Aeromobilities of diasporic returnees in Francophone African literatures

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ABSTRACT
Postcolonial literary studies have not paid much attention to literary portrayals of mobility practices partly because the field promotes a reductive understanding of ‘mobility’ as a mere synonym for migration. In order to address this blind spot and to recognise African fictional characters as mobile subjects, the present article focuses on representations of aeromobility in Francophone African literary texts narrating diasporic returnees’ journeys back to their former home countries. As my analysis of five Francophone African return narratives from the 1980s to the 2010s suggests, the aeromobilities of Afrodiasporic returnees are marked by a sense of unease that relates to the issues of (un)belonging and guilt, failures of modernity of the postcolonial nation-state, and the unrealistic expectations that those ‘back home’ have about migrant life. The article underlines the importance of aeromobility in the production of the mobile subjectivity of the returnee and their relationship with the place of return.

Postcolonial literatures and mobility studies: enhancing dialogue

In Camara Laye’s novel Dramouss (1966) the protagonist returns to Conakry after several years of studying in Paris. Within the three pages covering his experience of air travel and journey from the airport to the city, the narrative manages to convey diverse meanings of aeromobility in the context of a diasporic homecoming: nostalgia; the non-place qualities of airports; (post)colonial failures of infrastructure; and the notion of colonial modernity. As this example suggests, there is great potential in literary texts for studying representations of mobility embedded in the history and aftermath of colonialism. Postcolonial studies have acknowledged movement as ‘an element of empire’ (Aguiar, Mathieson, and Pearce 2019, 17), and the paradigmatic position of the figure of the migrant in the field bespeaks the founding role of mobility in the postcolonial era (Toivanen 2021, 1). And yet postcolonial studies have not been affected by the mobilities turn (Lagji 2019, 229) – they are more interested in the outcomes of mobility than in mobility per se (Aguiar, Mathieson, and Pearce 2019, 19). This is exemplified in the field’s approach to migration: the focus tends to be on ‘sedentarist’ issues such as integration and push-and-pull factors rather than on the tangible aspects of being on the move (see Schapendonk 2012, 119; Mainwaring and Bridgen 2016, 247). Consequently, even if the term ‘mobility’ features with increasing frequency in current postcolonial discourses, it is mostly used as a substitute for migration, diaspora, displacement, and exile (Toivanen 2021, 1-2).¹ In short, postcolonial studies do not acknowledge the diversity of mobilities in the way that mobilities research does.

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Because of the reductive understanding of mobility, literary portrayals of mobility practices – which may overlap with migration without being reducible to it – have only rarely been recognised as valuable objects of inquiry and even when this is the case such studies do not necessarily apply a mobility studies perspective in any explicit way.² The present article is motivated by the need to enhance dialogue between mobilities research and postcolonial literary studies. By engaging in this endeavour, I concur with the idea that while ‘mobility’ does not necessarily mean the same thing for literary scholars as for social scientists, the most inspiring exchanges are achieved when the humanities ‘actively enter into dialogue with the research that has emerged from the mobilities paradigm as conceptualised by Sheller and Urry’ (Aguir, Mathieson, and Pearce 2019, 26). Obviously, such dialogues should be two-directional: mobilities research gains new insights into the meaning-making processes of mobilities through postcolonial literary analysis. For a balanced dialogue the particularity of literature must be acknowledged: representations of mobility not only ‘reflect’ real-life mobilities but contribute to producing their meanings and make mobilities ‘illuminated through representation’ (Murray and Upstone 2014, 3, 8). Moreover, the power of artistic expressions of mobility lies in their ‘potential to trace how particular movements, experiences and sensations may be grounded in very different ontologies, embodied practices, and cultural and historical contexts’ (Merriman and Pearce 2017, 497).

This article analyses representations of aeromobility in Francophone African and Afrodiasporic literary texts from the 1980s to the 2010s, acknowledging the role of fiction in ‘the construction of the global imaginary of air travel’ (Durante 2020, 10, 12). My analysis is motivated by the need to take mobility ‘in a highly literal sense’ (Greenblatt 2009, 250; emphasis original) to recognise Afrodiasporic fictional characters as (aero)mobile subjects. I focus 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). Aeromobility captures ideas such as freedom of movement and the compression of time and space but also the proliferation of borders. Much like other modern mobile technologies, aeromobility carries the legacy of colonial modernity (see, e.g., Foster 2003; Pirie 2004; Aguir 2011; Green-Simms 2017; Neigh 2018). Indeed, ‘air voyage remains subject to hierarchical and colonialist logics of power and exclusion’ (Durante 2020, 11).

I approach aeromobility from the perspective of a mobile subjectivity that recurs continuously in Francophone African literatures: the diasporic returnee.³ By focusing on the air travel of diasporic returnees my analysis recognises that ‘mobile people are never simply people’ but are defined by the contexts in which their mobile subjectivities are produced (Cresswell 2006, 4; emphasis original), and 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’ (Cwerner 2009, 5). The aim of this article is to examine how aeromobility contributes to the production of the subjectivity of the diasporic returnee and her/his relationship with the place of return.

The text corpus includes 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 Loïn de mon père (2010), and Jussy Kiyindou’s Des Ombres et leurs échos … (2019). Most of these authors live/have lived in diaspora: Rakotoson became exiled from Madagascar to France in the 1980s; Tadjo was born in France, was brought up in the Ivory Coast, and has lived across the globe, including in various African countries; Biyaoula left Congo-Brazzaville to pursue his studies in France, and Kiyindou followed the same itinerary by leaving his country at the age of eleven.⁴ While I am not interested in tracing biographical ‘facts’ in the texts, it is possible that the portrayals of ‘homecomings’ have been inspired by the authors’ own experiences. This is most obvious in Rakotoson’s work, which, unlike the rest of the texts labelled as novels, 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 the ‘non-fiction dominant’, Rakotoson’s portrayal of aeromobility does not differ from the rest of the texts – probably because Rakotoson is also a writer of fiction whose lyrical yet (self-)ironic style is also manifest in her travelogue. In all the texts, air travel is narrated from the first-person perspective, which immerses the reader in a tangible and ‘unmediated’ narrativisation of the aeromobile experience. This may have ‘a moving effect’ on the reader since literary texts ‘hold great potential to recount the lives of those affected by mobility’ (Bond 2018, 7). While certainly not exhaustive, the text corpus is a cross-selection of returnee narratives with scenes of aeromobility – this is not automatically the case for African return narratives in general. For instance, Kangni Alem’s Coca cola jazz (2002), Kossi Efoui’s Solo d’un revenant (2008), and Alain Mabanckou’s Lumières de Pointe-Noire (2013) do not narrate the part played by transnational air travel in the diasporic return. While comparisons between Francophone African and other ‘postcolonial’ representations of returnees’ aeromobilities are beyond the scope of this article, many elements (identity dilemmas, diasporic guilt, nostalgia, and failures of decolonisation) that the aeromobility scenes in the text corpus embody can certainly also be found in other postcolonial texts. The specificity of the Franco-African context is, of course, the myth of the universality of France and the colonial politics of assimilation, which are very visible in Biyaoula’s text.

In general, airports and air travel feature marginally in literary texts as markers of narrative transitions. This is also the case for the texts analysed here; none of them is ‘about’ aeromobility per se, and the passages featuring aeromobility are rather short. And yet it is ‘precisely this ambient, unremarkable quality that contributes to the culture of flight’ (Schaberg 2011, 13). That portrayals of aeromobility easily go unnoticed attests to how air travel has become banal (Cwerner 2009, 6). However, the fact that such ‘trivial’ scenes continually recur in fiction suggests that they have specific functions in narrative structures, plot construction, and character development (Schaberg 2011, 1–2). Fiction also has the power to distance the reader from their own ‘trivial’ experiences of aeromobility, allowing them to see the complexities of air travel more clearly (Durante 2020, 8).

My reading focuses on landscapes of aeromobility: the airport, the plane, and the flight route (Adey, Budd, and Hubbard 2007, 774). Representations of aeromobility can be seen as a set of stages consisting of departure, passage, and arrival. Departure signals detachment from a specific context and localised 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). This pattern of the stages of the journey is useful for my analysis as it attests to how mobility generates the identities of people and places (Cresswell and Merriman 2013, 7–9). In return narratives, the role of mobility in producing the identities of the traveller and the place of travel relates to the returnees’ attempts to renegotiate their relationship with their former ‘homes’. That the transitions between different stages of the journey are not that smooth contributes to the unease informing the aeromobilities of diasporic returnees.

**Postcolonial aeromobilities and diasporic return narratives**

Mobility played a crucial role in the colonial project. ‘Modern’ forms of mobility such as the railway, automobility and aeromobility were introduced in the colonised world for practical reasons but also to underpin the ‘superiority’ of the colonial culture (see, e.g. Pirie 2004; Caprotti 2011; Aguiar 2011; Green-Simms 2017). While these technologies were adopted by colonised subjects in their attempts to become ‘modern’, the inseparability of colonial ideologies from the concept of modernity made the lure of modern mobilities problematic for them. For the colonised, automobility, for instance, was a ‘haunted infrastructure’ (Savonick 2015, 686) with its promise of freedom embedded in colonial modernity (Green-Simms 2017, 14–15), although scholars have also underlined African drivers’ transgressive uses of technologies that were initially colonial (see, e.g., Hart 2016). Modern mobilities such as automobility were unequally distributed not only during the colonial period but also in the post-independence period (Green-Simms 2010, 2017, 2018).
210, 213). Compared with automobile, air travel was – and remains – even more an unevenly accessed mobility resource for the great majority of (post)colonial/Global South subjects (Ni Loingsigh 2009, 55–56; Cwerner 2009, 2–3). As an enabler of transnational travel, aeromobility is the ultimate symbol of modern mobility and colonial superiority. It played a key role in ‘informing public understandings about Empire while engendering enthusiasm for the colonial project’ (Adey, Budd, and Hubbard 2007, 777), and, as such, it was the ‘fulfilment of a colonial fantasy’ by enabling easy access to colonial territories (Neigh 2018, 5). Nowadays, aeromobility’s colonial legacy is manifest in how air travel makes the Global South easily reachable for Western tourists (Neigh 2018, 6).

Aeromobility has also contributed to the accessibility of (post)colonial centres. By making the centre reachable, the aeroplane is often represented as ‘a symbol of promise and a figure of hope’ (Adey 2008, 1330) in African fiction featuring characters travelling to Europe for the first time (see Toivanen 2020). However, aeromobility’s promises of freedom remain compromised: given the difficulties of (post)colonial subjects’ attempts to claim colonial modernity as theirs, the characterisation of airports ‘as sites of alienation, strange encounters and inequality’ (Adey 2008, 1319) is particularly pertinent. Air travel has also affected African migration: not only may (affluent) Global South migrants travel to the Global North but they may also visit their former home countries (Cwerner 2009, 5; Neigh 2018, 3). This two-fold aspect of aeromobility as an enabler of transnational mobility informs my analysis.

One crucial ‘postcolonial’ aspect of aeromobility is the control of transnational travel. 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 in terms of class, nationality and race generate inequalities (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). The exclusionary aspects of aeromobility have been addressed in African novels narrating deportations of clandestine migrants – these can be considered non-voluntary returns.9 In the texts analysed here, the exclusionary elements of aeromobility are less striking: as voluntary returnees and in the role of ‘diaspora tourists’ (Li & McKercher 2016, 360) the travellers belong to the kinetic elite. 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 of Africans travelling 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 modern mobilities. In so doing, they challenge romanticised ideas associating aeromobility with freedom of movement (see Adey 2003, 1367).

Narratives of return have a long history in Afro diasporic literatures. Return to the ‘original continent’ was a central theme in black cultural movements such as the Harlem Renaissance and Nègritude in the early-twentieth century. Cahier d’un retour au pays natal (1939), by Aimé Césaire, one of the key figures of Nègritude, is probably the most canonical of Francophone Afrodiasporic 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), and it was also motivated by experiences of racism. Early return narratives often imagined Africa in a romanticised light because the returnees did not have personal links with the continent. This is where contemporary return narratives differ from their predecessors: the former represent the return more realistically (Ledent and Tunca 2014, 113) and are often characterised by disillusionment (Cousins and Dodgson-Katibo 2016, 3). Contemporary diasporic literatures are sceptical 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; see also Cousins and Dodgson-Katibo 2016, 9–10). Consequently, the ‘homecomings’ of diasporic returnees are often informed by an unease that results from the spatio-temporal and affective distance from the former home (Toivanen 2017; Ravi 2018, 66–67; Jones 2019, 217–246).
Reading aeromobilities in Francophone African return narratives

The analysed text corpus ranges from the 1980s to the 2010s. Since the 1980s, air travel fares have decreased and routes have increased, making aeromobility more accessible for a larger number of travellers (Neigh 2018, 5; Cwerner 2009, 7) – developments which are also reflected in the growing presence of airports and aeroplanes in cultural products (Durante 2020, 10). While air travel has become more democratised, the gap between business and low-cost/economy class travellers has simultaneously widened (Aday, Budd, and Hubbard 2007, 782), and in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks a ‘new regime of surveillance and security’ (Cwerner 2009, 8) has been established. To a limited extent, the diversification and increased accessibility of air travel is reflected in the text corpus: 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 diasporic 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. The ordering of the texts in the following analysis, however, is thematic and reflects less the developments of aeromobility than the returnees’ experiences air travel. Tadjo’s and Rakotoson’s texts focus on the problematics of diasporic identity and guilt. In Biyaoula’s novel, representations of aeromobility convey failures of decolonisation and underline the role of air travel in the production of the figure of the ‘successful migrant’. And finally, Cissokho’s and Kiyindou’s novels articulate a nostalgic, romanticised idea of the ‘homecoming’, although my reading exposes their darker undercurrents.

Diasporic unbelonging and guilt: Tadjo and Rakotoson

The factors motivating the return vary from family reasons to the returnee’s personal quests for identity and belonging. One recurrent motive is the death of a family member – indeed, death seems to be an event that justifies the expense of a plane ticket in situations in which returning would otherwise be out of the question. In the case of Tadjo’s privileged protagonist in Loin de mon père (2010), who returns from Paris to Abidjan because the death of her father, her long absence from ‘home’ is less a question of financial means than the civil war ravaging 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 aeroplane on its way to Abidjan. That the story opens with an air travel scene conveys the protagonist’s state of in-between-ness: she is no longer in her home in Paris and has not yet reached her former home country. As such, the aeroplane passage embodies ‘a sense of simultaneity, of being at least two places at once’ (MacArthur 2012, 273), which is also the key dilemma of diasporic identity. The distressing impact of the return on the protagonist is conveyed in the opening sentence: ‘Impossible to sleep’ (Tadjo 2014, 9). For Nina, the nocturnal sky is ‘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, ‘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 the relaxation movements that she performs. As the ‘stiffness’ (10) persists, Nina feels as if she were on an endless journey during which her body and mind have abandoned her: a sort of a death, that is. The stiffness also 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, ‘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 the violence of the civil war. The flight is referred to as ‘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 state of uncertainty.

Upon landing, the sun is rising, which suggests that Nina’s anxieties start to dissipate as 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 (see Leed 1991, 56, 85). The first thing that she feels as the aeroplane doors open is ‘the country’s burning breath’ (11) – not exactly the most welcoming element. At the passport control despite her Ivorian passport she is interrogated about the length of her stay. It is only when the customs officer identifies Nina as the daughter of an 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. As the narrative proceeds, it becomes clear that Nina’s airport experience is not exactly 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 it further suggests that she is an outsider in her ‘own’ country. Like the feeling of stiffness, sweating adds to the corporeal unease generated by the ‘homecoming’.

In the arrivals hall, Nina encounters a crowd that includes not a single familiar face, which makes her feel disoriented. When she exits the airport, a young man asks whether she needs a taxi and seized her luggage in the hope of gaining some money by offering his services. At this moment, Nina’s cousin turns up as arranged and there is a scuffle over the luggage between him and the intrusive porter, who, according to the narrator, regards the suitcase as ‘his prize’ (13). Nina remains a passive observer of the incident – her unconvincing attempt to intervene by saying, ‘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 ‘own’ country but also indicates the sense of guilt that an affluent returnee feels in her encounter with local inequalities (see also 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 France-based Malagasy author Michèle Rakotoson. The opening sentence reads simply: ‘Roissy, l’aéroport’ (7) (‘Roissy, the airport’). This underlines the importance of aeromobility for the narrative11: it is air travel that enables the returnee to go ‘back home’. Furthermore, by setting the opening scene at an airport the narrative foregrounds travel and departure as tropes that motivate the entire text. What follows the laconic announcement of the co-ordinates 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 aeroplanes; 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 warmthess: ‘Je vais au soleil’ (8) (‘I am going to the sun’). The narrator’s 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 problematic of her ‘homecoming’: she feels at home neither in Paris nor in her native Antananarivo.

While the aeroplane is supposed to take the narrator away from the ‘coldness’ of her diasporic home to the ‘sun’ of her native land, the travel experience itself is distressing. The oppressive silence of the airport persists on the aeroplane. Much as in the case of Tadjo’s returnee, the anxious thoughts of the narrator in Rakotoson’s narrative start to wander once she is seated. As Erica Durante (2020, 69) 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’. Immobile in her seat in the aeroplane, 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 some degree of determination, she exclaims: ‘Je n’ai plus envie de parler d’exil et de déchirement. Moi, je rentre chez moi’ (11) (‘I no longer want talk about exile or crying. I am going home’). These words signal the narrator’s 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 aeroplane window, disparate elements of the landscape become mixed and abstract, generating the impression that the landscape cannot be properly grasped (cf. MacArthur 2012, 269). The narrator nevertheless interprets the landscape, seeing in it traces of exile and slavery. The bird’s-eye perspective seems to be a privileged position for observing the homeland, but it also signals detachment from the landscape as a lived entity (see Rink 2017, 892). The narrator’s anxious train of thought is interrupted by the pilot’s ‘very professional voice’ (14) announcing the approaching landing: 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 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 also 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 case, 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 of ‘grasping/representing the home country/town informs Rakotoson’s return narrative in its entity (Ravi 2014, 298). Upon landing, the narrator observes old military aeroplanes that remind her of the years of political turmoil. The sight of the planes brings back painful memories, and the narrator states that she will look away when passing buildings that might evoke memories of friends who disappeared or were killed during the crisis. In this sense, the distanced and fragmented vision that she has had of the landscape through the aeroplane window allows for a more ‘merciful’ perspective on ‘home’.

At the airport, Rakotoson’s narrator is surprised to see smiling border officers who show no interest in inspecting her travel documents or luggage. Here, the narrative differs from the experiences of Tadjo’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 modernity and global connectedness that impresses local people from a modest socio-economical background. While the airport is not portrayed as chaotic, the presence of porters eagerly offering their services signals arrival in a place where transnational travel is the privilege of only a few. The main source of anxiety at the airport for the narrator is the fear that there is no one there for her; this is her ‘angoisse habituelle’ (18) (‘habitual anguish’). This is where the diasporic returnee differs from the typical contemporary air traveller as an ‘isolated, anonymous individual’ who travels to and from airports alone (Durante 2020, 36): in return narratives, one often finds 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 ago. The mother’s absence at the arrivals hall makes the narrator truly apprehend the death of her parents – in France this acknowledgement was merely ‘virtual’ (18). In this way, the arrivals hall symbolises the loss of the narrator’s parents, adding a gloomy shade to the text’s representation of aeromobility. Right after
the narrator’s desolate realisation 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. In Rakotoson’s travelogue, as in Tadjo’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 idea of homecoming.

**Disillusionment and the making of the successful emigrant: Biyaoula**

In Biyaoula’s *L’Impasse* (1996), the anxieties involved in returnee aeromobilities relate to the failures of decolonisation and to dilemmas of identity, but unlike in the texts discussed above, the latter is less a question of introspective interrogation of diasporic unbelonging than of the expectations that those who have stayed behind have about the returnee. Like Rakotoson’s travelogue, *L’Impasse* (1996) 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’). By setting the very opening of the novel at the airport, ‘a threshold to elsewhere’ (Durante 2020, 96), the narrative conveys the idea of being in transit. The protagonist, a Congolese working-class migrant, is on his way, after fifteen years of absence, to visit his native Brazzaville for a holiday. Unlike Rakotoson’s portrayal of the Parisian airport as a place bereft of identity, in Biyaoula’s story Roissy is characterised by the presence of African travellers, 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 fancy, expensive clothes, much in the spirit of Congolese dandysm, which is known as *La Sape*, or as a re-enactment of air travel before its trivialisation, when elegant clothing still distinguished those who could fly from those who could not (see Durante 2020, 91). The elegance of the vacanciers makes the protagonist feel as if he was in the middle of a fashion show or some sort of a ‘fake’ spectacle. 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* (2004) discuss underprivileged Africans’ unrealistic ideas about France as an Eldorado (Cévaër 2008, 103–105). Their ideas are fuelled by the stories told by the returnees, generating pressure on all 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 *Parisen* because of his shabby outlook, he becomes the subject of the other returnees’ mockery. Hence, the Parisian airport is represented as an alienating environment, but not because of its character as a non-place or its association with colonial modernity. Quite the contrary, the negative meanings of the airport spring from its being a gateway to home – a place where the returnee must correspond to the image of a successful emigrant.

The passage itself is an equally agonising experience for the narrator, representing a continuation of the ‘spectacle’ at the airport. 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 aeroplane passage pays little attention to the description of the journey itself; the narrative is occupied by the narrator’s introspection of unease, rather than allusions to the environment. The narrative mentions only 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 (see Caprotti 2011, 380). Interestingly, the local landscape and the approaching landing generate fears of death in the returnees: ‘Mais on aterri. 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 last hour has not yet arrived’). Indeed, the ‘homecoming’ may well be a social death if the returnee fails to live up to the expectations of those back home.

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 aeroplane with the others. The reason becomes clear later: they want to make an impressive entrance at the local airport. Those 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 un 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 deeply affected by this scene, which for him reveals some very negative elements of Congolese culture. He walks to the passport control like a robot.

The airport itself is portrayed as grey, small, sad, and timeworn. The narrator notes that the building has not been renovated since he left. This does not surprise him; quite the contrary: ‘Je m’y attendais’ (30) (‘This is what I expected’), he claims. He observes large portraits of the political elite on the walls, as if inspecting the arriving passengers. 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 Tadjo’s novel, the narrator’s passport is closely scrutinised by a border officer, while those of ‘important’ people are not checked at all. The officer addresses the protagonist in an aggressive, 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 home country. 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 powerful acquaintances but also ashamed of his apparent socio-economic failure in France. 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 Biyaoula’s novel, the different stages of the journey merge into one wholesale experience of alienation, and the scenes of aeromobility stage the setting for the narrator’s unsuccessful ‘homecoming’. The narrative 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-Katiko 2016, 3). The airport is hardly a ‘site at which the ritual of homecoming meritment begins’, as Erica Durante (2020, 163) argues in her short account of the Brazzaville airport scene of the novel.

**Nostalgia with dark undercurrents: Cissokho & Kiyindou**

While Biyaoula’s novel uses scenes of aeromobility to discuss the cult of power and wealth and the failures of decolonisation in an African postcolony, 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 Tadjo’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 and nostalgia. Unlike the oppressive ambience and self-tormenting introspection of the intercontinental journey in Tadjo’s, Rakotoson’s, and Biyaoula’s texts, the return journey undertaken by Cissokho’s narrator is characterised 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 any dilemmas of diasporic unbelonging. Everyone is so eager to reach the destination that their excitement prevents them from sleeping. Once the plane has landed, the enthusiastic passengers hurry to get their hand luggage from the overhead lockers and all of them try to exit the plane simultaneously.

Upon arrival it is dark and the passengers cannot see the colour of the land – this seems to be important to them as it is mentioned twice in the short aeroplane passage. They do, however, feel the heat, which, unlike in Tadjo’s novel, is not an unwelcoming element but characteristic of ‘home’. The protagonist has left Senegal three years previously, but already in this time things have changed – and 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 of the baggage trolleys. An annoyed returnee refers to the porters as ‘emmerdeurs sans scrupule’ (‘unscrupulous nuisances’), ‘voooleurs’ [sic] (‘thieifs’), and ‘marchands de rien’ (‘merchants of nothing’), and considers their behaviour ‘indigne devant cette porte de la modernité’ (22–23) (‘unworthy in front of 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 country itself is somehow compromised. The nameless passenger goes on to scold the porters, and when s/he claims that ‘Les problèmes sociaux de ces gens ne nous regardent pas’ (23) (‘The social problems of these people are not our concern’), the narrative flashes 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 naïve enthusiasm of the returnee is undermined as the failures of modernity and the social inequalities of the former home country are immediately exposed on their arrival.

In Kiyindou’s Des Ombres et leurs échos . . . (2016), 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 Tadjo’s and Rakotoson’s returnees, because of the civil war Kiyindou’s protagonist has been away for thirteen years. He returns to Congo to search for his mother, who disappeared during the war. However, unlike Tadjo’s and Rakotoson’s texts, whose scenes of aeromobility articulate feelings of guilt and grief typical of narratives of ‘dark return’, in which expatriates return to their crisis-ridden home countries (Ravi 2014, 296), in Des Ombres et leurs échos . . . 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 that he has banished from his consciousness: 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 clearly 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 recognise it before smelling and touching it’). The explicit intertextual allusion to Césaire’s Cahier d’un retour au pays natal (1939) underlines the romanticised aspects of the return, which stand in contrast to the current trend towards disillusionment and scepticism 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 travellers’ eagerness to see the colour of the soil from the ‘god-like’ perspective of the air traveller (see 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 travelling as a child; the figure of 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 majority of the texts under discussion here. One illustration of this is the aeroplane’s 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 feels 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 aeroplane passage, the role played by vision is smaller. Since, of all of the senses, vision is the one most associated with power, control, and detachment (Rink 2017, 879), by shifting the emphasis to sounds and smells the narrative suggests that the landscape is now being lived, not merely observed through the ‘aeromobile gaze’ (see Adey 2008, 777) and through the ‘irremovable transparent filter’ (Durante 2020, 3) of the aeroplane window. When the returnee exits the aeroplane and enters the airport he is overwhelmed by the forgotten smells that he associates with ‘home’ and his childhood. This clearly challenges Augé’s (1992) idea of airports as non-places lacking identity and history (see Urry 2007, 146–147; Adey, Budd, and Hubbard 2007, 778; Durante 2020, 130).

The arrival of Kiyindou’s protagonist at Brazzaville airport diverges from the anxious tones of Biyaoula’s returnee’s arrival in the same city, from Tadjo’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 discussed here, 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 aggressive porters. Furthermore, as he enters the arrivals hall, he recognises several familiar faces in the crowd. Here, the narrative stands in sharp contrast to Tadjo’s and Rakotoson’s texts, where the returnees’ feelings of unbelonging are conveyed through the fear that no one is there for them at the airport. In Kiyindou’s novel, the presence of thirty 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, 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 really 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 traumatising conditions of his exile allow the reader to contextualise the return and to challenge the ‘unproblematic’ impressions generated by the portrayals of aeromobility. Thus, there is a dark undercurrent lurking behind the novel’s nostalgic and romantic portrayal of aeromobility.

**Conclusion: aeromobilities and the making of the diasporic returnee**

Literary portrayals of the aeromobilities of diasporic returnees produce complex meanings of the mobility practice itself and play a key role in generating the identities of the traveller and what the
place of return means to them. In addition to being important elements in the narratives’ construction of a mobile fictional character (the returnee) and place (the place of return in particular), scenes of aeromobility have specific functions in the narrative structure. In the text corpus, they mostly feature in the beginning of the stories, conveying the idea of transition and the feeling of not being entirely ‘at home’ anywhere typical of the diasporic experience. Portrayals of air travel passages often mark a narrative transition during which the returnees’ anxieties concerning the spatio-temporal distance from their former homelands become intensified as the inertia of a long-haul flight makes room for introspection. Scenes of aeromobility are synecdochical of the texts’ problematics of the diasporic ‘homecoming’.

Portrayals of diasporic returnees’ aeromobilities attest to the anxious aspects of ‘the homecoming’. These spring from the context in which the travellers’ aeromobilities are embedded: that of returning to one’s former home country in the Global South after a long absence. The anxieties relate to the question of belonging and distance, but also to guilt caused by one’s socio-economic privilege and the fact of having been absent during national crises as in Tadjjo’s and Rakotson’s texts. Scenes of aeromobility also attest to the failures of modernisation of African postcolonial nation-states and convey the unrealistic expectations those at home have about migrant life, as suggested in Biyaoula’s novel. In line with the general disillusionment characteristic of contemporary return narratives, scenes of aeromobility in most of the analysed texts question the very concept of ‘homecoming’. Portrayals of aeromobility in Cissokho’s and Kiyindou’s novels, 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 realisation of social inequalities and failures of modernisation manifest at the airport of arrival, the romantic tones in Kiyindou’s novel are particularly problematic given that the protagonist was forced to leave his country as a child because of the civil war.

Airports of departure tend to be portrayed as lacking emotion, but significantly enough, airports of arrival are equally represented negatively as places of exclusion, alienation, and failures of decolonisation. In general, the texts challenge the idea of airports as non-places lacking identity and history. Many portrayals of the aeroplane passage also feature the returnees observing the landscapes of their homelands from above. The bird-eye view through the aeroplane window not only connotes privilege, but also symbolises the distance between the returnee and the place of return. The returnee figures in the text corpus are relatively affluent migrants who can afford the return — and who can travel back to their diasporic homes after a visit to a place where they may no longer feel at home. The ‘homecomings’ enabled by aeromobility are the voluntary returns of privileged travellers, and the meanings of such air travel experience certainly differ from those of underprivileged mobile subjects such as deportees. Nevertheless, the air travel of diasporic returnees attests to the global inequalities of the colonial aftermath, which literary representations of aeromobility render tangible even when the returnees’ own mobilities are not significantly hindered by unequal power structures.

(1) This trend is apparent – among a plethora of other examples – in Robert Spencer’s and Anastasia Valassopoulos’s Postcolonial Locations: New Issues and Directions in Postcolonial Studies (2021), in which one of the four thematic chapters is entitled ‘Mobility’. However, there is nothing that new – as suggested by the title of the book – in the way in which mobility is approached in the chapter. It is generally used as a synonym for global migratory movements and the literary examples of ‘mobility’ are mostly about migration in a wider sense and not about mobility practices per se.

(2) For studies on mobility practices in African/Afrodiasporic literatures, see, e.g., (Ni Loingsigh 2009; Steiner 2014; Upstone 2014; Savonick 2015; Forsdick 2016; Mazauric 2016; Green-Simms 2017; Neigh 2018; Toivanen 2021).

(3) The figure of the diasporic returnee draws attention to the diverse directions of transnational African mobilities rather than prioritising movement away from Africa as often done in
studies addressing African transnational mobilities. In narratives of return, Africa is the destination, although the very concept of ‘return’ implies anterior departure.

4. I was unable to find relevant biographical information on Cissokho.

5. Cissokho’s novel also uses the first-person plural as the narrator refers to herself and her husband. Cissokho’s text is the unique example in the text corpus in which the protagonist has a travelling companion.

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

7. Representations of aeromobility have been largely neglected by postcolonial literary scholars. For some of the exceptions, see Neigh (2018); Ni Loingsigh (2009); Toivanen (2020). MacArthur (2012) and Durante (2020) also discuss some ‘postcolonial’ texts.

8. By focusing on the mobilities of diasporic returnees, my analysis differs from the study of other postcolonial mobilities as the position of the diasporic returnee vis-à-vis colonial modernity and mobile technologies is informed by a specific form of hybridity: the diasporic returnee is part of (at least) two different worlds.

9. For novels addressing the aeromobilities of the ‘deportation class’ (Walters 2002), see Aminata Sow Fall’s *Douceurs du berçail* (1998), Alain Mabanckou’s *Bleu-blanc-rouge* (1998), and Nathalie Étoke’s *Un Amour sans papiers* (1998).

10. In the case of Tadjo’s (2014) novel I have used the English translation. All the other translations from the novels included are mine.

11. This is where Rakotoson’s travelogue differs from the majority of contemporary travel narratives which often leave the physical part of the journey unaddressed (see Pettinger 2012, 127).

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