

Lorenza Starace reviews Barbara Métais-Chastanier's *Chroniques des Invisibles. De l'Exil à Avignon. Récit d'une création* (Le passager clandestin, Paris, 2017).

In an effort to find the appropriate opening to her account, Barbara Métais-Chastanier retraces the contours of relevant events: “It begins in 2011, when Zia must leave Bangladesh [...] It begins in 2000, with the massacres in the Ivory Coast [...] It begins in 1974, when French closes its borders [...] it begins November 15th, 1884, in Berlin, when Bismarck, caressing its mustaches, carves up Africa” (9-10). Zooming in and out, spatially and geographically, the prologue of *Chroniques des Invisibles* offers an overview, at once formally lyrical and historically accurate, of the political entanglements that her narrative necessarily unfolds. For *Chroniques des Invisibles* is a work about migration, and Barbara Métais-Chastanier – who, besides being a playwright, is also pursuing an academic path in the humanities – is well aware of the tightrope walked by a white woman, speaking from the core of the Hexagon, who wants to write a book about a group of clandestine migrants. *How to welcome their stories? How to find the right place for them?* she wonders.

Her questions illustrate the extent to which the boundary between political issues and aesthetics becomes porous when it comes to migration narratives: how can she grant migrants and their stories the hospitality denied to them by the French government? As a humanist scholar and as an artist, she knows well the twofold risk she runs in her fictional position as a narrator; how to avoid exoticizing the migrants, while preserving their socio-cultural anonymity? [opacity] The key to this desirable balance lies, for Métais-Chastanier, in the literary hybridity and the fragmentation of her account: narrative voices overlap just like genres, thus simultaneously eluding a hegemonic narrative voice in favor of polyphony, and constrictive categorization in favor of generic hybridity. Ostensibly conceived as a firsthand commentary on the genealogy of *81, Avenue Victor Hugo*, the theatrical performance Métais-Chastanier co-wrote along with Camille Plagnet and Olive Coulon-Jablonka, the story gradually moves away from the meticulous reconstruction of the play's staging, without losing any of the gripping tones that the present tense narration grants to the plot, and comes closer to a retrospective and critical analysis of what the conceptualization of the *pièce* has meant in political and artistic terms for the people who were involved in it.

Brief, and at times abruptly interrupted, chapters follow one another, segmenting and rendering complex what could have been a simple, linear account told by a French playwright who created a

play about migrants: eight of them, among the eighty who, after having lived four months on the streets of Paris, illegally turned into a squat a deserted building at 81, Avenue Victor Hugo. Chastanier, however, knows that the play belongs to her just as it belongs to Bamba, Moustafa, Zia, Koné and the others; and that the only way to render justice to their role is to intersperse the narrative with all the other migrants' voices, hence counterbalancing her single point of view and restituting the collective dimension both of the squatting and of migrancy itself.

No linearity can be achieved when all of the events recounted epitomize a broader, and more threatening, system, what Chastanier often calls “the Empire”. Thus, the description of the squat and its dismal surroundings allows the author to denounce the condition of French *banlieues* with their “endemic unemployment, its will to keep an illegal and precarious labor force vital to the functioning of global capitalism” (34); similarly, the endless bureaucratic quibbles migrants encounter in their attempt to obtain a residence permit – how to make a play with illegal actors, without exposing them too much and, at the same time, without depriving them of a legal and equal compensation is one of the core questions of the book, a question in which the political and artistic issues at stake are more profoundly intertwined – represents the chance for Métais-Chastanier to accuse the administration's language of intentional opacity, an opacity the text consciously retains to better reproduce the sort of linguistic difficulties migrants have to face in their host country.

As the staging of the play proceeds and the narration accordingly unfurls, Barbara Métais-Chastanier further acknowledges her own status as a “dominant”, as a privileged white woman raised in a system that has made her life easier. Along with the genres of the quasi-journalistic reportage and of the critical essay, *Chroniques des Invisibles* also embraces the traits of an intellectual coming-of-age story: “I used to see the discrimination, but not the supremacy. I used to see the stigmati

Having always positioned herself within the oppressed – a white, lesbian, intellectual from a working-class background –, she now recognizes herself in the party of the oppressors. Yet, she knows the fresh danger courted by her newly acquired position – the “good” oppressor who has repented and paternalistically glances down at migrants – and manages to distance herself from the constricting dichotomy of a colonial/post-colonial framework, never letting her voice overpower the migrants' voices and resisting paternalism.

This imbrication of genres and voices successfully defies an unequivocal positioning or interpretation of the book, which can be more easily defined in negative, rather than in positive terms. Indeed, Chastanier's book certainly does not belong either to the well-established Francophone literary production – whose presence is now gaining visibility even in the global landscape, as a result of the increasing number of translations – or to the social sciences, the original disciplinary home of migration studies; it resists attempts to reduce it to a particular form by blending literary techniques with ethnographic observations, aesthetic concerns with political statements.

Chroniques des Invisibles ends up embodying French Global Studies' aspiration to find innovative literary modes that complicate our understanding of migration's dynamics and its political and intellectual implications in a post-post colonial regime, becoming a valuable and compelling resource not only for readers of fiction, but also for cultural studies and literary scholars.