

Border renegotiation and the quest for safe space in Helon Habila's *Travelers* and Uzodinma Iweala's *Speak no evil*

Divine Ujunwa Okorie

Department of English and Literary Studies
University of Nigeria, Nsukka
onyekadivine4@gmail.com

and

Mary J. N. Okolie

Department of English and Literary Studies
University of Nigeria, Nsukka
mary.okolie@unn.edu.ng

ORCID: 0000-0001-7896-2726

and

Anya Ude Egwu

Department of English and Literary Studies
University of Nigeria, Nsukka
Anya.egwu@unn.edu.ng

Abstract

*The status of border from the late twentieth century looks beyond border as a physical line, but as a social factor which conditions how individuals live in a society. Here, borders become increasingly invisible, socially-oriented and affect the identity of individuals living even in the same territorial zone. The symbolic nature of border significantly makes negotiation and renegotiation (im)possible at the border frontiers. Using border theorizations, this paper interrogates the social borders in Helon Habila's *Travelers* and Iweala's *Speak No Evil* as offshoots of physical*

crossings. The paper investigates the individual character's awareness of these social borders and how this awareness inspires a renegotiation, geared towards adjusting the border formations for accommodations and safe space.

Keywords: *border, border renegotiation, safe space, Habila's travelers and Iweala's speak no evil*

Introduction

The traditional sense of border is hinged on the demarcations that map nations and are fraught with exclusivity. Borders are simplistically defined as physical or tangible manifestations in the form of walls or obvious lines that divide, strike out and unaccommodate, existing in our nations or states as geographical borderlines. Studies on such borders are usually descriptive more than they are analytical. Recent studies on borders assume a rather conceptual and invisible outlook. Thus, border begins a transcending journey where occupancy of different geographic territories discontinues to be the object of interest; rather the focus is turned on the differences between the individual within a symbolic borderline and the individual outside it. What this connotes is that border comes off then as a consciousness that informs the totality of being of a group, such consciousness profound in their definitions of "us" and "them". It is at this point that exclusivity is discussed in its active sense; as the socially constructed stops that arise even within physical territories. This most importantly accounts for the movement of border studies from its geographic domain, as physical maps and walls, to a more symbolic status, where these walls tend to be invisible. The study of border initiates a sort of crossing in itself, where the movement

from its nature to a symbolic state has already been stated. This in turn initiates an interdisciplinary movement from its primary field in geography, “drawing together sociologists, anthropologists, historians, economists, international lawyers, philosophers and political scientists” (Newman 145).

The novel nature of border studies allows for an inclusion of social formations such as class, gender, sex, race, sexualities and religion. Such borders are only perceptible in our daily lives, labelled by likes and dislikes, normal and abnormal, accepted and unaccepted, self and others. At this level, the need for crossing becomes expedient due to the performative and definitive function of border as against its traditional nature of being merely descriptive. This demonstrates the nature of borders as “precisely traces”, steep in ambivalence, corresponding with Johan Schimanski’s assertion of borders as “zones of instability” (Schimanski 9). Hence, the symbolic border makes negotiation and renegotiation possible, so that the border crosser continually nudges at the walls, engaging squarely with the formators, for the purpose of crossing.

Crossing in different shades is an easy or vigorous activity. In the latter case, crossers invariably emerge bruised, maimed, bearing an indelible “scar”. Border crossing, or the attempt of it, is usually embraced with a sense of insecurity on the part of the border agents. This births the need for the crossings to be controlled, and the border to be securitized, so that the border crosser is only allowed as much space as the agent could yield. Where the crosser vigorously makes a return to the border, a purpose or quest underlies their journey. It is in this light that this paper examines border in its symbolic status, replete with interrogations, and sees these interrogations not as innocent, but as

a necessity for the character's quest for safe space. Safe space here is interpreted as the state of being where a successful crossing of the symbolic border accrues to the acquisition of comfort. Safe space extends beyond the physicality of shelters; it is a zone (abstract and material) where the characters' desires and safety are uncompromisingly accomplished. Such desire for identity and safety marks the journeys of both the compromising and transgressive characters in Habila's *Travelers* and Iweala's *Speak No Evil*.

Habila's *Travelers* dwells on the active migration of characters from their homes in Africa as a result of political crisis, religious hostilities, and the consequent pursuit of comfort and homeliness in the new settlement. The novel, since publication, has been scholarly acclaimed, as it reflects the vagaries of experiences of the migrants in the Berlin refugee crisis of 2013/2014, an event in which the author directly engaged the victims in form of interview and interrogations. Its focus on migration is illustrated especially in Solomon Olaniyo's analysis which emphasizes the fancy Africans have for migration. He sees migration as a form of departure that is total and un contemplated, capturing how pervasive the tendency to migrate is for Africans. This tendency he sees as hodophilic, explaining the fondness Africans have for travelling, as he thinks that the Africans in the text nurture a notorious desire to leave home. Abigail Onaikheno and Sandra Egbunike share a similar idea with Jonas Akung and Nathaniel Ojima, in tracing migration to be an impact of globalization, found in the constancy of "movement of people", which defines migration as "a common trait of humanity" (Onaikheno and Egbunike 335; Akung and Ojima 2). These scholars, however, converge in their view that the characters in Habila's *Travelers* are

motivated to make an outward journey, where the reasons are usually stated, such as “certain influences that have made the cultural milieu uninhabitable” and other perceptible factors namely economic collapse, political instability, corruption...and unfulfilled life (Olaniyo 70; Ordue and Tayo 539).

Iweala in *Speak No Evil* explores the intricacies surrounding identity complexity, by interrogating queerness and black identity. This is why, for Andray Domise, identity is a multi-layered history that involves the character’s struggle with “religious homophobia”, “pressures of religious hegemony” and the “historical atrocities”. This is so that the character, Niru, does not suffer singly as a queer person, but doubly as a black teenager. The multiplicity and complexity of identity is so that the character can “barely get behind the wheels of his car without a police cruiser materializing in the rear-view mirror”. Yet, Niru acts in ignorance of this complexity, and this ignorance, for Ayobami Onanuga and Paul Onanuga, culminates in a struggle which makes the character “a victim of racial discrimination and police brutality” (179). Osinubi adds that “Niru struggles with his sexuality, with white privilege, with the racial profiling from traffic police and with estrangement from his immigrant parents” (83). These layers of struggles imbue the character with perplexity, and the chief of all is the character’s confrontation with his sexuality.

Following its entrance into the humanities, border studies is renamed as border poetics. Schimanski submits that border poetics is “any approach to texts which connects borders on the levels of the “histoire”, the world the text presents to the reader, and the “recit” of the text itself, a weave of rhetorical figures and narrative structures”. Consequently, border poetics is interested in two kinds of spaces: “the presented space” the world presented in the text,

and “space of presentation”, the text itself as a presented space (Schimanski “Crossing” 51). Okolie captures the meaning of border poetics as the “intervention of arts and culture in the study of the border” (“Historicising Border” 1), and Melania Gallego posits that this “poetics of encounters provides a set of strategies for analysing and identifying meaning and the processes of border making and border permeability in contemporary societies through aesthetic forms” (“Border Poetics” 134). The theory explores the processual form of borders, how borders are constructed amidst cultural forms, and transiting from border lines to borderscapes (Schimanski and Wolfe “Cultural Productions” 43; Schimanski “What is a Border Figure?”). Focus is on border agents, in this case involving both the border crosser and border formator, as they are actively engaged in remapping boundaries.

The interest of contemporary border scholars is on how borders affect the lives of individuals. Thus, interrogation of border has more to do with identity, mediality, ethics and gender than it has to do with fixed phenomena (Schimanski and Wolfe “Entry Points” 1 & 14). Erasing the rigidity of borders progresses the field to a study of the processes of border-making, or bordering. Newman considers this bordering process as a dynamic one that determines the level of exclusivity and inclusivity at the borderlands and reflects the intersocietal difference, especially with the “us/them, here/there, inside/outside” demarcation. Hence, this process ultimately leads us to see borders as socially constructed, as well as managed by societal managers (Newman “Borders and Bordering” 172 & 175). Gloria Anzaldúa describes these societal managers as those who are privileged to say “Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot” (*Borderland/La Frontera* 3-4).

Contemporary border scholars have accentuated this relationship the border has with identity. Okolie, following from Schimanski's presented border plane – topographical, symbolic, textual, epistemological and textual borders – examines the entanglement that proceeds from these planes, how they lead to “boundary formation” and “identity negotiation with regards to different territories and spaces of belonging (“Historicising Border” 11). The individual at the borderland is involved in the dual processes of “debordering and rebordering”, where debordering refers to the “deemphasising of already existing borders, a decline or rejection of classifications or determinants of social structures and stereotypes”. On the other hand, rebordering suggests an inclusion of what has been formerly excluded, or vice versa. (14). Interestingly, both are the processes involved in bordering. Individuals in the borderland are, as a result, not dormant or passive characters, but involve themselves in the active process of crossing or resisting the inhibitions to their crossings. This is so that border is defined by the negotiations and renegotiations that go on across the borderland. Against this backdrop, in examining border renegotiations in Habila's *Travelers* and Iweala's *Speak No Evil*, this paper focuses on the theorizations of border, especially in relation to border formations, resistance and renegotiations of established borders, across social and spatial levels.

Border formations, controls and the characters' awareness of borders in Habila *Travelers* and Iweala's *Speak no evil*

Borders are socially constructed, and in this social nature, they involve a constant interaction between the border crosser and the border manager. The management of borders is an activity carried

out by what Anzaldúa thinks of as the societal managers (*Borderland/La Frontera* 3); those who perpetuate exclusivity and inclusivity by how much discomfort and comfort they allow.

Habila's *Travelers* involves characters who make actual and physical movements from one location to another, exemplified in the narrator's beginning statement "We came to Berlin in the fall of 2012" (Habila 6). By going further to supply that "at first everything was fine", the narrator refers to the delusive comfort attributed to the crosser who anticipates an accommodation at the borderlands, until they encounter the social differences that strike them out. At first, the narrator and his wife, Gina, see a schoolboy who waves at them while shouting "Schocolade! Schocolade!" (6). The boy's voice, according to the narrator is laced with surprise and pleasure. However, what underpins this salutation is the recognition of difference by the boy, and the impulse to point this out, as "Schocolade" is the German term for Chocolate, and is inspired by the narrator and his wife's chocolate skin. This border duty which the boy in the opening chapter performs is fully accentuated by the various presence of the police in the text, especially during the protest where the migrants and protesters are "knocked down" (18). The protest itself embodies a mark of difference, as it indicates the discomfort which the migrants live with, and their need to constantly navigate alienation. Again, by questioning Mark's inhabitation of the old church building, the police reminds him of Mark's unbelongingness and expose the evidence of difference. Thus, in being questioned, the crosser is asked to reaffirm his identity and assert the rightfulness of his presence. Mark, as well as other migrants, cannot live in Berlin without having to constantly state their purpose and prove themselves.

Racial differences underpin the realities of the migrants, such realities include alienation, where skin colour determines the degree of inclusion. Mark in Habila's *Travelers* remarks on this influence of race as a stimulator of difference, especially as the presence of a black man instigates suspicion from the whites. The understanding of the whites about the blacks here is hinged on the idea of the black person's refugee status. This refugee tag describing the black person snowballs to the notion of their criminality, where the whites are typically suspicious of the black man's movement, thus Mark asks "Why...do white people always assume every black person traveling is a refugee?" (27). The implication of this is that the migrant is one whose identity must be checked and whose intentions must be reviewed consistently in order to ascertain their harmlessness. Hence, it is only typical for the woman in Mark's story to hug her bag when Mark is in the vicinity, as well as it is regular for the Penn station policeman's hands to inch "towards the gun at his waist" (28), as the narrator approaches him. In Iweala's *Speak No Evil*, criminalization labelling as the spontaneous response in a black-white encounter underplays OJ's harassment by the police, and even as OJ is exonerated by the testimony of a next-door neighbour, he tells Niru that "I kept my hands visible" (Iweala 18), proving his non-aggression. Consequently, the blacks embody the qualities of the castaway, as Anzaldua puts it, "those who are pushed out of the tribe for being different" (*Borderland/La Frontera* 38).

Racial differences in both texts exist in the form of institutions, perceived as normal and as part of the realities of the migrants. Through racial slurs, the gap between the inhabitants and the migrants becomes widened and escalates with it symbolic walls of exclusion. In *Speak No Evil*, this gap is found in the

objectification of black characters, in their presentation as specimens for the satisfaction of racial curiosity, as Niru records his experiences with his classmates: “Then there was that time one of the girls came up to me after school and asked if she could look down my pants, just a peek you know, to settle a debate they had after sex ed” (Iweala 12). What follows is that Niru conceives the idea of a racially deprecated individual, acknowledging the derogatory differences marking his presence in America, putting him on the defensive, where he walks “around the rest of the day, staring at the floor with my fists clenched” (Iweala 12). In another case, this racial difference leads to repudiation and refusal of comfort, so that even as Niru’s father has achieved a milestone in America, he does not nurture the idea of home in America. The racial boundaries inhibit his crossing in a way that as OJ puts it he feels “hyperactivity, elevated mood, grandiose thinking and increased aggression” when he returns to Nigeria (Iweala 32).

The manifestation of religion as an indication of difference proves the point of borders existing beyond territorial groups and forming the basis of individual, group and inter-group interactions (Newman “Borders and Bordering”; Okolie “Historicizing Border”; Okolie “Adichie’s *Americanah*”). This is so that even amongst people belonging to the same territorial group and racial category, internal differences are implicated. In *Speak No Evil*, Reverend Olumide embodies the character of a border agent who governs the boundaries of religion and morality. By including lesbianism and homosexuality as “all manner of unclean things” (17), the clergy carries out the responsibility of erasing all forms of threat to this social categorization of normal, which posits a division in the novel, where Niru is considered a trespasser who should be purged of his immoral sexuality. Niru’s father also

attunes himself to the status of a disciplinarian. But he is at first stunned by the realization of what homosexuality implicates “in his house”, and so he begins to relate the eccentricities accruing to this difference and considers them an “abomination” (21). Religion thus mingles with morals to form a social boundary for the characters, especially in the limits of what they can do or become.

In *Travelers*, religion provides the condition on which people, and their individual choices, are either included or excluded. Mark’s father, for example, forbids his acting career, as long as it is outside the church. For his father, “it was okay to be an actor in church, but not outside the church” (Habla 31). Consequently, religion serves as a determinant of, as well as an inhibition to, career pursuit and explorations of personal desires in both texts, so that when Niru’s homosexuality is revealed, his father’s disposition towards him is marked by embarrassment and a sense of repudiation. Niru notes the way his father is more receptive of the village boys in Nigeria, and observes that “he thinks they are tough enough to be men, but not me, his own flesh and blood” (Iweala 39). The classification of Niru’s homosexuality as a sin, based on the religious interpretation, contributes to the reinforced cultural and gender boundaries, so that Niru’s father forbids him from participating in the kitchen as he “made it clear he didn’t think boys should spend too much time learning how to bake” (Iweala 70). While religion and patriarchy go hand in hand in *Speak No Evil*, in Habla’s *Travelers*, the implication of religious boundary is that it morphs into racial hostility, presenting itself as a term on which relationship is built, so that for Moussa, as Katharina recounts, “a wife must have her husband’s religion” (88). What this indicates is that religion removes the possibilities of personal preferences, and widens the gap between two races, and even

though Katharina announces that it was less of a problem donning Islamic attire, it is discovered that “religion was not very important to” her (Habla 88). Consequently, religion poses a barrier to comfort and becomes a burden for both Katharina and Moussa, leading to their estrangement and the impossibility of dismantling the migrant-resident boundary.

For the migrants, qualifications and registrations perpetuate an awareness of their difference and act as the necessities for their existence. Thus, the extent of their inclusion into the new space is mostly stipulated by the provision of registration, leading to the idea that they are in a position where they continually assert and reassert their existence. This is so that, for Mark in Habla’s *Travelers*, the expiration of his registration further terminates his student status, as much as it erases his freedom in Berlin, as such he lives only by “squatting with friends in the old church” (Habla 14). Attaining membership here is based on the qualification of the border crosser to possess the registration. Hence, their acceptance is hinged on temporarity, and prone to expiration. This character of qualification and registration as border markers highlight the social insecurities of the border agent (Lojo-Rodriguez and Pereira-Ares 2), thus the migrants are viewed with the potentiality of erupting threat to the established institutions and must be scrutinized so that for Karim and his children, to go through Greece, they “have to have papers and do registration and fingerprint and so many things” (Habla 101).

In a similar function, refugee camps manifest as border formation in Habla’s *Travelers*, as well as a point where their acceptance is either guaranteed or denied, embodying the exclusionary and inclusionary tendencies that characterize the borderland. As the narrator describes, it is thus “where asylum

seekers were kept pending the result of their asylum application” (23). The camp serves as a check to the migrant, shaping the realities of their unhomeliness. This is why for Hannah, obtaining a place in Berlin registers her full belonging and existence (Habla 57), one which the refugee camp has denied her. In effect, the refugee camp suggests the possibility of the border crosser being turned back even though the physical crossing is markedly successful.

For Okolie, borders are performative, in that the human person facing the border is subjected to constant negotiation of places and spaces essentially for survival (“Adichie’s *Americanah*” 4). As a result, being aware of the border imbues the crosser with the determination to either resist or compromise their identity in order to traverse the border planes. This corresponds with Newman’s idea that “if a border exists, there is always someone who wants to cross it to get to the other side” (“Borders and Bordering” 178). While the characters are aware of the border and how it impacts their daily lives and relationships, this paper identifies this awareness and the response to it as negotiation, and in the following section, it will investigate the several attempts of these characters at crossing as border renegotiation in the form of resistance and compromise (see Okolie “Historicising Border”).

Border renegotiation and the quest for safe space

Borders are imbued with the idea of difference and the potential for the acceptance or rejection of the crosser. Yet, it is this idea of acceptance or rejection that breeds the urgency for renegotiation, this is especially, as the character’s point of origin is markedly characterized by discomfort. Consequently, the characters are further convinced of their need to “leave home” in order to, as

Anzaldua puts it, “find [themselves], find [their] intrinsic nature buried under the personality that has been imposed on [them]” (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 16). In Habila’s *Travelers* and Iweala’s *Speak No Evil*, the characters, who are faced with the notion of their difference upon encountering the border, exhibit palpable acts of renegotiation by ways of shifting the borders and seeking accommodation (Schimanski “Crossing”; Okolie “Historicising Border”). These characters’ renegotiations are categorised in terms of their confrontation of the border, namely by ways of language, compromise, affiliation, and transgressions.

(a) **Renegotiation by language**

The significance of language is in the way it captures the extent of a character’s resistance and their intentionality towards renegotiation. In Iweala’s *Speak No Evil*, the revelation of Niru’s homosexuality mounts tension in the family, given the epistemological transition from the lack of knowledge to full awareness. This knowledge activates further hysteria which includes the condemnation of Niru’s sexuality and the suggestion for cleansing. However, Niru turns back against these instituted patterns geared toward returning him to normalcy. By insisting and asking “What if I don’t need help?” (30), Niru questions the idea that his sexuality could produce changes that would make him less of himself so he does not think the cleansing is necessary. The cleansing here serves as a barrier, a marker that distinguishes Niru from the rest of his family. By rejecting this, he becomes what Anzaldua describes as a rebel “who refuses to take orders from outside authorities” in the way he forms the language of resistance, pointing to his discomfort with the idea of being helped. Thus, he reasserts “I’m perfectly capable of deciding for myself” (Iweala

30). What this means is that he pushes back the realities of his difference and continues to cling to normalness, even as the border keeps tossing him back.

In Habila's *Travelers*, language manifests as a tool for establishing presence. Upon hearing Karim's story, the narrator wonders:

Did he perhaps in some little corner of that recollected room etch his name in the wall: Karim was here'? Why do people do that only in places of bitterness and suffering and sweat: prisons, locker rooms grimy toilets; but never in fancy hotels or restaurants or churches? (Habila 104)

Such etchings conceived by the narrator are similar to those found in the refugee camps: "*No to Borders! No to Illegal Detention! Asylum is a right!*" (Habila 36). At first, the border between acceptance and rejection of refugees is established at this point, where for the migrants what encapsulates their reality is the vulnerability to detention and victimization. The use of language in the form of these writings above also makes obvious the migrants' utter rejection of their status, so that by etching their names and desires on the walls, they express their disgust of their situation. Therefore, through the writings, they let out a "cry against extinction"; the writings become a reminder of their denigration, and they are more imbued with a "courage born of desperation" (Anzaldúa 11).

(b) Renegotiation by transgression and confrontation

Border encounters in many cases are driven towards transgression and the upsetting of the status quo (Anzaldúa *Borderland/La*

Frontera; Schimanski “Crossing” 52; Newman and Ansi Paasi “Fences and Neighbours in a Postmodern World” 188). While borders exist for their crossings, the individual at the frontier is usually confronted with the difficult choice of an inclination towards disruption of convention in the way of resistance against palpable differences.

In Habila’s *Travelers*, Lorelle’s insistence on Mark’s freedom and her opposition to his refugee identity goes beyond the mere delusive denial of migrant realities. Lorelle disputes the social classification of the refugees which puts Mark at a disadvantage, and for her, seeking asylum is not an option because “Well, he is not a refugee. He is a student” (Habila 22). Therefore, Mark is entitled to a visa extension without going down the rigorous route of re-adopting a refugee identity. Lorelle thus ignores the labels of difference and regards Mark equally as she regards all residents in Berlin. In a similar way, Mark’s arrival in Berlin is an upheaval of the societal expectations of child-father loyalty. Mark tells the narrator:

During the holidays, I’d stay with my friends and we’d perform in small theaters and nightclubs and in the streets. We made enough money to live on. I had fun. My mother came to see me and she begged me to come home. But I didn’t go back. When I graduated, I moved to South Africa to stay with my uncle Stanley.... He is a lecturer at a university.... I never went back home again. (Habila 32)

Mark opts to become a prodigal in defiance of his father’s ban on acting and performing outside the religious cycle, and this comes with an utter rejection of home and a conviction of the inhibiting

role of home. This decision to embrace prodigality as a means of achieving personal goals takes a semblance to that of Efuru in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, where she decides to abscond her father's home and go into a marriage with the man of her choice.

Aberration of familial norms and standards by these characters further implicates other instances of transgression. By choosing a career in acting, Mark has already begun upsetting the religious institutions and barriers, an unruliness marked by "the disappointment on my father's face" (Habla 31). Consequently, for Mark, the choice of pursuing an acting career activates further transgressions, including gender transitioning, as Lawyer Julius reveals to the narrator "you know, his real name is Mary" (34). This appropriation of the male gender serves, for Mark, as a way of erasing the temporal borders and eliminating his past, which includes religious and familial inhibitions. Upon arriving in Germany, Mark:

wrote to her uncle a letter, pretending it was from her friend. The letter said Mary had died in an accident, and that the body had been cremated because nobody came to claim it. She signed the letter 'Mark'. That was the day Mary died. (Habla 40)

In order to live and explore the present, Mark severs all forms of relationship with the haunting past, so that instead of nostalgia, he mimics, and makes a caricature of, his father on the pulpit preaching. He revolts by attacking the religious patterns which counters his existence at home and stripping off the gender on which this barrier has been targeted. Again, this

gender swap is his only way of living his dreams, as the narrator describes Mary (Mark): “Mary Chinomba. A preacher’s daughter who loved to dress in drag, who loved to perform male roles onstage, who wasn’t interested in the nice boys nudged in her direction by her parents” (Habila 40).

In Iweala’s *Speak No Evil*, prodigality is prominent in the way it pushes for the actualization of individual dreams. Damien’s dancing career is forbidden by his father because “his father wants him to join the Navy, wanted him to go to the Naval Academy, or at least to do ROTC” (Iweala 64). Thus, Damien’s movement to New York transgresses the expected child-father loyalty because he “wants to dance”. Furthermore, just like Mark, Damien’s crossing to New York marks the journey towards the materialization of a desire more than his fancy for dancing. It is in New York that he fully expresses his homosexuality. Thus, New York becomes his means of dismantling the status quo in his society, and a gateway for self-expression. This replicates itself in the character of Niru when he leaves his father on the parkway and flees. According to him, “I left my Dad on the GW Parkway, ran away from him, from all that, I can’t take it anymore, it’s crushing me, it’s too confusing for me to live all these lives when I only want one” (Iweala 84). Departure from home becomes for these characters a departure from border restrictions and marks a journey towards self-fulfilment.

Consequently, these characters begin to disbelieve the idea of home as a fortress. In Habila’s *Travelers*, Moussa feels irritated about home, so that, as Portia relates, only one year after his return to Africa, he takes off again. Portia, hence, wonders: “It is as if

some homing device, focused towards Europe, is implanted in their brains and it never stops humming till their feet are on European soil” (Habila 63). Moussa does not mind the possibility of his becoming a refugee, because in Europe, “they must feel relief”. Rather, he finds in home an obstruction to an unnamed desire, such is the nature of male migrants in many contemporary African migration literature, as is evident in the character of Obinze in Adichie’s *Americanah*. Obinze and Moussa share the same fascination for Europe and regard their home countries with repulsion, thus deconstructing the idea of home as a comfort zone.

Transgression highlights the conflict between the crosser and the power structures, that is those who perpetuate the lines of separation (Newman “The Lines” 147). Transgression becomes more inclined towards an obvious upending of institutions and social formations in a way that could lead to the alienation of the character from the social definition of home. However, in the case where the crosser is ridden of the chance in which their resistance could thrive, such characters attempt a renegotiation by manipulation, cutting the corners of the border or lobbying their way across the border.

(c) Renegotiation by compromise

At the confrontation with the impossibilities of crossing, the border crosser may turn to survival tactics that people caught between the worlds unknowingly cultivate, including the decision for compliance and conformity, especially in the process of becoming (Anzaldúa 39; Okolie “Adichie’s *Americanah*” 7; Okolie “Historicising Border”). The characters here are entangled in the futility of their resistance in negotiating for space at the border. This triggers the tendency towards compromise against their

renegotiation by transgressions and resistance. The individual embraces their difference as well as begins to seek acceptance through manipulation of the border figures and agents.

Manipulation is informed in the way the characters resort to the object of their distinction, weaponizing their rejection and “conform[ing] to the values of the culture.” For Niru, in Iweala’s *Speak No Evil*, he ignores the offensiveness of racial slur which sexualizes the relationship he shares with Ms. McConnell and laughs when his classmates’ joke “about Ms. McConnell keeping me after class because she wants some of that big black cock”. Beyond his embracement of the racial slurs, Niru is entangled in a society that expects his masculinity at all cost, so that he “laugh and talk about fucking her too” (Iweala 47). To achieve acceptance, and become included in what his father would regard as less abomination, Niru denies the realities of his homosexuality, which is hinged on his lack of attraction for the opposite gender as is obvious in his relationship with Meredith. Rather, he gravitates towards the external, agreeing to want “more than anything to be normal”. The sense of normal serves as a burden for Niru and prepares him for the identity appropriation (see Okolie “Adichie’s *Americanah*”) witnessed in the reversal of desires and his choice to “spend more time around people” because Reverend Olumide “says activity helps to keep untoward thoughts at bay” (Iweala 50). Thus, conformity is followed by grooming, a reforming of the self, in order to fit into the demands of the border.

The migrants in Habila’s *Traveler* also progress in their physical migration through manipulation. Manipulation becomes a necessity in their crossing, so that, the migrants prepare themselves for it, in the sense that, for Juma and the rest of his partners “it would make sense to arrive in France with some money to pay the

people smugglers or guides as they preferred to be called, who'd get us to England" (Habila 154). Juma and his partners here acknowledge their condition as illegal migrants, which leads to their difficulty in border crossing.

What follows is that with the inerasability of their illegal status, they devise a means of crossing by admitting their difference and working in destitute conditions in order to earn enough for the pass. For them, the option of resisting the demeaning and harsh reactions of the border agents is displaced. Thus, payment across the border is a reality that they must cling onto, and a means devised out of the lack of choice, as Basma narrates to Matteo, "Our engine was on fire, the captain wanted to turn back, but we begged him to go on. We would rather die in the water than go back" (Habila 129). Basma here reflects the capacity of the migrants in using their helplessness as a defence as well as a push, where they compel the captain, who is capable of denying their crossing, into recognizing the necessity of their movement because "there was nothing to go back to" (129). Therefore, the refugee status ceases to be denied or revolted against but is considered a leverage. For Juma, the resort to hunger strike stands out as a process towards the elicitation of sympathy, and to fully convince the government of the expediency of his onward movement.

(d) Renegotiation by affiliation and association

In seeking a space for belonging, the border crosser, tries to subvert the realities of their differences by forming a community or an association, usually with the inhabitants of the other side of the border. This community of resistance (see Okolie "Adichie's *Americanah*") alleviates strangeness and the anxieties that mark

the fate of the border crosser. In *Travelers*, Portia's feeling of strangeness in Berlin is curbed by the presence of an African man with whom she could fraternize. This strangeness implies that it inhibits Portia's desire to explore the city and this failure fills her with disappointment (Habila 68). However, with the presence of the unnamed African, Portia builds a sense of community and finds no need for exploration. Again, for Portia, her coming to Europe is premised on her search for the truth surrounding her brother, Moussa's, death. Portia is aware of the social difference and so bothers about what she calls "ice breaker", which is a way of reducing the tension between Katharina and her, for the success of an epistemological crossing from curiosity to answers (Habila 59). Thus, Portia attests to the tendency of a failed social or symbolic crossing occasioning a failure in epistemological crossing.

Juma's acquaintance with the narrator towards the end of the book suggests the influence of association and community as expedient in resisting, to a certain degree, the intensity of border expulsion. Liam asks the narrator here, on behalf of Juma, "Can he call you? It'd be lovely for him to have someone to talk to, someone from home" (Habila 144). This relationship is significant in the way it stalls Juma's arrest until The Guardian is ready to give him up. In a sense, Juma's association with The Guardian profoundly shields him from the victimization which pervades the borderlands, hiding him and "moving him from one safe house to another, evading Police and immigration officials" (Habila 142). Juma benefits from the possibilities of community, indicating the difficulty of the border crosser in renegotiating border formations as a lone figure. Thus, the association the crossers form becomes a passageway into their successful crossings.

The acts of renegotiation are basically underpinned by a motive. This prompts the refusal of reality by the crosser and the choice to continually combat with the border formations until they achieve successful crossing. Thus, this study holds that all crossings are, therefore, for the achievement of a purpose and this purpose is termed here, the quest for safe space. In the following subsection, this study will investigate the extent at which the characters achieve this safe space.

Border renegotiation for the quest for safe space

Border renegotiation is usually triggered by a search for reclamation of identity or purpose, or by the search for a new beginning (Okolie and Ukwueze “Women, Agency and the Environment”; Northrop Rachel “Borders on the Line”). The individual’s movement is informed by factors, which are palpably contributing to discomfort.

In Habila’s *Travelers*, this push appears in the form of violence in the home country in which case, characters such as Juma are convinced of an onward movement towards and across the borders and never a return journey. This realization appears in the vehemence of the statement “I said to myself, you are never going back home” (Habila 160), as much as it is found in Mark’s challenge of sexual and gender identities, and so his coming to Berlin is to seek “an alternative way of life” (Habila 15). Portia’s movement to Europe is marked by her search for epistemological satisfaction pertaining to her father and brother’s death. Thus, she seeks a safe space that is hinged on “joy, happiness and wisdom”, especially for her mother (Habila 73). In Iweala’s *Speak No Evil*, from the time of what Niru terms “the Great Revealing” (Iweala 24), Niru embodies the anxiety and what Anzaldúa sees as the

“trembling with fear” of the border crosser, and these influence him in a way that all he desires is to reaffirm his relationship with his father (Iweala 44).

However, the extent of success or failure in the achievement of this safe space is determined by the degree of exclusivity and inclusivity that occurs at the border region (Newman “Borders and Bordering” 172). Hence, safe space can be denied or reaffirmed by way of expulsion or accommodation, respectively. In Habila’s *Travelers*, Mark’s revolution against the denigrative treatment of refugees and migrants is halted, and eventually grinds to a fatal stop, when Lorelle reports his death:

On the third day, when the police got tired of the standoff and threatened to break in and drag them out the migrants soaked their mattresses, beddings and floors in kerosene, they promised to set the building and themselves aflame. Some went to the roof...Mark was there on the roof. I recognized his jacket...I saw him fall, from the roof to the concrete pavement (Habila 40)

Mark’s death at the point of his protestation against borders not only agrees with the idea of renegotiation being a quest for safe space but also points to the manifestation of the failures of this quest, a failure in the form of death. This is evident for Moussa, whose death is a result of the personal conflict, stemming from racial disagreements, between Katharina and him (Habila 89). Death can also be traced in the analysis of Niru’s quest for safe space. The death of Niru in the hands of white police

officers marks his failure in crossing the racial borders, and it is more ironic that it is his association with Meredith that leads to this death (Iweala 94).

For Niru, the differences emanating from his homosexuality are almost erased by his success at the end of high school where his father leans in for cordiality with him once more. “He smiles at me, a full-on I see you smile that must have only ever occupied his face at the moment I was born. He waves at me.... He says congratulations” (Iweala 74). Yet, Niru observes that his father intends to love him by substituting his religious and moral failures with his victory in the high school race so that loving him would mean an erasure of his sexual identity, an identity which portends a significant taint on their relationship. Consequently, Niru is filled with discomfort at this form of love by compromise and stops his father from checking his phone before he bolts away (Iweala 77). While Niru is afforded a safe space eventually, he responds by rejecting as this safe space contravenes his definition of safety, one in which he fully embodies his homosexuality. This rejection translates to his failure at the achievement of a safe space, even in his sexual orientation.

The multiple nature of borders can be considered a factor in the achievement of safe space. This is so that while certain borders may be crossed easily, the individual may face inhibitions, or dissatisfaction, arising from other barriers. Karim in Habila’s *Travelers*, successfully crosses the European borders with his two sons. Yet, this crossing activates a religious border, when Fadel joins the Jehovah Witnesses. While Karim succeeds in acquiring a space in Europe, which is at first the purpose of his journey, his family disintegrates with his wife promising “never to join me in

Germany, if I don't find Fadel" (Habila 108). For Portia, obtaining the truth about her brother's death makes her doubtful about the success of her journey to Basel. This stems from the revelations that occurred concerning her brother, which leaves her more disoriented than satisfied, and she "wondered if it was all worth it" (Habila 90). What follows is that Portia redefines her safe space and deciphers the purposefulness of her journey in her chance meeting with the African man claiming "But this has been worth it. I met you" (Habila 91).

In a reinforced confrontation with the border, characters face inhibitions to their achievements of safe space with the presence of death as the fatal reality of some crossers in Habila's *Travelers* and Iweala's *Speak No Evil*. This especially occurs in the characters encountering the topographically-realized racial borders. In this sense, the more the border crosser renegotiates the border for accommodation, the more the border thickens the walls of exclusivity, thereby lending this safe space an unreachable nature.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that border renegotiations in Habila's *Travelers* and Iweala's *Speak No Evil* are purposed for the quest for safe space. The study also examines the manifestations of border formations and border mapping in the texts, looking into how migrants are met with the notion of difference, in their interactions with the natives of the new space. Habila's *Travelers*, for example, entails a physical movement, where characters such as Juma, Mark, Moussa, Manu and Karim move away from their home countries as a result of civil unrest, religious discomfort and general political disorder which act as push factors for these characters. Crossing in Iweala's *Speak No Evil* is essentially across

the social planes or divides of right and wrong, normal and abnormal, acceptable and abominable. Niru's sexuality initiates tension in his home, where his religious and sanctimonious father considers it an abomination to become homosexual. The discomfort Niru experiences in his home, following the discovery of his sexuality, orchestrates a need for him to attempt a renegotiation of the social and religious divides, and push for his inclusion in the society of his father and Reverend Olumide.

This study examined the various formations and institutions of border in Habila's *Travelers* and Iweala's *Speak No Evil*, and how these formations engineer the acts of renegotiation of the border by the characters. Again, the study demonstrates the degree to which these acts of renegotiation lead to an eventual achievement or loss of safe space. Here, it is agreed that borders have exclusionary and inclusionary potentials, and the extent to which the border either excludes or includes determines the achievement of safe space.

References

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Americanah*. Kachifo Limited. 2013

Akung, Jonas Egudu and Ojima, Nathaniel Sunday. "Scattered Abroad": The Trials of African Migrants in Helon Habila's *Travelers*". *Nairobi Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 5, Issue 2, 2021. pp. 1-14

Anzaldua, Gloria. *Borderland/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books. 1987.

Domise, Andray. "Review: Uzodinma Iweala's *Speak No Evil* falls short of issues it tries to challenge". *The Globe and Mail*. April

- 5, 2018. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/book-reviews/review-uzodinma-iwealas-speak-no-evil-falls-short-of-issues-it-tries-to-challenge/article3835586866/>. Accessed on August 15, 2024.
- Habila, Helon. *Travelers*. W. W. Norton & Company. 2019. PDF
- Iweala, Uzodimma. *Speak No Evil*. John Murray. 2018. PDF.
- Johansen, Catherine. "Border Theory: A New Point of Access into Literature, a Border Theoretical Reading of China Mieville's *Un Lun Dum*, *The City and the City* and *Embassy Town*". The Arctic University of Norway. 2018.
- Lojo-Rodriguez, Laura and Pereira-Ares, Noemi. "Introduction: Border Politics and Refugee Narratives in Contemporary Literature". *Humanities*, Vol. 13, No. 74, 2024. pp. 2-6.
- Mellania, Terrazas Gallego. "Border Poetics: Gender, Essayism and Border Crossing in Sinéad Gleeson's *Constellations: Reflections from Life*". *Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies*, Vol. 66. 2022. pp. 131-149. DOI 10.26754/ojs_misc/mj.20227358.
- Newman, David. "Borders and Bordering: Towards an Interdisciplinary Dialogue". *European Journal of Social Theory*, Vol. 9, No. 2. 2006. pp. 171-186.

---. "The Lines that continue to separate us: borders in our 'borderless' world". *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 30. No. 2. 2006. pp. 143-161.

Newman, David and Paasi, Ansi. "Fences and Neighbours in the postmodern world: boundary narratives in political geography". *Progress in Human Geography*. Vol. 22, No. 2. 1998. pp. 186-207.

Nwapa, Flora. *Efuru*. Heinemann Educational Books. 1966.

Oaikhena, Abigail and Egbunike, Sandra. "Translocation and Migrants' Lived-in Experiences: A Literary Discourse on Select Novels". *UJAH*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2023. pp. 334-356.

Okolie, Mary J. N. "Adichie's *Americanah*, Transnational Border and the Prospects for Identity Reformation". *Journal of Borderland Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2, 2022. pp. 1-15.

---. "Historicising Border: Studies in Nigerian Novels". PhD Thesis, U of Stellenbosch, December 2019.

Okolie, Mary J. N. and Ukwueze, Ogochukwu. "Ecobordering: Women, Agency and the Environment in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* and Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow*". *MATATU*, Vol. 54, 2023. pp. 204-224.

Olaniyan, Solomon Olusanya. "Migritudinal Temper in Helon Habila's *Travelers*". *Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies*, Vol. 30, 2020. pp. 68-83.

- Onanuga, Ayobami Olajumoke and Onanuga, Paul Ayodele. "Transnational Mobilities in Search of Refuge: 'Home', Migration and the Queer in Nigerian Literature". *African Diaspora*, Vol. 15, 2020. pp. 166-189.
- Ordue, Goldman Alvaan and Tayol, Terhemba Raphael. "Assimilation Experiences of Migrants in Helon Habila's *Travelers*". *Economics, Higher Education and Sustainable Development in 21st Century Africa: A Festschrift in Honour of Professor Ichoku Hycinth Ementa*. Pp. 537-550.
- Osinubi, Adetunji Taiwo. "Sexual Assemblages in African Novels of America". *Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 1, 2019. pp. 82-86.
- Schimanski, Johan. "Border Aesthetics and Cultural Distancing in the Norwegian-Russian Borderscape". *Geopolitics*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2015. pp. 35-55.
- Schimanski, Johan. "Border Aesthetics". *International Lexicon of Aesthetics*. Autumn 2019 Edition. DOI: 10.7413/18258630068.
- . "Crossing and Reading: Notes towards a Theory and a Method". *Nordlit*, Vol. 19. 2006. pp. 41-63.
- . "Reading from the Border". *The Future of Literary Studies*. Ed. Jakob Lothe. Novus. 2017. pp. 61-71.

---. "What is a Border Figure?". *Border Culture EUBORDERSCAPES*. 2016.

Schimanski, Johan and Wolfe, Stephen. "Cultural Productions and Negotiations of Borders: Introduction to the Dossier". *Journal of Borderland Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1. 2010. pp. 38-49.

---. "Entry Points: An Introduction" *Border Poetics De-limited*. Ed. Johan Schimanski and Stephen Wolfe. Wehrhahn Verlag. 2007.

Divine Ujunwa Okorie, Mary J. N. Okolie and Anya Ede Ugwu are lecturers in the Department of English and Literary Studies., University of Nigeria, Nsukka.