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## READING MIGRATION LITERATURE THROUGH A MOBILITY STUDIES LENS

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## READING MIGRATION LITERATURE THROUGH A MOBILITY STUDIES LENS

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The purpose of this chapter is to discuss how to read migration literature from the perspective of the New Mobilities Paradigm (NMP) outlined by Mimi Sheller and John Urry. After discussing some of the key concerns of mobilities research and pinpointing its advantages for analysing migration literature, the chapter demonstrates, using concrete examples drawn from contemporary Francophone African and Afrodiasporic fiction, how the NMP can be used in studying the kinetic aspects of migration in literature.

It has become a commonplace to say that we live in a world that is on the move. While mobility is not only characteristic of globalisation and modernity but also integral to “both historical and contemporary existence” (Sheller 48), some forms of mobility tend to be seen as typical of the global era. In *Mobilities*, John Urry suggests that there are “twelve main mobility forms in the contemporary world”, one of which concerns “asylum, refugee and homeless travel and migration” (10). While migration is a pivotal element of the hyper-mobile global era and, vice versa, while mobility is an essential part of migration, relatively little attention has been paid to the kinetic aspects of migration (Cresswell, *On the Move* 2; Kalir 315; Mainwaring and Bridgen 247; Schapendonk, “Mobilities” 137; Toivanen, *Mobilities* 1). Migration and postcolonial studies tend to prioritise *space* by drawing attention to the place of departure and, above all, that of arrival, while the physical displacement between locations—that what happens *on the road*—is rarely seen as a valuable subject of inquiry (Schapendonk, “Sub-Saharan” 12). The focus on spatiality attests to the pervasiveness of methodological nationalism (Kalir 312) and directs attention to “factors that initiate migration and issues associated with settlement and integration” (Mainwaring and Bridgen 247). Of course, studies of migration literature move beyond sociological meanings of migration and attest to the ways in which literary texts articulate the complexities of migrant identities using specific literary means. However, focus on the *metaphorical* mobilities of migration—often in terms of identity, belonging, and transculturation—has overshadowed the *tangible* and *concrete* mobile aspects that are equally integral to migration and have also found their way into literary texts. Such tangibly mobile aspects of migration include, for instance, the migrant journey from the point of departure to the so-called destination (Schapendonk, “Sub-Saharan”; Mainwaring and Bridgen; Griffiths et al.); migrants’ everyday mobilities within the destination and beyond (Buhr 337; Ní Loingsigh 159); and different non-physical forms of mobility facilitated by images, texts,

communication technologies, and memories. As Aedín Ní Loingsigh argues, migrants are only rarely recognised as mobile subjects or travellers (2–3). Hence, it is not surprising that the kinetic dimensions of migration tend to be overlooked in the study of migration literature. There is a need for a framework that recognises the relevance of mobility as a valuable subject of critical inquiry (see Aguiar et al. 19) and allows for an understanding of the “convergence between categories of movement” (Averis and Hollis-Touré 4; see also Hui 75–76)—namely that migrants can simultaneously be other mobile subjects such as commuters, tourists, *flâneurs*, but also that migration entails non-physical forms of mobility that are equally important in literary representations of migration. In the case of underprivileged migrants, a mobility studies perspective enables insights into the unequal mobility regimes that affect and produce their (im)mobilities (Schapendonk “Sub-Saharan”, “Mobilities”; Mainwaring and Bridgen; Glick Schiller and Salazar; Bromley).

Mobility studies provides tools for analysing the kinetic aspects of migration and their representation in literature. In his “Mobility Studies Manifesto”, Stephen Greenblatt writes that

the physical, infrastructural, and institutional conditions of movement—the available routes; the maps; the vehicles; the relative speed; the controls and costs; the limits on what can be transported; the authorisations required; the inns, relay stations and transfer points; the travel facilitators—are all serious objects of analysis.

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Greenblatt goes on to state that it is “only when conditions directly related to movement are firmly grasped will it be possible fully to understand the metaphorical movements” (250). A mobilities research approach means placing the very act of movement at the centre of analysis by taking mobility “seriously” (Cresswell, “Towards” 18) and “in a highly literal sense” (Greenblatt 250). Foregrounding representations of tangible forms of mobility in the analysis of migration literature does not mean neglecting the metaphorical dimensions of movement, but rather represents a gesture of “bridging metaphor and praxis” (Thomsen et al. 5). While postcolonial literary studies tends to remain blind to the sheer diversity of mobilities and uses the term ‘mobility’ sloppily as a synonym for diaspora, exile, and migration (Toivanen, *Mobilities* 2), the NMP allows for a wider understanding of mobilities. In mobility studies, forms of mobility range from the physical travel of people and movement of objects to imaginative, virtual, and communicative travel (Urry 47). For the NMP, mobilities are relational (Urry 10), which is also why mobility is “never singular but always plural” (Adey 18). The idea of mobility systems that is integral to the NMP attests to the interlinked character of mobilities. For example, Urry defines automobility as “a self-organising autopoietic, non-linear system that spreads world-wide, cars, car-drivers, roads, petroleum supplies and many novel objects, technologies and signs” (118). Based on Urry’s conceptualisation, Veronika Zuskáčová summarises the system of aeromobility as “the assemblage of travelers, aircraft, and infrastructure, together with the countless other components, their relations, rules, signs, and various actors that constitute a dynamic complex system self-expanding in contemporary global society” (8). Acknowledging the relationality and interconnected quality of mobilities enables a fine-tuned and diverse understanding of the kinetic aspects of migration and their representation in literature. As Allison Hui notes, compared to mobility studies, migration studies often fail to acknowledge the multiplicity and relationality of mobilities as well as their systemic and non-human manifestations (71). Furthermore, as the concept of mobility system suggests, places are relevant for mobility studies. Not only are places seen to gain their meaning through movement (Edensor 6); they are also important as infrastructures or “moorings” that enable mobility (Hannam et al. 3). Transfer points or “places of intermittent movement” (Sheller

and Urry 213) such as airports, hotels, stations, motorways, bridges, or camps are interesting settings for a mobility studies-oriented reading of literary texts as they capture the entangled relation between space and movement. Instead of romanticising movement by promoting the idea of an ‘ethereal’ mobile subjectivity and conceiving movement as unimpeded ‘flow’, mobility studies scholars emphasise that mobilities “are both productive [of power relations] and produced by them” (Cresswell, “Towards” 21), and that power structures “enhance the mobilities of some while reinforcing the immobilities of others” (Sheller and Urry 213). According to such a view, mobility is necessarily connected to immobility. As Kudzai Matereke stresses, immobility is the underside of mobility because mobilities are often “failed, unrealised, and unachievable” (“Africa” 114). It is indeed noteworthy that the word ‘travel’ is a derivative of the French word for work, ‘*travail*’, suggesting that mobilities entail “planning, action, focused effort, and the solving of problems related to movement”, as Phillip Vannini (1) writes. The uneven distribution of the mobility resource and politics of mobility (Cresswell, “Towards”) are relevant aspects for any discussion of migrant mobilities and their literary representation. African mobility studies scholars have criticised the NMP for privileging mobilities and mobile technologies generated by the encounter with the West (Mavhunga 77) and for the assumption that Africans are essentially immobile (Nyamnjoh 659). In line with this criticism, Kudzai Matereke calls for an approach that focuses on “the specificities of African experiences of mobility” to “decenter Western-centric articulations of mobility” (“Africa” 115). African migration literature provides insights into African and Afrodiasporic experiences of mobility and thus has the potential to challenge Western-based understandings of mobility.

While mobility studies is often associated with social sciences—sociology and human geography in particular—its genealogy is grounded in the humanities: post-structuralist and post-colonial theories have played a pivotal role in the formation of the field (Aguilar et al. 4–5; Merriman and Pearce 493–94; Pearce 77–79). Currently, mobility studies is experiencing a “humanities turn” that foregrounds the “cultural-political, ethical, spiritual and emotional meaning[s]” of mobility (Kim et al. 100). The humanities turn of mobility studies, or what Jooyoung Kim et al. refer to as “the mobility humanities” (100), pays attention to the ways in which the meanings of mobility are produced by humanistic production via representation, imagination, and speculation. Literary scholars have been relatively “slow to hop on the mobilities bus” as Lynne Pearce (76) argues, and the same is true for postcolonial studies, which has yet to go through a wholesale mobilities turn (Lagji 229). There are some examples of studies in which migration literature is approached through a mobility studies lens (e.g., García-Corte; Lagji; Toivanen, *Mobilities*; Toivanen “Aeromobilities”; Toivanen, “Afroeurpean”; Torres Reyes), although not all recent studies concerning mobility in migration literature *explicitly* engage with the New Mobilities Paradigm (see, e.g., Mazauric; Neigh; Pfalzgraf). Nevertheless, by placing mobility at the centre of analysis and exploring the ways in which its meanings are produced through representation, such work contributes importantly to the scholarship on mobilities in migration literature. Indeed, as Lynne Pearce writes, “the NMP-inflicted ‘mobilities’ does not own the copyright of ‘mobility’”, and the humanities have “the potential to broaden, enrich, and revitalise” (77) sociological understandings of mobility. This said, although ‘mobility’ does not necessarily mean the same thing for literary scholars as for social scientists, I nevertheless agree with Aguilar, Mathieson, and Pearce when they write that most inspiring scholarly exchanges are achieved when the humanities “actively enter into dialogue with the research that has emerged from the mobilities paradigm as conceptualised by Sheller and Urry” (26). The power of the NMP lies in its way of drawing attention to the “*entanglement* of mobilities of all scales and registers in our daily lives” (Aguilar et al. 26; emphasis in original), and literary texts are invaluable sites for exploring the human experiences of these interactions.

Dialogue between migration literary studies and the NMP is mutually beneficial. Literary representations of mobility do not merely reflect ‘real-life’ mobilities passively but actively contribute to producing their meanings (Murray and Upstone 3). Literary texts have the power to render representable mobility, which is an element that is often seen to escape representation (Murray and Upstone 5). According to Roman Kabelik, literary representations “provide sensations and feelings of mobility in its multiple forms and dimensions” (143), while Aguiar, Pearce, and Mathieson state that literary texts are “vital constituents of the ways in which mobility itself is experienced as an embodied, subjective act that is informed by, and through, the cultural context in which it occurs” (17). Pearce further underlines that literature offers a privileged entry into “the full complexity of our experience of mobility” because of its high degree of reflexivity and honesty that is often missing in many other materials (81). These reasons also bespeak the advantages of a literary mobility studies analysis of migration literature: a mobility studies lens is useful in understanding our world on the move from a migrant perspective and in appreciating the very tangibly mobile aspects of the migrant experience as portrayed in literature. In return, the study of migration literature allows privileged entry into the complexities of experiences of ‘worldly’ migration mobilities.

In light of the above discussion, the rest of this chapter focuses on Francophone African/Afrodiasporic novels by Kidi Bebey, Daniel Biyaoula, Michèle Rakotoson, Alioum Fantouré, and Khalil Diallo, using them as examples of potential ways of applying a mobility studies perspective to migration literature. I concentrate on the texts’ portrayals of concrete mobility practices and modes of transport—being on the move often involves some sort of a vehicle—but also places of transit such as the airport. Furthermore, I draw attention to mobilities that do not entail physical human travel but that nevertheless play a pivotal role in migration narratives. The selected texts highlight the diversity of migrants’ *global* and *local* mobilities and different mobile subjectivities (e.g. the holidaymaker; the student newcomer; the diasporic returnee; the clandestine traveller) that are congruent or overlap with migration. My reading consists of fragments that capture the diverse ways in which mobility is relevant to narratives of migration, producing a holistic understanding of African migration mobilities across different contexts (cf. Cresswell, “Black” 12–13).

Kidi Bebey’s *Mon royaume pour une guitare* (2016), translated as *My Kingdom for a Guitar* (2021), is a biographical novel about the Cameroonian composer Francis Bebey and his family in France in the 1950s and 1960s. The novel portrays the family inhabiting a liminal space between their new and their former home, and the narrative is less concentrated on an individual migrant protagonist than on the family unit that is often on the move together. From a mobility studies perspective, the text is interesting not only because of its portrayals of mobility practices and imaginative journeys between France and Cameroon, but also because it stands in contrast to the stereotypical idea of Africans’ mobilities as primarily coerced and of African mobile subjects as victims, as captured in Francis B. Nyamnjoh’s words that “The impression is given that Africans are mobile only when things go wrong or others so desire” (659). Africans’ mobilities tend to be seen as ‘serious’ and associated with the slave trade, migration, or intellectual movements (Ní Loingsigh 2–3), but Bebey’s novel challenges this pattern with its portrayals of leisure and professional travel. The descriptions of the family’s holidaymaking convey the parents’ striving for a middle-class status as ‘proof’ of their successful integration into France both in the eyes of the French but also of those back home. The narrator’s exclamation, “Vacation! A word that sounded absolutely French” (130) and her observation that “Our parents were going to organise themselves like everyone else in this country and become real vacationers” (130), embody the parent’s assimilationist pressures and desires. Their journeys to holiday destinations involve automobility—the private vehicle is an important symbol of the socio-economic class, freedom,

and integration of the parents (80–81). The family joins a line of cars of French holidaymakers on their paid leave, heading on the motorway towards Southern France. What is significant is that while the protective shell of the private vehicle (see Urry 120) enables the black family to blend in among native French holidaymakers, as soon as they get out of the car, they are looked at in awe in a way that produces their difference. A similar scene happens during a trip to Normandy. To organise the weekend trip *à la française*, the family has brought with them a complete picnic set, including folding chairs and a table. The parents are aware that in a French province in the 1960s, a black family picnicking is a rare sight. In short, the text highlights the racial limits of the figure of the French leisure traveller and, in so doing, underlines the ultimate impossibility of African migrants' 'integration' into their host society. It is also noteworthy that the weekend trip to Normandy is motivated by nostalgia: the parents want to relive their experiences of Cameroonian beaches. However, in the "not so welcoming" northern seaside town, "the water was cold, the sky was pale, the air fresh" (128).<sup>2</sup> The destination does not meet the expectations of this physical *and* imaginative journey.

The migrant's 'homecoming' and 'holidaymaking' are equally relevant themes in Daniel Biyaoula's *L'Impasse* (1996) (*The Impasse*), in which the story revolves around the life of a Congolese migrant between his country of origin and France. The novel ties together these two geographically distant places that are integral parts of the protagonist's identity through the theme of return travel. The novel features an extensive portrayal of aeromobility—airport scenes in Paris and Brazzaville, the flight route, and rides from the airport to the city—that capture some of the key dilemmas of diasporic return: the returning migrant's feelings of unbelonging and the unrealistic expectations about migrant life held by those who have stayed. The novel's opening is set at Roissy Airport in Paris. The airport is crowded with returning African migrants or, as the narrator refers to them, *vacanciers* (holidaymakers) (13)—in a quite different sense than in Bebey's novel. As such, the airport setting serves the role of "a threshold to elsewhere" (Durante 96). The holidaymakers are dressed up in their finest clothes, much in the spirit of Congolese dandyism known as *La Sape*. While the scene could be read as a re-enactment of the 'Golden Age' of air travel before its current trivialisation and wider accessibility, when elegant clothing was used as a marker of difference between those who could afford to travel and those who could not (Durante 91), the meanings of this "fashion show" (13) are connected to the homecoming and expectations of migrant life. Returning migrants are expected to convey the image of socio-economic success that being a migrant in France is supposed to generate, and the best way to achieve this is on the level of appearance. The protagonist, uninterested in playing the role expected of a returning migrant—a Parisian, as the narrative refers to them—becomes the subject of others' scorn at Roissy. "Can you see how he is dressed? People like that bring shame to Africa" (14), as some of the *vacanciers* comment on the protagonist's outfit. Upon his arrival at Brazzaville Airport, he is welcomed with the open and aggressive mockery of the local people: "'Hey! You! You're not coming from Paris, are you'; 'Have you seen how skinny you are, have you? You must be a tramp'; [...] 'Have you seen what you're wearing? Peasant!'; 'You should have stayed in the country!'" (30). Passengers with expensive luxury clothes are welcomed as heroes. The airport setting not only plays an important narrative role as the symbol for the in-between space that the migrant inhabits; it also functions as a site of differentiation and a stage on which unrealistic expectations about migration are articulated.

The airport is also a key location in Michèle Rakotoson's *Elle, au printemps* (1996) (*She, in the Springtime*), in which a student from Madagascar arrives in Paris for the first time. Being a newcomer characterises the protagonist's mobilities: not only is it her first journey to the former colonial metropolis, but she is also an inexperienced air traveller and Metro passenger. This is reflected

in the text's portrayals of her journey to Paris by air, and also later, when she travels by public transport in the metropolis and beyond: her experiences of mobility are alienating and distressing, much as in the case of Biyaoula's protagonist. Rakotoson's novel is very rich in representations of travel by different modes of transport, but here I focus on the protagonist's travel using the Paris Metro. The Metro scenes expose the alienating aspects of this seemingly banal mode of everyday urban travel but also represent it as a mode of mobility that facilitates the migrant's integration in the city through an exercise that Franz Buhr refers to as urban apprenticeship (338–40). The protagonist's experience of being lost in the metropolis and its complex mobility systems is conveyed in her first encounter at the Metro ticket sales counter, where the newly arrived migrant is unable to understand concepts such as zones or the difference between a ticket or a book of tickets—key terms in the underground railway lexicon (39). When the booking clerk asks for her intended destination, the protagonist shows a small piece of paper with the address of a relative written on it. The trope of the piece of paper with handwritten addresses and 'simplified' metro maps recurs in the narrative, conveying the newcomer's sense of being lost in the metropolis and her need for points of reference in her attempt to handle what she experiences as a chaotic urban space: "Véro had given her a small piece of paper on which she had written the names of the stations, she had even given her a metro map ... Vavin, Pigalle, Crimée, Saint-Augustin, Barbès, Château Rouge ... [...] Sahondra was lost under the ground ... entirely ..." (55). The narrative articulates the newcomer's desperation as she fails to manage the metropolitan space from her position in the underground: "She is going to cry, she is going to cry ... A train under the ground" (55). While simple itineraries take her several hours, the text also attests to the moments of success that she experiences when she manages to exit the underground "safe and sound" (55): "Paris has almost no secrets left for her" (56), claims the narrative voice, victorious. The portrayals of the protagonist's journeys on the Metro convey the idea of how mobility practice becomes a way of "taming her fear and becoming used to Paris" (60), attesting to the mobile aspects of the urban experience and drawing attention to its alienating elements from the perspective of the migrant newcomer. As in Bebey's novel, mobility practices are pivotal in the construction of a migrant identity and in claiming belonging in the new home.

As the example of Bebey's novel showed, not all migrant mobilities are necessarily about physical mobility. This is also the case in *Un si beau fleuve tranquille* (2021) (*Such a Beautiful Calm River*), a novel in which the Guinean author Alioum Fantouré focuses on an elderly migrant—a figure which has been overshadowed by the young, able-bodied migrant in migration studies and studies devoted to migration literature alike. In addition to foregrounding the marginalised figure of the elderly migrant, the novel draws attention to an aspect of migration mobility that can be fully recognised with the help of the mobility studies framework and which captures the mobility/immobility nexus, namely imaginative travel. Urry mentions imaginative travel as one of the key modes of mobility together with more tangible forms of movement such as the physical travel of people and objects (47). What characterises imaginative travel is that it enables movement without the necessity to be on the move physically. This kind of a more inclusive understanding of mobility is of great ethical value if one is to acknowledge the mobile ways of being in the world of underprivileged global South subjects but also of disabled people (see Matereke, "Breaking" 20, 22; see also Matereke, "Mobilising"). Fantouré's protagonist is hospitalised in an unnamed, German-speaking European country. The protagonist—frequently referred to in the narrative as "*le malade*" ("the sick person/patient")—is in a condition of reduced physical mobility: he moves only when he gets out of his hospital bed to take a shower. Yet the narrative constantly transgresses the boundaries of the restricted space of the hospital room. The river mentioned in the title plays a pivotal role in the text as the elderly migrant travels back to his childhood environment somewhere

in Africa. The river symbolises his childhood home, and this imaginary return is facilitated by his taking a shower. This watery link between the here and there and the now and then serves as a metaphorical mode of transport enabling the protagonist to transgress his condition of limited physical mobility. The aquatic imagery is also connected with contemporary perilous sea crossings when the pirogues of the protagonist's childhood are contrasted with the boats of migrants drowning in the Mediterranean (53, 57)—a gloomy manifestation of the mobility/immobility nexus in the contemporary context of clandestine migration. The narrative's way of repeatedly highlighting the protagonist's customary behaviour of staying immobile in the shower and juxtaposing this immobility with his imaginary return journeys to the environment of his childhood undermines the boundary between mobility and immobility. A similar gesture is performed in a short dialogue between a nurse and a doctor. The nurse is worried and states, "Something is wrong with the patient, he stares into space", to which the doctor answers: "It's his time to travel home to Africa" (39). The novel's conceptualisation of migration mobilities operates on the scale of the imaginative and widens the scope of what being on the move can mean.

The aquatic element—present in Fantouré's novel in the form of a shower and the memory of a fluvial landscape—recurs frequently in narratives of clandestine migration between Africa and Europe. Khalil Diallo's *L'Odyssée des oubliés* (2021) (*The Odyssey of the Forgotten*) addresses the risky journeys of aspiring migrants across the African continent towards the shores of the Mediterranean. The narrative is structured around the journey motif that drives the plot—even at the beginning, when the characters are only planning their journey. The novel conveys the idea of such clandestine mobile pursuits as "stepwise journeys", a form of travel characterised by constant tensions between in/voluntary im/mobility (Schapendonk, "Sub-Saharan" 11, 15). Clandestine migrant mobilities are deviations from casual normative and everyday travel as portrayed in Bebey's and Rakotoson's novels; they "rarely conform to expectations of sequential trajectory, instead involving diversion, repetition and simultaneity" (Griffiths et al.). Arrival at the hoped-for destination may be deferred, if not entirely beyond reach, and the temporalities of clandestine migrant mobilities "cannot be reduced to just 'travel' time" but also imply waiting, acceleration, and stagnation (Griffiths et al.). The precarious character of clandestine migrant travel and its temporal specificities is conveyed in Diallo's text. The narrative repeatedly cites place names that constitute the itinerary, refers to the respective durations of specific legs of the journey, and alludes to burning heat and sandstorms. There are also recurrent mentions of the travellers' "stiffened muscles and aching bodies" (92) caused by the immobility of remaining seated in an uncomfortable vehicle for too long. The narrative dwells on minutiae in its descriptions of the vehicles by which the migrants travel: a long list of missing or broken car parts (43) becomes a metonym for the precarious nature of the pursuit. The narrative also highlights that the travellers are at the mercy of nature. When the vehicle rides through the desert and a sandstorm rises, the text resorts to imagery that evokes portrayals of the agitated oceans of clandestine migrant sea-crossings in novels such as Abassane Ndione's *Mbèkè mi: À l'assaut des vagues de l'Atlantique* (2008). Much like the waves of the sea, the sandstorm causes passengers to fall from the vehicle, and the sand blocks the horizon so that "sky and earth no longer exist" (90). By establishing parallels between clandestine sea and desert crossings, the novel highlights the fact that many attempted migrations come to an end on the African continent, without the travellers ever reaching the watery borders of Europe. In addition to the precarious aspects of clandestine migration mobilities, it should be mentioned that the journey motif and travel by different means of transport highlight the social aspects of mobility as the travellers befriend each other during the passage. Transport and travel are important for plot and character construction because they enable encounters between strangers, generating what Alasdair Pettinger has referred to as a sense of "shared travel-ness" (132). While



sharing one's experiences and the precarious conditions of travel with others does not necessarily make the ordeal any easier, it nevertheless creates a fragile, ephemeral sense of community.

A mobility studies perspective permits appreciation of the tangibly kinetic aspects of literary representations of migration. Mobility and migration are not synonyms, although migration is a form of mobility and entails mobility. The tangibly mobile aspects of migration that can be analysed in migration literature include, for instance, the migration journey; migrants' everyday mobilities in their new environments and beyond; and different non-physical forms of mobility such as imaginative travel. Mobility studies also acknowledge places of transit and intermittent movement as relevant subjects of inquiry. Analysing such settings in migration literature permits an understanding of the intertwinement of space and mobility. A mobility studies approach to migration literature provides a lens through which the interlinked, relational, and systemic dimensions of multiple mobilities can be appreciated. The same is also true for the mobility/immobility nexus, and the different scales that exist between the two (e.g., waiting, acceleration). As my examples from Francophone African and Afrodiasporic fiction demonstrate, theories and concepts of the New Mobilities Paradigm can be used in diverse ways and contexts to elucidate the meanings of mobility in contemporary migration literature.

### Notes

- 1 This work was supported by the Research Council of Finland under Grant 330906.
- 2 The translations from Bebey's novel are from the English translation of the novel. Translations from other novels are my own.

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