" of identities. "After all," he asks himself in a paper aptly titled "Narrative Identity" (Ricoeur, 1991, 73; see also Heinich, 2018), "do not human lives become

1 All references to these texts will from here on be cited parenthetically in the text.

more readable [*lisibles*] when they are interpreted in function of the stories people tell about themselves? And these “life stories”, are they not rendered more intelligible when they are applied to narrative models – plots – borrowed from history and fiction (drama or novels)?” Autobiography, Ricoeur goes on to argue, suggests as much, where idiosyncratic lives are made sense of in the context of particular narrative models and forms.

On an individual level, it is clear who does the telling – namely, the individual her- or himself. Here, it is the “I” who speaks and structures the stories. However, on a collective level, as other contributors to this issue each also discuss, and especially in the case of majority-minority relations, the agency and legitimacy of narrator(s) become much more complex and, often, contentious issues. Who is in the position to narrate? On whose behalf? Which stories can they tell? These questions strike to the core of theories of representation; they will be taken up in this paper as the basis of an exploration of how through their work Zadie Smith and Najat El Hachmi take on and insert themselves in the story of Europe.

Publishing a literary work, especially when done by writers belonging to once marginalized groups, can be understood as an act of citizenship. Engin Isin and Greg Nielsen (2008) proposed to think of citizenship not as a status, but rather an act. A way of making oneself visible, an act of citizenship stretches the boundaries of the possible. What matters, is not whether the claimant officially holds citizenship (in the form of a passport, for instance): especially when they are not members, subjects may claim to become members through specific acts. That is, through the act they express their feeling of belonging to a particular community. Seyla Benhabib (2004, 100) guides our concerns here when she states, in *Situating the Self*, that “[a]ll struggles against oppression in the modern world begin by redefining what had previously been considered ‘private,’ non-public and non-political issues as matters of public concern, as issues of justice, as sites of power which need discursive legitimation”. It is in this sense that writing and publishing a literary work in itself can be regarded as an act of citizenship: both El Hachmi and Smith become visible in the public domain through their works. Concurrently, at a second level, they also make visible migrants and their often private experiences in contemporary Europe. Even when not immediately or properly understood, for the act often positions itself outside conventional parameters of understanding, the claiming of a position worthy of attention is a first step in the search for a voice.

Although the struggles Benhabib alludes to do not necessarily have to unfold in works of art or literature – and, in fact, often do not –, her position is in line with Jacques Rancière's (2006) understanding of art as partaking in the distribution of the sensible. Every artwork redefines what can be thought and understood: it rearranges and reorders the world; in Benhabib's phrasing, this pertains to the becoming-public of what was hitherto considered private. From a normative hegemonic point-of-view, these struggles are surely based on a transgression, a calling into question of received norms and ways of ordering society into binary public and private realms. Historically, women occupied a complicated position vis-à-vis this binary: relegated to the private sphere, their actions and concerns were understood as non-political and therefore not worthy of public deliberation (see Pateman, 1988; Yuval-Davis, 1997)

National, or otherwise collective, identity is a narrative – a story that is told, retold, adapted and changed. Building on Benedict Anderson's insights into nation-building, Homi Bhabha (1990, 2, original emphasis) argues for understanding the nation as narration, and for the centrality of language in that act:

To encounter the nation *as it is written* displays a temporality of culture and social consciousness more in tune with the partial, overdetermined process by which textual meaning is produced through the articulation of difference in language; more in keeping with the problem of closure which plays enigmatically in the discourse of the sign.

In addition, to conceive of identity as continuously being told and retold requires us to understand a nation and its culture as “an activity, a creative engagement with a rapidly changing present”, as Leslie Adelson (2002, 245) puts it in her manifesto “Against Between”. Adelson brings out the tensions that often exist between a national sense of self and the interpretation of events in the contemporary moment: while a sense of self usually requires stability and coherence, the present is always changing and unfolding. Identity conceived as a static notion is not always best able to make sense of new developments. In other words, the present moment necessarily necessitates a rethinking and reordering of what is known and how things are made sense of. Migration might present such challenges to dominant understandings of national identity, as will become clear in the course of this paper.

Ambiguous Narration

For such a short text – the online version at *The New Yorker*, where the story was first published, runs to around 8,600 words – *The Embassy of Cambodia* is remarkably rich. It is, at the same time, a story about contemporary slavery and an exploration of the value and (im)possibility of comparison of traumas, all the while also exploring the intricacies of narration and representation. Content and form are aligned, with the novella questioning at various levels the desirability of telling only one story about history and who we are. The centrality of the story's narration to its political implications makes it even more remarkable that so little attention has been paid to the ambiguity and confusion of *The Embassy of Cambodia's* narrator.

As in most of Zadie Smith's fiction, *The Embassy of Cambodia* tells one of the many possible stories of life in the modern metropolis that is twenty-first century London. Here, the city's cosmopolitan reality comes into view in two ways: there is, firstly, the story of Fatou, a young woman from Ivory Coast who works as a nanny and cleaning lady for a South Asian family, fused with more impersonal observations of the buildings and people on Willesden Lane. Among them is the titular embassy, where people always seem to be playing badminton. Fatou regularly talks with Andrew, a somewhat older student from Nigeria, about the city around them and the world as they understand it. Set in the weeks immediately after the 2012 Olympic Games, *The Embassy of Cambodia* ends with Fatou being fired by the family that employed her and her sitting at a bus stop in full view of the Willesden residents.

While Fatou's trials and tribulations take up most of the novella's narrative space, the doubts that are cast upon standard constructions of Europe and European identity – mostly via Fatou and Andrew's conversations – are echoed and enhanced by the story's narrator(s). On the one hand, the parts of the novella that revolve around Fatou are narrated in a relatively straightforward manner consisting of extra-diegetic, omniscient narration; on the other hand, other parts are narrated by an anonymous "we" who at a certain point are shown to be a first-person singular. This double narration destabilises the narrative as a whole, as it becomes increasingly impossible to read the "we" or "I"s conjectures on Fatou's life without asking what gives this person the right to talk about her life. If all this person – the narrator's gender is never identified – does is, in their own words, "standing on the balcony" (40), how

can s/he take the risk, as Zadie Smith has called it elsewhere, to jump into other people's lives?²

The narrator her- or himself also addresses the arbitrariness of her or his representation in a passage following a reflection on the Khmer Rouge's designation of people as either "old" – peasants, farmers – or "new" – educated, urban folk. S/he states:

[...] I have been chosen to speak for them, though they did not choose me and must wonder what gives me the right. I could say, "Because I was born at the crossroads of Willesden, Kilburn and Queen's Park!" But the reply would be swift and damning: "Oh, don't be foolish, many people were born right there; it doesn't mean anything at all. We are not one people and no one can speak for us. [...]" The real reason you speak in this way is because you can't think of anything better to do." (40)

I quote this passage at length to show how the narrator destabilises her or his own narration by addressing its supposed homogeneity. This is the most extensive moment where the narrator, who had up until this point been talking in the first-person plural (after a couple of short sentences at the beginning of the story), switches to the first-person singular. The suggestion is that the narrator is an elderly (wo)man with too much time on her or his hands, who therefore has started to imagine what other people's lives look like. Although this would be an interesting backstory for the narrator, it leaves intact the more ethical questions that this passage also raises; namely, what gives this person the right to narrate other people's stories? How much freedom does she or he take to jump into Fatou's life?

In another passage, after she has been fired and has gone to swim at her regular health club one last time, Fatou waits for her friend Andrew at a bus stop:

Many of us walked past her that afternoon, or spotted her as we rode the bus, or through the windscreens of our cars, or from our balconies. Naturally, we wondered what this girl was doing, sitting on the damp pavement in the middle of the day. We worried for her. We tend to assume the worst, here in Willesden.

2 Zadie Smith coined this phrase in her essay "Fences," written directly after the 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and collected in *Feel Free* (London, Hamish Hamilton, 2018, 20-34).

We watched her watching the shuttlecock. Pock, smash. Pock, smash. As if one player could only imagine a violent conclusion and the other only a hopeful return. (69)

Here, at the bus stop, Fatou has wandered into the narrator's sight. Concurrently, the narrator confines her- or himself to observations about the situation: Fatou's inner life and her thoughts are not presented to the reader. This makes the passage before, in which Fatou goes to swim at the health club, all the more striking, exactly because information is presented that the narrator cannot possibly know or see from the balcony.

Bettina Jansen has read Zadie Smith's fiction, including *The Embassy of Cambodia*, as considerations of what a community is. Arguing that through her explorations of community, Smith renegotiates what it means to be English, Jansen shows how Smith opens up this category to include many different conceptions: "there are as many ways of being English as there are witnesses narrating their versions of Englishness" (Jansen, 2018, 237). Her evaluation of the novella's narration is altogether positive: she discusses the novella's homodiegetic narration and its awareness of the problematics of representation in terms of tolerance, acceptance and an openness that forgoes an essentialization of English identity. In my reading of the passage quoted above, however, such optimism can only ever remain tentative. "We, the people of Willesden" (1), as they introduce themselves via the narrator, remain at a distance while Fatou is all on her own at the bus stop. Although they are said to assume the worst, nobody feels compelled to intervene: while being aware she has been at the bus stop for hours, in an unusual and uncomfortable position, none of the Willesden residents offers help or even approaches her to ask how she is. That is, while membership of "we, the people of Willesden" is open to all who desire it, and therefore free of exclusionary or discriminatory definitions, the members do not feel forced to help each other out.

This is not a tension that *The Embassy of Cambodia* is interested in solving; indeed, the novella works to bring to the fore the complex ethics of representation and voice. As such, its ambiguous narration serves as an entry-point into the difficulties of representation and mediation in contemporary, multi-lingual Europe. From her debut novel *White Teeth* (2000) on, Zadie Smith's fiction has documented the changing face of Europe today. Her particular locus of attention is always London, that former imperial centre, and one of contemporary Europe's major cities. In other words, the particular place – London – is always embedded in the larger space – Europe. The attendant

reorientation and reinterpretation of Europe's history has also always been a feature; yet for the first time in *The Embassy of Cambodia*, Smith's fiction probes more deeply the question who is to speak for this new Europe, or with what awareness representation must happen. Form and content are aligned – and, more importantly, they reinforce the questions the other puts forward.

Fatou's voice is heard and her life is glanced either via an omniscient, extra-diegetic narrator, or via the homodiegetic narrator that is the Willesden resident in the dressing gown. A third and more likely option is that the local who has been chosen to speak on behalf of the community at times disguises as an omniscient, extra-diegetic narrator. In other words, s/he has taken the risk and jumped into somebody else's life by way of the imagination. This move into Fatou's life calls forth the ethical questions regarding voice and representation that together constitute Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) famous question whether or not the subaltern can speak. How can those who do not have a voice be heard? And which responsibilities does it give to those doing the translating and mediating – in this case, the (wo)man on the balcony? Understanding these questions as such means moving away from considering whether or not what Fatou has undergone really happened, and towards the epistemological and ethical terrain that is at the centre of this paper.

The narrator reformulates this terrain as being about attention. In the scene quoted earlier at the bus stop, this problem was implicitly present. Earlier in the story, in relation to the embassy in the street which is that of Cambodia and the gruesome history this presence calls forth in everybody's mind, the narrator makes a philosophical case for the benefits of attending only to one's immediate surroundings:

The fact is if we followed the history of every little country in this world – in its dramatic as well as its quiet times – we would have no space left in which to live our own lives or to apply ourselves to our necessary tasks, never mind indulge in occasional pleasures, like swimming. Surely there is something to be said for drawing a circle around our attention and remaining within that circle. But how large should that circle be? (23–24)

There is a tension here between the London residents who admit their scope is local, the embassy they observe and which reminds them of far-away spaces, and the larger European space of which they themselves are part. While the residents are interested in what happens at the embassy, they are not too concerned with Cambodia's recent history. The novella, however, *is* interested

in this history, and contrasts it with various other histories of violence such as the Holocaust.

In the conversations between Fatou and Andrew, the connected themes of suffering, violence and evil keep resurfacing. While working at a resort in Accra, Fatou has seen the decadence and racism of European tourists at the West African coast, including an economy of prostitution. She, too, gets raped (44), by a guilt-stricken Russian man. In London, as the nanny-cum-cleaning lady for the South Asian Derawal family, she essentially works as a modern-day slave (Ward, 2016). Through their conversations, Fatou and Andrew relate this kind of personal memories and experiences to larger, collective traumas such as Cambodia's killing fields, the Holocaust, the dropping of a nuclear bomb on Hiroshima by the U.S. army and the Rwandan genocide. Although they get the numbers wrong – they agree “more people died in Rwanda” than during the Holocaust, “millions and millions” (26), and Andrew claims the bomb on Hiroshima killed “five million people in *one second*” (29, original emphasis) – the underlying connections they make remain as forceful.

Fatou and Andrew are part of “the New People of Willesden” (40), yet they are also “new Europeans”. They are Londoners, connected to the city in part through the United Kingdom's colonial history, but also physical reminders of Europe's changing demographics through migration. Their presence, in turn, questions the role of the Holocaust as Europe's foundational trauma (Probst, 2003; see also Pérez Zapata, 2015). Through Fatou and Andrew's discussions, connections are forged between distant tales and histories, both in and beyond Europe. In the process, the centrality of the Holocaust to European identity is questioned, especially when it comes to potential ethical responsibilities one may have because of the events during the Second World War. *The Embassy of Cambodia* does not claim the Holocaust has become unimportant, nor does it question its importance; all it does is ask how the events of the past and the memory thereof relate to the continent's present population, especially the inhabitants in its major metropolises, coming as they do from all over the world and thus also coming with their own cultural memories and histories. In the process, Europe is not only provincialized (Chakrabarty, 2008), but also redefined: no longer self-contained, this is a truly cosmopolitan Europe (Ponzanesi, 2018), built of many connections. As such, *The Embassy of Cambodia* gives imaginative shape to the difficulties of a new and inclusive, European future.

Touching Tales in Catalonia

Such a Europe of connections returns in Najat El Hachmi's first novel *L'últim patriarca*. Through the journey of its young female protagonist, the daughter of the titular last patriarch, it shows how notions of (wo)manhood and cultural and religious difference overlap in Morocco and Catalonia. As an example of what Leslie Adelson has called "touching tales", the novel is an intervention "into and beyond national archives" and a literary narrative that "[commingles] cultural developments and historical references generally not thought to belong together in any proper sense" (Adelson, 2005, 12, 20). The idea of touching tales brings into contact not only historically distinct references, as Adelson states, but also often geographically disparate histories. That is, although nations certainly exist as historically constructed identities that gain meaning temporally, the talk about multicultural Europe, borders and globalization brings to the fore the spatial dimensions of the nation-state. The tales that are made to touch in *L'últim patriarca* find themselves – as in *The Embassy of Cambodia* – on the intersection of past and present, history and future, Africa and Europe. Morocco and Spain, at the narrowest point of the Strait of Gibraltar a mere fourteen kilometres apart, share a long history of mutual conquest and colonisation, and are in the present characterised by diverging developmental paths. The modern-day presence of Moroccans in Spain, especially in a prosperous and linguistically if not culturally distinct region such as Catalonia, gains its significance in this light.

For almost eight hundred years, from 711 to 1492, and to varying degrees, the Iberian Peninsula was under Muslim or Moorish control. The borders between Islamic al-Andalus, as it was also known, and various Christian kingdoms were never static and changed considerably throughout the centuries, especially under influence of the Spanish Reconquista. Immediately after the Spanish kings drove the Islamic influences out of the peninsula, they went on the attack, conquering the city of Melilla in 1497 and taking over the city of Ceuta from the Portuguese in 1668. Until this day, these two remain in Spanish hands as exclaves on the northern African coast. From 1912 to 1956, Spain held a northern and southern zone in Morocco as its official protectorate. From the 1980s onwards, the flows of people have once again reversed course, and this time Spain has received many Moroccan immigrants, large portion of whom went to rich parts of the country such as Catalonia (Calderwood, 2018).

There is much more to be said about this rich history; here, I wish to signal how these thirteen centuries of intense and often violent contact between

the two countries have given Morocco and Moroccans a special place in the Spanish imaginary as the cultural Other and as “defining figure[s] of Spanish identity” (Folkart, 2013, 354; see also Martin-Márquez, 2008). Daniela Flesler (2008) has similarly outlined how Moroccans have become, for Spaniards, something like a Gothic return of the repressed, in which the past and the present are inextricably bound up and entangled. For many, Spain and North Africa act as “mirror images”, with in them a fold – perhaps to be materialised as the Strait of Gibraltar – that “marks a frontier space of liminality fraught with the tensions of doubling and difference in the process of immigration” (Folkart, 2013, 354). Their borderlands, both maritime and on land, double as the boundary space between Europe and Africa, between north and south, between the supposedly enlightened continent and the heart of the darkness.

In such an overdetermined space, the body becomes a corporeal marker of difference, as well as a site of control. In *L'últim patriarca*, the nameless protagonist's female body is continuously moved in-between cultures, norms and practices. In fact, in this novel we are dealing with a “triple marginalitat” (Climent Raga, 2010, 23) of an immigrant woman in a minority language. And while there is a long history of silenced women, especially when to their womanhood are added other axes along which marginalisation can happen, El Hachmi's novel is a story about a young woman who finds her own voice and who thus breaks out from this historical pattern. Jessica Folkart states that her protagonist, a young girl from North Africa, “gains a voice, at last, to weave the text of her own identity” (Folkart, 2013, 359).

Around language, the community forms itself. In El Hachmi's *L'últim patriarca*, we find an exploration of the body – the female body, the immigrant body – in a minority language, the result of which is the discovery of a societal voice. Here, the corporeal and the linguistic go hand in hand: on the one hand, the body is made to stand out from traditional understanding of the national body politic, while on the other hand, via the Catalan language El Hachmi expresses an adherence to, or concern with, that particular community. This is the tension that the novel materially symbolises and negotiates: between the immigrant who wants to belong and the society who does not accept or even rejects the immigrant on the basis of the colour of her skin and accompanying associations. Put in a historical perspective, this is the tension between centuries of often violent conflict and a potentially peaceful, possibly Catalan – as opposed to Spanish – future.

Adolfo Campoy-Cubillo (2012) reads El Hachmi's novel as being engaged in an intertextual dialogue with two of Mercè Rodoreda's novels. To some extent, this comparison is invited by the novel, with its explicit reference by the narrator to Rodoreda on the closing pages (310). This is, of course, not an arbitrary reference either. In an interview with Catalan newspaper *El Periódico*, El Hachmi referred to Rodoreda (1908–1983) as a “mirror” through which she looks at herself (Campoy-Cubillo, 2012, 146). Rodoreda's *The Time of the Doves*, Campoy-Cubillo argues, offered a critique of Catalan identity construction from a feminist perspective; thus, El Hachmi's novel consists in part of a dialogue with this text through which it is brought into the present and expanded upon to have eyes for migrant women in contemporary Catalonia. It is through attaching herself and her story to a – by now – canonical writer that El Hachmi successfully finds herself a space in the Catalan and, to a lesser extent, Spanish literary field, as evidenced by her winning the most prestigious Catalan-language literary award with this novel, the Ramon Llull prize.

L'últim patriarca tells the story of Mimoun Driouch, who is announced in the preface to be the “last of the great patriarchs” (vii), and his nameless daughter, who ultimately ends the long patriarchal tradition. The novel situates his domination over his family in a line of male violence, suggesting Mimoun's fits of anger and rage are the result of either his father slapping him in his youth or the rape by his uncle – violent expressions of that same patriarchy. To escape from his family, Mimoun travels to Vic in Catalonia at age sixteen, which starts a difficult process of negotiating between Morocco and Spain, and between competing values and norms. In the second part of the novel, Mimoun's family, including his daughter, the narrator of the story, now also live in Catalonia. Here, the nameless daughter moves to the fore, as she starts to negotiate the even more complex and sometimes competing demands her father, her mother, Moroccan culture, Catalan society and schools place on her. Things change when she has her own affair, and her father is thus not the only one with lovers outside the house. Although the marriage resulting from this relationship breaks down, she attains freedom by living by herself. *L'últim patriarca* ends with the narrator alone, in her apartment, the lights on, knowing that this triggers her father, who comes to find her. She seduces her uncle, with a lonely witness: “Father, who'd never again play the patriarch, not with me, because he could never tell anyone what he had seen, not even *he* could have imagined such a dire betrayal, let alone perpetrated by the daughter he loved so much” (311; original emphasis).

As the phrase, “who’d never again play the patriarch”, suggests, the novel is narrated after the events have happened. This is why, in the preface to the novel, the story is introduced as the story of “the last of the great patriarchs” (vii): liberation is the theme of the story, as it was in Rodoreda’s. Both novels situate themselves vis-à-vis dominant notions of Catalan identity and critique that – or any – notion of national identity as a singular one. There are more stories to be told, from more angles, than is allowed for in monolithic conceptions of national identity.

Language and the body go hand-in-hand in this novel. Although language might be thought of as the more direct marker of difference (as well as a tool in group formation), it is on the body that cultural differences are projected and from which they emanate. Sex is a frequently recurring point of discussion in the novel. For instance, anal sex is portrayed in Morocco as providing a way to keep the idea of female virginity intact. When Mimoun goes to Catalonia, he finds that “[v]ery few let you do it from behind, they say it hurts” (73), although his boss’s wife lets him do it. He gives her the impression this is the only “Islamic precept” (76) he follows, and it suggests a congruence between the two competing spheres, geographies and narratives the novel represents. Indeed, Mimoun seems to side with Catalan precepts whenever it suits him: when his wife argues the protagonist should stay at home, “he retorted not a daughter of mine” (183). Here, the patriarch’s negotiation of Spain and Morocco, Europe and Africa fall to the former’s side.

All the while, the narrator observes her family and her surroundings. The second half of the novel reads as a *Bildungsroman*, in which she negotiates her position in society, in her family and, ultimately, as a product of two cultures. Importantly, this process starts with her taking up a Catalan dictionary and reading it (160). As Jessica Folkart (2013, 364) has noted, the narrator moves from observing patriarchy and its bodily violence to learning a new language, which leads to her empowerment. She learns the language well enough to write the complex and nuanced story that makes up *L’últim patriarca*. Concurrently, that story ends with the familial rape referenced before, which is an expression of her own, independent decision-making and her newfound authority as a young adult.

Thus, we are again directed back to the point where language and the body, the linguistic and the corporeal, come together. It is by writing in Catalan that El Hachmi, as an author, gives literary shape to her connection with the region and the place she lives in; and it is through claiming her body as hers that her

nameless protagonist in *L'últim patriarca* ends patriarchy. Language, as the pillar upon which Catalan identity rests (King, 2005; Pujolar, 2010), serves as a tool for societal cohesion: Catalan society is made through the Catalan language. This is El Hachmi's double act: not only does she contribute to Catalan literature and identity-construction through her writing, she has also written a narrative in which a young migrant woman finds her place in contemporary Europe. *L'últim patriarca* challenges some of the everyday assumptions about Catalan identity. El Hachmi's is a localised narrative, anchored around the specifics of the relation between Spain and Morocco, that nevertheless speaks to Europe-wide concerns. Just as in *The Embassy of Cambodia*, what the novel's nameless narrator negotiates, is not just those two cultures, but the larger contexts of European and African connections. She seeks to overcome simple binary oppositions between the two spaces, finding her own position; as a novel, *L'últim patriarca* makes clear what such an inclusive, urban future could look like.

Conclusion

As Stuart Hall has observed, with reference to C.L.R. James's phrase, some subjects are "in", but not "of" Europe (Hall, 2003). Geographically present, they do not fully belong. They do not really have a place in narratives of Europe. Hall was thinking, in the first instance, of migrants who, facing racism, discrimination and exclusion, are constantly made to stand out; however, it is possible to extend his analysis to other groups as well. The clever distinction between being in and being of helps conceptualise the workings of narratives of Europe, as well as the importance of thinking about voice and representation. In this paper, I have argued for understanding the narratives written by Zadie Smith and Najat El Hachmi as acts of citizenship, which make them visible as successful writers, as well as migrant subjects who find themselves in, but not necessarily of Europe. In the process, their writing expands the ways in which one can be "of" Europe, transforming it into more inclusive, cosmopolitan possibilities.

This expansion *The Embassy of Cambodia* and *L'últim patriarca* attain by staying close to major European events – such as colonialism and various histories and legacies of violence – and the writing of a major writer such as Mercè Rodoreda, and questioning these. In this, both works enact a literary revolt: these narratives are "an endless probing of appearances" (Kristeva, 2002,

120) and “a quest to see how that which unavoidably is excluded in universal truth claims can get shape, form and meaning” (Buikema, 2017, 16).³ To read El Hachmi’s and Smith’s work as a revolt, then, entails understanding firstly how they engage with canonical works of Catalan literature and Spain’s relation to Morocco (in the case of *L’últim patriarca*) and major historical ruptures (in *The Embassy of Cambodia*). Seeing these works as a revolt means to focus on how Smith and El Hachmi rework important moments in Europe’s history and connect them to its variegated, networked present.

Europe, the historian Hayden White writes, “has never existed anywhere except in discourse” (White, 2000, 67). Gurinder Bhambra has urged to broaden up definitions of Europe to include that and those which traditionally are defined as “non-European” (Bhambra, 2009). In this paper, I have worked in this vein to show the literary revolt Zadie Smith and Najat El Hachmi stage in two of their works to broaden up and diversify narratives of Europe. Smith’s novella *The Embassy of Cambodia* makes clear the radical contingency of representation and taking up a voice – why one person gets to speak over another; why one historical event carries more historical weight than another –, as well as how important it is to reflect on who gets to have a voice, and who does not. *L’últim patriarca*, El Hachmi’s first novel, points to the always political nature of the process of finding a voice, as her protagonist negotiates family and society to find a way through Morocco and Spain, Africa and Europe, south and north.

Narratives are always told by someone, and this analysis of *The Embassy of Cambodia* and *L’últim patriarca* show how important it is to attend to both the narratives’ contents as well as the narrators. For while the power to speak and shape stories is often distributed arbitrarily, the effects of storytelling are real. In a Europe that is slowly starting to understand itself as a space in continual cosmopolitan and postcolonial networks with the rest of the world, with all the attendant confusions and struggles over national and collective identities and debates regarding who gets to be included, through their fictional narratives literary writers point to more inclusive and sustainable futures. They imagine the questions that are discussed elsewhere in new, more concentrated forms, thus opening up the possibility for new ways of seeing that understand Europeans everywhere as being confronted with similar issues and challenges. In the process, these works might just be able to provide new answers, too.

3 Original Dutch: “[E]en zoektocht naar hoe dat wat bij universele waarheidsclaims onvermijdelijk wordt buitengesloten, een vorm, een plaats en een betekenis kan krijgen.”

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