Modes of transport and rhythms of mobility in Bernard B. Dadié’s *Un Nègre à Paris* (1959) and Tété-Michel Kpomassie’s *L’Africain du Groenland* (1981)

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**ABSTRACT**
This article discusses Bernard B. Dadié’s *Un Nègre à Paris* (1959; 1994) and Tété-Michel Kpomassie’s *L’Africain du Groenland* ([1981] (2015); 2001) by focusing on their portrayals of transport and rhythms of mobility, and in so doing enhances the dialogue between travel writing studies and mobilities research. The texts’ representations of mobility practices and the rhythms thereof contribute to the production of the traveller figure (tourist; Arctic adventurer) and the destination (colonial metropolis; Arctic periphery). Dadié’s portrayals of transport produce a poetics of mobility that conveys a sense of speed and hurry but also of not being in the rhythm of the colonial metropolis, which eventually transforms into a critical attitude towards assimilationist impulses. Kpomassie’s travelogue captures the idea of an unreachable destination and the traveller’s struggle to pursue the journey despite obstacles, but also attests to the productive qualities of inertia as well as to the eurythmy of Arctic mobilities.

**KEYWORDS**
African travel writing; Greenland; mobility; Paris; rhythm; transport

While travel has been a central theme in African written and oral literatures throughout history (Mortimer 1990, 1; Fonkua 1998, 9; Khair 2006, 25–26), “dominant discourses of travel” (Clifford 1997, 33) have failed to recognise Africans as travellers, reducing their mobilities to slave trade, migration, or intellectual movements (Ni Loingsigh 2009, 2–3). Similarly, Western-based generic criteria have contributed to the exclusion of African authors from the genre of travel writing (Forsdick 2005, 202; Khair 2006, 26; Ni Loingsigh 2016, 185–188). Postcolonial approaches to the genre have brought African travel writing into the limelight (see, e.g. Ni Loingsigh 2009; Moynagh 2015; Jones 2019a) and recent years attest to its growing popularity, as suggested by Sihle Khumalo’s *Dark Continent, My Black Arse* (2007), Emmanuel Iduma’s *A Stranger’s Pose* (2018), and Nanjala Nyabola’s *Traveling While Black: Essays Inspired by a Life on the Move* (2020), to mention only a few examples.

This ‘boom’ in African travel writing is an Anglophone phenomenon. Francophone African travelogues do exist, but they have not necessarily been identified as such (see Forsdick 2018, 94). A recent case in point is the publishers’ classification of Michèle
Rakotoson’s *Juillet au pays: Chroniques d’un retour à Madagascar* (2007) and Alain Mabanckou’s *Lumières de Pointe-Noire* (2013) as memoirs rather than as travelogues.1 Francophone African travel texts that are nowadays unanimously seen to belong to the genre include Bernard B. Dadié’s fictionalised travelogue *Un Nègre à Paris* (1959)2 and Tété-Michel Kpomassie’s *L’Africain du Groenland* (1981; 2001) (see Mudimbe-Boyi 1992, 27; Ní Loingsigh 2009; Forsdick 2018, 93–94; Forsdick 2019b, 249; Jones 2019b, 292). As conveyed by their titles, Dadié’s text – written in the form of a long letter addressed to the narrator’s friend – represents an Ivorian traveller’s journey to the colonial metropolis, whereas Kpomassie’s Togolese narrator travels to Greenland. While Dadié’s text – in its tongue-in-cheek manner – attests to the fascination of the African colonised subject with Paris, Kpomassie’s travelogue escapes the conventional pattern of the African periphery versus the colonial centre with its colonised, Arctic destination (Ní Loingsigh 2009, 123). Both texts can be read as African adaptations of exploration narratives: in Kpomassie’s case the link is obvious, but *Un Nègre à Paris* also evokes colonial travel writing with its parodic account of an African tourist adventuring in the ‘exotic’ metropolis ‘jungle’.

The reasons motivating my comparative approach to Dadié’s and Kpomassie’s travelogues, however, do not spring from their negotiations with the colonial heritage of travel writing – a theme that has been discussed by Aedín Ní Loingsigh (2009, 75–98, 123–149; see also Célestin 2001). Instead, I read the travelogues through a mobility studies lens by focusing on their portrayals of modes of transport and rhythms of mobility, with the goal of asking how these contribute to the construction of the figure of the traveller as well as that of the destination. Mobility studies is a field that places the act of movement at the centre of analysis (Sheller 2014, 45). The key concept of mobility “involves displacement – the act of moving between locations” (Cresswell 2006, 2), and this act is “imbued with meaning” (Adéy 2010, 33). While mobility studies is often associated with social sciences and the study of ‘real-life’ mobilities, the genealogy of the field is firmly rooted in the humanities (Aguiar, Mathieson, and Pearce 2019, 4–10; Merriman and Pearce 2019, 2–4) – this is reflected, among other things, in how the field acknowledges the role of representation in shaping our understandings of mobility (Cresswell 2006, 3; Aguiar, Mathieson, and Pearce 2019, 4). In line with the current humanities turn in mobilities research, literary scholars are starting to adopt mobility studies theories in their reading of the ways in which literary texts produce the meanings of mobility (Pearce 2020, 77–78) and in so doing are examining how the texts contribute to an understanding of “the social and spatial aspects of mobile practices within their cultural milieu” (Aguiar, Mathieson, and Pearce 2019, 2).

Mobility studies is all about “taking the very act of movement seriously” (Cresswell 2010, 18). In a similar vein, Stephen Greenblatt writes that “mobility must be taken in a highly literal sense” (2010, 250; emphasis in original) and that “only when conditions directly related to literal movement are firmly grasped will it be possible fully to understand the metaphorical movements” (250). According to Greenblatt:

> the physical, infrastructural, and institutional conditions of movement – the available routes; the maps; the vehicles; the relative speed; the controls and costs; the limits on what can be transported; the authorizations required; the inns, relay stations and transfer points; the travel facilitators – are all serious objects of analysis. (2010, 250)
When analysing travel texts, one way of taking mobility seriously is to focus on portrayals of mobility practices that often involve modes of transport (see Toivanen 2021, 5). Dadié’s and Kpomassie’s texts are particularly rich material in this respect: they feature depictions of aeromobility, travel by public transport, maritime travel, pedestrianism, and dog sledding. As such, the texts stand in contrast to what Alasdair Pettinger (2012, 127) identifies as a trend in modern travel writing, namely the poor representation of the traveller’s physical movements between places. The mode of transport can have different functions in travel texts. Not only does it affect “how quickly [the travellers] arrive at a destination and by what route” but it also shapes their encounters with other people in the course of the journey, in addition to which the chosen transport may also structure the narrative (Youngs 2015, 145). Furthermore, portrayals of mobility offer a privileged entry into observing how speed and transport influence perceptions of space (Frenay, Iacoli, and Quaquarelli 2019, 12–13). Taking portrayals of transport seriously “has the potential to root the study of travel writing in the material conditions of the journey” (Forsdick 2019a, 155) – both in terms of physical movement and the power dynamics or politics of mobility (Cresswell 2010, 21) that inform travel. In addition to portrayals of mobility practices themselves, equally worth analysing are representations of inertia – for the simple reason that deceleration and immobility are inseparable parts of mobility (Materemeke 2016, 14). Dadié’s and Kpomassie’s texts portray moments of inertia such as pausing (Cidell 2020) that attest to the gradual scales between mobility and immobility. Both travelogues emphasise that travel – a derivative of the French word for work, ‘travail’ – entails “planning, action, focused effort, and the solving of problems related to movement” (Vannini 2018, 1). While travel by different modes of transport has become a trivial part of the modern experience, portrayals of mobility in Dadié’s and Kpomassie’s texts not only shed light on the banal aspects of being on the move but also unveil “the extraordinary experiences of mobility” (Ady 2010, 31) since the narrators travel to destinations that are new and exciting to them – often by using equally new and exciting modes of transport.

My starting point for analysing modes of transport in Dadié’s and Kpomassie’s travelogues is based on the observations that mobility contributes to the meanings of place and the identity of the mobile subject (Cresswell and Merriman 2013, 7–10) and that one’s sense of time and space depends on the chosen mobility practice (Vannini 2018, 12). First, portrayals of mobility and transport in Dadié’s and Kpomassie’s travelogues play a pivotal role in the production of the African traveller, on the one hand, and the metropolital and Arctic destinations, on the other. While Dadié’s scenes of aeromobility, urban pedestrianism, and travel in the Paris Metro produce the figure of the modern African traveller – a tourist – in the colonial metropolis, in Kpomassie’s text public transport, maritime travel, and dog sledding represent an African adventurer facing various obstacles on his way to a peripheral, Arctic destination. Second, in addition to the intertwinement of movement and space, mobility involves temporality. Together with space, time forms the context for movement and is the product of movement, and “moving people […] are agents in the production of time and space” (Cresswell 2006, 4). Acknowledging the entanglement of spatial and temporal aspects in the process of making meaning out of mobility, my reading pays attention to the rhythms of mobility in Dadié’s and Kpomassie’s travelogues. Rhythms, or “patterns of mobile flow”, writes Edensor (2016, 5), “contribute to the spatio-temporal character of place”. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre’s rhythm analysis,
Edensor (2014, 163) argues that “places [...] are ceaselessly (re)constituted out of the processes which flow to, through and across them”, and that “a mobile sense of place is shaped by the mode and style of travel” (2016, 6). Looking into mobile rhythms is also a way to see mobility as an element that is reflected in the literary form in terms of narrative speed and changes in narrative rhythm, as Chris Ewers’s analysis of the experiences of speed in Laurence Sterne’s prose suggests (2018, 110–133). Hence, my reading not only operates on the thematic level but also addresses the question of the poetics of mobility (Toivanen 2021, 20–21, 209) by drawing attention to the narrative rhythms that inform the texts’ portrayals of metropolitan and Arctic journeys. The poetics of mobility in Un Nègre à Paris conveys a sense of speed and hurry. However, the narrative also articulates a feeling of not being in the rhythm of the colonial metropolis, which eventually leads to a critical attitude towards assimilationist pressures. In L’Africain du Groenland, the poetics of mobility consists of slow mobile rhythms and attests to the productive qualities of pausing that move the narrative forward.

**Un Nègre à Paris: the hectic rhythms of colonial modernity**

**Air travel**

Dadié’s narrator travels from the Ivory Coast via Dakar to Paris by aeroplane. The text opens with his excited announcement, “J’ai un billet pour Paris, oui, Paris!” (1959, 7) [“I have a ticket to Paris, … yes, Paris!” (1994, 3)]. As so often in Francophone African literature, Paris, the colonial centre, fascinates the narrator, and his ideas about the “city of light” are based on literary and cultural imagery. The opening part of the first chapter reads as an instance in which imaginative travel (Urry 2007, 169) transforms into physical travel: the narrator claims that “je vais cesser de contempler le Paris des cartes postales et des écrans” (Dadié 1959, 9) [“Soon I can stop thinking about the Paris that I’ve only seen on postcards or in films” (1994, 4)] and that he is going to “voir le Paris vivant” (1959, 10) [“see Paris in the flesh” (1994, 5)]. The narrator’s exclamation that he has a ticket to Paris is repeated in slightly modified forms throughout the first pages, underlining that, for him, Paris is not just any destination and that air travel is not just any mode of transport. The narrator’s way of carrying the ticket in his pocket, unable to resist touching it, attests to obsessive behaviour; he refers to the ticket as “une relique, un gri-gri” (1959, 8) [“a religious medal or a good-luck charm” (1994, 4)] through which Paris exerts its magical power on him (1959, 10). The repetition of the trope of the ticket conveys not only the narrator’s nervous excitement about flying to Paris; it also reads as a mantra that he uses to reassure himself that he is indeed going there. The ticket, obviously, is not independently mobile nor a moving vehicle transporting the fictional character and hence, as such, not an element that would directly produce “storyworld speed” by describing experiences of movement (Kukkonen 2020, 75; see also Hume 2005, 105; Baetens and Hume 2006, 351). However, as a metonymy of the journey and through the promise of the mobility that it embodies, the frequent reiteration of the trope of the ticket conveys a sense of movement on the formal scale.

The narrator’s journey proceeds via Dakar, where he wanders around the city as a tourist, observing the “frantic pace of modern industrialisation” (Ni Loingsigh 2009, 98) as conveyed in the image of the elevator, a symbol of progress and of the ‘upward’ movement associated with modernity. Yet in Dakar he also finds himself struggling.
with bureaucracy related to the trip to Paris: “Il ne suffit pas d’avoir un billet pour voir Paris” (Dadié 1959, 16) [“To see Paris one needed more than a ticket” (1994, 10)]. He laments attempts to discourage him by making him “courir les agences, en semant de multiples obstacles sur ma route, en me renvoyant d’une personnalité à une autre” (1959, 17) [“run from one agency to another, when they threw obstacle after obstacle in my way and sent me from this person to that one” (1994, 10)]. The initially excited, nervous narrative voice gains a new, slightly worried tone as the narrator is told that all flights for the next two weeks are fully booked and that seats are only granted to “important people” invited by the French president to celebrate the national day. An airline clerk suggests that the narrator should travel by ship instead, which is out of the question: for him, air travel is an integral part of experiencing Paris. Eventually, there turns out to be one free seat on the next flight after all, and the narrator is happy to seize the opportunity to travel on board “le gigantesque oiseau” (1959, 11) [“a gigantic bird” (1994, 6)]. The airport, “a place of intermittent movement” (Sheller and Urry 2006, 213), is described as a prelude to the hectic metropolitan environment: it is noisy, and people rush forward careless of one another. The narrator, however, does not feel distressed: “Fait étrange: je ne suis plus pressé; en moi le calme qui précède les événements importants” (1959, 21) [“It’s curious, but I no longer feel rushed; there is in me that sense of calm which often precedes important events” (1994, 12)]. Walking around in the airport, he turns into a sort of robot, moving without thinking, as if embodying the mechanisation characteristic of modernity.

As is typical of the ‘golden age’ of air travel, when flying connoted luxury and prestige as “the showcase of the elite” (Durante 2020, 90), in Dadié’s colonial West Africa of the 1950s aeromobility is a marker of privilege: it is “transport rapide”, meant for “personnalités de marque” (1959, 18) [“express service” for “distinguished personalities” (1994, 11)]. This privilege is not only a matter of socio-economic class but also reflects the “colonialist logics of power and exclusion” typical of aeromobility (Durante 2020, 11): the narrator is the only black passenger on board, and no-one is willing to take the seat next to him. Purifoye (2015, 286) has discussed the production of racial exclusion in public transport and introduces the notion of “nice-nastiness”, a combination of “expressions of politeness with disdain and distancing” that racialised subjects encounter in mobile public spaces. The concept of nice-nastiness captures Dadié’s traveller’s experience of exclusion as he observes white passengers walk past the free seat next to his. On a wider scale, the narrative attests to the embeddedness of aeromobility in the colonial project by alluding to the travel of colonial administrators between Paris and Dakar. In so doing, the text hints at the idea of aeromobility as “the fulfilment of a colonial fantasy” that facilitates easy access to faraway colonial territories (Neigh 2018, 5–6). The narrator’s statement that “il faut être quelqu’un pour aller à Paris” and that “je ne suis pas quelqu’un” (1959, 7) [“You have to ‘be somebody’ to go there” and […] I’m not ‘somebody’” (1994, 3)] not only underlines his identification with the position of the tourist who travels to Paris for no ‘real’ reason, but also exposes the colonialist logics and the politics of mobility (Cresswell 2010, 21) with regard to who qualifies as “somebody” in the context of aeromobility between Africa and Europe in the 1950s.

In addition to experiences of exclusion, air travel generates unease that springs from time–space compression. The narrator’s confusion about his whereabouts together with the time spent conveys a sense of disorientation that results from the “double
dynamic of [...] deterriorzation and dechronologization” typical of long-haul flights (Durante 2020, 77): “Où sommes-nous? [...] Ai-je dormi? Est-ce bien le jour? Que se passe-t-il? […] Dans quel pays vais-je?” (Dadié 1959, 22) [“Where are we? [...] Have I been asleep? Is it still daytime? What’s going on? […] What sort of a country am I heading for anyway?” (Dadié 1994, 13)]. This spatio-temporal disorientation captures the traveller’s transition to another world – a world where familiar landmarks no longer make sense. Other sources of anxiety include swollen feet, a general symptom of a long-haul flight that embodies the paradox of inertia/hypermobility characteristic of flying as one traverses long geographical distances at rapid speed while simultaneously experiencing the sedentariness of seating (Durante 2020, 195–196). Swollen feet make the narrator fear that he will have to walk barefoot in Paris as his shoes no longer fit. This fear is related to his preconception that everybody runs in the metropolis and that he, as a representative of an African ‘slow’ culture (Ni Loingsigh 2009, 88), will have to learn the right running technique to blend in. The idea of running, rather than that of aimlessly wandering in Paris as an idle flâneur, is interesting here. Flânerie is characterised by “a self-conscious denial of hurry” (Dennis, Mackintosh, and Holdsworth 2020, 13); the flâneur moves “against the flow” of the hectic urban environment and, through this detachment, embodies disengagement and critique of the modern industrialised urbanisation (Adey 2010, 63). Contrary to the figure of the flâneur, Dadié’s narrator is more interested in running to live a more ‘authentic’ experience in Paris – a space of accelerated, modern technology-enhanced movement. Running connotes hurry, and hurrying is an attempt to “adjust, keep up with the speed of economic, political and technological change” of modernity (Dennis, Mackintosh, and Holdsworth 2020, 9). In the case of the African tourist who travels from the colonial ‘periphery’ to the metropolitan centre, this process of ‘adjustment’ is one of assimilation embedded in colonial power structures. The link between modernity and hurry and the African traveller’s ‘adjustment’ to the metropolitan rhythms is further developed in the text’s portrayals of pedestrianism and the Paris Metro.

Pedestrianism and the Paris Metro

The narrator’s arrival in Paris immerses him in the hectic rhythms of the metropolis: “Des autos passent qui semblent glisser, tant elles vont vite” (Dadié 1959, 25) [“Cars whiz by they’re going so fast” (1994, 16)]. As he travels by coach from the airport to the city, he observes that the streets become more animated the closer he gets to the centre: the urban space is “un incessant tourbillon”, where “les piétons sont les plus pressés” (1959, 26) [“Constant movement”; “The pedestrians seem the most pressed” (1994, 17)]. The narrator describes pedestrians as robots with springs attached to their legs (1959, 26). There seems to be a rule that “il ne faut pas hésiter mais toujours aller de l’avant” (1959, 38) [“here you haven’t time to hesitate; you’ve got to keep going” (1994, 25)] – an imperative that conveys modernity’s dream of eternal progress. Indeed, as the narrator states towards the end of the travelogue, Parisians have contracted “la maladie de la bougeotte” (1959, 215) [“a severe case of the fidgets” (1994, 152)]. Yet the movement seems to be aimless in light of his observation that in Paris one is constantly going round in circles (1959, 27). As the narrator tries to adapt himself to the hectic rhythms of metropolitan pedestrianism, he becomes part of the “giant, adjusted and inhuman mechanism”
(Garnier 2012, 117; my translation) of urbanites: “On me pousse, je pousse, nous avançons tous” (Dadié 1959, 93) [“When someone pushes me, I push too – that way, we all make progress” (1994, 63)]. Despite becoming one with the crowd, the narrator experiences solitude (1959, 164), which signals his sense of alienation. Indeed, in the passages describing the Metro, the narrator seems detached from his environment and disconnected from the people around him despite the experience of “shared travel-ness” that travel by public transport engenders (Pettinger 2012, 132). This disconnection conveys the traveller’s position as an outsider-observer but also points to the aspects of the modern metropolis that are blasé. While practice eventually enables him to run like a Parisian, he is confused about this new skill and not only finds himself asking why he is running (Dadié 1959, 173) but also suffers from pain in his feet (181). The image of the hurting feet evokes the aeroplane passage in which the narrator worried about his swollen feet, an embodied response of refusal to the urge to become a modern mobile subject under the conditions of the colonial centre. Here, hurting feet are corporeal symptoms of the narrator’s arrhythmia – a feeling of being “out of synch” – as he tries to adapt himself to the mobile rhythms of the metropolis (see Edensor 2014, 167).

In addition to ‘running’, a key element of the narrator’s metropolitan mobilities is the Paris Metro. In Francophone African literatures of the mid-twentieth century, the Metro symbolises the metropolis and its modernity, and travelling in it represents an initiation rite for many African protagonists (Anyinefa 2003, 85). This symbolism is present in Dadié’s text, which states that the Metro is the most important monument of Paris, more even than the Arc de Triomphe or the Eiffel Tower (83). It is in the Metro that, according to the narrator, “on saisit le plus le rêve prodigieux du Parisien d’être le roi de ses machines” (1959, 83) [“you become most aware of the enormous love the Parisians have for what their machines have given them: the opportunity to play king” (1994, 56)]. The Metro is, in short, the culmination of the technological progress of the metropolis. Yet initiation in Paris by taking the Metro can be alienating for an inexperienced newcomer, as is conveyed in the sense of haste in the following passage:

Perds-toi dans les dédales de couloirs et de flèches, de plaques indicatrices et de coulées humaines, de sens interdits, de montées et de descentes, laisse partir le métro que tu devais prendre et prends celui que tu ne devais pas, puis descends à une station quelconque, sors, rentre, cogne-toi contre la poinçonneuse et explique-lui que tu t’es trompé de direction, repars, perds-toi encore, sors enfin, prends le boulevard et va devant toi. (1959, 51)

Lose yourself in the maze of corridors and arrows, of signs and crowds and wrong ways, ascents and descents; don’t get on the train you should but the one you shouldn’t; then go into another station, exit, enter again, and march up to a ticket-puncher and explain that you’re lost; take off and lose yourself once more. Finally, walk out and head down the street right in front of you. (1994, 34)

Here, the out-of-breath narrative generates the effect of heightening speed through multiplication (Hume 2005, 107) by citing a list of elements that constitute the experience of moving in the underground tunnel. Unlike Parisians who can handle the Metro thanks to their “sens du métro” (Dadié 1959, 81) [“sixth sense when it comes to the metro” (1994, 54)], the unaccustomed African traveller goes astray in the accelerated rhythms of the system:
Vous vous tromperez toujours, au moins trois fois, car on ne se tire jamais du premier coup de cette toile d’araignée coloriée. Lorsque vous sentez que vous dépassez le ton, risquant même de pousser des racines, vous vous mettez au diapason, c’est-à-dire vous reculez de quelques pas, regardez une dernière fois le plan, approuvez de la tête pour vous confirmer que vous n’avez pas avancé d’un pouce, puis résolument, décidé à vous perdre, vous prenez la première direction venue. Celle sur laquelle vos regards tomberont. Mais, et le nœud de l’histoire est là, vous rangez votre amour-propre, et à la poinçonneuse en tendant votre billet, vous demandez: « Pardon pour aller à … Pigalle … » (1959, 38)

Head off in the wrong direction at least three times; after all, you never manage to get things right the first time in this spiderweb of color. Just when you think you’re following the right tone, when you feel you’re about to plant roots there, get out the tuning fork – that is, step back and look at the map once again. Nod your head to convince yourself that you haven’t moved your thumb, and then, as resolutely as possible, even if you’re sure you’re going to get lost, take off in the direction your eyes light on first. But here’s the important part: swallow what pride you have and ask the person who’s waiting to punch your ticket, “Excuse me, but to get to … Pigalle … ?” (1994, 25)

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

Il m’arrive […] de m’embrancher dans les stations et alors pour ne pas afficher mon embarras, je sors de la bouche pour flâner au long des boulevards, quitte à reprendre le métro à une autre station. (1959, 197)

But once in a while I still get confused when find myself in a particularly busy station. To avoid embarrassment, I simply exit and stroll along the boulevard until I find another station. (1994, 139)

This strategy enables the traveller to avoid the embarrassing arrhythmia that would be caused by stopping to consult the map or asking for directions. This strategy of “attunement to place” of a body that is “out of place” is an act of readjusting oneself to an “unfamiliar space in order to regain ontological security” (Edensor 2016, 5). However, this level of assimilation and adaption to the urban rhythms of the colonial metropolis is not necessary a good thing. No longer “l’observateur impartial” (Dadié 1959, 106) [“impartial observer” (1994, 72)], the narrator believes that he has run the risk of not being able to make apt, objective observations. Learning to run like a Parisian and handling the Metro means for the narrator that it is high time for him to leave Paris.

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

L’Africain du Groenland: deferred mobilities towards the Arctic periphery

Stepwise journeys by public transport

Compared to the hectic rhythms of air travel, pedestrianism, and the Paris Metro in Un Nègre à Paris, the narrative rhythms in the portrayals of transport in L’Africain du Groenland are much slower. The slowness is related to the modes of transport the narrator uses: instead of flying, he first travels by public transport on the African continent, then by ship to reach Europe, and again by train as far as Copenhagen, where he finally boards a ship to Greenland. The slow rhythms of the narrative also reflect the frequent pauses that inform the traveller’s journey from Togo to Greenland and that result from financial, bureaucratic, infrastructural, and climatic obstacles. The first of the four parts of the travelogue concentrates on the narrator’s life in Togo and his travels across Africa to Europe. His journey from Togo to Abidjan, Accra, and Dakar is not straightforward and entails uncertainties related to unreliable vehicles, non-existent means of communication and limited finances, which cause involuntary stops and make him return to places that he had already left. Constant stops make the narrator worried about reaching his destination. The narrator’s Arctic pursuit in L’Africain de Groenland is inspired by literary representations of his destination: the text mentions, in particular, Robert Gessain’s book Les Esquimaux du Groenland à l’Alaska (1949). Aged 16 at the start of his adventure in 1958, the narrator is aware that he will not be able to reach his destination at once. In theory, the planned itinerary looks simple: “Il me faudrait commencer par le Ghana, pays voisin du Togo; puis remonter peu à peu l’Afrique de l’Ouest, traverser toute l’Europe et aller m’embarquer au Danemark” (Kpomassie 1981, 81) [“I would have to begin with Ghana, the country next to Togo, then gradually travel up the coast of West Africa, cross the whole of Europe, and sail from Denmark” (Kpomassie 2001, 50)]. In reality, it soon becomes clear that the journey will be far from straightforward. The first leg from Togo to Abidjan, where his aunt lives, is illustrative of the uncertainties ahead:
It was one of those trucks called “bush taxis” – kept going by secondhand spare parts, and creaking horribly on its battered springs – that tackled, as best it could, the first kilometers of my journey towards the Arctic (2001, 50).

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

There were some nasty surprises along the way – they were frequent on our antiquated public transport. One of the truck’s wheels flew off when we were traveling at top speed; a door held on with wire came away when the continual jolting snapped the wire; then flat tires followed one after the other with alarming regularity, not to mention the leaking radiator. (2001, 51)

The recurrent breakdowns of the vehicle, as listed in the above quotation, define the journey’s rhythm. The text also refers to the poor condition of the road – “poudreuse, sinuouse, accidentée” ([1981] [2015], 82) [“dusty, winding, potholed” (2001, 51)] – which attests to the “infrastructural impossibility” of automobility in West Africa (Savonick 2015, 670) and further contributes to the narrative’s broken mobile rhythms. While travel by public transport necessarily entails encounters with others, the narrative does not pay much attention to copresence and interactivity between passengers (see Pettinger 2012, 129) but rather underlines the narrator’s position as an individual traveller, constantly struggling to reach his destination.

In addition to the risk related to the unreliability of the transport, another hindrance pertains to the budget: the narrator’s meagre finances cover only half of the cost of the first leg of the journey, so he finds himself working as the driver’s assistant. Indeed, the narrator’s insufficient finances play a key role in slowing down the journey in the first part of the travelogue describing his eight-year journey from Togo to the moment when he boards the ship to Greenland in Copenhagen. The narrative’s constant and somewhat trivial allusions to place names across Africa and Europe produce an intermittent narrative rhythm – a description of an itinerary through places that do not have much interest for the traveller. In this part, the narrator’s strategy of balancing the necessity to work to increase his travel budget and the urge to travel punctuates the narrative. This alternation of mobility and pausing postpones the arrival at the destination. This frustrates the traveller: he fears that “la vie confortable” (Kpomassie [1981] 2015, 89) [“this easy life” (2001, 55)], permitted by his working in certain places such as embassies, might discourage him from pursuing his journey towards the Arctic. Yet these stops, even when they last several months, imply a continuation of the journey, which in turn differentiates them from the act of waiting and classifies them as pauses, defined by Julie Cidell as “a temporary cessation of motion with the intention of resuming that motion” (2020, 154). The pauses necessitated by the need to raise the travel budget
convey quite concretely the idea that mobility is not even possible without friction (Cresswell 2014, 114). As such, the pauses also play a role in driving the narrative forward.

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

In Europe, the mobile rhythms of the journey seem to accelerate once the narrator reaches Marseille where he has the luxury of “goût[er] pour la première fois au plaisir du touriste insouciant” (Kpomassie [1981] 2015, 94) (“enjoying for the first time the pleasures of the carefree tourist” (2001, 59)]. The narrator states that “je me sentis plus libre en France que sur le sol africain” ([1981] 2015, 94) (“I felt freer in France than on African soil” (2001, 59)]. Yet it is in Europe that he encounters bureaucratic hindrances that affect his mobility: on his way from France to Germany, he is made to descend from the train at the Franco-Belgian border because he does not have a visa. The incident is portrayed as a spectacle that underlines the narrator’s difference from the rest of the passengers “qui se penchaient impassibles aux fenêtres” ([1981] 2015, 105) (“staring impassively out of the windows” (2001, 66)), witnessing his humiliation in being left at the station. Another bureaucratic issue arises in Copenhagen when a Danish commissioner refuses to issue him a visa on the grounds that Greenland is too cold for an African. The refusal of the visa delays the narrator’s departure for Greenland by another three months. The commissioner’s reasons for his refusal attest to a patronising, colonialist attitude towards the narrator and his Arctic pursuit, and it is telling that the latter only gets his travel document when his French friend travels to Copenhagen to stand guarantee for him. The first part of the travelogue ends with laconic words that capture the paused mobile rhythms of the journey: “Huit ans s’étaient passés depuis mon départ du Togo” (Kpomassie [1981] 2015, 111) (“Eight years had passed since my departure from Togo” (2001, 71)].

Arctic mobilities: maritime travel and dog sledding

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

J’avais choisi de voyager par bateau: dans mon cas, il eût été imprudent d’affronter brusquement un grand froid après quelques heures de vol, alors qu’une traversée de plusieurs jours me permettrait de m’habiter progressivement au climat (Kpomassie [1981] 2015, 115).
I had decided to travel by ship: it would be rash for someone like me suddenly to come up against intense cold after only a few hours' flight, whereas a sea voyage of several days would allow me to adapt gradually to the climate (2001, 75).

As suggested by the quotation – curiously echoing the Danish commissioner’s patronising ideas – the slow rhythms of maritime travel best suit the narrator. Later, planning to travel to Northern Greenland, the narrator emphasises that, compared to flying, travel by ship enables him to appreciate “cette nature grandiose, se sentir écrasé par elle” ([1981] 2015, 360) [“this natural grandeur, to feel its overwhelming power” (2001, 268)]. Thus the choice of transport is informed by the traveller’s will to get used to the climate but also to become “overwhelmed” by natural landscapes. The narrator suggests that it has indeed been the slow rhythms of maritime travel that have enabled him to adjust himself to the absence of light and that, without this progression, the polar nights would have driven him mad (2001, 250).

While the sea voyage represents a transitional phase on the way to the destination, almost immediately after leaving Copenhagen, the narrator already feels “un peu comme au Grand Nord” ([1981] 2015, 117) [“closer to the Far North” (2001, 76)]. Indeed, as the journey proceeds, the narrative starts to refer to elements frequently associated with the Arctic – and to mobilities therein: the vastness of space and environmental conditions unfavourable for transportation (Habeck and Broz 2015, 511). A detailed description of the ship’s slow movement amongst floating ice blocks conveys the traveller’s entry into an environment where modern transport is slowed down by nature. The mobile rhythms of the ship are characterised by disturbances caused by the ice conditions as the vessel pursues “sa lente marche entrecoupée de secousses, de reculs, d’arrêts” ([1981] 2015, 121) [“her slow progress, interrupted by bumps, stops, and starts” (2001, 79)]. When on the fourth day the weather conditions grow worse, the narrator becomes seasick, in addition to which the surrounding icebergs make him fear, in a state of “sombre désespoir” ([1981] 2015, 119) [“dark despair” (2001, 78)], that they will be shipwrecked in the agitated, cold sea. In Greenland itself, his travels are equally characterised by the exigencies of the climate. His planned itinerary between different regions in Greenland is affected by the ice conditions: there is always the risk of getting stuck and having to wait for a change of season. Because of the lack of communications, trips that involve maritime travel need to be well planned. This careful planning and the significance of scheduling are reflected in the literary form: the narrative repeatedly cites the times of the departure and arrival of the ships by which the narrator travels. As a narrative device, the schedules convey the idea of movement by indicating the time that it takes to cross specific spaces. The schedules of the shipping also suggest that the Arctic is very much inscribed in (colonial) modernity – a modernity subordinated to climate conditions. The colonial dimension of modern Arctic mobilities is captured in the narrator’s observation that “Un trajet de Copenhague à n’importe quelle grande agglomération du Groenland est plus facile qu’un déplacement d’une localité à l’autre” ([1981] 2015, 165) [“A journey from Copenhagen to any large community in Greenland is easier than a trip from one locality to the next” (2001, 113)].

In addition to the challenging conditions of transportation, the narrative resorts to the Romantic imagery of the Arctic sublime, a literary aesthetics popular in Arctic exploration narratives (Morgan 2016, 2; Kjeldaas 2017, 39; Renov 2019). The Arctic sublime, “a mixture
of awe and terror” (Renov 2019, 207), evoking “the threatening and overpowering forces of nature against which the human is ultimately helpless” (Kjeldaa 2017, 39; Morgan 2016, 3), is echoed in Kpomassie’s portrayals of Arctic mobilities. In the course of a boat trip on his way to the north, the narrator gazes in awe at the sight of the fjords, described as “un spectacle grandiose et romantique” ([1981] 2015, 215) [“an imposing and romantic spectacle” (2001, 151)]. The passengers are entitled to receive a certificate attesting that they have crossed the polar circle. The narrator finds “cette distribution de papiers imprimés […] si grotesque que je ne me suis pas dérangé pour aller chercher le mien, préférant me livrer à l’étrange sensation que j’éprouve devant ce paysage impressionnant” ([1981] 2015, 216) [“this distribution of printed forms struck me as so grotesque that I didn’t bother to collect mine, preferring to savour the strange thrill of that striking landscape” (2001, 151)]. By showing contempt for the certificate and focusing on the landscape instead, the narrator distances himself from the figure of the tourist and evokes a parallel with earlier discourses of the Arctic sublime. The terrifying aspects of the Arctic sublime are manifested in portrayals of mobility practices that allude to the narrator’s fear of death. In one passage the narrator walks on the frozen surface of the sea, and unlike the locals in his company he plants his footsteps carefully, terrified at the idea of “couler dans l’eau glacée sans aucune chance d’en ressortir, à cause de l’immense banquise […] et mourir congestionné en peu de temps” ([1981] 2015, 270) [“sinking into the freezing water with no hope of getting out because of the immense sheet of ice […] I would drown in no time” (2001, 200)]. Later, travelling in a dog sled in a snowstorm, he observes the tracks of previous teams disappearing into the blizzard and starts to think about “une mort glacée” ([1981] 2015, 331) [“an icy death” (2001, 247)]. The vastness of the landscape and its transformations due to climatic and weather conditions adds a life-threatening dimension to Arctic mobilities. By resorting to the imagery of the Arctic sublime, the narrative constructs the figure of the heroic traveller who defies the harsh natural conditions (Kjeldaa 2017, 39). The use of the Arctic sublime also points to the ways in the text draws on existing literary discourses of the Arctic (see Ni Loingsigh 2009, 124; also Ryall, Schimanski, and Wærp 2010, x).

The narrator travels in the different regions in a somewhat problematic search for the ‘authentic’ Greenland (Ni Loingsigh 2009, 142), which for him is embodied in such activities as fishing, seal hunting, and dog sledding. He situates the authentic Greenland in the northern parts of the island, but ironically enough he never reaches this imagined destination because of his meagre finances and his tiredness of waiting for shipping. The latter reason suggests the narrator’s ‘failure’ to pass the “stern test of patience” by adapting himself to “the subtly changing rhythms of Arctic life”, as embodied in the idea of deferral that is characteristic of Arctic travelogues (Holland and Huggan 1998, 100). While the ‘authentic’ Greenland remains out of his reach, he nevertheless experiences dog sledding in Ilulissat. The fact that the entire chapter at the start of the last part of the travelogue is devoted to a minute description of the ride conveys the importance accorded to experiencing this ‘authentic’ form of Arctic mobility. One lengthy passage portrays the preparations, starting from the description of the harness to the position of the passenger on the sledge. Here, the narrative suddenly adopts the second person plural, thus engaging the reader in the subtle technicalities of how sitting on the sledge feels. The minuteness of the description slows down the narrative but also prepares the ground for the
importance of the mobile experience itself: the stillness of the preparations embodies a promise of the movement ahead.

Compared to the climate-related obstacles that the narrator’s plans for maritime travel between the different regions of Greenland encounter, the ride on the dog sledge attests to a smooth, unimpeded mobile rhythm and an experience of becoming one with the Arctic landscape:

Poyo [mon compagnon] cesse de parler et ferme les yeux. Il semble rêver. Je me laisse aussi aller à cette douce paresse. Un profond silence nous entoure; il n’est rompu que par le son mat et régulier du traîneau. J’ai beau prêter l’oreille, je n’entends plus le bruit des griffes des chiens sur la glace. […] C’est ainsi qu’ils nous tirent doucement pendant un quart d’heure sans la moindre secousse, ni bagarres ni aboiements. (Kpomassie [1981] 2015, 324)

After a moment, [my companion] Poyo stopped talking and closed his eyes; he seemed to be dreaming. I too let myself drift off into this pleasant idleness. We were surrounded by deep silence, broken only by the faint, even hissing of the runners. However hard I listened, I could no longer hear the scrape of the huskies’ claws on the ice. […] So for a quarter of hour they drew us along like this, without the slightest jolt, or any fighting or barking. (2001, 242)

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

However, the moment of eurythmy between the traveller, the landscape, and the dogs ends abruptly as the sledge first ascends a hill with great difficulty and then starts “[une] course folle” [“[a] mad rush”] “dans une descente vertigineuse” (Kpomassie 2015, 325) [“[a] dizzy plunge” (2001, 243)]. The calm, soothing rhythm transforms into excessive speed that is difficult to handle – especially for the African adventurer. The narrator loses his balance, falls off the sledge and rolls down the hill. While his Inuit companion descends “élégamment” ([1981] 2015, 325) [“gracefully” (2001, 243)] with the sledge, the narrator “[se] relève gauchement en secouant la neige de [s]es vêtements” ([1981] 2015, 326) [“wobbles to [his] feet and dusts the snow from [his] clothes” (2001, 243)]. Amused by this sight, his companion bursts out laughing. “Je ne peux pas le croire! […] Comment un homme peut-il tomber de traîneau?” ([1981] 2015, 326) [“Unbelievable! […] How can a man fall off a sledge” (2001, 234)]. The abrupt transition from eurythmy to arrythmia and the companion’s mockery creates a disjuncture between the Arctic landscape and the African traveller, suggesting that despite his efforts to adapt himself to the lifestyle of the ‘natives’ and to experience ‘authentic’ Greenland (see also Célestin 2001, 116–117; Ni
Loingsigh 2009, 142), he remains a tourist who cannot entirely handle the Arctic – or Arctic mobilities.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have attempted to shed light on what happens, so to speak, while on the move in *Un Nègre à Paris* and *L’Africain du Groenland*. Modes of transport and their characteristic rhythms play a focal role in the construction of the African traveller figures (modern tourist, Arctic adventurer) as well as of their destinations (colonial metropolis, Arctic periphery). In *Un Nègre à Paris*, aeromobility, travel in the Metro, and pedestrianism contribute to the production of Paris as a place of modernity with accelerated mobile rhythms. The African traveller finds himself fascinated by metropolitan modernity but also excluded and alienated by it. Yet his arrhythmic urban mobilities and desperate attempts to adjust himself to the hectic rhythms of Paris can be seen as a form of productive friction that generates critical consciousness, enabling the narrative to question the alleged superiority of the colonial discourses of modernity. In *L’Africain du Groenland* the rhythms of mobility attest to diverse hindrances to movement that may at any moment result in inertia. The rhythms of the journey are characterised by frequent pauses that result from financial, bureaucratic, infrastructural and climatic hindrances. While the traveller’s journey on the African continent is constantly paused because of his meagre finances, inadequate communications and unreliable transport, in Europe he encounters bureaucratic hindrances. Pauses during which he works to increase his travel budget attest to the productive qualities of these pauses as a form of friction that enables movement and takes the narrative forward. In Greenland, his travel plans are affected by climatic and weather-related obstacles, but the journey also involves experiences of eurythmic Arctic mobilities whereby snow and ice become facilitators of mobility instead of slowing it down. The construction of the Arctic adventurer in Kpomassie’s text relies on discourses on Arctic exploration in its uses of the figures of the heroic traveller, the Arctic sublime, and the notion of deferral.

Analysis of representations of mobility practices in travel writing permit an understanding of the material aspects of travel – both in terms of the physical sense of being on the move as well as of the power structures that produce and are produced by mobility. In addition to the politics of mobility, a focus on portrayals of transport and the rhythms thereof can be helpful in appreciating the poetics of mobility in such texts, namely how the mobility theme in travel texts is reflected in the literary form. A mobility studies perspective elucidates the intertwinement of mobility, subjectivity, space, and temporality in the process of making meaning out of travel.

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1. There are some existing studies that categorise Rakotoson’s and Mabanckou’s texts as (return) travelogues (Ravi 2014; Toivanen 2017).

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

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

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