Afro-European peripheral mobilities in francophone African literatures

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ABSTRACT
Paris is the axiomatic centre of francophone African literary representations of Europe. Focusing on narratives that revise Paris-centredness, this article explores francophone African representations of European peripheries from the perspective of Afro-European (im)mobilities. The article shows how, in novels by Michélè Rakotoson, Kidi Bebe, Simon Njami, and Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, three specific Afro-European mobile subjectivities, namely the newcomer, the holidaymaker, and the clandestine migrant, produce very different meanings of European peripheries. While the meanings of peripheral spaces in the novels vary and, thus, attest to the complexity of the concept of the periphery and point to a shift from a national framework towards a continental one, the texts simultaneously articulate the perpetual pull of traditional centres.

KEYWORDS
Afro-European; Europe; francophone African literatures; (im)mobility; periphery; mobile subjectivities

Moving beyond Paris

From Ousmane Socé’s (1937) Mirages de Paris to Alain Mabanckou’s (1998) Bleu–blanc–rouge, francophone African literatures have produced narrativizations of Europe by dramatizing Africans’ encounters with the (former) colonial centre. Such texts share a vision of Europe associated with France – and Paris in particular (see Cazeneuve 2003). Colonial discourses that classify colonies as peripheries in opposition to the metropolitan centre represented Paris as “la Ville-lumière”, and this idea of the city as the centre of modernity has intrigued the (post)colonial subject and nourished unrealistic expectations of an El Dorado that the African traveller could claim as their home (Treiber 2017). The prominent position of Paris in francophone African fiction attests not only to the power of colonial discourses in imposing the idea of the centrality of the metropolis, but also to a more general tendency to conflate Paris with France and to marginalize French provinces (Moudierno 2012, 53). The Paris-centred conception of the peripherality of non-metropolitan settings is reflected in the texts scrutinized in this article.

While Paris (with its immediate surroundings) remains a central setting in contemporary francophone African literatures – especially in migrant/post-migratory, Afropean, or banlieue novels (see Hitchcott and Thomas 2014; Kleppinger and Reeck 2018; Horvath 2018) – some narratives revise this tendency and contribute to widening the conception of postcolonial Europe by acknowledging the continent as marked by internal difference.

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In the French context, this means understanding that “France is not synonymous with Paris” (Moudileno 2012, 60; emphasis original). Indeed, through the inclusion of peripheral settings on the map of postcolonial Europe, African literary texts represent Europe as “decentralized, provincialized and diffracted” (Ponzanesi 2016, 160).

This article approaches European peripheries from the perspective of Afroeuropean (im)mobilities. My reading focuses on Afroeuropean mobile subjects and their (im)mobilities in and towards loci that the texts construct as peripheral vis-à-vis traditional (post)colonial (metropolitan) centres. My analysis draws on mobility studies, a field that puts mobility at the centre of theorizing (Sheller and Urry 2006, 208–209) by taking “the actual fact of movement seriously” (Cresswell 2010, 18) and “in a highly literal sense” (Greenblatt 2009, 250) in order to understand the processes through which “movement is made meaningful” (Cresswell 2006, 21). In addition to different forms of mobility, mobilities research is also interested in structures that “enhance the mobilities of some while reinforcing the immobilities of others” (Sheller and Urry 2006, 213). Mobilities research recognizes that “mobilities are often failed, unrealised, and unachievable” and, in so doing, it draws attention to “mobility’s underside”, immobility (Materere 2016, 114). Acknowledging the “interrelationship between and interdependency of mobility and stasis” is particularly relevant for understanding clandestine migrant mobilities, which are characterized by a particularly precarious interplay between the ability to move and becoming immobilized (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013, 188, 190; see also Schewel 2020, 330). While mobilities research is frequently associated with social sciences and the study of “real-life” mobilities of people, objects, and ideas (Sheller and Urry 2006), the field also pays attention to the representational aspects of mobility (Cresswell 2006, 3). Literary texts “not only represent mobilities, but are also vital constituents of the ways in which mobility itself is experienced as an embodied, subjective act that is informed by, and through, the cultural context in which it occurs” (Aguiar, Mathieson, and Pearce 2019, 17). Therefore, representations of mobilities do not merely reflect “real-life” mobilities, but actively produce them (Murray and Upstone 2014a, 20).

My text corpus includes Michèle Rakotoson’s (1996) Elle, au printemps, Simon Njami’s (1989) African Gigolo, Kidi Bebey’s (2016) Mon royaume pour une guitare, and Mohamed Mbourgar Sarr’s (2017) Silence du cœur. I have chosen these novels because they attest to the diversity of the meanings of European peripheries as produced through different Afroeuropean mobile subjectivities, namely the newcomer, the tourist, and the clandestine migrant. These figures are generated by “particular means and styles of moving” and they are “defined by representational schemes that lie beyond the scale of the individual” (Cresswell and Merriman 2013, 9). They also reflect the diversity of Afroeuropean mobilities in terms of class and the uneven access to mobility (Cresswell 2010, 21).

In addition to conveying the heterogenous meanings of European peripherality from a mobile African/Afroeuropean perspective, some of these texts also attest to the transnationalization of European peripheries in francophone African literatures. While Rakotoson’s, Njami’s, and Bebey’s novels “provincialize” Paris (Moudileno 2012, 68) by turning their gaze to French provinces, Sarr’s novel – much like other contemporary narratives of clandestine migrant travel such as Fabienne Kanor’s (2014) Faire l’aventure or Marc Alexandre Oho Bambe’s (2020) Les Lumières d’Oujda – conveys the unreachable-ability of European metropolitan centres for undocumented migrants and widens the scope from a national context to a continental one. Indeed, by moving beyond the French national framework, Sarr’s novel is most explicitly Afroeuropean in its approach (cf.
Brancato 2008; Hogarth 2018). In Rakotoson’s, Bebey’s, and Njami’s texts, the centre/periphery pattern is conveyed through the metropolis/province axis because of the national context in which the texts are set and the explicit Paris-centredness they articulate. The metropolis/province binary can be seen as a nation-specific subcategory of the conceptually more protean centre/periphery pattern. Much like the relationship between centres and peripheries, that of the metropolis and provinces is interrelational: “provinces can only be imagined within the ‘capital/provinces’ binary”, which means that the meaning of the metropolis also changes according to that of the province (Parts 2016, 201). Moreover, conventional negative meanings of provinces as “backward and devoid of any hope or vitality” (Parts 2016, 201) resonate with those attributed to the periphery more generally (Peeren, Stuit, and Van Weyenberg 2016, 4). This, in turn, makes it possible to establish parallels between the representation of provinces and colonies in metropolitan and colonial discourses respectively (Moudileno 2012, 55).

In what follows, I explore the ways in which European peripheries both produce and are produced by different Afroeuropean mobile subjectivities. In so doing, the article challenges the understanding of place – in this case, the “European periphery” – as a static container, and promotes, instead, the idea that places gain their meanings through mobility (Murray and Upstone 2014b, 193). I start by looking at the African newcomer figure and provincial France in Rakotoson’s novel, and then move on to an analysis of the periphery as a provincial holiday destination through the figure of the Afroeuropean holidaymaker in Bebey’s and Njami’s novels. Finally, I discuss the representation of clandestine migrant (im)mobilities and European insular peripheries in Sarr’s text. By moving through these varied peripheral locations as narrated from the perspectives of different Afroeuropean mobile figures – which can also be characterized by involuntary immobility as in Sarr’s novel – the article highlights the diversity of meanings that francophone African and Afrodisporic fiction associates with European peripheries and draws attention to the perpetual pull of traditional postcolonial centres. My analysis also demonstrates that far from promoting an idea of Europe as a monolithic centre, the texts articulate a nuanced understanding of the continent as divided into internal centres and peripheries (Welge 2014, 7).

The newcomer: Uncanny peripheral parallels

Michèle Rakotoson’s (1996) Elle, au printemps is a story about a Madagascan woman who travels to Paris to pursue her studies. Sahondra is a rather typical African newcomer figure – an inexperienced albeit enthusiastic traveller arriving in Paris for the first time without having a realistic idea about the metropolis (Toivanen 2019a, 62). Sahondra’s pursuit of studying is based on an insecure ground, as she is not enrolled at any university, and her sole connection to France is her sporadic correspondence with her penfriend Marie. Upon her arrival in Paris, Sahondra realizes that Marie is not there for her at the airport as agreed, which means that she is left alone to navigate the metropolis. Towards the end of the novel, the setting of the events changes as Sahondra travels to Valenciennes to find Marie. The journey from the metropolis to a provincial town signals the protagonist’s insecure position in France: she believes that finding Marie is necessary for a successful start of her life in the host country. The journey bears the kernel of the potential solution to her insecure situation: she is “sur la route de Valenciennes vers ce
qui allait être une réalité” (Rakotoson 1996, 92; on the road to Valenciennes towards what was going to be a reality).1

Rakotoson’s novel pays a lot of attention to mobility practices (Toivanen 2019a, 61), and the protagonist’s train ride to Valenciennes makes no difference here. The journey is described as a trip to “Dieu sait où” (Rakotoson 1996, 84; God knows where), which already conveys her understanding of Valenciennes as peripheral. Public transport is a site of encounter, but also of differentiation (Wilson 2011), and, indeed, Sahondra is very much aware that she is the only non-white passenger in the waggon. The narrative associates travel on public transport in France with silence; the passengers avoid any contact with each other. The protagonist finds this “mutisme” (Rakotoson 1996, 84; muteness) alienating – not least because she associates silence with Madagascar, her home country under military rule. As the train runs through rural areas, the narrative repeatedly refers to the greyness of the landscape; an element which, like silence, the protagonist associates with everything she disliked in Madagascar (cf. 19).

The uneasy effect that the parallels between Madagascar and the French province have on the protagonist attest to the operations of the postcolonial uncanny (see Johnson 2010). The uncanny embodies an experience of estranged familiarity by destabilizing the boundaries between the familiar and the strange, which results in feelings of ambiguity and a sense of not being entirely “at home”, as the German term unheimlich suggests (Eckhard 2011, 35, 37). The uncanny is a moment in which “material from the past erupts in the present moment unexpectedly and inappropriately” (Johnson 2010, 215). The postcolonial aspects of the uncanny come to light in the process by which the (post)colonial periphery and the centre “overlap and repeat one another in a mutual confrontation of unexpected, eerie sameness” (223). In other words, distant places that are connected through a common colonial past become each other’s “spatial and social repetitions”, which destabilizes the binary between the centre and the periphery (211, 213).

The novel’s construction of Valenciennes as peripheral relies on the conventional binary between a lively centre and a non-vital periphery (Peeren, Stuit, and Van Weyenberg 2016, 4) – or the metropolis and the province (Parts 2016, 201). After having lived in the lively metropolis, the protagonist clearly perceives Valenciennes as peripheral. The greyness and silence that characterized Sahondra’s perceptions of French rural landscapes during the train ride persist upon her arrival in Valenciennes. The streets are silent and empty: “seul un fond de bruit de moteur symbolisait la vie” (Rakotoson 1996, 93; except for the background noise of a motor that symbolized life). At the station, Sahondra comes across homeless alcoholics, and is perplexed by their ragged clothes and rotten teeth: the French novels she has read never made any allusion to this “misère en France” (94; misery in France). The railway station looks empty and oppressing (94), and does not correspond to the “rêve de progrès” (95; dream of progress) that places linked with modern mobilities are supposed to symbolize (see Cresswell 2006, 18).

The uncanny reiteration of Madagascar in the French province is further underlined as the text moves on to narrate Sahondra’s short stay in Valenciennes. The region used to be known for its mine industry, as Sahondra has learned from Marie’s letters and the French novels she has read. As Sahondra visits the town and its surroundings, she feels that her ideas about the region contrast sharply with lived reality. It is only the old town and its picturesque houses that resonate with her preconceptions of Valenciennes, which – as typical of the newcomer figure – are based on representations of the town
in 19th-century French literature and which date back to the empire. Significantly enough, she imagined Valenciennes “comme une ville toute blanche” (Rakotoson 1996, 93; as an entirely white town) – a choice of words which points to a postcolonial amnesia that denies the memory of the empire in the former colonial centre (see Gandhi 1998, 4). And yet, as the narrative’s allusions to the presence of Maghrebi mine workers suggests, French provinces are not outside the scope of postcoloniality, but widen the notion of postcolonial Europe beyond metropolises.

Greyness, sadness, and silence keep informing Sahondra’s observations of the town, and underline the link between Valenciennes and Antananarivo. Valenciennes, for her, is “une ville morte” (Rakotoson 1996, 106; a dead town), a city from a war movie “dans un de ces moments de couvre-feu” (106; in one of these moments of curfew). The allusion to curfew underlines the resemblance between the two locations. As the protagonist visits the closed coal mines, the resemblance becomes all the more explicit. In Sahondra’s eyes, the mine factory is “une carcasse immense, familière et surréel en même temps” (107; a huge carcase, familiar and surreal at the same time), and the town is deserted “comme si toute la vie avait fui” (107; as if all life had escaped). Further, Valenciennes is a place “qui semblait porter un deuil trop lourd pour l’oubli” (107; that seemed to carry mourning too heavy for oblivion). Such tropes, suggesting a problematic relation with the past, activate a link with the memory of empire. Indeed, the text explicitly refers to the historical entanglements of France and Madagascar as Sahondra imagines the life of the mine workers in 1880, “l’époque où les colons et les industriels se sont tournés d’un œil très intéressé vers les pays comme Madagascar” (108; the time when the colonizers and industrialists had turned a very interested eye towards countries like Madagascar). In the present, both French provinces and former colonial peripheries have been “oubliés par le développement” (111; forgotten by the development). This suggests that the peripherality of colonial and provincial loci relies on “similar constructions of alterity” as places outside modernity (Moudileno 2012, 55–56). According to Moudileno, from the Parisian perspective, French provinces are often seen as “a single, exotic, barbaric, and ahistorical space”, which echoes the representation of the colonies in colonial discourses (55).

While the narrative portrays European and former colonial peripheries as desolate places that lack vitality and fall outside modern/colonial discourses of progress, the protagonist also manages to find a positive angle to her encounter with Valenciennes. After the visit to Marie’s home village only to realize that she no longer lives at the address indicated in her letters, Sahondra stays one night in Valenciennes. Insomniac and tormented by the anxiety of not having found Marie, Sahondra goes for a nocturnal walk. Because of her gender and security risks, she was never allowed to go out on her own during the night in Antananarivo. By walking in Valenciennes, she symbolically claims the streets of Antananarivo. Indeed, while the ending of the novel leaves the protagonist’s future in France suspended, the parallels between the two locations contribute a sense not only of anxiety, but also of affinity. At the end of the novel, Sahondra feels “presque chez elle, à Madagascar” (Rakotoson 1996, 120; almost like home, in Madagascar) in the calm morning of the provincial town. Through its use of the postcolonial uncanny, Rakotoson’s novel creates links between locations situated on both sides of the former colonial divide. It is mobility that enables the narrative to establish these links and also to convey a more nuanced idea of the former colonial centre as divided into internal centres and peripheries.
Le vacancier: Welcoming and alienating provincial holiday destinations

Among representations of African mobile subjects, the figure of the tourist is not a recurrent one. One reason for this is what James Clifford (1997, 33) refers to as “the dominant discourses of travel” which exclude racialized subjects from certain categories of mobility. Tourism is associated with leisure, whereas African mobilities are mostly understood in terms of “serious” or coerced mobilities such as slave trade, intellectual movements, and migration (Ni Loingsigh 2009, 159, 2). However, as Aedín Ni Loingsigh’s analysis of Calixthe Beyala’s (1993) novel Maman a un amant suggests, the figures of the tourist and the African immigrant are not incongruent. Representations of African tourists in Europe provide insights not only into the construction of AfroEuropean identity, but also into the intra-European destinations African tourists pursue (Ni Loingsigh 2009, 159).

Bebey’s (2016) Mon royaume pour une guitare and Njami’s (1989) African Gigolo narrate the lives of African migrants in Paris, and they both include descriptions of leisure travel to northern and southern France. In the context of holidaymaking, peripheral locations are frequently romanticized as places where to escape the pressures of daily life, but they can also be invested with reactionary nostalgia (see Peeren, Stuit, and Van Weyenberg 2016, 3). Bebey’s and Njami’s novels articulate these meanings from an AfroEuropean angle, and inscribe the provincial holiday destinations on the map of postcolonial Europe. Black tourists’ leisure-related mobilities to such locations reveal the troubled relation of provincial spaces with the nation’s colonial past and postcolonial present in a particularly overt manner, and underline African migrants’ alienation, difference, and their negotiations with assimilationist pressures.

Mon royaume pour une guitare is a biographical novel that retells the life of the Cameroonian composer Francis Bebey and his family in France. The story is narrated by the composer’s daughter, and the novel’s key themes are the family’s dilemmas of belonging and the return that they keep postponing. The novel articulates the family’s efforts to claim France as their home and to lead a life that they and their relatives back home consider successful. It is in this context of assimilationist aspirations, exigencies of success, and the obligation not to forget one’s roots that one needs to situate the novel’s portrayal of the family’s touristic trips to French provinces of the 1960s. As tourism is a privileged form of mobility, the family’s trips reflect their socio-economic status.

The family’s first weekend trip takes place when the parents, “brusquement nostalgiques de la mer” (Bebey 2016, 189; suddenly nostalgic for the sea) that they miss from Cameroon, take the children to Normandy. The equipment they bring with them – shorts, sports shoes, cool box, and folding picnic table – indicates that the family takes the weekend holiday seriously. The sense of moving away from Paris, where their daily life is based, towards a peripheral setting is conveyed by describing how the car – a symbol of the family’s middle-class mobility – exits national routes and takes smaller roads. The family is aware that, as black picnickers outside Paris, they will attract local people’s attention: “Ils diront à leurs amis: je rentrais à la maison et là, d’un coup, j’ai vu des Noirs. Plein de Noirs en train de pique-niquer, assis sur des tabourets rouges! Tu te rends compte?” (190; They will tell their friends: I was on my way home and suddenly, I see black people. Plenty of black people picnicking and sitting on red stools! Can you imagine?). The trip towards and in the provincial space highlights the family’s racial difference and hegemonical conceptions of tourism as a typically white category of
mobility, but, as the playful narrative tone suggests, the family tries to pay no heed to this attention. Upon their arrival, the seaside town of Dieppe does not meet their expectations: “L’eau est froide, le ciel pale, l’air frais et la ville peu accueillante” (190; The water is cold, the sky pale, the air chilly and the town not very welcoming). As the unwelcoming elements of the town suggest, the parents, in their sudden nostalgic mood, have failed to find the maritime landscapes they miss from Cameroon in the European periphery. Unlike in Rakotoson’s text, no parallels between the French province and the former colony are established here.

The novel also features a description of the family’s holiday trip to southern France. The journey is motivated by the parents’ assimilationist project, as suggested by the typical French holiday vocabulary that the narrative voice recites self-consciously: words such as “descendre” (used to describe journeys from the north to the south of France), “vacancier” (holidaymakers), “congés payés” (paid holiday), and “aoûtins” (August holidaymakers) keep recurring. Indeed, as the narrator exclaims, “Les vacances! Un mot qui sonne tellement français” (Bebey 2016, 193; A holiday! A word that has a very French ring to it). Initially, the trip to the southern provinces in the context of the congés payés is an instance of the family’s desire to adopt French culture and to claim belonging in the host country. As part of the tailback of vacanciers on their way to the Mediterranean shores, the family feels part of the national community. However, as soon as they get out of the “domestic, cocooned moving capsule” (Urry 2007, 120) of the private vehicle, their racial difference becomes clear and they are looked at in awe by other travellers. At the holiday destination, the family continues to stand out in the crowd, but, as the narrative suggests, not in a way that they would experience as oppressing: “Nous étonnons mais ne dérangeons pas” (Bebey 2016, 197; We surprise but do not disturb), and “Partout, les regards sont bienveillants” (197; Everywhere, looks are benign). What these words do betray, however, is the family’s constant struggle for assimilation and the exclusionary aspects of “Frenchness”: they do not want to attract attention to themselves and want to be “accepted” by the French. Nevertheless, the family feels that the province is a place that welcomes them as Afro-European vacanciers. The holidays have a relaxing effect on the parents engaged in the stressful project of being “good immigrants” while also maintaining good links with Cameroon. As the narrator suggests, being away from Paris and out of reach of the phone calls from the home country, the family feels they have found a new way of constructing their identity as Africans in France without the demands of the extended family and the obligation of success in the metropolis: “Avec ces vacances, nos premiers congés à la française, une perspective nouvelle s’est ouverte [ ... ] Pour mes parents, il existe ici, en France, quelque chose qu’ils ne pouvaient pas trouver chez eux” (200; With these holidays, our first paid leave à la française, a new perspective has opened. For my parents, there exists something here in France that they could not find back home). The ways in which provincial holiday destinations are represented in Bebey’s novel attest to the escapist notions of the periphery. Yet the enthusiasm of the narrative voice about the empowering potential of the holiday trip in the province needs to be read in the context of the assimilationist discourses imposed on African migrants in France as some of the word choices (being “accepted” by and not “disturbing” the French) suggest.

In Njami’s African Gigolo, holiday trips to French provinces reflect the protagonist’s alienation. Moïse originally moves from Cameroon to Paris to study, but then abandons the project. Unaware of this, his parents keep financing his metropolitan idle life. Despite
his apparent nonchalance, the protagonist is tormented by a malaise compounded by a sense of unbelonging, the prejudice experienced in France, and what he perceives as the impossibility of return. As the novel’s title suggests, Moïse has many random sexual relationships. These relationships in which he exercises his sexual power over white French women are his only “means to overcome social marginalization and exact a measure of revenge on French society”, but also his way of rejecting the traditional African patriarchal model embodied by his father (Bryson 2008, 89). It is in the context of one of these relationships with a middle-aged upper-class white woman named Mathilde that Moïse travels first to Deauville in Normandy, and later to Aix-en-Provence. Moïse, whose life is entirely Paris-centred, sees both destinations as peripheral. The two travel to Deauville in Mathilde’s open-top Mercedes: Mathilde drives, wearing white silk clothes and a scarf on her head. This elegant, bourgeois, and carefree impression is suddenly contrasted with a violent image of racial segregation as Moïse starts to think about slavery and the fact that, only some decades ago, a black man in the US would get hanged for touching a white woman. Moïse is ill-prepared for the trip: he only has the clothes he is wearing, and Mathilde takes him shopping. As his place in the passenger seat and the lack of luggage suggest, the trip is Mathilde’s initiative; Moïse is not much more than her passive companion – a gigolo indeed. All these details echo the white, bourgeois character of the pursued peripheral destination. The figure of the “African gigolo” exposes race- and class-related aspects of French holidaymaking in the provinces.

Contrary to Bebey’s text, where holidaymaking becomes an element in the construction of the Afro-European subjectivity, for Njami’s protagonist the very notion of holiday is “anti-africaine” (1989, 69; anti-African), “une aberration de l’Occident” (69; an oc
cidental aberration), and “une comédie à laquelle il n’était jamais parvenu à se plier” (69; a comedy to which he had never managed to yield). After ten years in Paris, the journey to Deauville is Moïse’s first trip outside the metropolis. He sees Deauville as “[une] ville artificielle, superficielle, reproduction en miniature et au bord de la mer des beaux quartiers de Paris” (71; an artificial, superficial city, a miniature, by-the-sea reproduction of the beautiful districts of Paris). For him, Deauville is a town for the bourgeois to claim their class and racial identity through consumerism – a place stuck in the past as “un fleuron de la splendeur française” (71; a jewel of French splendour). The identity of the bourgeois, nostalgic, white tourist is out of reach – and not appealing to him anyway. When Moïse and Mathilde dine at the hotel restaurant, their racial and age difference raises curiosity. This suggests that the attitudes towards “mixed couples” in the bourgeois provincial town differ from those in the metropolitan, ethnically diverse Paris. The glances of the other diners signal that, as an African, Moïse is “out of place” in the luxurious hotel. The trip to Deauville conveys the frustration that the protagonist experiences as an African in France. He sees Normandy as an unwelcoming, bourgeois, and backward periphery where people live in the past. He rejects the position of the tourist and remains an outsider observing affluent holidaymakers from a critical distance.

The destination of Moïse’s next touristic trip is Aix-en-Provence, where he travels again with Mathilde. This time, he is more at ease with the role of the vacancier: he spends his time relaxing at the pool and taking long walks with Mathilde. He finds himself “à souhaiter que la vie s’arrêât là. Sur cette apparence de perfection, ces instants paisibles où aucun compte ne vous était demandé” (Njami 1989, 121; wishing that life would stop there. On this appearance of perfection, these peaceful moments where no-
one made any requests to you). However, in addition to the escapist calm, the narrative also associates the provincial space with backwardness, which clearly comes to the fore when locals see Africans as “subhuman” (123). The narrative constructs a binary between the metropolitan centre and the province: while in some elite circles in Paris, black people are valued for their “exoticism” (this also explains Moïse’s success with white women), in provincial settings they are seen as not entirely human Others. Exoticism in the metropolis is equally informed by racist ideologies, but in the province such biases take more overt forms.

The holiday takes a distressing turn that leads to Moïse’s sudden escape to Paris, attesting to the centrality of the metropolis for his identity as an African in France. There are two uneasy episodes that involve Moïse’s encounters with other Africans in the provincial space. The first instance takes place at a party organized by a former ambassador, where Moïse insults a Gabonese high functionary who disapproves of his informal outfit by saying to Moïse that he should dress properly “du respect que vous devez à vos pères” (Njami 1989, 131; for the respect you owe to your fathers). Because of his troubled relation with his father – and, by extension, his own Africanness – Moïse experiences these words as provocation and leaves the party dramatically. The second distressing incident relates to Moïse having sex with Sarah, Mathilde’s Ivorian god-daughter. There is a tension between the two from the very beginning: “Qu’elle détestait, nègresse, rencontrer un nègre dans ce milieu-là, et se contraindre à jouer avec lui un jeu écrit pour d’autres” (136; How the Negress hated to meet a Negro in this environment and compel herself to play with him a game written for others). The narrative suggests that the protagonist feels that the provincial setting and the holiday context underline the Africans’ “out-of-placeness” and alleged racially based affinity in a way that make them very self-conscious about white vacanciers’ expectations about their interactions. In addition to conveying his troubled relation with “Africanness” and the malaise he experiences while performing the stereotype of the hypersexual African man, the protagonist’s leisure travel to the provinces reveals the overt racism of such places, making the African holidaymaker more conscious of his alienation in the host society than in the multicultural metropolis.

**The clandestine migrant: Insular peripheries versus “real Europe”**

My last example of Afro-European mobilities in European peripheries attests to the current trend of undocumented migrant travel and the unreachable of traditional European centres (see Toivanen 2019b, 128). Contemporary clandestine migration from Africa to Europe often involves risky maritime travel to insular destinations such as Lampedusa or the Canary Islands. Clandestine migrant travel is a precarious and time-consuming form of mobility of “stepwise journeys” where the itinerary is constantly subject to revisions and reaching the destination is never guaranteed (Schapendonk 2013, 11), and where one’s mobility may transform into a state of stagnation and involuntary immobility at any moment (Schewel 2020, 330, 334). It is in this context of migrant (im)mobilities that Mohamed Mbougar Sarr’s (2017) Silence du cœur discusses the cultural encounters and clashes generated by the arrival of 72 African clandestine migrants at a Sicilian town. While in Rakotoson’s, Njami’s, and Bebey’s novels mobility is central to the texts’ conceptualizations of Afro-European subjectivities and French provinces, the key trope that defines the
insular periphery from the perspective of the undocumented migrants is *immobility*. In contrast to privileged mobile figures such as the tourist, the position of the clandestine migrant bears resemblance to the figure of the vagrant which embodies the dilemma of forced im/mobility and that of being an unwanted Other who “move(s) to escape one place or hope for something better in another” (Cresswell 2013, 250–251).

The novel features different narrative voices, including those of the arriving migrants and those of local people, whose attitudes towards the clandestine travellers vary from overt hostility to expressions of solidarity. This polyphonic quality contributes to the complexity of the text’s construction of the peripheral space: the migrants’ *mobilities towards* and *immobilities in* the small town are narrated by the migrants themselves as well as the locals, and these different perspectives produce differing meanings of the periphery.

By foregrounding immobility, the novel resorts to a conventional imagery of peripheries as stagnant spaces (Peeren, Stuit, and Van Weyenberg 2016, 3). For the clandestine travellers, Altino represents stagnation: once they have arrived, they are no longer allowed to move elsewhere while waiting for residence permits. The *mobile* aspect of the narrative – the migrants’ journeys on the African continent and across the Mediterranean – is mostly addressed through flashbacks in the form of scattered journal entries. This strategy not only highlights the immobility trope, but also suggests that the journey is a traumatizing event that the travellers wish to forget. Altino is portrayed as a sleepy little town where the migrants’ arrival creates tensions, attesting to the way in which the unwelcome mobilities of clandestine migrants produce new meanings of the place. As the town slowly wakes up after a night of rest, the tensions beneath the sleepiness and stagnation are conveyed as the narrative voice states that the migrants desperately search for sleep, but that “aucun repos véritable ne leur était possible” (Sarr 2017, 13; no real rest was possible for them).

The tensions between the migrants and locals motivate the narrative, and culminate dramatically in a scene of brutal violence and the eruption of Mount Etna. However, as the narrative suggests, the history of Sicily and the small town are marked by cultural contacts: the nearby excavation attests to “les traces de toutes les cultures qui avaient passé là” (Sarr 2017, 16; traces of all the cultures that had been here). This is acknowledged even by members of the local anti-immigration movement, who state that “la Sicile a toujours été envahie” (65; Sicily has always been invaded). However, for them, the present “invasion” by the Africans differs from previous ones because they believe that the clandestins will not bring Altino anything good: they are convinced that the migrants only expect that local people “les sorte[nt] d’une misère que nous vivons nous-mêmes” (66; help them escape the same misery the locals themselves are living). The way in which the members of the anti-immigration movement perceive Sicily and Altino reflects traditional ideas about peripheral spaces marked by victimization, economic deprivation, and disconnection from the centre (see Peeren, Stuit, and Van Weyenberg 2016, 5). This is articulated in the speech of the movement’s leader: “Qu’on les achemine au Nord! Qu’on les fasse passer dans d’autres pays de l’Europe!” (Sarr 2017, 67; Let them be sent to the North! Let them be passed to other countries of Europe!). The economically wealthier northern part of Italy and other European countries are seen as centres that can afford to receive undocumented migrants.

While the leader of the group engages in a discourse that positions him as a defender of the provincial town, he simultaneously acknowledges its peripherality on a national and European scale by referring to Altino in private discussion as “une insignifiante commune sicilienne” (Sarr 2017, 170; an insignificant Sicilian municipality). When it comes to the
migrants, many of them are not satisfied with their destination. “Ça peut pas être ça, l’Europe! Pas possible!” (142; This cannot be Europe! It’s impossible!), exclaims one of them, and goes on to say that the group of men is kept “hidden” in Altino so as to “nous empêcher de voir la vraie Europe” (142; prevent us from seeing the real Europe). For the migrants, the peripheral island is not the “real Europe”, and they want to “quitter Altino, y a rien ici” (143; leave Altino, there is nothing here). For one of them, “real Europe” is less a matter of geography than a vague idea of an El Dorado where he can “gagner de l’argent et [s]e taper des Blanches” (145; gain some money and bang white women). Europe – the centre – is also referred to as “le grand Rêve” (234; the big Dream) by the clandestine travellers prior to their arrival in Sicily. After being stuck in Altino for several months they become aware that Europe too has its peripheries and that in Altino they are far from the centre – the “Dream” – they had imagined beforehand. The journey to Europe seems to have ended in a cul-de-sac as the provincial town in the periphery of Europe does not have anything else to offer to them beside “la tragédie de l’ennui” (237; the tragedy of boredom) – a regular element of the immigration limbo of migrant mobilities (see Griffiths, Rogers, and Anderson 2013, n.p.). The migrants feel that they are hostages of Altino, and that there is “aucune possibilité de movement” (Sarr 2017, 176–177; no possibility of movement), which is why, for them, “la vraie mort, c’est Altino” (179; real death is Altino). While insular peripheries situated on the maritime borders of Europe are increasingly turning into sites of “containment of [ ... ] unwanted migrants” (Peeren, Stuit, and Van Weyenberg 2016, 3), Sarr’s novel shows that such peripheries are equally unwanted destinations for the migrants who keep pursuing the “real Europe”.

While the narrative articulates the idea of Altino and Sicily as not “genuinely” European, there are also voices that see the periphery in a wider context as part of Europe – albeit not necessarily in a good way. Conceptions of Altino as Europe refer to a general anti-migration sentiment and the migrants’ antagonistic feelings about the continent. One of the migrants states that the hostile attitudes towards them are not only typical of Altino, but illustrative of how “une grande partie de l’Europe ne veut pas de nous” (Sarr 2017, 267; the majority of Europe does not want us). Such hostility is not the privilege of Europeans: the narrative draws attention to the antagonistic mindsets of the migrants, some of whom see Europe as responsible for all historical wrongdoings, and their only goal is revenge (193). In addition, local people sympathetic towards the clandestine travellers see that Altino, as part of Europe, does not have anything to give to the migrants: “Il n’a rien à leur proposer qui les grandisse essentiellement [ ... ] en tant qu’hommes” (205; There is nothing to propose to them that would help them grow as human beings). In Sarr’s novel, clandestine migrants associate peripheral European locations with stagnation and see them as not “genuinely” belonging to Europe. Through the voices of the locals, the novel also resorts to the traditional imagery of peripheries as economically deprived, victimized regions that construct their identities in opposition to the alleged centres. These different meanings of the periphery are generated through the mobility and immobility of the clandestine migrants.

**Conclusion: (Im)mobile subjectivities and diverse peripheries**

My analysis has demonstrated how different Afro-European mobile subjectivities (the newcomer, the holidaymaker, the clandestine migrant) produce diverse meanings of peripheral –
including provincial – places. In Rakotoson’s novel, the journey to a dying industrial town establishes uncanny parallels between French provinces and former colonies that are constructed as peripheries in metropolitan and colonial discourses respectively. In Bebey’s novel, a Paris-based family’s travels to northern and southern France are part of their project of “becoming French”. While trips to provincial holiday destinations underline their racial difference, such places also temporally free the family from the pressures of their success-driven immigrant life, although this escapism has to be read against the context of the unbalanced power structures of the assimilationist politics imposed on African migrants in France. In African Gigolo, the protagonist’s travels to French holiday destinations emphasize his alienation, and provincial locations are portrayed as backward places that live in the past. While in these three novels French provinces do not replace the metropolis, but underline its centrality for the migrants’ subjectivities, Sarr’s novel moves further away from Paris by focusing on Europe and by promoting the idea of the continent as divided into centres and peripheries; there is, in other words, a shift from the national to the transnational and continental. Sarr’s novel underlines the antagonism between centres and peripheries in the context of migrant (im)mobilities, and suggests that undocumented migrants do not see insular destinations on the fringes of Europe as “real Europe”.

While the novels portray European peripheries as spaces where racial difference becomes accentuated and where the unavoidably postcolonial character of contemporary Europe is more or less latent present, these spaces are not uniquely invested with negative meanings. European peripheries are also constructed as places where Afro-European identities can – to a limited extent – be negotiated (Bebey) and where one may feel – somewhat uncannily – at home (Rakotoson). Ultimately, through the representations of mobilities to and immobilities in peripheral destinations, these narratives also attest to the pull of traditional centres such as Paris and central Europe.

**Notes**

1. While my analysis on Njami’s novel focuses on the protagonist’s holiday trips in France, it should be underlined that the novel also represents his business trips to Europe outside the Hexagon.
2. Since Sarr’s novel transcends the national framework, the metropolis/province nexus is not relevant for the analysis of the text.
3. Previously, I have discussed Rakotoson’s novel’s portrayals of urban mobilities and practical cosmopolitanism (Toivanen 2019a).
4. All translations from the novels included are by the article author.
5. See also Ní Loingsigh’s (2009, 160) analysis of Beyala’s *Maman a un amant*.
6. A similar pattern of insular peripheries versus “real Europe” informs Fabienne Kanor’s (2014) *Faire l’aventure* (see Toivanen 2019b).

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Funding**

This work was supported by the Academy of Finland under Grant 330906.
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