Trapped in the Airport: Borders, Global Travel and the Myth of the Global Citizen in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*[1]

Delali Kumavie

Syracuse University, The United States

Despite its title's entrenchment in the oceanic and maritime world of the Indian Ocean, Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* is a novel deeply invested in the airport and air travel. The novel details the manifold procedures, structures, and measures that the global airport harnesses to manage the flow of people into the time-space of the nation-state. It tells the story of Saleh Omar, a Zanzibari man who leaves his home along the Indian Ocean to seek asylum in the United Kingdom (2). He steals the identity of his enemy, Rajab Shaaban, whose son Hassan threatens to imprison Saleh if he does not return the deed to his father's house. Through these conflicts over home and belonging, Gurnah's astute novel provides one of the most relevant interrogations of airline travel, migrancy, and the impediments structured into the workings of the airport that render global citizenship beyond the reach of many African travelers.

The airport, as illustrated in *By the Sea*, is not merely a site of transit, but rather a border where the postcolonial traveler encounters the specters of empire through surveillance and security systems, and the deputized actors of the state who delineate citizens from foreigners and aliens. As Leonard C. Feldman points out, the airport functions as a "relay point" where various technologies of surveillance and control are deployed to separate travelers into "citizen," "foreigner,"—a cataloguing process that performs the state's sovereign power (Feldman 333). The airport, this essay argues, functions as a border to reveal the political, economic, and historical structures that undergird global travel and mobility.

Existing interpretations and readings of *By the Sea* have rightly focused on Indian Ocean literature and culture as it intersects with issues of global and transnational migration, the complex positioning of asylum seekers and refugees, and the possibilities and pitfalls of global communities. Sissy Helff, for instance, draws on Mary Louise Pratt's notion of "contact zone" and Kezilahabi's model of "Swahili dialogic literature" to address the material realities and conditions of encounter where national and ethnic identity and belonging are less significant than the "contact zone" where "traders, seafarers, locals, migrants, and refugees meet and interact" (154-158). Meg Samuelson has used the notion of "littoral states" to examine the Indian Ocean world that is at the heart of *By the Sea* and Gurnah's other novels.

Others such as Tina Steiner have argued that Gurnah's works points to the necessity of perceiving "Africa" as an "intercultural and interlinguistic space of geographical proximity" where "a politics of relation" present in Gurnah's fictional worlds can be gleaned (125-6). Yet these analyses in their excavation of the novel's engagement with mobility and the figure of the refugee, pay minimal attention to how the structures that facilitate these movements form part of the novel's criticism. For instance, we might ask how the airport refuses or creates obstacles to the relational politics and poetics that Steiner identifies? To consider migrancy and its attendant disruptions and demands on the nation-state as separate from the structures that facilitate the movement of people (such as the airport) elides the entanglements of the political, economic, and historical regimes central to understanding global mobility.

John Masterson, however, posits that James Clifford's reconfiguration of Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the "chronotrope" as a "setting or scene organizing time and space in representable whole form" such as "a hotel lobby, urban café, ship, or bus" is applicable to the representation of the airport in *By the Sea* (qtd. in Masterson 413). Masterson argues that the airport is a "self-enclosed and regulated" space of containment which when seen from "alien arrivants' perspective reveal[s] itself as a disciplinary and exclusionary space from the onset" (413). The airport, like the prison, and the holding facility where Saleh is sent later in the novel constitute a network of "interstitial spaces" and camps that prompts readers to "reflect on its disciplinary functions" (413-416). Whereas Masterson sees the airport in relation to other spaces of confinement and containment, I want to venture an alternative interpretation that considers the airport within the structures of global travel and mobility and its relationship to global hierarchies of power. Viewing the airport through the theoretical lens and approach offered by postcolonial studies, studies in transportation and Black feminist approaches to transit and mobility means that the unique structures of the airport are shown to be entangled with the *longue durée* of colonial epistemologies, and its effects on global travel. In other words, while Masterson's reading makes visible the relationship between containment and the airport, it sidelines how these structures and systems are part of the functioning of the international border.

It is indubitable that the airport constitutes a key part of the structures of global experience. In literary studies, the airport performs the double act of both reanimating questions of transnational mobility and revealing the global political and economic structures that provide access to the world for some while restricting the movement of others. Simon Gikandi asserts in "Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality," that postcolonial studies' perspective on globalization tends to put "emphasis on culture" which overshadows what he calls

the "global experience as a structural experience" (644). This structural experience, which is exemplified in Gikandi's interpretation of the letter written by the two Guinean boys whose bodies were discovered in the cargo hold of an airplane in Brussels, distills the disjuncture between narratives of global culture driven by hybridity and those propelled by "older narratives about civilization and development" (639). Even though Gikandi does not explicitly recognize the airport and aviation as a fundamental part of the structure of globalization, he relies on an example that is made possible because of the peculiar demands that aviation, and the airport specifically, makes on African travelers.

By the Sea, in addition to its detailed representation of the airport, permits a closer critical attention to the functioning of the airport as it encounters the African traveler who performs and embodies the lack of social and economic capital that elite African travelers possess. The novel forms part of an ecology of modern African literature that portrays the airport and aviation as a fundamental signifier of Africa's "uneasy" (and perhaps even "unruly") incorporation into the global system. The young protagonist of Mongo Beti's 1956 novel, *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, is fascinated by the "cars, trains and aeroplanes without number," pointing to these forms of transportation as a synecdoche of European technological modernity (47). The absence of these cars, trains, and aeroplanes and the predominance of the bicycle further highlights the schism between Europe and Africa. Abdourahman Waberi, in his novel *Transit*, offers yet another vivid and disturbing description of African travelers in Paris stuffed in airplane toilets during their deportation, bound to seats, incarcerated in detention centers, and rendered foreign in Roissy airport. Whereas Waberi is more interested in the airport as a site haunted by the homeland one has just left, his and the other literary representations open a window into how transit forms only a layer of the workings of the modern airport. While airports are popularly seen as infrastructural representations of "unimpeded" border crossing and travel, in their literary representations in modern African literature they are perceived as concrete sites where the ongoing tensions and hauntings of global imperial histories and hierarchies of global power unfold. What sets Gurnah's novel apart from these other literary portrayals is *By the Sea*'s depiction of the unequal and uneven structures of global mobility. The novel pays close attention to the demands, interactions, and bodily disciplining that the airport extracts from African travelers.

Yet, some theories and accounts of airports fail to consider the tensions and violence fundamental to its operation. One illustration of this is Marc Augé's famous theorization of the airport as a non-place—as spaces created by capital and invested with supermodernity where identities such as passengers, customers and the like are shared for the sole purpose of capital. These non-places set airports in opposition to

"the sociological notion of place" where "culture is localized in time and space" (34). The distinction between place and non-place, as Augé elaborates later, is best understood as a kind of palimpsest where the "scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten" (79). In other words, non-places do not completely replace or erase places. Augé's example of a French business traveler flying out of Roissy in Paris limits the stakes of air travel in general, and airports specifically, to temporal and spatial overabundance of supermodernity. What it forgets is that for some of the world's populace air travel presents overwhelming obstacles which are entangled with the legacies of colonial rule and its institutionalizing of global power hierarchies. The airport, as we see in African literature, is at the nexus of colonial modernity, developmentalism, race, and infrastructure where infrastructure was believed to be a fundamental part of the civilizing mission's attempts to catapult Africa into "global modernity" (Iheka 10). The demands of traveling by air, the visa applications and fees, the interrogation at the embassy, the possible rejection of one's visa application, and the exorbitant prices of flights all culminate to make air travel prohibitive to many African travelers.

In foregrounding Saleh's transit through the airport, Gurnah's novel captures what Augé does not. By setting Saleh's experiences at the nexus of the nation-state, the global, and the transnational, it provides the structural frame to discussions of globalization in postcolonial studies. While the airport is a site of transit, when characters linger in airports as they do in *By the Sea* and in the works that Christopher Schaberg examines in his monograph *The Textual Life of Airports*, they allow for a vast array of subjects to be examined within transit and global mobility such as nationalism and national belonging, politics of containment, the spectacularizing of labor and capital, and the entanglement between race, securitization and surveillance. These textual representations of airports are always in relation to the airport as an infrastructure designed to move people and things to a destination beyond it. Positioning the airport's transitory function within a constellation of structures and discourses that examine how people move across national and local borders allows for questions of globalization and global belonging to emerge differently.

In what follows, I examine the airport through a reading of *By the Sea*. I posit that the airport is a border zone where the postcolonial traveler encounters a global order, and therein becomes subjected to the matrix of difference—racial, economic, and historical—that delineate who has access to certain nation-states. The extreme display of technological modernity, securitization, and the obscured underbelly of carcerality (detentions and deportations) that govern the workings of the modern airport reveal the fundamental angst at the heart of global travel. *By the Sea* offers an opportunity to examine how the airport as an architectural and political structure pulls together ecologies,

histories and narratives fundamental to the formation and sustenance of the nation-state and its people, and its exclusion of others. Ultimately the airport and the issues it makes visible are, I argue, entangled with global modernity and the innovated power structures of empire.

Palimpsestic Borders: Airports as Borderlands

Borders are contentious spaces, where the potent fiction of the nation-state meets its geographical limits. Even when borders are not located at the limits of the nation-state, they function as borderlands— "a vague and undetermined place" that embodies the remains and residues of the past and present (Anzaldúa 25). By referring to the border as a palimpsest, I adapt a term that is often associated with the textual traces of something that has been written over, to suggest that the airport as a border sanitizes the violence of borderlands by rendering them invisible. Notwithstanding its futuristic architecture and its highly efficient methods of separating and selecting desirable travelers from undesirable ones, the airport is fundamentally a border —one that is arguably disentangled from the geographical limits of the state and thus can and does "materialize anywhere" (Pascoe 34). As a border, it bears a set of "values," "knowledge," "vocabulary" and a "universe of representative discourse" that dramatizes the "distance and difference of what is close to it and what is far away," a discourse that is affixed to geography and history (Said 55). These values and representative frames exceed their textual origins and have real effects on those caught within its net. Martin Kimani, for instance, provides numerous examples of African travelers exposed to the manifold hurdles and rigors of surveillance and security personnel at airports around the world (25). Kimani suggests that these forms of dehumanizing treatments are permitted because of the perception of Africans as villains in the theater of entry that takes place at the airport (28).[2]

In Gurnah's *By the Sea*, the surveillance and security systems of the airport are exemplified in the encounter between Saleh and his interrogator, Kevin Edelman (which I discuss below). Through this encounter the novel offers insight into how state apparatuses function to assess who qualifies for admission into the nation and implement a strategy to deal with those who lack the accoutrements needed for admission. From Saleh's arrival through to his interrogation, the airport emerges as a borderland where the nation must re-emphasize its commitment to its curated international public image as the purveyor of democracy (which is often adversarial to its actual imperialist objectives) even as it enforces its procedures of entry. As evidenced in *By the Sea*, the airport functions as a kind of exceptional space constraining mobility for those travelers who are detained and

subjected to the laws of the state. As Gallya Lahav poignantly notes, "international airports constitute 'no-man's land' zones where lawyers and humanitarian groups are notably absent" (81). In this space, where one is simultaneously beyond access to legal assistance, yet enmeshed in the law of the state, the relationship between humanitarianism and the longer historical forces of (neo)colonization and imperial epistemology are established and contested.

From the onset, the airport disciplines Saleh's comportment and movement. It transforms his steps into a slow and careful gait. He cautiously and dutifully obeys the signs, and he manages his emotions so as not to appear distraught or out of place. Counting himself among the countless other first-time travelers, Saleh surmises, "for some, as for me, it was the first journey by air, and the first arrival in a place so monumental as an airport, though I have travelled by sea and by land, and in my imagination" (5). *By the Sea* suggests that no other form of travel, by sea, land, or imagination, is comparable to air travel. The imagination, which acts as a kind of narrative bridge between what the narrator knows and what he imagines to be probable, fails to conjure up the scale of the modern airport. Just as there is nothing to prepare Saleh for the architectural scale of the airport, so too is there nothing to prepare him for the disciplinary regime that the airport demands of his body and self. Even before Saleh's realization of the exclusionary politics and carceral functions of the airport, the scale of it all impresses and frightens him. It disciplines his steps and demands that he submits to the order that the signs provide.

> I walked slowly through what felt like coldly lit and silent empty tunnels, though now on reflection I know I walked past rows of seats and large glass windows, and signs and instructions. … I walked slowly, surprised at every anxious turn that an instruction awaited to tell me where to go. I walked slowly so I would not miss a turning or misread a sign, so that I would not attract attention too early by getting into a flutter of confusion. (Gurnah 5)

The things that Saleh can now remember, though unnoticeable to him in the moment of his arrival, are reproduced in airports around the world. The "coldly lit and silent empty tunnels," the "rows of seats," and the "large glass windows" demarcate this space as the airport. So too do the signs and instructions which guide travelers into other clearly demarcated zones. These signs also function to maintain order and discipline.

In order to successfully navigate through the airport's architectural scale, Saleh relies, like other travelers, on what Gillian Fuller refers to as the "navigational semiotics" of the airport. These are the universally recognizable signage that seeks to "stabilise the confluence of people and machines" to control movement and flow (237-9). As Fuller further explains, these signs extend beyond the airport, as we find them

on the highway and at hospitals where they also manage flow and directionality. They are, as Fuller asserts, part of the biopolitical mechanism of the state. For Saleh, these signs lead him in his tentative, careful steps towards the passport desk, filled with the fear of "miss[ing] a turn or misread[ing] a sign" which in turn will, he believes, draw unsolicited attention to him (5). This fear is not the paranoia of the newly arrived, rather it is a direct outcome of what Christopher Schaberg describes as the airport's "borrowing from the complex layers of power and visibility emblematized by the Panopticon" (Schaberg 26). The temporary induction of travelers into the airport's surveillance system renders pliable and widely applicable the signifier of "suspicious behavior." Here, to borrow from Sara Ahmed, one "sense[s]" the distinction between the ordinary and the thing that is out of place, but the absence of specified language to encode the extra-ordinary is itself a "technique of knowledge," as well as an index of those "uncommon" bodies perceived to be out of place (29). Saleh disciples his gait and demeanor in order to normalize his presence at the airport even as these mechanisms of comportment insinuate that he constitutes part of the object of suspicion.

Though "navigational semiotics" provide direction at the border, like other non-citizens, Saleh has to rely on other ways of interpreting interpersonal signs in order to successfully cross into the time space of the nation-state. The 'semiotics of the powerless' which allow those seeking entry without the requisite visas and other documents to navigate the border's politics and poetics becomes Saleh's only recourse. In other words, while the "navigational semiotics" get Saleh to passport control, from there onwards it is the 'semiotics of the powerless'—the sometimes baffling, yet "resourceful," advice—that migrants receive or pass along in order to circumvent the state's security and surveillance instituted to halt or divert their mobility. Saleh decides to follow the advice of those from whom he purchased his ticket to pretend not to speak English (Gurnah 45). Though he does not initially understand the purpose of this advice, Saleh believes that it is the kind of "crafty" practice that the "powerless" would know and utilize (45). This 'semiotics of the powerless,' which momentarily deprives him of language, guides him through his interrogation. Though we have little information why Saleh is given this advice since the United Kingdom's foreign policy at the time had already offered asylum to people from Zanzibar, we get clues throughout the novel that these governmental pronouncements are limited by the calculable cost and benefit of accepting some asylum seekers over others. As Saleh comes to realize, "… someone had started to count the cost of admitting a man of my age to the United Kingdom: too old to work in a hospital, too old to produce a future England cricketer, too old for anything much except Social Security, assisted housing and a subsidized cremation" (49). Finding himself disadvantaged,

performing silence becomes the only pathway to navigating his interrogation.

Beyond these structural and semiotic codes of comportment, the airport's functioning as a border—a space for determining who belongs, who can be admitted, and who is too foreign and must thus be detained or deported—is best highlighted in the interaction between the airport's security apparatus embodied by Kevin Edelman and Saleh. It is in this conversation between Kevin and Saleh that the argument over race and racialization at the border (airport) is performed. At the interstitial zone of the border, where Africans are always already perceived as foreign, always recognized as strangers, as out of place, or beyond the scope of citizenship, even when they bear the requisite documentation, this interaction foregrounds the logics of exclusion and undermines its reasoning. Whether it be the ontological differences that sustain racialization or the cultural distinction that was the foundation of colonial racism, there is a predetermined ritual that subjects black African travelers to peculiar restrictions at the airport.[3] The repetitive and recurrent violence of "flying while black," for instance, is an implicit part of the working of the airport (Browne 131-2). Kevin's attempt to keep Saleh out and Saleh's silent claim of belonging in the UK are presented as an argument about historical perspective even as it is undergirded by race. On the one hand, Kevin stakes his claim of belonging in the UK by insisting that, by virtue of his whiteness, he and his family already belong, while Saleh does not:

> But my parents are European, that have a right, they're part of the family. … People like you come pouring in here without any thought of the damage they cause. You don't belong here, you don't value any of the things that we value, you haven't paid for them through generations, and we don't want you here. We'll make life hard for you, make you suffer indignities, perhaps even commit violence on you. (Gurnah 12)

Kevin's assertion not only disconnects this new diaspora from older ones, but he also lays claim to a European kinship that Saleh seemingly cannot. Jennifer Rickel describes this moment as one that bifurcates those like Kevin who served as the "model for the drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)" in response to the first wave of European refugees after the Second World War, and those like Saleh whose migrancy is part of a long historical unfolding that European imperial states and their citizens would rather forget (101). However, this moment exemplifies what Tiffany Lethabo King has called in another context "colonial unknowing"— the "willful ignorance" about the role of founding historical movements to the "instantiat[ion] [of] Blackness as a form of abject in the modern world" (n.p.).[4] I appropriate King's term to describe the historical unknowing that is present when Euro-American citizens who benefited from the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism willfully forget that

the foundations of their nation's wealth are rooted in these violent histories and insist that African and African-descended people can lay no claim to their national cake. By erasing Saleh and Africa from the history of the British nation-state, Kevin performs this unknowing.

In his mind, Saleh offers a counter-genealogy in his unspoken response to Kevin. It is an even longer history of Euro-American intrusion into Zanzibar and Africa at large to steal and extract resources. This history, he insists, gives him every right to be admitted into the British nation. Saleh says,

> Do you remember that *endless* catalogue of *objects* that were taken away to Europe because they were too fragile and delicate to be left in the clumsy and careless hands of natives? I am fragile and precious too, a sacred work, too delicate to be left in the hands of natives, so now you'd better take me too. I joke, I joke. (12 emphasis mine)

By invoking the specter of slavery and British complicity, and by repeating and remembering the "endless catalogue of objects" plundered from indigenous people in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere in the world, Saleh verbalizes the violent effects of transit, and the reverberation of this violence, at the foundation of the British nation-state. His silent response catalogs the ways that he, the African continent, and its people have paid for the economic prosperity of Europe. In other words, re-categorizing himself as an object, Saleh is harkening to those human and material objects that sustain Britain's place in the world. Christa Knellwolf King argues that in this exchange Saleh displays his knowledge of British beliefs that countries like Zanzibar cannot lay any "claim on British support" while forgetting that Zanzibar's political conflicts are in part an effect of British colonialism (201). Saleh's demand for asylum and entry into the nation positions the airport as both the border and the "gateway" of the modern nation-state. It also suggests that the airport is haunted by earlier borderlands where the encounter between people produced violence histories that innovate into new forms of securing national and local borders against those beyond the nation-state.

In *By the Sea* the airport, like these earlier sites of transit, is stained by the forms of violence and theft that marked early European encounters with indigenous peoples. It is perhaps in keeping with this trajectory that Saleh also loses something precious at the doorstep of the metropole: the *ud-al-qamari* (casket of incense) that Hussein, his friend, had earlier given him in exchange for an antique ebony table. For Saleh, this casket of incense symbolizes the transnational trades and encounters that existed in the Indian Ocean prior to and during the colonization of Zanzibar. This object connects Zanzibar to Cambodia, Bangkok, the Persian empire, and India. It also connects Saleh to his "before" life that is no more. When he realizes that Kevin has "plundered" the casket of incense, Saleh recounts the history that is

now forgotten as the "ownership" of the casket changes hands: "He gave me the casket as a gift, the casket Kevin Edelman plundered from me, and with it the last of the *udi* Hussein and his father bought in Bangkok in the year before the war, the casket which I had brought with me as all the luggage from a life departed, the provisions of my after-life" (31). Kevin's theft deprives Saleh of the sole possession that connects him with his previous life—his home, his stories, and friendships—as well as his after-life. Restrained by his predicament and momentary inability to communicate or protest, Saleh must accept this robbery, which replays, in miniature, European claims to own and map the lands they stole. As the "gatekeeper" or "bawab of Europe," Kevin does not realize that those same European gates unleashed "hordes that went out to consume the world" by committing genocide, pillaging humans and resources, and colonizing (31). These same gates that lead into Europe now demand that the rest of the world seeks Europe's permission to enter. Kevin, it appears, exercises the same kinds of power over Saleh that his ancestors exercised over Saleh's: the power to claim possession over the resources and materials of colonized people.

The Silent Foreigner at the Border

By the Sea underscores the shifting scale of the foreigner, "the refugee," the "asylum-seeker" (and the "terrorist" in more recent times). These concepts delineate foreign*ness* and distinguish between those who belong and those who do not. Whether local or global, the concept of the foreigner is always marked by class. As Rebecca Saunders asserts, wealth often fills the gap that allows some non-citizens to be accorded the rights of citizenship. Others must remain "global foreigners," which the nation keeps at bay by erecting walls and deploying its military. Saunders further maintains that while globalization has "shifted borders and redefined belonging," it maintains the category of the foreign(er) for those who slave away in "low-wages" to sustain the lifestyle and consumption of high-income professional and managerial classes (89 and 95). Similarly, Mark Salter observes how the constitution of the "foreign" is vital to understanding how airports operate. He writes, "the right to detain, examine, and search travelers is defined in relation to their foreignness, their origins "outside," which renders them without protection while under question at the border" (172). Thus, one of the first questions Kevin asks Saleh is, "Do you have any money, sir? Traveller's cheques? Sterling? Dollars" (Gurnah 7). According to Salter, the mobile subject is constituted in terms of "health, wealth, labor/leisure, and risk" (176). Failing to have the economic means to purchase his way into the class of those who belong, or to have any contacts in the

UK, or the right documentation, Saleh is perceived as a risk and forced to endure further interrogations.

If Saunders' theorization of the foreigner leaves out anything, it is what Sara Ahmed summons when she says that "some-bodies are more recognizable as strangers than other bodies precisely because they are already read and valued in the demarcation of social spaces" (30). These "skinned" bodies, as Ahmed refers to them, are defined by deep-seated sensibilities that both makes them invisible while also encoding them as stranger, outsider, foreigner, immigrant. Saleh's "skin" as a racializing signifier becomes prominent when he utters the words, "refugee" and "asylum." This lexicon of the immigrant, according to Arun Kundnani, has shifted meaning within UK public discourse. Incorporated into everyday language, "immigrant" signifies "illegal" for Black and Brown people, regardless of their conditions or terms of entry (43). Their very corporeality places them outside the presumptive racial category of Englishness. By homogenizing all forms of migrancy into the racialized category of "illegal immigrants," it licenses violent attacks on immigrants because their skin places them beyond the category of citizen. The ascension of whiteness associated with British citizenship relies on the descension accorded the immigrant, a subject trapped in the carceral institution of racism.

The "illegal immigrant," in this and other context, becomes a sign of race, and in its signification becomes entangled with other such terminology that separates foreigner from citizen. In *By the Sea*, the racial inflection of "illegal immigrant" hides behind the curtain of the rhetoric of uncontrolled infiltration into the nation to the detriment of its citizens. This rhetoric, in part, underpins Saleh's exclusion from the British nation. Perceived as multiply disadvantaged, black, old, poor, Saleh can lay no claim to any form of belonging. He exceeds the work-age and is thus unable to provide the cheap labor that is the "privilege" of some asylum-seekers. Kevin's suggestion that Saleh's age should have prevented him from leaving his home and seeking asylum mimics anti-immigration sentiments across Europe and the United States that constitutes the mobile non-white traveler as illegal. Saleh's unvoiced answers responds to the unreasonable logic that delineates and defines acceptable conditions for migrancy: "At what age are you supposed to be afraid for your life? Or not to want to live without fear? How did he know that my life was in any less danger than those young men they let in? Why was it immoral to want to live better and in safety?" (11). Saleh's unspoken, or even unspeakable, response meditates on the ways that arrival at the airport works to segregate and impose imperial epistemologies on some, often "raced," bodies. In addition, it points to the ways that the airport dictates that one "fit" within a recognizable category or narrative that the state determines.

It is in light of these exclusionary mechanism at the airport that the performance of silence in *By the Sea* can be seen as enacting a kind

of common-sense approach to oppose the machinery of immigration located at the airport. In choosing silence, Saleh refuses to participate in the "confessionary" impulse the nation-state demands of those attempting to enter through their borders. He refuses to participate in the kind of "self-telling" or "confessional" where migrants gain advantages by verbally and ontologically proving or narrativizing their abject conditions (Salter, "The Global Visa Regime" 183). In other words, if Saleh were to confess, or to tell his story of transit, he would be offering a mode of recognition by which he would be likely judged unfit for access into the nation. These verbal confessions, together with the "auto-confession of the body," are taken as partial evidence of the narrative one's documents and biometric data already tell (Salter, "The Global Visa Regime" 182). Unlike the "free-floating subject or un-hinged citizen" of cosmopolitanism that Michael Eze critiques in the work of Kwame Appiah, Saleh must confront the limits of his *"*paperized identity*"* as issued by a nation that does not have unlimited access to the world (94). By remaining silent and repeating only the English words that would secure his access into the nation, "refugee" and "asylum," Saleh finds a way to secure advantages, without yielding to the confessional. When he does decide to speak about his experiences, it is to the other Zanzibari character, Latif, whose father's name he has stolen.

In subverting the impulse to confess, *By the Sea* experiments with the limits and possibilities of silence. Sissy Helff, for instance, understands Saleh's silence as an attempt to "master the situation without losing control" (164). Citing Saleh's assertion that he knows the "meaning of silence, [and] the danger of words," Helff contends that this is illustrative of the reality that refugees encounter in the world, which demands that their narratives act as evidence of their violent experiences (qtd in Helff 165; Gurnah 12). In choosing silence, according to Helff, Saleh "fashion[s] realities beyond narration" (165). A reading by Meg Samuelson asserts that there is an oscillation between silence and storytelling, which Gurnah's characters in *By the Sea* are called upon to perform. Given Helff and Samuelson's analysis, we might ask what kind of space engenders silence and which spaces allow storytelling? It is clear from Saleh's decision to be silent that the airport is not a space for storytelling. Kevin Edelman, his interrogator, is not the ideal person to whom to tell stories. Indeed, the "small windowless room with a hard floor … lit with fluorescent strips" are "no suitable place to exchange personal memories" (King 200). Silence, as African feminists show, necessitates a nuanced approach. Iréne D'Almeida makes the distinction between silence and being silenced, between being coerced and a form of silence that is "strategic" and "eloquent" (3). Sylvia Tamale avers that silence can, in some African cultures, be "powerful" and "empowering" (13). In *By the Sea*, Saleh's silence is external; it is directed at the structures of

power. The unique dexterous first-person narrative vocalizes Saleh's thoughts and comments on his experience, allowing him a form of redress. Saleh's silence is a strategic one that grants him the opportunity to voice a position and simultaneously bypass the potential repercussions that his words might engender.

When asked if silence in *By the Sea* was a commentary on stories which had not yet been told, the necessity of certain stories which were not yet told or stories which had failed to be told, Gurnah responded by saying:

> I know the meaning of silence. Sometimes it endangers you to speak every word that you have to say. There is a paradox in that silence is on one hand intimidating, but on the other hand, it is also safety, for if you don't speak you don't incriminate yourself, if you don't speak you don't put yourself into difficulties. It's a kind of deference, a kind of resignation. But what this narrator really means and what I was interested in is the danger of words. Words are in you, but words are dangerous because they tell the truth. (Allen 121)

It is undoubtedly true that Saleh has something to fear from the revelatory potential of words, having stolen another person's name and traveled to the UK to seek asylum. Silence, it appears, is his only option, the only way to be certain that he does not reveal anything that British authorities can use against him to prevent his successful admission into the space-time of the nation. Yet Saleh's silence is also heavy with unsaid words, and the verbalization of his interiority—his thoughts and reactions—allow Gurnah to both represent silence and reveal its tense undercurrents. Within the linguistic culture of airports, Saleh's silence performs, perhaps to the extreme, the kinds of communicative restrictions airports impose, which have subsequently been cemented into travel culture. Generally, communication at airports is often unidirectional, delivered through public address systems and screens, or when solicited to permit entry or not. Dialogue is discouraged, and everyone—even those who have successfully crossed through the security barrier—remains a suspect. The airport encourages silence or dialogue with people one already knows, preferably mediated by phones and computers.

The Architectural Logic to Detain and the Structure of the Airport

If the airport in *By the Sea* titters between the hyper familiarity of points of national entry, and the strange unknown of its underbelly, it is to show how the airport functions to enable movement for some and restrict or halt it for others. At their core, airports are constructed to process and to manage those who disrupt the flow of "process traffic"

and to "capture and control flows in the most literal manner imaginable … of people, machines and cargo" (Fuller and Harley 15). Behind the shiny façades of sound-proof glass, lights, and malls, are the "invisible corridors" for the "deportation class" (Salter xi). While most travelers only experience airports through the visible sections of the airport's environment—ticketing counter, security, duty-free shops, and boarding gates—by arriving at the airport seeking asylum, Saleh is inducted into the substratum of the airport through his interrogation and subsequent detention. Saleh's experiences reveal the airport as designed to reveal itself and conceal its workings simultaneously. Increasingly, airports operate as sites for questioning and detaining any traveler who is perceived as threatening to the security of the nation-state. It is thus significant, particularly in the era of counterterrorism, that airports are often built by architects and architectural firms who also build prisons and detentions centers. The architectural company Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum, for instance, built Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport in Atlanta, LaGuardia Airport Terminal B, and Salt Lake City International Airport Passenger Terminal, among others. They also built a number of correctional facilities in Illinois, the Iowa State Penitentiary, and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation Mule Creek Infill Complex.[5] Funneled through this system of arrival, interrogation, and detention, Saleh is forced to rely on his silence to help him. In his silence, he reveals the deep-seated economic and racial segregation that is scripted onto the modern airport.

It is worth noting that earlier architectural visions and structures of the airport in Europe and the United States mimicked the known transitory hubs of the train/bus station and the port/harbor. The airport exists along this continuum. Like these transitory hubs in Europe and the United States, the airport enacts forms of racialization and class exclusion through sophisticated biometric surveillance systems. These transitory hubs constitute a palimpsestic vector, bearing the traces and remains of those other transitory sites out of which generations of Europeans traveled and sailed to so-called "new," "unknown" and "blank" lands to pillage, enslave, claim property, indoctrinate through civilizing missions, and enact violence on indigenous populations. Additionally, the construction of airports in the colonies were aimed at material and human extractions vital for sustaining the Second World War. In the era of global travel, the airport facilitates the travel and worldly aspirations of the postcolonial elite to global centers, allowing people from the African continent to Europe and the Americas. These travelers are strictly regulated and restricted by Euro-American embassies and immigration officers. In no way do their numbers compare with the number of Europeans who traveled unrestricted to the "new world."

When Saleh is finally sent to the detention center, he encounters others whose travel has also ended in a kind of stasis, waiting for the state to decide their fate. The detention center does not employ the surveillance tactics that Saleh expects, but rather, relies on forms of self-surveillance generated by the inmates' fears. In Saleh's opinion "to call it a detention center is to be melodramatic. There were no locked gates or armed guards, not even a uniform in sight. It was an encampment in the countryside" (Gurnah 42). Already imprisoned twice in Zanzibar, first in jail and later on a deserted island, Saleh does not find the forms of surveillance he expects. In their place, however, are the threats of bodily injury that haunt the center. Stripped of their possessions, money and papers, Saleh and the other inmates quickly realize that even though one could easily escape the detention center, they cannot "live" in the nation because "life" within the nation is dictated by the kinds of documentation and material that have been confiscated. But beyond the seized documents, the weather in November presents for Saleh an insurmountable obstacle. Turning once again to history, Saleh posits that Napoleon's delayed retreat from Moscow until February or March was primarily because of the weather, suggesting that he and anyone who tries to leave the detention camp would freeze to death.

Put differently, Saleh and the others he meets at the detention center, the "four Algerians, three Ethiopians, two Iranian brothers … , a Sudanese and an Angolan … , " fall within the category of "alien" in the eyes of the state and the world (44). They have transitioned into a zone of non-being because they do not possess the requisite, material evidence of their right to exist and live within the parameters of the nation-state. As a detained asylum seeker, Saleh perceives the hierarchy of value which the detention center represents: "the shed that accommodated us could have contained sacks of cereals or bags of cement or some valuable commodity that needed to be kept secure and out of the rain. Now they contained us, a casual and valueless nuisance that had to be kept in restraint" (43). In the hierarchy of value, Saleh recognizes that the "value" of the asylum-seeker is measured in comparison to commodities. But unlike the commodities that used to be kept in these detention centers, the cereal, and cement, whose value is tangible and indisputable, the value of admitting/accepting asylum seekers or refugees is not assured. Finding himself detained in a place where life-sustaining commodities used to be kept, Saleh can't help but revise his assertion of being a precious object to a "valueless nuisance" beneath the commodities stored here prior to their arrival (43).

Conclusion

Ultimately, the airport, as an architectural structure that encapsulates the promises of globalization, reveals the deepening securitization of global travel. In as much as the airport is proof that the regions of the world are closer and more connected than ever before, a vision of Marshall McLuhan's tight-knit "global village," it is also a space that delineates whom the nation-state admits from those it detains and/or rejects. Further, the connectedness that the airport purportedly sustains is always in concert with the nation-state, its militarized and securitized border control, and its anxieties over the influx of foreign bodies, ideas, and materials. As an aspirational site of the nation-state, both its "business card and handshake," the airport butts heads with its workings to separate and detain (Iyer 46). The airport, in Gurnah's novel, is a site where the endless interplay between histories and epistemologies of imperialism, race and racism, and the continuing hierarchies of global power are visible in the structures that mitigate access to the nation-state. Situated at the nexus of the architectural, epistemological, and practical logistical aspirations of the nation-state, the airport is a kind of haunting site in which the injuries of colonialism become part of the body of the nation and its people. The airport is an urban palimpsest—a point of culmination where Western countries must wrestle with the haunting of the postcolony. It remains a transitory space that illuminates the ways in which mobility must reckon with the immobility of systems of racial and economic violence that intersect to ground the black traveler.

Notes

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2. Nkiacha Atemnkeng's write-up in *The Guardian*, "'Try again next time': My Three Visa Rejections," which was published on 29th October 2020, outlined the ways that African travelers are at the mercy of embassies which can refuse visas application for no apparent reason.

3. Drawing on Nkiru Nzegwu's distinction between ontological racism that exists in the African diaspora, and the cultural racism that is modus operandi of colonialism. See Nzegwu.

4. Indeed, other Black feminist scholars have also noted this elision. Patricia McFadden in a presentation entitled "Resisting the Neo-colonial/ Neo-liberal Collusion: Reclaiming our lives, our futures" called this willful forgetting "the hegemonic waves of colluding amnesia" which results from the interplay between neoliberalism and neocolonialism. See McFadden.

5. Another example of the cross-over between prisons and airport is in Paul Virilio's "The Overexposed City" where he reveals that the French in constructing "maximum security cell-blocks" used the same "magnetized doorways" that airports had been using for years (359). Peter Adey in "Secured and Sorted Mobilities: Examples from the Airport" shows how the forms of surveillance employed by airports, such as metal detectors, after the hijackings of the late 1960s and 1970s have increasingly filtered into sites of the everyday, such as schools and shopping malls.

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