THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO LITERARY URBAN STUDIES

Edited by Lieven Ameel

15

URBAN MOBILITIES IN FRANCOPHONE AFRICAN RETURN NARRATIVES

Anna-Leena Toivanen

15

URBAN MOBILITIES IN FRANCOPHONE AFRICAN RETURN NARRATIVES

Anna-Leena Toivanen

Introduction

This chapter discusses the representation of West and Central African cities in francophone African narratives of diasporic return.[1] My reading of Camara Laye's *Dramouss* (*A Dream of Africa*), Aïssatou Cissokho's *Dakar, la touriste autochtone* ("Dakar, the Native Tourist"), and Daniel Biyaoula's (*L'Impasse* "The Impasse") focuses on their portrayals of urban mobility practices to explore the role of mobility in the construction of the postcolonial African city as experienced by the diasporic subject. In so doing, this chapter contributes to the "postcolonialization" of literary urban studies and enhances the field's dialogue with mobilities research. The ongoing postcolonialization of literary urban studies can be observed in "the dialectic of the 'postcolonial metropolis' and the 'postcolonial in the metropolis'" (Sandten and Bauer xv). As far as the "postcolonial metropolis" is concerned, critical attention has started to be paid to cities that were previously overshadowed by the Western "alpha" capitals (Finch et al. 4) – Global South cities among them. While postcolonial literary studies may have been "relatively slow" to acknowledge the relevance of urban spaces for studying postcolonial issues (Herbert 200), it is also true that, in contemporary African literary studies, Lagos and Johannesburg have become popular subjects of inquiry (see, e.g., Dannenberg; Dunton; Hugo; Kehinde; Manase; Nuttal; Savonick). Lagos, for instance, has been "established as one of the world's preeminent fictionalized cities" (Dunton 68). The inclusion of African cities in (literary) urban studies often means questioning Eurocentric assumptions about African urban spaces as "failed" copies of Western cities and the idea of "Africans as fundamentally and even essentially rural creatures" (Mbembe and Nuttall 5, 9). In addition to Global South cities, literary urban studies is also witnessing a growing interest in the *postcoloniality* of Western metropolises such as Paris and London (Amine; Kuietche Fonkou; McLeod; Perfect). The inclusion of Western cities in the category of postcolonial cities undoes "the long-standing divide in urban scholarship between accounts of 'Western' and . . . cities that have been labelled as 'Third World'" (Robinson, *Ordinary Cities* 1) and emphasizes that postcoloniality is a *global* condition, not solely an attribute of the formerly colonized world.

While the colonial city can be characterized as a site of colonial power and anti-colonial resistance (Herbert 201), the postcolonial city 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 14; see also Quayson 4). The "layered" character of

the postcolonial African city is not only a matter of failures and exclusions of colonial modernity (Freund 150; Robinson, "Afterword" 90) or of how "the enduring infrastructural shapes of colonial urban planning . . . reproduce spatial violence in the postcolonial presence" (Boehmer and Davies, 9). This layeredness also relates to heterotopic diversity (Robinson, "Living in Dystopia" 229), hybridization and transcultural encounters (Lüsebrink and Mbondobari 8), and creativity in the fashioning of the African city and the African urban subject in a postcolonial, global context (Primorac 1). Reflecting this layeredness, African literary cities have been studied from the perspectives of (post)colonial modernity, alienation, unevenness, and segregation, but also as places of dreams, freedom, diversity, transculturation, and spatial connectedness (see, e.g., Akande; Dannenberg; Garnier; Krishnan; Mbondobari; Nuttall; Odhiambo; Preira; Sommer; Williams).

As the existing body of work suggests, representations of African urban spaces are imbued with diverse, sometimes conflicting meanings. In addition to spatiality, it is important to note that literary texts often represent cities as experienced through movement, attesting to the entanglement of space and mobility. While different mobility practices and transport are increasingly recognized as key elements of the urban experience and the citiness of cities (see Amin and Thrift 7–25; Gordon et al.), studies of African literary cities prioritize spatiality over mobility: apart from a few exceptions (e.g., Nuttall; Savonick; Cumpsty), relatively little research has been concerned with the *mobile* aspects of African cities.

In order to explore the intertwinement of postcolonial urban spatiality and mobility, this chapter discusses African cities in francophone African and Afrodiasporic fiction through a mobility studies lens. Mobility studies places mobility at the center of analysis by "taking the actual fact of movement seriously" (Cresswell, "Towards" 18). The invitation to take mobility seriously is particularly welcome in postcolonial studies, where "mobility" is mostly conflated with migration (Toivanen, *Mobilities* 1–2) in a way that stresses the *outcomes* of mobility rather than mobility itself (Aguiar et al. 19), promoting a sendentarist view of "movement from one settled stage at the place of departure (*dis-placement*) to another settled stage at the destination (*re-placement*)" (Schapendonk 122, original emphasis). While mobilities research is frequently associated with the social sciences and the study of "real-life" mobilities, scholars in the arts and humanities have made important contributions to the field (Aguiar et al. 4–5; Merriman and Pearce 493–494). Instead of focusing on mobility as a "brute fact," the humanities are often interested in the *representational* aspects of mobility, which are not disconnected from real-life mobilities because representations contribute to producing their meanings (Cresswell, *On the Move* 3) – in much the same way that literary cities contribute to the construction of their material counterparts (Ameel et al. 2). Furthermore, 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" (Aguiar et al. 17).

My analysis of representations of mobility practices in African cities takes as its starting point the idea that space is mobile (Murray and Upstone 193) and that mobility produces the identities of both people and places (Cresswell and Merriman 7–10). Acknowledging that "mobile people are never simply *people*" but are defined by the contexts in which their mobile subjectivities are produced (Cresswell, *On the Move* 4), my analysis focuses on a specific mobile – and also typically postcolonial – subject: the *diasporic returnee*. 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 360). The diasporic perspective challenges the "binary opposition between home and away," and the temporal and spatial distance from the hometown may even facilitate a critical perspective (Kehinde 232, 234). My text corpus, Laye's *Dramouss*, Cissokho's *Dakar, la touriste autochtone*, and Biyaoula's *L'Impasse*, narrates diasporic returnees' "homecomings" to Conakry in Guinea, Dakar in Senegal, and Brazzaville in the Republic of the

Congo. The novels feature 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 novels 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 landscapes. 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, the dilemma of belonging and outsiderness, and disillusionment about narratives of decolonization and progress (see Ravi 297; Cousins and Dodgson-Katiyo 3). The figure of the diasporic returnee, moving in and observing the strangely familiar urban space, serves as a lens for exploring the role of mobility in the production of the African city from the perspective of the displaced postcolonial subject.

Apart from Cissokho's novel, the texts discussed here may not seem like "city novels" at first glance: in *Dramouss*, for instance, the protagonist's visit to Conakry only covers the first full-length chapter, whereas the rest of the events in the narrative present describe his journey to his native village. Yet the *presence* of the urban space in plot and character construction – in contrast to texts where the city functions as a mere *setting* – (Pike 8; Ameel 234) places these novels in the category of city writing. Being narratives of diasporic return, the settings shift from the African cities of return to different European locations: the texts are, therefore, essentially *translocal* (see Mattheis). Biyaoula's and Laye's novels move between Brazzaville/Conakry and Paris and, in the case of the former, also an imaginary French provincial town. As none of these novels is "about" urban mobility either, my analysis focuses on more or less fragmented passages to map out the meanings of postcolonial African cities as represented from the viewpoint of diasporic return-ees' urban mobilities. For me, the idea of taking mobility seriously (Cresswell, "Towards" 18) in postcolonial literary analysis means devoting full attention to portrayals of concrete mobility practices, both thematically and formally, and linking their meanings to the entity of the narrative and a relevant postcolonial context (see Toivanen, *Mobilities* 5). Such a method is applicable to other texts in addition to those discussed here. The same is true of the idea of approaching texts comparatively from the perspective of a specific mobile subject: to place a focus on the urban mobilities of, for instance, clandestine migrants, commuters, or characters in crime fiction would certainly tease out the different meanings of postcolonial cities and offer new avenues for explor-ing the mobile aspects of African literary cities.

As return narratives, Laye's, Cissokho's, and Biyaoula's novels can be seen to occupy a mid-dle ground between African fiction representing African cities and African narrativizations of European cities. Unlike Aminata Sow Fall's *La Grève des Bàttu*, in which the presence of the city is used for discussing social inequality and failures of decolonization, or Fiston Mwanza Mujila's *Tram 83*, which connects an unnamed African city to wider global networks of transcultural encounters and neocolonialism, in my text corpus the African city is no longer a self-evident environment for the protagonists. Instead, the texts represent African cities as spaces in which the returnees' belonging is constantly called into question. African Paris novels such as Ousmane Socé's *Mirages de Paris* and J.R. Essomba's *Le Paradis du nord* also represent the city as alienating. However, the returnees are not outsiders in the same way as African newcomers in the (post) colonial 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 263). Later, this fascination with newness gave room for narratives in which the city is no longer a new, alienating environment but home (Preira 263; Akande 358). The feelings of urban alienation in African 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, such as Abdoulaye Sadji's *Maïmouna* or Mongo Beti's *Ville cruelle* (published under the pseudonym Eza Boto) (see Preira; Sommer), the comparison between the "here" and the "there" in my text corpus articulates itself primarily along a trans-continental axis between the former African home city and the new urban domicile in Europe. Representations of African colonial cities such as *Ville cruelle* highlight the racial division of the urban space (Preira 236–248). While the Fanonian notion of the Manichean colonial city has become obsolete in the post-independence context, postcolonial cities as represented in the text corpus do remain fractured spaces with "large pockets of privilege coexist[ing] with misery" (Mbembe and Nuttall 5). This attests to the continuation of the colonial legacy and links the texts analyzed to city novels set in the colonial era.

Dramouss: Touring in a City of "Failed" Modernity

Cissokho's Dakar and Biyaoula's Brazzaville are postcolonial cities because of their post-independence contexts, whereas in Laye's *Dramouss*, published in 1966, 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 in a wider context consisting of the end of colonial rule, as it already alludes to post-independence problems (Aas-Rouxparis 44). Compared to the occasional disappointment experienced by Cissokho's returnee regarding the current state of Dakar and Biyaoula's overtly disillusioned view of Brazzaville, Laye's protagonist's experiences of Conakry convey unproblematized belief in the discourses of modernization and progress, although the narrative repeatedly refers to colonial power structures and neocolonial operations transforming the urban space. In this sense, all of the texts attest to how the term "postcolonial" implies a continuation of, rather than a rupture from, colonialism. Economic inequalities in the urban space are rooted in colonial structures of power, and their post-independence manifesta-tions include the workings of neocolonial processes of globalization and structural adjustment programs (Quayson 4; Krishnan 5). These patterns of inequality are manifest in the text corpus, and the perspective of the diasporic returnee further intensifies them, 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 298). Indeed, the texts analyzed here resonate with somewhat stereotypical ideas of African cities as lived dystopias (Robinson, "Living in Dystopia" 222).

Dramouss is a sequel to Laye's autobiographical novel *L'Enfant noir* (*The Dark Child*), 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 is conveyed at the start of the novel by allusions to his departure from Orly airport to his "native land" (9)[2] after six years of absence. The narrative articulates a rather optimistic idea of the home-coming without the returnee questioning his belonging to the country left behind – contrary to many contemporary return narratives (see Ravi 297; Toivanen, "Uneasy Homecoming" 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 aerial view of the city is distanced and abstract (see MacArthur 269), the protagonist's coach journey from the airport into the urban center exposes the pre-carious material realities of the city, which are embodied by the rickety shacks in the suburbs, where "poverty was common as dirt" (10). The text's way of describing 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 not the protagonist's usual environment. Second, by means of the depiction of the coach trip from the airport to the city, the narrative does not simply reflect the exclusion of airports from urban centers; 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 22). The protagonist's coach trip inscribes the returnee in the materiality of the city of return but, as the signs of poverty suggest, this re-integration is not a serene experience.

Public transport permits ephemeral encounters between strangers (Wilson), and it is while he is a passenger in the coach 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" (12). The protagonist does not share his views and asserts that "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 colonialism and its discourses of progress. As the coach pursues its route, the returnee observes potholes, the absence of bitumen, the sewers, and dust – 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 do not solely convey his attempts to reconnect with Conakry through mobility but also read as the couple's endeavor to bridge the gap that the separation has generated between them, attesting to the importance of "patterns of mobility to the . . . maintenance of [romantic] relationships (Pearce 778). When the returnee breaks the silence by saying, "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 the state of their relationship, simultaneously underlining her role in his reintegration into the city (Aas-Rouxparis 45, 47). The returnee's walk around Conakry suggests that the city is simultaneously familiar but also not quite the same: "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 reaches 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 "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 mentions them again by alluding to newly constructed warehouses that have transformed the urban landscape. The returnee's displacements in the formerly familiar urban environment reveal transnational mobilities that attest to the neocolonial operations of global capitalism – operations from which the local city dwellers seem to be excluded, as suggested by Mimie's words that the magnificent new villas "are not for people like you and me" (13).

The narrative also highlights the "modernization" of urban mobilities during the protagonist's absence. When he gets 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, "We too are quite up-to-date" (13). Here, the narrative not only establishes a link between Paris and Conakry but also suggests that the modernity of the latter is delayed in comparison to the colonial metropolis, the ultimate symbol of modernity. In this comparison, Conakry is seen as an imperfect deviation from the metropolitan norm (see Robinson, "Living in Dystopia" 222), the city being too "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 "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, "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. The evaluative aspect of the comparison is constantly present. On their way to visit an island near the city by motorized boat, the returnee invites Mimie to look at the city to appreciate its beauty, referring it to as "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: "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 technology 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 narrative's way of emphasizing "modern" mobilities further contributes to the construction of the returnee as a modern mobile subject.

Dakar, la touriste autochtone: Nostalgia in a Taxi

As in *Dramouss*, in Cissokho's *Dakar, la touriste autochtone*, the representation of the city of return also starts with an airport scene. The returnee's initial enthusiasm about the "homecoming" is challenged upon arrival: the alleged "door of modernity" (23) that the airport symbolizes is contrasted with the social inequalities and poverty of the city (Toivanen, "Aeromobilities" 10). On her way from the airport to the city center in a car, the returnee observes a sleepy bourgeois neighborhood with luxurious villas but she also sees missing streetlights, a detail that even at this point in time indicates a failure of infrastructure and the socioeconomic division of the city. While her first impressions of the city are not completely positive, the returnee is clearly enthusiastic about being in Dakar: early in the morning she leaves her childhood home to visit the city "as a native tourist," claiming that "the city was waiting for me" (27). 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 Durarte 22). 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" in Dakar 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. The relative lack of introspection gives the narrative the overall impression of a documentary. The documentary style of the narrative also reflects the speed of the moving vehicle: short paragraphs open with the name of a district, followed by a quick characterization of the place, before quickly moving on to the next paragraph describing the next area. In this way, the narrative conveys the returnee's experience of urban mobility in the moving taxi and produces a sketchy cartography of the city as perceived in a state of movement. While the narrative's 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 "clutch at names that have escaped me," and then rejoicing over regaining the ability to situate herself on the map: "But that's it! Not bad!" (33).

From the moving taxi, the returnee observes the built-up urban environment: she recognizes familiar buildings but also notes their worsened state: "Defaced! Worsened! What I saw continually aroused the same adjectives in me" (30). The description of the taxi ride through popular neighborhoods lists stereotypical images of chaotic local markets but also, in a more positive tone, scenes of everyday creativity at bus stations, where the drivers' assistants use every method they can think of to try to entice passengers to enter their vehicle. Much as in *Dramouss*, the city is one in which poverty and affluence coexist. In the city center, not only does the returnee observe car drivers in expensive luxury vehicles and tourists sipping fresh drinks in a café but she also rides along a street that "exhaled a smell, a crisis" (34), with street vendors, beggars, faded facades, and closed shops – a street that has become "unrecognizable, undesirable in its soiled outfit" (34). Upon her arrival at her destination, the protagonist is surprised to learn that the cost of the taxi ride has doubled during her three years' absence. The increase in the tariff not only signals the level of inflation but also represents a personal setback: "My stay promised to be bitter because I love to ride a taxi; I already thought of curbing my desires" (31).

In addition to the documentary tone of the narrative, there are also passages with a more emotional voice betraying the protagonist's feelings of outsiderness. There is an incident at a bus station during which a man – unknown to the narrator and, according to her, mentally ill – spits in the protagonist's face as she observes the embarkation of the coaches. No words are spoken, but the faces of the people who have witnessed the scene have a surprisingly strong effect on the protagonist: "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" (36). The returnee escapes the incident by running back to her taxi. This passage is interesting for several reasons. First, it conveys the returnee's outsiderness vis-à-vis Dakar and its people. Second, the incident with the allegedly mentally ill man has turned the returnee from someone who observes life in the city 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 the "scenes typical of public transport" (30) 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 the city of return. 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 she used to wait for her school bus. The sight of the familiar bus stop gives rise to nostalgia:

> 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.
>
> *(40–41)*

Here, the present of the hometown is seen through the lens of the past, and the comparison between the now and the then reveals a melancholic attitude toward what the returnee sees as 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 not only characteristic of return narratives (Toivanen, "Uneasy Homecoming" 4) but has been a crucial element of city writing since Baudelaire, whose portrayals of Paris conveyed the estrangement caused by the rapid changes in the urban environment (Pike 17). 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 41). The reflective nostalgia of returnee protagonists toward their hometowns deterritorializes one of the key concepts of urban literary studies by linking the sense of estrangement caused by nostalgia to the failures of modernization of the postcolonial city, a deviation from the metropolitan norm.

L'Impasse: Urban Itineraries of a Disillusioned Outsider

Compared to Cissokho's novel, in Biyaoula's *L'Impasse* from 1996, the portrayals of the city of return – Brazzaville – are much more definitively filtered through the returnee's feelings of unbelonging. The protagonist's sense of alienation and the questioning of the very idea of "homecoming" are explicit in the novel's opening, which features his experiences of air travel from Paris to Brazzaville (13–38). The key dilemma in the protagonist's return is his failure to project the image of a successful migrant in the eyes of those who have stayed: having lived in France for 15 years, he is expected to have attained a certain socioeconomic status and to show it off through expensive consumer products such as designer clothes and a luxurious car. When the protagonist shows up at the airport in a shabby outfit and uninterested in playing the role assigned to returning migrants, his family members are ashamed of him. Thus, the narrative conveys the idea of disillusionment in two ways – not only that "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 3). This two-dimensional disillusionment characterizes the text'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 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 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 105–106), that is, the successful migrant. 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 local powerful men – a boutique that, significantly, is called *Habits de Paris*, "Clothes of Paris." By evoking Paris, the name of the boutique conveys the idea of translocality and ironically comments on the myth of the metropolitan center 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 Poury, whose pronunciation evokes the adjective *pourri*, "rotten." Riding as a passenger in his brother's car makes him think, "My first encounter with Brazza starts badly!" (41).

Once the brother has successfully launched the project of converting the returnee from a failure into a proper *Parisien* through his clothing, he insists that he should take the wheel of the Mercedes – with the aim of projecting the proper image of a returnee. 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:

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.

(47–48)

For a proper *Parisien*, the only acceptable mode of urban transport is a luxurious private vehicle – a frequently employed status symbol in African cultural texts (Green-Simms 14, 18). Ironically enough, the narrative also alludes to failures in the urban infrastructure by describing the condition of the roads – "All rotten, all cracked!" (123) – and in so doing, it attests to the contradictions in the promises of freedom associated with automobility in African contexts of modernity and urbanization (Green-Simms 5, 15). What is significant is that the interactions between the brothers take place inside an automobile, the emblematic symbol of freedom of movement (Urry 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, conveys the returnee's lack of opportunities to reconnect with the city on his own terms – or in transport of his own choice.

Later, the protagonist claims 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 24). Indeed, as a pedestrian in the city streets, the returnee becomes immersed in the urban landscape, which permits a more material, embodied relationship with the city (Carrera Suárez 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:

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.

(80)

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 city dwellers. This is conveyed especially 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. This 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 freedom acquires considerably more narrative 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:

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??

(81)

As in the automobile passage, this monologue in which the protagonist does not have a say is again illustrative of his difficulty in claiming agency in the renegotiation of his position vis-à-vis Brazzaville. Moreover, the quotation positions the returnee not even as a tourist unable to navigate the allegedly dangerous postcolonial city – he is considered to be a child who should not be left alone to venture out into the city without supervision. For his family members, 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 a perspective that allows for the returnee's observation of the current state of the city itself. Thus, early one morning he goes out jogging around the streets, and by alluding to street names and specific buildings, the narrative produces a cartography reflecting the protagonist's movements in the urban space and conveying his interaction with it. The narrator observes people who seem to have just come out of nightclubs, but he is also observed by others who look at him "as if I had landed from another planet" (83). His walks along the city streets not only make him aware of his unbelonging but also reveal the somewhat depressed state of Brazzaville by means of an imagery consisting of "shacks, hovels, grey houses, real tombs" (83). The forlorn aspect of the urban environment gains its full meaning through a comparison with Paris:

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.

(83)

The allusions to another planet and galaxy convey the experience of being out of place: 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 space 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 left on their own: he associates this sort of reality with cities like "Bogota or some other Latin American city" (123), not Brazzaville. His travels in the public transport minibus, or *foula-foula*, are equally eye-opening because they further underline the city's abject poverty. Buildings convey the forlorn state of the city: "It is 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" (102). 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 Srilata 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" (296). Njami's protagonist's position as a returnee vis-à-vis this postcolonial urban "deathscape" (Ravi 301) is that of an outsider-observer: he is simply passing through the desolate urban landscapes 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.

Conclusion

This chapter has contributed not only to the ongoing postcolonialization of literary urban studies but also to the generation of dialogue between the field and mobilities research. For postcolonial literary studies, a focus on the city in texts means acknowledging the role of the urban space in the construction of postcolonial subjectivities such as the diasporic returnee. Furthermore, portrayals of urban mobility and transport allow for an understanding of the literary city and the fictional character as constructed in interaction with movement. While portrayals of concrete mobility practices may seem marginal parts of the text, such passages can be revealing of the relationship between the postcolonial city and the postcolonial subject.

As my analysis of Laye's, Cisskokho's, and Njami's novels demonstrates, the mobile perspective of the diasporic returnee produces a specific view of African cities as places that are no longer self-evident or familiar environments for the African protagonists. Portrayals of urban mobility play a crucial role in the narratives: the various modes of transport move the protagonists around in the urban space, permitting encounters with the city dwellers and urban landscapes. The returnees' mobilities in the city of return highlight the tensions between memory and the present as the protagonists try to relocate themselves in the urban space while simultaneously acknowledging its transformations and the need – and impossibility – to catch up with the spatiotemporal gap that life in diaspora has produced between them and "their" cities. The diasporic returnee's perspective is a comparative and translocal one. As the returnees in the text corpus live in France and most of them in Paris, the translocal and comparative 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, as suggested in the texts' recurring imagery related to poverty, infrastructural problems, and inequality. 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 heavily influenced by the colonial discourses of modernity, as in Laye's novel, or reproduces Western stereotypes of African cities as dystopic spaces, as in Biyaoula's text. Uncritical optimism and dystopianism both regard the metropolitan center as a norm from which African cities deviate. As Lola Akande (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" – although some contemporary writers see the city "worthy of investing hope in" (354). The novels analyzed attest to this unease and adhere to this general tendency with their pessimistic tones. While their portrayals of African cities are admittedly somber, if not also problematic, the diasporic perspective underlines the "paradigm of itinerancy, mobility, and displacement" (Mbembe 227; author's translation) that has marked the past and the present of Africa and, one could add, its cities. This itinerancy is often regarded as a typical feature of twenty-first-century African literatures, but as the return narratives from the 1960s to the 1990s suggest, the connectedness of the African literary city to the rest of the world is not that new.

Notes

1 This research has received funding from the Academy of Finland, grant number 330906.
2 English quotations from Laye's novel *A Dream of Africa*. Other translations are by the author.

Works Cited

Aas-Rouxparis, Nicole. "Le personnage de Mimie dans *Dramouss* de Camara Laye." *Francofonia*, no. 24, 1993, pp. 41–52.

Aguiar, Marian et al. "Introduction: Mobilities, Literature, Culture." *Mobilities, Literature, Culture,* edited by Marian Aguiar et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 1–31.

Akande, Lola. *The City in the African Novel: A Thematic Rendering of Urban Spaces.* Tunmike Pages, 2019.

Ameel, Lieven. "The City Novel: Measuring Referential, Spatial, Linguistic, and Temporal Distances." *The Routledge Handbook of Literature and Space*, edited by Robert T. Tally Jr., Routledge, 2017, pp. 233–241.

Ameel, Lieven, et al. "Urban History and the Materialities of /in Literature." *The Materiality of Literary Narratives in Urban History*, edited by Lieven Ameel et al., Routledge, 2019, pp. 1–16.

Amin, Ash, and Nigel Thrift. *Cities: Reimagining the Urban.* Polity, 2002.

Amine, Laila. *Postcolonial Paris: Fictions of Intimacy in the City of Light.* U of Wisconsin P, 2018.

Biyaoula, Daniel. *L'Impasse.* Présence Africaine, 1996.

Boehmer, Elleke, and Dominic Davies. "Planned Violence: Post/Colonial Urban Infrastructures, Literature and Culture." *Planned Violence: Post/Colonial Urban Infrastructure, Literature and Culture*, edited by Elleke Boehmer and Dominic Davies, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 1–25.

Boto, Eza. *Ville cruelle.* Éditions Africaines, 1954.

Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia.* Basic Books, 2001.

Carrera Suárez, Isabel. "The Stranger *Flâneuse* and the Aesthetic of Pedestrianism." *Interventions*, vol. 17, no. 6, 2015, pp. 853–865.

Cévaër, Françoise. "Les stéréotypes, vecteurs de la constriction identitaire chez Biyaoula." *Présence Francophone: Revue internationale de langue et de littérature*, vol. 71, no. 1, 2008, pp. 101–120.

Cissokho, Aïssatou. *Dakar, la touriste autochtone.* L'Harmattan, 1986.

Cousins, Helen, and Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo. "Editorial: Leaving Home/Returning Home: Migration and Contemporary African Literature." *Diaspora and Returns in Fiction*, edited by Helen Cousins and Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo, James Currey, 2016, pp. 1–11.

Cresswell, Tim. *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World.* Routledge, 2006.

———. "Towards a Politics of Mobility." *Environment and Planning D*, vol. 28, 2010, pp. 17–31.

Cresswell, Tim, and Peter Merriman. "Introduction: Geographies of Mobilities – Practices, Spaces, Subjects." *Geographies of Mobilities: Practices, Spaces, Subjects*, edited by Tim Cresswell and Peter Merriman, Ashgate, 2013, pp. 1–15.

Cumpsty, Rebekah. "Sacralizing the Streets: Pedestrian Mapping and Urban Imaginaries in Teju Cole's *Open City* and Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow.*" *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 54, no. 3, 2019, pp. 305–318.

Dannenberg, Hilary. "Narrating the Postcolonial Metropolis in Anglophone African Fiction: Chris Abani's *GraceLand* and Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow.*" *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2012, pp. 39–50.

Dennis, Richard, et al. "Architectures of Hurry: An Introductory Essay." *Architectures of Hurry: Mobilities, Cities and Modernity*, edited by Phillip Gordon Macintosh et al., Routledge, 2018, pp. 1–21.

Dunton, Chris. "Entropy and Energy: Lagos as City of Words." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2008, pp. 68–78.

Durante, Erica. *Air Travel Fiction and Film: Cloud People.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Essomba, J. R. *Le Paradis du nord.* Présence Africaine, 1996.

Finch, Jason, et al. "The Second City in Literary Urban Studies: Methods, Approaches, Key Thematics." *Literary Second Cities*, edited by Jason Finch et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 3–18.

Freund, Bill. *The African City: A History.* Cambridge UP, 2002.

Garnier, Xavier. "Écrire les villes d'Afrique postcoloniales." *Versants: Revue suisse des littératures romanes*, vol. 60, no. 1, 2013, pp. 13–26.

Green-Simms, Lindsey. *Postcolonial Automobility: Car Culture in West Africa.* U of Minnesota P, 2017.

Herbert, Caroline. "Postcolonial Cities." *Cambridge Companion to the City in Literature*, edited by Kevin R. McNamara, Cambridge UP, 2014, pp. 200–215.

Hugo, Esthie. "Looking Forward, Looking Back: Animating Magic, Modernity and the African City-Future in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon.*" *Social Dynamics*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2017, pp. 46–58.

Kehinde, Ayo. "Narrating the African City from the Diaspora: Lagos as a Trope in Ben Okri and Chika Unigwe's Short Stories." *African Identities*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2007, pp. 231–246.

Krishnan, Madhu. *Writing Spatiality in West Africa: Colonial Legacies in the Anglophone/Francophone Novel.* James Currey, 2018.

Kuietche Fonkou, Aubin. *La Représentation de Paris dans le roman d'Afrique noire francophone: Cas de la période 1930 à 1960.* Éditions Universitaires Européennes, 2010.

Laye, Camara. *L'Enfant noir.* Plon, 1953.

———. *Dramouss.* Plon, 1966.

———. *A Dream of Africa.* Fontana/Collins, 1974.

Li, Tingting Elle, and Bob McKercher. "Effects of Place Attachment on Home Return Travel: A Spatial Perspective." *Tourism Geographies*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2016, pp. 359–376.

Lüsebrink, Hans-Jürgen, and Sylvère Mbondobari. "Introduction générale." *Villes coloniales/Métropoles post-coloniales: Représentations littéraires, images médiatiques et regards croisés*, edited by Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink and Sylvère Mbondobari, Narr Verlag, 2015, pp. 7–21.

MacArthur, Marit J. "One World? The Poetics of Passenger Flight and the Perception of the Global." *PMLA*, vol. 127, no. 2, 2012, pp. 264–282.

Manase, Irikidzayi. "Black Diamonds and Excess in the Fictional and Lived South African City of the Early 2000s." *English Academy Review*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2016, pp. 87–96.

Mattheis, Lena. *Translocality in Contemporary City Novels.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.

Mbembe, Achille. *Sortir de la grande nuit: Essai sur l'Afrique décolonisée.* La Découverte, 2013.

Mbembe, Achille, and Sarah Nuttall. "Introduction: Afropolis." *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, edited by Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe, Duke UP, 2008, pp. 1–33.

Mbondobari, Sylvère. "Fragmentation de la ville et du personnage dans le roman francophone d'Afrique: Le cas de *Tous les chemins mènent à l'Autre* de Janis Otsiemi." *Écrire la ville*, edited by Bertrand Gervais and Christina Horvath, Figura, 2005, pp. 45–62.

McLeod, John. *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis.* Routledge, 2004.

Merriman, Peter, and Lynne Pearce. "Mobility and the Humanities." *Mobilities*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2017, pp. 493–508.

Mujila, Fiston Mwanza. *Tram 83.* Éditions Métailié, 2014.

Murray, Lesley, and Sarah Upstone. "Conclusion." *Researching and Representing Mobilities: Transdisciplinary Encounters*, edited by Lesley Murray and Sarah Upstone, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 191–193.

Nuttall, Sarah. "City Forms and Writing the 'Now' in South Africa." *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2004, pp. 731–748.

Odhiambo, Tom. "The City as a Marker of Modernity in Postcolonial Kenyan Popular Fiction." *Scrutiny 2*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2005, pp. 46–56.

Pearce, Lynne. "Walking Out: The Mobilities of Love." *Mobilities*, vol. 13, no. 6, 2018, pp. 777–790.

Perfect, Michael. *Contemporary Fictions of Multiculturalism: Diversity and the Millennial London Novel.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Pike, Burton. *The Image of the City in Modern Literature.* Princeton UP, 1981.

Preira, Joseph Ahimann. *L'Espace urbain dans le roman africain francophone.* Éditions Universitaires Européennes, 2015.

Primorac, Ranka. "Introduction: City, Text, Future." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2008, pp. 1–4.

Quayson, Ato. *Oxford Street, Accra: City Life and the Itineraries of Transnationalism.* Duke UP, 2014.

Ravi, Srilata. "Home and the 'Failed' City in Postcolonial Narratives of 'Dark Return'." *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2014, pp. 296–306.

Robinson, Jennifer. "Afterword: Modernity and Transformation in African Cities." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2008, pp. 89–92.

———. "Living in Dystopia: Past, Present, and Future in Contemporary African Cities." *Noir Urbanisms: Dystopic Images of the Modern City*, edited by Gyan Prakash, Princeton UP, 2010, pp. 218–240.

———. *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development.* Routledge, 2006.

Sadji, Abdoulaye. *Maïmouna.* Présence Africaine, 1953.

Sandten, Cecilia, and Annika Bauer. "Re-Inventing the Postcolonial (in the) Metropolis: An Introduction." *Re-Inventing the Postcolonial (in the) Metropolis*, edited by Cecile Sandten and Annika Bauer, Brill, 2016, pp. xi–xxi.

Savonick, Danica. "'The Problem of Locomotion': Infrastructure and Automobility in Three Postcolonial Urban Nigerian Novels." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 61, no. 4, 2015, pp. 669–689.

Schapendonk, Joris. "Mobilities and Sediments: Spatial Dynamics in the Context of Contemporary Sub-Saharan African Migration to Europe." *African Diaspora*, vol. 5, 2012, pp. 117–142.

Socé, Ousmane. *Mirages de Paris.* Nouvelles Éditions Latines, 1937.

Sommer, Marcel. *Les Villes et les livres: L'Image de la ville dans la littérature africaine francophone.* L'Harmattan, 2007.

Sow Fall, Aminata. *La Grève des Báttu.* Nouvelles Éditions Africaines, 1979.

Toivanen, Anna-Leena. "Aeromobilities of Diasporic Returnees in Francophone African Literatures." *Mobilities*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2021, pp. 597–611.

———. *Mobilities and Cosmopolitanisms in African and Afrodiasporic Literatures.* Brill, 2021.

———. "Uneasy Homecoming in Alain Mabanckou's *Lumières de Pointe-Noire.*" *Studies in Travel Writing*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2017, pp. 327–345.

Urry, John. *Mobilities.* Polity, 2007.

Varma, Rashmi. *The Postcolonial City and Its Subjects: London, Nairobi, Bombay.* Routledge, 2012.

Wilkie, Fiona. *Performance, Transport and Mobility: Making Passage.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Williams, Patrick. "What is the City in Africa?" *The Palgrave Handbook of Literature and the City*, edited by Jeremy Tambling, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 527–544.

Wilson, Helen F. "Passing Propinquities in Multicultural City: The Everyday Encounters of Passengering." *Environment and Planning A*, vol. 43, 2010, pp. 634–649.