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Cartographies of Paris: Everyday Mobilities in Michèle Rakotoson's Elle, au printemps and Alain Mabanckou's Tais-toi et meurs

Toivanen, Anna-Leena

Intellect

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Literary representations of postcolonial subjects' concrete mobility practices beyond migrancy have not received much critical attention. In order to fill this void, this article analyses the representations and poetics of urban everyday mobilities in two Francophone African diasporic novels, Michèle Rakotoson's *Elle, au printemps* (1996) and Alain Mabanckou's *Tais-toi et meurs* (2012), through a mobility studies perspective. I focus on the protagonists' use of urban mobility systems and the narratives' ways of producing urban cartographies as means for inscribing the newly arrived irregular African migrants in the metropolis, and argue that the texts give articulation to a practical cosmopolitanism. The texts' poetics of mobility – manifest in their uncanny and thrilleresque qualities – and the protagonists' journeys to peripheral dead-ends convey the anxious aspects of their attempts to claim Paris as their city through mobility.

Keywords: African diasporic literature; cosmopolitanism; everyday mobilities; Alain Mabanckou; Michèle Rakotoson; urban spaces

Urban spaces play a central role in the postcolonial literary imaginary. The idea of the Global South city as a place of (post)colonial modernity is a longstanding theme in African literatures (see, e.g. Primorac 2010; Bede 2014; Williams 2016). Literary representations of European metropolises like London and Paris, on the other hand, frequently foreground the figure of the migrant as a postcolonial city-dweller, and explore the hybrid qualities of the metropolis (see, e.g. McLeod 2004; De Souza &

Murdoch 2013; Perfect 2014; Amine 2018). The emphasis on migrancy in studies focusing on postcolonial literary representations of Western metropolises reflects the general tendencies of postcolonial studies, which **is** a field that has paradigmatized the figure of the migrant. The figure of the migrant embodies such central postcolonial concerns as displacement, transculturation, and (un)belonging. These themes are also central when analyzing the postcolonial aspects of urban spaces. However, literary representations of cities also illustrate the importance of everyday mobility practices for the construction of (postcolonial) urban spaces and identities (see Jensen 2009: 140; Beck 2013: 111; Murray & Upstone 2014b: 193; Prytherch & Cidell 2015: 19-20). Until now, studies on postcolonial literary cities have not paid much attention to everyday urban mobilities. This is mainly because in postcolonial studies, the concept of mobility is understood from a migrant studies perspective. The migration studies approach tends to result in a static, nation-based view on issues such as integration, and to erase the notions of mobility and journeying that the concept of migration does actually entail (Mainwaring & Bridgen 2016: 247, 251; Cresswell 2010: 18). Indeed, it can be argued that postcolonial studies promote a restricted understanding of mobility: the term 'mobility' is often reductively used as a synonym for global migratory movements, or as an intangible metaphor for 'the migrant condition'. Portrayals of *concrete* forms of physical mobility, in contrast, tend to go unnoticed by mainstream postcolonial literary studies.[1] It is therefore not surprising that racialized/postcolonial subjects are only rarely recognized as mobile subjects or travelers beyond being migrants (Loingsigh 2009: 2-3). In order to fill in this void, the present article demonstrates how two Francophone diasporic African novels, Michèle Rakotoson's *Elle, au printemps* (1996) and Alain Mabanckou's *Tais-toi et meurs* (2012), use everyday urban mobilities in their

constructions of the postcolonial metropolis and the metropolitan postcolonial mobile subject.

In order to move beyond the migration studies-oriented approach and promote a wider understanding of postcolonial mobilities that takes 'the actual fact of movement seriously' (Cresswell 2010: 18) and 'in a highly literal sense' (Greenblatt 2010: 250), and that challenges the idea of space as a static container (Jensen 2009: 140; Murray & Upstone 2014b: 193; Sheller 2017: 628), I read Rakotoson's and Mabanckou's representations of Paris through a mobility studies lens. The novels in question feature complex portrayals of urban everyday mobility, in addition to which mobility is also pivotal for their plot development and the construction of the fictional characters. The foregrounded role of urban everyday mobilities makes these novels ideal objects of inquiry for a critical endeavor that sets out to apply a mobility studies perspective on fiction. The mobility studies paradigm is a 'a movement-driven social science' (Urry 2007: 18) which puts mobility at the centre of theorising (Sheller 2014: 45) by focusing on diverse, interdependent forms of actual and imagined mobilities. With its emphasis on mobilities, connections, and flows, mobility studies have also generated a new way of understanding space – urban spaces in particular (Jonas 2015: 281). From a mobility studies perspective, 'space, subjectivity, […] and mobility are best understood as interdependent categories' (Beck 2013: 110). While Rakotoson's and Mabanckou's texts could be read as traditional 'migrant novels' addressing 'the migrant condition', they feature portrayals of what mobility studies scholars refer to as 'local processes of daily transportation' (Hannam, Sheller & Urry 2006: 1) whose meanings cannot be reduced to migration. It is through a mobility studies approach that these representations of urban everyday mobilities can be fully appreciated.

When reading mobility from a postcolonial perspective[2], one cannot ignore the fact that mobility is an unevenly distributed resource: mobilities are shaped by markers of difference such as race, nationality, gender, class, and ability (Cresswell 2006: 178; Upstone 2014: 40). Mobility studies scholars refer to the ways in which mobilities are both productive of and produced by power structures as *politics of mobility* (Cresswell 2010: 21) or as *mobility politics* (Nicholson & Sheller 2016: 5). When studying literary texts, however, it does not suffice to look at the politics but also at the *poetics* of mobility for the obvious reason that literary texts are products of artistic creation.[3] In this respect, I find Ian C. Davidson's (2017) concept of 'mobilities of form' and Chris Ewers's (2018) study on mobility in British 18th century novel, which both explain how literary form and genre can be shaped by mobility practices, inspiring. Davidson's and Ewers's formulations resonate with my conception of poetics of mobility, by which I refer to the ways in which thematic treatment of mobility is reflected in the form – in this case, how the generic features of the thriller in Mabanckou's novel and the uncanny qualities (as a sense of estranged familiarity and eerie repetition) of Rakotoson's novel translate the mobility theme into form.[4] By focusing on the representation and poetics of everyday urban mobility in African diasporic fiction, this article contributes to the topical endeavour of enhancing further dialogue between mobility studies and humanities (Merriman & Pearce 2017), and, in particular, to the relatively recent interest in applying mobility studies to the analysis of postcolonial fiction (Upstone 2014; Author 2017; Lagji 2018). Finally, the article contributes to 'mobilizing' literary urban studies by focusing on the representations of urban transport and mobility in the process of making meaning of the city and urban identities (see e.g. Thornbury 2014).

Elle, au printemps and *Tais-toi et meurs* – novels that, to my knowledge, have not received critical attention until now – feature African migrants who have recently

arrived in Paris under irregular conditions. Rakotoson's protagonist Sahondra, a young

Madagascan woman, leaves Antananarivo in an unorganized attempt to pursue her

studies in France: she travels to Paris without being enrolled to a university, relying

entirely on the help her French pen friend Marie to whom her only link is their sporadic

correspondence. The plot is driven by Sahondra's search for Marie, who has promised

to help her settle in France. The novel, giving articulation to the postcolonial urban

uncanny (see Johnson 2010; Wolfreys 2008), foregrounds the mobility theme by

depicting Sahondra's travels in detail. Mabanckou's thriller features a young Congolese

man who goes to Paris to work in a diasporic Congolese underworld community. As

typical of crime fiction and the thriller genre, the novel's plot and imaginary rely

heavily on mobility and suspense (see Rubin 1999 5; Huck 2012): being an irregular

migrant and a petty criminal, the protagonist is constantly on the run. Both novels depict

the protagonists' struggles to make sense of the postcolonial metropolis. I read the

protagonists' use of mobility systems and the narratives' production of urban

cartographies as a means of inscribing their newly established migrant selves in the

metropolitan space. I posit that the protagonists embody a practical cosmopolitan

attitude necessary in performing successful border-crossings in a new environment (see,

e.g. Beck 2006: 101-103; Mbembe 2008: 109; Werbner 2011: 110-113). This pragmatic

cosmopolitanism – a grassroot version of traditional elite cosmopolitanisms (see

Vertovec & Cohen 2008: 5) – is part of the process of becoming a modern postcolonial

metropolitan subject,[5] and it attests to the transformative power of mobility

(Berensmeyer & Ehland 2013: 13). Simultaneously, the texts highlight the anxious

aspects of the irregular African newcomers' everyday mobilities, which translates into

form in the texts' uncanny and thrilleresque qualities that capture the alienating aspects

of the postmodern city (see Rubin 1999: 10-11; Wolfreys 2008; Eckhard 2011; Beville

2013). The anxiety reaches its peak as the protagonists' metropolitan pursuits end up in peripheral dead-ends, symbolizing the failures of the newcomers' attempts to make Paris their city, and underlining its role in their newly established mobile subjectivities.

Cartographies of Paris

In what follows, I analyze the novels' ways of producing mobile cartographies of Paris by portraying the protagonists' travels in urban public transports. I argue that this cartographic impulse conveys the protagonists' struggles to claim the postcolonial metropolis as theirs, and that this anxiety also finds its articulation on the formal scale. Paris has occupied a special place in the Francophone African literary imaginary since the mid-twentieth century (see, e.g. Bennetta 1998; De Souza 2012; Braddock & Eburne 2013). Typically, the Paris-centered paradigm articulates the collision between migrants' high hopes and the harsh realities of the (post)colonial metropole (Treiber 2014). *Elle, au printemps* and *Tais-toi et meurs* rely on the Paris-centered paradigm, but also revise it by setting some events in provincial and sub-urban loci. Rakotoson's protagonist Sahondra and Mabanckou's Julian Makambo/José Montfort (who undergoes a change of identity when he arrives in Paris: his forged identity documents feature the name José Montfort) are somewhat conventional African migrant figures in the sense that they arrive in Paris for the first time without having realistic ideas about the city. Similar initially naïve and eventually disappointed newcomers have featured in, for instance, Ousmane Socé's *Mirages de Paris* (1933) and J.R. Essomba's *Le paradis du nord* (1996). Rakotoson's and Mabanckou's newcomers' lives in Paris are represented from a pronouncedly mobile perspective; travelling in public transports in particular is portrayed minutely. By describing the protagonists' mobilities in a detailed manner, the narratives produce literary cartographies of the postcolonial metropolis. The cartographic impulse is so foregrounded that Paris is not simply a passive stage on

which the events take place, but instead a space actively produced through everyday mobilities. In this sense, the novels' cartographies are not mere re-imaginings of space (Tally 2014, 4), but attest to the way in which space itself is mobile (Murray & Upstone 2014b: 193), and highlight mobility's role in constituting subjectivity (Prytherch & Cidell 2015: 19-20). In short, by embedding their cartographies of Paris into mobile practices, the novels 'free […] space from static representation' (Murray & Upstone 2014a: 5).

Cartography has a history as a colonial means of control. In the postcolonial era, the practice of mapmaking has gained new meanings. As Caterina Romeo (2015: 101) notes, 'If the necessity to impose control and surveillance over colonized countries was central in colonial Empires, at the time of postcolonial and global migrations this necessity travels together with migrants to the heart of Fortress Europe.' Urban cartographies in postcolonial literary texts and film are frequently interpreted as 'rewritings' of former colonial centers as hybrid spaces (see e.g. McLeod 2004; Orlando 2014). Rakotoson's and Mabanckou's literary cartographies of Paris, however, are less motivated by the need to portray the city as 'a subversive site […] in which processes of cultural signification [are] redefined by new cultural actors […] who claim belonging to the city' (Romeo 2015: 110), than by the purpose of using the cartographies as allegories for the protagonists' struggles for survival and their desire to make sense of the city. From the perspective of survival, it is noteworthy that sometimes mobility is less a matter of 'flow' than a task that demands efforts: 'Using a city requires knowledge and skill', writes Franz Buhr (2018: 339). In other words, walking in the city and travelling by different means of transportation necessitate knowledge which is acquired through practice, or what Buhr (2018: 340) calls 'urban apprenticeship'. According to Buhr (2018), urban apprenticeship through mobility is important in

migrants' integration into their new environments. As narrative strategies of urban

survival, Rakotoson's and Mabanckou's cartographies of Paris rely on the underground

network – a system that shapes cities' and individuals' conceptions of themselves as

urban. Modern cities are complex spaces, and not least because of their mobile networks

that urbanites have to master in order to '*work* the city' (Buhr 2018: 340). Transit maps

help city dwellers achieve this goal as they 'mitigate that complexity [and] assure

urbanites that the city is conceptually manageable' so that they can find a 'coherent

place for [themselves] within it […] by travelling the rail network' (Schwetman 2014:

87; 100). The cartographic impulse in Rakotoson's and Mabanckou's novels can

therefore be read as an element that captures the protagonists' attempts to manage the

complexity of their mobile metropolitan lives.

 Tais-toi et meurs is a typical thriller in the sense that its events take place in a

modern, urban setting that the narrative invests with a sense of adventure (see Rubin

1999: 14-15; see also Knight 2016). The adventurous spirit is conveyed in the

narrative's cartographic impulse, already manifest in the titles of chapters such as 'La

ligne 12' 'Line 12'; 'Bienvenue à Montparnasse' 'Welcome to Montparnasse'; and

'Montreuil-sur-Bamako'. The narrative does not get enough of urban Parisian

itineraries: street names and districts keep recurring throughout the text. The most

important role in this cartography is given to the underground. Julien Makambo's aka

José Montfort's initiation into the Parisian railway network is facilitated by Pedro, one

of the leading figures of the underground milieu, with whom he takes a RER train

(*Réseau Express Régional*; the Paris metropolitan and regional rail system) for the first

time. At the Gare du Nord station, Pedro, who 'connaissait Paris comme sa poche'

(Mabanckou 2012: 40) 'knew Paris inside out'[6], explains to Julien/José how the system

works, telling him that he should travel alone and get lost in order to better understand

the city. He also teaches Julien/José how to travel without paying the fare. After this initiation, the protagonist becomes a frequent *métro* passenger. Consequently, the cartography that the narrative produces mimics the Parisian underground map:

> Le parcours que j'avais à suivre était des plus compliqués depuis la station Cadet. D'abord, de Cadet, il me fallait aller jusqu'à Gare de l'Est, prendre ensuite la ligne 5 en direction de Bobigny-Pablo Picasso jusqu'à Gare du Nord, puis la ligne 4 en direction de la Porte de Clignancourt jusqu'à Marcadet-Poissonniers, et la ligne 12 en direction de Porte de la Chapelle pour arriver enfin au métro Marx Dormoy. (Mabanckou 2012: 169)

> The trajectory I had to follow was one of the most complicated ones from the Cadet station. First, from Cadet, I had to go to Gare de l'Est, then take line 5 in the direction of Bobigny-Pablo Picasso until Gare du Nord, then line 4 in the direction of Porte de Clignancourt until Marcadet-Poissonniers, and line 12 in the direction of Porte de la Chapelle in order to arrive, at last, to the station Marx Dormoy.

The novel is full of such detailed itineraries representing urban spaces as interconnected through mobility. By locating the protagonist on the mobile map of Paris, the narrative suggests that he is actively trying to 'handle' the city by orienting himself in its complex mobile networks. This urgency to handle the city turns into a concrete question of survival in the aftermath of a murder for which the protagonist is framed by his community. Escaping the crime scene, he feels that the metro does not move fast enough, and questions whether he had made the right choice by taking the underground at a specific station: 'Certes, il y avait d'autres possibilités : les stations La Chapelle,

Riquet, Crimée ou Porte de la Chapelle' (Mabanckou 2012: 28) 'Surely there were other possibilities: la Chapelle, Riquet, Crimée or Porte de la Chapelle.' From here on, the protagonist's mobility is shaped by his being a fugitive for whom 'sa propre ombre devient suspecte' (Mabanckou 2012: 28) 'his own shadow becomes suspicious' and who is perplexed by the question, 'Où aller à présent ?' Mabanckou 2012: 75) 'Where to go now?' The conspiracy plot adds a pronouncedly thrilleresque character to his mobility, generating a very anxiety-ridden poetics of mobility.

While the narrative is particularly interested in reproducing the Parisian underground map, similarly detailed descriptions accompany the protagonist's most banal displacements: 'Je suis sorti de l'hôtel et ai emprunté la rue de Paris en direction de la Porte de Montreuil pour aller chez Carrefour' (Mabanckou 2012: 91) 'I got out of the hotel and took the rue de Paris in the direction of Porte de Montreuil to go to Carrefour [supermarket].' Descriptions of such simple itineraries when there is no risk of getting lost betray the protagonist's increasing insecurity in the metropolis as he hides from the police and his community: it is as if the protagonist was constantly mapping out a potential, symbolic emergency exit. The protagonist's being in a constant 'cartographic mode' is symptomatic of his fear of falling off the map and is linked to his status as an outlaw. The cartographies produced by foot are associated with the protagonist's withdrawal from intramural Paris and convey his reduced mobility as a fugitive and failure to 'manage' central Paris outside the criminal community. Therefore, while the narrative speed slows down in the passages that represent the protagonist's walks in the suburb, the suspense related to the risk of getting caught is still present: as a pedestrian, the protagonist seems to be an easier 'prey'. In this way, different mobility practices contribute to the novel's thrilleresque narrative rhythm. Furthermore, the constant preoccupation with street names can also be understood in the

light of Julien's background; as mentioned earlier in the novel, he comes from a place where not all streets have names. The cartographic impulse, then, also articulates the epistemological shift that the process of becoming a modern postcolonial metropolitan subject entails.

The cartographic impulse is equally present in *Elle, au printemps*. The protagonist's arrival in Paris is defined by the unpleasant surprise of Marie not showing up at the airport, leaving the protagonist alone in the new environment. After the initial shock, she recalls that she has distant relatives in Paris, and decides to go to see them. As she sets out to take a bus, she finds herself tormented by questions as follows: '… mais comment prendre le bus en France ?' (Rakotoson 1996: 36) '… but how to catch the bus in France?'[7] and 'comment allait-elle trouver son bus… ?' (Rakotoson 1996: 37) 'how was she going to find her bus?' Taking the bus in Paris is an eerie experience: 'Tout était étrange' (Rakotoson 1996: 37) 'everything was strange', Sahondra observes as she realizes that there is no-one to tell the passengers where each bus is going. The sense of strangeness persists during the ride as the bus speeds forward with silent passengers. Sahondra's eerie experiences of urban public transports can be read as manifestations of the urban uncanny (Wolfreys 2008; Johnson 2010). The Freudian concept of the uncanny captures the idea of 'the destabilization of certain boundaries' – the boundary between the familiar and the strange in particular (Eckhard 2011: 35). The uncanny entails doubt and ambiguity and a sense of a lack of orientation or of not being totally 'at home', as *Unheimlich*, the original German term, suggests (Eckhard 2011: 37, 39). The uncanny is often considered a 'constitutive aspect of our experience of the modern' (Collins & Jervis 2008: 2), and as Julian Wolfreys (2008: 177) posits, the uncanny is associated with urban spaces where the sense of familiarity is constantly disturbed by 'the possibility of unfamiliarity, estrangement, and eruption.'

The 'urban uncanny' in Rakotoson's novel is related to the protagonist's experiences of travel in Parisian urban mobility systems, and, more specifically, with the silence that characterizes this form of travel. The uncanniness of silence springs from the fact that Sahondra associates silence with Madagascar, a country under a repressive military rule. Erica L. Johnson's (2010: 224) formulation of the urban uncanny builds on the idea that 'postcolonial time is uncannily repetitive and endlessly layered.' Consequently, distant places that are connected through their shared colonial pasts become each other's 'spatial and social repetitions' (Johnson 2010: 211). The uncanny repetition not only underlines the entangled pasts and presents, but also highlights the poetics of deception (Treiber 2012) that shapes much of Francophone African literature's representations of newcomers' travel to Paris: in Sahondra's words, 'quelque chose ne collait pas' (Rakotoson 1996: 27) 'something was not quite right'.

The novel represents Paris as an alienating environment. Sahondra's sense of being lost is conveyed by the narrative by showing that her urban itineraries are not planned by herself, but based on advice by random by-passers:

'Oh, mais c'est facile ça… Il vous suffit de prendre la navette, vous demandez au chauffeur de vous arrêter à Denfert et de là vous prenez le métro… La ligne est directe, vous n'aurez pas à prendre de correspondance… Tenez, la navette est à la sortie, […] vous changez pour le métro, direction Nation où vous vous arrêtez à la station Porte d'Italie, pour la correspondance… ' (Rakotoson 1996: 36)

'Oh, but that is easy… You just take the shuttle, you ask the driver to stop at Denfert and you take the metro from there… It is a direct line, no need to change… You see, the shuttle is next to the exit, […] you take the metro in the direction of Nation and you stop at the Porte d'Italie station for the transfer…'

While such advice is supposed to help Sahondra navigate in the urban environment and make it 'manageable', they generate further confusion. This sense of anxiety is conveyed by the narrative through the broken exchanges that Sahondra has with booking clerks or random by-passers. Sahondra's lines are reduced to one-word questions and end with three dots and question marks, as in the following example at a metro ticket sales counter:

- Un ticket ou un carnet ?

- …

- Combien de zones ?

- … C'est-à-dire que… (Rakotoson 1996: 39)

- A ticket or a book of tickets?

- …

- How many zones?

- … This is to say…

Such failed dialogues recur frequently in chapters depicting Sahondra's arrival in Paris, and they show how out of place she is when it comes to urban mobility. Against the metropolitan context of hyper-mobility, these broken dialogues, Sahondra's silences and her confused questions convey the idea of an interrupted movement. With such literary means, the narrative highlights the discrepancy between Sahondra's interrupted mobility and the speed characteristic of the mobility systems that surround her. Practices that are evident for anyone else seem absurd to Sahondra. She is not familiar with the names of the stations – for example, she mistakes Denfert for *l'Enfer* (hell). She does not know what the *métro* looks like and is surprised to learn that is just a train. She struggles with automatic doors, the buttons she is supposed to press, telephone cards, telephone boxes and so on. In short, she has constant trouble with modern mobile

technologies. As 'mobility is central to what it takes to be modern' (Cresswell 2006: 20), it is clear that Sahondra's struggle with mobile technologies can be equated with the struggle of becoming a modern, metropolitan postcolonial mobile subject. This is a demanding process that reflects the idea of mobility as transformative and therefore as a source of anxiety (Cresswell 2006: 17; Berensmeyer & Ehland 2013: 22; Davidson 2017: 552).

Sahondra's becoming a modern, metropolitan postcolonial mobile subject is grounded on a very fragile basis. The narrative captures this fragility in a small piece of handwritten paper that Sahondra's cousin hands to her prior to one of her first Parisian metro journeys. The piece of paper lists the names of the stations through which Sahondra should travel to reach her destination. This piece of paper, that could so easily get lost and whose readability suffers each time it is unfolded open, is a subtle metaphor for the challenges the protagonist faces in her newly found life in Paris. Much as in Mabanckou's novel, then, *Elle, au printemps* articulates the anxious aspects of migrant newcomers' urban everyday mobilities. The thrilleresque features of *Tais-toi et meurs* and the urban uncanny in Rakotoson's text translate this mobility-related anxiety into form.

Débrouillardise cosmopolitanism: Survival in a new environment

In this section, I focus on the ways in which Rakotoson's and Mabanckou's protagonists' attempts to 'manage' Paris through everyday urban mobility gives articulation to a practical cosmopolitan attitude. Cosmopolitanism is commonly conceived as an elite mobile position and 'world citizenship' of those who transgress boundaries with ease thanks to their 'badge of privilege' (Robbins & Lemos Horta 2017: 3). Alternatively, cosmopolitanism is seen as a form of global political solidarity (Cheah 2006) or a set of (utopian) ideals generating 'planetary consciousness' (Gilroy

2005; see also Spencer 2011: 2), and shaped by an ethics that entails openness to alterity (see, e.g. Appiah 2006). It is also associated with metropolitan, multicultural settings where cosmopolitanism is supposed to 'happen' – an idea that has been challenged because visual diversity alone only rarely leads to openness to alterity (Papastephanou 2012: 119). Besides its elitist connotations, utopian aspirations and the too easily made topographical associations, cosmopolitanism can also be understood as 'actually existing' processes (Robbins 1998). According to Vered Amit and Pauline Gardiner-Barber (2015: 543), 'cosmopolitanism requires a capacity and willingness to imagine that there may be other forms of subjectivity, sociality and engagement beyond the already familiar.' Understood along these lines, cosmopolitanism is not so much a utopian stance or a ethical aspiration, as an active engagement and a 'mundane practice' (Amit & Gardiner-Barber 2015: 543). To highlight the 'mundane' dimension of cosmopolitanism, Ulrich Beck (2006: 101) has introduced the term *cosmopolitanization* by which he refers to 'a "forced" cosmopolitanism' generated 'at the level of practice.' This pragmatic interpretation of cosmopolitanism strips the concept of its elitist connotations as privileged classes' easygoing ways of being 'at home in the world'. By understanding cosmopolitanization as a practical process that entails an effort to cross boundaries in order to engage with 'the world beyond one's immediate milieu' (Spencer 2011: 4), it is possible to use the concept to analyze how Rakotoson's and Mabanckou's protagonists orient and reinvent themselves in the new environment they have been 'thrown into'. Beck (2006: 103) suggests that migrants often have to 'become […] acrobats in the manipulation of boundaries' in order to survive: this is exactly what Rakotoson's and Mabanckou's protagonists' practical cosmopolitanisms are about.

The key aspect in the novels' conceptualizations of practical cosmopolitanism as a means of survival is *débrouillardise,* which is a French term that refers to

resourcefulness in situations that may set severe limits to one's agency. The term *débrouillardise* keeps recurring in both texts, although in a slightly different sense. In Mabanckou's thriller, it is tied to the operations of the delinquent milieu. Julien Makambo's arrival in Paris has been organized by the members of the underworld community; he owes his diasporic existence to Pedro, who '[l]'avait aidé à [s]e débrouiller dans Paris' (Mabanckou 2012: 34) 'had helped him manage in Paris.' It is Pedro who tells Julien/José to immerse himself in the city that he himself handles perfectly. When Pedro sends Julien/José on a mission to test his loyalty and capacities, he says, 'Cette mission, c'est donc un test pour toi, je veux voir comment tu te débrouilles' (Mabanckou 2012: 67) 'This mission is a test for you, I want to see how you manage.' *Débrouillardise* here refers to one's capacities to manage the city's mobile network while being in an irregular condition as a delinquent and an undocumented migrant. It entails taking the metro without buying a ticket – and without getting caught. Travelling without a ticket comes with specific risks for someone who lives outside the official society. Indeed, the protagonist acknowledges that some stations are riskier than others in this respect – including Montparnasse Bienvenüe where many 'compatriotes […] avaient été arrêtés […] et expulsés du jour au lendemain au pays' (Mabanckou 2012: 67) 'compatriotes had been arrested and deported overnight.' Indeed, the test that Pedro wants Julien/José to pass exposes the fragility of the latter's sense of being at home in Paris and shows him that he does not 'manage' the city as well as he thinks; this tension between control and vulnerability constitutes a key dialectic of the thriller form (Rubin 1999: 7). The control/vulnerability nexus culminates in a passage in which the protagonist is spotted and chased by inspectors in the labyrinth of an underground station. He tries to escape, but only encounters metro carriage doors closing in his face and 'No Exit' signs. That he wears a pair of slippery

luxury brand shoes – the hallmark of his *sapeur*[8] identity – does not facilitate his task.

His flight takes thrilleresque tones:

> J'ai emprunté le premier sens interdit que j'ai vu à ma droite. Encore un couloir !
> Un long couloir ! Plus je courais, plus le couloir se rétrécissait et s'assombrissait.
> Le pas du [contrôleur] résonnait derrière moi comme dans un film d'horreur.
> (Mabanckou 2012: 70)

> I took the first « Prohibited Direction » exit that I saw on my right. Again a
> corridor! A long corridor! The more I run, the narrower and darker the corridor
> became. The sound of the inspector's footsteps behind me echoed as in a horror
> movie.

In the end, the protagonist finds himself in a cul-de-sac, with a gleeful black inspector –

for whom the pursuit becomes a personal battle against fraudulent African metro users

who, according to him, ruin the reputation of all black urbanites – exclaiming, 'Fils de

bâtard, tu croyais connaître cette station mieux que moi, hein ?' (Mabanckou 2012: 70)

'Son of a bitch, did you really think you knew this station better than I do, did you?'

This passage captures the limits of the protagonist's practical cosmopolitanism. As a

member of a parallel society, he is in no position to claim the city and its mobile

networks as his own. According to John D. Schwetman (2014: 96-97), 'to travel on the

grade-separated transit system is to leave the plane of the actual city and enter the

alternative universe'; the underground is, in other words, 'another world detached from

the real life of the city.' This quotation draws attention to the way in which

Mabanckou's text uses the Parisian *métro* as a metaphor for the underworld society. The

protagonist's failure to handle the 'alternative universe' of the underground is,

therefore, a metaphor for his failure to handle Paris as a subordinate member of a

parallel society.

In *Elle, au printemps*, the *débrouillardise* dimension of everyday mobility is even more pronounced as the protagonist is left alone to 'handle' Paris. The verb *se débrouiller* ('manage') keeps recurring in the text. Sahondra's arrival at Orly airport marks her loss of all her points of reference. Despite the shock caused by Marie's absence, Sahondra acknowledges that she does not have any other solution but to manage: 'T'as voulu aller à Paris, tu y es, débrouille-toi…' (Rakotoson 1996: 34) 'You wanted to go to Paris, you're there, you will have to manage…' Sahondra lacks the privilege of accustomed world travelers who transgress cultural, national, and linguistic boundaries with ease. Already at Antananarivo airport, she does not quite identify with the nonchalant elite. On the airplane, she feels that she is being looked down at by the airhostesses and fellow passengers because of her cheap clothes and her lack of 'high society' manners. Her way of being out of place among frequent 'world class travellers' creates certain expectations with regard to her capabilities of 'handling' the metropolitan space, and the warnings by a fellow passenger about what could happen to a young woman travelling alone without money further add to these expectations. Rakotoson's novel, however, defies clichéd plots: the narrative refers to the protagonist's mobile pursuit as 'l'aventure […] avec une valise' (Rakotoson 1996: 9; 18) 'adventure with one suitcase', and portrays Sahondra as anything but a helpless young woman losing herself in the city while facing its 'dangers'.

The narrative not only conveys Sahondra's frustration with urban mobile networks, but also her perseverance in learning to 'work' Paris. Her urban apprenticeship (Buhr 2018) entails moments of desperation: 'Elle va pleurer, elle va pleurer…' (Rakotoson 1996: 55) 'She is going to cry, she is going to cry…', and 'elle va se perdre à Paris, elle va mourir dans Paris, elle va…' (Rakotoson 1996: 59) 'she is going to get lost in Paris, she is going to die in Paris, she is going to…' While others

give credit to her *débrouillardise*, she is less convinced of how it is even possible to manage the alienating universe of urban mobility networks:

> Tu te débrouilles bien, tu te débrouilles bien, facile à dire, trois niveaux, plusieurs lignes, RER… comment « se débrouillait-on bien » dans ce labyrinthe ? Vie sous terre, lumière glauque, odeur de l'huile de moteur chaude et de sueur, et foule qui ne regarde nulle part. (Rakotoson 1996: 82)

> You are doing well, you are doing well, it is easy to say, three levels, several lines, RER… how does one 'manage well' in this labyrinth? Underground life, dim light, a smell of hot motor oil and sweat, and a crowd that does not look anywhere.

Simultaneously, she is equally determined to manage the city on her own, and, indeed, after hours of drifting, she 'resort [...] saine et sauve du métro' (Rakotoson 1996: 55) 'exits the underground safe and sound.' There is a certain defiance in her declaration of not being an accustomed traveler or urbanite: 'Paysanne ! Oui, et alors ?' (Rakotoson 1996: 38) 'A peasant girl ! Yes, so what?' Such bursts of self-confidence, represented as the protagonist's internal monologues and often accompanied by exclamation marks, convey her determination. Sahondra's *débrouillardise* in the urban space is the result of her determined effort to 'dompter la peur […] et s'habituer à Paris' (Rakotoson 1996: 60) 'tame her fear and get used to Paris.' At one point, she fiercely declares that 'Paris n'a presque plus de secrets pour elle' (Rakotoson 1996: 56) 'Paris has almost no secrets left for her'. This marks the turning point in the mobility-driven narrative, as the protagonist decides to travel from Paris towards peripheral, provincial spaces in an attempt to find Marie. Just as Mabanckou's novel, *Elle, au printemps* revisits the notion of cosmopolitanism by conceiving it as a practical survival strategy that migrant newcomers adopt in their new urban environments.

Peripheral dead ends

Now I move on to analyzing Rakotoson's and Mabanckou's portrayals of peripheral journeys, which I argue are symptomatic of the protagonists' failures to handle Paris perfectly. Interestingly enough, these journeys also highlight the central role that Paris plays in the texts: while the protagonists leave intramural Paris because they have no other option, it simultaneously seems that the metropolis has a hold on them as it constitutes such an elementary part of their newly established mobile subjectivities. While the concept of the periphery can be valued positively or negatively, depending on the context and the purposes it is used to serve, Rakotoson's and Mabanckou's texts invest marginalized loci with negative meanings such as neglect and lack of vitality – features that are commonly associated with peripheral spaces (see Peeren, Stuit & van Weyenberg 2016: 3-4). While I read the protagonists' partly forced displacements from the metropolitan space to the periphery as the anxious culmination of their mobilities as irregular migrants in France, these peripheral mobilities also reveal that metropolitan Paris is itself shaped by what Lieven Ameel, Jason Finch and Markku Salmela (2015: 6) refer to as 'urban peripherality'. This concept conveys the idea that peripheries are present in places that are considered central. In Rakotoson's and Mabanckou's novels, the idea of urban peripherality is manifest in the irregular migrants' marginalized presence in the metropolis. Peripheries, in these novels, are therefore both topographical and conceptual/symbolic.

Sahondra travels to the provincial town of Valenciennes in order to find Marie, whom the narrative conceives as the prime mover of Sahondra's metropolitan pursuit. From Gare du Nord, Sahondra takes a train that 'l'emmènait vers Dieu sait où' (Rakotoson 1996: 84) 'took her God knows where.' As Paris has become slightly more manageable for her, the idea of travelling 'God knows where' indicates her being, yet

again, out of her comfort zone. In this sense, the trip to Valenciennes resembles her departure for Paris. As the train runs through the countryside, 'Un peu de brume voilait tout le paysage' (Rakotoson 1996: 89) 'Some mist veiled the entire landscape', which suggests that the trip makes Sahondra lose the fragile points of reference that she has acquired with difficulty in Paris. The peripheral town is an Elsewhere that Sahondra has to face and that frightens her. Through the train window, the landscape looks monotonous; it stands in contrast to Paris and its complex world of mobile networks. The train trip itself is an awkward experience. Sahondra is the only black person on the wagon, and she feels the other passengers' eyes on her. Again, the uncanny finds its manifestation in the silence of public transports: nobody speaks and even the train seems to move without making any noise. This time, Sahondra does not care about the uncanny feeling generated by the realization of how 'voyager était vraiment différent en France' (Rakotoson 1996: 81) 'travelling was really different in France.' She breaks the silence by talking to a fellow passenger about her home in Madagascar in a strange, loud voice. Her awkward monologue in the otherwise silent wagon further intensifies the eerie, unreal feeling as it immerses Sahondra in vivid memories, evoking her home country in the grey and monotonous rural landscape in a way that draws parallels between two distant locations.

Valenciennes is a place of uncanny silence and as such, reminiscent of the protagonist's home town. Upon her arrival, Sahondra observes that the streets are empty and quiet, the railway station is grey, and 'seul un bruit de moteur symbolisait la vie' (Rakotoson 1996: 93) 'only the sound of an engine signified life.' This eerie impression resonates with the narrative's portrayal of the Madagascan 'atmosphère de répression' (Rakotoson 1996: 20) 'atmosphere of repression' and the overwhelming greyness that Sahondra associates with everything she dislikes in the country. In this way, the

narrative underlines a 'spatial sameness' that is generated as former colonial and metropolitan spaces 'overlap and repeat one another in a mutual confrontation of unexpected, eerie sameness' (Johnson 2010: 221, 223). In Sahondra's mind, Valenciennes is like 'une ville morte […] dans un de ces moment de couvre-feu' (Rakotoson 1996: 106) 'a dead city […] under one of those moments of curfew'. The allusion to curfew creates an explicit parallel between the protagonist's Madagascan home town and the former mining town of Valenciennes. The parallels between these two locations are further underlined by narrative as it mentions their distance from Paris, their histories as sites of exploitation and/or colonization, as well as their presents as peripheries 'oubliés par le développement' (Rakotoson 1996: 111) 'forgotten by the development'. Through repetition, the postcolonial uncanny highlights how the similarities between peripheries located on both sides of the former colonial divide become exposed as a subject from a postcolonial periphery travels to a periphery located in the assumed center.

Making the journey represents a personal victory for Sahondra: 'Si elle était restée si longtemps à Paris sans bouger réellement, c'était pour se protéger, pour ne pas avoir à affronter un avenir en forme de cauchemar ou au moins d'interrogation' (Rakotoson 1996: 92). 'If she had stayed in Paris for such a long time without really moving, it was to protect herself, not to have to face a future in the form of a nightmare or at least full of questions.' As this quotation suggests, Paris, despite all its challenges, has slowly started to become a place that the protagonist can – at least to a very limited extent – handle. The journey to Valenciennes advances the plot by forcing the protagonist to face her uncertain future in France. By stating that her urban mobility was not really about movement at all, the narrative suggests that the real challenge of her migrant journey is still to be addressed: how to be able to settle in France so as to

pursue her studies, find a job, and a place to live. As Marie seems to be the key to

finding answers to these questions, the stakes of the journey to the periphery are high.

It turns out that Marie no longer lives in the address she mentioned in her letters.

Consequently, the trip to the periphery represents a dead end that leaves Sahondra's

future in France suspended in a state of ambiguity. At this point, the reader starts to

have doubts about whether Marie even exists. Marie is the reason for Sahondra's being

in France, and Sahondra's failure to find her and the consequent lack of closure that

characterize Sahondra's peripheral journey underline the uncertainty informing her

aspirations to settle in France. Sahondra's peripheral journey exposes the fragile

premises of her belonging in Paris, and, in this way, draws attention to how the Paris

she inhabits as an irregular migrant has been, from the very beginning, a conceptual

margin or a periphery itself (see Ameel, Finch & Salmela 2015: 6). Before returning to

Paris the next day, Sahondra goes for a late-night walk. This solitary nocturnal walk in

the peripheral town that reminds Sahondra of her home town in Madagascar is a gesture

of claiming public space as a female mobile subject; back home, walking alone during

the night was considered too dangerous for women. Interestingly enough, this time the

narrative does not depict the details of Sahondra's walk; only her departure from and

her return to her host's place are mentioned. This is where the novel's portrayal of the

protagonist's walk differs from Mabanckou's novel in which the cartographic impulse

prevails, to a certain degree, even during the protagonist's walks in the peripheral space.

Clearly, walking in the peripheral space has an empowering effect on Sahondra. In

contrast to her travels in public transports – and contrary to Mabanckou's protagonist –

there is no anxious aspect in walking. Through her nocturnal walk in Valenciennes,

Sahondra symbolically reclaims her native Antananarivo. The fact that this walk

escapes the cartographic impulse differentiates it from her Parisian displacements which

are framed as her survival strategy in the metropolis. In so doing, the narrative underlines Sahondra's mastery instead of portraying her as a lost newcomer struggling to not to fall off the map. On her return, it is already morning, and her host tells her that she should not have gone for a night walk on her own. Sahondra does not care about his reproach, and later, when she tells him that she will return to Paris right away, she rejects his offer to give her a lift to the station by saying that she needs to walk. This suggests that while the novel's ending remains open when it comes to Sahondra's future and while the anxiety informing her mobile position does not therefore loosen its grip, she has learned how to handle the uncertainties that being a not entirely regular migrant in France entails. In this sense, the trip to the periphery, while being a dead end in the sense of not finding Marie, seems to have had an empowering effect on Sahondra's mobility.

In *Tais-toi et meurs*, the protagonist's becoming subject of conspiracy forces him to escape Paris and hide in a cheap hotel in Montreuil, an Eastern Parisian *banlieue* – a locus which resonates with stereotypical images of French suburbs as socially deprived environments of 'banishment and exclusion' (Horvath 2011: 93) inhabited principally by North and Sub-Saharan African migrants. As in Rakotoson's novel, Mabanckou's protagonist's relegation in the periphery underlines the fact that 'his Paris', the criminal underworld milieu, was already an urban periphery – certainly related to the center while not entirely part of it (see Ameel, Finch & Salmela 2015: 6). The protagonist's banishment from the center – albeit from a symbolically peripheral one – is an ironic turn of the plot in the sense that a subject from a postcolonial periphery, who has dreamed of reaching the center, ends up relegated to a metropolitan periphery. The chapters narrating his life at the peripheral hotel rely on the generic conventions of the thriller by representing the protagonist as a solitary individual who is

'cut from his previously secure bearings of community' (Rubin 1999: 11). By referring to the hotel as a 'trou' (Mabanckou 2012: 81) 'hole', the narrative represents the displacement as a form of downgrading, and also, so to speak, a return to square one, as suggested by the fact that the protagonist checks in the hotel under his own name, not the one given to him by the community. The use of his own name conveys the idea that he is no longer under the protection of the community that 'created' him. The defeat of being relegated to the periphery is further conveyed in how the protagonist, previously a 'real Parisian' dandy wearing expensive luxury suits and shoes, starts to wear track suits, grows a beard and wears long hair. The change of style is yet another step in his mobility-related transformation process: the protagonist turns form a *sapeur* into a *banlieusard*. The narrative invests the *banlieue* setting with negative meanings so that it becomes the ultimate manifestation of the protagonist's failure to handle Paris – that is, the peripheral, underworld version of Paris that the criminal community has created.

The protagonist's relegation to the margins of the metropolis affects his mobility. The chapters depicting his stay in the hotel no longer feature travel in urban public transports: Julien Makambo's displacements are restricted to his immediate suburban milieu during his daily errands on foot. Still, as a matter of routine, the narrative keeps recording his simple itineraries in the vicinity, which conveys the protagonist's increased sense of insecurity due to his banishment from the community and intramural Paris. From the perspective of this insecurity, it is significant that the protagonist hides in a hotel. The hotel, as Mimi Sheller and John Urry (2006: 213; 219) posit, can be seen as a transfer point and a 'place[…] of intermittent movement.' Hotels are spaces of in-between-ness not only as 'gateways' between the public and the private (Davidson 2006: 169), but also because motels and budget hotels 'collect[..] deviancy' (Treadwell 2005: 215). In *Tais-toi et meurs*, the hotel is a space of deviancy as a refuge

for a fugitive whose current compromised mobility can be summarized in the question, 'Où irais-je puisque je ne connaissais personne en France en dehors de mon milieu ?' (Mabanckou 2012: 90) 'Where would I go as I knew no-one in France outside my milieu?' While the protagonist refers to his room as a 'refuge', he cannot entirely feel at home in that space either.

In terms of narrative speed, the hotel passages are characterized by slowness and relative immobility, which stand in contrast to the thrilleresque hyper-mobility of the protagonist's previous intra-Parisian itineraries. The narrative underlines this contrast with a meta-literary commentary by alluding to a receptionist reading Marcel Proust's narratively slow, multivolume novel *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Yet, there is a constant tension in this immobility: while at one moment, the protagonist claims that the longer he stays at the hotel, the more secure he feels, in the next instance he is convinced that he should leave the place immediately. The instability and in-between-ness of the hotel both as a refuge and an impasse gives articulation to this insecurity and the suspense it generates. In his current situation, the hotel, as a transitory space between dwelling and movement, is the only possible way for the protagonist to remain at least partially mobile. The hotel also marks a certain rupture in the narrative's mostly (intramural) cartographic impulse, which has now become reduced to the protagonist's walks in the vicinity. This reflects his eventually arrested mobility outside the criminal community.

As the story proceeds, the protagonist no longer feels safe in the hotel and decides to leave. Yet, the question of where to go persists. Julian Makambo's desperate situation gains its full meaning with his impulsive decision to leave for Nantes. He has never been to Nantes and does not know anyone from there, so the destination is entirely haphazard. In the ambiguous refuge/impasse of the hotel room, the provincial

town of Nantes represents his last hope for reinventing himself. Ultimately, this plan to travel to Nantes fails as the protagonist is arrested not far from the hotel. That his movement is literally arrested by the police underlines the constant risks of interruption that, from the very beginning, have shaped his metropolitan mobile position outside the official society. Due to his detention – the culmination of his arrested mobility – the speed of the narrative rhythm slows down drastically. Nantes, a destination he never reaches and of which he knows nothing, becomes the symbol for his impossible wish to exist on his own outside the criminal community that has created him. This highlights the elementary role of Paris in the construction of his postcolonial metropolitan subjectivity.

Conclusion

My analysis of Rakotoson's and Mabanckou's representations and poetics of everyday mobilities demonstrates how applying a mobility studies perspective to postcolonial literary texts that could easily be defined as 'migration novels' allows for a reading that recognizes African migrants as urban mobile subjects who actively engage in concrete everyday urban mobility practices. The characters are mobile not only in the sense of being part of transnational migration movements, but as urban travelers in the metropolitan space. Rakotoson's and Mabanckou's texts' ways of producing mobile urban cartographies and portraying newly arrived African migrants as practical cosmopolitans trying to survive in the metropolis and to make sense of it through mobility widen the scope of how the concept of mobility can be understood in postcolonial contexts. The plot twists with peripheral journeys/dwelling in both texts attest to the importance of Paris for the protagonists' mobile subjectivities.

I have used the notion of poetics of mobility to refer to the ways in which the mobility theme translates into form. While the notion of poetics of mobility can be applied to different literary texts, its manifestations inevitably vary according to the literary means employed by specific literary texts. By paying attention to literary features, my analysis points out that poetics of mobility essentially contribute to the texts' representations of mobility. Becoming a modern, metropolitan postcolonial mobile subject is a process of transformation – a profoundly anxiety-generating one. In *Elle, au printemps*, the anxious aspects of this transformation translate into form through a mobility-related urban uncanny which is generated through the protagonist's eerie, strangely familiar experiences. The postcolonial urban uncanny in Rakotoson's novel establishes links between France and Madagascar by highlighting their shared colonial past. Poetics of mobility in Rakotoson's novel are also manifest in how the narrative adopts different means (broken dialogues, silence, and unanswered questions) for conveying the anxious aspects of protagonist's attempts to 'manage' Paris through urban mobility. In *Tais-toi et meurs*, poetics of mobility pertain to the use of the generic features of the thriller form: the narrative structure and the plot development reflect the protagonist's urban (im)mobilities, generating a sense of suspense.

It can be concluded that Rakotoson's and Mabanckou's protagonists' struggles in the urban space, its mobile networks, and their peripheral journeys show how central a role mobility plays in the process of becoming a postcolonial metropolitan mobile subject and in the attempt of trying to claim the postcolonial metropolis as one's own.

Author bio

Dr. Anna-Leena Toivanen is a senior researcher at the University of Eastern Finland, and a former Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow (MSCA-IF) at CEREP (*Centre d'Enseignement et de Recherche en Etudes Postcoloniales*), University of Liège, Belgium. Her research focuses on mobilities and cosmopolitanisms in contemporary Franco- and Anglophone diasporic African literatures. Her recent work has been published in *Studies in Travel Writing*, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *Research in African Literatures*, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, and *Matatu*. Her chapter on mobility and labour in contemporary African diasporic fiction features in *The Routledge Handbook of African Literature* (2019).

Address:
Anna-Leena Toivanen
University of Eastern Finland
School of Humanities, Agora 233
P.O. Box 111
80101 Joensuu, FINLAND

Email:
anna-leena.toivanen@uef.fi

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[1] Besides the paradigmatization of the migrant figure in the field of postcolonial literary studies, the scarcity of critical attention given to literary representations of concrete forms of mobility results also from the fact that mobility is such an integral part of modern life that it easily goes unnoticed as a literary theme.

[2] Adopting a postcolonial lens for mobility studies is useful in exploring how race, ethnicity, and the aftermath of colonialism shape (im)mobilities (see, e.g. Upstone 2014; Carpio 2019). Enhancing dialogue between mobility studies and postcolonial studies is important because not much work has been done on the intersections between mobility and race (Nicholson & Sheller 2016: 5).

3   Mobility studies are associated with social sciences and 'real life' mobilities, whereas literary texts produce *representations* of mobility. Arts and literature have the capacity to render mobility – which is often considered to escape representation – 'representable' (Cresswell 2006: 47; Murray & Upstone 2014a: 2-3). However, fictional texts do not merely replicate social realities, but actively produce meanings and in so doing, 'shape […] and facilitate […] the image and understanding of a mobilised world' (Berensmeyer & Ehland 2013: 22).

[4] My formulation of poetics of mobility here is grounded on my reading of two specific literary texts, in which the mobility theme is translated into form through the thriller form and the uncanny. This obviously does not mean that poetics of mobility would be limited to particular genres or styles, or texts discussing urban mobilities in (post)colonial metropolises. Poetics of mobility can take a variety of forms, and my analysis is only one possible way of defining what poetics of mobility could be. My aim is not to produce a pattern that could be applied to all literary texts (which would, of course, be impossible), since literary texts are unique and follow their own logics. Any attempt to outline a poetics of mobility has to spring from the uniqueness of the literary text in question.

[5] My use of the notion of 'modern postcolonial metropolitan subject' is not to imply that non-metropolitan, postcolonial mobile subjectivities would be somehow automatically 'premodern' or 'traditional'. Rather, there is a variety of different, co-existing modernities that transform each other (see Ashcroft 2009).

[6] All translations of Mabanckou's novel are mine.

[7] All translations from Rakotoson's novel are mine.

[8] *La Sape* (*Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Elégantes*; 'Society of Ambiance-Makers and Elegant People') is a form of Congolese dandyism which entails

wearing luxury brand clothing and accessories. *Sapeur* figures feature throughout

Mabanckou's production.