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LITERATURE, AND CULTURE

Afro-European Mobilities in Francophone African Literatures

Anna-Leena Toivanen

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Anna-Leena Toivanen

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Joensuu, Finland

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

THE MOBILITIES TURN AND POSTCOLONIAL LITERARY STUDIES

Ken Bugul's *Le Trio bleu* (2022) could be defined as a migration novel, the story of an African migrant in Europe and his disillusioned homecoming. This migration novel goes mobile in a very tangible way: instead of alluding merely in passing to displacements between places or leaving them unrepresented, *Le Trio bleu* features portrayals of maritime travel, flying, and journeys by public transport, and of places of transit such as detention centers, airports, and hotels. These contribute to the construction of the protagonist's multiple mobile subjectivities and link migration to other macro- and micro-scale mobilities. Texts such as Bugul's novel tell stories about global and local mobilities, inviting us to see their diversity and relationality but also to perceive the value of mobility as a literary category that deserves to be taken seriously.

In comparison to the diversity of forms, scales, and practices of mobility to which literary works such as *Le Trio bleu* draw attention, the understanding of "mobility" in postcolonial literary studies remains surprisingly limited. When a postcolonial literary studies scholar uses the term "mobility", they most often talk about migration, understood as a condition resulting from transnational displacement and one that implies symbolic articulations of mobility such as transculturation and hybridity. Here,

“mobility” becomes a broad, abstract backdrop that is not really subjected to study, or it is used as a metaphor for the migrant experience. Only rarely is it understood as a subject of inquiry in its own right, and its material dimensions—the embodied experience of being on the move or immobile; the technologies and infrastructures that enable or disable mobility—become overshadowed by the metaphorical meanings. This sort of understanding also fails to see migration as one particular (macro-scale) form of mobility that is related to several others (e.g., tourism, educational or work-related travel) and as one that also entails specific mobility practices (e.g., automobility, pedestrianism, air travel). In order not to take postcolonial literary mobilities for granted by reducing them to something vaguely abstract and/or merely symbolic, this study endeavors to highlight the need to bring the field into closer dialogue with mobility studies, a framework concentrating on “the study of various complex systems, assemblages and practices of mobility” (Sheller 2014, 45). Mobilities research benefits from the dialogue with postcolonial literary studies not only through its understanding of the ways in which the colonial *longue durée* shapes contemporary mobilities but also through its emphasis on the role played by cultural representations in making sense of mobilities.

In their highly influential article of 2006, Mimi Sheller and John Urry have conceptualized and named a new interdisciplinary paradigm that is centered around mobility. According to Sheller and Urry, the New Mobilities Paradigm (NMP) challenges sedentarist theories that “treat[...] as normal stability, meaning, and place, and treat[...] as abnormal distance, change, and placelessness” (2006, 208). The New Mobilities Paradigm also moves away from previous celebrations of deterritorialization and nomadism, and places mobilities in social and cultural contexts of power (Sheller and Urry 2006, 210). The late 2010s and the 2020s have witnessed an increasing interest across the humanities in the New Mobilities Paradigm. Consequently, we have begun talking about the “humanities turn in mobilities” (Merriman and Pearce 2017; Aguiar et al. 2019; Biasiori et al. 2023) and the “mobility humanities” (Kim et al. 2019, 100). The aim of this present study is to contribute to this relatively new and growing interdisciplinary framework of mobility humanities from the perspective of postcolonial literary mobilities, with a specific focus on Francophone African literatures. In so doing, I argue for the benefits of enhancing dialogue between mobilities research and postcolonial literary studies generally (see also Toivanen 2021a, 16), and between mobilities research and African literary studies more specifically (Toivanen and

Pfalzgraf 2024, 1). Following the key tenets of the New Mobilities Paradigm (Sheller and Urry 2006; Hannam et al. 2006), the mobility humanities place mobilities at the center of analysis through a focus on the mobilities of people, objects, and ideas. Mobility studies in general, and the mobility humanities in particular, do not “celebrate” mobility or invest it with predefined meanings but explore the ways in which “mobilities have been given meaning within contexts of social and cultural power” (Cresswell 2006, 2; see also Sheller and Urry 2006, 211; Cresswell 2010, 21; Merriman 2012, 4–5). In terms of physical human mobility, which is the focus of this book, mobility studies is interested in the diverse, relational forms and scales of mobility, ranging from global, macro-scale mobilities to the embodied, everyday mobility practices across diverse cultural, social, and historical contexts (Sheller and Urry 2006, 212; Cresswell 2010, 18; Kellerman 2012, 5). Immobility, as the unavoidable underside of mobility (Matereke 2016, 114), is equally relational, modal, and scalar (Bissell and Fuller 2010, 6; Salazar 2021, 11), and in mobility studies its importance is equal to that of mobility. In effect, as Hager Ben Driss writes, the parentheses in the frequently used formulation (im)mobility are “not only a typographical device to foreground immobility, but also a mode to underscore the inseparability of the two terms both visually and phonetically” (2021, x).

Mobility studies is frequently associated with sociology and human geography but the humanities have contributed significantly to the formation of the field. Humanities scholars, of course, explored mobility-related phenomena well before the discursive naming of the mobilities turn and the New Mobilities Paradigm: fields such as postcolonial studies or travel writing studies are cases in point (Aguiar et al. 2019, 17–19). The genealogy of mobility studies is, in effect, firmly rooted in the humanities (Merriman and Pearce 2017, 494–496; Aguiar et al. 2019, 4–7). It is therefore important to acknowledge that “the NMP-inflicted ‘mobilities’ does not own the copyright of ‘mobility’” (Pearce 2020, 77) and to ensure that mobilities research and the NMP do not “overshadow the much longer history of academic engagements with practices of mobility” (Merriman 2012, 13). This said, I agree with Marian Aguilar, Charlotte Mathieson, and Lynne Pearce (2019, 7) when they write that “text-based scholarship has much to gain from a dedicated engagement with the work of the geographers and sociologists” who have contributed to the NMP.

The New Mobilities Paradigm is obviously no longer particularly new. As I have been presenting my research at different venues over the years,

some fellow postcolonial literary scholars have questioned the “newness” of the mobilities perspective, suggesting that there was not much new left to explore in postcolonial mobilities that postcolonial scholarship had not done already. James Faulconbridge and Allison Hui state that the first decade of NMP-inspired mobility studies was marked by a struggle to “justify[...] and emphasiz[e] the importance of mobilities research as a field” in social sciences (2016, 8). My experiences as a literary mobility studies scholar working in postcolonial studies resonate with this observation: the newness of the mobilities perspective is not always that clear to postcolonial literary scholars. This is certainly related to the fact that postcolonial scholarship has always been interested in processes that involve mobility and have been enabled by it—colonialism, the transatlantic slave trade, global migrations, and the social and cultural transformations that they have engendered. However, the main difference between postcolonial studies and mobilities studies approaches to such inherently mobile phenomena is that, while postcolonial studies views them as consequences of mobility, the mobilities perspective foregrounds their genuinely kinetic¹ aspects. In the words of Aguiar, Mathieson, and Pearce, compared to fields such as postcolonial and diaspora studies, mobilities research has “brought sharpened attention to *movement itself* as an object of study, rather than the outcomes of movement” (2019, 19, original emphasis; see also Toivanen 2021a, 1, 5). Because of this shift of focus from the outcomes of mobility to mobility itself, the mobilities perspective can definitively open up some of the venues that have been rather less explored in postcolonial literary studies and related fields. While individual scholars in postcolonial, migration, and diaspora studies have undeniably made an “immense contribution [...] in preparing the ground for mobility to become an object of study in its own right” (Merriman and Pearce 2017, 495), to claim that mobilities was “an already established field of research” in the humanities prior to mobility studies and the NMP (Ben Driss 2021, xii) is to miss the point regarding the difference between exploring phenomena as the *consequences* of mobility and seeing mobility *itself*—together with its plurality and relationality—as a valuable object of interest. In short, it can be said that the NMP turned the previously “fragmented and often abstract concern with mobile life” into an integral and multidimensional subject of scientific inquiry (Adey et al. 2014a, 2–3).

¹I use the term “kinetic” to refer to physical motion.

In addition to the premise of placing mobility itself at the center of analysis, the novelty of the NMP lies in its capacity to “attend to the *entanglement* of mobilities of all scales and registers in our daily lives” (Aguiar et al. 2019, 26; original emphasis), that is, to consider “a diverse array of forms of movement across scales ranging from the body [...] to the globe” (Cresswell 2010, 18). In short, one of the key contributions of the mobility studies framework is the understanding of mobilities as plural and relational (Adey 2010; Urry 2007). Writing in the context of Francophone women’s transnational writing, Kate Averis and Isabel Hollis-Touré touch upon this idea when they argue that there is “clear convergence between categories of movement” (2016, 4)—“the exile is traveller, is migrant, is expatriate, is nomad” (2016, 7). Averis and Hollis-Touré do not explicitly engage with the New Mobilities Paradigm, in addition to which their argument largely revolves around the habitual macro-scale transnational, long-distance, non-daily displacements (Kellerman 2012, 1) that postcolonial scholarship has always prioritized over embodied and everyday mobilities. In similar vein, a more recent study by Robert Spencer and Anastasia Valassopoulos (2021), subtitled as *New Issues and Directions in Postcolonial Studies*, features a chapter entitled “Mobility”. Apart from a single study by Mimi Sheller, the NMP and mobility studies is largely absent from the chapter and its bibliography. Moreover, the focus is, again, on migration as a macro-scale phenomenon and as an outcome of mobility, although some parts of the chapter do adopt more varied understandings of mobility. While not necessarily engaging in a very extensive dialogue with mobility studies and the NMP, these examples of postcolonial studies scholars acknowledging the relationality, plurality, and tangibility of mobilities are in many ways in line with some of the key premises of mobilities research and point toward new directions for studying mobilities in postcolonial and transnational literatures.

The novelty of an approach that (1) focuses on mobility per se and (2) understands mobilities as plural and relational becomes clear when considering it in the context of postcolonial literary studies and other similar fields that are interested in such mobility-related phenomena as transculturation, diasporic formations, and migration. As mentioned, postcolonial literary studies pays attention to mobile phenomena in a way that places the focus on the outcomes of mobility rather than mobility itself. In this process, “mobility” becomes not much more than a substitute for migration (Toivanen 2021a, 1–2)—similar observations have also been made by

scholars engaged in mobilities research and working in fields such as African studies (Thomsen et al. 2021, 5; Englert 2023, 128) and diaspora studies (Kleist 2019, 72). Equating mobility with migration is problematic because “not all mobile people are migrants and not all those who are labeled migrants are mobile” (Salazar 2021, 7).² In addition, it must be remembered that not everything about migration is automatically or primarily about mobility. Closely related to the reductive understanding of mobility as a synonym for migration is what Allison Hui (2016, 75) refers to as migrant exceptionalism, a feature that characterizes migration studies but often also mobilities perspectives on migration. Migrant exceptionalism, as Hui explains, pertains to “the assumption that migrants are extraordinary mobile subjects, discrete from other (concurrent) subject positions” (2016, 75). Migrant exceptionalism causes the plurality and relationality of mobilities to become overshadowed. This is very much the situation in postcolonial literary studies and it is also the reason why this book takes the plurality and relationality of mobilities as its starting point in order to move beyond the homogenizing figure of the migrant. While the mobility practices and categories of mobility explored in this study often overlap or are congruent with migration, migration is not, so to speak, the only story to be told about these mobilities. Mobility is a general human condition across times and geographical contexts (Sheller 2014, 48); the question is how it is to be placed at the center of analysis.

In literary studies, another problem that comes with the understanding of mobility as a mere “constituent of larger social processes” (Faulconbridge and Hui 2016, 3), instead of seeing it as “an interaction, phenomenon, and process in its own right” (Schimkowsky et al. 2025, 4), is metaphorization. To continue with the figure of the migrant, an example of metaphorization is to see “the migrant condition” as always already mobile so that processes of symbolic movement such as transculturation come to stand for mobility itself. Such metaphorization leads to the loss of the analytical power and theoretical specificity of a concept (Kovach et al. 2022, 6). As for the relationship between tangible mobility practices and more symbolic movements, Stephen Greenblatt (2010, 250) argues that it is necessary to study the material aspects of mobility in order to understand metaphorical movements. Moreover, as Hannah Grayson (2018,

²Whether a migrant is mobile or not depends on how mobility is defined. If mobility is understood as embodied, everyday and micro-scale displacements, most humans, migrants or not, are somehow mobile.

514) emphasizes, “the metaphorization of physical movement [...] risks neglecting the material conditions which affect and constrain that movement”—this point is particularly relevant when discussing the ways in which unequal power structures or *mobility regimes* obstruct the mobilities of some while enabling those of others (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). Of course, the meanings of tangible and symbolic mobilities overlap in a way that “bridg[es] metaphor and praxis” (Thomsen et al. 2021, 5). However, in order not to lose sight of mobility as a tangible phenomenon, a literary mobility studies analysis should take praxis—that which happens while on the move; how mobility is facilitated, and so on—as its starting point. This concerns the mobilities of humans and objects but also those of ideas: ideas not only move “figuratively” (cf. Gebauer et al. 2024, 13) but also literally, in the sense that they are “driven by personal mobilities [...] or they are enabled and facilitated through textual artefacts [...] or they may be shaped through particular [...] infrastructures” (Kallis 2023, 201). In this sense, while the concept of mobility has “both a literal and a figurative meaning” (Gebauer et al. 2024, 13), the mobilities framework invites us not only to engage with both of these levels but, above all, to commence our exploration of the latter through the former.

As Lynne Pearce observes, literary scholars have been “slow to hop on the mobilities bus” and “engage with the theories, concepts and paradigms developed by mobilities scholars” (2020, 77). According to Pearce (2020, 77), many literary scholars working on mobility-related topics have not necessarily even heard of mobilities research or the NMP. Postcolonial literary studies does not make a difference here. In 2019 Amanda Lagji wrote that “there is not yet a legible field that we might call ‘postcolonial mobility studies’” (2019, 229).³ While it would still seem premature to claim that postcolonial studies and African literary studies would be affected by a mobilities turn in the same manner as they have been marked by the spatial turn, there are clear signs that the mobilities turn has been making its entry into the study of African and Afrodiasporic literatures over the past few years. There are studies on specific mobility practices/systems such as automobility (Opoku-Agyemang 2013; Savonick 2015;

³ Lagji is of course right in her argument about the non-existence of a wholesale mobilities turn in postcolonial studies. However, Lagji does not reference previous postcolonial engagements within the mobilities framework prior to the publication of her article—Lindsey Green Simms’s *Postcolonial Automobility: Car Culture in West Africa* (2017) and Stéphanie Ponsavady’s *Cultural and Literary Representations of the Automobile in French Indochina: A Colonial Roadshow* (2018) are cases in point (see also Upstone 2014; Toivanen 2017).

Green-Simms 2017; Saroukhani 2017; Stork 2022), aeromobility (Kumavie 2021; Toivanen 2023), maritime travel (Remington 2016; Toivanen 2021b), public transport mobilities (Jones 2018; Gibson 2019; Kriegel 2024; Osinubi 2024; Toivanen 2024; Sackl 2025), and pedestrianism (Bastida-Rodríguez 2014; Pfalzgraf 2021; Moji 2022; Motahane 2025). Some studies have adopted a relational approach instead of focusing on one specific mode or system of mobility (Ní Loingsigh 2009; Steiner 2014; Upstone 2014; Toivanen 2021a; García Corte 2021; Englund 2024), while others have concentrated on mobile infrastructures such as roads (Twidle 2017; Coulibaly and Agnessan 2023) or information technologies as enablers of transnational mobility (Uwakweh 2022), or explore the intertwinement of mobility and diasporic formations (Ngulube 2025). Some of these studies explicitly engage with the NMP and the mobilities framework, while others rely on humanities theories of mobility that have already contributed to the study of mobility before the field was named. In both cases, this scholarship contributes to the mobilities turn in African literary studies. This scholarship also approaches African mobilities in a way that moves beyond the conventional macro-level of migratory movements and the outcomes of mobility to the very tangible, material, and embodied experiences of (im)mobility. In so doing, these studies not only take African mobilities “seriously” (Mavhunga et al. 2016, 44) but also respond to Greenblatt’s call to take mobility “in a highly literal sense” (2010, 250). According to Greenblatt,

The physical, infrastructural, and institutional conditions of movement – the available routes; the maps; the vehicles; the relative speed; the controls and costs; the limits on what can be transported; the authorizations required; the inns, relay stations and transfer points; the travel facilitators – are all serious objects of analysis. (2010, 250)

Tim Cresswell, who underlines the importance of representations in the production of the meanings of mobility, argues that in the simplest form, mobility is “the act of moving between locations”, that is, “getting from point A to point B” and that “the content that links A to B” should not be “taken for granted” (2006, 2). According to Cresswell, it was mobility studies that started to “take the actual fact of movement seriously” (2010, 18). I find such calls to take mobilities seriously and not for granted particularly inspiring. I hope that my readings of the texts, some of which have been widely studied, manage to shed light on their kinetic elements

that might have gone under the radar when reading them from a perspective that treats mobility as not much more than “an incidental part of a wider phenomenon” (Faulconbridge and Hui 2016, 4).

READING AFROEUROPEAN MOBILITIES: METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Instead of operating on a macro-level, where embodied mobility is easily lost from sight (Dakkak 2019, 191), or understanding mobility metaphorically, or, again, prioritizing one category of mobility over others, my method for reading mobilities in Francophone African literatures adopts some of the key premises of mobility studies: mobility as an embodied practice that is in itself a valuable object of inquiry and mobilities as plural and relational. In order to keep the focus on mobility, my readings concentrate on portrayals of mobility practices—pedestrianism, running, automobility, air travel, maritime travel, public transport mobilities, dog sledding, etc.—and places of transit or what in mobility studies are referred to as moorings (Hannam et al. 2006, 3), namely, infrastructures that tend to be seen as immobile but that enable mobilities. Such moorings include, e.g., stations, airports, hotels, ports, railways, roads, bridges, streets, and sidewalks. Some infrastructures, such as detention centers, serve to prevent mobility. Modes of transport and mobile infrastructures frame, enable, and regulate the mobilities of the fictional characters and author-narrators. This is the material dimension of mobility to which Greenblatt (2010, 250) refers. I focus on diverse mobility practices and travel by different modes of transport to reflect the multiple and relational dimensions of mobility, rather than limiting my inquiry to one specific mobility practice or system. This approach makes more sense with respect to my focus on specific mobile subjects whose mobilities are not limited to one mode or system of mobility. Given that the research material consists of literary texts, the method also entails paying attention to the narrative strategies that the texts use in their representations of mobility. I elaborate on this dimension in the next part of this chapter, but first I will outline the methodological background of this study.

Mobility practices and the scalar immobilities (Salazar 2021, 11) they entail are set in a wider context. Mobilities cannot be thought of outside temporality and space, and “moving people and objects are agents in the production of time and space” (Cresswell 2006, 4). In mobility studies,

space is understood as dynamic; spaces are “not simply contexts [but] actively produced by the act of moving” (Cresswell and Merriman 2013, 7). In this study, Afro-European mobilities form the *macro-scale context* within which embodied mobility practices are inscribed in a dynamic way. By Afro-European mobilities I refer to the mobilities of African or Afro-diasporic characters or author-narrators that take place between and/or in Africa and Europe. Afro-Europe, then, refers to the context that is produced by the characters’ mobilities and that, in turn, produces their mobilities (see Mavhunga et al. 2016, 44). The Afro-European framing entails not only transcontinental mobilities—mostly from Africa to Europe, but also, in the case of diasporic returnees, in the reverse direction—but also local mobilities that may be either exceptional or repetitive and banal (Binnie et al. 2007, 165).

In addition to being a dynamic geographical context of spatial mobilities, the notion of Afro-Europe implies the historical and present entanglements of the two continents (Brancato 2008; Bekers et al. 2009; Olaussen 2009; Hitchcott and Thomas 2014; Garrido et al. 2020). Colonialism, slave trade, and migratory movements are the key elements of these inherently mobile entanglements. Afro-European mobilities are inscribed in unequal mobility regimes and the “racialization of mobility” (Seiler 2009) or “a racialized politics of mobility” (Nicholson and Sheller 2016, 4). The racialization of mobility, as Cotten Seiler writes, refers to the ways in which “modern practices and institutions of mobility have been and remain highly racialized” (2009, 232). Judith A. Nicholson and Mimi Sheller further underline that “mobility and race have intersected historically, and they intersect today, in unequal relations of power that make mobility racially loaded” (2016, 6). Afro-European mobilities should, in short, be understood as part of the *longue durée* of coloniality: they are not just spatial but are also marked by violent histories of colonial and coerced mobilities (see, e.g., Mavhunga et al. 2016, 44; Cresswell 2016; Kleist 2019). At the same time, while acknowledging this historical weight it is also important to not to reduce African mobile subjects to victims (Nyamnjoh 2013, 659) or as passive users of Western/colonial mobile technologies (Mavhunga et al. 2016, 47).

To focus on Europe unavoidably foregrounds European or Western mobility technologies and infrastructures—even when these are approached from the perspective of African or Afro-diasporic mobile subjects. In a manner that is not entirely unrelated to the Afro-European focus of this study, Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga has criticized the way in

which approaches to African mobilities “privilege western forms and technologies of transportation over African ones (those generated from within without necessarily deferring to or arising from intercourse with the West)” (2011a, 77). Scholarship easily overshadows African mobilities that fall beyond the scope of the colonial paradigm, remaining “silent about *African knowledge production and technology*” (Mavhunga 2011b, 79; original emphasis) and “obscur[ing] much older and complex indigenous cultures and practices of mobility and transportation” (Hart 2020, 2). In addition to acknowledging the existence of historical, non-colonial African mobilities, scholars have underlined the ways in which colonial modes of transport have been appropriated by African users. Scholars in African automobilities in particular have mapped out African automobile subjects’ creative ways of challenging social hierarchies, enabling them to claim agency and navigate situations marked by instability (see, e.g., Hart 2016; Grace 2013; Stasik and Klaeger 2018; Melly 2017). By underlining the agency of African mobile subjects when adopting initially colonial forms of transportation, mobility studies has started to move beyond Western understandings of mobile technologies. My focus on AfroEurope rather than Africa itself necessarily diverts attention from strictly “African mobilities” and approaches the issue somewhat differently from Kudzai Matereke’s (2016, 112) call for an African-focused perspective on mobilities. However, if we are to understand African mobilities as mobile, transnational, and transcontinental also in the sense that they move beyond continental and national borders, the AfroEuropean perspective may be seen as a potential and valid way to proceed. I see the AfroEuropean approach as one that moves beyond the idea of Africa “as a circumscribed geographical entity” (Mabanckou 2011, 87) and that of opposing “African mobilities” and “European mobilities” (Englert 2023, 128). The AfroEuropean perspective highlights the interconnection of “African” and “European” mobilities by indicating the ways in which “African mobilities become constitutive of the world outside them and vice versa” (Mavhunga et al. 2016, 44).

In current scholarship, AfroEurope has become a popular concept for exploring the ways in which the entangled pasts of the two continents inform identity formation. Notions such as AfroEuropean, Afro-European, Afropean, or African European, with their different, nuanced connotations, are used in discussions related to the identities of people of African descent in Europe (see, e.g., Brancato 2008; Hitchcott and Thomas 2014; Garrido et al. 2020; Otele 2021; Hogarth 2023). While my analysis of AfroEuropean

mobilities does not primarily contribute to such discussions on identity, I pay attention to the ways in which Afro-European mobilities shape the meanings of Europe and how they contribute to the formation of specific mobile subjectivities. The transcontinental approach to Afro-European mobilities also enables a move beyond the Hexagon, the most obvious context for studying the mobilities between Francophone Africa and Europe. The transcontinental focus, rather than being a nation-based one, is also useful for observing the changes in the European destinations across different categories of mobility. Furthermore, the transcontinental and transnational approach implied in the notion of Afro-Europe resonates with the way in which the mobile subjects in this study move across diverse geographical locations and spatial borders: these are mobile narratives that rarely stay within the confines of a continent, country, region, or city.

“Afro-European mobilities” denotes a wide geographical and historical context that does not say much about the specific categories of mobility placed under its umbrella. In order to take into account the diversity of Afro-European mobilities, I have outlined five categories of mobility based on frequently recurring mobile subjectivities in Francophone African literatures in the Afro-European context. In addition to the literary texts, the categorization has been inspired by John Urry’s list of “twelve main mobility forms in the contemporary world” (2007, 10) and by the categories of mobile subjects outlined in different mobility studies volumes (e.g., Cresswell and Merriman 2013; Adey et al. 2014b). The categories of mobility are 1) educational mobilities, 2) leisure travel/tourism, 3) diasporic return travel, 4) work-related mobilities, and 5) clandestine migratory mobilities. Under these various categories I explore the embodied (im)mobilities as experienced by student newcomers, leisure travelers, diasporic returnees, workers, and clandestine migrants. The categories are obviously not entirely representative, and they could have been outlined differently. Other relevant categories I have identified include, for instance, mobilities of love and crime. These five categories, however limited, already reflect the diversity of Afro-European mobilities and enable comparison between categories.

What becomes evident in my readings is that these categories are by no means impermeable or self-contained: quite the contrary, they are related and often blend into each other so that a text that has been discussed in one category could also have been placed in one or several others. While I expected this porosity, the consistency with which it runs throughout the chapters was still surprising and attests, in a very concrete way, to the

relationality and multiplicity of mobilities. It should also be emphasized that mobile subjectivities are part of wider systems and assemblages of humans and machines (Hui 2016, 71). This systemic understanding moves beyond the individual mobile subject and highlights the ways in which being mobile is “really about being mobile-with” (Adey 2010, 18). While the systemic, post-humanist dimensions of mobility may be “at odds with [...] literary scholars’ traditional focus on character and psychology” (Pearce 2020, 80), it allows for new insights into the ways in which textual characters, much like human beings, “travel *with* other bodies, technologies and vehicles” (Merriman 2012, 13; original emphasis).

Given the methodological approach outlined above, the selection of the material has been guided by these three elements: (1) the geographical, historical, social, and cultural context of Afroeuropa; (2) the perspective of specific mobile subjectivities as outlined in the five categories of mobility; and (3) portrayals of mobility practices. This three-dimensional framework has enabled me to pay attention to both macro- and micro-level mobilities and reflect on the relationship between space, mobility, and subjectivity. The inclusion of a specific text in the research material has necessitated that the text resonates with all the elements of the three-dimensional framework. The fact that there is macro-level mobility in a text does not automatically mean that it would include portrayals of mobility practices. The texts are rarely “about” a specific mobility practice and the scenes featuring walking or displacements by different modes of transport do not necessarily take much narrative time. My method has therefore been comparative—in a sense, it has been almost a “mobile” one, since I have been moving across a wide set of literary texts. My method is marked by a move away from author-centered approaches, and in many cases, approaches that consider texts as closed entities (see Pearce 2020, 79). Different texts are often put into dialogue with each other in order to obtain a wider picture of the meanings of mobility. While my method does not qualify as distant reading as outlined by Franco Moretti (2013), I would argue, much like Lena Mattheis (2021, 10) in her analysis of translocality in 32 literary texts, that working on 31 texts achieves a more substantial picture of different categories of Afroeuropean mobilities than a focus on, say, two texts per category. If the wide set of material allows for movement between diverse texts within the five categories of mobility, a similar kind of “mobility” informs the temporal contexts and the literary genres covered. The publication years of the texts analyzed range from 1959 to 2023. The historical contexts in which the events are

set mostly fall within this period, although historical novels (Chap. 5) expand the timeframe. The timespan allows for insights into the changes and continuities of Afro-European mobilities across the five categories of mobility. For instance, student narratives become rare in the twenty-first century, whereas narratives of clandestine migratory mobilities become popular – this reflects changes in the macro-level mobilities between Africa and Europe and the mobility regimes that inform them. Return travel, work-related mobilities, and leisure travel, on the other hand, are less tied to specific time periods. It is notable that Paris has started to lose its importance as the geographical focus of Afro-European mobilities, although it should be emphasized that not all mid-twentieth-century narratives are centered around the former colonial metropolis, either (see Chaps. 3 and 5). As to literary genre, there are fictional texts such as novels and short stories but also works of narrative non-fiction such as travelogues. Some texts belong to genres that oscillate between the boundaries of fiction and non-fiction—historical biofiction and (auto)biographical novels are cases in point. Moreover, many of the fictional texts are partly based on the authors’ experiences. This diversity is telling of the importance of the mobility theme across genres in Francophone African literatures. In short, the diversity and relatively wide set of material and also the focus on representations of different, relational mobilities necessitate an approach that is in itself “mobile”. Moreover, if we are to understand the ways in which literature contributes to the production of the meanings of mobility, it is necessary to pay attention to the ways in which mobility may motivate the literary form through narrative strategies.

TOWARD A POETICS OF MOBILITY

Inspired by the mobilities framework, my attention is drawn toward representations of tangible mobility practices and mobile infrastructures. Given that the research material consists of *literary* texts, the question of literary form, or that of literariness, cannot be ignored (see also Toivanen 2021a, 18–20; Toivanen and Pfalzgraf 2024, 5–6; Gebauer et al. 2024, 14). For this reason, the contextually informed analysis of the material, infrastructural, and relational dimensions of mobility results from close reading that also entails paying attention to narrative strategies. As such, my method combines mobility studies with literary text analysis and highlights the contribution of literary studies to making sense of the meanings of mobilities.

Cultural representations such as literature play a pivotal role in producing the meanings of mobility as an embodied practice. Indeed, according to Cresswell, “to understand mobility without recourse to representation on the one hand or the material corporeality on the other, is [...] to miss the point” (2006, 3). Literary texts represent real-world mobilities—but not in a passive way. As Aguiar, Mathieson, and Pearce argue, literary texts are “vital constituents of the ways in which mobility itself is experienced as an embodied, subjective act that is informed by, and through, the cultural context in which it occurs” (2019, 17). Literature, according to Pearce, offers a privileged entry into “the full complexity of our experience of mobility” because of its reflexivity and honesty—other source material does not necessarily have the same capacity (2020, 81; see also Mom 2014, 31; Tuvikene et al. 2023, 2965). Representations of mobility “reproduce, reconfigure or produce further representations”, which also explains their potential as “site[s] of political engagement and [...] resistance and transformation” (Murray and Upstone 2014, 2). Related to this, Giada Peterle argues that texts have the power to “project future imaginations” (2023, 104). Discussing the role of art and literature in making meaning out of worldly mobilities, Adrien Frenay, Giulio Iacoli, and Lucia Quaquarelli also emphasize these points by stating that cultural products make the world “readable” and “imaginable” by “‘realizing’ the reality” (2019, 10; my translation). Literary representations of mobility, in short, cannot be reduced to “historical sources” (Kabelik 2019, 141) or to “mere sociological proofs” (Toivanen and Pfalzgraf 2024, 6). Literary mobility analysis should therefore pay attention to the ways in which literary texts not only “mirror” but rather “grasp” mobility (Berensmeyer and Ehland 2013, 13). In effect, Lesley Murray and Sara Upstone call for a movement “beyond a static notion of representation [in order to] engage with the idea that mobility can be represented and is produced through representation” (2014, 3).

This is where the question of how the mobility theme translates into literary form becomes important. I have touched upon this question elsewhere, referring to the formal manifestations of mobility in literary texts as *poetics of mobility* (Toivanen 2021a, 20, 209). My approach to the formal features of representations of mobility is inspired, for instance, by Elleke Boehmer’s (2018) study of postcolonial poetics and Johan Schimanski’s (2010) work on border poetics. More specifically, my readings draw inspiration from the work of scholars who have engaged with the formal representation of mobilities in literature, such as Chris Ewers

(2018), Giada Peterle (2016, 2023), Ian C. Davidson (2017), Roman Kabelik (2019), Una Brogan (2019), and Adrien Frenay (2021), to name only a few. In addition to this specific literary mobility studies scholarship, my understanding of what the poetics of mobility could mean has been guided by observations made by scholars in social sciences mobility studies concerning the embodied experiences of mobility and the relationship between mobility and space. In other words, my uses of narratological concepts are rooted in the mobilities framework. Moreover, my understanding of the notion of poetics is detached from strict structuralist narratological meanings, and it is used as a critical rather than a theoretical tool. Even when looking at form, my approach is cultural studies-oriented in that it asks what formal strategies achieve in a specific context of mobility.

How, then, does mobility assume literary form in the texts studied in this book? Is it possible to say something general about the poetics of mobility in the context of Afro-European mobilities? The answer is of course negative: there is obviously not *a* poetics of mobility that would capture the literary strategies of all of the individual texts studied—finding such a pattern has not even been the goal of this project. Rather, the goal has been to identify relevant, mobility-related narrative strategies in the texts. While not proposing a model that might be supposed to travel effortlessly into other contexts, my readings have produced tentative guidelines for what to look for when exploring formal representations of mobility in literary texts. In line with Schimanski's (2010, 51) outlining of border poetics, I understand the poetics of mobility as the texts' ways of applying mobility to the level of the story (the content of the narrative as a series of events) and narration/discourse (the structuring of these events).

Spatiality: mobility and space are inseparable, which is why spatial elements are a pivotal aspect in the poetics of mobility. One relevant dimension is the perception of space while on the move—for instance, behind the window of a moving car or an aircraft—and how the chosen mode of transport affects the mobile subject's perception of space and their engagements with it. For instance, fast-moving vehicles tend to render perceptions of landscapes blurry or enable only quick glances (e.g., Cissokho's and Rakotoson's texts in Chap. 4); here, engagement with the landscape also becomes a matter of speed. Perceptions of space can reflect the movement of the environment (Dadié's travelogue in Chap. 3) and the immobility of the observer (Gauz's novel in Chap. 5). The space-mobility nexus is also central in narrativizations of how spaces are being "handled"

through mobility practices. The attempt of mobile subjects to situate themselves on city or transit maps is a literary strategy that conveys spatial movement through the citation of street names or Metro stations (Chapters 2, 3, and 5). Moreover, inherently mobile narrative settings, such as airports and aircrafts, can motivate the narration (e.g., the non-place character of global airport and the anonymization of the focalizer in Kihindou's novel in Chap. 2; the hypermobility/sedentariness nexus and introspective monologues on the aircraft in Chap. 4).

Rhythm and speed: changes in rhythm and speed can convey mobility both in the story world and in the narration. Experiences of the hectic urban environment can be captured in internal monologues, where devices such as multiplication and lack of punctuation produce a sense of speed on the level of narration (e.g., Rakotoson's representation of the airport in Chap. 2 or Dadié's portrayal of the Paris Metro in Chap. 3). Such moments of speed can articulate enthusiasm but also a sense of panic (e.g., students' experiences of the Paris Metro and air travel in Chap. 2; N'Sondé's portrayal of a clandestine migrant's embodied unease at the Metro/RER station in Chap. 6). Syntax-level changes in rhythm achieved through strategies of punctuation can articulate a discord between free-flowing and restricted movement (Oho Bambe's novel in Chap. 6). Pauses, ellipses, and summaries are used to convey the idea of which (im)mobilities matter for the mobile subject (e.g., Kpomassie's travelogue in Chap. 3; Sarr's trivialization of air travel in Chap. 3; Pagni's Moroccan transit and Lyamlahy's portrayal of Pateh Sabally's walk in Chap. 6; shame informing deportation air travel in Chap. 6). In the story world, tensions between hurry and waiting reflect the characteristics of modernity (Hountondji's novel in Chap. 2 and Oussou-Essui's novel in Chap. 5).

Relational mobilities: the relationality of mobilities is a key premise of mobility studies, and it translates into literary form through different narrative strategies. Relationality can entwine different categories of mobility in the narration through multiperspectivity (Gauz's novel in Chap. 5; Lyamlahy's text in Chap. 6). The relationality of mobilities is also produced through juxtaposition (Dongala's and Sembène's texts in Chap. 5) or comparison (e.g., diasporic returnees' urban mobilities in Chap. 4). Relational mobilities are often linked to the production of translocality and transtemporality. A frequently recurring transtemporal aspect is the linking of twentieth and twenty-first-century Afro-European mobilities to the history of coerced transatlantic mobilities, as demonstrated in Chaps. 5 and 6 on work-related and clandestine migratory mobilities, but also in

Chap. 3 on leisure travel, with Njami's novel. The links can be established through word choices or imagery that allude to Middle Passage mobilities (e.g., the Sembène short story in Chap. 5 or Diallo's novel in Chap. 6). This traumatizing link can be evoked through dreams (Dongala's novel in Chap. 5), haunting (visual and non-visual) perceptions (N'Sondé's novel in Chap. 5), or ghosts (Awumey's and Lyamlahy's texts in Chap. 6). Relationality also manifests itself in the polyphonic qualities of the narration (Oho Bамbe's novel, Chap. 6).

Mobility in the arrangement of the story: mobility may affect the narration in terms of plot development and narrative structure. A wholesale structural role of mobility can be conceived through the notion of the mobile chronotope (Peterle 2016), as in the case of Sarr's travel chronicle, in which hypermobility functions as an organization structure (Chap. 3). Another aspect relates to the question of literary genre—travelogues (Chap. 3) are structured around a journey, which usually entails mobility (even when the part of physical mobility is not represented), and the same goes for the road novel (Diallo's and Awumey's novels in Chap. 6). The ordering of events involving mobility is also important. As a non-daily, "exceptional" mode of mobility, air travel often marks a narrative transition. In the case of diasporic homecomings, this entails the transition from migrant to returnee, often positioned near the beginning of the narrative in order to reflect a sense of in-betweenness (Chap. 4). In narratives concerning student newcomers' mobilities to Europe, scenes of aeromobility at the beginning capture the idea of a new start in a new environment (Chap. 2). The circular nature of clandestine migratory mobilities can be reflected in the circularity of the narration (Oho Bамbe, N'Sondé, and Mabanckou, Chap. 6).

Mobility in character development: the mobilities of the characters in the story world play a role in character construction. Modern mobile technologies contribute to tourists' and student newcomers' self-fashioning as modern mobile subjects (Chaps. 2 and 3). Aeromobility plays a key role in the production of the figure of the diasporic returnee, while the use of local modes of transport facilitates their attempts to fashion themselves as "locals" (Chap. 4). Holidaymaking and automobility are pivotal in the project of "becoming French" related to the characters in Bebey's text (Chap. 3), while the crossing of national and continental borders contributes to the construction of the figure of the clandestine migrant (Diallo's

and Pagni's novels in Chap. 6). The processes of becoming, enabled by a character's spatial mobility, can be destructive, as in the case of Sembène's short story (Chap. 5). Mobility produces encounters which can be meaningful for the characters and from the perspective of plot construction (experiences of the Paris Metro in Laye's novel in Chap. 2; encounters on the road in Diallo's and N'Sondé's novels in Chap. 6). Encounters "on the road" can also be fruitless in order to convey a character's alienated condition, as in the case of Awumey's taxi-driver (Chap. 6). Diasporic returnees' mobile encounters with "locals" often position them as outsiders and tourists (Chap. 4).

Mobility-related motifs: these are motifs that point toward the mobility theme and that recur frequently in an individual text or a set of texts. Examples of mobility-related motifs in the texts examined include "simplified" maps such as lists of names of Metro stations to represent an itinerary to be followed to reach a desired destination (Paris Metro, in Chap. 2). In student narratives (Chap. 2) the motif of the baggage encapsulates the pressures of assimilation and the burden of colonial education. In the context of clandestine migratory mobilities, a light backpack, in contrast, captures the precarity of the clandestine journey (Lyamlahy's text in Chap. 6). The motif of non-arrival, embodying the (symbolic) failure to reach the desired destination, can be observed across different categories of mobility (e.g., Bugul's novel in Chap. 2; Kpomassie's travelogue in Chap. 3, and several narratives of clandestine migratory mobilities in Chap. 6). Mobile figures such as the adventurer features not only in narratives of clandestine migratory mobilities (Chap. 6) but also in those of educational mobilities (Chap. 2), conveying the idea of mobility as a strategy of resilience. The figure of a porter offering their services at African airports recurs in narratives of diasporic homecomings, articulating the gap between the returnee's socio-economic privilege and the hardships of the former home country (Chap. 4). Transport schedules and tickets as metonymies of spatial movement, or promises thereof, feature in Dadié's and Kpomassie's travelogues (Chap. 3). The motifs of the road and walking in narratives of clandestine migratory mobility embody the precarious aspects of these mobilities and the self-perpetual qualities of mobility as a strategy of resilience (Oho Bambe's and Awumey's novels in Chap. 6) but also convey a position of empathy (Lyamlahy's text in Chap. 6).

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter 2 discusses the mobilities of student newcomers to and in Paris by focusing on portrayals of aeromobility and mobilities in the Paris Metro. The texts analyzed range from novels published in the 1960s to the 1980s, the 1990s, and even the 2010s, and include Ake Loba's *Kocoumbo, l'étudiant noir* (1960), Camara Laye's *Dramouss* (1966), Ken Bugul's *Le Baobab fou* (1983), Gisèle Hountondji's *Une Citronnelle dans la neige* (1986), Monique Ilboudo's *Le Mal de peau* (1992), Michèle Rakotoson's *Elle, au printemps* (1996), and Liss Kihindou's *Chêne de bambou* (2013). They emphasize the role played by modes of transport in the formation of modern mobile subjectivity. While air travel is represented as an alienating experience that sets in motion an assimilatory process, the student newcomers' journeys in the Paris Metro can also be read as claims of agency that aim at handling and claiming belonging to the urban space. The poetics of mobility in scenes of aeromobility reflect the newcomers' transition into a new life in the metropolis, while their journeys in the Metro capture their disorientation in the underground transit system but also their attempts to make sense of the city.

Chapter 3 explores mobility practices in the context of leisure travel. I analyze the representations of different modes of transport in two classics of travel writing, Bernard Dadié's *Un Nègre à Paris* (1959) and Tété-Michel Kpomassie's *L'Africain du Groenland* (1981), and then move on to novelistic representations of holidaymaking in Simon Njami's *African gigolo* (1989) and Kidi Bebey's *Mon Royaume pour une guitare* (2016). The last section focuses on Felwine Sarr's travel chronicle *La Saveur des derniers mètres* (2021). Compared to the Paris-centered settings of the texts discussed in Chap. 2, in this chapter Afro-European mobilities are topographically more varied, ranging from Kpomassie's Arctic destination to French provinces and other European cities in Njami's and Bebey's texts, and, eventually, beyond Europe in Sarr's travelogue. The chapter highlights the role played by different modes of transport in the construction of the meanings of the destination, on the one hand, and the figure of the traveler, on the other. Modes of mobility and transport contribute to the texts' poetics of mobility by means of changes in narrative rhythm and speed (Dadié and Kpomassie), through plot and character construction (Njami and Bebey), and, finally, as a wholesale organizational structure (Sarr).

Chapter 4 addresses narratives of diasporic return—texts that reverse the direction of Afro-European mobilities from outward mobilities from Africa to journeys from Europe back to Africa. This chapter analyzes both transnational journeys and local mobilities of diasporic returns. The texts discussed are Camara Laye’s *Dramouss* (1966), Aïssatou Cissokho’s *Dakar, la touriste autochtone* (1986), Daniel Biyaoula’s *L’Impasse* (1996), Michèle Rakotoson’s *Juillet au pays: Chroniques d’un retour à Madagascar* (2007), Véronique Tadjo’s *Loin de mon père* (2010), and Jussy Kiyindou’s *Des Ombres et leurs échos...* (2019). Much as in the case of student newcomers (Chap. 2), the aeromobilities of diasporic returnees are marked by an unease that translates itself into form. The state of being suspended between two places characteristic of air travel reflects the diasporic condition, and scenes of aeromobility often feature in the opening. Local mobilities move the returnees across their former hometowns in a way that not only contributes to producing the meanings of the cities but also illustrates the returnees’ complex relationship with them.

Chapter 5 analyzes work-related mobilities by placing different scales of mobility and immobility at the center of analysis. I discuss two historical novels, Wilfried N’Sondé’s *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* (2018) and Emmanuel Dongala’s *La Sonate à Bridgetower (Sonata Mulattica)* (2017), which frame the Afro-European journeys of their privileged professional travelers within the context of coerced transatlantic (im)mobilities. Strategies such as juxtaposition bring these two categories of mobility together. In Ousmane Sembène’s short story “La Noire de...” (1962) work-related Afro-European mobilities are embedded in colonialist, racist, classist, and gendered power structures, challenging associations of mobility with freedom and labor migration with social mobility. Denis Oussou-Essui’s *La Souche calcinée* (2004) and Gauz’s *Debout-payé* (2014) attest to the precarious aspects of employment-related mobilities for African migrants in France. Gauz’s novel introduces different scales of employment-related (im)mobilities to the formal scale through multiperspectivity and strategies that convey work-related immobility. The texts draw a picture of the transtemporal dimensions of Afro-European work-related mobilities from the slave trade to neoliberal globalization.

Chapter 6 concentrates on clandestine migratory mobilities. The mobilities of undocumented migrants are approached in three contexts. First, the chapter concentrates on transnational mobilities from the African continent and toward Europe. These texts are often given settings on the

road, with North Africa as one that is important. Second, the chapter discusses clandestine migrants' urban mobilities once they have reached their alleged destination in Europe. Third, the chapter analyzes deportation aeromobilities. The texts include Alain Mabanckou's *Bleu-blanc-rouge* (1998), Aminata Sow Fall's *Douceurs du bercail* (1998), Nathalie Etoke's *Un Amour sans papiers* (1999), Edem Awumey's *Les Pieds sales* (2009), Wilfried N'Sondé's *Le Silence des esprits* (2010), Aminata Pagni's *Impossible de rester* (2019), Marc Alexandre Oho Bambe's *Les Lumières d'Oujda* (2020), Khalil Diallo's *Odysée des oubliés* (2021), and Khalid Lyamlahy's *Évocation d'un mémorial à Venise* (2023). In many of the texts, mobility practices drive the plot and generate encounters. Some texts translate the unpredictability of clandestine travel onto the level of syntax or produce a poetics of mobility that highlights the relationality of mobilities, including in a transtemporal sense.

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CHAPTER 2

Educational Mobilities in the Metropolis

THE STUDENT NEWCOMER AND COLONIAL MODERNITY

The student leaving their African home country to pursue their studies in Europe—most often in Paris, the (former) colonial metropolis—is one of the most emblematic mobile subjectivities in Francophone African literatures (Ní Loingsigh 2009, 52). In the 1930s a wave of African and Caribbean students arrived in Paris (Dessy 2011, 69) and representations of these educational mobilities found their way into literary texts that often reflect the authors' own experiences (Treiber 2010, 37). The trend of narratives of student mobilities reached its peak in the 1960s (Dessy 2011, 71). By the end of the decade, the authors' interest in the metropolis decreased and Paris did not reclaim its position until the end of the 1980s with authors of the new writerly generation, many of whom were living or were born outside Africa (Dessy 2011, 71). The axiomatic Afro-European mobile subject of the student gave way to the figure of the immigrant in a more general sense (Dessy 2011, 72; see also Cazenave 2007, 1). The student narratives I discuss here are not solely from the 1960s; the texts also include novels published between the 1980s and the 2010s, which suggests that even though the heyday of the African student novel was in the 1960s, educational mobilities are not strictly a mid-twentieth-century literary theme.

Afro-European educational mobilities must be understood within a context of power relations embedded in discourses of colonial superiority, the

civilizing mission, and the negation of indigenous values (Ní Loingsigh 2009, 62–63). For African students of the colonial era, Paris was not only a national capital and an allegedly cosmopolitan city but also an imperial city (Garnier 2012, 109). If the colonized is not entirely “agent of their own history”, Afro-European educational mobilities are likewise set within a context that imposed specific limits on agency (Treiber 2010, 38; my translation). The African student’s relationship with the (former) colonial center is characterized by assimilative desires but also by rejection (Dessy 2011, 70); the relationship is nonreciprocal and nourishes expectations that cannot be met (Treiber 2010, 40). The disillusionment resulting from failed expectations is rooted in “the myth of Paris as the center of the world”, a discourse that constructs an image of Paris as “the guardian of liberty, freedom, and reason” and as one that promotes ideas about its alleged universality (Amine 2018, 22; see also Stäedtler 1999, 330). Influenced by this myth, Paris in the Francophone African literary imagination has been represented as the axiomatic center (see, e.g., Stäedtler 1999; Cazenave 2007; Kuintche Fonkou 2010). French discourses of universality seem to include colonized subjects but who, in the end, find themselves excluded by these ideals. Hence, it is unsurprising that narratives of educational mobility convey the alienating elements of the colonized subjects’ encounters with the metropolis (Ní Loingsigh 2009, 53). According to Pius Adesanmi, the case of African students differs from that of African Americans or Caribbeans in that Africans lack the latter two groups’ “incipient, always present western-ness”, which causes Africans’ contact with Paris to be more prone to the “danger of [a] psychic split” and a deeper sense of alienation (2013, 318). The “literary prototype of the black student” that features in Aké Loba’s *L’Étudiant noir* (1960) embodies the shift from romanticized ideas of Paris and the disillusionment generated by experiences of exclusion (Dessy 2011, 71; see also Stäedtler 1999, 336–337; Treiber 2010, 43). The student newcomer’s arrival in Paris is a process of confrontation of the imaginary and the real. Ideas of Paris promoted by the colonial school and French cultural products (Fonkou 1999, 102; Stäedtler 1999, 328) are challenged as the newcomer is confronted with the reality. The lived experience of the metropolis that does not correspond to expectations causes the student newcomer to be an outsider thrown into a new environment. The newcomer “looks at the world as [a] stranger”—a process that is not merely aesthetic but also a social phenomenon (Schimanski 2018, 313).

While the texts discussed here attest to the unbalanced power relations that inform the student newcomers' relationship with the metropolis, the texts also renegotiate this relationship, especially through portrayals in which the protagonists engage in "handling" the city and claiming their place in it. During this process the newcomer transforms into a postmigratory (see Kleppinger and Reeck 2018), Afropean (Hogarth 2023), or AfroFrench (Moji 2022) subject. This transformation changes the way in which Paris is perceived. The metropolis is no longer a postcard image but a lived reality. The presence of (what are initially) newcomers transforms the city: homogenizing, exclusionary conceptualizations of Paris give room to manifestations of diversity that acknowledge the interconnections between Africa and Paris, as attested by such notions as Black Paris (Jules-Rosette 2000; Braddock and Eburne 2013), AfroParis (Moji 2022), and postcolonial Paris (Amine 2018). While the perspective of the newcomer tends to generate portrayals in which Paris is seen as the (former) colonial metropolis rather than as Black/Afro/postcolonial Paris, this more diverse side of Paris may surface as the narrative proceeds and when the newcomer is no longer new to the metropolis.

African narratives of educational mobilities reveal a fascination for Paris, its "modernity", and its technological "progress". Within this framework the colonial periphery, in contrast, becomes associated with an absence of modernity—a colonialist idea that some characters in the texts analyzed seem to have adopted at least partially. In this light, the goal of educational mobilities is that the colonized subject should travel to the center to acquire knowledge that will benefit the colony in its pursuit of modernity. The return is supposed to benefit the returnee through "rapid socio-economic mobility", as in the case of the Anglophone African *been-to* figure in the early post-independence period (Lagji 2016, 34). Moreover, returning students often became the "arrowheads of independence movements" (Adesanmi 2013, 315). This conceptualization of educational mobility implies the notion of return and thus refers to the relationality of mobilities. Indeed, some early student narratives such as Loba's *Kocoumbo*, Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë* (1961), and Camara Laye's *Dramouss* (1966) feature a return to the "home continent". These returns, however, are rarely unproblematic. Equally frequent are narratives in which the planned return becomes impossible; a case in point is the Cameroonian student in Simon Njami's *African gigolo* (1989), who has dropped out of his studies and ends up in a limbo in which he struggles to

find his place in France while simultaneously acknowledging the impossibility to return. The same applies to Kidi Bebey's *Mon royaume pour une guitare* (2016), in which the author's Cameroonian parents, who have come to Paris to study, keep postponing their return, seemingly unable to admit to themselves that their life is now in France. The return—and its impossibility—is addressed in Chap. 4. However, apart from Laye's protagonist in *Dramouss*, the diasporic returnees discussed in that chapter are not students and their “homecomings” are framed as visits with determined duration.

The perspective of the outsider characterizes not only the students' relationship with the metropolis but also with typically “modern” modes of transport and mobility systems such as air travel and the Paris Metro. Adesanmi's description of the African student as an “outsider to the modernity of Paris” (2013, 316) can therefore be understood as a position that they occupy vis-à-vis “modern” modes and systems of transport. The student newcomers are mostly inexperienced air travelers and Metro passengers. Due to their lack of experience, portrayals of their journeys by airplane or the Metro fall outside the category of banal mobilities (Binnie et al. 2007, 165). Instead, the texts attest to “the extraordinary experiences of mobility” (Adey 2010, 31), and, in so doing, they stress “the difference and singularity of lived experience of being in passage” (Adey et al., 2012, 173). Travel in the Paris Metro, for someone who has never used it and for whom the very concept of the Metro is incomprehensible, is not an act of boring commuting that “foster[s] a mobile homeliness and a familiarity with space” (Edensor 2013, 196). Similarly, the meanings of aeromobility in these texts are detached from the “routine, matter-of-fact, effectively *banal*” meanings that inform contemporary, hegemonic understandings of air travel (Cwerner 2009, 6; original emphasis). The texts articulate a determination that captures newcomers' eagerness to “handle” modern modes of transport in order to assert a claim to occupying the position of the “modern” metropolitan mobile subject—a position they often understand in somewhat Eurocentric and colonial terms. Narrativizations of the students' use of the Paris Metro provide more room for such claims than the highly regulated system of aeromobility. As an everyday mode of mobility, the newcomers can use the Metro more regularly to learn to master it. This process of becoming is articulated through a transition from the realm of the extraordinary to that of the banal, which is manifested in the decreasing narrative centrality of the

subterranean environment as the mobility system becomes an integral part of the student's everyday life. In effect, educational mobilities are a learning process also in terms of learning how to navigate the city through mobility practices.

AEROMOBILITIES OF STUDENT NEWCOMERS

Camara Laye's autobiographical novel *L'Enfant noir* (1953), which addresses the clashes between traditional culture and the colonial school, ends with a portrayal of the protagonist seated in an aircraft on its way from Conakry to Paris. He is emotional—he is leaving his country and loved ones behind, and when he squeezes his arms around his chest as if to comfort himself, he feels the folded map of the Paris Metro in his pocket (179). In *Dramouss* (1966) [*A Dream of Africa* (1974)], a sequel to *L'Enfant noir*, the narrator flies over Paris in “le grand oiseau métallique” (58) [“the great metal bird” (39)],¹ trying to observe the metropolis through the mist. In the temporal context of Laye's novels, aeromobility was accessible only to a limited number of Africans because of which most narratives of student mobilities from that period do not entail air travel. The Ivorian student in Loba's *Kocoumbo, l'étudiant noir* [Kocoumbo, the Black student] travels to France by land and by sea,² although the narrative does mention aeromobility (Ní Loingsigh 2009, 55–56). Since the 1980s, air fares have decreased and the number of routes has grown (Cwerner 2009, 7), and this “outburst of aeromobility” is reflected in the prominence of air travel in cultural products (Durante 2020, 10), African literatures included.

This section focuses on representations of aeromobility student narratives. My analysis looks at Ken Bugul's *Le Baobab fou* (1983/2009) [*An Abandoned Baobab* (2008)], Monique Ilboudo's *Le Mal de peau* (1992/2001) [Skin ache], Michèle Rakotoson's *Elle, au printemps* (1996) [She in the springtime], and Liss Kihindou's *Chêne de bambou* (2013) [Bamboo oak]. Besides being new to the metropolis, the young protagonists are inexperienced as air travelers. The insecurity engendered by their lack of experience is reflected in portrayals of aeromobility, in addition to

¹All the translations from Kihindou's, Rakotoson's, Ilboudo's, Loba's, and Hountondji's novels are mine. The page numbers after English quotations in Laye's and Bugul's novels refer to the published English versions of the texts.

²See also the discussion of the maritime journey in *La Souche calcinée* (Chap. 5).

which the narratives underline the (post)colonial entanglements between Europe and Africa through the periphery-center nexus. The travelers' expectations of the metropolis play a key role here: the fact of traveling to the "center" adds its own twist to the aeromobile unease the newcomers experience. Scenes of aeromobility function as narrative transitions, and they seem somewhat marginal in terms of narrative time. In Kihindou's, Ilboudo's, and Bugul's novels, portrayals of aeromobility occur on only between three and five pages. It is, therefore, unsurprising that such passages easily go unnoticed in a literary analysis. However, even such marginal portrayals can be full of meaning, especially when put into dialogue with other similarly "trivial" fragments. Read together, they contribute to what Christopher Schaberg refers to as the "culture of flight" (2011, 13), attesting to the pivotal role played by fiction in producing meanings of aeromobility (Durante 2020, 10).

My reading focuses on the novels' *landscapes* of aeromobility that include airports, planes, and flight routes (Adey et al. 2007, 774). Such an approach conveys the idea of aeromobility as a mobility system (Zuskáková 2020, 8). As for the poetics of mobility, scenes of aeromobility play a role in plot and character construction and in the texts' aesthetic strategies such as in the use of motifs. The aeromobilities of African student newcomers are marked by an anxiety that springs from the context of the travel, namely, (1) that the characters are inexperienced air travelers and (2) that they are traveling to the former colonial center for the first time. The texts articulate the colonial roots of aeromobility and convey the tensions between the local and the global—or the traditional and the modern. In many of the texts the questions of gender and social class also contribute to the experiences of alienation associated with air travel. Often placed in the opening of the narrative, aeromobility scenes symbolize the new beginning that student life in Europe represents for the characters and mark narrative transitions whereby they enter the process of becoming modern mobile subjects in the metropolis. As such, these scenes are events that mark "the shifting of a persona across the borders of a semantic field", to quote Jurij Lotman (1977, 233).

Coloniality is constitutive of modernity (Mignolo 2007, 464), and mobility—especially in its motorized forms—is frequently associated with progress and modernity. The word "modern" "seems to evoke images of technological mobility – the car, the plane, the spaceship" in such a way that it can be said that it is mobility that constitutes the modern subject (Cresswell 2006, 15). Modern modes of transport, such as automobility

and the railway, are intertwined with the colonial project, constituting the idea of colonial modernity. This is also true of aeromobility and its “entangle[ment] with the *longue durée* of colonial epistemologies” (Kumavie 2021, 2; see also Bhimull 2017, 16). Aeromobilities played a key role in “informing public understandings about Empire while engendering enthusiasm for the colonial project” (Adey et al. 2007, 777). Air travel “ushered new ways to image and inhabit space, time and place”, and it was a technology influenced by racialist ideas (Bhimull 2017, 16). Modern mobile technologies such as aeromobility were introduced to the colonies not only for practical reasons but also to bolster the alleged superiority of the colonizer (Bhimull 2017, 20). Air travel was a response to colonial fantasies of control since it facilitated a greater accessibility of the empire (Neigh 2018, 5). The lure of modern mobile technologies is problematic for the colonized subject, who is excluded from the ideas of modernity and progress. The process of self-fashioning as a modern subject is therefore a process in which the colonial legacy of modernity cannot be neglected—it is the unavoidable structure that the colonized has to live with (Scott 2004, 21).

As scholars have highlighted with respect to African appropriations of initially colonial mobile technologies, African mobile subjects have been far from simply acting as passive adopters of these technologies but have also successfully negotiated their relationship with them and claimed them as their own (e.g., Hart 2016; Grace 2013). While some of the texts discussed here attest to gestures to such claims of agency, the overwhelming feature that characterizes the portrayals of African students’ aeromobilities is the unease that relates to the process of becoming a modern mobile subject in the Western sense of the term. This is a process that involves assimilation and questions of power in terms of who qualifies for “modern mobile subject”. Aeromobility, as represented in the texts, leaves little room for the traveler’s agency and their attempts to destabilize the colonial hierarchies. In addition to the colonial roots of aeromobility, another reason for this relative lack of agency springs from the passenger’s condition of being a “captive” within the mobile space of the aircraft and also of being subject to the highly regulated mobility system (see Adey et al. 2012, 172) that imposes limits on creative appropriations of the technology.

All mobilities are productive of and produced by power structures that are constructed on markers of difference such as class, gender, and ethnicity (Cresswell 2010, 21). Such a “politics of mobility” (Cresswell 2010, 21) defines the way in which aeromobility contributes to “produc[ing]

certain identities and inequalities” (Cwerner 2009, 10). The production of identities and inequalities that is performed by aeromobility is manifested, for instance, in racial profiling at the airports (Cwerner 2009, 10–11). Aeromobility is not only a question of “flows” of people in an interconnected world but it is also symptomatic of the simultaneous proliferation of borders. Airports are the “thresholds of nations” (Manzanas and Sanches 2011, 112) that differentiate those who do not have the right to travel from those who do have that privilege (Adey 2008, 1326). While air travel remains one of the most unevenly distributed modes of mobility, for those who can access it, it has made the world more easily reachable. As suggested throughout this book, Francophone African portrayals of aeromobility reveal what Graham Huggan refers to as a “conspicuously uneven global culture” (2009, 3). The student newcomers discussed here are not part of the kinetic elite, but they are not seen as “threatening outsiders” either. Most of the narratives do not refer to the presence of border authorities at the airports, which suggests that the characters’ mobilities are somewhat unimpeded. At the same time, aeromobility’s promises of freedom often remain compromised: given the difficulties of (post)colonial subjects’ attempts to claim colonial modernity, the characterization of airports “as sites of alienation, strange encounters and inequality” (Adey 2008, 1319) is particularly pertinent. Moreover, the role played by aeromobility in the production of differences and identities is conveyed in most of the texts. In Marc Augé’s famous conceptualization, airports represent the non-places of late modernity “in which neither identity, nor relations, nor history really make any sense” (1995, 87). While it is certainly true that global airports may qualify as non-places, the idea of smaller, local airports as bereft of identity has been contested (Urry 2007, 146–147; Adey et al. 2007, 778). Considering the power structures that produce and are produced by global aeromobilities, Augé’s characterization of airports as places where relations no longer matter is highly problematic. This said, portrayals of individual student newcomers’ first experiences of airports of arrival in Europe tend to resonate with the notion of non-place.

Anxious Arrivals in Kihindou’s and Ibouodo’s Novels

Ibouodo’s *Le Mal de peau* and Kihindou’s *Chaîne de bambou* feature young female protagonists traveling to France to pursue their studies. Both texts open with an airport scene, throwing the reader directly into the

characters' aeromobile experience; the contexts of their journeys unfold later. Ilboudo's protagonist's journey is also motivated by the hope of finding her father, a French colonial officer who raped her mother while he was on a mission.³ This colonial allegory underlines the violent and hierarchical center-periphery relationship and connects the protagonist's aeromobile unease to the fact that her destination is the former colonial "fatherland". Likewise, in Kihindou's novel the context of the journey unfolds after the airport scene. The novel is one of the rare examples of a twenty-first-century student narrative. Kihindou's protagonist is fascinated by everything that Paris has to offer, but also feels pressure to succeed as if to justify her presence there: "Elle devait absolument réussir" (36) [She absolutely had to succeed]. Her unease in the airport passage can be read in light of these mixed feelings.

The aeromobility scenes in Kihindou's and Ilboudo's novels may cover only three pages, respectively, but their position at the beginning of the novel frames the story to follow. Neither of them addresses the departure from Africa nor the travel passage itself; both start with the protagonist's arrival in France. This strategy underlines that the protagonists are in the transitional phase of starting a new life in a new environment. Whereas Ilboudo's text mentions the time of landing, the number of the flight, the company name, and the fact that the airport of arrival is Roissy, Kihindou's text does not feature any such details. By omitting the information, the reader is thrown into a state of uncertainty—at this point, the narration does not reveal much about the protagonist, not even that she is an African student: she is simply described as "[une] jeune fille noire" (9) [a young Black woman]. The strategy of not sharing information about the traveler or the nature of the journey reflects the feelings of the newly arrived protagonist, lost at an airport in a new city. Moreover, by not revealing her identity, the narration performs a gesture of anonymization—an experience not unfamiliar to air travelers joining the faceless flows of passengers at a global airport. The fact that the airport is not named contributes to the non-place (Augé 1995) character of the narrative setting: the place could be any airport. This strategy of anonymization can be read as a manifestation of the text's poetics of aeromobility.

³The protagonist finds her father and they engage in a process of reconciliation. The novel, however, ends tragically: the plane in which Cathy is returning home with her boyfriend and father is hijacked and blown up by terrorists fighting for a local liberation movement. Aeromobility plays an important role in the plot construction and produces an effect of circularity in narration.

There is a distressing aspect to the protagonist's arrival: it turns out that the person—introduced simply as Corinne without any further information—who was supposed to be waiting at the airport for the first-person narrator has not shown up. A sense of being alone in a new environment is conveyed by the narrator observing other passengers' reunions with their loved ones: "Autour de moi, ce n'était qu'embrassades, retrouvailles chaleureuses, éclats de rire, sourires émus ou complices" (9) [Around me, it was all hugs, warm reunions, laughter, emotional or knowing smiles]. Indeed, as Erica Durante points out, the "Airworld" is "a platform in which intimate emotions and feelings are expressed" (2020, 161). This aspect undermines traditional characterizations of the airport as a non-place (Durante 2020, 162). For Kihindou's protagonist, other passengers' expressions of affection underline her sense of being left alone and in anonymity. In so doing, the narrative articulates and intensifies the ideas of placelessness, loneliness, and alienation frequently attached to airports (Adey 2008, 1319; Kellerman 2008, 175). The narrator compares herself to a fisherman trying to "jet[er] son regard comme un hameçon voulant tirer du flot humain de l'aéroport un sourire qui la sortirait de l'anonymat" (9) [cast her gaze like a hook wanting to draw from the human flow of the airport a smile that would lift her out of anonymity]. While the postcolonial problematics of aeromobility are not explicitly present in the passage, as the narrative proceeds, the reader is able to establish a link between the protagonist's airport anxiety and feelings of excitement that her arrival in the metropolis generates.

As the attempts of the protagonist to be "saved" from anonymity fail, anxiety sets in. She shows signs of nervousness; she walks back and forth and is tormented by the idea that she may have given Corinne incorrect information about her time of arrival. While she is stuck at the airport, her imagination runs wild like "une voiture de course" (10) [a racing car] as she imagines all of the possible misfortunes that may have befallen Corinne. There is, then, a tension between the protagonist's interrupted movement, the hypermobility of the global airport, and the speed of her train of thought. The narration conveys a sense of panic through short, colloquial sentences that end with question or exclamation marks: "Allons! Un accident l'aura sûrement empêchée d'arriver à l'heure ... ou alors! Mais oui! Comment n'y avais-je pas pensé plus tôt? Elle [Corinne] avait oublié que j'arrivais ce matin!" (10) [Come on! An accident has surely prevented her from arriving on time ... or! Of course! How could I not have thought of it earlier? She [Corinne] has forgotten that I was arriving this

morning!]. The narration articulates a particularly anxious poetics of mobility: the racing car sort of internal dialogue suggests not so much the general hypermobility of the global airport as the distressing experience of being a newcomer in the metropolis, with all of its opportunities and risks of failure.

In *Le Mal de peau* the protagonist's arrival at Charles de Gaulle Airport conveys the clumsiness of an unaccustomed air traveler and the clash between the local and the global or the traditional and the modern. Cathy, a young student traveling to France from an imaginary African country, expresses her surprise upon landing: she has expected the journey to last longer. Her naïve enthusiasm causes amusement for her more experienced fellow passengers. Her inexperience is equally manifest in her unawareness of the permitted number of items of hand baggage, and in her clumsiness while handling the baggage and moving in the airplane and at the airport. Not only has Cathy brought with her three items of baggage instead of one, she also drops her belongings when she tries to retrieve them from the overhead locker. What is significant here is not only her clumsiness but also the nature and contents of the hand baggage—a basket filled with local foodstuffs: “[D]es cacahuètes, salées, sucrées, bouillies, grillées, son gombo pilé, ses ‘feuilles séchées’, et [...] ses deux ou trois kilos de ‘bassi’ que sa mère avait si amoureuxment préparés” (11–12) [salted, sweet, stewed, roasted peanuts, her mashed okra, her “dried leaves”, and the two or three kilos of “bassi” that her mother had so lovingly prepared]. This long list of foodstuffs produces a strong aspect of “locality” and stands in contrast to the associations of aeromobility with the erasure of (local) identity (Adey et al. 2007, 779). During the short aeromobility passage, the narration alludes to the basket and its contents on several occasions: they become the key motifs of Cathy's inexperience and the “local identity”. Cathy reproaches her mother for the “wrong” type of hand baggage: “Je lui avais bien dit qu'on ne prend pas l'avion avec un panier!” (12) [I had told her that one does not take a basket onto a plane!]. The foodstuffs and the inappropriate baggage are associated with the mother, an uneducated peasant, who does not have access to air travel nor to the metropolis, thus also underlining Cathy's modest background in terms of social class. The idea that Cathy knows better the sort of baggage suitable for air travel suggests that she has already entered the process of transformation into a modern aeromobile subject. Cathy's clumsiness, however, encapsulates the challenges of this transformation: she accidentally drops her peanuts on another

passenger, and as she exits the plane she stumbles on the moving walkway leaving her now notorious basket behind for someone else to pick up: “Vous êtes très agile, dites donc!” (13) [Well, you are very agile, aren’t you!], are her co-passenger’s sarcastic words.

Aeromobile Non-arrival: Le Baobab fou

Compared to Ilboudo’s warmly humorous narrative voice, the tone in Bugul’s classic of African feminist writing, the autobiographical novel *Le Baobab fou* is much gloomier. The narrative voice reflects the dark shades of the protagonist’s life in Europe, where, instead of pursuing her studies as intended, she ends up in prostitution and drug use, and suffers a mental breakdown, before returning to her native Senegal (Kalisa 2009, 47–48). The narration is marked by the protagonist’s state of alienation, the roots of which lie in her personal history as a child abandoned by her mother and in the detrimental effects of colonization on her psyche (Mudimbe-Boyi 1993, 202). From the perspective of the weight of this personal history, it is noteworthy that, unlike in Kihindou’s and Ilboudo’s texts, Bugul’s novel does not open with an aeromobility scene. The air travel passage features in a chapter titled “1”, but it is preceded by chapters titled “Pré-histoire de Ken” [“Ken’s prehistory”] and “Histoire de Ken” [“Ken’s history”], respectively. While the strategic featuring of aeromobile scenes at the start of Kihindou’s and Ilboudo’s novels conveys the idea of a new beginning in a new environment, Bugul’s strategy of placing the air travel scene *after* two unnumbered prelude chapters functions as contextualization and undermines the effect of newness. This narrative strategy ties the protagonist’s experiences of intercontinental travel to her previous, traumatizing experiences (i.e., abandonment by her mother), which lie at the core of her self-destructive behavior in Europe (Hitchcott 1997, 30).⁴ The journey to the former colonial center does not help her rid herself of the old ghosts. In effect, “L’arrivée ressemblait au départ” (46) [“The arrival was much like the departure” (28)], as the narrator states laconically.

There is a foreboding element in the description of the protagonist’s flight from Senegal to Europe. When she looks through the airplane window, her home country seems unrecognizable. Yet at the same time she does not have the impression of being on the move at all: “l’avion

⁴A similar strategy motivates the aeromobility scene in Jussy Kiyindou’s return narrative, as discussed in Chap. 4.

avançait-il ou était-il suspendu dans les airs?” (45) [“was the plane moving forward or was it suspended in the air?” (27)]. The feeling of immobility is typical of modern air travel, where the aircraft disconnects the passenger from the surrounding space and the sensation of movement (Rink 2017, 891). The hypermobility of the vehicle does not reflect the experience of the passengers, who spend most of the flight sedentary in their seats (Durante 2020, 69); a condition of “mobile immobilization” as Adrien Frenay (2021, 11; my translation) describes it. In Bugul’s text this sensation of immobility is symptomatic of the protagonist’s mistake of equating physical mobility with the idea of moving forward in one’s life—in Europe, she ends up in a cul-de-sac. She goes to the toilet to cry, and when she returns to her seat she tries to convince herself, “tout ceci était de la vieille histoire, que tout ceci allait s’arranger dans le Nord sans problème” (45) [“all of this was an old story; all of it would get straightened out in the North without any difficulty” (28)]. After waking from a troubled sleep, she is unsure whether she will ever reach Europe: “Allait-on arriver à destination, ou allait-on rester ainsi, mais jusqu’à quand?” (46) [“Were we ever going to reach our destination or were we going to stay like this, but for how long?” (28)]. The journey to the former colonial center that is supposed to liberate the protagonist from her problems seems to be a journey of non-arrival.

In addition to the notion of non-arrival, the narration resorts to imagery that alludes to indifference and violence. The protagonist feels that “l’avion [...] semblait ignorer tout ce qui était en train de s’opérer en moi” (46) [“the plane [...] seemed ignorant of all that was happening inside of me” (28)], as if the aircraft was supposed to be an agent capable of feeling the protagonist’s distress. The contrast between the systemic, post-humanist dimension of mobility and the humanistic perspective centering on the emotions and thoughts of an individual passenger-subject (Pearce 2020, 209) is interesting here. When the landing starts, the protagonist finds herself “cramponnée aux accoudoirs” (46) [“clutched [at] the armrests” (28)], feeling the way “les roues [...] heurt[aient] un peu violemment la piste” (46) [“the wheels, not without some bumping, touched down on the runway” (28)]—violent imagery that symbolizes the traumatizing encounter of the colonized with the former colonial center (see Kalisa 2009). Outside the aircraft, on her way to a connecting flight to Brussels, the protagonist shows signs of clumsiness in much the same way that Cathy does in Ilboudo’s novel. She expresses her disappointment at her own stumbling: “Encore? [...] Ça y est, non? Je suis

arrivée, qu'est-ce qu'il y a?" (46) ["Again? [...] Enough is enough, no? I've arrived, what's the matter this time?" (29)]. Bugul's portrayal of aeromobility suggests that the protagonist's quest to start a new life in the metropolis is doomed to failure: her new life is constantly haunted by her past (see Bisanswa 2012, 24).

The idea that (aero)mobility fails to give the protagonist a new start is also conveyed in the text's portrayal of the airport. Observing the Parisian airport through the windows of an airport shuttle, the narrator states that "ce fut un bien triste trajet. Ce n'était pas ainsi que je voyais Paris, ce n'était pas ainsi que je pensais Paris. Ce fut seulement plus tard que je fus informée que le bus avait pris les routes périphériques. Les périphériques. Quelle idée!" (47) ["it was a very sad trip. This was not at all how I'd expected Paris to look, this was not how I had thought Paris would be. It was only later that I was told the bus had taken outlying roads. Beltways. What an idea!" (29)]. This passage suggests that the protagonist's expectations of the metropolis are incongruent with the reality—the fact that she only later realizes that the airport is not the same thing as central Paris does not dissipate her disappointment. The protagonist's retrospective understanding of her peripheral itinerary attests to the fact that by the time of her arrival, what she has previously known about Paris was based on the myth of the city's centrality and that she lacks the understanding that Parisian airports, like airports generally, are located on the fringes of the city (Durante 2020, 21). Such an understanding also ignores the existence of the Parisian suburbs (*banlieue*) and the division of Paris into the city center and its outskirts, which produces "uneven material and symbolic relations between a small and elite city *intra-muros* (between the walls) and the peripheral suburban, extraurban and rural territories *outre-muros* (outside the walls)" (Enright 2016, 35). The idea of a city divided by a beltway (*le Périphérique*) makes no sense to her. Her arrival at Brussels Zaventem is marked by a similar lack of enthusiasm: she feels tired and walks to the airport bus in "une allure d'automate" (47) ["moving like a robot" (29)]. Europe fails to claim its "redemptive promise of a metropolitan elsewhere" (Mielly 2002, 51).

Aeromobile Alienation and the Making of the Modern Mobile

Subject: Elle, au printemps

Kihindou's, Ilboudo's, and Bugul's texts do not include portrayals of the airports of departure: the protagonists have either already arrived at their

destination or they are in the process of traveling in the airplane. In contrast, in Rakotoson's *Elle, au printemps* the protagonist's journey from Antananarivo to Paris is narrated in more detail and at greater length: scenes involving aeromobility occupy more than 30 pages, allowing for a more complex analysis of the role of aeromobility in the protagonist's process of transformation into a modern (aero)mobile subject.

The novel opens with a scene set at the airport of Antananarivo. A young woman named Sahondra is about to leave Madagascar to travel to Paris to work and pursue her studies. Her family has accompanied her to the airport, and everyone is feeling emotional. Sahondra's departure for France is invested with high hopes: much like Bugul's protagonist, Sahondra is traveling to the mythic North—a journey that is expected to change the life of the entire family for the better. In addition to hopeful expectations, Rakotoson's text invests aeromobility with uneasy feelings. Sahondra feels out of place at the crowded airport as she observes a distinction between the affluent class of allegedly cosmopolitan “frequent travellers” (Calhoun 2008, 89) and novices like herself, whose clothing and behavior betray their lower socio-economic status. While Sahondra identifies herself with the young women with “l'ourlet de la jupe mal repassé” (9) [badly ironed skirt hems] and “accrochées à Maman” (9) [clinging to Mom], the narrative voice also refers to her traveling as “l'aventure, avec une valise” (9) [an adventure, with one suitcase]. The narrative mentions her heavy baggage on several occasions, making it the symbol for her pursuit. Sahondra's determination in the face of the challenges is conveyed through allusions to the journey as an adventure.

Unlike Ilboudo's Cathy, Sahondra is aware of the permitted number of baggage items, although the fact that hers exceed the weight limit by three kilos adds to the stress caused by the departure. The narrative attracts attention to the highly controlled nature of aeromobility by referring to border controls, national police, customs, and other authorities present at the airport. For Sahondra, who has experienced life under military rule, the presence of soldiers at the airport represents the risk of interrupted mobility. Her unease persists as she moves on to the transit hall, which separates her from her family and makes her realize that she is about to leave Madagascar. While the departure hall has been noisy, silence reigns in the transit hall: “Ici, plus de cris, plus de rires, plus de larmes, mais des chuchotements, de la moquette, des voix tamisées” (13) [Here, no more cries, no more laughter, no more tears, but whispering, fitted carpet, subdued voices]—a description that evokes Augé's (1995) notion of a

non-place. Sahondra associates silence with the West, and the transit hall already feels like being abroad. While going to Europe has long been her dream, she is not enthusiastic about leaving, and questions herself about whether the Europe she has imagined even exists: “Pour quelle Europe de carte postale s’exilait-elle?” (14) [For what sort of a postcard Europe was she leaving?]. She believes Paris is a place with “[les] lustres de l’Empire qui n’étaient pas les leurs” (15) [the chandeliers of the Empire that were not theirs]. The anxious aspects of air travel are related to her destination: the former colonial center.

Sahondra feels scared as the plane takes off. The blinking signal lights make her thoughts run wild, and she starts to imagine the plane crashing into the ocean. Behind the window, the lights of Antananarivo can no longer be seen, and the darkness symbolizes the protagonist’s unawareness of what awaits her in Paris. During the flight, Sahondra’s feeling of being out of place becomes accentuated. The awkward silence of the transit hall persists in the airplane, and she feels that she does not handle the etiquette of air travel in the way that some of the more experienced travelers do. Air hostesses and fellow passengers seem to judge her on the basis of her clothes, and when she drops her fork—cutlery she is not used to using—the narrator states in a self-ironic tone, “Décidément, le beau monde ne [lui] réussissait guère” (21) [Clearly, she could not handle the high society style]. In effect, the passage describing her as being seated alongside an elegantly dressed, self-confident man who orders champagne also draws attention to the fact that the roots of Sahondra’s alienated experiences of air travel are not only cultural in their essence but also relate to class and gender. While the other passengers eat their meals with their “petit doigt levé” (21) [little finger raised], Sahondra is struggling with the cutlery and the serving, acknowledging that the goal is to avoid being perceived as “commun et vulgaire” (21) [common and vulgar].

The unease that informs Sahondra’s experience of air travel reaches its peak on her arrival at Roissy airport. She is surprised by the grayness of the environment. The allusions to grayness are significant because Sahondra has associated grayness with everything she dislikes in Madagascar. The grayness and the lack of light that it implies contrast with the idea of Paris as the city of lights (Dessy 2011, 76). That her first impressions of Paris are defined by grayness suggests that her fears of not finding the Europe she has dreamed of are starting to materialize. As in Bugul’s novel, then, in Rakotoson’s text aeromobility does not seem to fulfill its promise of “un air d’ailleurs” (27) [an air of elsewhere]. By the time she arrives,

Sahondra has already started to adopt the behavior of frequent travelers, and, unlike Ilboudo's Cathy, she refrains from expressing naïve excitement: "[P]our ne pas faire touriste sous-développée, Sahondra prit l'air blasé et digne [...] tout en surveillant d'un œil anxieux les mouvements des passagers de l'avion, qui se préparaient à sortir" (28) [In order not to appear to be an underdeveloped tourist, Sahondra looked blasé and dignified while also watching with anxious eyes the movements of the other passengers who were preparing to leave]. The notion of "underdeveloped tourist" conveys the colonial biases informing modern mobilities, and the indifference that Sahondra wishes to perform is associated with being a Westernized, "modern" traveler. Her anxiety as she follows the gestures of the other passengers conveys the pressures of assimilation.

The transformation from being a former colonized subject into a "modern" air traveler is not easy: Sahondra feels lost at the airport—she cannot even handle the airport lexicon, as her troubled question suggests: "Un terminal, c'est quoi un terminal...?" (28) [A terminal, what is a terminal...?]. She tries to keep up with the pace of the crowd and becomes part of the anonymous masses of passengers, finding herself "propulsée dans un autre monde... lumière au néon, musique douce, magasins, magasins... parfums, foulards, vins fins" (29) [propelled into another world... neon lighting, soft music, shops, shops... perfumes, scarves, fine wines]. This "other world" of the global airport, imbued with consumer culture and lacking local identity, resonates with Augé's idea of airports as non-places of late modernity (Augé 1995). Sahondra observes seemingly bored people moving "vite [...] sans regarder personne" (31) [fast [...] without looking at anyone]. It is in this unwelcoming place that Sahondra realizes that her French penpal Marie, who is supposed to be there to meet her, is not at the airport. This causes a panicky reaction, conveyed in a stream-of-consciousness narration made up of accumulating sentences:

Une peur terrible, abjecte, qui lui donnait envie de hurler, de faire pipi, d'agripper un passant, n'importe lequel, mais à qui elle pourrait dire qu'elle avait peur, très peur, qu'elle était seule en France, que Marie n'était pas là et que même si elle était là, elle Sahondra ne savait pas qui était Marie, parce qu'elles ne se connaissaient que par lettres, que Sahondra avait rêvé du voyage, comme de la France, comme de Marie... (33)

A terrible, abject fear, which made her want to scream, pee, grab a passerby, anyone, someone to whom she could say that she was afraid, very afraid, that she was alone in France, that Marie was not there and that even if she was

there, she, Sahondra, did not know who Marie was, because they only know each other through correspondence, that Sahondra had dreamed of the trip, as of France, as of Marie...

The out-of-breath impression generated through the accumulation of feelings and observations seems to heighten the speed of the narrative (Hume 2005, 107). Rakotoson's novel gives voice to a panicky poetics of mobility—much like Kihindou's text. The out-of-breath narration conveys not only the hypermobility of the global airport environment but also the panic that characterizes the protagonist's experience of being an arriving, inexperienced passenger in a new place, with no one to rely on. There is, in short, a connection between internal (mind) and external (airport) spaces and their hectic movements (see Thacker 2003, 5). The airport scene culminates in an image of Sahondra dragging her heavy baggage in search of a service counter to ask for help. While the aeromobility passage does not promise an easy start to her new life in France, it does point to her courage as someone thrown into a new environment, and her determination to claim the metropolitan center as her own. Interestingly, the motif of the heavy baggage, embodying the frictional mobilities of African student newcomers toward and in the metropolitan center, recurs in portrayals of the Paris Metro, as the following section on students' urban mobilities shows.

METROPOLITAN MOBILITIES OF STUDENT NEWCOMERS

The Paris Metro

The meanings of cities are constituted through the mobility practices and mobile infrastructures people engage with (Jensen 2009, 140). Underground railroad networks are urban mobility systems and key sites for producing meanings of the city. Urban mobilities also play an important role in generating urban identities (Freudendal-Pedersen et al. 2020, 4). The Paris Metro is an emblematic setting in Francophone African fiction depicting newcomers' experiences of the metropolis. Embodiment of technological development, the Metro, despite running under the ground, is often represented as a place of bright lights—imagery that captures the idea of Paris as the city of lights (Dessy 2011, 74, 79). The name of the Paris Metro, *Le Métropolitain*, and its association with the metropolis evokes ideas of centrality so that the Metro can be seen to be in a metonymical relation with Paris. The underground system in Paris is

centralized and in line with the early nineteenth-century fortifications around the city. This in-built idea of the centrality of the Paris Metro and the division of the city into central, *intra-muros* spaces and peripheral, suburban localities (*banlieue*) (Moji 2022, 3) is also reflected in the Metro map, which, with its graphic design, “tells users quite clearly whether they are in Paris or out” (Schwetman 2014, 93). Generally speaking, the Metro serves the center, while the suburban train RER (*Réseau Express Régional*), built in the 1960s and 1970s, runs between intramural Paris and the suburbs. The intersecting Metro and RER lines underline the “segregated urban form” of Paris (Andersson 2013, 698) that “spatialises racial difference” (Moji 2022, 98): the *banlieues* with which the RER is associated are often represented as socially deprived environments whose residents consist mainly of migrants of North and sub-Saharan African origin (Horvath 2018, 1). The idea of the centrality of the Metro is built on class and ethnic difference.

According to Koffi Anyinefa, the Paris Metro is a symbol of colonial modernity and an object of postcolonial exoticism, and traveling in it represents an initiation rite for African newcomers (2003, 82, 85). The newcomer can fail in this rite of initiation in a dramatic way, as suggested by Rachid Boudjedra’s novel *Topographie pour une agression caractérisée* (1975): the protagonist gets lost in the subterranean maze for 12 hours, and when he finally finds his way out, he is killed by a group of racists (see Anyinefa 2003, 85–90; Mullen 2012; Rosello 2016; Yoshioka-Maxwell 2018). While the descriptions of travel in the Paris Metro discussed here do not entail such extreme experiences of straying, and while they do not have such a fatally violent outcome as in Boudjedra’s novel, the Metro is clearly a place of disorientation. The views of Paris from the Metro and from the perspective of the African student newcomer are marked by a sense of alienation and outsidership in two ways: “literally from under the ground and figuratively from a subaltern position”, as Polo B. Moji writes (2022, 125). Indeed, the view of Paris as seen from the Metro, a space vertically distanced from the city, is liable to produce a “peripheralised vision” of the metropolis (Toivanen 2023a). Seen from the underground, Paris loses at least some of its mythical status in most of the texts analyzed here. The progress and modernity that the Metro is supposed to embody do not necessarily generate unimpeded urban mobilities. Instead, the texts highlight moments of waiting and deferral as the “flipside of mobility” (Singer et al. 2019, 3) and attract attention to the fact that “modern” mobility is also about deceleration (Dennis et al. 2018, 8).

While the student newcomers' experiences of the Paris Metro are marked by alienation and disorientation, they strive to learn to handle the mobility system so that they can manage the city. This sort of exercise can be exemplified with the protagonist Cathy in Ilboudo's *Le Mal de peau*. The narrative states that Cathy "avait hâte de faire [...] connaissance avec Paris" [was eager to get to know Paris] (61), describing how she engages in exploring the city so that eventually, "le métro n'eut plus de secret pour elle" (61–62) [the Metro no longer had any secrets for her]. In Rakotoson's *Elle, au printemps*, Sahondra engages in a similar learning project and in the end, "Paris n'a presque plus de secrets pour elle" (56) [Paris has almost no other secrets for her]. Such "urban apprenticeship" (Buhr 2018, 340) is a recurrent element in African student newcomers' encounters with the Metro. The wider contextual background of educational mobility intersects with a smaller-scale process of learning that is likewise facilitated by mobility and that leads to the newcomer's capacity to navigate the urban space. The overlapping of Afro-European educational mobility with urban mobile apprenticeship underlines the importance of understanding mobilities relationally and across scales. The experiences of the Paris Metro of student newcomers are more than simply being trivial or banal. In his description of literary representations of underground journeys in Barcelona, Enric Bou writes that the texts he discusses "focus on the fact that they are short journeys in the company of strangers, thus emphasizing anonymity, combination of bright lights in stations with the darkness of tunnels, monotony of the journey, scrutiny of fellow travellers, reading, sleeping, daydreaming" (2016, 365). While many of these elements are alluded to in the narratives of student newcomers' first encounters with the Parisian underground network, the texts foreground experiences that are far removed from what could be described as the urban *blasé* attitude. The figure of the newcomer enables new insights that lie beyond the alleged triviality of urban public transport.

None of the texts discussed here adopts the Paris Metro as a main setting. As with many mobility practices discussed in this book, the passages containing portrayals of the Metro are not very extensive in terms of narrative time. Despite their marginality, these portrayals provide insights into how modern, Western modes of transport are experienced by newly arrived African passengers. Readings of such textual fragments enrich the existing body of critical work that deals with the meanings and narrative uses of the underground primarily in Western literary traditions (see, e.g., Thacker 2003; Welsh 2010; Hwang 2013; Ahonen 2015; Bou 2016;

Lamer and Breux 2018; Eldelin and Nyblom 2021). I focus on the portrayals of the Paris Metro in Loba's *Kocoumbo, l'étudiant noir* (1960), Laye's *Dramouss* (1966), Gisèle Hountondji's *Une Citronnelle dans la neige* (1987), Rakotoson's *Elle, au printemps* (1996), and Kihindou's *Chêne de bambou* (2013). While the texts represent first- (Loba; Laye), second- (Hountondji; Rakotoson), and third-generation (Kihindou) African authors, their portrayals of the Metro do not radically differ from each other. Recurrent elements include the incomprehensibility of the mobility system, often expressed in the characters' inability to "read" and "speak" the Metro (see Rosello 2016, 78), and also in the motif of the heavy baggage and in anxious internal monologues, all of which reflect the hypermobile metropolitan environment. The decreasing importance of the underground setting as the story proceeds marks the transition of the meanings of the Metro from the realm of the extraordinary to that of the everyday and the banal.

Enthusiastic in the Metro: Kocoumbo, l'étudiant noir

Loba's *Kocoumbo, l'étudiant noir* is a story about a young man who leaves Ivory Coast to pursue his studies in Paris. The opening of the novel describes his life in his native village while showing how the community is affected by colonialization. The presence of colonial modernity in the protagonist's village is conveyed through allusions to the colonial school and aeromobility (Ní Loingsigh 2009, 55). Loba's novel offers material for understanding the power of education in the colonial project, but it is equally interesting for a mobilities-oriented reading focusing on the meanings and narrative uses of modes of transport. With its portrayal of the protagonist's voyage on a ship to Marseille, *Kocoumbo* "devotes a certain amount of space to the student's physical journey to France" (Ní Loingsigh 2009, 54). In addition to the representation of the maritime passage, the novel contains a portrayal of a train journey from Marseille to Paris, which is followed by a scene in which the protagonist finds himself traveling in the Paris Metro for the first time. It seems that *Kocoumbo*, after getting off the train in "un épais brouillard [qui] rendait toutes choses indistinctes" (88) [a thick fog that rendered everything unclear], accidentally ends up at the entrance of the Metro tunnel that leads to the platform. The image of the fog embodies his disorientation in his new environment and his limited capacity to grasp Paris—it is as if the city refused to unveil its secrets. The fog evokes the image of the mist in the portrayal of the

protagonist's aeromobile arrival in *Dramouss*, where the narrative mentions "un épais brouillard" (58) ["a thick mist" (39)] through which the Air France aircraft flies as it approaches Paris.

It is only when the protagonist asks a passerby for confirmation that he understands that he is indeed near the entrance to the Metro. Compared to the cold weather outside, the warm air from the underground tunnel feels welcoming, so by following a passerby's advice, Kocumbo purchases his ticket. As he approaches the platform, the narrative conveys his naïve excitement by means of a sudden change from the third to the first-person singular, the abundant use of exclamation marks, and sudden shifts in the focus of attention. In doing so, the narrative articulates a sense of speed and the protagonist's excitement about modern mobility both at the level of the story and that of the discourse (see Baetens and Hume 2006, 351). Enthusiasm, as Allison Hui argues, is characteristic of mobilities in several ways—for instance, it pushes people forward (2014, 173, 179). For Loba's protagonist, his enthusiasm about the Metro motivates him to become a passenger. Kocumbo is in awe at the sight of the technological achievement that the Metro represents: "Quel beau plafond! Quelle belle voûte! [...] Ces carreaux blancs, sur le mur, quel travail! [...] Comme c'est ingénieux tout de même!" (89) [What a beautiful ceiling! What a beautiful vault! And those white tiles on the wall, what great work! How ingenious it all is!]. His admiration for the Metro is admiration for colonial modernity, as is demonstrated by his exclamations, "L'Européen travaille, c'est incontestable" [The European works, that's indisputable] and "[l'Européen] travaille pour tout le monde" (90) [the European works for everyone].

Kocumbo's strategy of following the examples provided by established users of the Metro when queuing at the ticket sales counter and waiting for the Metro to arrive (89) signals an assimilationist impulse and the beginning of the process of molding himself into a metropolitan mobile subject. The fog that has symbolized his disorientation earlier has become less dense by the time he reaches his destination at Bastille Station and exits the tunnel (90). The lifting of the fog conveys the idea of a decreasing sense of disorientation, suggesting that Kocumbo is already experiencing some success in the process of becoming of a mobile urbanite. In effect, his first journey in the Metro attests to his ability to "handle" the city and its mobile networks. When Kocumbo reaches the place where the family lives that has promised to help him to settle into his new life in

Paris, the son of the family finds it difficult to believe him when he says that he has managed to find his way to their home by himself and that he has taken the Metro on his own.

The ways in which Kocoumbo experiences the Metro are rather positive. There are no scenes of overt racism as in Ousmane Socé's *Mirages de Paris* (1937/1964) or Hountondji's *Une Citronnelle dans la neige* (1986), both of which feature passages set in the Metro in which the racial difference of the African protagonist is emphasized by apparently innocent comments made by white children.⁵ This said, Loba's protagonist is aware of the meanings of his racial difference: he is surprised by the politeness of French users of the Metro toward "des personnes autres que celles de leur propre race" (90) [people other than their own race]. However, as critics have highlighted (Ní Loingsigh 2009, 54; Treiber 2010, 40; Stäedtler 1999, 337), his naïve enthusiasm later assumes more critical tones.

Pressures of Assimilation and Failures to Understand the Metro: Dramouss

In Laye's *Dramouss* the protagonist arrives by airplane from Conakry, via Dakar, at Orly airport. From there he catches a coach to the Invalides in central Paris. At the Invalides he notices to his surprise that no one is there for him, and he suspects the reason to be a delayed telegram. The presumably delayed telegram has the narrative function of forcing the protagonist to enter the underground system on his own, in addition to which it captures the idea of unreliability of modern mobile technologies, i.e., the risk of systemic crashes inherent in modernity (Virilio 2007). This situation, produced by a technological dysfunction, evokes the distressing aeromobile arrivals of Rakotoson's and Kihindou's protagonists discussed in the previous section. To his relief, Laye's protagonist-narrator perceives a fellow African student and asks him how to go to Argenteuil, a Parisian suburb that the protagonist mistakes for a provincial town. The fellow student's words are, however, of little help: "Ce n'est pas compliqué pour y aller. Tu n'as qu'à prendre le métro" (60) ["You'll have no difficulty getting there. Just take the metro" (40)]. The narrator's reaction to this advice

⁵These passages evoke Frantz Fanon's discussion of the objectification of Blackness through the exclamation, "Tiens, un nègre!" [Look, a Negro!] in *Peanu noire, masques blancs* (1952).

reads: “je ne comprenais pas très bien ces explications” (60) [“I was having trouble following his explanations” (40)]. The whole concept of the Metro makes no sense to him or, to use Mireille Rosello’s formulation, he cannot “read the Metro” (2016, 78).

In much the same way as Christopher Schaberg’s reference to “the textual life of airports” (2011, 2), textual practices are pivotal with respect to the Metro. According to Augé, “to speak of the metro first all means to speak of reading and cartography” (2002, 9). Furthermore, as Adeline Wrona (2008, n.p.) stresses, the user of the Metro is immersed in a space of signs that consists of maps and textual signposts of the mobility system itself, but also of posters on the walls. To this “textual life of the Metro” (cf. Schaberg 2011) one could also add the circulation and consumption of literature as part of the experience of passengering (see Huck 2012) and, as the texts discussed in this chapter suggest, the act of translation of the Metro system and underground transit maps to the inexperienced traveler. In *Dramouss*, this translation produces a new meaning of the Metro that makes it more comprehensible to the newcomer. The fellow student uses the metonymy of the hole (*trou*) to explain the underground network to the protagonist: “Tiens! Descends dans le trou là, tout proche, et suis la foule... (60)” [“Look! Go down that hole there, just over there, and follow the crowd...” (40)]. The protagonist adopts the metonymy of the hole and uses it himself later in the same passage. The advice to follow the crowd evokes Loba’s novel, in which the newcomer follows the example of other passengers to handle the unfamiliar, hectic environment but also to symbolically initiate the process of becoming a modern, mobile metropolitan subject as part of the “giant, adjusted and inhuman mechanism” of urbanites (Garnier 2012, 117; my translation). In this respect, both texts highlight the systemic aspects of mobility and the way in which being mobile is always “about being mobile-with” (Adey 2010, 18) and that people “travel *with* other bodies, technologies and vehicles” (Merriman 2012, 13; original emphasis). The process of becoming part of the moving masses marks a shift beyond the idea of “solitary individuals on the move” (Adey et al. 2012, 171), and thus *Dramouss* also embodies the relative lack of agency and the limits imposed by the context of colonial power structures to which Treiber (2010, 38) refers in his discussion of Afro-European educational mobilities.

The textual life of the Metro in terms of the newcomer’s inability to “read” the system recurs in Laye’s novel. When, instead of using the term “hole”, the narrator adopts the expression of “la bouche du métro” (62)

[“the jaws of the underground” (41)], which refers literally to the mouth of the Metro—a term that belongs to the standard Parisian underground lexicon—the expression appears within inverted commas. This suggests that the term makes little sense to the newcomer. Furthermore, when an unknown fellow passenger offers to help the protagonist with his baggage, he tells the protagonist that he has just come from Les Halles—a Metro station, but also the name of what used to be Paris’s central fresh food market. In response, the narrator states that “je ne comprenais pas parfaitement” (64) [“I did not understand him completely” (43)]. The protagonist’s difficulties in understanding the textuality of the Metro reflect his inability to make sense of the mobility system. The feeling of disorientation generated by this lack of understanding translates into despair and fear. After the departure of the fellow African student who has given the protagonist cursory advice about how to use the Metro, the protagonist finds himself “désespérément seul, mes affaires posées pêle-mêle autour de moi” (60) [“despairingly alone, my bags and possessions scattered at random at my feet” (40)]. This image evokes his solitariness and disorientation in the Metro and, by extension, in the metropolis. Immobile, the protagonist is surrounded by his baggage in an environment that is characterized by “un bourdonnement continu” (62) [“a continual rumbling” (41)], and his mind is racing: “Ma pensée voltigeait” (61) [“My thoughts continued to roam” (41)]. What follows is an internal monologue in the course of which the protagonist thinks about his family members—his memories of them provide him with strength in the midst of his disorientation—and about what his fellow African students have told him about Paris. The hectic speed of the environment and of his thoughts connects internal and external spaces (Thacker 2003, 5), and the speed of his mind and his surroundings is contrasted with his physical immobility.

His troubled condition intensifies when he descends into “the hole”. The vague advice he has received make him feel insecure, up to the point at which “j’hésitais réellement à avancer; [...] j’étais prêt à rebrousser chemin” (62) [“I was really wondering whether I should go on; I was thinking of retracing my steps” (42)]. His urge to turn back would have involved the idea of moving against the flow of the users of the Metro, attesting to how his metropolitan mobilities are marked by friction, a concept that highlights the moments of inertia and pause while being on the move and that causes “differential mobilities” (Cresswell 2014, 108). This imagery of friction can also be read as the newcomer’s difficulties in

claiming the position of the modern, mobile metropolitan subject. Frictional mobility differentiates him from the established users of the Metro, who, in Augé's description, are "easily recognized by the elegant and natural economy of [their] walking" (2002, 6). "Je vois que vous ne connaissez pas le coin" (63) ["I see you don't know your way around in these parts" (42)], states a man who approaches him, confirming that the protagonist's sense of disorientation is obvious to other passengers as well. The protagonist's encounter with the man leads to the latter helping him carry his baggage, and, eventually, to an unexpected manifestation of anti-colonial solidarity (Toivanen 2023b, 3072–3073).

Initially, however, the protagonist is terrified by being approached by a stranger in the underground. The scene, in which the narrator walks in the company of the stranger in what seems to be an endless tunnel, is marked by the newcomer's feelings of fear, unease, and disgust (Laye 1966, 66), conveyed, again, in the form of a distressing internal monologue. In his mind, the narrator repeats the words of a colonial officer, warning him about solitary men in big cities—"ce sont des brigands" (63) ["they're up to no good" (45)]⁶—and wonders whether the stranger wants to knock him out and rob him. Again, the protagonist feels like turning back, but this is out of question because he does not want to run "le risque d'avoir l'air ridicule" (65) ["the risk of appearing ridiculous" (43)]. That he prefers to walk forward in the tunnel with a man whom he suspects may be a violent criminal, rather than leaving and thus running the risk of being looked at, is telling of the power of the pressures of assimilation.

Laye's portrayal of the Metro ride resorts to the conventional imagery of the alienating aspects of modern urban public transport mobilities (Toivanen 2023b, 8)—elements that are not uniquely typical of narratives involving African newcomers nor specifically illustrative of the modernity-coloniality connection. One final detail that I want to address here is the motif of baggage, which recurs a number of times in the text—in much the same way as in the previous analyses of student newcomers' aeromobilities. In *Dramous* the baggage the student newcomer carries is heavy and difficult to manage. The motif of the heavy baggage conveys the idea of frictional mobility—the baggage slows the protagonist down and exhausts him physically, as can be seen in the way in which he is

⁶A similar fear features in *Kocoumbo*, where the protagonist has been warned about the dangers of Marseille. Consequently, his walks in the city are characterized by almost comical cautiousness toward the people he encounters.

“préoccupé par le poids de mes valises” (69) [“preoccupied by the weight of my suitcases” (46)] as he walks along. It is noteworthy that the narrative mentions that the heavier suitcase contains his books (63). This very tangibly renders the symbolism of the burden of colonial education carried by the newly arrived African student.

Hountondji: Hurry, Waiting, Transit Maps

Like Loba’s and Laye’s texts, Hountondji’s *Une Citronnelle dans la neige* [Lemongrass in the snow] is a narrative of Afro-European student mobility with autobiographical elements. It opens with the Beninese protagonist, Gisèle, arriving at Bourget Airport, near Paris. The beginning is fast paced: the reader is immediately immersed in the protagonist’s new life in the metropolis. In the short airport scene at the start of the novel, Gisèle struggles to understand a passerby’s advice about where she can retrieve her suitcases. When she finally manages to find the right place, she has to wait 45 minutes before the baggage arrives. These two incidents, on the one hand, her difficulties in understanding the airport—a place of modern mobility—and, on the other, her waiting, capture the key elements of the novel’s poetics of mobility. The urban environment and its mobility systems are represented as hectic, but the protagonist’s difficulties in understanding how to navigate the city and the recurrent act of waiting both convey the idea of frictional mobility. Initially, the plot is driven by Gisèle’s difficulties with French bureaucracy and by her struggle to find a place to live. Illustrative of her bureaucracy-driven urban mobilities are scenes in which she is first portrayed as in a hurry as if she were running late for an important appointment, and then in the next instant she finds herself waiting in a queue only to learn that the place to retrieve the various relevant documents is not at the counter at which she has been queuing.⁷ The recurrent imagery, relying not only on the notion of hurry but also that of waiting, captures the essence of modernity (Dennis et al. 2018, 9; Singer et al. 2019, 5) and conveys an image of Paris as a place of modernity stripped of its idealism of functionality.

Gisèle’s metropolitan mobilities require the use of the Metro. She is unsure about her ability to orient herself in Paris; the idea of having to take the Metro frightens her (14). It is her France-based brother who buys her

⁷ Bessora’s novel *53 cm* (1999) features similar descriptions of the protagonist’s struggles with French bureaucracy (Moji 2022, 110–131).

a map of the city and tells her how the Metro works, after which she is on her own: “débrouille-toi” (16) [Find your way around], her brother tells her. The notion of *débrouillardise* recurs throughout the text; it is a term that is used in Francophone sub-Saharan Africa to refer to resourcefulness. *Débrouillardise* can also be applied to the creative ability of migrants to manage and make sense of their new urban environments through everyday mobility (Toivanen 2021, 117–119). In a similar vein, Hannah Grayson associates *débrouillardise* with being streetwise, and links the notion to everyday mobility: “the readiness to move is to be seen as one part of *débrouillardise*” (2018, 514). This attitude characterizes the urban mobilities of Hountondji’s protagonist. Her *débrouillardise* evokes Sahondra in *Elle, au printemps*, who frequently refers to her metropolitan pursuit as “[une] aventure, avec une valise” (Rakotoson 1996, 9) [an adventure, with one suitcase], although it should also be specified that the baggage in question weighs “30 kilos et des poussières aussi lourds que des pavés” (39) [30 kilos and counting, as heavy as paving-stones]. Despite Gisèle’s initial fear, there is a dynamic, *débrouillard* side to her approach to learning how to make sense of Paris through mobility. The notion of *débrouillardise* is related to that of adventuring, which is associated with clandestine migratory pursuits from Africa to Europe, but which also more generally connotes the idea of trying one’s luck somewhere else—in another city, for instance (Mazauric 2016, 50–51). If in *Elle, au printemps* Sahondra is explicitly referred to as a female adventurer, in *Citronnelle* Gisèle does not qualify herself as such but seems to think that there are no female adventurers: she claims that she has never met Black women “qui débarquent en France [...] en aventurières, à la recherche d’un emploi” (46) [who would have come to France as adventurers looking for a job]. Nevertheless, I see both Rakotoson’s and Hountondji’s main characters as female versions of the prominently masculine figure of the adventurer: instead of the context of work-motivated migration and clandestine migratory pursuits (see Mazauric 2016, 35–72), the adventurer emerges in the context of educational mobility.⁸

Citronnelle, like *Dramouss*, features the motif of heavy baggage. The protagonist is portrayed dragging her suitcase in Paris. On her way to the Metro she notes to her surprise that no one offers to help her. The scene

⁸The notion of adventure does not have to be limited to precarious mobilities such as clandestine migration or underprivileged rural-urban mobilities. As Mazauric mentions, adventuring is explicitly reflected in the title of Kane’s *L’Aventure ambiguë* (1961), which is a narrative of educational mobility (2016, 51).

captures the general lack of support that African student newcomers encounter in France, but the motif of the heavy baggage can also be read as an embodiment of the burden of colonial education—a link that *Dramouss* makes explicit. In *Citronnelle*, the problematic “contents” of the baggage—colonial education—are frequently displayed, since the narrative highlights the discrepancies between the protagonist’s expectations and the reality of the metropolis. One example of this occurs when, after having observed a racist scene in the Metro, the first-person narrator states: “Les Français ne sont donc pas si tolérants, me dis-je, en pensant aux auteurs littéraires que j’avais lus en Afrique avant de venir” (44) [So the French are not that tolerant after all, I tell myself, thinking of the authors I had read in Africa before coming here]. The protagonist’s metropolitan mobilities include experiences of overt racism, such as children being afraid of her skin color (44), car-drivers hurling racist insults at her (51), elderly white women commenting on her hair (64–65), and a scene in which she witnesses an old lady refusing to take a seat next to a young Black man in the Metro (76–77). These incidents reveal the racialized limits of metropolitan mobile subjectivity and contribute to the frictional qualities of the urban displacements of the African student.

Hountondji’s portrayal of the Metro, however, is not limited to seeing it as a space involving racialization and expressions of racism. For the protagonist, the Metro represents the personal challenge of claiming the city as her own. Gisèle’s first experiences of the Paris Metro articulate her uncertainty but also her determination to understand her location on the transit map:

Nous sommes à Maubert Mutualité. Donc je vais en direction de la Porte d’Auteuil et je fais une correspondance à Duroc pour descendre à la Porte de Vanves. Ah! Je commence à comprendre enfin comment fonctionne le métro! (19)

We are at Maubert Mutualité. So I now go in the direction of Porte d’Auteuil and change at Duroc to get off at Porte de Vanves. I’m starting to understand how the Metro works!

This description of the route reproduces an itinerary following the Metro lines 10 and 13, and its impersonal tone reflects what Augé identifies as characteristic of “the statements [that the underground map] authorizes” and that “underline at once the general nature of the schema, the automaticity of its design, and the repetitive character of its use” (2002, 28). By adopting the impersonal “language of the transit map”, it is as if the

narrator was explaining her whereabouts to herself and how she could reach her destination, revealing her desire to reassure herself of her ability to handle the Metro. The repetition of some of the details of the Metro map generates a sense of place but also of movement, translating the protagonist's displacements into literary form and conveying their ideally smooth quality. Such internal monologues containing the names of the stations on a particular Metro line attest to the way in which the Metro map can become a tool for understanding the city and how "getting to know a city by using the metro is a journey taken in accompanied solitude, a voyage through space and through a kind of geographically mapped collective unconscious" (Bou 2016, 356). For newcomers in the city, using the Metro is a process of "urban apprenticeship" (Buhr 2018, 340). Eventually, at a certain phase in the learning process, the narrator is in the position to claim that "Maintenant je connais parfaitement le métro: je peux m'y diriger toute seule, rien qu'en consultant une carte" (49) [Now I know the Metro perfectly: I can orient myself in it all alone, just by consulting my map]. While her enthusiasm may be premature in the sense that the Metro map's representation of the city is a simplification and distinct from the urban space above (Bou 2016, 356), Gisèle is represented as competent and confident in her ability to handle the city—both above *and* underground. When she wishes to find her way to a street address, she rather effortlessly identifies the closest Metro station and the connection: "Voyons donc. Rue Léopold-Robert, c'est... c'est... métro Raspail. Ah, ce n'est pas loin d'ici. Il faudra changer à Odéon" (50) [Let's see. Rue Léopold-Robert, it's... it's... Metro Raspail. It's not far from here. I have to change at Odéon]. The ellipses in "c'est... c'est..." marks the pause in her quick consultation of the city map—a moment of hesitation that differentiates the newcomer's urban mobilities from the routine itineraries of established passengers.

However, urban mobilities can be frictional even when an individual passenger handles the system. In one scene, the protagonist misses the Metro because of an out-of-date ticket that denies access to the platform. Instead of immediately catching the Metro, therefore, she first queues at the ticket office to purchase a new ticket and then to get it stamped. Queuing, as Gillian Fuller writes, "is the slow dance of the everyday" that occurs "at any place where traffic [...] congregates" (2014, 205–206). Queuing is an embodied practice and a form of control, but also an inherently mobile, ephemeral infrastructure (Fuller 2014, 211) that captures

the continuum of movement and deceleration. The Metro station, a place of transit and a mobile infrastructure supposed to enable rapid displacements in the city, is also a place of halt and pause—an image that captures the narrative’s constant oscillation between hectic movement and waiting. Public transport is characterized by the “inseparable relationship of speed and friction that has become increasingly tension-filled against the background of modern aspirations of time-efficiency and acceleration” (Kellermann 2020, 151). The modern ideal of “seamless travel” is an impossibility because modern mobilities necessarily entail infrastructural friction (Kellermann 2020, 145). Illustrative of such infrastructural delays and dysfunctions are descriptions in which the Metro unexpectedly stops in the tunnel, causing the protagonist to miss an important meeting that is often related to bureaucratic procedures or housing (Hountondji 1986, 20). The narrative cites the standard, impersonal announcements made through the loudspeakers as instances of (spoken) Metro textuality. In one scene of systemic dysfunction, the train stops between stations. Here, the protagonist’s worry about being late is based on her understanding of the workings of the mobility network in terms of correspondences and her own current position on the transit map: “Le train subitement s’immobilise entre deux stations... entre Sèvres-Babylone et Odéon. Zut! Je vais être en retard! Surtout qu’il me reste une correspondance à faire à Sèvres-Babylone” (73–74) [Suddenly the train stops between two stations... between Sèvres-Babylone et Odéon. Damn! I’ll be late! Especially as I still have another Metro to catch at Sevrès-Babylone]. Urban mobility systems are represented as unreliable, and as such they stand in opposition to the modernist ideals of efficiency: instead of enabling smooth displacements in the city, they contribute to the stressful rhythms of metropolitan life that alternate between hurry and the fear of being late and moments of stagnation and waiting that mark the narrative especially in the early stages of the novel. This frictional quality of urban mobility is stressful for the protagonist because the delays disturb the execution of her diverse administrative chores that French bureaucracy imposes on her as an African student. Toward the end of the novel, the narrative loses some of its frantic rhythms. Simultaneously, descriptions of the Metro become less frequent, which is illustrative of how the protagonist has acquired sufficient knowledge of how to manage the mobility system. The diminishing narrative weight of the Metro signals that the transport has lost its extraordinary character and become a more trivial part of the protagonist’s everyday life.

Lost in the System: Elle, au printemps

The necessity to learn how to use the Metro—and to “read” and “speak” it—is also a key theme in Rakotoson’s *Elle, au printemps*. At the start of the novel the newly arrived protagonist stays at her cousin’s house and one of the family members gives her a short introduction to the use of the Metro:

Il [...] lui expliqua gentiment [...] comment il fallait qu’elle fasse pour prendre le métro, pour acheter ses tickets, les diverses catégories de tickets, comment se retrouver sur les plans, [...] lui indiqua les diverses stations de métro qu’elle aurait à prendre le plus fréquemment, et en fait, l’introduisit dans sa société. (46)

He kindly explained to her how she had to do to take the Metro, to buy her tickets, the various categories of tickers, how to position herself on the map, he indicated to her the many Metro stations she would have to use most frequently, and, in fact, he introduced her to his society.

The long list of technicalities to master that are required of a Metro-user conveys both the complexity of the rules governing the transit system and the overwhelming effect of this complexity on the newcomer. Moreover, as the quotation suggests, knowing how to move in a city by using its mobility systems is an important part of being able to feel part of society. For Sahondra, this learning process is far from easy, but she is nevertheless ready to immerse herself in the effort: “Elle fit quelques pas pour dompter la peur, pour s’habituer à Paris” (60) [She took a few steps to tame her fear and to get used to Paris]. Mobility becomes a remedy for the fears that it generates.

For Sahondra, the Metro is not only “[un] univers glauque et surréaliste” (54) [a gloomy and surreal universe]; orienting oneself within it is also difficult, even with the help of the Metro map and “un petit bout de papier” [a small piece of paper] on which her cousin has written the names of the stations on her itinerary (55). This piece of paper and its description of the itinerary in a supposedly simplified form is a motif that features in Boudjedra’s *Topographie idéale pour une agression caractérisée* (1975). As Rosello emphasizes in her discussion of such “simplified” maps, “‘giving directions’ is pointless when the protagonists are not already on the same map” (2016, 88). Unlike in Hountondji’s novel, the list of names of Metro stations in Rakotoson’s text is less a manifestation of the protagonist’s ability to handle the mobility system and situate herself on the transit

map than a panicky recital of meaningless words: “Vavin, Pigalle, Crimée, Saint-Augustin, Barbès, Château Rouge” (55). In effect, the automated list of stations is followed by another sort of recital: “Elle va pleurer, elle va pleurer...” (55) [She’s going to cry, she’s going to cry...]. The impersonal, automated language of the transit map is contrasted with an overwhelming feeling of desperation: the narrator’s repetitive words read as an incantation to keep back her tears. This passage captures well the coexistence of the systemic, non-human qualities of mobility and the emotions and consciousness of the individual on the move into which literary texts permit a privileged entry (Pearce 2020, 209). Her emotional response to passengering has nothing to do with the notions of passivity and boredom that inform popular representations of the figure of the commuter, that is, an urban traveler with well-developed mobile routines (Edensor 2013, 198). One of Sahondra’s early experiences of the Metro feels at least as senseless as the “user’s instructions” that she has received. The universe of the Metro is absurd and frightening:

Et les Blancs sont peut-être fous, mais ils sont surtout sadiques, il faut avoir une drôle d’imagination pour avoir créé ce machin-truc-chose, cet entrelacement de boyaux, de couloirs et autres labyrinthes, où respirer semble relever d’un exercice surnaturel, où il faut se mouvoir à la lumière de lampes électriques ou autres qui vous font la mine pâle et fatiguée, et se mettre à courir derrière des hommes et des femmes qui se gardent bien de vous regarder. (54)

And the white people may be crazy, but they are above all sadists; one must have a strange imagination to have created this thingamajig, this interlacing of entrails, of corridors and other mazes, where breathing seems to be a supernatural exercise and where you have to move under the light of electric lamps or other lights that make you look pale and tired, and where you have to start running behind men and women who are doing their best to not to look at you.

This description evokes the idea of the Metro as an underworld detached from the surface level of the city and “associated with death or with irrational [...] energies” (Eldelin and Nyblom 2021, 52; see also Pike 2007, 1). Indeed, as John D. Schwetman suggests, “to travel on the grade-separated transit system is to leave the plane of the actual city and enter the alternative universe of the system with rules and visual hierarchies unique to itself” (2014, 97). The alienating aspects of the Paris Metro—or the metropolitan environment in general—are of course not unique to narratives focusing on African newcomers. Similar experiences can be found in

portrayals of French rural or provincial characters, as exemplified by Raymond Queneau's novel *Zazie dans le métro* (1959). It is, however, noteworthy that in the quotation above, the narration connects the absurd and distressing qualities of the Metro explicitly with whiteness. In doing so, the narrative suggests that the absurdity of the Metro results from colonial modernity and points at the roots of the newcomer's alienation in the mobility system. In moments of distress in the absurd, hectic urban environment, Sahondra starts to think of her grandmother and imagine what she would say (54). This strategy of self-reassurance also features in *Dramouss*: thinking of home in the alienating underground environment gives the disoriented newcomer the strength to manage, *se débrouiller*.

If transit maps are supposed to “mitigate [the] complexity [of the modern city] to assure urbanites that the city conceptually manageable” (Schwetman 2014, 87), Sahondra's experience of Metro maps does not resonate with such a definition. She gets lost in the tunnels, and once she manages to find her way out after several hours of wandering, “Elle n'a pas de repères, aucun repère” (55) [She does not have reference points, any reference points]. Her disoriented underground adventure disconnects her from the surface level of the city, rendering the above-ground equally complicated to navigate. Instead of facilitating displacements, the underground is a maze in which to become lost—and not only in terms of space but also of time: “Elle a mis trois heures pour s'orienter dans le métro... trois heures” (56) [It has taken her three hours to orient herself in the Metro... three hours]. The newcomer, an unaccustomed user of the Metro, experiences a distortion in the temporal rules of the underground system: a sense of speed and hurry give way to a stretch of time. The underground is indeed an environment where the “normal rules of space and time do not quite apply” (Schwetman 2014, 100). The Metro wastes her time, although not in the conventional sense that would regard “the journey time [a]s wasted time” (Dennis et al. 2018, 6; Kellermann 2020, 144), but rather in how her straying in the tunnels for several hours condemns her to a spatiotemporal limbo. Boudjedra's protagonist's aimless wandering around the Metro tunnels resonates with Rakotoson's portrayal of the same environment: “The metro is not seen as a means of transportation that takes passengers to their destinations. It is a self-contained underground universe where the migrant endlessly suffers” (Rosello 2016, 78). While the suffering of Boudjedra's protagonist is on another level—he is murdered when he manages to find an exit—for

Sahondra the Metro loses its function as a transit system that enables efficient displacements in the city. As Moji points out, it is helpful to “think of the metro [as] signifier of estrangement – suspended in time – between two locations”, thus capturing the feeling of being “out of space” experienced by the racialized urban traveler (2022, 125). While the underground environment is hard to master and while advice received from other passengers is not helpful, expressions of empathy seem to render the environment easier to handle. This is suggested in the novel’s portrayal of an encounter in the Metro tunnel between Sahondra and an elderly woman: “[La vieille dame] lui expliqua gentiment sa route, racontant comment elle aussi s’était sentie aussi perdue dans ces couloirs de métro” (39) [The old lady kindly explained the itinerary to her, telling how she, too, had felt lost in the corridors of the Metro].

On the extra-muros Transit Map: Chêne de bambou

The link between urban apprenticeship through mobility (Buhr 2018) and the textuality of the underground environment (Augé 2002, 9; Wrona 2008; Rosello 2016) is further stressed in Kihindou’s *Chêne de bambou*. The novel features a short description of the student newcomer’s first journey in the Parisian urban railway system as she travels from Orly Airport to the city center by taking the RER line B. While the narrative does not explicitly mention that it is question of an RER line, the point of departure (Roissy) and the cited stations help readers to identify the line in question. The presence of the RER differentiates Kihindou’s novel from the earlier student narratives discussed above. In the other texts, the newcomers arriving at Orly travel to Paris by coach, which reflects the fact that the airport was connected to Antony RER station by a light rail shuttle in 1991, that is, later than the publication date or the temporal context within which the novels by Laye, Hountondji, and Rakotoson are set.

The allusion to the RER line draws attention to the distinction between locations outside intramural Paris and the Metro lines that operate in the center. The text’s reference to the RER line, which serves not only the passengers traveling from the airport but also the residents of the Parisian suburbs, moves beyond understandings of Paris as a city in which Black Metro users are more of an exception, as suggested by mid-twentieth-century student narratives. Indeed, in Kihindou’s novel, the protagonist’s experience of travel by metropolitan public transport draws a picture of

Paris as an ethnically diverse city. The passengers around her are “des voyageurs cosmopolites: des Européens, des Asiatiques, des Noirs” (16) [cosmopolitan travelers: Europeans, Asians, Blacks]. While some of the passengers are tourists visiting Paris, at an unnamed station a Black passenger enters the carriage, speaking the narrator’s native language Lingala. The protagonist rejoices over the fact that “l’Afrique [est] venue à sa rencontre à travers une de ses langues” (17) [Africa has come to meet her through one of its languages]. As mentioned, the dichotomy between the Metro, which serves intramural Paris, and the RER, which serves the Parisian suburbs, attests to the city’s divisive urban geography based on the spatialization of racial difference (Mojj 2022, 98) and social class (Enright 2016, 44). However, for the student in Kihindou’s novel the presence of a passenger who speaks her language makes her arrival a far less alienating experience than that represented in, for instance, *Elle, au printemps*.

As in the other texts discussed above, the description of the newcomer’s ride in the RER from the airport demonstrates the necessity of being able to situate oneself on the transit map while in motion: “À chaque station, elle s’assurait que le nom qu’elle lisait sur les murs de la gare correspondait bien à ce qui était mentionné sur sa carte” (16) [At each station, she made sure that the name she read on the wall of the station corresponded to the one mentioned on her map]. The narrative produces an underground map by citing the names of RER stations in the order in which they feature on line B: “Je descends dans trois stations. Il y a encore *Gentilly, Cité Universitaire*, puis ce sera *Denfert-Rochereau*” (16; italics in the original) [I’ll get off after three stations. There is still *Gentilly, Cité Universitaire*, and then it will be *Denfert-Rochereau*]. The use of the italics in the names underlines their importance for the protagonist in her attempt to handle the (sub)urban space through the mobility system, but it also adds a certain mythical aura to them. The narrative creates a sense of movement not only by reproducing the names of the stations on the RER line B and further, its intersection with Metro line 6, but also by describing the newcomer’s eyes “qui n’arrêtaient pas de se mouvoir, allant du plan au paysage qui défilait à travers la fenêtre, du paysage aux voyageurs qui l’entouraient” (16) [that kept moving from the map to the landscape that went by outside the window, and from the landscape to the passengers that surrounded her]. This sense of movement not only captures both the spaces within and outside of the carriage but also, by means of the map in the passenger’s hands and the names of the stations on the walls of the tunnel, the

textuality of the transit network that serves as a link between the internal and external spaces—the subject and the system.

The textual character of the underground is emphasized when the newcomer arrives at the connecting station and observes “des indications partout” (19) [the signs everywhere]. What puzzles her, however, is that the trains do not have line numbers on them. The fact that she refrains from asking another passenger about this because the question might appear “saugrenue” (20) [absurd] signals her unwillingness to be seen as an inexperienced user of the Metro and to run the risk of being deemed ridiculous. The necessity to act as if there were nothing new in the Metro evokes Laye’s newcomer, who has also not wanted to attract attention to himself by running against the flow of passengers. Scenes like this capture the pressures of assimilation that African student newcomers experience in the metropolis.

CONCLUSION

The mobilities of student newcomers in the metropolis are educational mobilities on two ways: first, in terms of the wider Afro-European context of education within which their mobilities are set, but then also in terms of practical, everyday displacements that are about learning to handle the metropolis. The position of the student newcomer implies a process of self-fashioning in which “modern” forms of mobility play a key role. Representations of transport in narratives of educational mobility are revealing of the burden of colonial power structures within which the newcomers operate as they travel toward and within the metropolis.

The aeromobilities of African student newcomers are marked by a sense of distress that is related to the experience of being an unaccustomed air traveler on the way to a new, yet highly emblematic, destination: the former colonial center. The colonial legacy of aeromobility generates unease in the inexperienced African air traveler, who is afraid of being taken for an “underdeveloped tourist”, as formulated in Rakotoson’s text. Manifestations of African “locality” seem to contradict the Westernized idea of a modern traveler, as Ilboudo’s novel suggests. The texts also convey the high expectations and hopes that students attach to Europe. However, the idea of a new beginning enabled by air travel undertaken to the metropolis is challenged in some of the narratives—Bugul’s aeromobility passage is the most obvious example of this. Passages representing aeromobility often open the narrative, marking narrative

transitions and apparent new beginnings. The texts translate the distressing effects of newcomers' aeromobilities into a literary form: the panicky monologues in Kihindou's and Rakotoson's texts embody the anxieties aroused in the inexperienced newcomer by the hypermobile airport, conveying a distressed form of poetics of mobility. Motifs of inappropriate or heavy baggage symbolize the expectations and challenges that the student travelers face in the process of becoming "modern" mobile subjects.

The Paris Metro features frequently in narratives of student mobility. It is a symbol of (colonial) modernity and of the centrality of Paris, and while some of the newcomers admire its technological superiority, it is mostly portrayed as an alienating environment where the newcomers' mobilities are slowed down and where they become lost as a result of their inability to understand the very concept of the Metro. Hurry/hypermobility and waiting/deceleration are sides of the same coin. The newcomers struggle with heavy baggage, and they are immersed in anxious, hypermobile internal monologues and try to make sense of simplified maps and itinerary advice. The panicky thoughts of the newcomers reflect the hypermobile urban environment, underlining the frictional quality or the state of limbo in which they find themselves. Internal (mind) and external (mobility system; urban space) movements are connected and attest to the coexistence of systemic and subjective functions and meanings of mobility. While the Metro is an alienating environment, the newcomers are determined to learn how to master it so as to be able to manage the city. The texts feature portrayals of newcomers consulting their maps and reciting the names of Metro stations. Such narrative strategies convey the idea of movement and position the protagonists on the transit map. As with aeromobility, the process of becoming a modern, mobile subject is not unproblematic: the texts' portrayals of the Paris Metro and their formal strategies bear witness to the frictional character of this transformation and highlight the exclusion of the African students from the discourses of modernity.

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Mobilities of African and Afroeuropean Leisure Travelers

TRAVEL FOR TRAVEL'S SAKE

Travel has been a central theme in African written and oral literatures (Mortimer 1990, 1; Fonkua 1998, 9; Khair 2006, 25–26; Balseiro and Rapola 2020; Agnessan and Coulibaly 2023). “Dominant discourses of travel” (Clifford 1997, 33), however, have failed to recognize Africans as travelers, reducing their mobilities to slave trade, migration, or intellectual movements (Ní Loingsigh 2009, 2–3; see also Yoshioka-Maxwell 2018, 148; Englert 2023, 128). Criticizing the stereotype that represents Africans as inherently immobile, Francis B. Nyamnjoh writes that “the impression is given that Africans are mobile only when things go wrong or others so desire” (2013, 659). The notions of travel and tourism, however, connote leisure and socio-economic privilege. As “less serious” forms of mobility, they have received limited critical attention (Greenblatt 2010, 251; Adey et al. 2014, 3). In postcolonial literary studies, the binarism between “serious” and “non-serious” forms of mobility informs the way in which underprivileged mobilities tend to attract more critical interest than leisure travel. This is understandable due to the urgency of some contemporary postcolonial mobilities such as coerced migration. Yet the mobilities of more privileged subjects are no less important if we are to understand the multiplicity and relationality of postcolonial mobilities.

Such a relational perspective is highlighted by the definition of tourism mobilities proposed by Mimi Sheller and John Urry: it “highlight[s] that many different mobilities inform tourism [and] shape the places where tourism is performed”, in addition to which it captures “the relational mobilizations of memories and performances, gendered and racialized bodies, emotions and atmospheres” (2004, 1).

Studies of tourism that apply a postcolonial perspective reveal that their authors have been primarily preoccupied with the colonial legacies of tourism in their focus on leisure travel undertaken by white, Western tourists in the Global South (see, e.g., Hazbun 2009; Kothari 2015; Phillips 2008; Wearing and Wearing 2006). Illustrative of this is Srilata Ravi’s description of “postcolonial critique of tourism” as a critical endeavor that “sees the tourist as one of the most virulent perpetrators of neo-imperialism, turning ‘the exotic’ natives into commodities and objects of curiosity” (2011, 220). Travelers from the Global South or racialized subjects from the Global North are only rarely recognized as tourists (for exceptions, see, e.g., Baidwan 2022; Boukhris 2017). In postcolonial literary studies, engagements with tourism follow similar patterns (see, e.g., Beriault, 2017; Carrigan 2011; Osagie and Buzinde 2011). Analyses focusing on “postcolonial tourists” in critical literature remain scarce—studies by Aedín Ní Loingsigh (2003, 2009) constitute an exception, also in the sense that she emphasizes the congruences between migration and tourism. According to Ní Loingsigh, given the strict binary between migration and tourism and the latter’s association with “the pursuit of pleasure”, comparing the two “may appear disingenuous” (2003, 155). Yet both groups are imagined as uncontrollable masses and threats to “‘authentic’ cultural and social practices” (Ní Loingsigh 2003, 163). That said, while the tourist is conceived as white or “Western”, the migrant is a racialized, non-Western subject (Ní Loingsigh 2003, 163).

In Francophone African literatures the most obvious places to look for “travel for travel’s sake” are travelogues. Apart from narrative non-fiction, portrayals of African or Afro-European leisure travel are less recurrent and tend to occupy a marginal position in the narrative. However, such fictional texts answer Maureen Amimo’s call for the “need to re-conceptualise what qualifies as travel in order to recover a lot of African travel and travel writing” (2020, 160). In similar vein, Ní Loingsigh emphasizes the necessity to “uncover neglected practitioners of travel” and to recognize that, “despite its frequently cited associations with colonialism, gender and class privilege, [travel] is too diverse and multiform to be reduced to any simple

definition” (2003, 156). According to Amimo (2020, 160), the diversification of the meanings of travel is also pivotal in the attempt to move beyond conventional Western understandings of travel writing. In effect, Western-based generic criteria have contributed to the exclusion of African authors from the genre (Forsdick 2005, 202; Khair 2006, 26; Ní Loingsigh 2016, 185–188). Postcolonial approaches, in contrast, have brought African and Black travel writing into the limelight (see, e.g., Ní Loingsigh 2009; Moynagh 2015; Jones 2019a; Amimo 2019; Kalous 2022), and have underlined the relational character of the notion of travel by, for instance, foregrounding narrativizations of travel as experienced by paperless African migrants (Yoshioka-Maxwell 2018) or African travelers’ journeys undertaken for professional reasons (Remmington 2022, 74–75).

Reflecting the diversity of African articulations of travel, this chapter discusses leisure travel in different types of texts. The first section focuses on Bernard B. Dadié’s and Tété-Michel Kpomassie’s travelogues *Un Nègre à Paris* (1959) [*An African in Paris* (1994)] and *L’Africain du Groenland* (1981) [*An African in Greenland* (2001)]. Both of them are nowadays unanimously seen as belonging to the genre of travel writing (see Mudimbe-Boyi 1992, 27; Ní Loingsigh 2009; Forsdick 2018, 93–94, 2019, 249; Jones 2019b, 292).¹

Dadié’s and Kpomassie’s texts are adaptations of exploration narratives: in Kpomassie’s case this is obvious, but *Un Nègre à Paris* also evokes colonial travel writing with its parodic account of an African tourist adventuring in the exotic metropolitan jungle (see Amimo 2019; see also Alix 2019). Here, I discuss the portrayals of transport and rhythms of mobility in the texts. As Tim Youngs highlights, in travel writing modes of transport affect “how quickly [the travelers] arrive at a destination and by what route” and shape their encounters with others, in addition to which the chosen transport may also structure the narrative (2015, 145). My reading pays attention to how the mobile rhythms generated by different transports contribute to the understanding of the destinations. As Tim Edensor (2014, 163) argues, “places [...] are ceaselessly (re)constituted out of the

¹ Louis-Marie Ongoum (1974, 419) does not classify *Un Nègre à Paris* as a travelogue but refers to it as satire and epistolary, also suggesting that it creates a wholly new African musical genre (“*genre chansonnier*”). *L’Africain du Groenland*, on the other hand, was “not associated with the rapid renewal of interest in travel writing in the 1980s” upon its publication in France but became inscribed in the genre by the review in English in the *Times Literary Supplement* by James Kirkup—the translator of the English version of the travelogue—in 1981 (Forsdick 2018, 93–94).

processes which flow to, through and across them”, and that “a mobile sense of place is shaped by the mode and style of travel” (Edensor 2016, 6). Looking into the texts’ mobile rhythms is a way of seeing mobility as an element that is reflected in the literary form in terms of narrative speed and changes in narrative rhythm.

The second section concentrates on novelistic or fictionalized (auto)biographical portrayals of the holidaymaker in narratives that do not per se revolve around traveling, namely, Simon Njami’s *African gigolo* (1989) and Kidi Bebey’s *Mon Royaume pour une guitare* (2016) [*My Kingdom for a Guitar* 2021]. What is striking in them is the way in which privileged forms of mobility such as tourism contribute not only to migrants’ processes of self-fashioning (Bebey’s text) but also to the role they play in capturing the alienation of an African migrant in Europe (Njami’s novel). While mobility practices do not structure Njami’s and Bebey’s novels as profoundly as in the other texts discussed here, their poetics of mobility relate to the role of mobility in character and plot construction.

The final section addresses the poetics of hypermobility in Felwine Sarr’s *La Saveur des derniers mètres* (2021) [The taste of the last meters]. *La Saveur* could be characterized as a travel chronicle which captures glimpses into the author-narrator’s non-stop transcontinental journeys linking distant places together. Modern modes of hypermobility enable the narrator’s rapid displacements both transnationally and locally, and the text reflects this speed and effortlessness formally.

CLASSIC AFRICAN TRAVELOGUES: DADIÉ’S TOURIST, KPMOASSIE’S ARCTIC EXPLORER

Dadié and the Hectic Rhythms of Colonial Aeromobility

Bernard B. Dadié’s *Un Nègre à Paris*—written in the form of a long letter addressed to the narrator’s friend—represents an Ivorian traveler’s journey to the colonial metropolis. Based on the author’s journey to Paris, it is one of the first Francophone African travelogues. It inscribes itself in the realm of modernity by foregrounding the figure of the tourist, “the social emblem of the modern mobile subject” (Larsen 2001, 81). Tourism, as Jonas Larsen writes, “is [...] constitutive of modernity’s mobility: by definition [it] involves geographical performances of corporeal mobility through physical space via mobility technologies or vehicles” (2001, 81). In contrast to contemporary “culturally derogative and negative

connotation(s)” attached to the term “tourist” (McCabe 2005, 86), Dadié’s narrator embraces this designation as part of his project of becoming a modern mobile subject. The text’s portrayals of mobility are rooted in colonial modernity, as suggested by the fact that the narrator travels from the Ivory Coast via Dakar to Paris by airplane. The travelogue opens with his announcement, “J’ai un billet pour Paris, oui, Paris!” (7) [“I have a ticket to Paris,...yes, Paris!” (3)].² Paris fascinates the narrator, and his ideas about the “city of light” are based on literary and cultural imagery. The opening of the first chapter reads as an instance in which imaginative travel (Urry 2007, 169) transforms into physical travel: the narrator claims that “je vais cesser de contempler le Paris des cartes postales et des écrans” (9) [“Soon I can stop thinking about the Paris that I’ve only seen on postcards or in films” (4)] and that he is going to “voir le Paris vivant” (10) [“see Paris in the flesh” (5)].

The narrator’s exclamation that he has a ticket to Paris is repeated in slightly modified forms throughout the first pages, suggesting that Paris is not just any destination and that air travel is not just any mode of transport. His way of carrying the ticket in his pocket, unable to resist touching it, signals obsessive behavior—in effect, he refers to the ticket as “un gri-gri” (8) [“a good-luck charm” (4)] through which Paris exerts its magical power on him (Dadié 1959, 10). The repetition of the trope of the ticket conveys not only the narrator’s excitement about flying to Paris; it also reads as a mantra that he uses to reassure himself that he is indeed going there. The ticket, obviously, is not independently mobile nor a moving vehicle transporting the narrator and hence it is not an element that would produce “storyworld speed” by describing experiences of movement (Kukkonen 2020, 75; see also Hume 2005, 105; Baetens and Hume 2006, 351). However, as a metonymy of the journey and through the *promise* of the mobility that it embodies, the reiteration of the motif of the ticket conveys a sense of movement on the formal scale.

The narrator’s journey proceeds via Dakar, where he wanders around the city as a tourist, observing the “frantic pace of modern industrializ[ation]” (Ní Loingsigh 2009, 98) as conveyed in the image of the elevator, a symbol of the upward movement associated with modernity. Yet in Dakar he also finds himself struggling with bureaucracy: a Black tourist does not travel to Paris just like that. He laments attempts to

²In the cases of Dadié’s, Kpomassie’s, and Bebey’s texts, the page number after English quotations refers to their respective published English versions. Translated quotations from Njami’s and Sarr’s texts are mine.

discourage him by making him “courir les agences, en semant de multiples obstacles sur ma route, en me renvoyant d’une personnalité à une autre” (17) [“run from one agency to another, when they threw obstacle after obstacle in my way and sent me from this person to that one” (10)]. The initially excited narrative voice gains a worried tone as the narrator is told that all flights for the next two weeks are fully booked and that seats are only granted to “important people” invited by the French president to celebrate the national day. An airline clerk suggests that the narrator should travel by ship instead, which is out of the question: for him, air travel is an integral part of experiencing Paris. Eventually, there turns out to be one free seat on the next flight, and the narrator is happy to seize the opportunity to travel on board “le gigantesque oiseau” (11) [“a gigantic bird” (6)]. The airport is described as a prelude to the hectic metropolitan environment: it is noisy, and people rush forward careless of one another. The narrator, however, does not feel distressed: “Fait étrange: je ne suis plus pressé; en moi le calme qui précède les événements importants” (21) [“It’s curious, but I no longer feel rushed; there is in me that sense of calm which often precedes important events” (12)]. Walking around in the airport, he turns into a sort of robot, moving without thinking, as if embodying the mechanization characteristic of modernity.

As typical of the “golden age” of air travel, when flying connoted luxury and prestige as “the showcase of the elite” (Durante 2020, 90), in Dadié’s colonial West Africa of the 1950s aeromobility is a marker of privilege: it is “transport rapide”, meant for “personnalités de marque” (18) [“express service” for “distinguished personalities” (11)]. This privilege is not only a matter of class but also reflects the colonialist and racist biases of air travel (Durante 2020, 11): the narrator is the only Black passenger on board, and no one is willing to take the seat next to him. Gwendolyn Y. Purifoye (2015, 286) has discussed the production of racial exclusion in public transport and introduces the notion of “nice-nastiness”, a combination of “expressions of politeness with disdain and distancing” that racialized subjects encounter in mobile public spaces. The concept captures the narrator’s experience of exclusion as he observes white passengers walk past the free seat next to his. The narrative conveys the embeddedness of aeromobility in the colonial project by alluding to the travel undertaken by colonial administrators between Paris and Dakar, representing air travel as a mobile technology that facilitates easy access to faraway colonial

territories (Neigh 2018, 5–6). The narrator’s statement that “il faut être ‘quelqu’un’ pour aller à Paris” and that “je ne suis pas ‘quelqu’un’” (7) [“You have to ‘be somebody’ to go there” and [...] “I’m not ‘somebody’” (3)] not only underlines his identification with the position of the tourist who travels to Paris for no “real” reason, but also exposes the colonialist politics of mobility (Cresswell 2010, 21), namely, who qualifies as “somebody” in the Afro-European context of aeromobility in the 1950s.

Air travel generates the physical unease that springs from time-space compression. The narrator’s confusion about his whereabouts, together with the time spent on board, conveys a sense of disorientation that results from the “double dynamic of [...] deterritorialization and dechronologization” typical of long-haul flights (Durante 2020, 77): “Où sommes-nous? [...] Ai-je dormi? Est-ce bien le jour? Que se passe-t-il? [...] Dans quel pays vais-je?” (22) [“Where are we? (...) Have I been asleep? Is it still daytime? What’s going on? [...] What sort of a country am I heading for anyway?” (13)]. This spatiotemporal disorientation captures the traveler’s transition to another world where familiar landmarks no longer make sense. Other sources of anxiety include swollen feet, a general symptom of a long-haul flight that embodies the paradox of inertia/hypermobility characteristic of flying as one traverses long geographical distances at rapid speed while experiencing the sedentariness of seating (Durante 2020, 195–196). Swollen feet make the narrator fear that he will have to walk barefoot in Paris as his shoes no longer fit. This fear is related to his preconception that everybody runs in the metropolis and that he, as a representative of an African “slow” culture (Ní Loingsigh 2009, 88), will have to learn the right running technique to blend in. The idea of running, rather than that of wandering in Paris as an idle flâneur, is interesting here. Flânerie is characterized by “a self-conscious denial of hurry” (Dennis et al. 2020, 13); the flâneur moves “against the flow” of the hectic urban environment and, through this detachment, embodies the disengagement and critique of modern industrialized urbanization (Adey 2010, 63). Contrary to the figure of the flâneur, Dadié’s narrator is more interested in running to undergo a more “authentic” experience in Paris. Running connotes hurry and hurrying is an attempt to “adjust, keep up with the speed of economic, political and technological change” of modernity (Dennis et al. 2020, 9). In the case of the African tourist who travels from the colonial periphery to the metropolitan center, this process of adjustment is one of assimilation.

Pedestrianism and the Paris Metro in Un Nègre à Paris

The narrator's arrival in Paris immerses him in the hectic rhythms of the metropolis: "Des autos passent qui semblent glisser, tant elles vont vite" (25) ["Cars whiz by, they're going so fast" (16)]. As he travels by coach from the airport to the city, he observes that the streets become more animated the closer he gets to the center: the urban space is "un incessant tourbillon", where "les piétons sont les plus pressés" (26) ["Constant movement"; "The pedestrians seem the most pressed" (17)]. The narrator describes pedestrians as robots with springs attached to their legs (Dadié 1959, 26). There seems to be a rule that "il ne faut pas hésiter mais toujours aller de l'avant" (38) ["here you haven't time to hesitate; you've got to keep going" (25)]—an imperative that conveys modernity's dream of eternal progress. Indeed, as the narrator states, Parisians have contracted "la maladie de la bougeotte" (215) ["a severe case of the fidgets" (152)]. Yet the movement seems to be aimless in light of his observation that in Paris one is constantly going round in circles (Dadié 1959, 27). As the narrator tries to adapt himself to the hectic rhythms of Parisian pedestrianism,³ he becomes part of the "giant, adjusted and inhuman mechanism" (Garnier 2012, 117; my translation) of urbanites: "On me pousse, je pousse, nous avançons tous" (93) ["When someone pushes me, I push too – that way, we all make progress" (63)].

Despite becoming one with the crowd, the narrator experiences solitude (Dadié 1959, 164), which signals his sense of alienation, echoing the experiences of the student newcomers in Chap. 2. Indeed, in the passages describing the Metro, the narrator seems detached from his environment and disconnected from the people around him. This disconnection conveys his position as an outsider-observer but also points to the aspects of the modern metropolis that are blasé. While practice eventually enables him to run like a Parisian, he is confused about this new skill and he not only finds himself asking why he is running (Dadié 1959, 173) but also suffers from pain in his feet (181). The image of the hurting feet evokes the airplane passage in which the narrator worried about his swollen feet.

³The speed and hurry in Dadié's travelogue are characteristic of its portrayals of mobility practices. Elsewhere, the narration dwells on lengthy descriptions of different aspects of French culture inspired in the narrator by Paris. In these passages the narrative speed is slow and "reflects the attitudes of an unhurried tourist who saunters about and stops whenever he pleases" (Mudimbe-Boyi 1992, 28).

Here, hurting feet are corporeal symptoms of the narrator's arrhythmia—a feeling of being “out of synch”—as he tries to adapt himself to the mobile rhythms of the metropolis (see Edensor 2014, 167).

In addition to running, a key element of the narrator's metropolitan mobilities is the Paris Metro. As also posited in Chap. 2, in Francophone African literatures of the mid-twentieth century the Metro symbolizes the metropolis and its modernity and traveling in it represents an initiation rite for many protagonists (Anyinefa 2003, 85). This symbolism is present in Dadié's text, which states that the Metro is the most important monument of Paris, more so than even the Arc de Triomphe or the Eiffel Tower (Dadié 1959, 83). It is in the Metro that, according to the narrator, “on saisit le plus le r ve prodigieux du Parisien d' tre le roi de ses machines” (83) [“you become most aware of the enormous love the Parisians have for what their machines have given them: the opportunity to play king” (56)]. Yet initiation into things Parisian by taking the Metro can be alienating, as is conveyed in the sense of haste in the following passage:

Perds-toi dans les d dales de couloirs et de fl ches, de plaques indicatrices et de coul es humaines, de sens interdits, de mont es et de descentes, laisse partir le m tro que tu devais prendre et prends celui que tu ne devais pas, puis descends   une station quelconque, sors, rentre, cogne-toi contre la poin onneuse et explique-lui que tu t'es tromp  de direction, repars, perds-toi encore, sors enfin, prends le boulevard et va devant toi. (51)

Lose yourself in the maze of corridors and arrows, of signs and crowds and wrong ways, ascents and descents; don't get on the train you should but the one you shouldn't; then go into another station, exit, enter again, and march up to a ticket-puncher and explain that you're lost; take off and lose yourself once more. Finally, walk out and head down the street right in front of you. (34)

The out-of-breath narration generates the effect of heightening speed through multiplication (Hume 2005, 107) by citing elements that constitute the experience of moving in the underground tunnel. Unlike Parisians who can handle the Metro thanks to their “sens du m tro” (81) [“sixth sense when it comes to the metro” (54)], the African tourist goes astray in its accelerated rhythms:

Vous vous tromperez toujours, au moins trois fois, car on ne se tire jamais du premier coup de cette toile d'araign e color e. Lorsque vous sentez que

vous dépassez le ton, risquant même de pousser des racines, vous vous mettez au diapason, c'est-à-dire vous reculez de quelques pas, regardez une dernière fois le plan, approuvez de la tête pour vous confirmer que vous n'avez pas avancé d'un pouce, puis résolument, décidé à vous perdre, vous prenez la première direction venue. Celle sur laquelle vos regards tomberont. Mais, et le nœud de l'histoire est là, vous rangez votre amour-propre, et à la poinçonneuse en tendant votre billet, vous demandez: "Pardon pour aller à...Pigalle...". (38)

Head off in the wrong direction at least three times; after all, you never manage to get things right the first time in this spiderweb of color. Just when you think you're following the right tone, when you feel you're about to plant roots there, get out the tuning fork – that is, step back and look at the map once again. Nod your head to convince yourself that you haven't moved your thumb, and then, as resolutely as possible, even if you're sure you're going to get lost, take off in the direction your eyes light on first. But here's the important part: swallow what pride you have and ask the person who's waiting to punch your ticket, "Excuse me, but to get to...Pigalle...?" (25)

The allusion to the tuning fork and the sense of missing the right "tone" articulate the idea of arrhythmia, and the description of the traveler trying to position himself on the map one last time conveys a moment of hesitation before he eventually "swallows his pride" and asks for help. The inertia that getting lost produces generates not only frustration but also the embarrassment of not managing the Metro and hence of not being part of metropolitan movement. Toward the end of his trip, the tourist learns how to handle the rhythms and codes of the Metro—a skill that he takes as a sign of his assimilation into Paris (Dadié 1959, 106). He even has a plan for how to react in the case that he should get lost:

Il m'arrive [...] de m'embrouiller dans les stations et alors pour ne pas afficher mon embarras, je sors de la bouche pour flâner au long des boulevards, quitte à reprendre le métro à une autre station. (197)

But once in a while I still get confused when find myself in a particularly busy station. To avoid embarrassment, I simply exit and stroll along the boulevard until I find another station. (139)

This strategy enables the traveler to avoid the arrhythmia that would be caused by stopping to consult a map or ask for directions. This strategy of "attunement to place" of a body that is "out of place" is an act of readjusting oneself to an "unfamiliar space in order to regain ontological security"

(Edensor 2016, 5). However, this level of assimilation to the urban rhythms of the metropolis is not a good thing for Dadié's tourist: he believes that he has run the risk of not being able to make objective observations (Dadié 1959, 106). Learning to run like a Parisian and to handle the Metro means for the narrator that it is high time for him to leave Paris.

In the end *Un Nègre à Paris* suggests that it is exactly the African tourist's experiences of being out of rhythm that reveal how "places are always in a state of becoming, seething with [the] emergent properties" of different rhythms (Edensor 2016, 3). Dadié's travelogue attests to the postcolonial dynamics and polyrhythmic qualities of the Paris of the 1950s: the meanings of the colonial metropolis are not only produced through the mobilities of the smoothly proceeding Parisians but equally through the stumbling rhythms of travelers from colonial peripheries. The urban mobilities of Dadié's tourist are marked by friction, a concept that draws attention to inertia and hindrances to mobility and attests to the power structures that enable the motion of some while slowing down that of others (Cresswell 2014, 108). Friction, caused by "differential mobilities", can make "the smooth, hidden workings of the space of flows suddenly visible" (Cresswell 2014, 114). In *Un Nègre à Paris*, the interrupted urban mobilities of the African tourist attest to "the dance of mobility and friction" that "interferes with the dreams of unimpeded mobility" (Cresswell 2014, 113) characteristic of colonial modernity. Beyond its initial enthusiasm, the narrative's approach to the colonial discourses of modernity is critical: through the figure of the objective observer, the text "distinguish[es] between what aspects of another culture can be adapted to benefit, enhance or revitalize" African cultures instead of "rushing headlong into the adopting" of these elements (Ní Loingsigh 2009, 90). Hence, the friction that informs the narrator's mobilities in Paris can be seen as productive; hindrances to movement generate critical consciousness (see Cresswell 2014, 114).

Stepwise Journeys Toward the Arctic: L'Africain du Groenland

Kpomassie's narrator travels from Togo to Greenland. With its (colonized) Arctic destination, the narrative escapes the conventional pattern of the African periphery versus the colonial center (Ní Loingsigh 2009, 123). Compared to *Un Nègre à Paris*, the mobile rhythms of *L'Africain du Groenland* are much slower. This slowness relates to the modes of transport that the traveler uses to reach his destination: instead of flying, his

journey starts with traveling by public transport on the African continent, then by ship to reach Europe, and again by train as far as Copenhagen, where he finally boards a ship to Greenland. The slow rhythms of the narrative reflect the pauses that punctuate his journey and that result from financial, bureaucratic, infrastructural, and climatic obstacles. The first of the four parts of the travelogue concentrates on the narrator's life in Togo and his travels across Africa to Europe. His journey from Togo to Abidjan, Accra, and Dakar is not straightforward but entails uncertainties related to unreliable vehicles, non-existent means of communication and limited finances, which cause involuntary stops and force him to return to places that he has already left.

The narrator's Arctic pursuit is inspired by literary representations of his destination: the text mentions Robert Gessain's book *Les Esquimaux du Groenland à l'Alaska* from 1949. Aged 16 at the start of his adventure in 1958, the narrator is aware that he cannot reach his destination at once. In theory, the planned itinerary looks simple: "Il me faudrait commencer par le Ghana, pays voisin du Togo; puis remonter peu à peu l'Afrique de l'Ouest, traverser toute l'Europe et aller m'embarquer au Danemark" (81) ["I would have to begin with Ghana, the country next to Togo, then gradually travel up the coast of West Africa, cross the whole of Europe, and sail from Denmark" (50)]. It soon becomes clear that the journey will be far from straightforward. The first leg from Togo to Abidjan is illustrative of the uncertainties ahead:

C'est un de ces camions appelés "taxis-brousse", ramené à la vie par des pièces de récupération et criant affreusement sur ses ressorts, qui avala de son mieux les premiers kilomètres de mon voyage vers l'Arctique. (81)

It was one of those trucks called "bush taxis" – kept going by secondhand spare parts, and creaking horribly on its battered springs – that tackled, as best it could, the first kilometers of my journey towards the Arctic. (50)

The accumulation of technical issues in the following passage conveys the idea of a bumpy ride with frequently occurring hindrances to movement:

Il y eut en cours de route des surprises désagréables – fréquentes à bord de la plupart de nos vieux véhicules de transport en commun. Une roue du camion fut arrachée en pleine marche; une portière, maintenue par un fil de fer, céda, le fil ayant été rompu par les cahots incessants; puis des crevaisons se succédèrent avec une régularité effrayante, sans compter le radiateur qui fuyait. (82)

There were some nasty surprises along the way – they were frequent on our antiquated public transport. One of the truck’s wheels flew off when we were traveling at top speed; a door held on with wire came away when the continual jolting snapped the wire; then flat tires followed one after the other with alarming regularity, not to mention the leaking radiator. (51)

The recurrent breakdowns of the vehicle define the journey’s rhythm. The text also refers to the poor condition of the road—“poudreuse, sinueuse, accidentée” (82) [“dusty, winding, potholed” (51)]—which conveys the “infrastructural impossibility” of automobility in West Africa (Savonick 2015, 670) and further contributes to the narrative’s broken mobile rhythms. While travel by public transport normally entails encounters with others, the narrative does not pay much attention to the co-presence and interactivity of the passengers (see Pettinger 2012, 129) but underlines the narrator’s position as an individual traveler who is interested only in reaching his destination.

Another hindrance relates to the budget: the narrator’s meager finances cover only half of the cost of the first leg of the journey, so he finds himself working as the driver’s assistant. His insufficient finances slow down the journey in the first part of the travelogue describing his eight-year journey from Togo to the moment when he boards the ship to Greenland in Copenhagen. The narrative’s constant and trivial allusions to place names across Africa and Europe produce an intermittent narrative rhythm—a description of an itinerary through places that do not hold much interest for the traveler. In this part, the narrator’s strategy of balancing the necessity of working to increase his travel budget, combined with his urge to travel, characterizes the narrative. This alternation of mobility and pausing postpones his arrival at his eventual destination. This frustrates the traveler: he fears that “[la] vie confortable” (89) [“this easy life” (55)], permitted by his working in such places as embassies, might discourage him from pursuing his journey toward the Arctic. Yet these stops, even when they last several months, imply a continuation of the journey, which differentiates them from waiting and classifies them as pauses, defined by Julie Cidell as “a temporary cessation of motion with the intention of resuming that motion” (2020, 154). The pauses necessitated by the need to earn his travel funds convey concretely the idea that mobility is not possible without friction (Cresswell 2014, 114). The pauses drive the narrative forward.

Other hindrances of the African part of journey include deficient communications. In Nouadhibou, in Mauritania, there is no transport to Algeria through the desert. As there are no passenger ships departing from Nouadhibou either, the narrator is obliged to return to Dakar, from where he boards a ship to Marseille after six years of travel in West Africa. The fragmented nature of the journey on the continent evokes contemporary clandestine migrant mobilities consisting of “stepwise journeys” (Schapendonk 2013, 11), whereby the itinerary is constantly revised and the arrival at the destination not guaranteed. Such journeys are represented in contemporary African fiction (see Chap. 6) and the figure of the adventurer that such texts frequently feature (Mazauric 2016, 50–51) produces an interesting parallel with Kpomassie’s Arctic adventurer, who, despite being a relatively privileged mobile subject who travels for leisure, is not in a position to enjoy the luxury of unimpeded movement. In Arctic travelogues, deferral is the “most obvious temporal attribute” associated with the Arctic (Holland and Huggan 1998, 100). In Kpomassie’s travelogue, deferral defines his journey well before he even arrives in Greenland.

In Europe, the mobile rhythms of the journey accelerate when the narrator reaches Marseille, where he has the luxury of “goût[er] pour la première fois au plaisir du touriste insouciant” (94) [“enjoying for the first time the pleasures of the carefree tourist” (59)]. Here, the narrative constructs a binary between the Arctic explorer and the tourist by alluding to the allegedly carefree qualities of touristic mobilities. The narrator states that “je me sentis plus libre en France que sur le sol africain” (94) [“I felt freer in France than on African soil” (59)]. Yet it is in Europe that he encounters bureaucratic hindrances, which affect his mobility. On his way from France to Germany he is made to descend from the train at the Franco-Belgian border because he does not have a visa. The incident is portrayed as a spectacle that underlines the narrator’s difference from the rest of the passengers “qui se penchaient impassibles aux fenêtres” (105) [“staring impassively out of the windows” (66)], witnessing his humiliation in being left at the station. Another bureaucratic issue arises in Copenhagen when a Danish commissioner refuses to issue him a visa on the grounds that Greenland is too cold for an African. The refusal of the visa delays the narrator’s departure for Greenland by another three months. The commissioner’s reasons for his refusal demonstrate a patronizing, colonialist attitude toward the narrator and his pursuit, and it is telling that the latter only gets his travel document when his white French friend travels to Copenhagen to stand guarantee for him. The first part of

the travelogue ends with laconic words that capture the slow mobile rhythms of the journey: “Huit ans s’étaient passés depuis mon départ du Togo” (111) [“Eight years had passed since my departure from Togo” (71)]. The summary highlights the insignificance of this part of the journey for the narrator (see Bal 1997, 104).

Kpomassie’s Arctic Mobilities

Once the voyage to Greenland starts, the narrator reflects on his reasons for choosing maritime travel:

J’avais choisi de voyager par bateau: dans mon cas, il eût été imprudent d’affronter brusquement un grand froid après quelques heures de vol, alors qu’une traversée de plusieurs jours me permettrait de m’habituer progressivement au climat. (115)

I had decided to travel by ship: it would be rash for someone like me suddenly to come up against intense cold after only a few hours’ flight, whereas a sea voyage of several days would allow me to adapt gradually to the climate. (75)

As suggested by the quotation—curiously echoing the Danish commissioner’s patronizing ideas—the slow rhythms of maritime travel best suit the narrator. Later, planning to travel to Northern Greenland, the narrator emphasizes that, compared to flying, travel by ship enables him to appreciate “cette nature grandiose, se sentir écrasé par elle” (360) [“this natural grandeur, to feel its overwhelming power” (268)]. Thus his choice of transport is informed by his will to adjust to the climate but also to become “overwhelmed” by the natural landscapes. The narrator suggests that it has indeed been the slow rhythms of maritime travel that have enabled him to adjust himself to the absence of light and that without this progression the polar nights would have driven him mad (Kpomassie 2015, 250).

While the sea voyage represents a transitional phase on the way to his destination, almost immediately after leaving Copenhagen the narrator already feels “un peu comme au Grand Nord” (117) [“closer to the Far North” (76)]. As the journey proceeds, the narrative starts to refer to elements associated with the Arctic and to the mobilities therein: the vastness of space and environmental conditions that are unfavorable for transportation (Habeck and Broz 2015, 511). A detailed description of the ship’s

slow movement among floating ice blocks conveys the traveler's entry into an environment where modern transport is slowed down by nature. The mobile rhythms of the ship are characterized by disturbances caused by the ice conditions as the vessel pursues "sa lente marche entrecoupée de secousses, de reculs, d'arrêts" (121) ["her slow progress, interrupted by bumps, stops, and starts" (79)]. When on the fourth day the weather conditions grow worse, the narrator becomes seasick, in addition to which the surrounding icebergs make him fear, in a state of "sombre désespoir" (119) ["dark despair" (78)], that they will be shipwrecked in the cold, restless sea.

His planned itinerary between different regions in Greenland is affected by the ice conditions: there is always the risk of getting stuck and having to wait for a change of season. Because of the lack of communications, trips that involve maritime travel need to be well planned. This careful planning and the significance of scheduling are reflected in the literary form: the times of the departure and arrival of the ships are frequently cited. As a narrative device, the schedules convey the idea of movement by indicating the time that it takes to cross specific geographical spaces. The schedules also suggest that the Arctic is very much inscribed in colonial modernity. The colonial dimension of modern Arctic mobilities is captured in the narrator's observation that "Un trajet de Copenhague à n'importe quelle grande agglomération du Groenland est plus facile qu'un déplacement d'une localité à l'autre" (165) ["A journey from Copenhagen to any large community in Greenland is easier than a trip from one locality to the next" (113)].

The narration resorts to the Romantic imagery of the Arctic sublime, a literary aesthetics popular in Arctic exploration narratives (Morgan 2016, 2; Kjeldaas 2017, 39; Renov 2019). The Arctic sublime, "a mixture of awe and terror" (Renov 2019, 207), evoking "the threatening and overpowering forces of nature against which the human is ultimately helpless" (Kjeldaas 2017, 39; Morgan 2016, 3), is echoed in Kpomassie's portrayals of Arctic mobilities. During a boat trip on his way to the north, the narrator gazes in awe at the sight of the fjords, described as "un spectacle grandiose et romantique" (215) ["an imposing and romantic spectacle" (151)]. The passengers are entitled to receive a certificate attesting that they have crossed the polar circle. The narrator finds "cette distribution de papiers imprimés [...] si grotesque que je ne me suis pas dérangé pour aller chercher le mien, préférant me livrer à l'étrange sensation que j'éprouve devant ce paysage impressionnant" (216) ["this distribution of printed

forms struck me as so grotesque that I didn't bother to collect mine, preferring to savor the strange thrill of that striking landscape" (151)]. By showing contempt for the certificate and focusing on the landscape instead, the narrator distances himself from the tourists and evokes a parallel with earlier discourses of the Arctic sublime.

The terrifying aspects of the Arctic sublime are manifested in portrayals of mobility practices that allude to the narrator's fear of death. In one passage the narrator walks on the frozen surface of the sea, and unlike the locals in his company he plants his footsteps carefully, terrified at the idea of "couler dans l'eau glacée sans aucune chance d'en ressortir, à cause de l'immense banquise [...] et mourir congestionné en peu de temps" (270) ["sinking into the freezing water with no hope of getting out because of the immense sheet of ice [...] I would drown in no time" (200)]. Later, traveling in a dog sled in a snowstorm, he observes the tracks of previous teams disappearing into the blizzard and starts to think about "une mort glacée" (331) ["an icy death" (247)]. The vastness of the landscape and its transformations due to weather conditions adds a life-threatening dimension to Arctic mobilities. By resorting to the imagery of the Arctic sublime, the narrative constructs the figure of the heroic traveler who defies the harsh natural conditions (Kjeldaa 2017, 39).

The narrator travels in the different regions in a problematic search for the "authentic" Greenland (Ní Loingsigh 2009, 142), which for him is embodied in such activities as fishing, seal hunting, and dog sledding. He situates the "authentic" Greenland in the northern parts of the island, but he never reaches this destination because of his meager finances and his tiredness of waiting for shipping. The latter reason suggests the narrator's failure to pass the "stern test of patience" by adapting himself to "the subtly changing rhythms of Arctic life", as embodied in the idea of deferral characteristic of Arctic travelogues (Holland and Huggan 1998, 100). While the "authentic" Greenland remains out of his reach, he experiences dog sledding in Ilulissat. The fact that an entire chapter is devoted to a minute description of the ride conveys the importance accorded to experiencing this "authentic" form of Arctic mobility. In effect, as Roman Kabelik argues, "the affordances of rhythmic patterns in narrative can point out which practices of mobility are made meaningful and which ones have become unnoticeable" (2019, 147). One lengthy passage portrays the preparations, starting from the description of the harness to the position of the passenger on the sledge. Here, the narration suddenly adopts the second person plural, thus engaging the reader in how sitting on the

sledge feels. The minuteness of the description slows down the narrative or, in Mieke Bal's terms, pauses the fabula so that "no movement of the fabula-time is implied" (1997, 108). This pausing also prepares the ground for the importance of the mobile experience: the stillness of the preparations embodies a promise of an extraordinary movement ahead. Compared to the climate-related obstacles that the narrator's plans for maritime travel encounter, the ride on the dog sledge is an experience of a smooth mobile rhythm and becoming one with the Arctic landscape:

Poyo [mon compagnon] cesse de parler et ferme les yeux. Il semble rêver. Je me laisse aussi aller à cette douce paresse. Un profond silence nous entoure; il n'est rompu que par le son mat et régulier du traîneau. J'ai beau prêter l'oreille, je n'entends plus le bruit des griffes des chiens sur la glace. [...] C'est ainsi qu'ils nous tirent doucement pendant un quart d'heure sans la moindre secousse, ni bagarres ni aboiements. (324)

After a moment, [my companion] Poyo stopped talking and closed his eyes; he seemed to be dreaming. I too let myself drift off into this pleasant idleness. We were surrounded by deep silence, broken only by the faint, even hissing of the runners. However hard I listened, I could no longer hear the scrape of the huskies' claws on the ice. [...] So for a quarter of hour they drew us along like this, without the slightest jolt, or any fighting or barking. (242)

This is a moment of eurythmy, a comfortable, and relaxing experience where the traveler becomes lulled by the movement (Edensor 2014, 166). It is also an experience of "shared travel-ness" (Pettinger 2012, 132) not only with his traveling companion but also with the dogs pulling the sledge. In his analysis of Gary Paulsen's memoir *Winterdance*, Jopi Nyman introduces the concept of snowmobility to describe "the process of joint human-dog navigation of Arctic snow-covered space where the sled dog narrative serves to problematize alleged human mastery and control over the nonhuman" (2021, 116). With respect to Kpomassie's portrayal of the sledge ride, what could be added to the animal/human dyad is the traveler's experience of immersion in the Arctic landscape. Indeed, traveling on the dog sledge moves the narrator physically, but also affectively and esthetically (see Nyman 2021, 126). The eurythmic experience attests to the double qualities of snow and ice as friction that both hinders and facilitates movement (Cresswell 2014, 114): "Ice and snow are not only obstacles, but they also transform northern spaces for the purposes of mobility" (Nyman 2021, 116).

However, the moment of eurythmy between the traveler, the landscape, and the dogs ends abruptly as the sledge first ascends a hill with great difficulty and then starts “[une] course folle” [“[a] mad rush”] “dans une descente vertigineuse” (325) [“[a] dizzy plunge” (243)]. The soothing rhythm transforms into excessive speed that is difficult to handle—especially for the African adventurer, who loses his balance, falls off the sledge and rolls down the hill. While his Inuit companion descends “élégamment” (325) [“gracefully” (243)] with the sledge, the narrator “[se] relève gauchement en secouant la neige de [s]es vêtements” (326) [“wobbles to [his] feet and dusts the snow from [his] clothes” (243)]. Amused by this sight, his companion bursts out laughing, “Je ne peux pas le croire! [...] Comment un homme peut-il tomber de traîneau?” (326) [“Unbelievable! [...] How can a man fall off a sledge” (234)]. The abrupt transition from eurythmy to arrhythmia and the companion’s mockery creates a disjuncture between the Arctic landscape and the narrator, suggesting that, despite his efforts to adapt himself to the lifestyle of the “natives” and to experience “authentic” Greenland (see also Célestin 2001, 116–117; Ní Loingsigh 2009, 142), he remains a tourist who cannot entirely handle the Arctic or its mobilities.

AFROEUROPEAN TOURISTS AND HOLIDAYMAKERS

The Alienated Afroeuropean “vacancier” in African Gigolo

Given its focus on the life of a young Cameroonian man in Paris, Simon Njami’s *African gigolo* qualifies as a migration novel. It also features portrayals of different forms and practices of mobility. Here, of particular interest, are leisure-related mobilities which sometimes overlap with work-related travel (see Chap. 5). The protagonist Moïse is in his late twenties. He has come to France as a student but has abandoned his studies, devoting his time to sexual adventures with white women. His parents, unaware that their son no longer pursues his studies, continue to finance his relatively idle life in the metropolis. The key theme of the novel is Moïse’s alienation both vis-à-vis France but also Cameroon and, in particular, his father, an embodiment of African patriarchal masculinity. Moïse’s excessive sexual behavior as conveyed in the stereotypical role of the “African gigolo” that he has adopted should be read as a reaction to this alienation

and recognized as his only available “means to overcome social marginalization and exact measure of revenge on French society” (Bryson 2008, 89). It is against this background that his leisure mobilities gain their full meaning.

Moïse travels to Deauville in Normandy in the company of one of his female acquaintances, a middle-aged, upper middle-class white woman called Mathilde. For him, the very concept of holidaymaking is “une notion anti-africaine”, “une aberration de l’Occident” (69) [an anti-African concept, an aberration of the Occident], and “une comédie à laquelle il n’était jamais parvenu à se plier” (69) [a comedy with which he had never managed to conform]. Moïse’s attitude toward leisure travel is marked by ironic distance, and he is not interested in playing the role of an African holidaymaker to “become French” as is the case of the Cameroonian family in Bebey’s novel discussed in the next section. The portrayal of the trip to Deauville is interesting for an intersectional reading of mobility that considers not only the relational meanings of social differences such as “race”, class, gender, and sexuality, but also the weight of history in the present (see Ilmonen 2021, 204–205). Mathilde drives her white Mercedes convertible while wearing an elegant white silk outfit, with a scarf holding her hair in place. The fact that Mathilde drives and Moïse occupies the passenger seat not only challenges conventional gender roles but also underlines their class difference and Moïse’s subordination in the relationship. The role of the passenger is often seen as “a weak or secondary form of mobile subjectivity, particularly when viewed relationally as hostage to the apparently more powerful and commanding figure of the ‘driver’” (Adey et al. 2012, 172). Furthermore, Moïse is ill-prepared for the trip: he has only the clothes that he is wearing, so Mathilde takes him shopping. This underlines the power structures informing their relationship. Sitting in the passenger seat, Moïse suddenly starts to think about enslaved Africans in the USA and how, only 20 years earlier, a Black man could get hanged for touching a white woman. Here, the narrative connects Moïse’s mobilities in the company of Mathilde to the transatlantic history of slavery and racial segregation, contrasting the nonchalant mobilities of white bourgeois holidaymakers with the coerced (im)mobilities of enslaved Africans. In so doing, the narrative produces an effect of what Cresswell refers to as “black moves”, namely Afrodiasporic mobilities that are characterized by the way in which they “carr[y] the ghost of the Middle Passage” and “point toward continuities and

repetitions through time and indicate the pervasiveness of the interlinking of race and mobility” (2016, 21). In effect, the Middle Passage is not “merely a maritime phrase to describe one part of an oceanic voyage” but rather a wider context of Black mobilities that establish links across geographies and cultures (Rediker et al. 2007, 2). In short, the narrative hints at the historical roots of Moïse’s malaise. In this specific passage, the narrative externalizes these roots by remaining silent about France’s own colonial history and its biased legacies, which is characteristic of the nation’s inability to face its past (Lotem 2021, 25).

For Moïse the predominantly white and bourgeois town of Deauville is “[une] ville artificielle, superficielle, reproduction en miniature et au bord de la mer des beaux quartiers de Paris” (71) [an artificial, superficial town, a seaside reproduction in miniature of the upmarket districts of Paris]. Deauville embodies bourgeois nostalgia for a past when France was still a colonial empire. The restaurant of the hotel in which Moïse and Mathilde dine captures this “elegance”, evoking Clifford’s (1997, 32–33) characterization of the hotel as a symbol of socio-economic privilege and nostalgia. While the hotel has frequently been analyzed as “a fundamental modern space” (Davidson 2018, 4) and a perfect setting for giving voice to modern alienation and restlessness (Bates 2003, 71), in *African gigolo* it also a site of “transcultural networks” (Despotopoulou et al. 2023, 1) and one that invites intersecting questions on race, class, sexuality, and age. Other hotel guests cast glances at Mathilde’s and Moïse’s table, signaling to Moïse that he is out of place in the bourgeois environment and in the company of an older white woman. It is worth mentioning that Mathilde and Moïse are not sexually involved at this point, and that their unconventional relationship defies the usual pattern of the protagonist’s sexual adventures. Nevertheless, the hotel setting, as an ideal space for deviant behavior (Treadwell 2005, 215) and cultural taboos such as sex (Van Herk 2014, 145), is prone to generate judgmental glances. Illustrative of the couple’s way of defying stereotypical expectations, Moïse and Mathilde have separate rooms. Moïse’s room is filled with “solitude complexe” (75) [complex solitude], which is telling of his alienation and how the fact of not having slept with Mathilde challenges his self-image built on stereotypical Black male hypersexuality.

Another key scene of leisure travel overlaps with employment-related mobility. Moïse travels to Venice with his new employer, an art-dealer named Durand. While the two are in Venice for business, the trip includes touristic activities such as visiting Piazza San Marco and walking by the

Canale Grande. Moïse is guided by Durand, who is familiar with the city. Much as with Mathilde, Moïse's role is a passive one of "se laiss[er] entraîner" (105) [being dragged along]. The scene in which he travels by airplane conveys the idea of Moïse as an inexperienced traveler: he observes the landscapes and the landing "comme un enfant, fasciné" (103) [fascinated like a child]. The habitual blasé attitude that he continues to have in Paris further loses its grip as he travels on board a *vaporetto* to go to the hotel. His being "muet d'admiration" (103) [speechless with admiration] amuses his employer, who states that "au fond vous n'êtes qu'un enfant" (103) [deep down you're just a child]. Durand's comments on Moïse's allegedly child-like nature gain their full meaning as they are pronounced at the entrance of the luxury historical establishment Hotel Danieli, consisting of palaces from the fourteenth, seventeenth, and nineteenth centuries. In this context, Moïse's naïve admiration evokes the colonial stereotype that sees Africans as child-like and existing outside history. Moïse assimilates this racist discourse both on a personal level and as a collective stereotype: he admires the hotel and ponders on "l'énormité de son ignorance, de son inexpérience" (104) [the enormity of his ignorance and inexperience], asking himself "par quoi les Africains combleraient-ils l'absence de vieilles pierres et d'histoire tangible?" (104) [how could Africans make up for the absence of old stones and tangible history?]. His alleged personal ignorance and the idea of the inferiority of African cultures highlight the colonial roots of Moïse's alienated condition.

Moïse's business trip to Amsterdam accords him a more active role in exploring the city. Traveling without Durand enables him to enjoy moments "de liberté, de maturité" (167) [of liberty, maturity]. His contact person in Amsterdam takes him from the airport to the hotel—again an establishment that exists in reality, namely, the Hotel Krasnapolsky. The hotel not only becomes an important center of his displacements on foot in the city; it also functions as the symbol of his alienation. The hotel room is associated with solitariness and insomnia, and in the bathroom mirror Moïse sees an "old man"—paralleling the portrayal of Dorian Gray before his ugly end (177). In effect, instead of being a space of "decompression" where one can "relax and compose [oneself]" (Davidson 2018, 5), the room is invested with tormenting meanings that lead to the protagonist's malaise reaching its peak in a violent narrative climax. The hotel room, in short, becomes a "traversable threshold" that generates a rupture (Despotopoulou et al. 2023, 3): after spending distressing moments alone

in his room, Moïse decides to drown himself to “*faire la paix avec lui-même*” (178; original emphasis) [to make peace with himself].⁴ However, failing to find a suitable canal, he ends up in a red-light district, where he pays an Antillean prostitute. From here, the events escalate quickly. He does not get an erection, and the prostitute laughs at him; he gets angry and assaults her. A group of white men enter and beat him up and drive him to a construction site on the outskirts of the city, where they rape him and leave him mutilated for the workers to find next morning. The rape partly destroys the “African gigolo” in Moïse, although he gets his revenge by acquiring a gun and killing the rapist. In brief, business/leisure mobilities gain dark, violent, and unexpected meanings in the novel. As such, the journey to Amsterdam stands in stark contrast to his previous leisure trip to the South of France with Mathilde. Relaxing at the swimming pool at Mathilde’s holiday home, Moïse, despite his cynicism, had experienced the restful effect of holidaymaking, hoping that “*la vie s’arrêtat là. Sur cette apparence de perfection, ces instants paisibles où aucun compte ne vous était demandé*” (121) [life could stop here. On this appearance of perfection, on these peaceful moments when one was not accountable to anyone]. This sunny image could not be further from the violent moments that he experiences in the fog and unwelcoming atmosphere of Amsterdam.

While Moïse’s roaming around Amsterdam is marked by “*le poids d’un insurmontable malaise*” (171) [the weight of insurmountable malaise], sometimes these insomniac walks give him respite from alienation. During one of his walks he ends up in a bar with a Black bartender and clientele and where Bob Marley’s music is being played. While he does not engage in conversation with anyone—the fact that everyone speaks Dutch excludes him—Moïse experiences a relieving sense of being a foreigner, but a consenting one and not “*un imposteur qui eût assumé, usurpé le rôle d’un autre*” (171) [an imposter who has assumed, usurped the role of someone else]. After the rape episode, Moïse returns to this bar but he no longer feels at home; the language spoken by the clientele make him feel like an outsider in a negative way (187). For him, not only the hotel and the bar but Amsterdam itself is an experience of solitary nocturnal walks in cold

⁴A similar suicidal impulse is articulated in other novels focusing on African migrants’ hardships in Europe; Ousmane Socé’s *Mirages de Paris*, J. R. Essomba’s *Le Paradis du nord*, Caryl Phillips’s *A Distant Shore* are cases in point (see Knox 2016; Toivanen 2019). See also the analysis of Khalid Lyamlahy’s *Évocation d’un mémorial à Venise* (2023) in Chap. 6.

and foggy weather in places that do not seem to be attractive sites for tourism. In addition, he often gets intoxicated during these walks. Unlike the flâneur, for whom getting lost represents an opportunity to “discover the unknown” (Nuvolati 2019, 28; my translation), for Njami’s protagonist not knowing his whereabouts is not an opportunity to know Amsterdam better. Rather, it makes him realize that he is a “stateless person” in a city that is “futile, hostile, cynique” (212) [futile, hostile, cynical]. At one point, he takes a taxi to revisit a graveyard next to the construction site where he had been raped, explaining to the driver that his visit is motivated by “curiosité malsaine” (190) [morbid curiosity]. There is, then, a genuinely dark aspect to the protagonist’s touristic mobilities in Amsterdam. This darkness is due less to the destinations per se as in dark tourism, which concentrates on places of death, disasters, and atrocities (Lennon and Foley 2000), than to the traveler’s wholesale alienation caused by racialization and sexually motivated gender stereotypes and the sexual violence he has experienced. Hence, the Amsterdam episode reveals the tormenting underside of his seemingly privileged mobilities. It is noteworthy that Amsterdam, where his alienated condition reaches its violent peak, exists outside his habitual environment represented by Paris. It is therefore not only mobility itself but also the destination that end up playing a key role in plot development in Njami’s novel.

Bebey and Holidaymaking as Self-Fashioning

My second example of novelistic representations of Afro-European tourists is from Kidi Bebey’s *Mon Royaume pour une guitare*. The novel is (auto)biographical: it tells the story of the author’s father, the Cameroonian composer and musician Francis Bebey and his family in France, covering a couple of decades starting from the late 1950s. It adopts the perspective of different family members, including the author-narrator’s younger self. Grounding her writing in her childhood experiences, Bebey has stated that, while the text features real people, the fact that her memories have faded and that those of her siblings sometimes fundamentally differ from hers, *Mon Royaume* cannot be said to “express any truth” (Bebey 2020, 155; my translation).

In addition to being a biography, or even an autobiography, the novel could be classified as migration literature or, given the perspective of the children born in France, as postmigration literature (Schramm 2024, 162). Despite their marginality in terms of narrative amplitude, portrayals

of leisure travel are important in character construction. Descriptions of holidaymaking are a pivotal element in the migrant family's process of self-fashioning: they convey the parents' striving for assimilation and social mobility—values that they adopt but that are imposed on them by French society and by their relatives back home, respectively. Pressures of assimilation and social mobility are explicit in descriptions of the family's leisure trips. Taking the family outside their habitual living environment in the culturally diverse Paris, the trips to provincial destinations also contribute to an understanding of non-metropolitan French spaces (see Ní Loingsigh 2009, 159). Another dimension of leisure mobility relates to the role played by the parents' home country, Cameroon, in the family's life in France. In this case, holidaymaking is linked to the idea of return—either in the form of physical mobility or of imaginative travel. As such, *Mon Royaume* attests to the relational character of the different forms and categories of mobility (see Averis and Hollis-Touré 2016, 4; Ní Loingsigh 2003, 155): migratory mobilities intertwine with leisure travel, educational mobilities, and diasporic returns.

Mon Royaume opens with a description of the narrator's father and mother and their childhood in Cameroon. Following a familiar pattern of narratives of educational mobilities, the talented young Francis leaves his home and ends up in La Rochelle to pursue his studies. At the same time, Madé, the narrator's equally talented mother, leaves Cameroon to study in Coulommiers. Already at this point the expectations of those back home are made explicit: “La conscience de l'immense attente des miens pesait tellement sur mes épaules que je n'osais pas avoir d'ambition personnelle” (44) [“All too aware of my family's huge expectations that weighed so heavily on my shoulders, I didn't even dare to have personal ambitions” (24)], conveys the narrative Madé's feelings. Pressures also originate from French society—Francis works hard to prove wrong the racist, colonialist prejudices regarding Africans. “Il est brillant, très intelligent *pour un Africain*” (45; original emphasis) [“He was brilliant, very intelligent for an African” (25)] and “vous l'avez entendu, presque pas d'accent. C'est *extraordinaire*” (52; original emphasis) [“did you hear him, practically no accent. It's extraordinary” (30)], quotes the narrative voice words that one can well imagine African students hearing in the France of the 1950s. These quotations capture the two-sided pressures that Francis and Madé experience and that are key to understanding the family's leisure-motivated mobilities in and outside France.

A scene featuring leisure-related mobility depicts the parents, “*brusquement nostalgiques de la mer*” (189) [“nostalgic for the sea” (127)], deciding to pack their car—“*la large Taunus blanche familiale*” (189) [“the wide, white family Taunus” (127)]—and drive the family to Normandy, in northern France, for a weekend outing. The family prepares for the road trip with great ease, packing supplies that range from sports gear and a picnic table and chairs to provisions that sound stereotypically French: “*On court acheter du pain, du jambon, des tranches de saucisson sec et à l’ail chez la charcutière*” (189) [“We rushed to buy bread, ham, and slices of dried sausage with garlic at the local deli” (127)]. The family leaves their Parisian home early in the morning, with the children in the backseat “*bercés par le ronronnement du moteur*” (190) [“lulled by the humming of the engine” (127)]. The car and the system of automobility more generally play an important role as the enabler of the family’s leisure mobilities to destinations outside Paris. Travels in the spacious family car not only capture the idea of the family unit as mobile or their middle-class aspirations, but also the parents’ pressures of assimilation—in other words, their project of “becoming French”.⁵ As a result of their racial difference, which excludes them from ethnically white conceptualizations of Frenchness, the parents’ project of self-fashioning has its limitations. The family members are uneasily aware of their “difference”, but the narrative also describes a moment when they themselves make fun of racial stereotypes. When the car leaves the national highway to follow side roads, the family stops to set up their picnic equipment. The father is aware of the fact that a Black family on a weekend trip in a French provincial landscape is a rare sight. He laughs at the reactions that he imagines local white people driving past them may have: “*Ils diront à leurs amis: je rentrais à la maison et là, d’un coup, j’ai vu des Noirs. Plein de Noirs en train de pique-niquer, assis sur des tabourets rouges! Tu te rends compte?*” (190) [“They’ll tell their friends: I was coming back home and suddenly, just like that, I saw some Black people. A whole bunch of Black people sitting on red stools, picnicking! Can you imagine?” (128)]. In addition to the aspect of self-fashioning, the trip to Normandy captures the parents’ nostalgia for their homeland—a recurring theme in the early parts of the novel. The trip to the Northern seaside town of Dieppe is motivated by the parents’ longing

⁵ See also Ní Loingsigh’s (2003, 163–165, 2009, 159–171) analyses of Calixthe Beyala’s novels *Maman a un amant* and *Le Petit prince de Belleville*, which highlight the role of leisure travel in the process of African migrants claiming belonging in France.

for the maritime landscapes of Cameroon. At their destination, however, small stones prevent the children from racing into the sea, and the overall impressions of the provincial seaside town are negative: “L’eau est froide, le ciel pâle, l’air frais et la ville peu accueillante” (190) [“The water was cold, the sky was pale, the air fresh, and the town not so welcoming” (128)]. In consequence, the parents’ and the children’s expectations remain unfulfilled: “la mer nous doit une revanche” (191) [“The seaside owed us a rain check” (128)], as the narrator says. The description of the seaside does not include indications of encounters with other people, which suggests that the family is alone on the beach. This detail points to the parents’ “misreading” of what Ní Loingsigh refers to as the “unspoken rules governing certain tourist practices” (2009, 160)—perhaps the season and/or the weather are not favorable for a swim in seawater or the beach is not meant for swimming in the first place.

Another scene involving leisure travel features later in the same chapter when a doctor orders sunbaths to the children’s vitamin D deficiency. Instead of traveling to Cameroon as suggested by the doctor, the parents decide to organize a holiday in the South of France. Here, as in Njami’s novel, the very concept of a holiday does not seem to make much sense, given the parents’ origins (1989, 102). The idea of holidaymaking in the South of France, a popular touristic destination, is therefore something quite new to the parents. The “Frenchness” of the concept of holidaymaking is conveyed in the narrator’s exclamation, “Les vacances! Un mot qui sonne tellement français” (193) [“Vacation! A word that sounded absolutely French” (130)]. If the trip to Normandy was motivated by the parents’ nostalgia for Cameroonian maritime landscapes, the trip to southern France conveys the pressures of assimilation that have been stimulating the parents’ aspirations to “become French”. This is conveyed through the way in which the narrative resorts to the typical lexicon of French holidaymaking: expressions such as “*descendre*” (travel from the northern parts of France to the South), “*aoûtien*” (August holidaymakers), and “*congés payés*” (paid holidays) keep recurring in a self-conscious, almost tongue-in-cheek manner (Bebey 2016, 193). Again, the family car plays a pivotal role as the enabler of leisure travel but also in the production of the image of the French middle-class tourist: the family joins the line of other automobile “*aoûtien*” on the congested main roads heading south. While the protecting capsule of the car body (see Urry 2007, 120) allows the family to blend in with the lines of vehicles transporting white French holidaymakers to the Mediterranean shores, the occasional “exposure” of their racial difference challenges this sense of belonging:

Derrière les vitres des voitures, autour de nous, on nous regarde parfois à la dérobée ou on nous sourit en levant le pouce. Nous créons particulièrement la surprise lorsque nous sortons les uns après les autres de la voiture pour nous dégourdir les jambes. (194)

All around, people looked at us from their car windows, sometimes on the sly, and they would smile and give us a thumbs-up. We were a real surprise, however, when we stopped and got out of the car to stretch our legs. (130)

Other vacationers' staring annoys the narrator's younger self since it functions as a gesture that signals the family's difference, and she reacts by grumbling in her other language Douala questions such as "Vous n'avez donc jamais voyagé ailleurs?" (194) ["You've never traveled?" (131)]. White French tourists are represented as parochial rather than "real" travelers.

At the holiday destination, "les vacances prennent leur véritable sens: nous étonnons mais ne dérangeons pas" (197) ["Here, *vacation* took on its true meaning: People looked surprised to see us, but didn't seem bothered" (132; original emphasis)]. The narrator's words convey the family's worry about "disturbing", i.e., standing out in a negative way as African migrants in their host country. The naivety of the perspective of the narrator's younger self fails to recognize the problematic aspects implied in the idea of not disturbing. The family engages in performing traditional touristic activities such as walks in picturesque landscapes, eating at seaside restaurants, visiting wineries, and going to the beach. As Daniel Burdsey argues, in former European colonial empires such as France the beaches have been "constructed as symbolic sites for (re)affirming dominant national, cultural, and ethno-racial identities" (2016, 5). The beach and the seaside are places that illuminate "the inveterate, racialized form of exclusionary social relations" (Burdsey 2016, 6), and indicate "the racialisation of recreational spaces" (10). In France, such meanings have been explicit in the controversy surrounding burkini-style swimsuits worn by Muslim women (see, e.g., Almeida 2018). The implicit racialization of the beach and the recreational activities it offers is alluded to in Bebey's narrative when the narrator states that "notre famille se remarque plus par sa pudeur que par sa couleur" (197) ["our family drew attention, more so because of our modesty than the color of our skin" (132–133)]. As the quotation suggests, more than racial difference, diverging cultural understandings of "decency" make the family stand out as they put on and

change from their bathing suits under the protection of unpractical “sacs de plage” (197) [“beach bags” (133)] that Madé has sewn. Interestingly enough, as yet another expression of assimilation, Madé “a même osé porter, c’est la mode, un bikini” (197) [“even dared to wear a bikini, in fashion at the time” (133)]. The mother’s balancing between culturally specific notions of decency and her aspirations to “become French” is captured in this short passage. While the family’s holidaymaking cannot be read beyond the discourses of Frenchness and assimilation, their holiday also opens up a new horizon: “Pour mes parents, il existe ici, en France, quelque chose qu’ils ne pouvaient pas trouver chez eux” (200) [“For my parents, there was something here in France they could not find back home” (134–135)]. This “something else” entails a sense of freedom of movement and the potential for social mobility, but also the opportunity to make choices of their own without the weight of the expectations and exigencies of the extended family back “home” (Bebey 2016, 200). Despite its limitations as a tool for African migrants to claim their belonging in French society, the family’s holidaymaking consequently captures “[le] goût délicieusement acidulé de la véritable liberté” (202) [“the deliciously acidic taste [...] of absolute freedom” (136)].

In *Mon Royaume* holidaymaking overlaps with diasporic returns, as the family travels to Douala. This holiday, compared to the one in Southern France, is “bien plus symbolique[...] encore” (203) [“even more symbolic” (137)]. For the parents, the symbolic value is the opportunity to reconnect with their relatives and with their memories of home. For the narrator’s younger self, who was born in France and has not been to Cameroon before, the destination seems exotic. Indeed, she tells her Parisian friends about the trip, with the goal of “faire mon intéressante” (204) [“get[ting] my classmates’ attention at school” (137)]. The long flight and the idea of traveling to “cette contrée africaine, lointaine et sauvage” (204) [“this African country, far away and unspoiled” (137)] impresses her schoolmates. What is striking in the narrator’s way of imagining Cameroon and representing it to her friends is the colonial imagery it relies on. She sees herself as “Tintin dans la forêt congolaise” (204) [“Tintin in the Congolese forest” (138)], confronting dangerous animals. The fact that the family will stay in an apartment house in the heart of urban Douala does not bear much weight in these fantasies. The power of literary texts to imagine places now takes a new form: for postmigratory AfroEuropeans, it is no longer Paris that is imagined through cultural products but the African home country of their parents.

It turns out that the holiday in Cameroon is not quite the same as the holiday in Southern France. The text conveys the nervousness of the parents, for whom the homecoming and the approval of their relatives represents a test that defines whether they have “succeeded” in France while remaining attached to their roots. This also defines how the children experience the holiday “back home”: “Nous ne visitons pas *le pays*, c’est nous qui sommes visités” (208; original emphasis) [“We didn’t visit the country; we were the ones who were visited” (141)]. For the parents, the holiday raises feelings of guilt that revolve not only around social problems but also their own personal “debt” to their relatives, who have played a significant role in enabling them to construct a relatively privileged life in France. In the eyes of some, this privilege is associated with a kinetic, “European”, middle-class lifestyle. There is a belief that Cameroonians living in France are “toujours en vacances” (205) [“always on vacation” (139)] and that they spend their time “*au volant d’une belle voiture américaine, en promenant [leur] famille*” (224; original emphasis) [“*at the wheel of a beautiful American car, driving around [their] family*” (152)]. The contrast between those who stay and those who live in France is constructed on the idea that migrants enjoy mobility for mobility’s sake, in a “typically European” way.

PRIVILEGED GLOBETROTTING: *LA SAVEUR DES*
DERNIERS MÈTRES

Poetics of Hypermobility

Felwine Sarr’s *La Saveur des derniers mètres* (2021) is an example of contemporary non-fictional travel narrative. Sarr, a Senegalese author and academic, currently works as a professor at Duke University in the USA. *La Saveur* consists of 27 short chapters that portray his journeys across the world, including a variety of African and European countries. Unlike in travelogues by previous writerly generations, Europe no longer occupies a special place in Sarr’s text but has become one destination among others. *La Saveur* could be considered a *travel chronicle* because of its short, disconnected chapters depicting the author-narrator’s journeys to different places bound together by time rather than plot (see Scholes 2001, 108). Chronicles are “often thought of as a form of temporal document”, hence qualifying as records rather than stories or explanations (Scholes 2001, 108). In *La Saveur*, the oldest texts date back to 2012 and 2013 and the

newest to 2020, although not all of the chapters mention the date or year of travel. The text challenges conventional generic definitions of the chronicle in the sense that the depictions of the journeys do not follow in chronological order. As such, it bears some resemblance to Michèle Rakotoson's recent homecoming travelogues, which carry the generic designation in their titles, *Juillet au pays: Chroniques d'un retour à Madagascar* (2007) and *Madame à la campagne: Chroniques malgaches* (2015) (for the former, see Chap. 4).

Unlike Rakotoson's texts, the cover of *La Saveur* does not feature any genre classifications. Yet the text can be characterized as a travel narrative due to its focus on travel and how it is "shaped by mobility" (Remington 2022, 70), as well as by its non-fictional quality (Borm 2004, 17). The text points to its own self-understanding as travel writing when the narrator recalls a discussion he has had with "Dany" (44)—very likely the diasporic Haitian author Dany Laferrière—in which the two pondered on the small number of texts by African authors focusing on "leurs sentiments et impressions des villes et pays qu'ils visitaient" (44) [their feelings and impressions of the cities and countries they had visited]. Traditional conceptualizations of travel writing imply the idea of *travel-for-travel's-sake*, but the travels undertaken by Sarr's narrator are often done for professional reasons, since he attends literary events around the world—because of this, the text could also have been discussed in Chap. 5 on work-related mobilities. While the literary events frequently provide the context for his journeys, the focus is on the embodied experience of being on the move rather than on the events. As such, *La Saveur* foregrounds the notion of travel-for-travel's-sake.

Together with the changing settings, allusions to the dates and arrival times of the respective journeys convey the sense of global hypermobility experienced by a privileged traveler who crosses spatial borders almost effortlessly. This effortless is facilitated by *hyperautomobility* and *hyperaeromobility*—systems that both, according to Phillip Vannini (2018, 7), have become integral elements of global modernity by reducing the laborious aspects of travel previously embodied in the etymological links of "travel" with *travail*, the French word for work (1). While the "laboriousness" of mobility (Vannini 2018, 6–9) is related to slower mobility practices such as walking and biking, but also with modes of public transport such as train travel, it is not merely a question of mode of transport but also one of socio-economic privilege and racialization. The power structures that inform and generate unequal access to mobility can be

understood in light of the notion of regimes of mobility, which highlights “the role both of individual states and of changing international regulatory and surveillance administrations that affect individual mobility” (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013, 189). The notion of a mobility regime allows for an understanding of the mobility/immobility nexus and of how the movements of some are normalized while those of others may be criminalized and hindered (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013, 189).

The racialization of African travelers affects their mobilities, as demonstrated in Janet Remington’s (2022) discussion of twenty-first-century Black South African travel writing and Gary Totten’s (2021) account of the mobilities of the African American travel writer Carl Rowan. Both Remington (2022, 70) and Totten (2021, 890–891) highlight the restricted mobilities of Black travelers in the South African and US contexts, respectively. Considering these “laborious” aspects of Black mobilities resulting from colonialist and white supremacist power structures, Sarr’s accounts of his effortless hypermobility draw a very different picture of the Black traveler. *La Saveur* only rarely attests to hindrances affecting the narrator’s mobility, although it cannot be said to be entirely blind to the racialized politics of travel either. As such, Sarr’s text sheds light on the “unequal relations of power that make mobility racially loaded in particular moments while also making racial processes, racialized spaces, racialized identities [...] deeply contingent on differential mobilities” (Nicholson and Sheller 2016, 8).

While the chapters in *La Saveur* remain disconnected from each other, their poetics of hypermobility binds them together. Following Andrew Thacker’s (2003, 7) argument that the emergence of modern modes of transport has been pivotal in the modernist literary portrayals of space, my interpretation of Sarr’s travel chronicles is that their form has been shaped by contemporary “routinization of geographically distant movement” (Shin and Lee 2022, 1). Glimpses into the author-narrator’s changing destinations enabled by hypermobility show that it functions as an organizational structure. Sarr’s chronicles can be read in terms of what Giada Peterle (2016, 289) refers to as the mobile chronotope. Peterle’s (2016) concept draws on Bakhtin’s (1981, 119) chronotope, which captures the confluence of time and space that structures literary texts. Peterle suggests that modes of transport and mobility practices can be understood as *mobile chronotopes* that “deeply influence [a text’s] form and contents, intertwining and connecting the temporal and spatial axes of the narration” (2016, 289). In Sarr’s chronicles, air travel is the enabler of his transnational

mobilities while automobility enables his local travels from the airport and in and beyond urban spaces. The text also includes scenes of pedestrianism, with the author-narrator walking in the streets of the cities that he is visiting. Walking, as an “anti-hyper-mobile” mobility practice (Vannini 2018, 8), enables encounters with the environment in which embodiment and sensory perceptions become more prominent.

From Airports to the Backseat of a Car

Many of the chapters in *La Saveur* repeat a similar logic: the narrative refers to a time of arrival and the name of an airport, after which it moves on to registering the narrator’s observations of the city toward which he is traveling as a passenger in a car. Airport arrivals are only rarely described—it is as if this part of the journey was taken for granted so that air travel becomes trivialized (see Durante 2020, 91) and its role in making sense of the places visited is marginalized. However, even the cursory allusions to the aeromobile infrastructure convey the importance of aeromobility as the enabler of the narrator’s journeys. The frequent use of temporal attributes (e.g., “Nous arrivons à 3h 40 du matin à l’aéroport de Douala” (31) [We arrive at 3:40 am at Douala Airport]; “J’arrive à Istanbul à la tombée de la nuit” (105) [I arrive in Istanbul at dusk]) that mark international arrivals and departures or times when the narrator has to wake up in order not to miss his flight ties the narrative to flight schedules. The lengths of transit times are frequently mentioned, as in the case of his trip to Québec via New York (44). Most chapters are structured around aeromobile temporalities, capturing the idea of the time-compressed hypermobility of air travel.

In addition to the temporal aspect, the implicit presence of aeromobility is conveyed in spatial terms through the car rides from extra-urban airports to urban centers. These passages describe the narrator’s progressive entry into a city through its peripheries, articulating a sense of anticipation: “Il y a toujours ce moment où l’on est arrivé, mais où l’on ne voit pas encore la ville. Est-elle plate? Se dresse-t-elle en hauteur? Est-elle chatoyante? Terne? Les bras ouverts? Recroquevillée?” (106) [There’s always the moment when one has arrived but when one has not yet seen the city. Is it flat? Does it rise to the heights? Is it shimmering? Dull? Open-armed? Huddled?]. Nocturnal automobile arrivals and the smooth transitions of off-peak hours add a certain intimacy to the narrator’s first encounter with a city: “J’entre dans la ville pendant qu’elle dort. Je peux la regarder sans

qu'elle me voie et sentir son souffle apaisé, la douceur de sa nuit. Rouler dans des avenues fluides, deviner ses bâtisses, son atmosphère congestionnée ou aérée" (32) [I enter into the city while it sleeps. I can look at it without it seeing me and feel its calm breathing, the softness of its night. Drive along flowing avenues, guessing its buildings, its congested or airy atmosphere]. Sometimes the city turns out to be disappointing already upon arrival and through the windows of the moving car: "Nous arrivons à Entebbe vers 2 heures du matin et traversons la ville en voiture au milieu de la nuit. Pas vu grand-chose, mais il m'a semblé qu'il n'y avait pas grand-chose à voir" (14) [We arrive in Entebbe towards 2 am and ride through the city in a car in the middle of the night. I haven't seen much but it seems that there's not much to see anyway]. In *La Saveur*, cars "are not only machines for transporting [travelers] to particular destinations, but also technologies for visually experiencing [...] these places through mobile sightseeing", as Jonas Larsen (2001, 81) describes the role of motorized transport in making sense of the place of travel. Cityscapes in Sarr's travel narrative are first encountered and observed by a passenger located in a moving car.

These scenes of arrival also, necessarily, entail co-traveling—either with a taxi driver or with a relative, friend, or colleague who has come to pick up the narrator from the airport. During these moments of co-traveling, the narrator learns details about the cities that he has just flown to. On their way from Mexico City to the Mexican hinterlands, his traveling companion informs him about the country's history (28); in Cairo, he shares a minibus with the Senegalese author Mohamed Mbougar Sarr (112), with whom he discusses culture-related topics inspired by the city; and in New York, he engages in a conversation in French with a taxi driver—whom he suspects is Haitian—about the renowned Haitian author Frankétienne (43). These encounters, which are facilitated by the shared space of the moving vehicle, challenge ideas about such transits as meaningless time (Larsen 2001, 81). Instead, the text frames mobilities in motorized transport undertaken in the company of others as important parts of what the narrator considers to be his main reason for traveling, namely, his eagerness to "goûter le monde, le connaître, élargir mes géographies, visiter mes semblables" (134) [to taste the world, to get to know it, to widen my geographies, to visit my fellow human beings]. The human aspect of such encounters renders the motorized vehicles as more than mere "mobility machines" facilitating visual engagement with surrounding landscapes (Larsen 2001, 94), but also creates them as moving social

spaces. While the modes of modern hypermobility take their toll on the narrator, as will be seen in the following section, their impact on his thirst for understanding the world cannot be denied.

The narrator wishes to disassociate himself from tourists. The text resonates with negative understandings of the tourist as a figure that stands in opposition to the more “serious” pursuits of “non-tourists” (see McCabe 2005, 103). While hypermobilities have enabled mass tourism because of their effectiveness in making must-see touristic destinations easily reachable, the travels of the narrator in *La Saveur* are not motivated by an urge to engage in this sort of an activity: “Je ne suis pas attiré par les lieux, lorsque j’arrive dans une ville, je ne cours pas visiter les endroits à *absolument* voir. Je le suis par les personnes que j’y rencontre” (20; original emphasis) [I’m not attracted by places when I arrive in a city; I don’t run to see the *must-see* places. I’m attracted by the people I meet there]. In New York, he distinguishes himself from tourists on their way to visit Ground Zero—he prefers to “flâner [...] dans la ville” (44) [roam in the city]. The figure of the flâneur connotes a degree of elitism or even snobism through its behavioral difference from that of the general tourist (Nuvolati 2019, 26). Stereotypical tourists use their time efficiently by following planned itineraries, while the flâneur’s mobilities are characterized by slowness and an aspiration to “become native and integrated in order to share the natives’ local lifestyle” (Nuvolati 2019, 27; my translation). In Rome, however, Sarr’s narrator succumbs to the lure of “programmed events and precise timeframe” typical of touristic rhythms (Nuvolati 2019, 27; my translation) by accepting an offer made by a tout. He pays for “une formule qui me fera éviter les trois heures de queue pour accéder aux musées du Vatican” (39–40) [a formula that will allow me to avoid three hours of queuing to access the Vatican museums], only to find out, like a stereotypically gullible tourist, that “c’est une arnaque” (40) [it’s a scam]. The border between the traveler and the tourist is not as neat as the narrator would like it to be.

Slow Mobilities and the Politics of Mobility

La Saveur also features slow mobilities, including the narrator’s urban strolls. Adama Coulibaly’s (2023) distinction between the road (*la route*) and the street (*la rue*) clarifies the change of scale in the mobilities of Sarr’s narrator. Coulibaly (2023, 42) differentiates the motif of the road—as an infrastructure that exceeds the city map and an image that captures a

more generic idea of a way or a route—from that of the street, which is closely associated with urbanity. Through pedestrianism, Sarr’s narrator moves from the realm of the road, associated with modern hypermobility—automobility but also peri-urban aeromobile infrastructures—to the realm of the street, which is inscribed in the city map, connoting a more specifically defined local spatiality.

A chapter on Lisbon describes his walks in the city. Walking, he claims, is his way of getting to know the rhythms of the city: “Je m’exerce à [...] sentir [les villes] par leurs points de vibration: les passants d’une rue, leur cadence rythmique” (20) [I try to feel the cities through their points of vibration: the passers-by on a street, their rhythmic cadence]. Places, as Edensor (2016, 5) has stated, have their characteristic rhythms. Moreover, as Adrien Frenay, Giulio Iacoli, and Lucia Quaquarelli put it, “moving around on foot, slowing down one’s pace and gaze, gives new bearings in the world that is being explored” (2019, 14; my translation). In *La Saveur* walking as an embodied practice enables the narrator to grasp the rhythms of Lisbon. Sarr’s narrator is less the modernist, detached flâneur than its contemporary counterpart, embodied in the figure of the (postcolonial) pedestrian characterized by their “physical and emotional engagement with the city” (Carrera Suárez 2015, 857). While walking is a way for him to immerse himself in the urban space, the narrator does not claim that it would permit him to achieve an infallible entry into the “essence” of the city. In Lisbon, he walks along Avenida de Roma several times because he suspects that his senses may have failed him (23). A similar scene emerges in a chapter describing his visit to Cassis in France (117). Walking is represented as a continuous learning process, and the narrator cherishes the idea of getting lost: he wishes to be guided by his senses to understand the city (43). Aimless walking is a way of being attuned to the here-and-now of the place: “Une déambulation sans but; marcher, laisser les pensées vaquer, décanter, être disponible à ce qui surgit au coin de la rue” (117) [Roaming without a goal, letting one’s thoughts wander and clarify, to be open to what comes around the corner]. Walking is also a way for the narrator to reclaim his own embodied mobile rhythms, which have been disturbed by motorized hypermobilities in the course of which the body is being transported instead of moving itself: “Je ne me hâte pas et cherche cet autre rythme interne qui est fondamentalement mien. Celui qui articule mon poids, mon âge, ma mécanique intérieure, la cadence de mes errances” (117) [I don’t hurry and look for the internal rhythm that is

fundamentally mine. The rhythm that articulates my weight, age, my inner mechanics, the rhythm of my wanderings]. Despite technologies that enable rapid displacements across geographical spaces, the body remains a location where all mobilities intertwine.

During his walks in different cities, urban spaces from around the world are evoked, producing a sense of translocality (Mattheis 2021). The light that envelops Lisbon is compared to that in Alger (19), and so is the Mediterranean atmosphere of Naples (41). The Mexican town of Tepoztlán reminds the narrator of Lisbon (26), and the rising streets in Porte-au-Prince (60) and Istanbul (106) have the same effect. In New York, he does not want to visit Ground Zero because he has already seen the genocide sanctuary in Murambi in Rwanda: “cela me suffit comme témoignage” (44) [that’s enough of a testimonial for me]. The street life in Porte-au-Prince makes him think of unspecified African cities. In addition to spatial links generated through translocality, the narrator also establishes *transtemporal* connections across places. This is the case in a passage in which he observes portrayals of the memory of slavery in murals in Mexico City (25). The sounds of a fado song in Lisbon cause him to imagine how his father might have listened to the Malian musician Habib Koité during his mission in Darfur as a UN peacekeeper (21). In Dakar, he visits his former home street—this time himself behind the steering wheel—and travels back in time to his early years (35–36). His urban mobilities are not only set in the specific spatiotemporal context of the here-and-now but also transgress the boundaries thereof by establishing relational links between different mobilities. The position of Sarr’s narrator resembles what Andrew Stafford (2020, 215) refers to as the “transnational flâneur” in his analysis of Barlen Pyamootoo’s travelogue *Le Tour de Babylone* (2002): Pyamootoo’s text narrates the Mauritian author’s visit to Bagdad, which is represented as a city of interwoven spatiotemporalities.

The text also includes scenes of boating in pirogues on the narrator’s native island, Niodior, and his jogging in Dakar. Niodior and Dakar function as points of anchorage to which the highly mobile narrator regularly returns. Niodior features in several chapters, including the opening one, while a couple of chapters are set in Dakar, a city in which the narrator has lived. This narrative strategy accords importance to the places that are linked to the narrator’s personal history. As places of return and centers of his mobility, Niodior and Dakar become connected to the other places

that the narrator visits. The chapters focusing on Niodior feature aquatic mobilities through the presence of pirogues. In one chapter, the narrator navigates a pirogue himself. Here, the physical dimension of mobility is highlighted when he tries to get used to the gestures that were once familiar to him: “Tirer la barre vers moi afin que la pirogue aille en sens opposé, sentir l’ampleur du geste et sa vélocité pour ne pas brusquer le mouvement” (70) [Pull the bar towards me so that the dugout is moving in the opposite direction, feeling the extent and speed of the gesture so as to not to rush the movement]. Navigating the pirogue makes the narrator aware of his own body as a generator of movement—unlike in a car, he is not just a body transported but a body that has to make a physical effort to move itself and others. In scenes like this the focus shifts from visual perceptions of the landscape to embodied movement.

Such experiences of “rooted”, embodied mobility seem crucial for the narrator, who is engaged in a hypermobile lifestyle. Hypermobilities are not opposed to slow mobilities, but rather, as Nour Dakkak writes, “fast-accelerated mobilities [...] enable slower movements to be acknowledged and fully appreciated” (2019, 118). The importance of slow mobilities is reflected in the title of the book, which is derived from a chapter that focuses on his running exercise in Dakar: “Les derniers mètres de la course ont une saveur” (127) [the last meters have a flavor of their own], states the narrator as he lists the feelings that running generates in him. In Douala he suffers from “road fatigue” (85). He believes that his weariness results from constant traveling: “Le corps et le cœur ont perdu de l’amplitude, à courir sans arrêt ces dernières semaines sur les routes du monde: conduire, prendre l’avion, faire l’expérience de différents rythmes biologiques sur différents continents” (75) [The body and the heart have lost something of their normal function due to the non-stop running over the last few weeks on the roads of the world: driving, flying, experiencing different biological rhythms on different continents]. Sarr’s text does not contribute to the “glamorization” of hypermobility but rather highlights its darker “physiological, psychological, emotional and social consequences” (Cohen and Gössling 2015, 1662). Sarr’s portrayals of road fatigue show “how passenger bodies are [...] closely entangled with aeromobility infrastructures at a material physiological level” (Adey et al. 2024, 720). Given his road fatigue, it is also significant that hotels and hotel rooms feature in the narrative only in passing. Davidson (2018, 5) accords to the hotel room the role of “decompressing” the tensions caused by the

time-space condensation of hypermobility. Sarr links decompression to physical activity rather than to sedentary relaxation in the temporary of home of the hotel room. Toward the end of the volume, two chapters focus on running, an activity the narrator takes up while at home in Dakar. Returning home from a run is paralleled with a return from a journey abroad (127). This suggests a relational understanding of mobilities and the idea of being on the move as a wholesale philosophy of life. According to this philosophy, “le voyage ne s’arrête jamais” [the journey never ends] and “mouvement et immobilité ne font plus qu’un” (135) [movement and immobility become one].

While the narrator’s own mobilities are mostly unrestrained, the text acknowledges the effects of racialized mobility regimes. In short, the poetics of hypermobility of *La Saveur* is not without the recognition of racialized mobility politics shaped by the “unequal relations of power inherent in both mobility and race” (Nicholson and Sheller 2016, 4). The text features a scene with African migrants returning to the continent on a flight to Addis Abeba operated by Air France. The narrator observes the condescending attitudes of the air hostesses toward the “immigrés partant en vacances” (14) [immigrants going on holiday]. He states that in the restricted space of the airplane, travelers resort to subtle social strategies “pour maintenir les distances, les hiérarchies, les distinctions et les supposées différences de classe sociale” (14) [to maintain the distances, hierarchies, distinctions and apparent differences of social class]. While the narrator shows awareness of the production of social differences in the context of mobility, he remains in the position of an observer without associating himself with the immigrants. This emphasizes his relatively privileged position, further adding to the impression of the effortless of his mobilities. In another anecdote, discriminatory treatment is not only suffered by his fellow Black travelers but also by the narrator himself, who laments the overt racism of the Royal Air Maroc (RAM) employees: “Il faudra un jour que j’écrive sur le racisme des agents de la RAM. J’en ai une longue expérience pour avoir maintes fois voyagé sur leurs lignes, et la plupart des Africains subsahariens qui prennent cette compagnie la partagent avec moi” (114) [One day I’ll have to write about the racism of the RAM officers. I have wide experience thereof, having traveled many times on their routes, and most Sub-Saharan Africans have shared this experience].

La Saveur alludes to clandestine migratory mobilities when the narrator returns to his home island of Niodior. He explains that almost all of the young men there dream of leaving because they are lured by “le mirage de l’Espagne” (71) [the mirage of Spain]. When he meets his young relatives who are under the influence of this dream of Europe, he tries to change their minds by warning them about the realities of migratory life in Europe and the dangers of the route. However, he acknowledges that his warnings probably make no difference and asks himself whether it would make more sense to help his relatives “à y aller avec le moins de risques possible, ou m’en tenir à ma position de principe?” (74) [to go there with as little as risk as possible, or to stick to my principles?]. In another chapter, he walks in the streets of Mantua in Italy and comes across a Black man begging. The young man, probably a clandestine migrant, avoids addressing his requests to the narrator. The latter suspects that the reason for this is shame—the young man does not want to be identified by a fellow African as being in a humiliating condition. On his way back from the walk, the narrator speaks to the man, gives him some money, and refers to him as his brother. This brief encounter between an affluent “transnational flâneur” (Stafford 2020) and a migrant adventurer (Mazaauric 2016, 50–51) draws attention to the diversity of African mobilities in Europe and the limited accessibility of global hypermobility.

CONCLUSION

While the figure of the African or Afro-European tourist or leisure traveler is not necessarily the most recurrent mobile subject in Francophone African literatures, it certainly occurs in travelogues and in fictional texts. Tourism and travel connote leisure and privilege, but for most of the travelers discussed in this chapter, mobilities are not necessarily unimpeded. In effect, the “laborious” aspects of travel are evident in all of the texts discussed here. *Un Nègre à Paris* and *L’Africain du Groenland* attest to the frictional and arrhythmic qualities of touristic and Arctic exploration mobilities through their narrative rhythms. Hectic and slow rhythms and moments of pauses play a key role in the production of meanings concerned not only with the mobility practices but also with those of places traveled to and with the figure of the traveler. *African gigolo* and *Mon Royaume pour une guitare* highlight not only the alienating aspects of leisure mobilities from the perspective of African tourists and

holidaymakers; Bebey's text attracts attention to the way in which holiday-making serves as a mode of self-fashioning for African migrants. Njami's and Bebey's novels foreground the relational aspects of mobilities: leisure travel overlaps with professional mobilities or diasporic returns. *La Saveur* captures the rhythms of contemporary hypermobilities both thematically and in its form. However, it does this without glamorizing hypermobility: the author-narrator's transnational journeys by airplane and in the back-seat of a car are counterbalanced by physical exercise and slow mobilities. Walking permits more detailed and rooted understandings of the place of travel, although the role of automobile journeys in the company of others is not insignificant in making sense of place and creating ephemeral affinities. In terms of hypermobility, Dadié's and Sarr's texts can be seen as part of the same continuum. Earlier fascination with the colonial metropolis and its hectic rhythms has given way to expressions of global connectedness that move beyond the colonial periphery-metropolis nexus. The negative aspects of hypermobility are discussed more explicitly in *La Saveur* than in Dadié's travelogue.

Equally interesting is the way in which some of the travelers embrace the position of the tourist, while others reject it. For some, being a tourist means adopting the position of a modern mobile subject (Dadié) or claiming belonging in the host country (Bebey). For others, the position of the tourist is unappealing because it contradicts the idea of certain forms of travel as heroic pursuits (Kpomassie); it may connote an uncritical adaptation of European culture (Njami), or it may seem incongruent with more "profound" engagements with the places and people (Sarr). Despite their differences in terms of destinations and the ways in which the travelers position themselves vis-à-vis tourism, the choice of mode of transport is pivotal in the texts' construction of place and of the figure of the traveler. The texts represent a wide range of different modes of transport, from aeromobility to automobility, and from dog sledding to various modes of waterborne traffic. This diversity is linked to the travel destinations, which are equally the most varied in this chapter. In effect, the mobilities in all of the texts—apart from Dadié's travelogue—move beyond a strictly metropolitan setting in Paris and challenge the idea that the primary destination of African migrants based in Europe is their former home country on the African continent. Texts about leisure-related travel do, to some extent, liberate the African and Afro-European travelers from the notion of home and open up new insights into Afro-European mobilities.

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CHAPTER 4

Mobile “homecomings” from Europe to Africa

DIASPORIC RETURN JOURNEYS

This chapter discusses Afro-European mobilities from the perspective of the diasporic returnee, a figure that draws attention to the diverse directions of Afro-European mobilities rather than prioritizing outward mobilities from Africa. In narratives of return, Africa is the destination, although the notion of return implies anterior departure. Returnees recur frequently in diasporic literatures, capturing the conditions of in-betweenness and unbelonging caused by dislocation. Return narratives have a long history in Afro-diasporic literatures, starting folklore and myths (Uwakweh 2023, 184). Returns to Africa were a central theme in the Harlem Renaissance and the *Négritude* movement in the early twentieth century. *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939), by Aimé Césaire, one of the key figures of *Négritude*, is the most canonical of the Afro-diasporic return narratives. For Black cultural movements, the return to Africa was “a quest for a remembered past [...] undertaken to reaffirm a lost identity” (François 2011, xv). Moreover, as Yogita Goyal argues, in Black diasporic literatures, “the sign of Africa speaks as directly to dreams of redemption and return to a lost homeland, as it does to the politics of fighting racism and imperialism” (2010, 8). Early return narratives often imagined Africa in a romanticized light, partly because the returnees did not have personal links with the continent. Contemporary diasporic roots tourism is equally marked by

disconnection; these are journeys undertaken to visit symbolic homelands rather than places linked to one's personal past (Marschall 2018, 8, 11).

The reasons for diasporic returns vary: in addition to nostalgia and the quest for roots and identity, they also include "the call to filial duty, engagement with the homeland development, [and] desire to invest in its economic opportunities" (Uwakweh 2023, 186). In Anglophone West African literatures set in the early post-independence period one frequently comes across the figure of the *been-to*, a relatively affluent character who has studied abroad and who returns to their homeland to contribute to the independent nation-state and profit from the opportunities that it offers (Cousins and Dodgson-Katiyo 2016, 3). Discussing the temporal aspects of the *been-to*'s return, Amanda Lagji states that there is "[a] dissonance between the temporalities engendered by national development and 'progress'" and the deferral of this progress as experienced by the returning migrant (2016, 29). The *been-to*'s sense of disillusionment embodies the motif of waiting for the promises of independence to be realized (Lagji 2016, 29) and articulates the idea of failed postcolonial modernity.

Compared to their predecessors, contemporary return narratives tend to represent the return more realistically (Ledent and Tunca 2014, 113), and many of them "refuse to construct Africa as a site of salutary return" (Adesanmi 2013, 321–322). They are skeptical about natural affiliations and aware of the fragmented identities that diaspora generates, which is also why return narratives today "have become transformed into discourses problematizing the very concepts they had earlier sought to idealize" (Ravi 2014, 297). Consequently, the "homecomings" of diasporic returnees are often informed by an unease that results from the spatiotemporal and affective distance from the former home (Toivanen 2017; Ravi 2018, 66–67; Jones 2019, 217–246; Moji 2019, 33; Cobo Piñero 2020, 169). Diasporic returns represent "a turning point in the migration experience" because of the returnee's changed status in relation to their former community and environment (Suárez Rodríguez 2020, 794). Return travel, in the case of contemporary African diasporas, is not only about spatial mobility but also a form of temporal travel whereby the returnee travels back to a place with which they share a common past. Sabine Marschall's term "personal memory tourism" is pertinent in this context: it describes "people who travel in pursuit of memories of their own past and retrace journeys undertaken earlier in life" (2015, 36). The aspect of tourism is central here: the diasporic returnee is most often a

socio-economically privileged traveler whose plans only rarely include returning for good. Seeing diasporic returns as a form of tourism highlights the intersections between different categories of mobility (Marschall 2018, 2).

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the genuinely kinetic aspects of diasporic returns. This is achieved by giving priority to mobility itself (Faulconbridge and Hui 2016, 4) instead of reducing it to a mere “ancillary to whatever precedes or follows it” (Schimkowsky et al. 2025, 4). In line with the idea of putting mobility at the center of diasporic “homecomings”, the first part of this chapter addresses the transnational dimension of return travel through portrayals of aeromobility, while the second part approaches mobility practices in local, mostly urban, settings. Both transnational and local mobilities contribute to the construction of the figure of the diasporic returnee as well as the place of return, attesting to the way in which mobility practices, subjectivities, and space are interrelated and co-productive (Cresswell and Merriman 2013, 5–11).

AEROMOBILITIES OF DIASPORIC RETURNEES

The scenes of aeromobility analyzed in this book tend to be marginal in terms of length, which attests to the banalization of air travel (Cwerner 2009, 6). The same is true of this chapter, where none of the texts discussed is about aeromobility per se.¹ And yet it is “precisely this ambient, unremarkable quality that contributes to the culture of flight” as Christopher Schaberg (2011, 13) observes. That such “trivial” scenes recur in fiction suggests that they fulfill specific functions in narrative structures, plot construction, and character development (Schaberg 2011, 1–2). Moreover, fiction also has the power to distance readers from their own trivial experiences of air travel, allowing them to see the complexities of aeromobility more clearly (Durante 2020, 8).

This section focuses on descriptions of air travel and airports, that is, the system of aeromobility, which is central to the global world (dis)order (Urry 2007, 149) since it embodies “both the opportunities and the vulnerabilities of [...] globalization” (Salter 2008, ix). As relatively privileged mobile subjects, diasporic returnees can be seen to benefit from its opportunities. In effect, compared to other forms of motorized transport

¹For a Francophone African novel focusing on aeromobility, see Assamala Amoi’s *Avion par terre* (2010).

such as automobility, air travel remains even more an unevenly accessed resource for the great majority in Global South (Cwerner 2009, 2–3). If in the colonial era, air travel represented the “fulfilment of a colonial fantasy” as it enabled easy access to colonial territories, nowadays its colonial legacy is manifest in how air travel makes the Global South easily reachable for Western tourists (Neigh 2018, 5, 6). Air travel has affected African migration and diasporas in that not only may (affluent) Africans and diasporic Africans travel to the Global North but they may also visit their former home countries (Bhimull 2017, 23; Neigh 2018, 3). Aeromobility has become an important enabler of diasporic homecomings, which is also why scenes of air travel are frequent in return narratives.

Paolo Cwerner emphasizes that “aeromobilities cannot be dissociated from the places, people, and organizations they connect, the distances that they bridge and the speed with which they distribute people [...] across these distances” (2009, 5). In line with the idea that mobilities, places, and subjects are interrelated, this section examines how aeromobility contributes to the production of the subjectivity of the diasporic returnee and their relationship with the place of return in Aïssatou Cissokho’s *Dakar, la touriste autochtone* (1986) [Dakar, the native tourist], Daniel Biyaoula’s *L’Impasse* (1996) [The impasse], Michèle Rakotoson’s *Juillet au pays: Chroniques d’un retour à Madagascar* (2007) [July in the country: Chronicles of return to Madagascar], Véronique Tadjou’s *Loïn de mon père* (2010) [*Far from My Father* (2014)], and Jussy Kiyindou’s *Des Ombres et leurs échos...* (2019) [Shadows and their echoes]. While the other texts can be classified as novels—many of them with autobiographical elements—Rakotoson’s work belongs to the genre of travel writing, which is “characterised by a non-fiction dominant that relates [...] in the first person a journey [...] that the reader supposes to have taken place in reality while assuming [...] that author, narrator and principal character are but one or identical” (Borm 2004, 17). Despite its “non-fiction dominant”, Rakotoson’s portrayal of aeromobility does not stand out from the other texts—probably because Rakotoson is also a writer of fiction whose lyrical yet (self-)ironic style is also manifest in her non-fictional work. In all the texts, air travel is narrated from the first-person perspective, which immerses the reader in a tangible and “unmediated” narrativization of the returnee’s aeromobile experience.

As in Chap. 2, my reading of air travel focuses on *landscapes* of aeromobility: the airport, the plane, and the flight route (Adey et al. 2007, 774).

As a mobility system, aeromobility also includes mobile infrastructures beyond these landscapes (Zuskačova 2020, 8) such as journeys from the airport to the city,² which I address in the next section. Representations of aeromobility can feature scenes of departure, passage, and arrival. *Departure* signals detachment from a specific context and localized identity (Leed 1991, 56). *Passage* conveys a state of movement during which “the passenger becomes more conscious of self as a ‘viewer’ or ‘observer’”, while *arrival* implies attachment to a new context and a process during which “the traveler identifies the place and [...] the place identifies the [...] traveler” (Leed 1991, 56, 85). That the returnees’ transitions between different stages of the journey are not always smooth contributes to the unease informing the poetics of aeromobility in diasporic return narratives. Representations of diasporic returnees’ air travel enable insights into experiences of aeromobile “discomfort and disorientation” that have not received much attention in current scholarship (Adey et al. 2024, 719).

Not all mobile subjects are equal in the regulated system of aeromobility. Some move more freely than others, and the differences in the accessibility of aeromobility generate inequalities in terms of class, nationality, and race (Cwerner 2009, 10). Airports are border mechanisms that define who “is safe or threatening, who has the right to travel and who does not” (Adey 2008, 1326), and these processes are profoundly racialized (Kumavie 2021a, 1; Browne 2015, 132). The most flagrant dimensions of the exclusionary aspects of aeromobility have been represented in novels narrating deportation flights. Unlike the “homeward” journeys of relatively affluent diasporic returnees, aeromobilities of the “deportation class” (Walters 2002) as discussed in Chap. 6 are *unvoluntary* returns. In the texts analyzed in the present chapter, the exclusionary elements of aeromobility are less striking because the returnees are relatively privileged mobile subjects. Moreover, return narratives feature Africans who travel from Europe back to the countries where they supposedly “belong”: the risk of being classified as an “unwanted intruder” is less tied to race and nationality than in stories that feature Africans traveling to Europe. That said, the texts do convey the idea of aeromobility as a generator of differences and they allude to the link between colonialism and air travel.

²For analyses of airport journeys in literature, see Durante (2020, 19–50), García Corte (2022, 99–139), Toivanen (2023).

Since the 1980s, air travel fares have decreased and routes have increased, making aeromobility more accessible for a larger number of travelers (Neigh 2018, 5; Cwerner 2009, 7). These developments are reflected in the growing presence of airports and airplanes in cultural products (Durante 2020, 10). The diversification and increased accessibility of air travel is reflected in the texts under analysis: Cissokho's novel, published in 1986, features passengers ranging from tourist class to business class, and it also alludes to competing airlines operating the Paris-Dakar route. Rakotoson's text includes a portrayal of a Malagasy family of Southern Asian origin flying to Antananarivo, with the narrator describing their inexpensive clothing and wondering in which of the socially deprived Parisian suburbs they live, and Biyaoula's passengers not only represent social elites but also include working-class migrants like the protagonist. In this sense, the texts reflect real-world developments of air travel while foregrounding the subjective experience of the returnee.

*Aeromobile Journeys of Unbelonging and Guilt: Tadjou
and Rakotoson*

The factors motivating the return vary from economic and family reasons to the returnee's personal quests for identity (Uwakweh 2023, 186). One recurrent motive is the death of a family member: it justifies the expense of a plane ticket in situations in which returning would otherwise be out of the question. In the case of Tadjou's protagonist in *Loin de mon père* (2010), who returns from Paris to Abidjan because of the death of her father, her long absence from home is less a question of financial means than the civil war raging in Ivory Coast. Nina's return to the war-torn country is marked by anxieties generated not only by the loss of her father but also by her fears of no longer being able to claim Ivory Coast as her home and by her worries about her relatives' attitudes to her long absence. These anxieties are reflected in the novel's opening, set in an aircraft on its way to Abidjan. In terms of the poetics of mobility, the fact that the story opens with an air travel scene is significant: it conveys the protagonist's state of in-betweenness as someone who is at home neither in Paris nor in their former home country. The airplane passage is an event that marks a transition "from one state to another state" (Bal 1997, 182), and it embodies "a sense of simultaneity, of being in at least two places at once" (MacArthur 2012, 273), which is the key dilemma of diasporic identity. The distressing impact of the return on Nina is conveyed in the opening

sentence: “Impossible de dormir” (13) [“Impossible to sleep” (9)].³ For her, the nocturnal sky is “dense et inquiétante”, “[un] trou noir” (13) [“dense and troubling”, “a dark hole” (9)] that she does not want to see, so she pulls down the window shade. Nina oscillates between a waking state and fragile sleep from which she suddenly awakes, tormented by a nightmare in which voices tell her, “Pour qui te prends-tu? Tu n’es rien. Ta maison a été rasée. Tes parents n’existent plus. Personne ne veut de toi, ici. Va-t’en!” (14) [“Just who do you think you are? You are nothing. Your house was destroyed. Your parents are dead and gone. No one wants you here. Get out!” (10)]. The narrative mentions Nina’s swollen feet and aching body—typical symptoms of a long-haul flight but which can also be read as embodied symbols representing the distress that she does not manage to ease, despite relaxation movements. As the stiffness persists, Nina feels as if she were on an endless journey during which her body and mind have abandoned her: that is, a sort of a death. The stiffness highlights the hypermobility/inertia paradox characteristic of air travel, with all the waiting and sitting that it entails (see Durante 2020, 195–196). When Nina clumsily walks in the aisle, she observes other passengers sleeping in awkward positions, with their arms sticking out from under the blankets, “tels les membres rigides de cadavres mal emballés” (14) [“like the stiffened limbs of badly wrapped corpses” (10)]. The image of indifferently treated corpses captures Nina’s gloomy thoughts, evoking not only the death of her father but also victims of the civil war. The flight is referred to as “calvaire” (16) [“torture” (11)], and the fact that Nina cannot wait to see the daylight and feel the ground under her feet conveys the idea of the journey as a distressing condition of disorientation.

Upon landing, the sun is rising, which suggests that Nina’s anxieties start to dissipate since she can finally meet her family. However, several elements in her arrival at the local airport indicate her failure to be “identified” by the place of the return and to feel attached to it (Leed 1991, 56, 85). The first thing that she feels as the airplane doors open is “l’haleine brûlante du pays” (16) [“the country’s burning breath” (11)], which is far from being the most welcoming element. Despite her Ivorian passport, at the passport control she is interrogated about the length of her stay. It is only when the customs officer identifies Nina as the daughter of an

³In the cases of Tadjó’s and Layé’s texts, the page number after English quotations refers to their respective published English versions. Translated quotations from Cissokho’s, Biyaoula’s, Rakotoson’s, and Kiyindou’s texts are mine.

important Ivorian public figure that he welcomes her to the country. This underlines that Nina's link to Ivory Coast is her father: without him, she is nothing more than a tourist. The fact that her mother was a white French woman further adds to her exclusion from her "fatherland". The scene underlines the quality of the airport as a site where "the nation concentrates the display of its sovereignty, even as it negotiates the limits of such sovereignty within a global world system" (Kumavie 2021b, 68). Soon it becomes clear that Nina's airport experience is not a pleasant one. Wearing too many clothes, she starts to sweat in the heat: her inappropriate clothing signals that she has become unaccustomed to the local climate and that she has become an outsider in her "own" country. Like the feeling of stiffness, sweating adds to the imagery of embodied unease associated with homecoming.

In the arrivals hall Nina encounters a crowd that includes not a single familiar face, causing her to feel disoriented. When she exits the airport, a young man asks whether she needs a taxi and seizes her baggage in the hope of gaining some money by offering his services. At this moment, Nina's cousin turns up and there is a scuffle over the baggage between him and the intrusive porter, who, according to the narrator, regards the suitcase as "son butin" (18) ["his prize" (13)]. Nina remains a passive observer of the incident—her unconvincing attempt to intervene by saying "Cela n'a pas d'importance, il peut porter ma valise..." (18) ["It's not a big deal. He can carry my bag..." (13)] is ignored by the others. This not only signals that Nina is a mere tourist in her former home country but also indicates the sense of guilt that an affluent returnee feels in her encounter with local inequalities (Ravi 2014, 296).

Similar issues of unbelonging and guilt are articulated in the portrayals of aeromobility in *Juillet au pays: Chroniques d'un retour à Madagascar*, a travelogue narrating the "homecoming" of the diasporic author Michèle Rakotoson after several years of absence and after more than 20 years of life in France. Rakotoson exiled in 1983 for political reasons and was not allowed to travel to Madagascar for 25 years. *Juillet* narrates her multiple returns to the country from 2002 to 2007, and by intertwining her desire to revisit her own past with the need to understand the colonial history and the postcolonial present of Madagascar, the text reflects her traumatic experience of exile (Wimbush 2021, 144, 158; Schwerdtner 2016).

The airport is a key setting in *Juillet*. The text's opening sentence reads simply: "Roissy, l'aéroport" (7) [Roissy, the airport]. The opening underlines the importance of aeromobility for the narrative: it is air travel that

produces the subjectivity of the returnee, and represents a transformative event (Bal 1997, 182). What follows the laconic announcement of the coordinates is a depiction of the airport as a typical non-place *à la* Augé (1992): “Propre, net, sans âme. Dans l’air, une odeur de produits de nettoyage. Aéroport sans traces” (7) [Clean, neat, soulless. The smell of cleaning products in the air. Airport without traces]. For the narrator, Roissy is not only bereft of identity and history but also of feelings: nobody cries or “makes scenes” there. The lack of emotion is reflected in the silence that reigns at the airport but also in the feeling of coldness that the narrator experiences while waiting for the boarding to start. She observes the rain falling on the airplanes; a scene that in her mind is the perfect symbol for despair. The symbolic and concrete coldness of the Parisian airport is soon contrasted with the returnee’s ideas associating her Malagasy home with warmth: “Je vais au soleil” (8) [I am going to the sun]. In effect, as Kumavie suggests, the airport is a site of temporal transition “where our future arrival and our current locality converge” (2021b, 64). The narrator has expectations about her future arrival but, at the same time, her feelings are mixed: on the one hand, she registers the coldness and silence of the airport, while, on the other, she also claims that she likes airports and departures. These contradictory feelings are symptomatic of the problematics of her “homecoming”: she feels at home neither in Paris nor in Antananarivo.

While the airplane is supposed to take the narrator away from the “coldness” of France to the “sun” of Madagascar, the journey is distressing. The oppressive silence of the airport persists on the airplane. As in the case of Tadjò’s returnee, the anxious thoughts of the narrator start to wander once she is seated. As Durante observes, “waiting opens up space for meditative and silent interstices”, and this introspective mode in “slow motion [is] incongruous with the accelerated air transport landscape” (2020, 69). This sort of anxious introspection, facilitated by the nexus between mobility and inertia typical of air travel, is a central aspect of poetics of returnee aeromobilities in Tadjò’s and Rakotoson’s texts. Immobile in her seat in the airplane, which is preparing to take off, the narrator is tormented by questions related to (un)belonging, and she is painfully aware of the socio-political crisis that Madagascar has endured during her absence. When the plane eventually takes off, the narrator ends her anxious musings with determination: “Je n’ai plus envie de parler d’exil et de déchirement. Moi, je rentre chez moi” (11) [I no longer want to talk about exile or crying. I

am going home]. These words signal her attempt to detach herself from the sense of unbelonging that diaspora generates.

In the following chapter the plane flies over Madagascar. The sun has risen and the narrator sees her home country from the perspective of a bird, thus adopting the role of an observer (see Leed 1991, 56). Through the airplane window, disparate elements of the landscape become mixed and abstract, generating the impression that it cannot be grasped (MacArthur 2012, 269). The image of the narrator looking out of the window highlights the human-machine assemblage (Hui 2016, 71) aspects of air travel. In the context of passenger flights, the notion of the aerial gaze has its limits: the small size of the window and the thickness of its frame produce a restricted view of the landscape. As Bradley Rink puts it, “the cocooned fuselage of a modern jumbo jet [...] may buffer the traveller from the sensation of flight and the rearranging earth below” (2017, 891). In short, for the passenger in a modern aircraft, the aeromobile view is necessarily unsatisfactory and partial. The narrator nevertheless tries to interpret the landscape, seeing in it traces of exile and slavery. The bird’s-eye perspective seems to be a privileged position for observing the landscape, but it also signals detachment from it as a lived entity (Rink 2017, 892). The approaching landing is announced by “la voix du pilote [...] très professionnelle” (14) [the pilot’s very professional voice]—a voice that in the narrator’s mind is a “sas de sécurité avant la plongée dans l’autre réalité” (14) [security lock before diving into that other reality]. Thus the narrative suggests that the narrator already anticipates some sort of a clash between the aerial view (emotion-free, distanced, “professional”) and a more material, personal, and affective encounter with the Malagasy realities. While the narrator claims that she loves Antananarivo, she notes that altitude and speed distort the city, making her effort to identify places difficult. Indeed, the city seems to be hiding: “[Antananarivo] se cache dans son écrin, ne dévoile que ses contours, comme un bijou qui ne veut pas se laisser prendre” (15) [Antananarivo hides in its setting, reveals only its contours, like a jewel that does not want to be taken]. By means of the trope of a city that refuses to reveal its true face, the narrative captures the returnee’s struggle to claim that she belongs to her former hometown; this difficulty in grasping/representing the home country/town informs the text in its entirety (Ravi 2014, 298). As a mode of mobility, air travel conveys this difficulty perfectly.

Upon landing, the narrator notices some old military airplanes, which remind her of the years of political turmoil. The sight of the planes brings back a painful past, and the narrator states that she will look away when passing buildings that evoke memories of friends who disappeared or were killed during the crisis. In this sense, the distanced and fragmented vision seen through the airplane window allows for a more merciful perspective on “home”. At the airport, the narrator is surprised to see smiling border officers, who show no interest in inspecting her travel documents or baggage. Here, the narrative differs from the experiences of Tadjó’s protagonist at Abidjan Airport. As the narrator observes, Ivato Airport has not changed much since her departure. She can still see peasants who come there to watch planes landing and taking off—a scene conveying the idea of the airport as the ultimate symbol of colonial modernity and global connectedness that impresses local people from a modest socio-economical background. As in Tadjó’s novel, the presence of porters eagerly offering their services signals arrival in a place where transnational travel is the privilege of only a few.

Echoing Nina’s distress caused by her solitary arrival in Abidjan, the main source of anxiety at the airport for Rakotoson’s narrator is the fear that there is no one there for her. This is where the diasporic returnee differs from the typical contemporary air traveler as an “isolated, anonymous individual” who travels to and from airports alone (Durante 2020, 36): in return narratives, there is often an allusion to a friend or a family member whom the returnee expects to see in the arrivals hall, as if to ensure immediate reconnection with the place of return. The narrator starts to look for her mother, who used to come for her at the airport, only to remember that her parents have died some time previously. The mother’s absence makes the narrator properly apprehend the death of her parents—in France this acknowledgment has been merely “virtual” (18). The arrivals hall embodies the loss of the narrator’s parents, adding a melancholic shade to the text’s representation of aeromobility. Immediately after the narrator’s desolate realization that “Personne ne m’attend” (18) [Nobody is waiting for me], she hears the voice of a friend calling to her. The airport scene ends with her anxiety dissolving—albeit only momentarily. Here, as in Tadjó’s novel, the tension generated by the friend’s late arrival at the airport has already planted a seed of doubt in the returnee’s mind with respect to her preconceptions about the return. The airport of arrival functions as a key setting in the creation of a sense of unbelonging.

Aeromobility and the Making of the Successful Migrant: Biyaoula

In Biyaoula's *L'Impasse* (1996), the anxieties of returnee air travel relate to the failures of decolonization and dilemmas of identity but, unlike in the previously discussed texts, the latter is less a question of introspective interrogation of unbelonging than of the protagonist's encounters with others and the expectations that those who have stayed behind have of the returnee. Like Rakotoson's travelogue, *L'Impasse* opens with an airport scene: "Il est tout plein de bruit et de monde l'aéroport Roissy Charles de Gaulle" (13) [Roissy Charles de Gaulle Airport is full of noise and people]. Again, by setting the opening of the novel at the airport, "a threshold to elsewhere" (Durante 2020, 96), the narrative conveys the idea of being in transit—not only concretely but also symbolically as an Afro-European mobile subject.

The protagonist, a Congolese working-class migrant, is on his way, after 15 years of absence, to visit Brazzaville. Unlike Rakotoson's portrayal of the Parisian airport as a place bereft of identity, Biyaoula's Roissy is characterized by the presence of African travelers, whom the narrator refers to as *vacanciers* (13) [holidaymakers] in an ironic tone that suggests his lack of affinity with them. The protagonist's modest clothing causes him to stand out from the *vacanciers*, who are dressed up in expensive clothes, much in the spirit of Congolese dandyism, known as *La Sape*, or as a (postcolonial) re-enactment of air travel before its trivialization, when elegant clothing still distinguished those who could fly from those who could not (Durante 2020, 91). The elegance of the *vacanciers* makes the protagonist feel as if he was in the middle of a fashion show. The "spectacle" is illustrative of a phenomenon described in other Francophone African migrant novels from the turn of the 2000s: like *L'Impasse*, Alain Mabanckou's *Bleu-blanc-rouge* (1998) and Fatou Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* (2003) discuss unrealistic expectations about France as an Eldorado by those who stay (Cévaër 2008, 103–105). Such ideas are fueled by the stories told by the returnees, generating pressure on migrants to "succeed" in France. As conveyed in these novels, the returnees—*Parisiens*—are expected to show off their success. This dilemma lies at the heart of the unease that informs the narrator's experiences of aeromobility in *L'Impasse*. As the narrator fails to embody the image of the successful *Parisien*, he becomes the object of the other returnees' mockery. The Parisian airport is an alienating environment, but less because of its character as a non-place or its association with colonial modernity: its negative

meanings spring from its being a gateway to home—a place where the returnee must correspond to the image of a successful migrant.

The passage on board is an equally agonizing experience for the narrator. Being seated next to a son of a local “big man”, the narrator tries to ignore his co-passenger: the idea of having to pretend to be impressed by his status annoys the protagonist. The airplane scene pays little attention to the description of the journey itself; instead of the external environment, the narrator’s introspection is foregrounded. The narrative does, however, mention briefly a view of Paris and its lights from above and later, as the landing approaches, “la verdure qui se déroule en bas, à perte de vue” (29) [the greenery that unfolds below as far as the eye can see]. These contrasting views associate Paris with modernity, while the endless, monotonous green landscapes of Congo connote the absence of anything similar—much as in colonial representations of aviation in Africa (Caprotti 2011, 380; Bhimull 2017, 147). Interestingly, the local landscape and the approaching landing generate fears of death in the returnees: “Mais on atterrit. Soulagés qu’on est tous dans l’avion qui se remplit de bruits. Elle n’est pas encore arrivée, notre dernière heure” (29) [But we land. Relieved that we are all on a plane filling up with noise. Our final hour has not yet arrived]. Indeed, the “homecoming” may well be a social death if the returnee fails to live up to the expectations.

Upon arrival, the spectacle that started at Roissy reaches its climax. At first, the narrator does not understand why some of the passengers do not exit the aircraft with the others. The reason becomes clear later: they want to make an impressive entrance at the local airport. Passengers dressed like the narrator face a crowd yelling insults at them:

“Hé ! toi ! Tu ne viens pas de Paris, toi”; “T’as vu comment tu es maigre, toi ? tu dois être clochard, toi”; “Qu’est-ce que tu viens faire ici ? D’où tu sors, toi ?”; “T’as vu comment t’es fringué ? paysan!”; “T’aurais mieux fait de rester au pays!” (30)

“Hey! You! You’re not coming from Paris, are you”; “Have you seen how skinny you are, have you? you must be a tramp”; “What are you doing here? Where are you coming from?”; “Have you seen what you’re wearing? Peasant!”; “You should have stayed in the country!”

The reception of the “successful” returnees is the opposite: they are treated “comme s’ils étaient descendus du ciel” (31) [as if they had landed from heaven]. The narrator is affected by this scene, and walks to the

passport control like a robot, echoing the feeling of stiffness experienced by Tadjó's narrator.

The airport is portrayed as gray, small, and timeworn. The narrator notes that the building has not been renovated since he left. This, however, does not surprise him: "Je m'y attendais" (30) [This is what I expected]. He observes large portraits of the political elite on the walls, as if inspecting the arriving passengers. In this way, the text highlights the role of airports not only as sites of global connectedness but also as places where "the nation-state attempts to define the limits of its territory and the ideologies that underpin its national identity" (Kumavie 2021b, 63). The narrative paints a gloomy picture of the airport and, by extension, the postcolonial nation-state: only power and appearance matter; corruption reigns and for the popular classes, nothing changes for the better. Much as in Tadjó's novel, the narrator's passport is closely scrutinized by a border officer, while those of "important" people are not checked at all. The scene not only attests to the way in which the airport is a place "imbued with power and control" (Adey 2003, 1375) but also underlines its meaning as a narrative setting for generating unease in the returnee right upon his homecoming. The officer addresses the protagonist in a condescending tone when he notices that his passport has expired. At this point, the son of a "big man" who was seated next to the narrator comes to his rescue. The narrator avoids arrest but feels disgusted by the way in which status resolves problems in his former homeland.

The dilemma of the homecoming culminates in a scene in which the narrator's family, who have come to welcome him at the airport, is both impressed by his new acquaintances but also ashamed of his apparent socio-economic failure. The narrator states: "On dirait qu'ils ne sont pas très joyeux, très contents de me voir, qu'ils auraient aimé que je sois tout différent" (38) [It seems that they are not very glad, not very happy to see me, that they would have liked me to be entirely different]. In *L'Impasse*, the different stages of the aeromobile journey merge into one wholesale experience of alienation, and the scenes of aeromobility stage the scene for the narrator's unsuccessful return. The narration underlines the role of aeromobility in the construction of the successful returnee and in the disillusionment "of the protagonists who return and are disappointed by what they find, but [...] also that of their families [...] who had expectations of them which are not met" (Cousins and Dodgson-Katiyo 2016, 3). The airport of arrival is hardly a "site at which the ritual of homecoming meriment begins", as Durante (2020, 163) argues in her account of the Brazzaville airport scene of the novel.

*Darker Undercurrents of Nostalgic Aeromobile Homecomings:
Cissokho and Kiyindou*

While Biyaoula’s novel uses scenes of aeromobility to discuss the cult of power and wealth and the failures of decolonization of the returnee’s former home country, the tone in Cissokho’s novel is, at least at the start, more carefree. The novel refers to the dilemma of (un)belonging in its title, *Dakar, la touriste autochtone* [*Dakar, the Native Tourist*], but unlike in Tadjó’s and Rakotoson’s texts, the anxious aspects of the tension between the identity of the local and the tourist are absent from its portrayals of aeromobility. The protagonist’s return from Paris to Dakar is motivated by homesickness. Unlike the oppressive ambience and self-tormenting introspection of the intercontinental flight in Tadjó’s, Rakotoson’s, and Biyaoula’s texts, the return journey undertaken by Cissokho’s narrator is characterized by enthusiasm. She travels with her husband, and most of the passengers are Senegalese. The passengers have a lively discussion in Wolof, “la langue aérienne” (18) [the aerial language] during the flight, a detail that conveys a sense of local identity and the absence of dilemmas of unbelonging. Everyone is so eager to reach the destination that their excitement prevents them from sleeping—quite the contrary to Tadjó’s protagonist, whose tormented thoughts kept her awake. Once the plane has landed, the passengers hurry to get their hand baggage from the overhead lockers.

Upon arrival it is dark and the passengers cannot see the color of the land—this seems to be important to them as it is mentioned twice in the short airplane passage. They do, however, feel the heat, which, unlike in Tadjó’s novel, is not an unwelcoming element but a pleasant characteristic of home. The protagonist has left Senegal three years previously, but already in this time things have changed—but not for the better. Unlike the previous time that she was at the airport, the arrivals hall is crowded and chaotic; arriving passengers cannot even approach the baggage claim. The cause of the chaos is the porters, who impose their services by seizing all the baggage trolleys. An annoyed passenger refers to the porters as “emmerdeurs sans scrupule” [unscrupulous nuisances], “vooleurs” [sic] [“thiiiéfs”], and “marchands de rien” [merchants of nothing] and considers their behavior “indigne devant cette porte de la modernité” (22–23) [unworthy at this doorway of modernity]. The local airport fails to assert the promises of modernity that the returnees associate with aeromobility. By extension, the failing modernity of the airport suggests that the modernity of the country itself is compromised. The nameless passenger goes on

to scold the porters, claiming that “Les problèmes sociaux de ces gens ne nous regardent pas” (23) [The social problems of these people are not our concern], the narrative flashing a sense of irony that springs from the affluent returnees’ way of reducing poverty to a mere hindrance to their mobility. Indeed, as the narrative voice concludes the airport scene, “Cette ville multiforme nous ouvrit, ainsi, méchamment, sa porte d’entrée” (23) [In this way this multifaceted city opened to us, wickedly, its front door]. The initial naive enthusiasm of the returnee is undermined as the failures of modernity and the social inequalities of the former home country are exposed on their arrival.

In Kiyindou’s *Des Ombres et leurs échos...* the aeromobility scene features in the first third of the novel. The protagonist, a Congolese man in his twenties, travels from Paris to Brazzaville. Much like Tadjó’s and Rakotoson’s returnees, because of the civil war Kiyindou’s protagonist has been away for 13 years. He returns to Congo to search for his mother, who has disappeared during the war. However, unlike Tadjó’s and Rakotoson’s texts, whose scenes of aeromobility articulate feelings of guilt and grief typical of narratives of “dark return” (Ravi 2014, 296), in *Des Ombres* the returnee does not seem to be tormented by anguish. Yet the chapters preceding the aeromobility scene show that the narrator suffers from a trauma: he has nightmares about the events that led to his exile. That these violent memories do not seem to darken the novel’s representations of aeromobility conveys the idea of a traumatic past that the protagonist is unable to face.

The Parisian airport is not described other than by naming it in passing; the aeromobility scene starts with the passengers boarding the “Boeing Air France” (84). This narrative strategy signals the returnee’s detachment from his diasporic home and his reorientation to the mode of the former home country, so to speak. The narrator underlines that he has reserved a seat next to the window and mentions that as a child he took great pleasure in observing landscapes from above: the visual aspect of air travel is important for him. By sitting next to the window, he wants to make sure to “rien perdre de ce retour au pays natal puisqu’il fallait le voir, le reconnaître avant que de le sentir et de le toucher” (84) [miss nothing of this return to his homeland because it was necessary to recognize it before smelling and touching it]. The explicit allusion to Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* underlines the romanticized aspects of the return, which stand in contrast to the current trend in contemporary return narratives. Moreover,

by underlining the importance of sensory identification with the native country, Kiyindou’s text resonates with Cissokho’s description of the return travelers’ eagerness to see the color of the soil from the god-like perspective of the air traveler (Rink 2017, 879). As the flight approaches Brazzaville, Kiyindou’s returnee observes the Congo River through the window. He makes room for a little boy seated next to him to enjoy the aerial view, probably in much the same way as he himself did when he was traveling as a child; the child reinforces the nostalgic dimension of the representation of the passage. The landscape from above seems “féérique” (87) [magical] although, in a similar way to Rakotoson’s travelogue, traces of colonialism are also perceptible, as suggested by the description of a land “où avaient subsisté tant bien que mal les vestiges de la modernité” (87) [where the vestiges of modernity had somehow survived].

Kiyindou’s representation of the “homecoming” is less anxiety-ridden than the other texts under discussion here. One illustration of this is the smooth landing on Congolese soil: “Le pilote avait choisi de se poser en douceur pour souhaiter que ces retrouvailles fussent de bon augure” (88) [The pilot had chosen to land gently as if to express the wish that this reunion was auspicious]. As the doors open and disembarkation starts, the first things that the narrator senses are “le bruit et l’odeur du pays” (88) [the sounds and the smell of the country]. The encounter with the homeland is based on aural and olfactory observations; compared with the airplane passage, the role played by vision is smaller. Since, of all of the senses, vision is the one most associated with control and detachment (Rink 2017, 879), the shift of emphasis to sounds and smells suggests that the landscape is now being *lived*, not merely observed through the “aeromobile gaze” (Adey 2008, 777) and through the “irremovable transparent filter” (Durante 2020, 3) of the airplane window. When the returnee exits the aircraft and enters the airport, he is overwhelmed by the forgotten smells that he associates with home and his childhood. This challenges Augé’s (1992) “exhausted narrative [...]” of airports as non-places lacking identity and history (Adey et al. 2024, 720; see also Urry 2007, 146–147; Adey et al. 2007, 778; Durante 2020, 130).

The arrival of the protagonist at Brazzaville airport diverges from the anxious tones of Biyaoula’s returnee’s arrival in the same city, from Tadjou’s protagonist’s disembarkation in Abidjan, or even from the arrival of Cissokho’s narrator in Dakar. To the protagonist’s surprise, the airport looks more “modern” than it had been when he left the country: the

modest airport of his childhood has been replaced by a building which attests to how “le pays allait de l’avant” (89) [the country had progressed]. This observation causes “un petit sourire d’autosatisfaction” (89) [a little self-congratulatory smile] to appear on the protagonist’s face, suggesting that he still feels affinity with the country. Unlike the other texts, the returnee’s arrival is pleasant and there are no hindrances to his mobility: there are no allusions to problems caused by border control or intrusive porters. Furthermore, as he enters the arrivals hall, he recognizes several familiar faces in the crowd. Here, the narrative stands in sharp contrast to Tadjó’s and Rakotoson’s texts, where the returnees’ anxieties of unbelonging are conveyed through the fear that no one is there for them at the airport. In Kiyindou’s novel, the presence of 30 family members at the airport makes the returnee feel like a celebrated hero—but in a quite different sense from that of the *Parisiens* in *L’Impasse*. Here, as a narrative setting, the airport genuinely plays its role as a place enabling an affective “connection and reconnection of otherwise faraway individuals” (Durante 2020, 163). It should, however, be underlined that the lack of anxiety here does not attest to the unproblematic nature of the homecoming but rather to the fact that the return is affected by an experience that the returnee wants to banish from his memory. The preceding chapters describing the traumatizing conditions of his exile allow the reader to contextualize the return and to challenge the romanticized portrayal of return air travel.

URBAN MOBILITIES IN NARRATIVES OF RETURN

This section focuses on urban mobilities in Camara Laye’s *Dramouss* [*A Dream of Africa* (1974)], Cissokho’s *Dakar, la touriste autochtone*, Biyaoula’s *L’Impasse*, and Rakotoson’s *Juillet au pays* in order to explore the role of urban mobilities in the construction of the figure of the diasporic returnee but also that of the city of return. All of the texts feature complex, yet not invariably lengthy, portrayals of mobility practices—pedestrianism, automobility, travel by public transport—with the returnees observing their former home cities while trying to renegotiate their relationship with them. Through their depiction of urban mobilities, the texts convey the idea of the postcolonial city as inherently mobile and underline the narrative role of mobility practices as enablers of the returnees’ encounters with urban spaces. While the colonial city can be

characterized as a site of colonial power and anti-colonial resistance (Herbert 2014, 201), the postcolonial city⁴ is, by definition, “layered with multiple legacies” and “constituted by the tensions and contradictions between the global, national, and the local concepts and practices of urban space” (Varma 2012, 14; see also Quayson 2014, 4). The layered character of the postcolonial African city is not simply a matter of colonial modernity nor of how “the enduring infrastructural shapes of colonial urban planning [...] reproduce spatial violence in the postcolonial presence” (Boehmer and Davies 2018, 9). This layeredness also relates to heterotopic diversity (Robinson 2010, 229), hybridization (Lüsebrink and Mbondobari 2015, 8), and creativity in the fashioning of the African city and the African urban subject in a global context (Primorac 2008, 1).

Literary texts often represent cities as experienced through movement, attesting to the entanglement of space and mobility. While mobility practices and modes of transport are increasingly recognized as key elements of the urban experience and citiness (Amin and Thrift 2002, 7–25; Dennis et al. 2018; Toivanen and García 2024), studies of African literary cities prioritize space over mobility. With a few exceptions (e.g., Nuttall 2004; Savonick 2015; Cumpsty 2019; Pfalzgraf 2021, 2022, 49–103; Toivanen 2024; Li 2024, Mohulatsi 2024; Kriegel 2024a, 2024b), relatively little research has been concerned with the *mobile* aspects of African literary cities. As throughout this book, my analysis takes as its starting point the idea that space is mobile (Murray and Upstone 2014, 193) and that mobility produces the identities of both people and places (Cresswell and Merriman 2013, 7–10). The relation of diasporic returnees to their former hometowns is marked by unease springing from their ambivalent position as both natives and “diaspora tourists” (Li and McKercher 2016, 360). In effect, the diasporic perspective challenges the “binary opposition between home and away”, and the spatiotemporal distance from the hometown may even facilitate a critical perspective (Kehinde 2007, 232, 234). This critical perspective of the returnee, however, is not always unproblematic: it may evoke somewhat stereotypical ideas of African cities as lived

⁴ Cissokho’s Dakar, Biyaoula’s Brazzaville, and Rakotoson’s Antananarivo are postcolonial cities because of their post-independence contexts, whereas in Laye’s *Dramouss* the return takes place in 1953, five years before Guinea’s independence. However, as the story proceeds, the timeline is mixed up so that the novel needs to be read within a wider context consisting of the end of colonial rule, as it already alludes to post-independence problems (Aas-Rouxparis 1993, 44).

dystopias (see Robinson 2010, 222). The perspective of the returnee intensifies the dystopian aspect, as the “tourist-natives” from the metropolitan center are suddenly faced with “the horror of the destruction of their home cities by dictatorial regimes, whole-scale corruption, and economic catastrophes” (Ravi 2014, 298).

The mobile, postcolonial cities of African diasporic returnees are characterized by the palimpsestic presence of the past in the present—not just in terms of the colonial legacy but, above all, in personal memories. Prominent are also the dilemma of outsidership, and disillusionment with narratives of decolonization and progress (Ravi 2014, 297; Cousins and Dodgson-Katiyo 2016, 3). The settings in the texts shift from the African cities of return to various European locations: the texts are essentially translocal as “they are set in two or more cities, which – by means of a variety of narrative techniques – are closely layered, connected and intertwined” (Mattheis 2021,1). Biyaoula’s and Laye’s novels and Rakotoson’s travelogue constantly move between Brazzaville, Conakry, Antananarivo, and Paris and, in the case of Biyaoula, also an imaginary French provincial town.

The texts analyzed occupy a middle ground between African literary representations of African cities and African narrativizations of European cities. For the returnee, the African city is no longer a self-evident environment but a space in which their belonging is constantly called into question. African Paris novels featuring student newcomers represent the city as alienating (Chap. 2). However, the returnees are not outsiders in the same way as newly arrived African students in the metropolis, and the question of racial difference that is central in Paris novels is not of much relevance in return narratives. Early African literary texts often portrayed the colonial city from the perspective of a rural newcomer looking for a brighter future and freedom in the city (Preira 2015, 263). Later, this fascination with newness gave room for narratives in which the city is no longer a new, alienating environment but home (Preira 2015, 263; Akande 2019, 358). The feelings of alienation in return narratives obviously do not stem from the “newness” of the environment as such, but from the feeling of no longer being able to claim the city as one’s home. Furthermore, while much of Francophone African fiction focusing on African colonial cities operates on the rural/urban binary (Preira 2015; Sommer 2007), the comparison between the “here” and the “there” in the texts examined articulates itself along an Afro-European axis. Representations of African

colonial cities highlight the racial division of the urban space (Preira 2015, 236–248). While the Fanonian notion of the Manichean colonial city has become obsolete in many west African post-independence contexts, post-colonial cities do remain fractured spaces with “large pockets of privilege coexist[ing] with misery” (Mbembe and Nuttall 2008, 5). Economic inequalities visible in the urban space are rooted in colonial structures of power, and their post-independence manifestations include the workings of neocolonial processes of globalization and structural adjustment programs (Quayson 2014, 4; Krishnan 2018, 5). It is through mobilities in the urban space that this fractured quality of the postcolonial city is revealed.

Dramouss: Touring in a City of “failed” Modernity

Dramouss is a sequel to Laye’s autobiographical novel *L’Enfant noir*, narrating the protagonist’s return from Paris to his native village through Conakry, the city after which the first full-length chapter is named. The protagonist’s divided position between Africa and Europe—his Afro-European mobile subjectivity—is conveyed at the start of the novel by allusions to his departure from Orly Airport to Guinea after six years’ absence. The narrative articulates a rather optimistic idea of the homecoming, with the returnee not questioning his belonging to the country that he has left behind—in contrast to many other contemporary return narratives (see Ravi 2014, 297; Toivanen 2017, 330). As the airplane approaches Conakry, the narrator observes the natural landscape surrounding the city and, after the plane lands, the text describes the light that, as far as the protagonist can see, is typical of Guinea. While the short passage describes the aerial view of the city as distanced and abstract (see MacArthur 2012, 269), the protagonist’s bus journey from the airport into the urban center exposes the precarious material realities of the city, embodied by the rickety shacks in the suburbs, where “la misère était monnaie courante” (12) [“poverty was common as dirt” (10)]. The way in which the text refers to both the arrival at the airport and the journey into the city is significant. First, the air travel passage conveys the idea of a distant *elsewhere*, emphasizing that Conakry is no longer the protagonist’s usual environment. Second, the depiction of the bus trip does not simply reflect the exclusion of airports from urban centers, but the journey also represents “a pivotal juncture for fiction” in that the fictional character

“shifts from a state of travelling, and thus being excluded from the city, to one of reintegration into the urban fabric” (Durante 2020, 22). The protagonist’s bus trip inscribes the returnee in the materiality of the city of return but, as the signs of poverty suggest, this reintegration is not a serene experience. Public transport permits ephemeral encounters between strangers (Wilson 2010), and it is while he is a passenger in the bus that the protagonist has his first contact with a city-dweller. The passenger seated next to him ascribes the miserable state of the suburbs to the colonizers’ lack of interest in building a “presentable” environment for the “natives” (Laye 1966, 12). The protagonist does not share his views and asserts that “la colonisation nous a donné beaucoup” (13) [“colonisation has given us a great deal” (11)], after which his co-passenger no longer speaks to him. That the encounter ends with discord is not a promising sign from the perspective of the homecoming. Moreover, his short dialogue with his fellow passenger reveals the protagonist’s uncritical position vis-à-vis colonial discourses of progress. As the bus pursues its route, he observes potholes, the absence of bitumen, the sewers, and dust—all of them images of dirt and infrastructural failure through which the narrative questions his ideas about the beneficial effects of colonization.

Soon after his arrival at his relatives’ house, where he also finds Mimie, his fiancée, the protagonist is eager to visit Conakry. His excursions in the city with Mimie not only convey his attempts to reconnect with Conakry through mobility but also read as the couple’s endeavor to bridge the gap that their prolonged separation has generated between them, attesting to the importance of “patterns of mobility to the [...] maintenance of [romantic] relationships” (Pearce 2018, 778). When the returnee breaks the silence by saying, “Tout a beaucoup changé” (15) [“Everything’s changed so much” (13)], he not only refers to the incongruity between Conakry in the present and his memories of it but also invites his fiancée to discuss their relationship, underlining her role in his reintegration into the city (Aas-Rouxparis 1993, 45, 47). The returnee’s walk around Conakry suggests that the city is familiar but also not quite the same: “Certes, c’étaient les avenues et les boulevards que j’avais quittés, et les mêmes arbres; mais, en trop d’endroits, ce n’étaient plus les mêmes maisons” (16) [“Certainly these were the avenues and boulevards I had left behind, and the same trees; but at almost every point there were no longer the same buildings” (13)]. When the couple reach the seaside, the returnee finds the landscape changed: next to a mine there is an agglomeration of new villas—the property of what Mimie vaguely refers to as “Sociétés

étrangères” (16) [“foreign companies” (13)]. These mysterious foreign companies have also constructed a new railroad track, and when the couple continues their visit in the city, the narrative alludes to them again by mentioning newly constructed warehouses that have transformed the urban landscape. The returnee’s displacements in the formerly familiar urban environment reveal transnational mobilities generated by neocolonial operations of global capitalism—operations from which the local city-dwellers seem to be excluded, as conveyed by Mimie’s suggestion that the magnificent new villas “ne sont ni pour toi, ni pour moi...” (16) [“are not for people like you and me” (13)].

The narrative highlights the “modernization” of urban mobilities during the protagonist’s absence. When he grows tired of visiting the city on foot, he decides to take a taxi. It is only when he fails to stop one with a gesture he has learned in Paris that he realizes that taxis in Conakry are a new phenomenon. Reacting to his astonishment, Mimie says, “Nous sommes à la mode, nous aussi” (17) [“We too are quite up-to date” (13)]. Here, the narrative not only establishes a translocal link between Paris and Conakry but also suggests that the modernity of the latter is delayed in comparison to the colonial metropolis. In this comparison, Conakry is seen as an imperfect deviation from the metropolitan norm (Robinson 2010, 222), the city being too “étroite et petite” (17) [“small, and cramped” (13)] for a “proper” taxi ride. The city’s failures of modernization are conveyed during the taxi ride when the narrative states that beautiful natural landscapes “compense[nt] le manque de maisons modernes” (17) [“compensate for the lack of modern houses” (14)]. Again, the beauty of the seaside evokes a comparison between Conakry and the metropolis when Mimie suddenly exclaims, “Il paraît que là-bas, à Paris, c’est beau” (17) [“I hear that over there, in Paris, it’s very beautiful” (14)]. Here again, the perspective of a diasporic returnee, whose life is elsewhere, underlines translocality, which in this quotation is achieved through imaginative travel (Urry 2007, 169). The evaluative aspect of the translocal comparison is constantly present. On their way to visit an island near the city by motorized boat, the narrator invites Mimie to look at the city to appreciate its beauty, referring it to as “une Floride africaine” (38) [“an African Florida” (26)]. Simultaneously, however, his thoughts also convey the idea of Conakry as a place that has not yet “reached” the modernity of Western cities: “Il nous faudrait du temps pour faire, de ce pays, un pays ultra-moderne. Mais cela viendrait un jour!...” (38) [“It will take us some time [...] to turn our country into an ultra-modern one. But

it will come, one day!” (26)]. The city’s “failures of modernization” are revealed by the protagonist’s tourist-like, urban mobilities that are enhanced by modern transport and also by his position as a diasporic returnee, which allows him to establish comparisons between the metropolitan center and his former hometown in the colonial periphery. The returnee does not challenge the colonial discourses of modernization that construct binaries between Western and African cities, seeing the latter as failed copies of the former. The way in which the narrative emphasizes modern, motorized mobilities in the exploration of the city contributes to the construction of the returnee as a modern mobile subject.

Nostalgia in a Taxi: Dakar, la touriste autochtone

As demonstrated in the previous section, in Cissokho’s *Dakar*, the representation of the city of return starts with an airport scene. As in *Dramouss*, the journey from the airport to the city functions as a narrative transition signaling the returnee’s reintegration into her former hometown (see Durante 2020, 22). It also turns the traveler into what Ye Li (2024, 48) has referred to as “a motorized returnee”, a traveler experiencing their former hometown through the windows of a motorized transport. On her way from the airport to the city center in a car, the returnee observes a sleepy bourgeois neighborhood consisting of luxurious villas but she also sees missing streetlights, a detail that already indicates a failure of infrastructure and the socio-economic division of the city. While her first impressions of the city are not completely positive, she is enthusiastic about being in Dakar: early in the morning she leaves her childhood home to visit the city “en touriste autochtone” [as a native tourist], claiming that “La ville n’attendait que moi” (27) [the city was waiting for me]. The returnee’s visit begins at a nearby taxi stand. She pays attention to the coexistence of the old and the new—and sees that the new is mostly in a state of becoming: an old mosque next to the taxi stand is waiting to be demolished, while the construction of a new one has not yet been finished. The co-presence of the old and the new construction reads less as a manifestation of a palimpsestic layering of time than as a metonymy for the failures of urban modernization: abandoned construction projects convey the precarious economic situation of the postcolonial city and the arrested state of its “progress”.

What characterizes the narrative tone during the protagonist’s touring is the conspicuous focus on her observations of the external world and the

transformation of the city rather than on introspective reflection about how these changes affect her or about her challenges in renegotiating her relationship with Dakar. In short, the city is observed in its present real condition rather than through the lens of personal memories—a somewhat untypical approach as far as return narratives are concerned (cf. Toivanen 2017). The relative lack of introspection gives the narrative an overall impression of being a documentary. In terms of the poetics of mobility, it is interesting how the documentary style of the narrative reflects the speed of the moving vehicle: short paragraphs open with the name of a district, followed by a brief characterization of the place, before quickly moving on to another paragraph describing the next adjacent area. In this way, the narrative conveys the returnee’s experience of urban mobility in a moving taxi and produces an outline of the city as perceived while in a state of movement. While the narrative strategy of citing district and street names suggests that the returnee manages to situate herself on the map of her former hometown while visiting it in a moving car, there are also moments when she almost fails in the task and finds herself trying to “m’agripper aux dénominations qui m’échappaient” (33) [clutch at names that have escaped me]. From the moving taxi, the returnee recognizes familiar buildings but also notes their worsened state: “Dégradé! empiré! ce que j’observais me flanquait toujours les mêmes adjectifs dans l’idée” (30) [Defaced! Worsened! What I saw continually aroused the same adjectives in me]. The description of the taxi ride through popular neighborhoods lists stereotypical images of allegedly chaotic local markets but also, in a more positive tone, scenes of everyday urban creativity—or *débrouillardise*, to employ the French term for resourcefulness that “carr[ies] connotations of being street-wise” (Grayson 2018, 514)—at bus stations, where the drivers’ assistants use every method they can think of to try to entice passengers to enter their vehicles. Much as in *Dramouss*, the city is a space of co-existing poverty and affluence. In the city center not only does the returnee observe car-drivers in luxury vehicles and tourists sipping fresh drinks in a café but she also rides along a street that “exhalait une odeur, la crise” (34) [exhaled a smell, a crisis], with street vendors, beggars, faded facades, and closed shops—a street that has become “méconnaissable, indésirable dans sa tenue souillée” (34) [unrecognizable, undesirable in its soiled outfit].

In addition to the documentary tone of the narrative, there are passages with a more emotional voice betraying the protagonist’s outsiderhood. There is an incident at a bus station during which a man—unknown to the

narrator and, according to her, mentally ill—spits in her face as she observes the embarkation of the buses. No words are spoken, but the faces of the people witnessing the scene have a surprisingly strong effect on the protagonist: “Des gens semblaient me reconnaître, presque. Leur drôle de frimousse m’énervait. [...] Subitement je les détestais sans raison ni cause. J’avais l’intention d’être des leurs, mais tout me dégoûtait” (36) [People almost seemed to know me. Their funny little faces annoyed me. Suddenly I hated them without reason. I intended to be one of them, but everything disgusted me]. The returnee escapes the incident by running back to her taxi. This passage is interesting for several reasons. First, it conveys the returnee’s outsidership vis-a-vis Dakar and its people. Second, the incident with the allegedly mentally ill man has changed the returnee from being someone who observes the urban life from a detached position through the windows of a moving taxi into someone who is *observed* and *seen* by the “locals”. And finally, her way of leaving the place quickly by going back to her taxi is illustrative of her privilege as someone who can observe “spectacle[s] caractéristique[s] du transport en commun” (30) [scenes typical of public transport] from a distance, without having to travel in it herself. In traveling by taxi rather than public transport the returnee avoids encounters with the city-dwellers, maintaining a personal distance from her former hometown. Her escape in the taxi also symbolizes the fact that, as a diasporic returnee, she can always leave the city.

Another scene that betrays a more personal, emotional reaction to the city features in a passage in which the protagonist’s taxi drives along a street where in the past she waited for her school bus. The sight of the familiar bus stop generates nostalgia:

La petite fille d’antan [...] se rappela [...] les bons moments durant lesquels elle longeait la rue sans grands soucis. [...] Le mirage d’un bus se dessinait à l’angle puis disparaissait. [...] La petite se souvint de cette rue comme de tant d’autres naguère toujours bien nettoyées. [...] Désormais, le sable s’empilait en maints endroits sur le talus. La [rue] 37 défigurée perdait tout attrait. (40–41)

The little girl of yesteryear remembered the good moments when she walked on this street without worries. The mirage of a bus loomed around the corner and then disappeared. The little girl remembered this street like so many others that had always been well cleaned. Now the sand was piling up in many places on the embankment. The disfigured [street] 37 had lost its appeal.

Here, the present of the hometown is seen through the lens of the past, and the comparison between the now and the then reveals the present dilapidation of the city, captured in the image of sand accumulating on its streets. The sense of alienation generated by the clash of nostalgic memories and the present of the city is characteristic of return narratives (Toivanen 2017, 329). Typical of contemporary, disillusioned return narratives, the nostalgic impulse in Cissokho’s novel takes the form of reflective nostalgia, which, unlike romantically attuned restorative nostalgia, acknowledges the irrecoverability of the past (see Boym 2001, 41). The reflective nostalgia of returnees toward their hometowns links the estrangement caused by nostalgia to the failures of modernization of the postcolonial city, which are revealed thanks to the returnee’s mobilities in the urban space.

Urban Itineraries of a Disillusioned Outsider: L’Impasse

Compared to Cissokho’s novel, Biyaoula’s portrayals of the city of return are more strongly filtered through the returnee’s feelings of unbelonging. As discussed in the previous section, the key dilemma in the protagonist’s return is his failure to project the image of a successful migrant. On the other hand, the former hometown does not correspond to the returnee’s expectations, either. This two-fold disillusionment characterizes the novel’s mobile portrayals of the returnee’s Brazzaville. Seen in the light of this two-dimensional disillusionment, the protagonist’s mode of transport from the airport to the city is significant: he travels in the passenger seat of his brother’s shiny Mercedes. In the restricted, insulated space of the private vehicle, he is at his brother’s mercy—a man who has made his way into the local elite and enjoys the respect of his family. Because of his lack of agency as a passenger—he is clearly “hostage to the apparently more powerful and commanding figure of the ‘driver’” (Adey et al., 2012, 172)—who does not have the authority of a taxi passenger to tell the driver his destination, the Brazzaville that the protagonist encounters is less his than his brother’s. During the ride, the brother reproaches the protagonist for the shame caused to the family by his failure to correspond to the stereotype of the “*Parisien*” (39–40; see Cévaër 2008, 105–106). His brother advises the returnee not to reveal his working-class profession to anyone and takes him to buy a suit in a boutique frequented by powerful local men—a boutique that, significantly enough, is called *Habits de Paris*, “Clothes of Paris”. The name of the boutique conveys the idea of

translocality and comments ironically on the myth of Paris and the returnee's failure to claim the role of the *Parisien*. This irony is further underlined by the fact that the protagonist does not even live in Paris but in an imaginary provincial town called Pourry, whose pronunciation evokes the adjective *pourri*, "rotten".

Riding as a passenger in his brother's car makes the returnee think, "Ça s'emmanche vraiment mal mes premiers contacts avec Brazza!" (41) [My first encounter with Brazza starts badly!]. Once the brother has launched the project of converting the returnee into a *Parisien* through his clothing, he insists that he should take the wheel of the Mercedes to convey the right image. To learn that the protagonist does not have a driver's license and to hear him say that he can walk or bike in the city upsets the brother:

Il me rétorque qu'on n'a jamais vu un Parisien marcher, se déplacer ni à vélo ni en bus, que j'ai sans doute oublié, qu'il me suffirait de voyager une fois seulement dans un bus pour que j'en sois dégoûté à jamais, que, de toute façon, il ne permettrait pas que ça arrive, toujours pour l'honneur de la famille, que décidément je ne réalisais pas encore que j'étais à Brazza, qu'à Brazza on vivait avec les gens, que les coups de langue c'était leur spécialité, qu'il fallait tenir compte de leurs yeux, de leurs mots, de tout ce qu'ils pourraient penser. (47–48)

He retorts that no one has ever seen a Parisian walk or move around either by bike or bus, and that I have certainly forgotten that it would be enough for me to travel only once in a bus to be disgusted forever, and that, anyway, to maintain the honor of the family he would never allow that to happen, and that it was clear that I did not yet realize that I was in Brazza, and that in Brazza one lives among the people, that talking was their specialty, that one had to be aware of their looks, their words – of everything that they might be thinking.

For a proper *Parisien* the only acceptable mode of urban transport is a luxurious private vehicle—a status symbol frequently employed in African cultural texts (Green-Simms 2017, 14, 18). Ironically enough, the narrative also alludes to failures in the urban infrastructure by describing the condition of the roads—"Toutes pourries, toutes crevassées!" (123) [All rotten, all cracked!]¹—and attests to the contradictions in the promises of freedom associated with automobility in African contexts of modernity and urbanization (Green-Simms 2017, 5, 15; Savonick 2015, 670). It is significant that the interactions between the brothers take place inside a car, the emblematic symbol of freedom of movement (Urry 2007, 119).

For Biyaoula’s returnee, however, the private vehicle represents a mobile space in which he *loses* his freedom to explore Brazzaville on his own. The preceding quotation, echoing his brother’s choice of words with its cumulative sentences, and leaving no room for the protagonist’s thoughts, captures on the formal level the returnee’s lack of opportunities to reconnect with the city on his own terms—and in transport of his own choice. In the vehicle, there is room only for his brother’s ideas about how the narrator’s relationship with Brazzaville should be.

Later, the protagonist reclaims his freedom of urban mobility and goes out to tour the city on foot. Compared to modes of transport that “with barriers of glass and metal” prevent contact with the environment, walking is often considered to be a mobility practice in which the subject’s interaction with the landscape is least mediated (Wilkie 2015, 24). Indeed, as a pedestrian, the returnee becomes immersed in the urban landscape, which permits a more material, embodied relationship with the city (Carrera Suárez 2015, 857). It is through such walks that the protagonist renegotiates his relationship with Brazzaville. His first solitary excursion is characterized by darkness, which makes it difficult for him to orient himself: “Je pénètre dans la ténèbre des rues, les yeux grands ouverts. La nuit, Brazza est tout sombre. On distingue à peine les gens venant devant soi. J’entre plusieurs fois en collision avec certains” (80) [I enter the darkness of the streets, my eyes wide open. During the night, Brazza is very dark. One can hardly distinguish people in front of you. Several times I collide with some of them]. The lack of light in the streets not only signals failure in the infrastructure of the postcolonial city but also symbolizes the returnee’s difficulties in identifying himself in Brazzaville, in orienting himself in it, and in finding his place among mobile urbanites. This is conveyed in the image of the faceless people whom the protagonist bumps into while walking. It is noteworthy that the passage describing his nocturnal walk is brief, consisting of just a few lines. Summary as a narrative strategy suggests that his walk has been little more than an ephemeral attempt to reconnect with the city. The passage that follows this brief moment of mobile freedom acquires considerably more weight because of its length—the imbalance is significant in terms of the narrator’s failed attempts to reconnect with the city without his family’s interference. Upon his return to his parents’ house, he is welcomed by family members, who are upset by his absence and interrogate him about his solitary stroll:

Faut comprendre que tu es presque un étranger à Brazza !... tu ne peux te permettre de te promener comme ça ! ... Surtout qu'on ne sait même pas où tu te trouves !... mais qu'est-ce que tu crois toi, hein ?... mais les choses ne se passent plus comme dans le temps à présent !... la nuit, il y a plein de bandits dans les rues !... il ne faut pas que tu te promènes tout seul si tard !... il peut t'arriver n'importe quoi !... Quoi ?? qu'est-ce qui peut t'arriver ?? tu n'es plus un enfant ??... (81)

You have to understand that you are practically a foreigner in Brazza! ... [Y]ou cannot afford to walk around like that!... Especially since we didn't even know where you were!... [W]hat do you think you're doing, eh?... [B]ut things are no longer as they used to be!... [A]t night, there are plenty of crooks in the streets!... [Y]ou mustn't be out walking alone so late!... [A]nything could happen to you!... What?? [W]hat could happen to you?? [Y]ou're no longer a child??

As in the automobile passage, this monologue in which the protagonist does not have a say is illustrative of his difficulty in claiming agency in the renegotiation of his mobile position vis-à-vis Brazzaville. The quotation positions the returnee as a child who should not be left alone to venture out into the city without supervision, signaling that, for his family, the returnee is no longer part of Brazzaville.

The protagonist's urban mobilities are marked by his relatives' attempts to set the conditions governing his relationship with Brazzaville, but when an occasion for a walk occurs, the returnee seizes it. In passages describing his stroll in the city, the focus of the narrative shifts from introspective reflection on the unease of the homecoming to the returnee's observations of the current state of the city. Thus, early one morning he goes out jogging around the streets, and by alluding to street names and specific buildings the narrative reflects the protagonist's movements in the urban space and conveying his interaction with it. The returnee observes people who seem to have just come out of nightclubs, but he is also observed by others who look at him "comme si je débarquais d'une autre planète" (83) [as if I had landed from another planet]. His walks along the streets not only make him aware of his unbelonging but also reveal the desolate state of Brazzaville by means of an imagery consisting of "masures, des cambuses, des maisons toutes grises, [...] de vrais tombeaux" (83) [shacks, hovels, grey houses, real tombs]. As in Laye's novel, the forlorn aspect of the urban environment gains its full meaning through a comparison with Paris: "C'est terrible, particulièrement horrible, démoralisant, cette impression qu'on a dans une ville africaine quand on a encore en tête les images de

Paris. Elle vous amène [...] à vous demander si vous n’êtes pas ailleurs, dans une autre galaxie” (83) [It’s terrible, particularly horrible, demoralizing, the feeling you have in an African city when you still have images of Paris in your head. Inevitably it makes you wonder if you are not somewhere else, in another galaxy]. The allusions to another planet and galaxy convey the experience of being out of place or what Polo B. Moji (2019, 41), analyzing a return narrative by Nimrod, refers to as cognitive disorientation. In *L’Impasse*, not only does the returnee imagine that he is seen as an alien by the city-dwellers, but he also experiences Brazzaville as an alienating place that does not have much in common with the metropolitan “model”.

A visit to popular neighborhoods previously unknown to the protagonist reveals a new side of the city. He is surprised to see street children: he associates this sort of reality with cities like “Bogota ou [...] une autre ville d’Amérique latine” (123) [Bogota or some other Latin American city], not Brazzaville. His travels in a public transport minibus, a *foula-foula*, are eye-opening because they underline the city’s abject poverty. The *foula-foula* itself is described as a can of sardines where people travel “les uns sur les autres” (101) [on top of each other] and where the returnee is ridiculed by his fellow passengers: “Quand on n’est pas capable de se payer un taxi ou une voiture, c’est pas la peine de mettre un costume” (101) [When one is not capable of paying for a taxi or a car, there’s no point in wearing a suit]. Here public transport becomes less a site of welcoming encounters with “locals” than one of conflict (see Osinubi 2024). As the *foula-foula* travels further into the fringes of the city, buildings convey its forlorn state: “C’est que des maisons de guingois, du genre de celles qu’on doit rencontrer dans les enfers, dans lesquelles on n’imaginerait pas que des êtres de chair et de sang puissent habiter, que je vois. Que des tombeaux” (102) [It is the lopsided houses—the kind one certainly encounters in the underworld, places in which one would not imagine that beings of flesh and blood could dwell—that I see. Just tombs]. Again, the narrative resorts to the image of the tomb. In such passages, the postcolonial city is represented as a place of death and decay, resonating with what Ravi refers to as “failed cities” where “infrastructure failure [...] has created disrupted urban centres of [...] extreme poverty which have become sites of grief and perpetual trauma” (2014, 296). Njami’s protagonist’s position as a returnee vis-à-vis this postcolonial urban “deathscape” (Ravi 2014, 301) is that of an outsider-observer: he is simply passing through during his walks and rides in various vehicles—and, on a wider scale, as someone with a return flight ticket to France in his pocket.

Rakotoson's Mobile Landscapes of Memory

Rakotoson's *Juillet au pays* is rich in portrayals of different mobility practices. As mentioned in the previous section, the arrival of the narrator at the airport was characterized by her anxiety of no one being there for her. Eventually, the narrator's friend arrives to pick her up to drive her into the city. Observing the environment from the passenger's seat of a moving car, the returnee notes that "des détails me sautent aux yeux, que je ne voyais pas avant" (19) [details that I had not seen before jump out at me]—the concrete block houses of military bases, rickety houses along the road, people walking barefoot. According to the narrator, the low speed of the vehicle causes these details to become perceptible; the car runs "au rythme du pays" (19) [to the rhythm of the country], which is "une vitesse normale, celle qui permet de voir les détails du paysage, d'en faire partie" (19) [a normal speed, which permits one to see the details of the landscape, to become part of it]. Compared to air travel, traveling in a passenger car seems to be a more appropriate mode of transport for reconnecting with the city of return. However, the slow speed of the car also makes it possible to see things that do not strengthen the connection between the narrator and Antananarivo but that make the returnee see the surrounding poverty and failures of the infrastructure, or what she refers to as "la fragilité de ce pays" (21) [the fragility of this country]: the streets are too narrow to support motor traffic, which causes traffic jams, and there is a flagrant gap between the affluent members of society driving their "grosses 'bagnoles'" (30) [big "rides"] and peasants with their heavily loaded carriages. Highways with three lanes are made for the élites, while people living alongside the road must walk for several kilometers when they want to cross it.

The landscape through which the narrator and her friend drive is marked by a social inequality that manifests itself in the opposition between the traditional and the modern, or the rural and the urban: one has to be constantly wary of "[un] troupeau d'oies qui s'égaré ou à la grosse Ferrari qui se croit sur un circuit de rallye" (31) [a flock of geese going astray or a big Ferrari that thinks it is on a rally circuit]. While the returnee perceives these differences, the reader cannot ignore that she is inside the protective "shield" (Pirie 2015, 49) or the "domestic, cocooned moving capsule" (Urry 2007, 120) of the private vehicle, observing the environment "au travers des vitres forcloses de la voiture" (30) [through the tightly shut windows of the car]. Suddenly, the driver brakes, waking the narrator from

her introspective mode: a man is dragging a car wreck on a rickshaw, but one of the wheels has stuck in a pothole. The traffic stops for ten minutes, and the narrator’s friend says, “Bienvenue à Antananarivo et son indiscipline” (32) [Welcome to Antananarivo and its indiscipline]. The narrator reacts to his words as follows: “Je me tais, ravale la phrase cinglante qui a failli fuser” (32) [I keep quiet, swallow the scathing sentence that almost bursts out]. It remains unclear what the narrator wanted to say—whether she was going to criticize Antananarivo’s failures of infrastructure or her friend’s caustic words. In any case, that she feels obliged to keep her comments to herself points to her awareness of her position as an outsider: someone not entitled to criticize.

The returnee’s outsidership is also conveyed in another scene involving automobility as she decides to rent a car to drive to the countryside. Her friend’s worrying reaction—“Tu vas y aller seule ?” (55) [You’re going there alone?]—suggests that he identifies her as a helpless tourist, echoing the experiences of Biyaoula’s protagonist with his family. The very next passage describes the returnee driving a rental car and picking up a hitchhiker. After a short discussion during which the hitchhiker, a young peasant, informs the narrator about the hardships of rural life, the two travel in silence. Immersed in her memories in a melancholic, introspective mode while driving through the desolate landscape, the narrator claims:

Rouler dans ce pays mien, rouler encore et toujours, prendre les grandes routes nationales, les routes secondaires, les pistes, rouler, rouler, essayer de comprendre... Maintenant mon co-voyageur se tait. Que lui dire ? Que je ne partage sûrement pas les mêmes souvenirs que lui ? (58)

Driving in this country of mine, driving time and again, taking the national highways, side roads, paths, driving, driving, trying to understand ... My fellow traveler is now silent. What can I say to him? That I certainly don’t share the same memories as him?

The quotation suggests that, for the returnee, automobility is a way of trying to reclaim the place of return and to renegotiate her relationship with it. The fact that she does not know what to say to the hitchhiker—who belongs to a different socio-economic class and generation—suggests that her attempts to understand the present tense of her former home country by engaging in mobility practices are not particularly successful.

The narrator feels overwhelmed by Antananarivo’s “demands” (111) and its omnipresent poverty, so she plans another trip to the countryside,

where she believes she will be able not only to find much-needed space and silence but also to reconnect with her childhood memories. That the narrator's trip into the countryside is motivated by a nostalgic impulse also influences her choice of transport: she takes a bush taxi to relive a childhood experience. Typical of public transportation, the minibus in Rakotoson's text functions as a mobile space of encounter and differentiation (see Kathiravelu 2015; Wilson 2010) in that it challenges her ideas about being part of Madagascar. To catch the bush taxi, she first has to ride another bus to reach the road station. The bus is crowded, but the narrator occupies two seats instead of one, unlike the locals, whose giving her more room makes her feel "elephantine" (112). Her awareness of taking more space than the locals underlines her outsidership and class privilege in a very tangible and almost comical way. In order not to think about this awkwardness, the narrator focuses her attention on the streets she sees through the window of the vehicle. She recognizes the buildings and notes that "[Les rues] sont celles que je prenais autrefois, pour aller en vacances" (112) [The streets are the ones that I once took when going on holiday]. Her sense of familiarity is, however, disturbed by the present overpopulation, which differs from her childhood memories. The nostalgic landscape of the homecoming is the same but not quite: it is "a superimposition of two images"; home and away, and the past and the present (Boym 2001, xiv).

The returnee experiences another moment of familiarity when the bus reaches the road station, where a seemingly chaotic assemblage of vehicles is waiting. She manages to find the right bush taxi when someone directs her to "une vieille guimbarde pourrie" (113) [an old, rotten jalopy]. In this respect, the vehicle evokes her childhood experiences. But then again, the tragedy of nostalgia is that time affects not only the things that are remembered but also the person who remembers. This becomes clear when the returnee starts to think about the doubtful safety standards of the vehicle: "De toute façon, je voulais renouer avec mes racines: elles sont là. Je voulais un voyage comme dans mon enfance: j'y suis. Sauf que je ne le suis plus, enfant" (114) [Anyway, I wanted to reconnect with my roots: here they are. I wanted to travel in the same way as I did in my childhood: here I am. Except that I am no longer a child]. The journey in the bush taxi is also explanatory of how she is positioned as a tourist-outsider by the locals. When the bush taxi does not set off, the returnee starts to lose her patience:

J'avais oublié qu'ici le temps est élastique. [...] Je demande:

- Quand partons-nous?

J'aurais mieux fait de me taire. L'aide-chauffeur me regarde d'un air dédaigneux.

- Quand nous aurons fait le plein.

- Et quand aurons-nous fait le plein?

Voici bien une question d'étrangère. Il me le fait comprendre. (113)

I had forgotten that time is flexible here. [...] I ask:

- When do we leave?

It would have been better to have kept my mouth shut. The driver's assistant looks at me disdainfully.

- When we're full.

- And will we be full?

A foreigner's question. He makes sure that I know this. (113)

The narrator's impatient questions position her as someone no longer familiar with the local procedures of travel by public transport and whose “foreigner's” concept of time is not in line with local rhythms. As Filipa Wunderlich argues, “a sense of time [is] not only [...] intersubjective but also place-specific” and “time in urban places is produced and perceived jointly” (2010, 45). In *Juillet*, the returnee's relation to the local, jointly produced, temporalized space is marked by lack of synchrony, all of which contributes to the failure of her nostalgia trip by public transport.

Juillet also includes portrayals of pedestrianism. The returnee's walks in the vicinity are motivated by the need to reconnect with the place of return—for her, walking is an embodied process of spatial appropriation à la de Certeau (1988, 97): “Il me faut marcher, respirer, me retrouver dans cette ville, y adapter mes gestes, ma respiration, m'y remodeler” (40) [I need to walk, breathe, find myself in this city, adapt my movements to it, reshape myself to it]. As in *L'Impasse*, walking, in contrast to forms of transport whereby the landscape is observed from the vehicle and through a window, seems to be a more “unmediated” and embodied way of moving in the landscapes of return. The recurring word-choice “*Il me faut*” (I need/have to) in passages portraying walking conveys the narrator's sense of urgency to understand her own position *vis-à-vis* her former hometown. Her attempt to reconnect with the city through walking is a process of identifying the different temporal layers of meaning that she attaches to the urban landscape: “Il me faut faire un tri, entre ce que j'ai ramené en moi de Paris, ce que je vois maintenant et ce qui revient de mon passé. Il

me faut errer dans la ville, sans but, ou plutôt au gré des envies” (45) [I need to sort out what I have brought in me from Paris, what I see now, and what comes from my past. I need to wander in the city without a goal, or aimlessly, rather]. The narrator’s act of *flâneurism* is a “diasporic returnee version” of the activity (see also Toivanen 2021, 70): it is an act in which she attempts to reconcile the schisms between memory and the present, between the here and the remote, and not an act of “detached” observation by someone who feels at home in the urban space as the modernist *flâneur*.⁵

The narrator’s aimless wandering in Antananarivo is characterized by the necessity to accept her loss of the city that she once knew and to come to terms with its present. The narrative keeps alluding to the figure of the tourist in its descriptions of the returnee’s walks in the urban space. The way in which the narrator positions herself in relation to the figure of the tourist is revealing of her ambivalent relationship with Antananarivo. She claims that she wants to walk in the city streets “sans être touriste” (46) [without being a tourist] and that, indeed, “Je ne suis pas touriste dans ma ville, mais profondément d’ailleurs, d’une autre vie, d’un autre temps” (46) [I’m not a tourist in my city, but profoundly from somewhere else, from another life, from another time]. She rejects the position of the tourist and defines her relationship with Antananarivo differently, as someone displaced from its present. Later, however, she is willing to identify herself in the figure of the tourist: “Marcher, marcher comme une touriste qui découvre” (79) [To walk, walk like a tourist who discovers]. Here, she embraces the position of the tourist as an attempt to see the city with new eyes and not as someone engaging in personal memory tourism (Marschall 2015)—and to remain detached and more “approving” of its unpleasant aspects, as her rhetorical question suggests: “Comment aimer cette ville, sans la haïr, ville que la pauvreté a rendue pieuse, sage comme une femme excisée?” (79) [How can one love this city without hating it, a city that poverty has rendered pious and wise, like a circumcised woman?]. The uneasy relation between the past and the present is articulated again in the way in which the narrator, walking while immersed in melancholic introspection and her personal memories of Antananarivo, almost trips over a child sleeping on the street on a sheet of cardboard.

⁵For postcolonial conceptualizations of the *flâneur*, see Carrera Suárez (2015), Aatkar (2020), Pfalzgraf (2021).

CONCLUSION

Portrayals of the transnational and local mobilities of diasporic returnees produce meanings of the mobility practices themselves, play a key role in generating the identities of the traveler and what the place of return means to them, and have specific functions in the narrative structure. In the texts discussed, scenes of aeromobility mostly feature at the beginning of the narrative, conveying the feeling of not being entirely at home anywhere typical of the diasporic experience. Portrayals of air travel mark a narrative transition during which the returnees' anxieties concerning the spatiotemporal distance from their former homelands become intensified because the inertia of a long-haul flight provides space for introspection. Gloomy imagery often characterizes these introspective passages and contributes to the uneasy poetics of aeromobility in return narratives. Portrayals of diasporic returnees' aeromobilities attest to the anxious aspects of the "homecoming" that spring from the context within which their journeys are embedded: that of returning after a long absence to a former home country in the Global South. The anxieties relate to the question of belonging and distance, but also to guilt caused by socio-economic privilege and the fact of having been absent during national crises, as in Tadjó's and Rakotoson's texts. Scenes of aeromobility also attest to the failures of modernization in African postcolonial nation-states and convey the unrealistic expectations those at home have of migrant life, as in Biyaoula's novel. In line with the general disillusionment characteristic of contemporary return narratives, scenes of aeromobility in most of the texts question the concept of "homecoming". Portrayals of aeromobility by Cissokho and Kiyindou, however, articulate feelings of nostalgia and belonging and thus run against current trends. While the initial enthusiasm in Cissokho's narrative is overshadowed by the realization of social inequalities and failures of modernization manifest at the airport of arrival, the romantic tones in Kiyindou's novel are problematic as the protagonist has been forced to leave his country as a child because of civil war. Airports are important narrative settings. Airports of departure tend to be portrayed as lacking emotion but, significantly enough, airports of arrival are represented just as negatively as places of exclusion, alienation, and failures of decolonization.

With regard to ground-level mobilities, the mobile perspective of the returnee produces a view of African cities as places that are no longer self-evident environments for the protagonists. Portrayals of urban mobility play a crucial role in the narratives: modes of transport move the returnees

around in the urban space, permitting encounters with the city-dwellers and urban landscapes. In brief, representations of urban mobility practices and modes of transport are important in structuring return narratives. The poetics of return mobilities include text-specific ways of translating movement into literary form, as in Cissokho's text, and of conveying the limitations imposed on urban mobile subjectivity, as in Biyaoula's novel. The texts frequently produce mobile cartographies that convey the returnees' attempt to position themselves on the map of their former hometowns. More generally, the returnees' urban mobilities highlight the tensions between memory and the present when the protagonists try to relocate themselves in the urban space while acknowledging its transformations and the need/impossibility to catch up with the spatiotemporal gap between themselves and "their" cities. The diasporic returnee's mobile perspective is a comparative and translocal one, and this aspect articulates itself on the axis of metropolitan center vs. (former) colonial periphery. This comparison, in the eyes of the returnees, reveals failures in the modernization of African cities. The returnees are privileged mobile subjects who can observe the unequal and failed aspects of the city while they are in motion—and while they maintain a certain critical distance generated by their diasporic position. However, this critical distance is sometimes influenced by the colonial discourses of modernity, as in *Dramouss*, or reproduces Western stereotypes of African cities as dystopic spaces, as in *L'Impasse*. Uncritical optimism about colonial modernity and dystopianism tends to regard the metropolitan center as a norm from which African cities deviate. As Lola Akande (2019, 5) notes, the relationship between the African novel and the city has been an uneasy one, "resulting in a consistent negative portrayal of the city". With their pessimistic tones, the texts discussed here do not stray far from this general tendency.

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Work, Labor, and Afroeuropean (Im)mobilities

RELATIONAL EMPLOYMENT-RELATED MOBILITIES

This chapter discusses Afroeuropean employment-related mobilities,¹ taking as its starting point the fact that work, labor, and mobilities are inherently intertwined (Cresswell et al. 2016, 1798). Employment-related mobilities have received little attention in mobilities research and, concomitantly, mobilities have been largely absent from studies focusing on work (Cresswell et al. 2016, 1790). In their call for a mobilities approach to work, Tim Cresswell, Sara Dorow, and Sharon Roseman emphasize the importance of adopting “a dynamic model of mobility across multiple scales” (2016, 1793). This means “break[ing] from siloed attention to discrete forms of mobility to, for, or at work, such as migration, daily commuting, long-distance rotational commuting, or the micro-movements of

¹I use interchangeably employment-related mobilities (Cresswell et al. 2016; Dorow et al. 2017), work-related mobilities, and professional mobilities. Cristiana Bastos, Andre Novoa, and Noel B. Salazar use the concept of mobile labor to cover “movements *for* labour (migrant trajectories, economic-induced displacements), movements *as* labour (highly mobile jobs), and movements *of* labour (labour-related geographical displacement and its different rhythms)” (2021, 155; original emphasis). Nicky Gregson (2023, 890) criticizes such interchangeable uses of “work” and “labor”. “Labour”, as Gregson points out, “is inseparable from the capital-labour relation and debates about value, whereas the term work is reserved for the everyday tasks associated with a job and/or unwaged activity” (2023, 890).

bodily labor” to account for the relationality of employment-related (im) mobilities (Cresswell et al. 2016, 1798). Like all mobilities, work-related mobilities should be understood within their contexts and as part of mobility regimes to acknowledge that they are both “lived and structured” (Dorow et al. 2017, 8).

My analysis draws on approaches outlined by geographers and anthropologists working in mobility studies (Cresswell et al. 2016; Dorow et al. 2017; Bastos et al. 2021). Nicky Gregson criticizes mobilities scholars’ approaches to work and labor for their interest in “the experience and/or sensation of being on-the-move and/or of embodied movement”, which, according to Gregson, does not have “much to contribute to wider debates on work and/or labour” (2023, 889). In the context of postcolonial literary studies or studies of migration literature, however, the focus on the experience of being on the move or being immobile is relevant, valid, and I would also argue, a refreshing perspective on work-related mobilities because it does not reduce mobility to “just a secondary activity that is ancillary to whatever precedes or follows it, but an interaction, phenomenon, and process in its own right” (Schimkowsky et al. 2025, 2). In line with the overall focus of this book on Afro-European mobile subjectivities, I am primarily interested in employment-related mobilities as embodied experiences of mobility but also of immobility, given that these “two [are] dynamic sides of the same coin” (Salazar 2021, 15).

Through contextualization, my analysis of embodied experiences of employment-related (im)mobilities is far from being disconnected from the material world and its socio-historical developments. Typical of postcolonial literature, the texts that I discuss also highlight their own worldliness. One of the key contextual factors that inform my readings is that colonialism and imperialism are the root causes of the uneven processes of neoliberal globalization (Munck 2010, 163–164). As also demonstrated by some of the texts discussed in this chapter, coerced and racialized historical labor mobilities date back to the simultaneous expansion of empire and capitalism—in effect, it can be argued that “the plantation created labour before the industrial revolution did” (Bastos et al. 2021, 156). The texts analyzed also refer to the period of economic growth from after World War II until the mid-1970s, which saw a boom in migrant labor in Europe (Cohen 2006, 138–139), and more recently, the increasing role of border mechanisms “in producing the times and spaces of global capitalism” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 3–4). In France, for instance, the postwar shortage of workers led to the recruitment of foreign

labor also from Africa, but already in the 1960s concern was raised that there were too many Africans in France, which led to stricter migration policies (Germain 2016, 22). Currently, labor migration is “an integral aspect of a wider neoliberal economic regime”, and the insecure condition of migrants combined with the precarization of work renders migrant workers vulnerable to exploitation (Bauder 2006, 3–4). Closely connected to this precarity, the texts analyzed also draw attention to the overrepresentation of migrant workers in the low-paid service sector (Sassen 1998, 48, 87). Combined with an understanding of such socio-political developments regarding the work/labor-mobility nexus, the mobility lens “has the potential to reveal the circuits and nodes of power that reproduce and/or disrupt the spatio-temporal relations of work in any given context” (Dorow et al. 2017, 3). Furthermore, a postcolonial perspective is helpful for understanding the legacies of slavery and colonialism in Afro-European employment-related mobilities.

As throughout this book, my readings here are guided by the idea that “one kind of mobility seems to always *involve* another mobility” (Adey 2010, 18; original emphasis). As Dorow, Roseman, and Cresswell observe, “work is a core human activity increasingly steeped in multiple mobilities” (2017, 8). In effect, in addition to the relationality of different work-related mobilities ranging from labor migration to commuting and embodied micro-mobilities at the workplace (Cresswell et al. 2016, 1798), employment-related mobilities in the Afro-European context are connected to other categories of mobility. They are not only related to student mobilities (Chap. 2), which carry a similar promise of social mobility but also, due to the precarization of work, to the mobilities of clandestine migrants. Indeed, the informal work of the clandestine taxi-driver in Edem Awumey’s novel *Les Pieds sales* (2009) embodies the precarity of both work and migration (Chap. 6). Employment-related mobilities also importantly overlap with diasporic return travel (Lagji 2024, 321). Financing such “homecomings” may demand years of hard work, and yet not all professions are equally valued by those who stay, as is suggested by the reception of the factory worker upon his return in Daniel Biyaoula’s *L’Impasse* (1996) (Chap. 4). And finally, leisure travel is a privileged form of mobility often enabled by labor and inscribed in the concept of paid holidays, as demonstrated by Kidi Bebey’s novel *Mon Royaume pour une guitare* (2016) (Chap. 3).

Employment-related (im)mobilities in the Afro-European context have been addressed in a wide body of texts, including the mobilities soldiers

(*tirailleurs sénégalais*) as in Tierno Monénembo's *Le Terroriste noir* (2021); blue-collar laborers such as the plumber in Ken Bugul's *Le Trio bleu* (2022); sports professionals such as the boxer in N.G.M. Faye's *Le Débrouillard* (1964); or instructors as in Pius Ngandu Nkashama's *Vie et meurs d'un primitif en Essonne, Quatre-vingt-onze* (1987). For my analysis I have chosen texts that portray the genuinely kinetic—or stagnant— aspects of work instead of, for instance, exploring labor migration as an *outcome* of transnational mobility (see Aguiar et al. 2019, 19). As Nadeen Dakkak underlines in her discussion of labor migration, “migrating from one place to another [...] may seem to be an ultimately mobile act from a macro perspective, but it does not necessarily entail mobility on a daily basis” (2019, 191). In order to keep the focus on mobility, Dakkak suggests focusing on “the everyday spatial practices” of labor migrants (2019, 191). Indeed, this sort of framing is necessary if one is to “foreground mobility, rather than seeing it as a constituent of larger social processes”, as James Faulconbridge and Allison Hui (2016, 3) summarize the key premise of mobilities research. Approaching work through portrayals of mobility practices or representations of immobility allows for new insights into labor migration by enabling a “holistic focus on movements, meanings, and practices of employment-related geography mobility” (Cresswell et al. 2016, 1791). Work-related mobilities, labor migration in particular, imply the promise of social mobility. Yet while “the impulse to [...] migrate is often located in the pursuit of the dream of educational or material enrichment, each in turn promising the conferral of status” (Thomas 2004, 39), labor migrants frequently realize “the falsehood of the freedom dreams promised by neo/liberal economic frameworks” (Musila 2023, 197). This transition from promises of social mobility to the failure thereof informs many of the texts discussed in this chapter.

The present chapter consists of three sections. The first section concentrates on Wilfried N'Sondé's *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* (2018) [One Ocean, Two Seas, Three Continents] and Emmanuel Dongala's *La Sonate à Bridgetower (Sonata Mulattica)* (2017) [*The Bridgetower Sonata: Sonata Mulattica* (2021)], which both feature historical figures whose mobilities highlight the intertwined histories of Africa and Europe and the transatlantic dimension thereof through their setting in the context of the slave trade and coerced labor. The poetics of mobility in these texts is concerned with their way of highlighting the relationality of mobilities through juxtaposition. The second section analyzes Ousmane Sembène's

“La Noire de...” (1962) [“The Promised Land” (1974)], a short story depicting the work-related mobilities of a Senegalese maid at the end of the colonial era. My reading foregrounds the racialized and gendered aspects of employment-related mobilities and pays attention to social and physical immobility. The third section discusses Denis Oussou-Essui’s *La Souche calcinée* (2004) [The charred stump] and Gauz’s *Debout-payé* (2014) [*Standing Heavy* (2022)], which portray precarious, working-class (un)employment-related (im)mobilities in France from the 1950s to the early 2000s. Both novels feature a transition from student mobilities to employment-related mobilities. Despite being set in different temporal contexts, all the texts are connected through transtemporal links that highlight the weight of the Middle Passage and colonialism on AfroEuropean employment-related (im)mobilities.

PRIVILEGED AFROEUROPEAN MOBILITIES AT THE TIME OF SLAVERY

This section discusses the interconnections between AfroEuropean and transatlantic mobilities in N’Sondé’s *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* and Dongala’s *La Sonate à Bridgetower*. I focus on the connections between the privileged AfroEuropean professional mobilities of the central characters and the coerced transatlantic (im)mobilities of enslaved Africans. Through their portrayals of mobility practices the texts highlight the historical mobilities and presence of Africans in Europe and represent Europe as built on and haunted by (the legacy of) slavery. *Un Océan* and *La Sonate* feature historical figures, the priest Nsaku Ne Vunda and the violinist George Bridgetower. By foregrounding such lesser-known historical characters, the novels reflect the interest of postcolonial biographical fiction in individuals forgotten by hegemonic historiography (Tunca and Ledent 2020, 343). Yet by intertwining the professional mobilities of Nsaku and Bridgetower with coerced Middle Passage (im) mobilities both texts move beyond the story of an individual character. Their portrayals of mobility also accentuate the way in which the “pursuit of capital” has motivated the mobilities of people between Africa and the Western world since the era of slave trade (Otiono 2011, 6). These historical novels can be read as responses to the current political climate in Europe, which not only denies the complex history of AfroEuropean encounters but also “excludes and discourages awareness of Europe’s

imperial histories” (Garrido et al. 2020, 5; see also Otele 2021, 8). Current engagements with historical Afroeuropa and the transatlantic slave trade are not concerned solely with the past but function as “literary archaeologies of the present” (Forster 2019, 1) that expand the “spatial and temporal continuum” of the Middle Passage (Dietrich et al. 1999, 8) to include today’s Europe.

The transatlantic slave trade is a flagrant example of “co-dependent (im)mobilities” in that it enabled the mobility and wealth of those who benefited from slavery but also the mobility of various colonial products (Kleist 2019, 74). The Middle Passage itself is a “paradoxical mix of extreme enforced transoceanic mobility and equally extreme enforced bodily immobility” (Cresswell 2016, 22). The mobilities of N’Sondé’s and Dongala’s main characters differ from those of enslaved Africans in that while the formers’ mobilities are enabled by their “exceptional” skills (Bridgetower) or their education and protected position (Nsaku), the latter group is reduced to commodities to be transported in order to increase the slave-owners’ wealth (Smallwood 2007, 33–64).² A relational reading makes it possible to appreciate the narrative strategies that the texts employ in juxtaposing and intertwining privileged professional mobilities with coerced transatlantic (im)mobilities. These are pivotal to the texts’ poetics of mobility.

While Black diasporic mobilities often carry “the ghost of the Middle Passage” (Cresswell 2016, 21), the privileged position of Nsaku and Bridgetower also emphasizes that “Africans in Europe must not be reduced to victimhood” (Garrido et al. 2020, 6) and that not all historical transcontinental African mobilities fall within the category of slavery. Related to this, Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga (2012) and Bradley Hinger (2022) argue, respectively, that the meanings of African/Black mobilities should also be explored *beyond* the colonial paradigm and not only as reactions to the structures of white supremacy. This said, while historical AfroEuropeans did enjoy some degrees of privilege in Europe, they “were considered to have earned or been granted their rights and privileges and were therefore rendered exceptional” (Otele 2021, 7). *La Sonate* and *Un Océan* suggest that such exceptionalism is fragile and the line between enslaved and free-moving Africans is an oscillating one.

² Coerced mobilities of enslaved Africans were not limited to the Middle Passage but also informed their displacements in local settings, as demonstrated by Camillia Cowling’s (2021) article on “slave-moving” in Cuba.

Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents: *A Journey in the Cabin of a Slave Ship*

Un Océan is based on the journey from Congo to the Vatican of Nsaku Ne Vunda, a Roman Catholic priest born near the Congo River in around 1583. Nsaku Ne Vunda, baptized as Dom Antonio Manuel, was appointed by the king of the Bakongos as an ambassador to the Pope with the mission of putting an end to the transatlantic slave trade. In the novel, the king does not mention that the journey to Rome will take the protagonist first to Brazil on board a slaver. While the novel narrates his entire journey from Brazil to Lisbon and from there onward to Rome, the sea passage from West Africa to South America is the most complex part and lends itself particularly well to an analysis that aims at unpacking the meanings produced by and during movement between locations (Cresswell 2006, 2). As Joanne Chassot argues, the Middle Passage has only rarely been represented in Afrodiasporic literatures addressing slavery as it “resists narrative form” (2018, 37). With its detailed portrayal of the sea-crossing, N’Sondé’s novel engages in rendering the Middle Passage in representable form. This said, the text simultaneously questions the limits of representation, and the narrative perspective is that of a free man, not of an enslaved subject.

The novel makes slavery its key theme by not only describing the transatlantic slave trade but also by referring to Arab Muslim slave trade, local forms of coerced labor, and the involvement of the Bakongo people in transforming their society into “un dangereux système de prédation” (30) [a dangerous system of preying], thus underlining Africans’ involvement in the slave trade much as Yaa Gyasi’s *Homecoming* (Van Rens 2023, 783). Yet when Nsaku starts his journey in the direction of the Vatican, he is unaware of the route and traveling conditions. He imagines his itinerary by drawing “une ligne fictive qui contournait la bosse que formait l’Afrique de l’Ouest, se dirigeait ensuite vers le nord, traversait le détroit de Gibraltar pour enfin s’arrêter à Rome” (42) [a fictitious line that went around the hump formed by West Africa, then headed north, crossed the Strait of Gibraltar, and finally stopped in Rome].³ The itinerary turns out to be more complex, and the idea of the detour encapsulates the alleged disconnection between European modernity and slavery.

³Translated quotations from N’Sondé’s and Oussou-Essui’s novels are mine. In the cases of Dongala’s, Sembène’s, and Gauz’s texts, the page number after English quotations refers to their respective published English versions.

The protagonist is excited about seeing the ocean. He believes that by crossing “la grande eau, [je] découvrirais la lointaine et merveilleuse Europe, [...] le continent où l’amour du Christ palpitait dans tous les cœurs” (43) [the big sea, to discover the distant and marvelous Europe, [...] the continent where the love of Christ was palpitating in all hearts]. It is noteworthy that these idealized expectations, springing from his Catholic education, are not only contrasted with local traditional knowledge about the sea goddess Mamie Wata but also with the imagery of destruction associated with slavery. Nsaku has an experience of being taken over by ancestral spirits and imagines vessels in a chaos of fire and blood, hearing “les cris affolés d’une centaine d’hommes et de femmes enchaînés dans une cage” (51) [the frantic cries of a hundred men and women chained in a cage]. This vision with voices claiming justice and remembrance serves as a prelude to the journey, during which the path of the royal ambassador—a privileged and exceptional Black maritime traveler due to his profession—crosses with that of the enslaved. This imagery marks the “beginning of the adventure and the progressive loss of ignorance and innocence for the young ecclesiastic” (De Meyer 2022, 153; my translation).

To reach the port, Nsaku first travels over land. Seated in a sedan chair, his mode of traveling elevated from the ground signals his privileged position. This impression is further underlined when the porters take a break because the rain renders the path difficult to walk on. Past them trudges “une interminable colonne de vagues formes humaines [...] une ligne d’ombres” (55) [an endless column of vague human forms, [...] a line of shadows]. Attached to each other with chains, these vague figures move slowly, struggling to keep up with the rhythm of the armed guards. The text juxtaposes Nsaku’s comfortable mobility with the staggering line of chained captives and it emphasizes his individuality by describing the latter as a faceless mass of “contours” (55) and “silhouettes cassées” (56) [broken silhouettes]. Simultaneously, this strategy also serves to convey Nsaku’s attempts to avoid the visual perception of and “la confrontation avec l’âpre réalité de la servitude” (56) [confrontation with the harsh reality of servitude], which comments on the limits of representation of slavery. Through this strategy, the figure of Nsaku Ne Vunda becomes an embodiment of what Véronique Porra in her analysis refers to as “absent witnesses” (2023, 102). Upon arrival at the coast the porters hasten their steps as they pass a slave fort to spare the priest from the smell of burning skin. Again, the first-person narrator describes how “je baissai la tête et détournai mon regard” (57) [I turned my head down and looked away]. While the

narrative frequently describes him as avoiding visual perceptions of the predicament of the enslaved, the aural and olfactory sensations telling the same story are inescapable during the crossing (Toivanen 2021a, 162). The very concept of the sea voyage implies a condition of confinement or, as Michel Foucault describes it, that of being a “prisoner of the passage”, not only in the sense of the passenger being surrounded by an endless mass of water but also in terms of the passengers’ confinement within the ship in a state of stagnation-in-movement (Adey et al. 2012, 177–178). The idea of being a “prisoner of the passage” finds its extreme material manifestation in the Middle Passage and the “mobile, seagoing prison” of the slave ship (Rediker 2008, 45) where the degree and consequences of confinement are not the same for the crew or a passenger protected by his education and professional status like the protagonist as for the enslaved human beings lying in the restricted space of the hold. Yet the all-penetrating quality of “un cauchemar sonore” (62) [the sonic nightmare] and “la puanteur des actes barbares” (130) [the stench of macabre acts] ensures that no one on board can escape the predicament of the enslaved. In short, the narrative’s representation of trauma is particularly complex: the approach is not strictly confrontational or explicit, but it does not inscribe trauma in the realm of the unspeakable either (see Van Rens 2023, 777).

At the port Nsaku is impressed by the sight of the colossal vessels and their technical ingenuity. The ships mark his entry into “un monde totalement nouveau” (59) [a totally new world] and for a moment make him forget “la puanteur qui planait dans l’air et les malheureux traînant leurs chaînes” (58) [the stench that hung in the air and the unfortunate dragging their chains]. This image captures the anachronism existing between slavery and modernity (Gikandi 2011, 4) by juxtaposing the lures of colonial modernity, including its mobilities, with its dark side of dehumanization and exploitation. The slave ship is not simply a modern mode of transportation but a “machine” that transforms captured Africans into slaves and “bring[s] into existence a new Atlantic world of labor, plantations, trade, empire, and capitalism” (Rediker 2008, 72). The constant introduction of the horrors of slavery from below the deck and slave houses to the privileged protagonist’s consciousness are a key element of the novel’s poetics of mobility that captures the idea that his professional mission cannot be separated from the coerced (im)mobilities of the enslaved. Furthermore, by making the reality of slavery pervasively present by means of cries and smells and by contrasting it with images of colonial modernity—and by implication, the alleged superiority of Europe—the narration underlines the role of slavery in the making of Europe.

That a contemporary novel should foreground the link between slavery and Europe points toward the weight of the past in the present. The postcolonial historical novel “retrieves from the dustbin of history the inassimilable, heterogeneous traces of stories that resist [...] dominant historiography” (Forster 2019, 5). As Porra (2023, 101) points out, N’Sondé used archival fragments to reconstitute Nsaku’s journey to stress its embeddedness in the history of the slave trade; a “detail” about which most archival material remains silent. The first-person narration is punctuated by short chapters in italics and narrated by a third-person narrator, and with their details of names, dates, and events these chapters suggest that Nsaku’s story is, indeed, grounded in history (De Meyer 2022, 155). The exploration of the past by the postcolonial historical novel is, however, not only about the past but also serves to “untangle the meaning of our present and invent a genuinely *postcolonial* future” (Forster 2019, 2; original emphasis). N’Sondé’s novel explicitly articulates this idea at its beginning, set in the present and narrated from the perspective of the memorial of Nsaku erected in Rome in 1608, commonly known under the name “Nigrita”, which reduces the person to an anonymous representative of his “race”. “Je me suis tu il y a plus de quatre cents ans” [I had stayed silent for over four hundred years], states the narrator-statue, articulating his wish to tell his story and the forgotten memory of enslaved Africans to “les badauds” (9) [onlookers] and to “curieux qui s’arrêtent un instant devant mon buste” (9) [the curious who stop for a moment in front of my bust]. Here, the narrative interconnects mobilities from different historical and social contexts: those of the forgotten victims of the Middle Passage; the professional travels of the protagonist whose “exceptionality” the memorial in Europe embodies; and the mobilities of what seem to be tourists visiting Rome, throwing indifferent looks at the now immobilized “Nigrita” while remaining deaf to its stories about the Middle Passage. As to Nsaku’s tensioned position with regard to the predicament of the victims of slave trade, it is indeed significant, as Bernard De Meyer (2022, 154) emphasizes, that the story is narrated by a marble bust that has remained silent for over 400 years.

The portrayal of the sea-crossing conveys the idea of Nsaku’s “exceptionality”: as an African whose education and professional position saves him from being destined for the ship’s hold, he is “une erreur” (64) [an

error] that “perturbe leurs certitudes” (102) [disrupts [the crew’s] certainties]. At the same time, the narration articulates a sense of ambiguity, suggesting that the line between the enslaved and the free is faltering.⁴ This points to the wholesale manner in which slavery affects societies and it also questions the existence of innocent “onlookers”, or “passers-by”, to evoke the nonchalance of those observing the “Nigrita” as a mere touristic curiosity, without their acknowledging the history underlying its surface. When it comes to Nsaku and his “exceptionality”, the text frequently underlines the vacillating line between him and those confined in the hold, starting from how his “freedom of movement” is affected when he realizes that he is going to travel on a slave ship. He feels “pris au piège” [trapped] with his “membres raides” (62) [stiff limbs]—imagery that echoes the traveling conditions of the captives. Nsaku also has a nightmare in which he is in the hold himself (66), and when he listens to the cries of the captives in his cabin, he bursts into tears and his laments join those rising up from below the deck (75). He is animated by the fear of no-return (82), and is unsure whether he is still alive, which evokes the zombie-like, dehumanizing traveling conditions (Toivanen 2021a, 162–163) of those in the hold of “[le] caveau ambulante” (118) [the mobile vault]. The wide-ranging effects of slavery and the role of the Atlantic in “connect[ing] the enslaved and their enslavers” (Gikandi 2011, ix) are conveyed in a scene in which the corpses of a captive and a crew member are thrown overboard in the aftermath of a failed mutiny: Nsaku feels “hanté par l’image de leurs deux cadavres poursuivant leurs lugubres noces au fond des eaux” (130) [haunted by the image of the two corpses continuing their gloomy wedding at the bottom of the waters]. The novel further underlines the collective trauma of slavery with the narrator’s words that “autant de chaînes invisibles enserraient nos corps et nos têtes” (130) [as many invisible chains encircled [the] bodies and heads] of those traveling above deck as those in the hold—words that read metonymically as a reflection on Europe’s entanglement with slavery.

⁴Here, *Un Océan* evokes the novel *Middle Passage* (1990) by the African American author Charles Johnson, whose Black protagonist ends up becoming a crewmember on a slaver on its way from the USA to Africa. The protagonist’s position is an ambiguous one, “treading the space between sailor and future slave” (Fagel 1996, 626).

**La Sonate à Bridgetower: “Exceptional” Professionals
and Transatlantic Hauntings**

The central character in Dongala’s novel is the historical George Bridgetower, a violinist born in 1778 in Poland, where his father, known as John Frederick Bridgetower or, among other names, Frederick de Augustus, worked at the court of Prince Esterházy. The father was probably from Barbados although, as the novel suggests, he frequently presented himself as an African prince. George Bridgetower was a child prodigy who gave concerts in Paris, London, Bath, Bristol, and Vienna, and became the protégé of the Prince Regent—the future King George IV—in 1791. The father’s Barbadian background and the fact that his grandfather was an enslaved son of an African prince bring the reality of slavery and coerced transatlantic (im)mobilities to Europe—more precisely, to the sumptuous concert halls of its music capitals.

Frederick de Augustus embodies—rather like Nsaku in N’Sondé’s novel—the “exceptionality” in the eyes of white Europeans of a free Black person (Otele 2021, 7). The presence of the expensively dressed Frederick de Augustus in the sumptuous concert halls of Europe attracts curious glances from predominantly white concert guests, betraying their confusion at the sight of a free Black man in high society (Dongala 2017, 15). The figure of the father conveys not only this “exceptionality” but also embodies metonymically the troubling presence of the overseas colonies and coerced labor in the heart of “cultivated” Europe. The father’s way of presenting himself as an African prince signals his rejection of his being associated with enslaved Afro-Caribbeans and is also symptomatic of his aspiration to spare his son from the reality of slavery. Yet the narration repeatedly refers to his family history, which is tied to the Middle Passage: a grandfather dreaming of freedom in the hold of a slave ship and a grandmother committing suicide to avoid bondage (Dongala 2017, 46). This discrepancy produces a tension that marks the text until the father’s disappearance from his son’s life and the narrative. The text comments explicitly on the tension between the Bridgetowers’ privileged travels as “exceptional” Afro-European mobile subjects and the reality of the transatlantic slave trade by means of Frederick de Augustus’s words to his son: “Dans ce monde où tu grandis et voyages, il ne faut rien prendre pour argent comptant. Souvent, beaucoup de choses se cachent derrière l’apparence des choses. Un décor a toujours son envers” (56) [“In the world where you are growing up and traveling, you should take nothing

for granted. Many things are often not what they appear to be. A stage set always has its other side” (58)].

One illuminative example of the linking of the seemingly disconnected spaces of the European concert halls with the transatlantic realities features in a passage in which Frederick de Augustus lies on his bed in a Parisian hotel, dreaming of a concert organized at the court of Esterházy. As a place of transit for relatively privileged travelers, the hotel contrasts with the plantation, a space of confinement for enslaved Africans that serves to restrict their right to be mobile. In Frederick de Augustus’s dream, what at first seems to be a conventional concert suddenly transforms into a scene in which Caribbean rhythms take over:

[Frederick de Augustus] se revit à côté de son père à la Barbade, pendant le *crop-over*, cette fête où les esclaves étaient autorisés à célébrer la fin des récoltes, cette fête où ils avaient le droit de danser et de faire de la musique avec tous les instruments possibles et imaginables. (49)

[Frederick de Augustus] saw himself again alongside his father in Barbados during the *crop-over*, the festivity when slaves were allowed to celebrate the end of the harvest, the festivity when they were allowed to dance and make music with every possible imaginable instrument. (50)

While the dream is carnivalesque and Frederick wakes up laughing, the passage suggests that Europe and its high culture cannot be thought of beyond the “intimate connection between modern subjectivity and the political economy of slavery” (Gikandi 2011, 17). By juxtaposing scenes such as these with the Bridgetowers’ mobilities in the narrative present, the narrative addresses their relationality on the level of form. As a literary device, juxtaposition is, as Elleke Boehmer suggests, a form of “movement of going-between” that “allow[s] hidden and as-yet-unsayable meanings to be suggested” (2018, 53). Juxtaposition is also an inherently mobile strategy because it “demands of the reader a constant bridging across and zigzagging back and forth” (Boehmer 2018, 52). As such, it draws attention to a “sense of asynchronicity” characteristic of the experience of displacement (Tabunan 2023, 673).

The fact that Frederick de Augustus revisits a childhood memory in Barbados during a dream underlines his habitual conscious efforts to disconnect himself from this past, exemplified by a scene in which he and his son come across Black coalmen during a walk in Paris. For the Bridgetowers, walking represents a way of familiarizing themselves with the city: it not

only brings them to landmark Parisian buildings and bridges but also exposes them to less picturesque elements of urban French life, such as flagrant poverty (Dongala 2017, 63–65). Ultimately, their urban stroll turns into an unexpected encounter with a group of Black coalmen. Here, the Bridgetowers’ privileged mobilities intersect with less privileged Black mobilities, symbolically bringing transatlantic realities into the metropolitan center. If Frederick de Augustus is startled to see Black men in Paris, the coalmen are equally surprised to encounter the sumptuously dressed-up “African prince”. When the coalmen greet him, he feels “mal à l’aise sans savoir trop pourquoi” (68) [“uncomfortable without knowing why” (70)] and looks away because “il ne voulait pas être confondu avec eux, ni s’y associer” (68) [“he didn’t want to be confused or associated with them” (70)]. His son, however, waves to the coalmen, “content de voir ces hommes qui ressemblaient à son père” (68) [“happy to see these men who looked like his father” (71)]. The father’s unwillingness to be associated with the coalmen is not merely a question of social class but above all one linked to his desire to disassociate himself from the realities of coerced labor to which his “race” seems to connect him. Moreover, their walking is also a means for Frederick de Augustus to protect his son not only from his family history but also, more generally, from the reality of transatlantic slavery. Ultimately, the father, who becomes involved in the abolitionist struggle, reveals his family history to George during a disagreement that arises when the father accuses the son of wanting to become an Englishman. The truth comes out in an abrupt way: “N’oublie pas d’où tu viens. Ton grand-père et ton père viennent des plantations. [...] Ne te fais pas d’illusions sur ce que tu es. Une marchandise, un bien mobilier” (231–232) [“Don’t forget where you come from. Your grandfather and your father come from the plantations. [...] Don’t have any illusions about what you are. A piece of merchandise, a movable goods” (253–254)]. The father’s revelation and his suggestion that, in the eyes of white Europeans, his son is simply an object with an exchange value highlights the discrepancy between the Bridgetowers’ journeys in luxurious horse carts and their strolls in European cities and the coerced (im)mobilities of the victims of slavery. Simultaneously, it also hints at the fragility of their position as “exceptional” mobile subjects.

Significantly enough, the novel’s detailed portrayals of modes of transport reflect the importance of mobility for Frederick de Augustus, whose grandfather was a victim of transatlantic (im)mobilities and whose father grew up on a plantation, not leaving even when freed because “il ne savait

pas où aller” (166) [“he didn’t know where else to go” (181)]. With Frederick’s and George’s journey from Paris to London, the narration dwells on the characteristics of different horse carriages (Dongala 2017, 182), suggesting that the choice of the right vehicle is elementary to the father’s project of self-fashioning. Likewise, when he takes his son on a tour of Paris after their arrival in the city, the father immediately identifies the most elegantly dressed among the coach drivers (Dongala 2017, 86). This passage contrasts the privileged professional mobilities of the father and son with the coerced Afro-Caribbean maritime journeys of the former character’s grandfather, but also with the social movements of the underprivileged and exploited French masses when the Revolution occurs. During their ride, the luxurious carriage attracts the attention of armed protesters, who encircle the vehicle, yelling “Mort aux riches! Mort aux aristocrates!” (88) [“Death to the rich! Death to the aristocrats!” (92)]. This menacing scene highlights the intersecting and relational aspects of social privilege but also draws attention to Frederick de Augustus’s project of fashioning himself as “vedette exotique en grande tenue” (194) [“an exotic star in full dress” (211)] in European high society—the path of a self-made, free Black man whose itinerary from Barbados to Europe functions as a counter-image to his grandfather’s experience of the Middle Passage. His taste for luxury clothing is also an aspect of this counter-image. Upon boarding a slaver, African captives were forced to remove their clothes in order to strip away any “style or mode of self-presentation” (Gikandi 2011, 211). As such, with the dehumanization and the loss of identity that it generated, the “act of undressing [was] a prelude to enslavement” (Gikandi 2011, 213). Frederick de Augustus’s polished style and, more generally, his project of self-fashioning can be read as a reaction to the “art of undressing” (Gikandi 2011, 211) that enslavement entailed.

Despite the relative freedom of movement that Frederick de Augustus and his son enjoy in Europe, the narration also highlights the fragility of the protection that their “exceptionality” enables. On their way back from a walk near the Palais Royal, the father lets the son choose the coach driver to take them to their hotel. George chooses “la voiture la plus minable” (132) [“the most pathetic coach” (144)] as an act of charity directed at the most poorly dressed driver. Immediately after they have boarded the coach, policemen (*Police des Noirs*) appear, asking the father for his “*cartouche*” (Dongala 2017, 132), a box containing a certificate that justifies the presence of Black persons in France—a material manifestation of the concern that “il y en avait déjà trop dans le royaume” (132) [“there were

allegedly too many of them in the kingdom already” (144)]. Frederick de Augustus, believing in his own “exceptionality” in the role of the African prince, does not have the “*cartouche*” (Dongala 2017, 132) and he panics, imagining how he and George will be taken to “les dépôts des Noirs qu’on expulsait, au Havre, à Nantes, à La Rochelle ou à Saint-Malo, et de finir dans les cales d’un navire en partance pour les colonies françaises” (132) [“the cells in Le Havre, Nantes, Rochelle, or Saint-Malo, where they kept Blacks who were deported, and ending up in the hold of a ship bound for the French colonies” (145)]. The father and son save themselves by speaking German—a language the policemen obviously do not believe “un quelconque ‘Nègre des colonies’” (133) [“some ordinary ‘Negro of the colonies’” (145)] could master—and punctuating their speech with the French words for ambassador, diplomat, and prince; professions and positions that distinguish them from coerced laborers. The episode underlines the fragile line between the “Nègres des colonies” and the “exceptional” father and son. The allusion to the French slave ports and the threat of deportation link the Bridgetowers’ mobilities with the Middle Passage but also with the contemporary practices of control and deportation to which “unauthorized” Africans in Europe are frequently subjected.

(IM)MOBILITIES OF THE DOMESTIC WORKER IN “LA NOIRE DE...”

This section concentrates on Sembène’s short story “La Noire de...” (1962). A relatively early narrative of labor migration from Africa to Europe, the narration establishes parallels with slavery and the Middle Passage, giving the protagonist’s employment-related mobilities a trans-temporal dimension. A classic of African writing, “La Noire de...” has been widely studied not only in its short story form but also as the filmic rendition realized by Sembène himself in 1966 (e.g., Langford 2001; Thomas 2004; Parascandola 2009; Calhoun 2020; Oliver-Powell 2021; Sanogo 2021). It is through its focus on representations of tangible mobility practices and immobilities in the context of domestic work that my analysis wishes to provide a less explored perspective.

Set in the year 1958, two years before the independence of Senegal, “La Noire de...” is a story about Diouana, a young Senegalese laundry-woman employed by a French family in Dakar. When her employers, referred to in the narrative as simply Madame and Monsieur, travel to

Antibes in France for their summer vacation, Diouana joins them, lured by Madame's promises of a good life and freedom. In the new household, all housekeeping chores and childcare become Diouana's responsibilities. The France she had dreamed of is transformed into a nightmarish experience that leads her to commit suicide by her cutting her own throat in her employers' bathtub. Sembène was inspired by a real-life incident covered in the "*fait divers*"—a section typically featuring sensationalist news items—of a French newspaper (Calhoun 2021, n.p.).

"La Noire de..." moves beyond the familiar itinerary from the African homeland and village to the metropolitan center of Paris and its suburbs by adopting a peripheral setting: Antibes in southern France. In so doing, the text "provincialises Paris" (Moudileno 2012, 68) by framing the southern town as a relevant "site[...] in the formation of postcolonial identities" (67) and other postcolonial debates such as the ways in which peripheral Afro-European mobilities shape the meanings of postcolonial Europe (Toivanen 2021b, 359). With its spatial setting in the French Riviera, "La Noire de..." also brings to the fore the question of the relationality of mobilities: the maid's employment-related mobilities and her subsequent fatal social and spatial immobility are intertwined with French holidaymaking mobilities. The discrepancy between leisure and work-related mobilities underlines the exploitation and patterns of inequality that motivate the story. Symbolically, the return to France of Madame and Monsieur and Diouana's moving there with them foresee the transformations of migratory mobility patterns at the time of decolonization: the decrease in the number of French migrants in Western Africa and the "burgeoning migration of Africans from the lower echelon of the colonial hierarchy" to France (Germain 2016, 22).

While not necessarily playing a prominent role in the short story, portrayals of mobility practices and transport punctuate the text and contribute to the theme of (im)mobility that motivates the story. Moreover, in terms of plot construction, the migratory journey is a decisive prime mover of the narrative in the sense that it is exploitative labor migration that drives Diouana to suicide. Diouana's employment-related mobilities mostly relate to her migratory journey, but the narration also alludes to her long walks from her home to her workplace in Dakar. Such work-related mobilities turn into a relative state of immobility when she enters France. This is because she now lives with her employers but also because of her distress, which is both the cause and the result of her confinement to the domestic space. Her immobility finds its ultimate manifestation in

the image of her dead body lying in the bathtub and how it is carried out of the house (Sembène 1962, 160). In addition to her micro-mobilities inside the house, Diouana's mobilities prior to her suicide are limited to imaginary travel: she travels back to her home in her thoughts, recalling the warnings about life in Europe made by her cousin Tive Corrêa, a former sailor (Sembène 1962, 181–182). The following quotation captures Diouana's decreasing spatial and symbolic mobility as a Black domestic worker in France: “Le territoire du pays se limitait à la surface de la villa. Lentement, elle se noyait. Les larges horizons de naguère se limitaient à la couleur de sa peau” (177) [“The whole country contracted to the boundaries of the villa. Slowly but surely, she was sinking under it all. Her wide outlook in the past was narrowed down to the colour of her skin” (95)].

The notion of drowning in the quotation above establishes a link with coerced maritime mobilities during the transatlantic slave trade. As Louis J. Parascandola (2009, 368) observes, the fact that Diouana travels from Dakar to Marseille by sea—unlike the family who, due to Monsieur's work in aviation in Dakar, travels by airplane⁵—associates her journey to France with the crossing of the Atlantic made by the victims of the Middle Passage. Discussing the Middle Passage parallel, Doyle Calhoun (2020, 106) pays attention to a passage in which, prior to the crossing, Diouana observes the sea in Dakar: “Là, penchée sur la large fenêtre ayant vue sur la mer, Diouana, transportée, suivait le vol des oiseaux, haut sur l'immense étendue bleue; loin, l'île de Gorée se dessinait à peine” (168) [“But Diouana, looking out of the big window with its wide view of the sea, was mentally following the birds flying high over the vast blue expanse. The off-shore island of Gorea was only just visible” (90)]. The birds flying in the sky symbolize the idea of freedom of movement that nourishes Diouana's expectations of her new life in France, namely, her idea of

⁵ A contemporary rewriting of “La Noire de...” can be found in Fatou Diome's short stories in *La Préférence nationale* (2001) (Sanogo 2021, 301). From the perspective of employment-related mobilities, the short story “Le Visage de l'emploi” includes several interesting passages. It opens with a scene set at Roissy Airport, suggesting that the protagonist, later employed as a baby-sitter, arrives in France by airplane. The narrative uses the airport (the first contact location of an arriving passenger with a country) as a metaphor for the stereotypical, racist, first impressions of white French employers vis-à-vis African migrants (63–64). In short, while the mode of transport may have changed, French attitudes to Africans workers, at least as suggested by Diome's short story, have not. “Le Visage de l'emploi” also attests to the precarization of work where high education no longer guarantees social mobility: unlike Diouana, who barely speaks French, Diome's baby-sitter has an academic degree.

having “la liberté d’aller où elle le désirait, sans avoir à travailler comme une bête de somme” (165) [“the freedom [...] to go where she wanted, [...] not having to work like a horse” (88)]. However, as Calhoun writes, “on the level of wordplay, *transportée*, [...] manages not only to capture Diouana’s mental reverie [...], but also suggestively points at her looming conversion into commodity, into human cargo soon to be ferried across the sea where a form of neoslavery awaits” (2020, 106). The association of Diouana with goods resurfaces later when it is told how in Antibes “on la trimbalait de villa en villa” (178) [“she had been lugged out to someone’s villa” (96)]⁶ as an object of curiosity to prepare “exotic” Senegalese meals.

The Middle Passage parallel is further emphasized through the allusion to the Island of Gorée, which “served as a transition point and was used by slaveholders, thereby remaining indissociable from the symbolic crossing that will bring Sembène’s protagonist to the shores of southern France” (Thomas 2004, 41). The crossing itself, briefly described as a monotonous experience of “de l’eau devant, derrière, à tribord, à babord, rien qu’une nappe liquide, et par-dessus, le ciel” (174) [“just the sea in front and behind, to port and to starboard, just a watery sheet and the sky above” (94)], evokes the notion of a journey of non-arrival frequently associated with the Middle Passage (Smallwood 2007, 135). Toward the end of the short story, allusions to slavery become explicit as a result of Diouana’s own realization of her situation: she repeats the words “Vendue... vendue... achetée... achetée” (182) [“Sold, sold... bought, bought” (98)] and tells herself, “On m’a attirée, ficelée et je suis rivée là, comme une esclave” (182) [“I was enticed here, bound, and now I’m chained here like a slave” (98)]. In light of more recent mobilities of aspiring migrants across the Mediterranean (see Chap. 6), Diouana’s crossing and her exploitation in Europe point to a wider transtemporal and transpatial context of coerced Afro-European mobilities whereby “the circulation across the Mediterranean of African migrants [...] activates a parallel circulation of images and memories of the Atlantic Middle Passage” (Lombardi-Diop 2008, 163).

Equally significant in this linking of Diouana’s employment-related mobilities to the coerced journeys of enslaved Africans is the role played by her employers. Diouana’s increasing immobility toward the end of the

⁶The official English translation fails to capture the repetitiveness implied in the French original, in which Diouana is being dragged from *one villa to another*.

short story is illustrated in her confinement to the domestic space. In her analysis of the filmic version of “La Noir de...”, Melissa Oliver-Powell argues that Madame’s social and physical mobility outside the home is enabled by her “abusive exploitation of Diouana” (2021, 88), that is, Diouana’s labor. While the filmic version may render the contrast between Diouana’s immobility and Madame’s “highly mobile” (Oliver-Powell 2021, 88) lifestyle more poignantly, the short story also points to how Madame benefits from the colonialist, gendered, and racialized division of labor, especially in terms of nursing (Sembène 1962, 165–166). As to the contrast between Madame’s social and spatial mobilities and Diouana’s lack thereof, it is illustrative that Madame finds Diouana’s body when she comes home from a walk (Sembène 1962, 183). Moreover, it is significant that the return of Madame and Monsieur to France is framed within the context of holidaymaking. This framing further underlines the discrepancy between the mobilities of Madame and Diouana, but also recalls the fact that, historically, privileged white travelers were often accompanied by racialized servants, who have been excluded from the category of travelers (Clifford 1997, 33). While Diouana certainly qualifies as a traveler, her mobilities are severely restricted by her position as a racialized migrant domestic laborer. In this sense, her mobilities quite drastically differ from the leisure-related journeys of the African and Afrodiasporic tourists discussed in Chap. 3.

Diouana’s transnational mobilities and her occasional motored mobilities outside the household depend on Monsieur. The latter’s “403” (Peugeot) is the enabler of his own work-related and other mobilities. At the beginning of the short story, when the police come to investigate the crime scene, there is a mention of a garage door (Sembène 1962, 157) and that Monsieur is in Paris (161). In a scene preceding Diouana’s departure from Dakar, Monsieur drives her to her home to fetch her baggage. Monsieur keeps his distance from her relatives. When he loses patience with Diouana’s allegedly time-consuming goodbyes, he does not get out of his car to tell her to hurry but revs up the engine “pour avertir, avec politesse, qu’il avait envie que l’on finisse” (174) [“as a polite way of indicating that he’d had enough and that it was time to go” (93)]. The car, in short, is closely associated with Monsieur, his employment-related mobilities outside the household (in contrast to Madame), his social mobility, as well as with his “racial superiority” to Diouana’s relatives and to Diouana as her *maître* (master).

In Dakar Diouana walks to her workplace: “trois fois par semaine [elle] se tapait ses six kilomètres aller et retour” (162) [“Three times a week Diouana used to trudge the four miles there and back” (87)]. “La route bitumée de l’avenue Gambetta” (163) [“the asphalted Avenue Gambetta” (87)] that she takes can be read as a symbol of colonial modernity. The bitumen road is a mobile infrastructure named after the French statesman Léon Gambetta, who played a role in shaping France’s colonial ambitions during the Third Republic (Ageron 1972, 165). Walking is contrasted with automobility, and the two short scenes of automobility are important for the construction of the plot since they capture Diouana’s expectations of France that are intrinsically connected to the unfulfilled ideal of freedom of movement. In a scene in which Diouana rides in Monsieur’s car prior to boarding the ship, the narrator mentions that “Diouana n’avait pas souvent l’honneur d’être conduite par Monsieur” (170) [“It was not often that Diouana had the honour of being driven by the master” (91)]. However, on the day of her departure she has the “honor” of being a passenger in Monsieur’s 403. The short passage featuring Diouana’s automobile ride from her home to the house of her employers and, finally, to the port conveys her expectant emotional state and a (illusory) sense of freedom of movement. Diouana is so excited about what awaits her in France that during the car-ride she is overwhelmed by “[une] joie tumultueuse” (171) [“bubbling joy” (91)]. The ephemeral experience of “automotive adventure” that enables new experiences and spatial explorations (Mom 2014, 29), however limited in terms of agency from Diouana’s perspective, seems to further enhance her excitement. The narrative suggests that Diouana is amazed at the experience of speed enabled by motorized transport, which is an inherently modern experience (Duffy 2009, 3–4): “Déjà, se dit-elle” (171) [“‘So soon,’ she said to herself” (91–92)] when Monsieur parks the car in front of the house. A similar scene of ephemeral, albeit illusory, automotive freedom and speed features on Diouana’s arrival in Marseille, when Monsieur drives her from the port to Antibes. In the fast-moving 403,

[Diouana] dévorait tout de ses yeux, s’émerveillait, s’étonnait. Elle se meublait l’esprit. C’est beau ! Toute l’Afrique lui apparaissait comme un taudis sordide. Sur la route du littoral, défilaient les villes, les autobus, les trains, les camions. Cette intensité de la circulation la surprenait. (174–175)

Her eyes took everything in and she gazed in wonder and admiration. Her mind became filled with these first impressions. How beautiful it was! Africa now seemed no more than a sordid slum. The coast road led through one town after another, with a stream of buses, cars and lorries in both directions. This dense traffic amazed her. (94)

The generalizing association of Africa with a slum relegates the entire continent to a state of poverty and stagnation, while France is associated with modern modes of transport, speed, and (a desirable form of) urbanism.

These short scenes of automobile freedom and speed correspond to Diouana's expectations of France. However, these expectations are overshadowed from the outset by the fact that Diouana is not the driver but a passenger in Monsieur's car. Furthermore, even this more passive automobile role (Adey et al., 2012 185) is a rare delicacy for her and only accessible due to her subservient position to her *mâtres*. Diouana, in short, is not really an automobile subject—"the double resonance of 'auto'" in automobility referring both to the autonomous subject and to the motorized transport (Urry 2007, 118) is of particular importance here—enjoying alleged freedom of movement but one whose mobilities are orchestrated and controlled by her middle-class white employers. When Diouana's condition deteriorates and her employers start to question whether she is ill, Monsieur suggests taking her to Toulon (Sembène 1962, 183). Seeing car-riding as a remedy for Diouana's predicament is absurd in its irrelevance and reflects Monsieur's lack of understanding of the consequences of her exploitation and experiences of racism.

The relationship of dependency between Diouana and her employers is also emphasized in the scenes in which she boards and disembarks from the ship. She may well travel without her employer but is still "sous [la] surveillance" (168) of another French family returning to France on the same ship ["The Duponts [...] [will] look after you" (90)]. Furthermore, on the quay before boarding, "[elle est] toujours sous la garde de Monsieur" (174) ["Monsieur hovered impatiently in the background" (93)] and, upon arrival, Monsieur is again there. Monsieur also delivers her *carte d'identité* to her and keeps control of her boat ticket (Sembène 1962, 168), which further signals his power as a white, male middle-class colonial employer over her mobility.

PRECARIOUS WORK AND (IM)MOBILITIES

From Student to Laborer: Failing Social Mobility in La Souche calcinée

While discussed here as an example of work-related mobilities, *La Souche calcinée* (2004), by the Ivorian author Denis Oussou-Essui, could also have been included in Chap. 3, which focuses on student mobilities. It is the coming-of-age story of Lagou, a young man who leaves his native village in Ivory Coast to study in France in the 1950s. The narrative line concentrating on student mobility, however, is subordinate to another that depicts the protagonist's experiences in numerous blue-collar jobs (e.g., factory worker; docker; security guard) in France after he has had to abandon his studies due to an incident that has caused that he can no longer pay his tuition fee. The novel opens with a scene depicting Lagou's job-hunting in Paris. As the story unfolds, the reader learns more about his migratory path, first as a student and later as a laborer. This technique conveys his transition from one position to another—a transition that he considers a *faillure*: “Quel déshonneur que de venir en France, de traverser cinq mille kilomètres d'océan pour devenir manœuvre !” (81) [What a disgrace to come to France, to cross five thousand kilometers of sea only to become a laborer!]. In effect, *La Souche* can be seen as a narrative of failed student mobility. As such, it reflects real-world social developments where “modest student jobs (*le petit-boulot étudiant*) have progressively become the marker of the continuing proletarianization and degradation of the condition [of African students] in France” (Ndiaye 2020, 143; my translation). In the context of work, mobility is strongly associated with “the promise of economic and symbolic mobility” (Bastos et al. 2021, 157). In *La Souche*, the association of physical mobility with expectations of social mobility is captured in a scene in which Lagou, along with a group of African students, travels aboard a ship that is about to arrive in Marseille. In a discussion with his traveling companions, Lagou explains the difference between “destination” and “goal” by using examples based on their respective white-collar career dreams:

Nous ne retournons contents, dans sept ou huit années, vers les nôtres que si nous avons pu devenir, toi, Gohi-Bi-Tra, ingénieur des Ponts et Chaussées, toi Tasqué, pharmacien, lui, avocat; Akoua médecin [...] et moi, le professeur de lettres que j'ai toujours rêvé d'être [...]. Autrement dit, le but c'est l'objectif que l'on s'est fixé d'atteindre dans la vie'. (102)

We only return happily to our families after seven or eight years if we have become an engineer from Ponts et Chaussées [school of civil engineers] like you, Gohi-Bi-Tra, or a pharmacist like you, Tasqué, or a lawyer like him; and Akoua, as a doctor, and myself as the literature teacher I've always wanted to be. In other words, the goal is what you set out to achieve in life.

This scene combines physical movement and arrival in France with aspirations of social mobility, supposedly enabled by education. In Lagou's case, however, arrival at the destination has not led to the goal that he had set himself.

Rather than Lagou's glorious return to Ivory Coast with a desired diploma, the novel's opening portrays him waking up early and hurrying through the streets of Paris to buy a newspaper so that he can scan the job announcements. Job-seeking is represented as an activity rhythmized by the sudden alternations of hurry and waiting. To find a job, one has to be quick: hirings take place early in the morning and there is strong competition for any open position. Lagou walks "en pressant le pas" (9) [with a quick pace] to join a long queue of jobseekers also waiting to buy a copy of the newspaper. The image of the queue captures effectively the modern, hypermobile environment in which the protagonist is seeking a job: as a practice, queuing interweaves mobility and waiting, and it is linked to "the increasing mobilization of societies" (Schimkowsky et al. 2025, 1). Once the newspaper has been obtained, the rhythm speeds up again: Lagou "s'engouffra dans le métro le plus proche. Il volait à l'adresse indiquée pour arriver parmi les premiers" (11) [rushed to the nearest metro station. He flew to the address indicated so as to arrive as one of the first]. Clearly, an experienced jobseeker, Lagou has a backup plan and has reserved enough time "pour courir partout" (12) [to run everywhere] in case the first hiring event is unsuccessful. Reaching the place where the hiring is going on is depicted with the aid of imagery that emphasizes the sense of hurry: not only "le train fonçait à une allure folle dans les ténèbres du tunnel" [does the train speed at breakneck speed through the darkness of the tunnel] but the protagonist also "se vit sauter du train à peine arrêté et filer à toutes jambes à l'adresse" (12) [sees himself jumping off the train when it has hardly stopped and racing to the address]. Hurry is inseparable from modernity; it is impossible to "conceive of modern society and modern capitalism without invoking [...] the desire for speeding-up, the fears and anxieties associated with acceleration, and the physical, psychological, and emotional consequences of hurry"

(Dennis et al. 2018, 2). The speed that job-hunting necessitates is facilitated by the capacity to navigate the city through mobility, that is, by possessing “a system of knowledge and skills [...] in order to use the urban space” (Buhr 2018, 308). Lagou has acquired this necessary know-how through his experience of having “sillonné [Paris] maintes fois” (12) [crisscrossed Paris many times].

His job-hunting consists of several “stages” (12), the final one of which entails joining a group of nervous jobseekers in a waiting room (13). It turns out that Lagou’s efforts do not pay off: after some standing in line, the hiring team no longer accepts any more applicants and so Lagou has to prepare himself for another round of hectic job-seeking later. He is “soucieux d’avoir fait des kilomètres pour rien” (18) [worried about having traveled several kilometers for nothing]. Waiting, in this situation, is associated with negative meanings; it is a waste of time and renders visible the power structures that relate to governing time (Singer et al. 2019, 5). By representing Lagou’s job-search as an inherently mobile, embodied exercise that is marked, on the one hand, by the tension between hurrying and waiting, and by circularity, repetitiveness, and futility on the other, the narration inscribes pursuit in the realm of precarity. The haste that informs Lagou’s job-hunting mobilities challenges stereotypical images of unemployed “loiterers”, as embodied in the figure of the hustler typical of African urban landscapes (Quayson 2014, 199), but also one that can be found in Francophone African migration narratives. Cases in point include the protagonist in Léandre-Alain Baker’s *Ici s’achève le voyage* (1989), who pretends to be a jobseeker in order to be able to continue living on social benefits and Moïse’s carefree urban wandering prior to his employment in art-dealing in Njami’s *African gigolo* (1989) (see Chap. 3).

Being employed does not much change the precarious, exhausting rhythms of Lagou’s job-hunting. In a job interview he is asked where he has worked previously, and he lists cities across northern France and the job titles that he has had (52). The list captures geographical mobility but is much less a story of social mobility. While the novel is set in the 1950s and 1960s, that is, before more recent developments characterized by the racialization of the division of labor and the use of migrant laborers as a replaceable work force reserve (Bauder 2006, 5–6), it attests to the precarity of work, at least for migrants in blue-collar jobs. Indeed, *La Souche* depicts a France where the division of labor is not yet as pronouncedly racialized as in the 2000s, nor as it is portrayed in Gauz’s *Debout-payé*,

which I discuss in the next section. Lagou's colleagues at ports and in factories are predominantly white, as is suggested by recurrent allusions to incidents where his skin color makes him a curiosity in the eyes of his co-workers. His capacity to do the work is also questioned on the same basis.

The job interview leads to Lagou's hiring to work in a pasta factory. The factory work is characterized by the repetitive, circular rhythms of commuting, a performance of "regulated synchronicity" (Edensor 2013, 195): at the end of the day, Lagou finds himself to be part of "la cohue de la foule des travailleurs qui se pressaient aux stations de métro" (60) [the hustle and bustle of the crowd of workers who have rushed to the metro stations]. In the morning, he makes sure to be on time. Being late for work "aurait été comme manquer un départ, rater son avion ou son train et se retrouver ensuite à errer dans une ville étrangère sans un sou en poche" (83) [would have been similar to missing a departure, your plane or train, and to find yourself wandering in an unfamiliar city with no money]. Associating being late for work with missing a mode of transport on an important journey and being disoriented in an unfamiliar city suggests that, for Lagou, having a job means moving forward and gaining a sense of mastering his situation. Simultaneously, he is aware of the precarity of his situation as a low-salaried factory laborer. He worries about whether "cet argent qu'il allait gagner suffirait à pourvoir à ses besoins" [the money he was going to earn would be enough to meet his needs] and after making some calculations he comes to the conclusion that "non, on ne va pas bien loin avec ça!" (60) [no, we're not getting very far with this!].

Lagou's work in the pasta factory includes making deliveries in Paris—a category of *mobile work*, as defined by Gregson (2023, 892). The delivery work is characterized by fast-paced driving so that he can stick to schedule. These hectic rhythms are punctuated by pauses imposed by traffic congestions, during which Lagou's Sicilian colleague talks about his situation as a paperless migrant, causing the pauses to become moments of sharing precarious experiences of work and migration. The text underlines the physical toll of a day of deliveries in Paris:

À la fin de la journée, Lagou avait sillonné Paris, latéralement, verticalement. Il avait pénétré dans des restaurants, dans des bars; il avait troublé les repas des concierges des cantines d'employés; il était descendu dans des caves obscures aux méandres compliqués; il s'était glissé dans les boyaux de Paris pour livrer ses pâtes. Ses oreilles bourdonnaient des grondements des poids-

lourds, des vociférations intempestives des hommes d'affaires, des remarques désagréables des clients. Ses jambes portaient des kilomètres de parcours et dans son corps, son sang n'était plus que du plomb fondu. (94–5)

By the end of the day, Lagou had crisscrossed Paris laterally and vertically. He had entered restaurants and bars; he had disrupted the meals of managers in staff canteens; he had descended into dark cellars with complicated rambling passageways; he had slipped into the bowels of Paris to deliver his pasta. His ears were ringing with the rumble of trucks, the unwelcome yelling of businessmen, the unpleasant remarks of customers. His legs bore the weight of the kilometers and in his body his blood was nothing more than molten lead.

Lagou's mobile work may have taught him to thoroughly master the metropolitan space but it also wears him out physically and mentally: "une telle vie détraque l'homme" (97) [a life like this throws a man off balance]. Related to this, the novel features a nocturnal scene in which Lagou suddenly wakes up with a knife in his hand, about to cut his arm as if it was the pasta that he cuts in the factory. In her discussion of literary texts depicting labor migration, Nandita Ghosh writes about how "migrants get consumed and erased while producing value through their labor" (2012, 36). The scene in *La Souche* locates this erasure and consumption literally in the realm of the body of the African laborer. This experience causes Lagou to ask himself, "Qu'ai-je fait depuis dix ans en Europe? Qu'ai-je fait dans ma vie?" (98) [What have I done in Europe over the past ten years? What have I done in my life?]. In terms of plot structure, the incident opens up a retrospective narrative path that traces his trajectory both to and within France, starting with his boarding the ship on its way to Marseille in the early 1950s. By linking Lagou's hectic experience of delivering pasta in Paris with his boarding the ship several years previously, the narration contrasts his current predicament with his optimistic, future-oriented migratory quest toward France as a young student.

*Precarious Employment-Related (Im)mobilities in the Era
of Neoliberal Capitalism: Debout-payé*

Focusing on a specific occupational group—that of the security guard—*Debout-payé* (2014) (*Standing Heavy*, 2022), by the Ivorian author Gauz, has been characterized as a satire (Alix 2019) and a picaresque (Niemi 2024). It scrutinizes the absurdities of working life in the context of

globalization and consumer culture viewed from the perspective of racialized (undocumented) migrant workers in Paris. It is a fictional text based on the author's own experiences as a security guard in Paris, making it a typical example of *littérature du travail* (literature about work) (Beinstingel 2018, 328). In the words of the narrator, the title of the book refers to “l'ensemble des métiers où il faut rester debout pour gagner sa pitance” (33) [“all the various professions that require the employee to remain standing in order to earn a pittance” (22)].

Much as in *La Souche calcinée*, *Debout-payé* captures the tensioned metropolitan (im)mobilities of unemployed African migrants or migrants working in menial jobs. While *La Souche* traces the transformation of an African student into becoming a laborer struggling with unemployment at the level of an individual character, *Debout-payé* proposes a wider picture of developments ranging from the golden age following World War II—in France, a period known as *Les Trente Glorieuses*, The Glorious Thirty—to the current precarization, where “workers can only look back jealously on post-war levels of employment, wage increases and social mobility” (Connell 2017, 3). The precarization also relates to migration through the migrant division of labor, which characterizes post-industrial economies and has resulted in the relegation of migrants to “hazardous and low-skilled jobs” (Rodriguez and Mearns 2012, 584). *Debout-payé* entwines different scales of (un)employment-related mobilities and immobilities, including patterns of transnational labor migration and individual experiences thereof; everyday (im)mobilities related to commuting, job-hunting, and unemployment; and the embodied micro-mobilities or immobilities while doing one's job. In addition to these tangible (im) mobilities, the symbolic dimension of social mobility is important.

In terms of the relationship between social mobility and mobilities related to job-seeking, the opening of *Debout-payé* is particularly interesting. It evokes the opening of *La Souche*: a hiring event for security guards. The opening sentence reads: “La longue file d'hommes noirs qui montent dans ces escaliers étroits ressemble à une cordée inédite à l'assaut du K2, le redoutable sommet de la chaîne himalayenne” (11) [“The Black men mounting the narrow staircase look like climbers roped together for an assault on K2, the most fearsome peak in the Himalayas” (1)]. While there is a tongue-in-cheek list that produces a more nuanced picture of different nationalities based on clothing styles and accents (Gauz 2014, 12), the homogenous and endless queue of “hommes noirs” is telling of the

intersection of race, gender, and labor in postcolonial France. First, “la cordée noire” (13) [“the Black procession” (3)] of nameless and faceless male candidates ironizes the racialized character of the profession, constructed on colonialist “clichés du bon sauvage” (14) [“this jumble of ‘noble savage’ clichés” (3)] of Black men having “le profil morphologique [...] prétendument adéquat” (14) [“the morphological profile [...] supposedly adequate” (3)] for the job. Second, the anonymous “cordée noire” captures the replaceability of the worker in the eyes of the employer and, in so doing, conveys the precarity of the position. Third, by means of the line of Black men the scene also generates a transhistorical parallel,⁷ evoking an image of enslaved Africans walking in a line toward the slave port—a scene that also features in N’Sondé’s novel and was discussed earlier. Mobility in the opening scene of Gauz’s novel has both material and symbolic meanings: climbing the stairs to the waiting room on the sixth floor before being invited into the interview room is not only a demanding physical exercise, as suggested by the allusion to the Himalayas and how “la cordée s’étire avec les étages et la fatigue” (11) [“with each floor, the weary mountaineers become more spaced out” (1)] but it also symbolizes the potential of social mobility. Indeed, as the narrator puts it, “Entrés chômeurs dans ces bureaux, tous ressortiront vigiles” (15) [“Every man who came into these offices unemployed leaves as a security guard” (4)]. The image of climbing up to a mountain peak, however, throws a shadow of doubt on the aspirations of social mobility that the candidates may have. This effect is further supported by the slavery parallel.

The innovative form of *Debout-payé* consists of a cross-exposure of two sets of chapters. Their alternation conveys the relationality and transtemporality of mobilities in literary form or, as Ruth Bush describes it, it “bridges the experience of an African student ‘elite’ to the precarity of the *sans-papiers*” (2022, 110). One set of chapters, “third-person generational sagas” (Fronsman-Cecil 2019, 80), articulate a wider historical context of African (labor) migration in France through the perspectives of Ivorian characters that are initially students and later paperless migrants. These

⁷The slavery parallel is also activated later when the narrator comments on brand names or names given to specific items. Discussing the naming of white linen trousers as “Martinique”, the narrator associates the garment with the clothing worn by white slave-owners on the plantations (Gauz 2014, 44), and when the security guard narrator sees a Black client wearing a bag of the brand Comptoir des Cotonniers, he states that, in other times, the man in question would have been an “Uncle Tom” (95).

chapters map out socio-political developments from the era of decolonization to the post-independence migratory movements, and finally, to neoliberal globalization. The other category of chapters features trenchant observations made by African security guards working in the clothing and cosmetic chain stores, Camaïeu and Sephora.

The first two contextualizing chapters are set in 1960–1980 and 1990–2000 and are entitled “L’âge de bronze” (“The Bronze Age”) and “L’âge d’or” (“The Golden Age”), respectively. The third contextualizing chapter does not mention a time span, but it is set in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 and is simply entitled “L’âge de plomb” (“The Age of Lead”). The second and third contextualizing chapters focus on the young Ivorians Ossiri and Kassoum, whose experiences as safety guards are reflected in the humoristic, pseudo-ethnographical observations in the other set of chapters.⁸ A central location in the contextualizing chapters is the MECI (*Maison des étudiants de Côte-d’Ivoire*; “Residence of Students from Côte d’Ivoire”, RSCI).⁹ Initially, it has accommodated students but, reflecting the changes in the work market and immigration policies over the decades, the composition of the type of inhabitants of MECI changes so that “il y avait de plus en plus d’illégitimes” (61) [“there were more and more ‘illegals’” (49)] and “de moins en moins de ‘vrais’ étudiants” (61) [“fewer and fewer ‘real’ students” (49)]. In similar vein, the deindustrialization starting from the 1970s is illustrated by the presence of Les Grands Moulins de Paris (Great Mills of Paris) in the narrative. While earlier generations of security guards have worked there together with white factory laborers, as the years have gone by the security guards have ended up guarding the abandoned buildings of the no longer operational mills. Les Grands Moulins de Paris is also a significant setting in the sense that they “process[ed] wheat grown under French neocolonial

⁸The narrator in these chapters is, however, never explicitly identified as Ossiri or Kassoum. By making the reader unable to identify the narrator as one of these characters, the narrative achieves two effects. First, it enables the text to strive for a sort of “generalized knowledge” (Alix 2019, n.p.) that ironizes customer behavior in the consumer culture typical of neoliberal globalization (Fronsman-Cecil 2019, 82); and second, the anonymization formally reproduces the idea of the replaceability of the “low-skilled” workforce: similar observations could be made by anyone, not specifically by Ossiri or Kassoum.

⁹Generations of African students from the 1950s onward have often lived in such dormitories designated for students from the colonies (*foyers d’étudiants des colonies*), places that became sites of student activism (Germain 2016, 2), as also attested in Gauz’s novel.

agricultural policy in West Africa” (Bush 2023, 109)—a detail that underlines the historical connections between France and its former African colonies through the mobilities of goods.

The chapters focusing on the work of the security guard adopt a humorous, cutting tone in their observations that reflect consumer behavior in neoliberal capitalism. The chapters take the form of aphorisms with sub-headings that come across as pseudo-scientific (e.g., “*Theorie du désir capillaire*” (32) [“THE THEORY OF HAIR ENVY” (20)]), which adds to the text’s satiric qualities (Alix 2019, n.p.). Linking the observations of the security guard to the similar activity of the *flâneur*, Bush argues that “the fragmentary structure of these chapters is indicative of the unstable, momentary temporality of urban life, as well as the attempt to observe, understand, and record shopping as a quintessential urban leisure activity” (2023, 107). Indeed, these aphoristic observations are a key element in the novel’s engagement with mobility in literary form, that is, its poetics of work-related mobilities. The swift movements from one observation to another capture the vigilance of the security guard’s gaze, highlighting the performative dimension of literature that captures how “the world changes according to the speed and modality of the movement of the eye that narrates it and makes it exist” (Frenay et al. 2019, 12–13; my translation). Moreover, the focus on the actions of the customers highlights the guard’s relatively immobile position near the exit of the store. This position of immobility, however, entails motility or the potential to move (Leivestad 2016, 133–134) if shoplifting eventually occurs. The tensioned relationship between the security guard’s immobility/motility and the customers’ movements to, from, and inside the store is conveyed through a football metaphor: “Être vigile, c’est comme être gardien de but: on reste debout à regarder jouer les autres, et, de temps en temps, on plonge pour attraper la balle” (33–34) [“Being a security guard is like being a goalie; you stand there watching everyone else play, and, once in a while, you dive to catch the ball” (22)].

Toward the end of the novel there is a scene in which the latent mobility of the security guard materializes as he engages in pursuit of a shoplifter. However, since “les longues heures de station debout raidissent les articulations” (165) [“the long hours spent standing have left his joints stiff” (136)], “[le] départ [du vigile] est pataud” (165) [“he gets off to a bad start” (136)]. The guard runs after the thief but when the stoplights

force him to stop, he starts to question the meaning of the pursuit. His reflections first relate to questions of personal safety but then move on to articulating a critique of neoliberal capitalism and what is meaningful work:

Quel genre de devoir remplit-on à poursuivre de la sorte un voleur de parfum ? Quelle idée de courir après quelqu'un qui a volé dans la boutique de Bernard [Arnault, CEO and owner of the world's largest luxury group LVMH], première fortune de France, une babiole ridicule produite par Liliane [Bettencourt, board member and one of the principal shareholders of the cosmetics company L'Oréal], septième fortune de France? Un tel zèle, un tel manque de recul et de lucidité! (166)

What great moral imperative is satisfied by pursuing a perfume thief? How absurd is it to hunt down a man who has stolen from Bernard, the richest person in France, a frivolous frippery made by Liliane, the seventh richest? What zeal! What a preposterous lack of objectivity and judgement! (137)

Here, in a very tangible, embodied way, the text articulates the capitalist logics according to which “labour dances to the tune of, and moves to, sites of capital accumulation” (Gregson 2023, 889). The narrator’s realization of their own enabling role in the system also suggests that while for previous generations a position as a security guard may have been “un bon job” (75) [“a good job” (60)], in the contemporary world it might well be closer to what David Graeber has referred to as meaningless “bullshit jobs” (2018, 3).

In addition to wider patterns of labor migration and embodied micro-mobilities/immobilities in the workplace, *Debout-payé* also portrays work-related mobilities in the urban space. The text depicts Ossiri’s daily commute by bicycle to his workplace at Camaïeu in rue du Faubourg-Saint-Antoine. The passage features street names and points of reference that trace Ossiri’s trajectory and his smooth navigation suggests that he is at home in the city. On his way to work he stops at the Monoprix supermarket, where Tantie Odette, an Ivorian woman near retirement, has worked for 28 years as cashier before being promoted to department manager two years previously. The narrator attributes the slow-paced social mobility to racial discrimination: “vingt-huit ans pour se lever de la chaise de la caisse... Promotion à vitesse mélaninée ?” (23) [“it took twenty-eight years before she was allowed to emerge from behind the checkout

counter... Was this fast-track promotion at the speed of melanin?" (11–12)]. For Ossiri, stopping off at Monoprix to see Tantie Odette, a friend of his mother, has become a ritual (Gauz 2014, 24) that links him not only with the Ivorian community in Paris but also with his family and the Ivory Coast through the news “from home” that Odette shares with him. The visit to Monoprix widens the immediate here-and-now of the daily commute and ties it to other places (Ivory Coast) and times (previous generations’ migrations). When Ossiri arrives at his workplace, he attaches his bicycle to a sign forbidding parking (probably of cars) as a manifestation of his creatively rebellious attitude. Riding a bicycle instead of a car also differentiates him from the representatives of previous generations such as Ferdinand, the owner of his own security firm, whose social mobility is rendered through allusions to his Peugeot 205 GDR (Gauz 2014, 130).

Ossiri’s daily commute is a transtemporal experience also in the sense that it reminds him of his earlier strolls with Kassoum in the 11th arrondissement (Gauz 2014, 17), which represented a systematic exercise aimed at mastering the city through mobility practices (see Buhr 2018). These urban strolls, which included diverse activities free of charge, read as Ossiri’s and Kassoum’s claims of freedom in the “commodified urban space of Paris” (Fronsman-Cecil 2019, 79). These past urban mobilities, explicitly linked to Ossiri’s commutes in the narrative present, are particularly significant from the perspective of the precarious position of undocumented migrants. When the aftermath of 9/11 makes the employment situation for African migrants in the security sector difficult, the inhabitants of MECI end up in an apathetic state of stagnation:

Comme dans tous les ghettos du monde, les Méciens bougeaient peu. Ils restaient chez eux, enfermés dans la cale de leur propre misère, incapables d’une simple balade à l’air libre sur le pont de leur galère. Aucun mur, aucun geôlier ne les retenait physiquement. La place d’Italie et ses nombreux cafés étaient à deux minutes de marche, la Butte-aux-Cailles et ses bars branchés à cinq minutes. Les jardins de Bercy étaient à trois stations de métro. (187)

As in every ghetto in the world, the inhabitants of RSCI rarely moved around. They kept to themselves, holed up in their misery, unable even to take a stroll in the fresh on the deck of their prison ship. There were no walls, no jailer to physically imprison them. The cafés on the place d’Italie were a two-minute walk away, the trendy bars of the Butte-aux-Cailles only five minutes’. The gardens of Bercy were three métro stops. (153)

This limited horizon generated by immobility is connected to the alienation that unemployment reinforces in those already pushed to the margins of society.

The precarity of being an undocumented migrant further contributes to barriers to physical and social mobility, as is demonstrated by the description of Ossiri's arrival in France. He lives in a dormitory suburb inhabited by unemployed persons and laborers whose mobilities are limited to "tourn[er] en rond autour de deux points névralgiques: la gare RER et le grand café-bar-tabac-PMU" (128) ["circl[ing] between two nerve centers: the RER train station and the café-cum-bar-cum-tobacconist-cum-betting office" (105)]. While the unemployed Ossiri goes for walks to familiarize himself with his new environment, he avoids taking the RER because of his fear of deportation: the Parisian public transport system is seen as "une vaste toile d'araignée optimisée pour piéger les 'sans-papiers'" (127) ["a vast spider's web designed to catch undocumented immigrants" (104)]. In his increasing predicament of no employment or money, Ossiri spends time standing on a bridge, observing RER trains heading for Paris. Eventually, he decides to contact and meet Ferdinand, his mother's acquaintance from her Paris years. "Le voyage jusqu'à Chaville fut l'un des plus anxiogènes de sa vie" (129) ["The Journey to Chaville was one of the most stressful he had ever experienced" (105)], describes the narrator. By taking the risk of traveling without a ticket, Ossiri's situation changes when Ferdinand hires him as a security guard in his company. In so doing, the narrative links physical mobility, work, and the promise of social mobility—a combination that allows Ossiri to move away from the stagnant *banlieue*. Generational differences and changes in society over the 40 years of African migrations are again illuminated when a comparison is made of Ossiri's fear of public transport and that of Ferdinand some decades previously. While Ossiri's avoidance of public transport is linked to his deportability (De Genova 2002), Ferdinand's fear of the Metro originates from the clash of metropolitan "modernity" with a local Ivorian belief system: "Dans son village, les seuls hommes qui partaient sous terre étaient les morts et les mauvais esprits" (60–61) ["In his village, only dead men and evil spirits dwelled underground" (48)]. Illustrative of the societal developments mapped out by the novel, Ferdinand's attitude toward the Metro evokes those of the student newcomers (Chap. 2), while Ossiri's fear resonates with those of other *sans-papiers* (Chap. 6).

CONCLUSION

Covering work-related AfroEuropean mobilities from the time of the transatlantic slave trade to the era of colonization and contemporary neoliberal globalization, the texts analyzed draw attention to the relational aspects of being on the move and immobile. A mobilities perspective on work enables a holistic and relational understanding that moves beyond a more conventional focus on labor migration as an outcome of mobility. A mobilities perspective allows for an analysis of the genuinely kinetic dimensions of work/labor in the form of the labor migration journey, mobilities to the workplace, mobilities related to job-seeking, and the embodied, physical movements while at work. As my analysis of N'Sondé's, Dongala's, Sembène's, Oussou-Essui's, and Gauz's texts demonstrates, these diverse work-related mobilities are inseparable from immobility, in addition to which they also relate to other categories of mobilities. This relationality is also manifested in the literary form of many of the texts.

Despite the central characters' attempts to ignore the mobilities related to the slave trade, the privileged historical AfroEuropean mobilities in N'Sondé's and Dongala's novels are constantly juxtaposed with the coerced (im)mobilities of the Middle Passage, forming a key element of their poetics of mobility. While these novels convey the "exceptionality" of the protagonists as privileged Black mobile subjects, they simultaneously represent this position as fragile and fraught with ambivalence. Both novels signal the importance of the history of slavery to contemporary Europe by establishing parallels between past and contemporary mobilities and by bringing the history of slavery to Europe. They refer to existing portrayals of their respective key characters—a bust of Nsaku Ne Vunda in Rome and a drawing featuring the young George Bridgetower in the collections of the British Museum. N'Sondé and Dongala shed light on the presence in Europe of these figures, now immobilized in artworks, thus reminding readers of their personal professional mobilities but also, indirectly, of the transatlantic mobilities of coerced labor that have shaped today's Europe.

"La Noire de..." by Sembène links the employment-related mobilities of the protagonist to the Middle Passage. Its representations of automobility associate modern, motorized modes of transportation with the freedom of movement. These moments of illusory freedom are enabled by

Diouana's subordinate position vis-à-vis her employers as an uneducated, Black female domestic worker. Her life in Antibes in France is increasingly characterized by immobility—a condition that both causes and results from her distress, and one that facilitates the social and spatial mobilities of Madame. The setting in the French Riviera highlights the contrast between Diouana's (im)mobilities and the carefree leisure mobilities of French holidaymakers.

If, in addition to racialization and gendering, the (im)mobilities of Sembène's Diouana are dictated by her lack of formal education, *La Souche calcinée* draws attention to a transition away from future-oriented, optimistic student mobilities and toward the wearing, work-related mobilities of migrants either doing or hunting for menial jobs. The transition from one category of mobile subjectivity to another is described as a failure of social mobility. Oussou-Essui's protagonist's work-related mobilities include job-seeking, characterized by the alternation of the uneven rhythms of hurrying and waiting. This is illustrative of precarity and points to the similarities of the mobilities of the migrant *chômeur* (the unemployed) and that of the *sans-papiers* (Chap. 6). The line between these two categories becomes further blurred in *Debout-payé*. With its formal innovation, this novel is interesting in its rendering of the poetics of mobility. Through the alternation of the contextualizing chapters and the aphoristic observations of an unnamed security guard, the narration conveys relational mobilities. The aphoristic observations also capture the vigilance of the gaze of the security guard while simultaneously pointing to his immobile—although latently mobile—position as an observer. The representations of embodied, work-related mobilities in all of the texts are firmly rooted in the times or the aftermath of colonialism and slavery. In so doing, they attest to the violent intertwinement of mobilities and labor in African, Afrodiasporic, and Afro-European contexts.

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Clandestine Afroeuropean Itineraries

MIGRANTS ON PRECARIOUS JOURNEYS

This chapter concentrates on the Afroeuropean mobilities of clandestine migrants. While “representational anxiety” may have meant that precarious migrants have started to feature in narrative fiction only relatively recently (Woolley 2014, 21), the urgency of the so-called migration crisis has contributed to a heightened awareness of the topic in Francophone African and Afrodiasporic literatures. The past ten-fifteen years have seen an increase in the number of works engaging with the cross-desert and maritime journeys of African migrants. Many of these texts could be seen as forming a mobility-focused sub-genre of the migration novel, as fictionalized travelogues of undocumented travel, or even as postcolonial variations of the road novel.

Migration has constituted a key theme in postcolonial literary studies, and coerced migration has also received critical attention in the field (e.g., Boletsi et al. 2020; Woolley 2014; Cox et al. 2020). The *kinetic* aspects of narratives of undocumented migration, however, have been less frequently investigated (for exceptions, see, e.g., Bastida-Rodríguez 2014; Mazauric 2016; Rosello 2016; Toivanen 2016; Palladino 2018; Lagji 2019; Bromley 2021; Lewis 2022). This relative neglect is no doubt partly due to the slowness of literary scholars to “hop on the mobilities bus” (Pearce 2020). Instead of the mobilities perspective, narratives of migration tend to be analyzed through the lenses of migration studies, where the focus is on

push-and-pull factors and dilemmas related to settlement rather than on mobility itself (Schapendonk and Steel 2014, 262; Hui 2016, 75). As Allison Hui argues, migration studies is marked by “migrant exceptionalism”, namely, “the assumption that migrants are extraordinary mobile subjects, discrete from other (concurrent) subject positions” (2016, 75). Thus, the relational and systemic qualities of mobilities have been overshadowed in migration studies. Migrant exceptionalism also concerns mobility studies, where discussions of specific mobility practices tend to be treated separately from migration (Hui 2016, 76). In consequence, Hui calls for approaches that take into consideration “the multiple roles and experiences of diverse and unequally privileged people” (2016, 76). In addition to promoting a holistic and relational understanding of mobilities, one of the strengths of the mobility studies perspective on migration is that it moves beyond a sedentarism by addressing “a broader canvas across space and time that disrupts the focus on the nation-state as the site for research on migrants and migration” (Harney 2024, 18).

Stating that “the journey is at least as important as the destination or place of origin”, Gijs Mom and Georgine Larsen call for “ways to bring migration and refugee studies into closer conversation with critical mobility studies” (2016, 2). In effect, the growing interest in mobilities research has led migration studies scholars to explore the kinetic aspects of migration. In his discussion of “viapolitics”, William Walters calls for more attention to be paid to the materialities of migration mobilities—namely, the “vehicles, roads and routes” of migration (2014, 469). In this context, attention has been accorded to the migration journey (Schapendonk 2012, 2013; Bridgen and Mainwaring 2016), attesting to the effects of mobility regimes on underprivileged mobile subjects and their stepwise journeys (Schapendonk 2013, 11). The focus on the migration journey—its routes, rhythms of mobility, and modes of transports—is one way to foreground the kinetic aspects of migration. More recently, scholars have started to highlight the necessity to consider the migration journey as part of a wider continuum consisting of pre-departure and post-arrival mobilities (Schapendonk et al. 2021). In this respect, migrants’ displacements in the “destination” have been studied in urban contexts (Baligand 2015; Filipo 2020; Ruszczuk 2023). Such approaches “de-exceptionalize” the migration journey and allow for a wholesale understanding of the mobilities of migration, which of course do not stop on arrival at a destination (Schapendonk et al. 2021, 3245–3246). In line with these developments,

my readings are informed by the necessity to foreground the mobile aspects of migration and to highlight the continuum of migration mobilities beyond the migration journey.

The precarity of migration mobilities is reflected in their unpredictable rhythms, which typically oscillate between sudden haste and stagnation (Hyndman and Giles 2011; Griffiths et al. 2013; Bridgen and Mainwaring 2016). The routes of undocumented migrants from Africa to Europe are fragmented, and the destination may change in the course of the journey (Collyer 2007, 668; Schapendonk 2017, 212). The journeys entail life-threatening elements such as crossings of deserts and the sea (Bridgen and Mainwaring 2016, 420–421) and reliance on smugglers (Brachet 2018). The travelers' status necessitates cautiousness and “concealment strategies” to avoid the risk of arrestation and deportation (Bridgen and Mainwaring 2016, 416). For passengers without passports, visas, or money the experience of travel is quite different from that of travelers who undertake their journeys with sufficient financial means and the required travel documents (Bromley 2021, 11–12). This also applies to the choice of modes of transport: highly controlled modes such as air travel are not legally available for undocumented migrants—except in the case of deportation (Bromley 2021, 11). In European cities, undocumented migrants tend to avoid driving and prefer public transport due to the greater risks of deportation linked to the use of private transportation (Ruszczuk 2023, 54).

In addition to the characteristic precarity of mobility practices in narratives of clandestine migration, this category of mobility shapes the landscapes of Afroeuropa. While texts set in metropolitan centers remain linked to the urban sphere despite their peri-urban or suburban settings, narratives of migration journeys shift the perspective not only to peripheral places in the maritime fringes of Europe but also further to the African continent. The prominence of insular settings such as the Canary Islands or Lampedusa in literary texts reflects the routes of undocumented migration. Similarly, a growing body of texts concentrates on *non-arrivals* in which Europe remains out of reach; narratives of such aborted journeys are typically set in North Africa. In this sense, some of the texts discussed in this chapter seem to move beyond a strictly *Afroeuropa* setting. This said, it should be underlined that the geographic boundaries between Africa and Europe are not always very clear: the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in Morocco are instances of “Africa *in* Europe and Europe *in*

Africa” (Thomas 2013, 163; original emphasis). Moreover, Europe is very much present as a future destination and as an object of imaginary travel. Given the circular character of clandestine migratory mobilities, the direction of travel may also change from Africa to Europe and then back to Africa. This is the case of returns—either voluntary or coerced. In narratives of deportation, Europe often keeps its grip on the repatriated migrant who may want to leave again or whose life “back home” is constantly compared with their experiences in Europe. Here again, the Afro-European aspect remains relevant.

I discuss Afro-European clandestine migratory mobilities from three different perspectives in three sections. The first section focuses on the transnational journeys of migrants on their way from the African continent and toward Europe. In these narratives, the travelers do not necessarily reach Europe but remain stuck on in North Africa. The second part moves from the desert and maritime routes to urban mobilities in European cities, and the third part analyzes representations of deportation air travel. This theme recurs in several Francophone African migration novels from the 1990s and it reveals an alternative view of the diasporic returns discussed in Chap. 4, namely, that of coerced homecomings.

ON THE ROAD TOWARD EUROPE

This part discusses three texts focusing on the migration journey across the African continent toward European insular and coastal peripheries. *Odyssée des oubliés* [Odyssey of the forgotten], by Khalil Diallo, is mostly set on the road. The narrative describes the protagonist’s and his fellow travelers’ journey through the desert toward the Mediterranean shores. Aminata Pagni’s *Impossible de rester* [Impossible to stay] focuses on the protagonist’s five-year transit in Morocco; the novel foregrounds this prolonged transit and the importance of North Africa as a setting. Marc Alexandre Oho Bambe’s *Les Lumières d’Oujda* [The lights of Oujda], which has been defined as a slam novel (Bertho 2021, 25), similarly refers to North African transit points on the Afro-European migratory route. The narrative is circular, attesting to the constant departures and (involuntary) returns of clandestine “adventurers” (Mazauric 2016). The narration is neither chronological nor plot-driven and is structured around different places on the migratory route. Postcolonial scholars have seen the Mediterranean as a space of both contact and bordering (Chambers 2008; Thomas 2013, 159–168; Lalagianni and Moura 2014), and since 2015 it

has become *the* site of “the migrant crisis” (Boletsi et al. 2020). While the sea-crossing features in all of the three novels as the final leg of the odyssey, the texts also draw attention to other key sites of the “crisis”—North African border towns and littoral cities as well as the Sahara. This strategy emphasizes the twofold passage that comprises both the Mediterranean *and* the Sahara (Di Maio 2013, 45).

A Precarious Odyssey by Diallo

With most of its events set “on the road”, *L’Odyssée des oubliés* by the Senegalese author Khalil Diallo is structured around the migratory journey. The opening explains the reasons that drive the protagonist Semboyane from his native Forédougou, an imaginary country situated between Senegal and Guinea, to the clandestine routes toward Europe. After this prelude, Semboyane and his friend Idy are on the road. Together with the motif of the journeying, the novel’s chronological structure, captured in the concept of the road (Gumbrecht 2006, 613), conveys the idea of movement toward a desired destination. This said, the journey entails detours and is punctuated by pauses.

L’Odyssée lends itself well to a reading focusing on the role of the modes of transport in narratives of clandestine migration mobilities. The first leg of the journey is by lorry, where the travelers hide under a mound of domestic waste to cross the border. This mode of travel is typical of the mobilities of undocumented migrants, who frequently resort to concealment strategies that entail temporary immobility and loss of control over their bodies (Bridgen and Mainwaring 2016, 416). Through the association of the travelers with garbage the text conveys the idea of undocumented migrants as “wasted lives”—the unavoidable side-effects of modernity (Bauman 2004, 5), who are “out of place everywhere except in places that are themselves out of place”, such as refugee camps (80). Their first stop is a landfill in Kédougou in Senegal—the crossing of the border quite literally turns the travelers into human waste. This attests to the transformative effects of border-crossings, resonating with Chiara Brambilla’s conceptualization of borders not only as “*markers of belonging*” but also as “*places of becoming*” (2015, 24; original emphasis). The journey across the border contributes to the production of the undocumented migrant; a global-era version of the figure of the vagrant whose poverty and “irregular and unpredictable” mobilities lead to their relegation to the margins of society (Cresswell 2013, 245; 250–251).

From Kédougou the journey continues toward Mali. While this time it is question of (informal) public transport and not of a van transporting waste, the condition of the vehicle captures the precarity of the pursuit:

L'intérieur est dégarni. Devant le chauffeur, rien qu'un volant à la tige entourée de fils recouverts de ruban adhésif. Il n'y pas de tableau de bord: après tout, la voiture n'atteindra presque jamais les cinquante kilomètres à l'heure ! Le rétroviseur interne devait certainement altérer la vue du chauffeur, vu la façon dont il a été arraché. Le plancher, sans doute pour pallier l'absence d'aération du véhicule est ouvert par endroits, et on peut même estimer à partir de là notre vitesse de croisière. (43)

The interior is bare. In front of the driver there's nothing but a steering wheel with a stalk surrounded by tape-covered wires. There's no dashboard: after all, the car will hardly ever reach fifty kilometers an hour! The internal rear-view mirror must certainly have impaired the driver's view, given the way it has been ripped off. The floor, no doubt to compensate for the vehicle's lack of ventilation, is open in places, and we can even estimate our cruising speed from there.¹

The text also describes the poor condition of the roads. A reference to “ces routes craquelées” (34) [these cracked roads] not only stands for the hardships of the clandestine journey but also attests to the “infrastructural impossibility” of automobility in many parts of postcolonial Africa (Savonick 2015, 670). Nevertheless, the vehicles and the road infrastructure enable the travelers to pursue their journey, albeit at a frustratingly slow pace. *L'Odyssee* could be read as an adaptation of the road novel that moves away from conventional associations of driving and the road with freedom and autonomy toward a more precarious and tensioned understanding of automobility in the context of migration (see Stork 2021, 20). The automobile subject in this case is a passenger, not a driver, which further revises the dimension of autonomy central to the concept of automobility and its implied idea of the “solitary individual on the move” (Adey et al. 2012, 171). The clandestine adventure enabled by automobility also adds a global mobilities layer to Gijs Mom's (2014, 29) notions of “automotive adventure” and the car as an “adventure machine” facilitating the exploration of new places and experiences of speed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

¹Translated quotations from Diallo's, Pagni's, Oho Bамbe's, Lyamlahy's, Etoke's, and Sow Fall's texts are mine. In the cases of N'Sondé's, Awumey's, and Mabanckou's texts, the page number after English quotations refers to their respective published English versions.

Vehicles play a key role in the novel's poetics of mobility. In addition to driving the plot by transporting the characters, they enable encounters between passengers (see Wilson 2011, 634). In line with Bakhtin's (1981, 243) chronotope of the road, many of these chance encounters are important for plot construction (Gumbrecht 2006, 612). For instance, the journey from Kédougou toward the Malian border enables Semboyane to meet Karim, also on his way to Europe. In effect, in *L'Odyssée*, rides in different transports structure the narration in much the same way as Giada Peterle (2016) interprets the role of the private car in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* or as suggested by my analysis of the Dakarian bus route in Ousmane Sembène's "Niiwam" (Toivanen 2024, 135–142). A similar role is accorded to a hotel in which the travelers stay. Here, a passenger who has overheard the group's discussion in a vehicle introduces himself to Semboyane and Idy, asking whether he may travel with them (61). Much like Karim before him, this new acquaintance, Alain, shares his story with the others in the transit space of the hotel room, which becomes yet another setting for "ephemeral communities" as Robert A. Davidson (2018, 6) describes the role of the hotel in bringing travelers together. As the journey proceeds, the group is complemented with other travelers. As mobile spaces of chance encounters, transports and transit points turn individual travelers into traveling companions. Exchanges between the members of this ephemeral mobile community transform spaces of transit into sites of conviviality where migrants share their stories of hardships. In effect, the road serves as a motif that combines "dislocation and death with sociality on the move", as Maureen Moynagh (2020, 210) suggests in her conceptualization of the "dead road" motif in African narratives of forced displacement.

Diallo's portrayal of the migratory journey also transcends individualistic conceptualizations of travel by highlighting the role of smugglers. If tourists and holidaymakers such as Dadié's narrator (Chap. 3) may have used a travel agency for organizing their trips, for Diallo's travelers, the smuggler assumes this role. *L'Odyssée* highlights the exploitative character of the travelers' relations with smugglers but simultaneously adds nuance to this pattern. This is conveyed in the portrayal of a smuggler called Sami, who "dans l'imaginaire collectif, [a été] envoyé par le génie protecteur des clandestins" (27) [in the collective imagination was sent by the protective genius of undocumented migrants]. The best smugglers are described as "de vrais navigateurs" [real navigators] and "de vrais héros" [real heroes] (77). Unlike the Arctic explorer in Kpomassie's travelogue (Chap. 3),

clandestine travelers are not themselves explorers—this role is accorded to the smuggler: “Ce sont les explorateurs de l’époque: ils ouvrent de nouvelles routes” (79) [They are the explorers of our times: they open new roads]. The appreciation of skilled smugglers as enablers of mobility is per se illustrative of the precarity of the mobilities of clandestine migrants and of the fact that they cannot avoid giving away part of their autonomy if they want to travel.

The novel captures the unpredictable temporalities of clandestine migratory mobilities that range from experiences of suspended time to sudden temporal accelerations (see Griffiths et al. 2013). Journeys in slowly moving vehicles cause Semboyane to lose his sense of time (49), and moments when the journey stops for an indeterminable period feel endless. When the migrants are seized by Libyan terrorists who set out to sell them as slaves, the time not only slows down (143) but their future feels jeopardized: “Le futur se limite à ma prochaine respiration” (143) [The future is limited to my next breath]. Moments of temporal stagnation are frequently interrupted by a sudden haste, contributing to the unpredictable temporal rhythms of the journey. Temporal accelerations feature in scenes where the travelers need to find a smuggler quickly (76) or when a smuggler drives across the desert without pausing (91–92), or when the migrants suddenly leave Tangier to escape the violent attacks by local residents against Sub-Saharan migrants (169). Such scenes attest to the tensioned nexus between in/voluntary (im)mobilities characteristic of clandestine travel.

L’Odyssée establishes transtemporal links between the migrants’ travels and the history of the coerced mobilities of enslaved Africans across the desert and the sea. The Mediterranean has come to embody this transtemporal link in how it shares with the Black Atlantic “the proximity of black life to death” (Macura-Nnamdi 2022, 251). However, as *L’Odyssée* suggests, the crossing of the Sahara should not be omitted from this continuum. A train that the travelers catch to reach Bamako “avance vers un ailleurs redouté comme les bateaux négriers des siècles précédents” (55) [advances toward a dreaded elsewhere like the slave ships of previous centuries]. A similar connection is generated in the description of the crossing of the Sahara, where the portrayal of the desert makes one think of a tormented sea. Allusions to “[une] immense étendue de sable” (92) [a vast expanse of sand] and a sandstorm through which the vehicle struggles its way forward evoke the image of a slave ship sailing in a storm. Waves of sand are “comme d’immenses murs infranchissables” (88) [enormous

insurmountable walls] and the land and the sky become one: “L’horizon, le désert ont disparu” (89) [The horizon, the desert have disappeared]. The motif of an endless journey, characteristic of Middle Passage mobilities (Smallwood 2007, 135) is manifested in *L’Odyssée*: “Aucun espoir à l’horizon. Mes compagnons fixent comme moi l’étendue du désert, le visage de plus en plus livide” (98) [No hope on the horizon. Like me, my fellow travelers stare at the expanse of desert, their faces increasingly livid]. Furthermore, the cries of the passengers (88) and their “muscles ankylosés, [...] corps courbaturés” (92) [stiff muscles, aching bodies] evoke literary portrayals of the “zombifying” travel conditions of the victims of coerced transatlantic mobilities in the hold of a slaver (Chassot 2015; Toivanen 2021a, 159–164). The short portrayal of the sea-crossing in the end of the novel constructs the Mediterranean as what Hakim Abderrezak refers to as “seametry”, a neologism that “capture[s] the oxymoronic nature of the sea in which liquidity has become synonymous with immobility precipitated by preposterous and rigid policies that have transformed a sea into a cemetery” (2020, 373). The portrayal also emphasizes the transtemporal link through the motif of the floating tomb commonly used to describe slave ships (Smallwood 2007, 137): “Notre embarcation était un mouroir à la merci de l’orage” (183) [Our craft was a death trap at the mercy of the storm]. With its portrayals of modern slavery, however, in Diallo’s novel the slavery parallel is not a matter of the past.

The Moroccan Limbo in Impossible de rester

If Diallo’s novel can be read as a road novel, *Impossible de rester*, by the Ivorian author Aminata Pagni, foregrounds the themes of stagnation and waiting in its portrayal of the five-year Moroccan “transit” of the female protagonist Aram. Most of the events take place in Morocco, although the novel opens with a prologue describing the protagonist’s crossing of the Mediterranean with other migrants. The text employs familiar imagery to narrate the sea-crossing: its perilous nature is articulated in references to the small boat and difficult weather conditions, while the secrecy it necessitates is conveyed though the nocturnal departure and its tensioned temporalities are articulated in the hasty departure and subsequent endless drifting at sea. The prologue compares the clandestine passage to normative travel: “D’appel à l’embarquement, il n’y en a pas eu [...] pour la simple et bonne raison que nous étions loin d’être dans un aéroport, loin des quartiers d’un port officiel” (9) [There was no boarding call for the

simple reason that we were far from an airport, far from official port districts]. A similar scene occurs near the end of the novel, set at a moment when Aram has been living in Paris for some time. She is at an airport, on her way to Yaoundé and Abidjan to visit her family and relatives with the child she has had with a Cameroonian man in Morocco:

Une voix dans le haut-parleur [...] annonçait l'embarquement de mon vol à destination de Casablanca, où je faisais escale avant de rejoindre Yaoundé. C'était un peu une façon de revenir dans ce pays où tout avait commencé, mais cette fois avec la certitude que ce serait pour quelques heures. (156)

A voice over the loudspeakers announced the boarding of my flight to Casablanca, where I had a stopover before continuing to Yaoundé. It was a return to the country where everything had started, but this time with the certainty that it would only take a few hours.

With such scenes the narration plays on the discrepancies between normative and irregular travel. The generally reliable schedules of air travel stand in contrast to the suspended waiting typical of undocumented migratory mobilities: the meandering migratory journey is compared to “un vol classique Abidjan-Paris, qui durait à peine six heures” (29) [a normal Abidjan-Paris flight, which took barely six hours].

Pagni's novel challenges clichés surrounding clandestine migration. With its female protagonist, it moves beyond male-centered representations of undocumented migration. By highlighting Aram's agency, it also undermines stereotypical ideas about undocumented migrants as mere victims. The refutation of victimhood is closely related to the question of gender: literary representations of female clandestine migrants often link their migratory pursuit to sex-trafficking (see Bastida-Rodríguez 2014; Toivanen 2021b, 129, 184–5). Aram, in contrast, ensures her daily survival by running a clandestine restaurant. Her relatively affluent background differentiates her from underprivileged adventurers. Unlike her less affluent counterparts such as the protagonist in Diallo's novel, Aram does not have to resort to the services of smugglers to get to North Africa: she simply gets a passport and flies from Abidjan to Casablanca. Despite her privilege, she refers to her pursuit as her “aventure marocaine” (16) [Moroccan adventure], which inscribes the journey in the realm of clandestine adventuring and its precarious connotations (see Mazauric 2016, 50–51; Toivanen 2021b, 128). Aram's determination to survive in challenging conditions evokes the female student-protagonists in Rakotoson's

and Hountondji's novels discussed in Chap. 2. The narrative constructs her as a *débrouillard*e, whose resilient agency is inherently linked to her readiness to move (see Grayson 2018, 514).

The notion of transit, as conveyed through portrayals of Morocco as “un passage” [a passage], “un transit” [a transit], or “[un] espace d’attente” [a waiting room] (29) captures the notion of spatiotemporal suspension. Transit implies the idea of an unsatisfactory present, whereby the future is associated with an unattainable elsewhere—a new life in Europe. As the narrator puts it, “l’avenir ne devait pas avoir lieu ici” (87) [the future was not meant to happen here]. Indeed, the act of waiting at the border is motivated by “the desire to cross a border hoping that something is on the other side” (van Houtum and Wolfe 2017, 142)—in this case, an anticipated future, or another temporality “where the monotonous routines and lack of hope are expected to transform into a new life”, as Jopi Nyman (2024, 76) puts it in his analysis of migration temporalities in Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*. In *Impossible* the migrants' precarious status and their struggle for everyday survival make them prisoners of the immediate *now*. Their relation to time is defined by what Nicolas De Genova refers to as the “enforced orientation to the present” that pushes away the future (2002, 427): “Notre statut d’aventuriers ne nous permettait pas de faire de projets à long terme, ni de prendre des engagements que nous ne tiendrions pas” (87) [Our status as adventurers did not allow us to have long-term plans or make engagements that we could not keep]. Their condition is one of “chronic waiting”, where the present becomes not much more than a burden without prospects (Jeffrey 2008, 955).

The unattainability of a future reads as an example of the halting characteristic of migration temporalities (Griffiths et al. 2013, n.p.). Indeed, waiting “contributes to the production of migrant ‘illegality’ or ‘irregularity’” (Jacobsen and Karlsen 2021, 2). This process of becoming, which Brambilla (2015, 24) attaches to the role of the border in migration, is explicit in *Impossible*, where the narrator reflects on her situation: “Dans cet espace d’attente, je m’accoutumai à la nouvelle identité de Subsaharienne suspectée de vouloir passer en Europe” (29) [In this waiting room, I got used to my new identity as a sub-Saharan migrant suspected of wanting to go to Europe]. While the narration keeps alluding to the length of the transit and portraying it as a suspended, meaningless present, it also complicates such straightforward interpretations. In the end, Aram reflects in retrospect on her long transit: “Malgré les terribles moments, les années d’errance et de précarité, j’y avais connu des gens formidables et l’amour

aussi” (154) [Despite the terrible moments, years of errantry and precarity, I had known great people and also love]. These words suggest that the time in the “waiting room” has not been entirely meaningless, and hence challenges conceptualizations of migration temporalities as empty, dead time (see Jacobsen and Karlsen 2021, 8).

Waiting not only relates to temporality but also to mobility in terms of deceleration and stagnation. As a captive of the Moroccan “waiting room”, one character describes his situation as that of being in a cage (39), which encapsulates his experience of forced immobility. The migrants’ mobilities often consist of their being expelled by the Moroccan authorities. This form of involuntary mobility is circular and repetitive: “En cinq ans au Maroc, il avait effectué plus d’une dizaine d’allers-retours à Oujda. Il disait avec un humour sombre s’y être habitué” (34) [During five years in Morocco he had done more than ten round trips to Oujda. With dark humor he said he had gotten used to it]. The circularity and repetitiveness highlight the condition of spatiotemporal suspension and the migrants’ inability to escape both the transit space and the immediate present it represents. Repetitive departures and returns form a circular rhythmic pattern, and the process of becoming used to these rhythms establishes an ironic contrast to normative routine mobilities such as commuting (see Edensor 2013, 189). The everyday mobilities of undocumented migrants are marked by attempts to avoid the authorities (33). When these strategies fail, the migrants become objects of “la chasse à l’homme” [a man-hunt] and of “les courses-poursuites” [high-speed chases] (42). Such representations of mobility counterbalance the imagery of stagnation while still capturing the precarious nature of the irregular adventure.

The importance of the Moroccan transit is conveyed through narrative amplitude, which also reflects the temporal width of this part of the migratory journey, giving it narrative importance (see Bal 1997, 104). This can be considered an aspect of the novel’s poetics of mobility that foregrounds the suspension of transitoriness rather than of straightforward mobility. Toward the end of the novel, the future elsewhere that Europe represents for Aram starts to acquire a larger role. The drowning of her fiancé makes her feel that “la durée de mon séjour au Maroc était expirée (140) [the duration of my stay in Morocco had expired]. By necessity, the previously suspended future now becomes imaginable. Waiting for the final leg of the journey to start, Aram and her friend feel “fébriles mais patients, proches de notre objectif après toutes ces années” (139) [restless but patient, close

to our goal after all these years]. The crossing of the Mediterranean represents the final stage of the journey (151), as if after years of errantry the migratory pursuit had a clear closure.

Poetics of Walking-with in Les Lumières d'Oujda

My third example of the migratory journey is *Les Lumières d'Oujda*, by the Cameroonian writer Marc Alexandre Oho Bambe. Compared to Diallo's and Pagni's more traditional strategies, Oho Bambe's text is formally innovative. Many parts of the novel consist of concise main clauses, contributing to its slam-like qualities (Bertho 2021, 25). The narrative is non-linear, and the setting changes from chapter to chapter, although most of the locations resurface throughout the text. The novel's fragmented form is further generated through the changes in the narrative perspective: in addition to the first-person narrator, the chapters feature a range of other characters and focalizers involved in migratory mobilities.

The novel's structure bears a resemblance to Sarr's *La Saveur des derniers mètres* (Chap. 4). As in Sarr's text, the swift changes of geographical settings convey the idea of movement (Schneider and Brinker 2022, 153). Most chapters mention a location—often cities such as Rome, Oujda, Paris, Conakry, Douala, Lille, Beirut. Moreover, insular/littoral border-scapes or European “peripheral ‘transit’ spaces within the European center” (González and Michael 2022, 4), such as Lesbos and Calais, are also mentioned. The settings reflect migrants' multiple itineraries: their points of departure, their intermediate stopping points in North Africa, and their destinations in Europe. A polyphonic perspective on the phenomenon is adopted instead of foregrounding the viewpoint of one individual. The strategy of changing settings captures the multidirectional qualities of migratory journeys. The circularity of migratory mobilities is rendered thematically through the first-person narrator, who has been repatriated to Douala from Rome. Unlike the relatively affluent returnees in Chap. 4, the “homecomings” of repatriated paperless migrants are marked by shame and humiliation (35), standing apart from the voluntary returns of “tourist-natives” (Ravi 2014a, 296).² The discrepancy between the different types of returns is captured in the words of the first-person

²From this perspective, the novel's title evokes Alain Mabanckou's return travelogue *Les Lumières de Pointe-Noire*, in which the affluent author travels back to his former hometown (see Toivanen 2017).

narrator: “Je ne viens pas de *back*, j’ai été rapatrié” (37; original emphasis) [I’m not back, I’ve been repatriated].

The fact that the protagonist works for an association that pleads the cause of migrants and that he travels in the context of his work complicates the idea of the place names as reflecting solely the itineraries of migrants. Through the protagonist’s work-related travels to typical transit places such as Oujda, Lesbos, and Calais, the narrative highlights the relationality of mobilities. More importantly, this strategy conveys the idea of being mobile-with (Adey 2010, 18) or, to borrow a recurrent motif in the text, of *walking-with* the migrants. The relationality of mobilities becomes an ethical question of understanding the conditions and stakes of clandestine migratory pursuits, of making the stories of the travelers visible, and of finding ways to contribute to a change so that people would not have to leave. *Walking-with* is therefore a narrative strategy that can have “a mobilizing, or moving effect” on the reader and also has the potential to “set [...] off another chain of mobility” (Bond 2018, 7). On the other hand, the idea of *walking-with* is disturbed through the discrepancies between professional and clandestine mobilities. Settings such as hotels, conference venues, and airports, and procedures such as visa applications that inform the work-related trips of the narrator are far removed from the realities of traveling of those for whom the association works. Illustrative of this is a scene in which the employees of the association are waiting for their flight at Beirut airport, when they receive a smartphone message that a migrant boat near Lampedusa has been refused permission to berth (186). Scenes like these draw attention to the limits of *walking-with*.

Related to *walking-with*, the novel resorts to the metafictional device of the narrativization of clandestine migration mobilities. Not only is the first-person narrator referred to as a poet but the association for which he works organizes writing workshops for migrants to compile their testimonies (283). Another key element in the theme of narrativization is embodied in two Cameroonian men who become popular rappers in Tangier. The narrator explains that “Yaguine et Fodé³ rapaient leur exil, le mien aussi, vécu plus tôt et différemment certes, mais nous partageons le même blues, les même bleus à l’âme, le même sort triste” (71) [Yaguine et Fodé

³In the case of the two rappers there is an extra-textual dimension in the treatment of breaking silence. As Anne Schneider and Virginie Brinker (2022, 152) point out, the characters are named after Yaguine Koïta and Fodé Tounkara, two Guinean teenagers found dead in the landing gear of an airplane from Conakry to Brussels in July 1999.

rapped about their exile but also about mine, lived earlier and certainly differently, but we shared the same blues, the same bruising of the soul, the same sad destiny]. Their rapping is described as an act of speaking up (115). There are several sections consisting of rap lyrics by Yaguine and Fodé such as the following lines:

Pourquoi on part ?

Parce qu'on a tellement cramé

Au soleil de la misère

Qu'on a peur de caner

Si on reste proie docile à l'amer

Alors on part

On traverse la vallée des ombres de la mort

On prend la porte du désert ou la mer [...] (181; original italics)

Why do we leave?

Because we have burned

In the sun of misery

That we're afraid to croak

If one remains a docile victim of bitters

So we leave

We cross the valley of the shadows of death

We take the door of the desert or the sea

These lyrics revolve around the question “Why do we leave?”, articulating what Abderrezak calls *leavism*—“the burning desire to leave one’s country” that “advocates for free movement of humans across borders” (2020, 373). The rap lyric sections do not feature place names that structure the narrative elsewhere; the rap lyrics are raised above topographically specific settings to articulate a universal condition of human errantry.

What is interesting in terms of the poetics of clandestine migratory mobilities is the way in which prose narration permits changes in rhythm. A recurrent strategy of disturbing the flow of prosaic sentence structures is the use of punctuation and linefeed:

Youssef.

S'appelle.

En réalité.

Sabai Jai.

Et il a choisi.

De vivre.
 Toujours du côté de l'optimisme.
 Il y a des gens comme ça.
 Youssef.
 A grandi à Douala.
 Fleur fanée.
 Du jardin de sa naissance.
 Youssef a quitté Douala.
 En suivant son intuition.
 Son intuition.
 Du monde.
 Et son envie.
 D'une autre vie.
 Son envie.
 D'autres vies.
 Que la sienne.
 D'autres vies.
 Que celle à laquelle.
 Certains auraient voulu l'assigner. (237–238)

Youssef.
 Is called.
 In reality.
 Sabai Jai.
 And he has chosen.
 To live.
 Always on the side of optimism.
 There are people like that.
 Youssef.
 Grew up in Douala.
 Faded flower.
 Of the garden of his birth.
 Youssef left Douala.
 Following his intuition.
 His intuition.
 Of the world.
 And his desire.
 For another life.
 His desire for other lives.
 Than his.
 Other lives.
 Than the one that.
 Some would have liked to assign to him.

The breaking of sentence structures through punctuation and linefeed invites a lyrical rather than a prosaic reading. Scheider and Brinker interpret the punctuation and parataxis as the articulation of “the rupture in the bond of humanity generated by trauma” (2022, 146). However, following Stephen Clingman’s (2009, 18) idea that movements of reading correspond to spatial navigation, I see this strategy as a way to convey the interrupted, stepwise character of clandestine migratory mobilities. Clingman writes: “You navigate your way through [...] [the] recursive and combinatory possibilities [of a sentence], looking for landmarks, safe havens, and new vistas – just as you might navigate through a landscape half-known or unknown” (2009, 18). The truncated sentences and full stops in unexpected places translate the precarious mobile conditions into literary form: they force the reader to stop abruptly and “wait” for the continuation without knowing where the syntax is taking them next. The reader can never be sure whether a sentence is stopping or continuing after a full stop. This places the reader in a suspended situation of halt that reflects the unexpected pauses and the uncertainties of clandestine travel. This strategy conveys the instability of the future by translating into literary form the idea of the undocumented migrant as “un sans-avenir” (289) [a futureless person]—a neologism that Oho Bambe derives from the French term *sans-papiers* (paperless migrant).

The rap lyrics, in contrast, do not employ punctuation at all to enable the flow—or mobility—of words. In addition to the lyrical typographical formatting of the rap lyrics as in the excerpt “*Pourquoi on part*” displayed above, there are sections in which the lyrics merge into prose poetry freed of the restrictions of punctuation:

Pourquoi on part?

En vrille, en vrac...

Parce qu'on veut refaire le monde à notre image redonner aux femmes et aux hommes humains visages ne plus connaître le courroux des dictatures qui nous prennent à la gorge nous prennent tout de la maternité à la morgue on part parce que nos pays n'existent pas pas vraiment nos pays sont des États fictifs des États de non-droit des États sur le papier mâché recraché des rêves d'indépendance partis en fumée on part parce que nous revendiquons soleil ! soleil ! soleil ! pour toutes pour tous pour nous aussi ivres de mers et d'ailleurs ivres d'amour et de vie [...] (147; original emphasis)

Why does one leave?

In a tailspin...

Because we want to remake the world in our own image give human faces to women and men no longer subject to the wrath of dictatorship that have us by the throat take us all from the maternal school until the morgue we leave because our countries do not really exist our countries are the fictitious states of lawlessness states on the paper chewed spit out dreams of independence gone up in smoke we leave because we want sun! sun! sun! for all of us drunk on seas and elsewhere drunk on love and life

Such passages capture the urgency to move. Through the alternation of the heavily punctuated, staccato style of writing and the unrestricted flow of words the narration articulates the tension between freedom of movement and the obstacles that this ideal faces. This strategy captures in literary form the notion of the autonomy of migration put forward by Nicolas De Genova (2017, 5–6), where migrants' will to move intersects with border technologies that aim at preventing their mobilities.

As to imagery related to the tangibly kinetic aspects of the migratory pursuit, the motif of walking in *Les Lumières* is particularly interesting. It operates on both a material and a metaphorical level. On the one hand, it describes one of the migrants' key modes of mobility: "Yaguine et Fodé avaient marché, longtemps" (113) [Yaguine and Fodé had walked, for a long time]. On the other, it renders the idea of errantry as a human condition: "Êtres humains qui marchent. / Marchent sur la Terre" (69) [Humans that walk. / Walk on Earth]. More specifically, as suggested by the first-person narrator's description of his own journey from Douala via Rome to Oujda, walking becomes a metonymy of undocumented migration:

J'aurai marché, pour ainsi dire.
De la place Saint-Pierre jusqu'à la rue D'Acila.
En repassant par Douala, ville natale. (36)

I'll have walked, so to speak.
From St. Peter's Square as far as D'Acila street.
Passing by Douala, hometown.

In many places, the metaphorical and material meanings of walking become intertwined. However, to acknowledge walking as an embodied mobility practice avoids the risks of the "metaphorization of physical movement" that may lead to "neglecting the material conditions which

affect and constrain that movement” (Grayson 2018, 514). In effect, the physical dimension of walking helps readers to see underprivileged migrants not as “metaphors for rootlessness, but socially situated subjects” (Woolley 2014, 4). Allusions to walking are frequently accompanied by temporal attributes that articulate the idea of endless journeying, turning the migrants from someone seeking for refuge into perpetual travelers (Macura-Nnamdi 2022, 263). Moreover, it is suggested that walking is not something that the migrants have chosen but that there are pressing reasons behind their peregrination: “Swaeli a marché longtemps, pour arriver à trouver la paix. Après la guerre dans son pays. Et en lui aussi” (25) [Swali had walked for a long time to find peace. After the war in his country. And in himself as well.]. Indeed, the duration of physical movement and the so-called push factors of emigration go hand in hand in the text. The long walk of Yaguine and Fodé is represented in the text, and it also features a narrativization of their “walk” in the form of rap lyrics. The lyrics encapsulate the idea of endless walking and establish a link between mobility and resilience:

Tu marches vers le jour
Tu marches
Vers
Le jour d'après
La faim qui t'étreint les tripes
T'éteint
Et pourtant
Tu marches
Encore
Toujours
Tu marches (99)

You walk toward the day
You walk
Toward
The day after
The hunger that chokes your guts
Switches you off
And still
You walk
Again
Always
You walk

Hannah Grayson’s analysis of Tierno Monénembo’s work, in which she argues for an understanding of resilience that is about the ability to be mobile (2018, 514–515; 524), is relevant here. Oho Bambe’s text invests mobility with hope for a better future: “Persistant à avancer. Avancer et croire. Croire à demain. Marcher, même quand rien ne marche” (59) [Persist in going forward. Going forward and believing. Believe in tomorrow. Walk, even when nothing works]. Grayson (2018, 528) underlines qualities such as creativity and pragmatism in her conceptualization of mobile resourcefulness or *débrouillardise* in Monénembo’s oeuvre, and this idea is equally present in Oho Bambe’s novel. In effect, *Les Lumières* not only qualifies African migrants as modern-day nomads (280) and Black reincarnations of Odysseus (47, 66) but also portrays them as “champion[s] du monde de la débrouillardise” (13) [world champions at resourcefulness]. Survival is described as “l’œuvre de l’Homme” (280) [the Human’s task]—the word *œuvre* highlights the pragmatic but also the creative aspects of *débrouillardise*.

The darker side of mobile resilience is equally addressed: ceaseless mobility becomes walking with hurting feet while getting lost (259–260). The motif of the road, a mobile infrastructure enabling the mobilities of nomads such as clandestine migrants (Coulibaly and Agnessan 2023, 16) is invested with monstrous meanings:

La route.
 Qui nous avale.
 Et nous recrache.
 À sa guise.
 La route. (243)

The road.
 That swallows us.
 And spits us out.
 As it pleases.
 The road.

The idea of the road as a man-eater draws attention to the limits of mobility as resilience: it is a strategy of survival that does not “change the circumstances which make [migrants’] lives difficult” (MacLeavy et al. 2021, 1565–1566) but functions as a perpetuator of further precarity. The motif of the road implies past mobilities: through footprints and the traces of wheels, “the road functions as a loaded site of memory” or “a waste

palimpsest of those who have passed through or those who have not returned from the passage or crossing” (Coulibaly and Agnessan 2023, 16; my translation). In *Les Lumières*, the memorial function of the road is linked to the theme of narrativization. On the one hand, in his role as a worker for the association the first-person narrator develops creative methods to “redonner les mots à celles et ceux qui avaient été mangés par la route” (76) [give back words to those who have been eaten by the road]. On the other, in a chapter entitled *La Route*, the road itself is humanized as a witness (265) and given a first-person narrative voice with which it tells the story of “filles et fils du bitume” [daughters and sons of bitumen] or the “[g]uerriers de l’asphalte” (266) [warriors of asphalt]. The role of the witness of “the agent road” (Gumbrecht 2006, 641) gains its full meaning in the case of clandestine travel, which, as captured in the title of Diallo’s novel, is an “odyssey of the forgotten”.

MOBILITIES IN THE URBAN UNDERGROUND

This section moves from the desert and maritime routes to European urban spaces. The urban mobilities of clandestine migrants discussed here challenge the very notion of arrival: their urban displacements remain precarious and their dreams of a better elsewhere are shattered. To highlight the perpetual precarity of the mobilities of clandestine migrants in European cities, I adapt the notion of the underground to my readings of Wilfried N’Sondé’s *Le Silence des esprits* (2010) [*The Silence of the Spirits* (2017)], Edem Awumey’s *Les Pieds sales* (2009) [*Dirty Feet* (2011)], and Khalid Lyamlaḥy’s *Évocation d’un mémorial à Venise* (2023) [Evocation of a memorial in Venice]. I use the notion mainly metaphorically to describe the mobilities of clandestine migrants as “subterranean” due to their marginalization in the urban space. The underground connotes darkness, and this element is strong in the texts analyzed; the urban mobilities of the key characters are marked by solitariness, exclusion, and even death. David Pike’s characterization of the underground as a space of threatening otherworldly elements that defy “whatever has been defined as normal and belonging to the world above” (2007, 1) is particularly helpful here. To a lesser degree, I employ the notion of the underground in a spatial sense as in the case of the Paris Metro and aquatic below-the-surface spaces of the canals in Venice. Narratives of clandestine migration tend to move beyond traditional metropolitan centers, attesting to their increasing unattainability. Typical peripheralized settings include suburbs such as

the Parisian *banlieues* (Bragard 2013, 138) but also locations on the maritime fringes of Europe and other emerging migratory destinations. While N’Sondé’s and Awumey’s novels are set in Paris and its suburbs, Lyamlahy’s text, with its events set in Venice, illustrates the growing relevance of European peripheral settings in Francophone African literatures (Toivanen 2021c, 366). As such, these narratives and their portrayals of urban mobility disconnect the link between the city and centrality (Ameel et al. 2015, 1–3).

Public Transport and the Clandestine Migrant: Le Silence des esprits

Le Silence des esprits is a story about Clovis Nzila, a clandestine Congolese migrant and a former child soldier in Paris, where he meets Christelle, a middle-aged French nurse, with whom he becomes romantically involved. Their first encounter, which changes the course of events, takes place on a RER train on its way to the *banlieue*: the novel’s plot relies on public transport mobility and the peripheralized meanings of the RER (see, e.g., Andersson 2013, 698). The Parisian *banlieue* has also inspired N’Sondé’s other works (Bragard 2013; Ravi 2014b, 138; Hogarth 2018, 68). The suburban setting—including the scene in the RER discussed below—contributes to the protagonist’s social and spatial relegation to the fringes of the metropolis as an undocumented migrant. This exclusion is articulated in his displacements in the city. Clandestine migrants’ urban mobilities are characterized by strategies that oblige them to remain alert and acquire specific skills for moving in the city to minimize the risk of being deported (Filipo 2020, 237). Their access to and use of urban spaces are marked by vulnerability, and the constant mode of being alert produces a stressful urban experience (Baligand 2015, 62). This vulnerability informs the novel’s portrayals of the protagonist’s displacements, characterized by the necessity to remain unnoticed: “Je rasais tous les jours les murs de Paris, marchais la tête basse et fixais mes pieds pour éviter de regarder devant moi” (24) [“I kept a low profile in Paris, walking with my head down and staring at my feet to avoid looking in front of me” (8)]. He is constantly on the move but with no place to go, as is captured in the words “je fuyais vers nulle part” (24) [“I was running away, heading nowhere” (8)]. Such involuntary mobilities in the city underline the perpetual precarity of clandestine migration mobilities beyond the migration journey. Furthermore, the apathetic protagonist staring from the Austerlitz Bridge into the dirty water of the Seine and his way of referring to himself as “une petite chose

niée, naufragée du bonheur” (23) [“inconsequential, a shipwrecked victim of happiness” (8)] establish a link to the dark aquatic imagery of clandestine crossings.

His way of circulating “des heures à pied ou à vélo” (24) [“for hours on foot or by bicycle” (9)] indicates aimless wandering caused by the “enforced idleness” that being an outsider to the rush of the city entails (see Griffiths et al. 2013, n.p.). Clovis’s exclusion from normative urban everyday mobilities is highlighted through juxtaposition. As someone whose presence in the public space must be tuned down, the nonchalance of the routine mobilities of urbanites seems distant from Clovis’s experiences. The novel’s opening features a scene depicting Christelle’s commuting, and it contrasts with Clovis’s distressing urban mobilities with its portrayal of the dull, routine-like gestures of commuters in rush-hour public transport, where “une marée humaine” (21) [“a human tide” (6)] of passengers pushes forward in synchrony. In the key scene in terms of plot development, Clovis is near the Gare de Lyon, one of the stations where the Metro and RER lines intersect, planning to catch a suburban train to go to a shelter for the homeless. He is aware of the possible presence at the station of police officers. His anxiety takes a corporeal form: “J’angoissais comme jamais, le ventre noué, les mâchoires serrées” (26) [“I was so anxious, my stomach was knotted up and my jaw was clenched” (10)]. Inside the station he notices a police check taking place, and a physical anxiety that might well betray his fear overwhelms him. He starts to reverse, moving against the flow of people entering the station—a movement that signals his exclusion from the Metro and his arrhythmic relationship to the normative metropolitan mobilities:

Mon cerveau bouillonnait d’inquiétude, fuir, disparaître dans le vacarme de 18 heures, l’estomac et la gorge coincés dans une même crampe. Serrer les fesses. Ne pas se faire prendre. Mes genoux vacillaient sous le poids de la peur, mes jambes tremblaient. (27)

My brain was bubbling over with anxiety, to take off, disappear into the racket of the early evening rush hour. My stomach and throat were seized with cramps. Butt in gear. Do not get caught. My knees wobbled beneath the weight of my fear, and my legs were trembling. (10)

The corporeal imagery resonates with the idea of the underground railway as the bowels of the city (Bou 2016, 363)—with the difference that here the body of the clandestine migrant becomes the locus of the disfunctions

of the postcolonial metropolis. Clovis manages to escape the police check by boarding a random RER train. As the train leaves the station, his anxiety relinquishes its grip—but only until he sees police officers again approaching. The sight makes him feel as if he is “dans sa peau d’être absent, illégal, le monstre qui inquiète, la vilaine bête à laquelle personne ne veut ressembler” (30) [“in his skin the absent one, illegal, the monster who frightens, the villainous beast no one wants to resemble” (13)]—words that encapsulate the abjection of his clandestine condition and highlight the distressing aspects of his urban mobilities. As the policemen approach Clovis, a white woman—Christelle—sitting opposite him places her hand on his knee. This gesture changes the course of events: the policemen walk past without checking Clovis’s identity papers, assuming that he and Christelle are a couple. The carriage turns into “a huis clos transitional space that parallels the identity in transit of the protagonist and his transient relationship with [Christelle]” (Bragard 2013, 146). The encounter in the RER not only saves Clovis from deportation but also enables him to engage in a relationship that renders him visible—including his past as a child soldier, which complicates the questions of hospitality (see Ravi 2014b, 144) and the victim-perpetrator nexus (Bragard and Lindo 2018). Moreover, as Mélanie Pénicaut observes, it is only after the encounter with Christelle in the mobile non-place of the RER carriage that the hitherto nameless protagonist becomes “an individual in his own right”—so far, he has been an anonymous figure trying to remain unnoticed (2017, 76; my translation).

The ending closes a circle: as in the beginning, Clovis finds himself near a station, with the presence of authorities adding a threatening dimension to his displacements. Public transport, in other words, is key to plot construction and closure, underlining its role in the novel’s poetics of mobility. Clovis has left Christelle’s home to buy croissants from a bakery and, upon returning, he notices an identity check taking place next to the RER station. Suddenly, his movement is transformed from “d’un pas rapide et sûr” (166) [“walking quickly, certain of my footing” (109)] into an experience of embodied unease, evoking the scene at the RER station in the opening pages:

J’ai hésité un instant, avalé péniblement une boule de salive avant de m’éponger le front à plusieurs reprises, le regard fixé sur le sol, la tête baissée. Je fus tenté de rebrousser chemin, m’enfuir à nouveau et me cacher. [...] Avec la peur et l’angoisse qui revenaient au galop, j’ai courbé l’échine et plissé les yeux en avançant devant les forces de l’ordre. (167)

I hesitated a moment, painfully swallowing a ball of saliva before wiping my forehead several times, my gaze fixed on the ground and my head lowered. I was tempted to go back, take off again and hide. [...] Flooded with fear and anxiety, I hunched my back and lowered my eyes as I passed in front of the police.

When the agents tell him to stop, he starts running:

Mon cœur battit soudainement la chamade de l'effolement, une course à grande vitesse du sang à en exploser les pores de ma peau, mes genoux mollissaient et se mirent à trembler, la peur, un coup de tonnerre dévastateur dans mon cerveau et des bribes de prières oubliées sur ma langue. (168)

My heart was suddenly beating wildly as the blood rushed through my veins and almost exploded out of the pores of my skin, my knees gave way and started to tremble, a devastating thunderbolt in my head and fragments of forgotten prayers in my language. (110)

His attempted escape is “une folle cavalcade dans tous les sens, sans but, désespéré” (168) [“a crazy stampede going every which way, with no clear direction, desperate” (111)], which ends in a cul-de-sac. The novel ends with Clovis in the backseat of a CRS (*Compagnies républicaines de sécurité* [Republican Security Corps]) van, being beaten by the policemen. The closing scene puts an end to his urban mobilities by placing him in a state of coerced immobility in a rapid turn of events that also affects his loved one, who Clovis imagines in a state of suspended waiting and uncertainty after his sudden disappearance.

Clandestine Taxi in the Urban/Global Underground: Les Pieds sales

Les Pieds sales (2009) is set in what might be referred to as the global underground. The protagonist Askia is a paperless Guinean migrant who drives a clandestine taxi in Paris. He is in the metropolis searching for his father, who abandoned his family decades previously. Toward the end it is revealed that Askia initially came to Paris as a politician's bodyguard and that he has worked for a militia called *La Cellule*, an organization killing opponents of the ruling party. The search for his father Sidi Ben Sylla and the fact of having deserted *La Cellule* cause Askia to try, simultaneously, to trace his past (Gaboury-Diallo 2019, 185) and also to flee from it. Similarly, his relegation to the underground relates both to his status as a

clandestine migrant and former contract killer and also, in the narrative present, as a deserter. However, the novel is not only about Askia's mobility but interweaves his urban mobilities within a wider context of global migrations (De Souza 2012, 267). By this means, *Les Pieds* highlights the multiple, relational aspects of migratory mobilities as the texts focusing on the journeys on the African continent discussed above. Moreover, by alluding to Sidi Ben Sylla as Odysseus and Askia as Telemachus, the narrative ties contemporary migratory pursuits to a history of global mobilities and their representations in literature (De Souza 2012, 265)—the link to Odysseus also features in Diallo's and Oho Bambe's novels.⁴

With the driver of a clandestine taxi as its protagonist, *Les Pieds* adopts a tangibly mobile approach to its representation of migration and inscribes the urban space as a relevant site for exploring the mobilities of migration. Awumey has described himself as “a writer of the road” (Diouf 2015, 132; my translation), and Coulibaly (2023, 50) defines *Les Pieds* as a road novel—a genre marked by the spirit of movement, the evolution of a character on the move, and the centrality of the vehicle (53). Indeed, in terms of poetics of mobility, the vehicle is a key (mobile) setting and a center of overlapping mobilities and encounters in the novel. The narration maps out the vehicle's movements in Paris by alluding to the names of neighborhoods and streets. In this way, the text attests to the protagonist's capacity to “work the city”, that is, his knowledge of navigating the urban space through mobility practices (Buhr 2018, 340). While the mobile, literary “map” produced through Parisian street and place names suggests that Askia is at home in the metropolis, the fact that he drives his taxi during the night aptly conveys the vulnerability of his urban mobilities and challenges the idea of Paris as a city of lights—in the words of Pascale De Souza, the Paris in the novel is “a maze of darkness” (2012, 266). Indeed, Askia is portrayed as “un rafiôt râpé par les vents de ses voyages” (40) [“a battered ship lashed by the winds of many voyages” (34)], with his “taxi [qui] s'enfonce dans le noir des rues”, pursuing its “périple obscur” (40) [“taxi [that] plunges into the dark streets [...] [on its] dark journey” (34)]. Darkness not only symbolizes the underground qualities of his urban mobilities as an undocumented migrant and driver of a clandestine taxi but it is also a cover that guarantees him less stressful urban displacements (see Baligand 2015, 62).

⁴For the uses of the Odysseus metaphor in contemporary discourse on migrations across the Mediterranean, see Khalsi (2024).

The car is a mobile cocoon from which Askia observes the city and which also enables him to make a living. Moreover, it enables him to avoid the squat where he lives—he frequently sleeps in the front seat of the car. As De Souza notes, Askia’s vehicle is an “emblematic locale [...] to explore the intersection between migrancy, identity, and urbanism”: once he loses his squat, the car becomes not only his “work and transportation” but also his home, “thus unifying the threads of his identity into a site of permanent wandering” (2012, 263). Mobility is a necessity of his clandestine condition, not something he would strive for. He stays in “le lieu instable de son taxi” (89) [“the shifting space of his taxi” (95)] because “pour les gens de sa race, la halte était un piège” (89) [“a place to stop was a trap for people like him” (94)]. Being on the move is a mode of urban survival dictated by the clandestine condition, although it is movement without a goal, “[une] déambulation stérile” (79) [“wandering through Paris with nothing to show for it” (81)]. Askia’s search for his father may be seen as a goal (Gaboury-Diallo 2019, 189) but this pursuit turns out to be futile. As such, Askia’s errantry perpetuates the legacy of his childhood nomad life, when his family moved from city to city without Askia understanding “les raisons de la marche” (55) [the reasons of the walk].⁵ The notion of “les pieds sales”⁶ (dirty feet) refers to the precarious mobilities of “unwanted” migrants such as Askia’s family (Gaboury-Diallo 2019, 182). While Askia’s urban displacements are facilitated by his car, and the dusty roads of his family’s migratory pursuit have changed to the asphalted streets of Paris, his condition of a *pied sale* persists. It is significant that, eventually, the taxi becomes the place of his death, as he commits suicide in it in an underground parking lot after understanding that *La Cellule* is after him. In his suicide, the tangible and symbolic meanings of the underground overlap. Through the image of the parked vehicle within which Askia inhales exhaust fumes, the narration moves from conventional associations of automobility with freedom of movement toward a dark notion of mobility as a futile, restless, and self-perpetuating pursuit that only ends in death.

⁵ My translation here; an entire paragraph is missing in the official English translation.

⁶ As De Souza notes, the notion of *pieds-sales* echoes not only Sartre’s *Les Mains sales* but also *les Pieds-Noirs*, which refers to migrants of French and Italian background who moved to Algeria between the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (2012, 264). However, Awumey’s reference to Sartre is not intentional and his “frame of reference [moves] beyond French literature and colonization to encompass all migrants who have crossed real and personal deserts during their life” (ibid.).

Awumey's novel conveys a relational understanding of the precarious mobilities of underprivileged migrants and other coerced mobile subjects. Askia's rides in his taxi in Paris are constantly linked to three different categories of mobility. First, there are the speculations about his father's itinerary of several decades previously; second, there are the paths taken by clandestine migrants from Africa and Europe; and finally, the historical mobilities are traced of the enslaved Africans en route to European and American ports. These three categories of mobility across different geographies and temporalities are intertwined with the protagonist's urban mobilities in the narrative present. This challenges the boundaries between the self and the other, the past and the present, and the here and the there. The narrative strategy of bringing clandestine migrant mobilities through Global South cities and European maritime peripheries and also the ghost of the Middle Passage to a European metropolitan space draws a wider image of transcontinental and transtemporal Afro-European (underground) mobilities.

With regard to the connections between the protagonist's mobilities in Paris and the speculated itineraries of his father, in his imagination Askia reconstructs Sidi Ben Sylla's journey from the Gulf of Guinea and the Mediterranean via places such as Lomé, Lagos, Cotonou, and, finally, Marseille (Awumey 2009, 28). There are several scenes in which Askia drives his taxi and a client starts to talk about a man they have encountered who has resembled Askia. In the stories told by the clients, the father has been seen in the course of several decades in different places across Europe and Africa. His supposed whereabouts vary, forming not much more than "an incomplete litany" (Gaboury-Diallo 2019, 187). In these stories, his father wears his characteristic white turban, and he is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, "fuyant tout repérage" (29) ["evading all detection" (21)]. The father embodies the notion of haunting, which, as Lena Mattheis argues, has "much translocal potential" (2021, 195). In effect, the father is described as a ghost; he is "des images qui se précipitaient sur le pare-brise du taxi" (25) ["images streaming down onto the windshield of Askia's taxi" (17)]. While the taxi is a mobile space of encounter between Askia and his clients, these encounters remain shallow: they do not link him with the society around him but are centered on the fleeting ghost of his father. This gives the encounters a dreamy, alienating appearance, which highlights Askia's position "dans les ombres parisiennes" (46) ["in the shadows of Paris" (41)]. In Awumey's novel, the chronotope of the road is dissociated from the meaningful chance encounters (cf. Bakhtin

1981, 243; Gumbrecht 2006, 612–613) and becomes instead the time-place of fruitless, alienating errantry. As an exception to such meaningless encounters on the road, Askia’s encounter with Olia, a Bulgarian migrant and a photographer for whom Askia’s father has allegedly posed, represents a slight respite from his solitude and disconnection. Yet here, too, the relation between the two is centered around the mystery of Askia’s father, adding to the past-oriented, futile narrative quest.

In addition to the father’s ghostly presence, the narration repeatedly alludes to clandestine migrant routes from Africa to Europe. As Askia drives his car, central places such as la place Beaubourg are described as sites that host “[des] aventuriers, coureurs sans but” (36) [“adventurers, aimless runners” (29)] from all around the world. His car radio transmits news about African boat people arriving in the Canary Islands (46). The recurring allusions to the itineraries of undocumented migrants become interwoven with Askia’s mobilities in Paris, generating a sense of translocality. The narration also connects Askia’s mobilities to the historical mobilities of enslaved Africans. This collective, haunting past is evoked through imagery that links Askia’s everyday life and mobilities in the streets of Paris to the memory of the Middle Passage, which here becomes mobilized by being moved away from “constricted space and limited time” (Dietrich et al. 1999, 9). The squat in which he lives is described as “le ventre froid, humide et sale d’un grenier de Lutèce” (31) [“the cold, damp, dirty belly of an attic in Lutetia” (25)]. The quotation refers to the Roman name of Paris, and the restricted space of the room and allusions to humidity and dirtiness, together with the notion of the belly, evoke a parallel with the traveling conditions of the victims of the Middle Passage in the hold of a slaver. Maritime imagery comparing the taxi to a raft sailing through darkness further emphasizes this parallel. The link is made explicit when the narrative cites African, European, and American slave ports and identifies transatlantic slave trade as “la folie générale qui avait jeté les hommes sur les routes” (105) [“the mass insanity that had cast people out on the road” (112)] in a scene in which Askia takes the Metro to find traces of his father in a gloomy Parisian neighborhood. The trans-temporal, transatlantic link is further emphasized when Askia’s ancestors are imagined either as slaves working on plantations in Virginia or as the domestics of ship owners loading slavers in the slave port of Nantes (Awumey 2009, 106). The victims of coerced transatlantic mobilities and the inhabitants of the contemporary *banlieues* are connected by referring to them both as embodiments of *pieds sales* (Awumey 2009, 107).

The novel also features portrayals of the Paris Metro—a setting where the notion of the underground finds material expression. Askia takes the Metro with Olia, who crosses the turnstile without paying for a ticket. Askia is surprised at her rebellious side (Awumey 2009, 81). Her behavior is in contrast to Askia's, who uses his ticket only to find out that it is invalid. A homeless man observing the scene exclaims: “Je vois que t’es pas valide. T’as pas le bon billet pour passer les portes de Lutèce” (82) [“I see you’re not valid. You don’t have the right ticket to get through the gates of Lutetia” (84)]. His words encapsulate Askia’s rejection from the urban space. When Olia and Askia make it to the platform, the Metro becomes yet another place of mobile connectivity:

Leur train arriverait dans une dizaine de minutes. Askia pensa à sa ville sur les bords de l’Atlantique, à une gare où plus aucun train n’arrivait parce qu’il n’y avait plus de rails... Sur un tableau fixé au béton au-dessus de leurs têtes, des lettres et des chiffres lumineux marquaient les noms des différents arrêts avant le leur: Luxembourg, Port-Royal, Denfert-Rochereau... Et, dans cette suite de noms, Olia se prit à penser tout haut à un autre enchaînement, sa ligne de métro à elle, les gares par lesquelles elle passait avant de descendre à Opalchenska: Vardar, Konstantin, Velichkov... Et Askia dans sa tête fit la même gymnastique. Il revit dans un flash les minicars verts de sa ville côtière, les bus qui prenaient invariablement 50 francs pour la course, la course jusqu’à Kodjoviakopé, et avant ce point de chute il y avait Bè, Amoutivé, Hanoukopé, Nyékonakopé... (82–83)

Their train would be there in about ten minutes. Askia thought back of his city on the shores of the Atlantic, a station where trains no longer stopped because there were no tracks left. On the board bolted to the concrete wall above their heads, illuminated letters and numbers indicated the stations remaining before their stop: Luxembourg, Port-Royal, Denfert-Rochereau. Seeing the series of names, Olia was thinking out loud of another series, her metro line, the stations she went through before getting off at Opalchenska: Vardar, Konstantin, Velichkov. So Askia in turn was prompted to silently perform the same mental gymnastics. He saw in a flash the green minibuses of his coastal city, the bus riade that invariably cost fifty francs, the ride to Kodjoviakopé, which first had to go through Bè, Amoutivé, Hanoukopé, Nyékonakopé... (85–86)

Askia’s and Olia’s itinerary on the Parisian Metro map evokes personal memories of everyday mobilities in other cities. The Paris Metro is no longer simply a local mobility system but a site of palimpsestic translocality

where different layers, mobilized by memory, are “combined on the axis of time, but also move on the axis of space” (Mattheis 2021, 53). This constant spatiotemporal overlapping of mobilities as a narrative strategy lies at the core of the poetics of migration mobilities in Awumey’s novel.

*Under the Surface: Walking with Pateh Sabally in Évocation
d’un mémorial à Venise*

Khalid Lyamlahy’s *Évocation d’un mémorial à Venise* is a work of narrative non-fiction focusing on the suicidal drowning of Pateh Sabally, a 22-year-old Gambian man, in the Grand Canal in Venice in January 2017. As Lyamlahy tells in an interview, the text is a reconstruction of Pateh Sabally’s trajectory—a written trace of his journey that also evokes other migrant trajectories and tragedies (“Évocation”). In *Évocation*, the author-narrator travels to different places on Sabally’s itinerary, which, as Oho Bambe’s novel discussed above, makes it a case of *walking-with*. There is an explicit ethical, mobilizing aim (see Bond 2018, 7) in Lyamlahy’s project of *walking-with*.

Composed of three parts—“Les eaux” [The waters], “Les cris” [The screams], and “Les mots” [The words]—*Évocation* consists of fragments that, in terms of mobility, can be divided into three categories: the reconstruction of Pateh’s trajectory as imagined by the narrator; the author-narrator’s own mobilities in Pateh’s footsteps; and finally, insights into news and internet material about the mobilities of undocumented migrants, centered around the Mediterranean.⁷ Writing, according to the narrator, who addresses his words directly to Pateh, is an act of “bâtir un pont de mots et d’images entre le vide de ta perte et le trop-plein d’information” (58) [building a bridge of words and images between the emptiness of your loss and the overflow of information]. Simultaneously, “cette écriture est condamnée au va-et-vient, à l’errance sans fin entre le fleuve du pays natal et les canaux du pays des autres” (53) [this writing is condemned to a to-and-fro, to endless errantry between the river of the

⁷A fourth mobile dimension that features near the end of the text is the actions taken by people—mostly migrants—to do justice to Sabally. This can be seen as mobilization or social movement. This mobility is less consistently woven into the narrative fabric, whereas the other three mobilities—Sabally’s, the narrator’s, and migrants’—are interwoven throughout virtually the whole narrative.

home country and the canals of the countries of others]. With its structure, which moves back and forth between Patch's, the narrator's, and migrants' mobilities, the text intertwines multiple mobilities, translating their relationality into a literary form.

Much like the trajectory of Askia's father in Awumey's novel, the representation of Patch's urban mobilities in Venice is a reconstruction based on combined pieces of both the available information and the narrator's imagination. This strategy conveys the idea that Patch's voice cannot be recuperated, pointing toward the limits of representation and emphasizing the absence of the central "character" from the narrative. The author-narrator has traveled to Venice in an attempt to walk in Patch's footsteps. He is not familiar with the city but knows it as a popular tourist destination. The touristic character of Venice is a key element in the text's way of connecting seemingly disparate mobilities. The narrator's reconstruction of Patch's short and perilous trip to Venice is enmeshed with the carefree mobilities of tourists. The gap between these two contemporary forms of global mobility is conveyed, for example, by reference to different items of baggage. While Patch travels with his rucksack—serving simultaneously as his baggage, grocery bag, and occasional pillow (20)—the tourists travel with their suitcases (29). The rucksack contains the necessities for a precarious journey of undetermined duration, whereas the tourists' suitcases—equipped with wheels to facilitate locomotion—can contain many more items suitable for a short, determined, leisure-oriented stay.

The contrast between the touristic and clandestine mobilities is further highlighted through the comparison of the narrator's reconstruction of Sabally's arrival at the railway station of Venice with that of the tourists: "Autour de toi, l'excitation palpable de tous ces passagers pressés de rejoindre les sorties" (28) [around you, the palpable excitement of all those passengers hurrying to reach the exits]. For Patch, there is no hurry to discover the city: "Prendre son temps. Retarder la rencontre avec la ville-monde. [...] Éviter les agents de sûreté postés aux quatre coins de la gare" (30) [Take one's time. Delay the encounter with the city-world. Avoid the security guards all around the station]. In similar vein, the narrator imagines Patch's train trip from Milan to be characterized by the necessity to remain discreet and to ensure an escape route: "Être proche des portes de sortie. Faire preuve de prudence et de discrétion" (23) [To be close to the exits. Use caution and discretion]—mobile strategies or, as the narrator puts it, "lessons" dictated by "des années d'errance et d'incertitude" (23) [years of wandering and insecurity]. While the tourists

head toward the city, Pateh postpones his encounter with what the narrator already suspects that Pateh foresees as his “cercueil aquatique” (26) [aquatic coffin]: on the stairs of Santa Lucia station, he sits apart and waits (36) before “affronter le paysage de la ville” (39) [confronting the cityscape]. Sitting on the steps highlights the centrality of waiting and Pateh’s hesitation before facing Venice points to undocumented migrants’ limited access to the urban space (Baligand 2015, 61).

In the case of Pateh Sabally, this act of waiting seems particularly ominous since, from here, he walks straight into his death. Eventually, the narrator imagines Pateh getting up and starting his walk toward the canals, capturing some of his potential observations of the environment. Based on the information concerning the drowning, the narrator underlines that Pateh walks along Grand Canal for only a few minutes, which is “une formule laconique pour résumer ces longs moments où l’on ignore tout de tes pensées, de tes émotions, de ton état d’esprit” (66) [a laconic formula to sum up those long moments when we know nothing about your thoughts, your feelings, your state of mind]. By taking the first 72 pages, that is, the first part of the book, to describe Pateh’s arrival at the railway station and his walk alongside the canals before his drowning, narrative amplitude is given to an event that is short in story time. The “slow-down” of the tempo (Bal 1997, 107) is part of the text’s poetics of mobility—it functions as like a “magnifying glass” (Bal 1997, 107) that highlights the necessity of moving beyond sensationalist, rapidly consumed news and internet material on the event by taking the time to individualize the tragedy.

While Pateh’s mobilities are contrasted with those of the tourists, the narrator’s case is more complex. On the one hand, there is his pursuit of walking in Pateh’s footprints, while on the other, the narrative recognizes the limitations of this gesture of empathy and identification. The narrator wishes to distinguish himself from leisure travelers. On the airplane, he refers to the “rires désagréables” (98) [unpleasant laughter] of a group of tourists, and once he has reached Venice he wants to “rester à l’écart” of “le flot de touristes” (109) [keep away from the flood of tourists]. Here, the narrator describes tourists as an unwanted “flood”—an image that is regularly attached to both tourists and undocumented migrants (Ní Loingsigh 2003, 163). Given his “peur de tomber dans l’indécence du touriste” (149) [fear of falling into tourist indecency], he is uninterested in exploring the city any further than he is required to by his mission to trace Pateh’s trajectory. It is also emphasized that, like Pateh, he travels

with a rucksack, which contains his notebook and articles about Pateh. The narrator mentions how light the rucksack feels (108, 124), which reads as a commentary on the evasive nature of the “truth” about Pateh Sabally. Yet like a tourist, the narrator stays in a hotel—one of the spaces to which Pateh had no access and of which he has only seen the facades (104, 124). The narrator experiences empty time in which he is unable to do anything (135), which evokes the involuntary idleness and waiting characteristic of migration temporalities (Griffiths et al. 2013), as in the case of Pateh’s seemingly aimless waiting on the stairs of the railway station. The narrator’s aeromobile journey from Paris, on the other hand, is contrasted with how he imagines Pateh’s travels: the procedures at airports are represented as “[un] cirque aéroportuaire auquel [Pateh] [a] échappé” (85) [an airport circus from which Pateh escaped] and the bird-like view from the airplane “une fenêtre sur un monde que [Pateh] n’a[...] pas connu” (88) [a window on a world that Pateh did not know]. The narrator’s reflections on the dis/similarities of his travels and those of Pateh Sabally and the tourists reveal the complex relationality of different global mobilities.

Évocation draws attention to the psychological toll of the narrator’s project of *walking-with*. He finds himself on the verge of fainting near the Grand Canal, which he thinks wants to “punish” him for his curiosity about Pateh’s story (131–132). He believes that he has seen the specter of Pateh without being sure whether it is “une hallucination ou s[’il] continue de revivre [l’]arrivée [de Pateh] à Venise” (142) [a hallucination or if he is still continuing to re-live Pateh’s arrival in Venice]. Much like in Awumey’s novel, the urban mobilities in *Évocation* are haunted by the spectral presence of a migrant. The figure of the ghost is a recurring trope in the literatures of the African diaspora (Chassot 2018, 3). In the context of the older African diasporas, the ghost is intrinsically connected to the cultural traumas of the Middle Passage and slavery (Chassot 2018, 10). In *Évocation*, the spectral figure of Pateh—in a way that resembles Askia’s father in *Les Pieds sales*—can be read as a reaction to current “cultural conditions and anxieties” (Chassot 2018, 3), namely, the tragedies of clandestine migration taking place in the maritime peripheries of Europe. The text links European maritime border regions with the aquatic environments of Pateh’s personal history and further brings these together with the Grand Canal. As the narrator observes, Pateh’s “histoire est encerclée par les eaux” (38) [story is surrounded by waters]. The figure of the ghost, together with the prominently aquatic imaginarity, gives the narrative an

underworldly character in both symbolic and concrete terms—illustrative of this is the narration’s play with the notions of the living/the evanescent (57; 63) and the depths/the surface (31; 64; 79). The idea of the under-the-surface also captures the author-narrator’s attempt to reconstruct Pateh’s story: he is preoccupied with questions and images that “remonte[nt] à la surface” (31; 24) [rise to the surface]. Pateh’s drowning in the “immense cimitero” (47) [vast cemetery] of Venice and its linkages to the Mediterranean “seametry” (Abderrezak 2020, 373) bring the “migrant crisis” into the space of an extremely touristic European city. In so doing, the text draws attention to how “imperial history lurks just beneath the surface”, as Katelyn E. Knox (2016, 3) points out in her discussion of a number of other African literary texts engaging with European aquatic/riverine spaces.⁸ Hence, *Évocation* not only brings together a variety of different mobilities but does the same with the aquatic landscapes of the migrants’ African homes, the seas dis/connecting Africa and Europe, and European cities.

DEPORTATION AEROMOBILITIES: MABANCKOU, ETOKE, SOW FALL

This final section approaches clandestine Afro-European migratory mobilities from the perspective of coerced return travel, namely, deportation aeromobility. Air travel is the most inaccessible form of mobility for undocumented migrants and it rarely features in literary texts concerned with clandestine mobilities. As a form of state-enforced mobility (Walters 2018, 2801), the deportation flight is one way in which air travel becomes accessible to undocumented migrants. As William Walters posits, aviation has become “central to the infrastructure of deportation today” (2016, 436): without its “capacity to forcibly transport large numbers of people great distances the weapon of deportation would lose much of its potency” (437). Moreover, the speed of air travel, the sky routes the airplane follows, and the “hermetic seal with which the plane encloses its travellers” cause aviation to constitute a highly apt deportation infrastructure (Walters 2018, 2803). In short, the aeromobile infrastructure plays a key role in the production of the deportee as a mobile subject.

⁸With respect to the trope of drowning, see also the discussion of Njami’s novel in Chap. 3 and Toivanen (2019).

While deportation flights are a contemporary phenomenon of uneven global mobilities, they belong to a wider temporal continuum of coerced (im)mobilities such as those of the victims of the transatlantic slave trade (Walters 2016, 436, 2018, 2801; Durante 2020, 146; Kumavie 2021, 2, 16). In Francophone African literatures from the end of the 1990s to the early 2000s there are recurrent allusions to the “charters of shame” (*chartes de la honte*). These representations can be read as reactions to the politics of expulsion inaugurated by the French minister of interior, Charles Pasqua, in 1986 (Dridi). Since then, charter flights have become “the key technology for governments looking to advance interlinked agendas of enhanced border enforcement and deportation effectiveness” (Walters 2018, 2804). The texts discussed here, namely, Alain Mabanckou’s *Bleu-blanc-rouge* (1998) [*Blue White Red* (2013)], Nathalie Etoke’s *Un Amour sans papiers* (1999) [Love without papers], and Aminata Sow Fall’s *Douceurs du bercail* (1998) [Sweetness of home] all feature portrayals of the deportation infrastructure from the perspective of “the vulnerable passenger” (Durante 2020, 145) traveling in the “deportation class” (Nyers 2003, 1079).

Bleu-blanc-rouge is one of the most emblematic and widely studied Francophone African novels about clandestine migration. In addition, it is also a novel that is concerned with the “underworld” of Paris, given the protagonist’s involvement in a fraud that entails selling season tickets for the Paris Metro (*Carte Orange*) on the black market. Massala-Massala, the protagonist, travels to Paris and becomes part of a diasporic community of Congolese petty criminals. When his tourist visa expires, he stays in Paris until his arrest, jail sentence, and eventual deportation. The opening and ending of the novel form a circle, with the first part entitled “Ouverture” and the closure aptly named “Fermeture”. Both chapters revolve around Massala-Massala’s confinement in prison and at a detention center, typifying his condition of involuntary immobility. While air travel—deportation travel in particular—is marginally rendered in the novel, the protagonist’s identity as *débarqué*, that is, as someone who has recently disembarked from an airplane, refers to the central role played by aeromobility in the construction of his migrant identity, including its eventual disintegration when he is finally deported.

The portrayal in the closing chapter of the deportation flight marks a shift from coerced immobility to coerced mobility, putting an end to the protagonist’s adventure. The closing chapter starts with the opening of the door of the protagonist’s cell, with a faceless, anonymous voice

announcing, “Le charter part dans trois heures exactement, magnez-vous!” (213) [“The charter leaves in exactly three hours, get a move on!” (141)]. Before taking the charter flight, which stops at several airports in west and central Africa, the protagonist takes a shower. He is seized by suicidal thoughts, reproaching himself for being “un bon à rien” and “un raté” (214) [“a good for nothing”; “a failure” (141)]. The failure of the Parisian adventure and its shameful climax symbolized by the deportation flight make him think that he is no longer a man (Mabanckou 1998, 215). The shower scene features the protagonist urinating and fouling himself and observing his “sexe rétréci” and “bourses retirées” (215) [“shrunken genitals”; “contracted balls” (142)]—imagery that conveys the abject and humiliating aspects of deportation and highlights the gendered dimensions of his “failure” that is written on the body (see also Moudileno 2001, 188). However, he renounces his suicidal ideas; eventually, there is even a sort of claim of agency. “J’ai choisi d’assumer jusqu’au bout” (215) [“I chose to see this through to the end” (142)], he states, and manages to imagine a future for himself when he is back home—plans that lose their meaning as the charter flight approaches Brazzaville. The portrayal of the flight passage is extremely concise. The faceless authorities—representatives of a powerful system—treat the deportees like “des marchandises” (219) [“merchandise” (145)], but neither this nor Massala-Massala’s previous humiliations seem to equal the shame generated by his involuntary return. Indeed, in the closing paragraphs, the protagonist is already thinking about returning to France because he cannot “demeurer avec un fiasco dans la conscience” (222) [“I can’t live with a fiasco on my conscience” (147)]. As Innocent Ngulube argues, the deportation passage and Massala-Massala’s “inability to decide where home is” attest to the “interminable disintegration of [his] selfhood” (2023, 170). It is indeed also in this sense that the deportation flight perpetuates the uncertainty typical of precarious migratory mobilities.

A deportation flight also features toward the end of Etoke’s *Un Amour sans papiers*. It signals a new beginning, albeit of necessity, and, unlike in *Bleu-blanc-rouge*, the deported character does not cherish any hopes of returning to France. The flight passage is represented in the form of a letter that the female protagonist Malaïka, a Cameroonian student in Paris, receives from her loved one, Salif, a clandestine migrant from Mali. The letter is preceded by a chapter describing Malaïka’s mental breakdown that has resulted from the sudden disappearance of Salif after one of his morning runs—a scene that evokes the ending of *Le Silence des esprits*, where

Clovis worries about Christelle's reaction to his abrupt disappearance. Running, for Salif, represents "une sensation de liberté" (95) [feeling of freedom], which stands in stark contrast to the coerced nature of deportation aeromobility. The letter that Malaïka receives after two months of uncertainty marks Salif's absence and, as such, conveys on the level of form the unpredictability of the coerced and precarious mobilities of clandestine migrants: Salif's physical presence transforms into communicative mobility. In his letter, Salif refers to the shame of deportation and describes the dehumanizing traveling conditions suffered by the passengers. Illustrative of the embodied "political economy of violence" of deportation aviation (Walters 2016, 43), the deportees are made to swallow soporifics or their mouths are covered with adhesive tape (106) to make them more manageable. But the letter also refers to the deportees' acts of resistance. Upon arrival, they manage to damage the airplane so that it becomes "un champ de bataille atypique" [an untypical battleground] with its "hublots brisés, fauteuils déchirés, lampes cassées" (107) [broken windows, torn seats, broken lamps]. While their act of mutiny—a scene evoking historical mutinies on slavers—itself does not lead to anything, the ending of the novel suggests a sort of new beginning for Salif, who returns to his home village to herd livestock, determined never to return to France (110).

In contrast to the somewhat marginal portrayals of the deportation infrastructure in Mabankou's and Etoke's novels, Sow Fall's *Douceurs du bercail* foregrounds the aeromobile "deportation world" (Walters 2016, 437). The Senegalese protagonist Asta Diop is presented as a privileged traveler—she is on a business trip to Paris to attend a conference entitled "l'Ordre Economique Mondial" (18). She is a member of the Dakarian urban middle class and her travel documents are in order. The opening of the narrative distinguishes her from "adventurers" on their circular clandestine pursuits to Europe: "S'ils m'expulsaient, je ne reviendrais plus" (9) [If they expelled me, I would not come back] is her reaction to the aspirations of some of her fellow passengers to return to Europe after repatriation. Nevertheless, although her travel documents are in order, on arrival in Paris Asta is subjected to a body search. The narrative describes the experience of physical humiliation, to which Asta violently reacts by attempting to strangle the security official. The scene attests to "the racist and sexist practices that [Black women] are often subjected to" at airports, but also articulates an act of resistance on the part of the Black female

passenger (Browne 2015, 132). This event changes the course of the plot and transforms Asta from a relatively privileged traveler into an eventual deportee who is unable even to exit the destination airport. This attests to the stereotyped understanding of all Black African travelers in Europe as potential irregular migrants (Keubeung 2022, 621).

In sum, the narrative conveys a sense of coerced immobility through its main setting, *le dépôt*, a holding facility in which the deportees are held prior to their repatriation. By framing the facility as a hidden, underground space in the labyrinth behind the official scene of the airport (41, 67), the narration highlights the discrepancy between normative air travel and deportation air travel, marked by its “shadowy existence” (Walters 2016, 440)⁹ as “the obscured underbelly of carcerality” (Kumavie 2021, 4). If the official façade of the airport can be seen as an entry space into the “sky world”, the place in which the deportees are gathered is associated with an underground that functions as a site of deviation and exclusion (Pike 2007, 1). The threatening aspect of the space of coerced immobility represented by the *dépôt* is also conveyed in signs of airport textuality (see Schaberg 2011). When Asta’s French friend Anne comes to the airport in search of her after having failed to see her among the arriving passengers,¹⁰ she spots “au bout d’un couloir souterrain, un écriteau qui lui avait paru plus sévère que d’autres” (67) [at the end of an underground corridor a sign that struck her as more severe than the others]. The language of aeromobile detention and deportation stands apart from the “semiotics of luxury” of the air world inhabited by “fluid passengers” (Durante 2020, 102, 139).

While some of the chapters focus on the efforts of Asta’s friends to help her, other chapters are set in the *dépôt*, describing the interactions of the racialized passengers condemned to be removed from French territory. As Sandra García Corte observes in her analysis of the deportation scene in Adichie’s *Americanah*, the holding facility is a “location where various undocumented migrants’ paths collide” (2022, 116). In the facility represented in *Douceurs*, the deportees-to-be interact and engage in

⁹For an analysis of a similar scene in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *By the Sea*, see Kumavie (2021, 14).

¹⁰In contrast to the aeromobile arrivals of some of the diasporic returnees and student newcomers in Chaps. 2 and 4, which were marked by the absence of the person who has supposed to be there at the airport for the arriving passenger, in Sow Fall’s novel, it is the passenger who is missing.

discussions, but the *dépôt* also becomes a site of sexual violence when one of the passengers is raped. In Sow Fall's novel, the violence of deportation aeromobility (Walters 2016, 43) is not only exercised by border control mechanisms but it is an element defining the relations of the deportees held in the detention facility and that takes the form of sexual violence against women.

As a space of transit, the *dépôt* is one of involuntary stagnation hidden in the underground maze of the airport, where time loses all meaning. In the constantly glaring lights of the room, Asta is unable to distinguish day from night (83), and only the rhythm of different meals enables the passengers to keep track of the passing of time. The loss of their sense of time, generated by the *dépôt*, resonates with the precarious temporalities of clandestine migratory journeys discussed earlier in this chapter, and it is also antithetical to the importance of predefined schedules that inform normative air travel. The spatiotemporal disconnection produced by the holding facility places the captured passengers in an aerial world apart.

Compared to the narrative time dedicated to the portrayal of Asta's and other passengers' experiences of forced immobility in the *dépôt*, the description of the deportation flight itself is very short:

Ce jour, il n'y pas eu d'appel. Le même convoi pour tous. Un charter. Une voix: "Embarquement immédiat. L'ordre des escales sera indiqué à bord. Le petit déjeuner sera servi dans l'avion." (131)

That day there was no call. The same convoy for all. One charter. A voice: "Immediate boarding. The order of stopovers will be announced on board. Breakfast will be served on the plane."

The suddenness of the announcement and the way in which it is rendered laconically with no reference to the deportees' perspective captures the (state-imposed) unpredictability of precarious mobilities and resonates with the portrayals of clandestine journeys in Diallo's, Pagni's, and Oho Bambe's novels. The strategy of ellipsis, which consists of not describing the airplane passage itself, is significant from the perspective of the poetics of deportation aeromobility: the narrative silencing of the event effectively captures the shame associated with the deportees' forced return. Indeed, as Asta describes the flight in retrospect, "Le silence [...], c'était depuis l'avion. Pendant toute la durée du vol, personne n'avait parlé" (181) [Silence reigned in the airplane. Throughout the flight, no-one spoke]. What should be underlined in Sow Fall's treatment of deportation

aeromobility is that, despite the humiliation that it causes, it nevertheless marks a new beginning since Asta launches a traditional agriculture project back home. The project also has a communal dimension; it creates prospects for the local young people who might otherwise be attracted by an “adventure” of their own in Europe. The deportation flight, then, is not an end but, of necessity, a beginning of something viable back home.

CONCLUSION

Locations in North Africa have become important settings for Afro-European mobilities in narratives of clandestine migratory mobilities. Europe in these stories is not necessarily associated with traditional metropolitan centers but with maritime and insular peripheries. These stories of the roads represented by the sand and the sea provide particularly appropriate material for the study of the kinetic aspects of migration. While the migration journey is an important element of migration mobilities, it does not supply the whole picture—migrants are also mobile beyond the migration journey. To address this continuum, I have discussed both the urban mobilities of clandestine migrants and also deportation air travel, which can be seen as involuntary returns orchestrated by the European states.

The literary portrayals of Afro-European clandestine migration mobilities attest to the precarious qualities of such mobilities. The rhythms of clandestine migration mobilities vary from hasty departures to experiences of spatiotemporal limbo. They are frequently circular in nature—arrivals are postponed and returns to places previously left behind disturb the linearity of travel. Many of the texts produce translocal and transtemporal links, emphasizing the connectedness of places but also the links between historical and contemporary coerced (im)mobilities. The relationality of mobilities is explicitly acknowledged in most of the texts, which allows for effective comparisons between undocumented migration mobilities and normative forms of travel. Clandestine migratory mobilities on the African continent in the direction of Europe are often stories of traveling together—the figure of the individual traveler is less frequent in these narratives. Individual agency is also undermined by allusions to the key role of smugglers as the enablers of mobility. Compared to the shared experiences of travel on the African continent, the urban mobilities of undocumented migrants are marked by isolation and solitariness, which is telling of their exclusion from the normative mobile flows of the city. Some of the texts articulate the idea of *walking-with*—an ethical endeavor of

mobilization to walk with or in the footsteps of undocumented migrants. However, as the texts also suggest, this endeavor has its limits.

In terms of literary form, mobility structures many of the texts discussed in this chapter in an explicit manner. Mobility and the chronotope of the road propel the plot forward in *L'Odyssee des oubliés*, which could indeed be read as a “clandestine migration variation” of the road novel. With its passages of rap lyrics and prose poetry, the experimental form of *Les Lumières d'Oujda* articulates the tensions between the necessity/right to move and the obstruction of this right by border mechanisms. The notion of obstructed movement, or waiting, is conveyed in *Douceurs du bercaïl* and *Impossible de rester*, in which transits are conveyed through narrative amplitude: Sow Fall foregrounds the protagonist's experience of detention at an airport—an axiomatic site of global hyper-mobility—while Pagni's novel places Morocco at the center of Afro-European migration mobilities. *Évocation d'un memorial à Venise* adopts a narrative strategy that highlights the relationality of the different categories of global mobilities and provides a link between the mobilities of specific individuals; *Les Pieds sales* uses a similar technique but in a less consistent manner. The key turns in the plot of *Le Silence des esprits* are linked to urban mobilities and to public transport in particular. Finally, the narrative strategies used in Etoke's, Mabanckou's, and Sow Fall's portrayals of deportation flights convey the feelings of shame and finality that coerced returns generate in deportees. Interestingly enough, narratives of deportation aeromobilities articulate future-oriented plans and projects back home, although it should be underlined that these plans are devised out of necessity and as reactions to the humiliation of the coerced return.

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