Article

The Transnational Turn in African Literature of French Expression: Imagining Other Utopic Spaces in the Globalized Age

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Abstract: This article focuses on African literature published since 2000 by authors of French expression. While contemporary authors' subjects are varied—ranging from climate change, human rights, to ethnic cleansing—they also imagine new "what ifs" and other utopic spaces and places that extend beyond postcolonial, Africa-as-victim paradigms. Literarily, authors such as Abdelaziz Belkhodja (Tunisia) and Abdourahman A. Waberi (Djibouti) have effectuated a transnational turn. In this literary transnational turn, Africa is open to new interpretations by the African author that are very different from the more essentialist-based, literary-philosophical movements such as Negritude and pan-Africanism; cornerstones of the postcolonial literary frameworks of the past. Belkhodja and Waberi offer original narratives for Africa that, while describing their countries as utopias, also traverse the very dystopic realities of our time.

1. Introduction

In the last decade, many contemporary African authors of French expression from both North and Sub-Saharan Africa posit perspectives in their novels that reveal a global cosmopolitanism that uniquely defines African literature in the 21st century. Authors writing in French, such as Salim Bachi (France/Algeria), Abdelaziz Belkhodja (Tunisia), Calixthe Beyala (Cameroon), Youssouf Amine Elalamy (Morocco), Fouad Laroui (Morocco), Alain Mabanchou (Congo), Marie Ndiaye (France/Senegal), and Abdourahman Waberi (Djibouti), among others,[1] promote a "way of being African in the world" that thematically exposes different attitudes about Africa and Africans remarkably unlike previous tropes ([1], pp. 13–22). Thematic shifts have broken with past scenarios that revolved around the angst of the postcolonial condition, the traumas rooted in tensions between modernity and traditionalism, the sociocultural and economic divisions between North and Sub-Saharan Africa, poverty and despair. Evan Maina Mwangi states that new, engaging 21st century African writing from the continent and the diaspora "is neither a 'writing back' to Europe nor an endorsement of Euro-American neocolonialism. It is first and foremost about self-perception" ([2], p. 4).

This article focuses on two African authors of French expression, Tunisian Abdelaziz Belkhodja and Djiboutian Abdourahman A. Waberi, who have published works since 2000. While in general contemporary writers' subjects are varied, ranging from climate change, immigration, human rights

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[1]   The list is certainly not limited to those authors writing in French. Authors writing in English such as Nigerian Helon Habila, Kenyans M. G. Vassanji and Shailja Patel, Libyan Hisham Matar, and Zimbabwean Brian Chikwava equally can be classed in the Afropolitan camp.

abuse in the home country, socioeconomic challenges, and ethnic cleansing, they also imagine innovative "what ifs" that postulate new scripts for Africa. My core argument is that these hypothetical narratives from both North and Sub-Saharan Africa mark a "transnational turn" as articulated by Paul Jay, where the author creates and engages spaces that move away from "nation-state locations by focusing our attention on transnational spaces and regions" ([3], pp. 8–9). Specifically, Belkhodja's *Le Retour de l'éléphant* (The Return of the Elephant, 2003) and Waberi's *Aux Etats-Unis d'Afrique* (African USA, 2006)[2] offer exemplary cosmopolitan narratives that demonstrate this transnational turn.[3] Their themes extend beyond insular topics pertaining to the postcolonial nation state in order to explore the positive and negative realities of globalization, transnational migration, and the general planetary challenges of our age.

In the past, African nationalist novels contextualized the burgeoning nations emerging from the colonial moment, highlighting "commitment" and the "responsibility of writers to their societies" in order to evoke a renaissance of indigenous authenticity ([4], p. 248). At the outset of decolonization the role of the activist author (*l'écrivain engagé*) was, as Frantz Fanon proclaims in *Les Damnés de la terre*, to rally the people to the grand ideas of the newly formed nation. Authors and intellectuals would define the "cultural models" of postcolonial nations through their writings and "assert...liberation [in] a jagged style, full of imagery". The perfected image of the new nation was to be key to its people's liberated "consciousness" ([5], pp. 156–57). Authors rose to the challenges of nationalist commitment as prescribed by Fanon in the late 1950s and early 1960s.[4] Since the 1970s, however, their function as proponents of nationalist messages has waned as they have become disillusioned with state ideology and the failure of postcolonial institutions to meet the needs of their peoples.

Emerging from a literature of commitment (*la littérature de combat*) written in French, authors in the new millennium extend their themes beyond the boundaries of cultural and national specificity, embracing a more cosmopolitan transnational spirit that explores the world's others, and "obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the more formal ties of shared citizenship" ([6], p. xv). Although their cosmopolitanism and worldly engagement are evident, what is particularly interesting about these millennial narratives is that in order to explore the present, authors feel the need to tell their stories in the distant future. It is here where they create utopias to study the very real dystopic truths that Africa faces in its postcolonial reality. The utopias and dystopias, or what I suggest as being a combination of the two—a dystopic utopia—created by Belkhodja and Waberi allow for hopeful possibilities while also offering critical frameworks through which to articulate the universal shortcomings and challenges of the planet's modern societies.

The two novels discussed here, created within the dystopic utopia, imagine *other* and *othered* spaces and places possible for Africa and the West. Waberi turns the African continent into the powerful "United States of Africa" which dominates socio-politically and culturally the international landscape, leaving the impoverished West to fend for itself. The author's heroine, Maya (short for Malaïka), is white but grew up in Asmara, the capital of Eritrea in the Federation of African States,

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2   All translations of these works are my own.
3   Aziz Belkhodja (b. 1962) is well known in Tunisia for his acerbic articles published in the 2000s in various Tunisian newspapers criticizing the first Gulf War as well as well-placed politicians in the Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali government. In 2002, he even dared to denounce in the press Ben Ali's dictatorial call to change the 1959 constitution, which would ultimately overturn many of the rights and liberties granted Tunisians in the early days of the nascent Tunisian republic. From the early 2000s up to the ouster of Ben Ali, Belkhodja was known for his activism on the Internet and particularly for his 2010 publication of a report entitled "The True Nature of the Ben Ali Regime" (*La Véritable nature du régime de Ben Ali*), in which the journalist called for a complete overhaul of the government and for Ben Ali to step down. Two days later, on 18 December 2010, Tunisia's "Arab Spring" unfolded.Novelist, essayist, and poet Abdourahman Waberi (b. 1965) is exemplary as a contemporary African transnational author. He has worked in positions in academia in Europe, the USA, and Canada and written widely in French and English. He studied English literature, worked as a literary consultant in Paris, and has lived his own transcontinental experiences since the publication of his first novel, *Le Pays Sans Ombre* (The Land Without Shadow, 1994).
4   As expressed in works such as *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Black Skin, White Masks, 1951) and *Les Damnés de la terre* (The Wretched of the Earth, 1961).

basking in the affection of her African father, "Docteur Papa", a humanitarian doctor who adopted her at birth. Waberi spins a tale that reverses history, making Africa an Eldorado recognized for the intellectuals, scientists, businessmen and women, and artists contributing to its greatness. A similar narrative, beginning on the back jacket cover of Belkhodja's *Le Retour de l'éléphant*, overturns the West's habitual, stereotypical view of the "Arab-East as a Depraved Society" to posit Arabs as "the fortunate of History" rich from oil revenues and investment in vast cultural enterprises. In the year 2103, world order has been turned upside down. It is now destitute Westerners (particularly Americans) like John who must immigrate to Carthage with one suitcase, seeking education and, hopefully, new fortunes in order to escape the socioeconomic poverty and decrepitude of his North American society. The great Roman city of the ancient past has been resurrected in the future as the grand Republic of Carthage. The gleaming city is a technologically advanced urban megatropolis, known throughout the world for its fortunes made through innovations in solar energy and reverse osmosis that have given it inexhaustible sources of electricity and clean water. Both novels present North and Sub-Saharan Africa as centers of civilization, culture, and economic stability. Africa is a continent on which, as Waberi writes, "l'homme d'Afrique s'est senti très vite, sûr de lui" (the African very quickly was sure of himself) ([7], p. 54).

2. The *Pensée-Autre* of the Afropolitan Novel in French

Waberi and Belkhodja cast their thematic nets wide to conceptualize the African subject as universally connected and committed to trying to solve, or at least better understand, the transnational challenges of our era. Their ideas about African *being* promote the conception of subjecthood as always evolving in a *becoming* that is "unlimited and unending" ([8], p. 33). The dystopic utopian spaces in which their narratives are cast provide the perfect window through which to explore the "what if" and what "could be" with respect to African postcolonial subjecthood. In order to scrutinize these potential spaces, I propose to engage two critical areas of postcolonial thought. The first draws on what Moroccan sociologist Abdelkébir Khatibi designates as *une pensée-autre* (an idea that embodies an "other way of thinking" or "thinking other") about the postcolonial subject's *being-in-the-world*. The second employs Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe's theory of *Afropolitanism*, which promotes "a stylistic, an aesthetic and a certain poetics of the world" that argues for a *creolization*, or what Khatibi calls a *pluralization* of African modes of being-in-the-world. Mbembe's Afropolitanism envisions African authors as contributing to transnational connections that link the continent to other places. "Africans of the World", he notes, are "African immigrants, transnationals, émigrés and exiles, citizens of African nations living in the West as well as those living on the continent" who experience the intra- and extra-continental relationships taking place in transnational climates between self and other ([9], p. 16). Afropolitan authors strive to extend their ideas about what it means to be African beyond the borders of "nativist interpretations of culture and the claim to autochthonous cultures" as seen in earlier African national writing ([9], p. 18). Afropolitanism connotes, thus, movement forward and becoming something other than the stereotypes associated with the continent as defined by the West, while also defining identity not as insularly nationalist and tribal but rather global and transnational: "Afropolitanism is the spirit that espouses this paradigm of itinerancy, mobility and displacement" ([9], p. 19).

Khatibi's pensée-autre and Mbembe's Afropolitan worldview provide the means through which to explore the dystopic utopian worlds proposed by Belkhodja and Waberi. These thinkers and authors meld philosophies and ideologies, as well as aesthetic modes of African discourse and ways of looking at the globe from North and Sub-Saharan Africa with French and European philosophical frameworks, to offer readers an original conception of being-in-the world that is neither totally African nor European. Their conception draws on Heidegger's philosophy of selfhood promoting an understanding of the "being of all beings of a character other than its own" ([8], p. 33), Khatibi formulates his pensée-autre as a thought process that encapsulates the importance of understanding identity as "*being-already-alongside* with others". It is a conception of being that is derived through being "*fascinated by* the world with

which it is concerned" (author's italics) ([8], p. 88). This fascination leads to intercultural scenarios in which two sign systems come into contact—African and Other—through which identity, history, culture, and language are parsed, fragmented, and then put back together again, allowing for a cultural mosaic to flourish. For Khatibi, who was particularly influenced by French phenomenologist philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze,[5] the conception of being as an ever-evolving becoming is also "always in between the past and the future [since] it moves in both directions at once" ([10], pp. 1–2). Therefore, being "is never fixed (even when it appears to be so) [it is] a continual process of change without destination" ([11], p. 41).

Both Khatibi and Mbembe contextualize how the African author has been influenced by the colonial imprints that have left indelible marks on his frames of reference; the most notable of which is the French language. For Khatibi, the pensée-autre is both acceptance of "cet heritage occidental" (this Western heritage) as well as "notre patrimoine" (our patrimony), which has often been limited by its postcolonial, nationalist failings ([12], p. 12). Khatibi's ideas about living in the postcolonial era, writing in the language of the former colonizer, but using this same language to critique the realities of Africa, efface binary thinking about Self as opposed to Other. For the Moroccan theorist and poet, the interweaving of West and African promotes thinking in a multiple way and thereby—"mettre au jour la pluralité"—(bringing to light plurality) ([12], p. 13). Within the plural, the African author's sense of identity is always enmeshed in the "bi-langue" (the bilingual) where "the 'maternal' language is at work in the foreign language", which then serves the writer by aiding in engaging with his environment, both locally and transnationally. Writing "bilinguistiquement" (bilingually) about the world in the language of the other ([12], pp. 13, 184), Belkhodja and Waberi, thus, "assume the French language" (its colonial past as well as the reality of its continued use in the postcolonial era) in order to negotiate all facets of their reality ([12], p. 179). Their utopias map a third space, as Khatibi outlines, which is at once Western and African, Self and Other:

> We want to uproot Western knowledge from its central place within ourselves, to decenter ourselves with respect to this center, to this original claimed by the West... The Occident is part of me, a part that I can only deny insofar as I resist all the Occidents and the Orients that oppress and disillusion me ([13], p. 106).

The dystopic utopias proposed by Waberi and Belkhodja are so significant because they explore African sociocultural and economic realities of the new millennium as well as the success and failures of the postcolonial nation. Afropolitanism and la pensée-autre are foundations for a literary and linguistically decentered space that transmits not only African-specific messages but also transnational humanist ones as well. Within the Afropolitan's scope, one finds in Africa the "history of the rest of the world of which we are a part" ([14], pp. 1–3) that represents a plurality of languages, migratory fluxes, and "comings and goings" between the continent and elsewhere ([14], p. 1).

3. Mapping Dystopic Utopias in Afropolitan Space

In their reconceptualization of Africa as a vibrant continent at the center of the world, Belkhodja and Waberi join sub-Saharan Africa and the Mediterranean Maghreb, thus disavowing the impossibility of harmony between the north and the south and refuting former colonial divisions that contributed to racial hierarchies. In these transnational texts of continental Africa, a universal African consciousness is promoted through continental universities (Waberi) and medical organizations such as "Toubib sans frontières" (Doctors without borders) that run refugee camps in Carthage and elsewhere for displaced Europeans ([15], p. 21). Young Africans, like Maya, are "talented" in their openness "to be nomads" where they often find their "tout" (all) "pas au centre de l'empire africain mais à sa périphérie" (not in the center of the African empire, but at its periphery) ([7], p. 163).

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[5]   As well as linguists such as Jacques Derrida, philosophers Nietzsche, Foucault, and Blanchot.

Waberi's and Belkhodja's novels beseech readers to think about why the potential utopian space offers a compelling environment through which to explore the real, salient present challenges to African societies. "Utopianism is a deep and growing aspect of postcolonial literatures and it appears to trace a different trajectory from the Marxist utopianism that has dominated contemporary utopian theory [in the West]" ([16], pp. 8–14). Utopias usually posit hope, but as postcolonial literary theorist Bill Ashcroft suggests, in our modern world, when used as a trope to explore the non-Western context, "utopian achievement of postcolonial independent states becomes degenerate" subjected to "catastrophic failure...or outright swindles" ([16], p. 9). For the postcolonial nation, there is an "ambiguous relationship" between utopia and dystopia that arises because the "relation between memory and the future" are always at odds ([16], p. 9). These aspects are evident in the both novels. On the one hand, Waberi and Belkhodja project through their narratives what they want their countries and continent to be, yet on the other, these scenarios are only possible by making the rest of the world dystopic—a sort of Mad Max paradigm that opens up commentary on the state of Africa in the 21st century. Historic inversion allows for social criticism of the homeland's true realities in the present (but that are influenced by memory of the colonial past), expressed through the dystopic paradigms they portray. Their use of the West as a foil for reflecting the failed political arenas of their own nations is the most salient aspect of both works.

Examples of a satirical dystopic view are repeatedly noticeable in Belkhodja's *Le Retour de l'éléphant*. Although the context in his future place posits the West as despotic, the author is really referring to Tunisia in the present. The world has been turned inside-out, revealing the underbelly of capitalism run rampant, corruption and the overarching general malaise of humankind. John, who left behind the failed states of the USA in order to immigrate and benefit from the richness of the socioeconomic possibilities of Carthage, underscores throughout the novel the extent of American sociocultural failure. The northern hemisphere's downfall resembles Tunisia's postcolonial reality in the 2000s: "là où je viens, tout est faux. Tout est mensonge, bassesse...Les gens sont hypocrites, vils, faibles, prétentieux et profondément bêtes. Vivre dans un environnement pareil, ça te détruit le sens moral, le naturel, le vrai..." (there, from where I come, everything is false. Everything is a lie, baseless...The people are hypocrites, vile, weak, pretentious and profoundly stupid. Living in such an environment destroys a sense of morals, the natural and the true...) ([15], p. 139).

Waberi's and Belkhodja's dystopic utopian narratives describe the glistening cities of Carthage, Kinshasa, and Nairobi that signify "l'Afrique...au centre du monde" (Africa...at the world's center) ([7], p. 55), while they also explore "la misère de Manhattan . . . la lagune paludéenne de Venise" (the misery of Manhattan...the malarial laguna of Venise) beyond the borders of the continent ([7], p. 89). In general, as Ashcroft suggests, the utopic-themed narrative is interesting to African authors because it allows for both use and subversion of this very recognizable Western literary motif. The glistening city of Aristotelian myth draws on "the long tradition of thinking about ideal cities" as including projections of beautiful, symmetrical, and harmonious designs for plazas, towers, and squares. These are conceived of on a dramatic scale, "sustaining ecological plans for self-sufficient environments, and so on" ([17], p. 150).

In Waberi's novel, these projections of the beautiful are reflected in the "progressive universities of certain African states such as Lubumbashi, in Ouagadougou or in certain remote ballet theatres of the savanna near Dar es-Salaam" ([7], p. 92). Luminous African cities are peopled with famous men and women of color from the continent and the diaspora, hailing from the real past and present: the tennis player Yannick Noah; authors Nuruddin Farah, Chinua Achebe, and Emmanuel Dongala; rappers King Caïn and Queen Sheba, all make appearances in Waberi's narrative. Universities across Africa are named after notables of the diaspora such as Langston Hughes, Angela Davis, and WEB Dubois, and streets for great artists and leaders, Ray-Charles, Habib-Bourguiba, and Abebe-Bikila ([7], p. 18). African places and institutions of higher learning are where "millions of white, Asian or American students...take long walks, books in hand" ([7], p. 179). The African utopian city in Waberi's novel exudes an intellectual cosmopolitanism that reflects a contemporaneous longing for a sustainable relationship in

the present postcolonial era between "domestic governance and international politics" ([18], p. 453). The author thinks through transnational systems as they have impacted local societies both positively and negatively from the ancient, as well as more recent colonial past ([18], p. 453).

His "Fédération des Etas-Unis d'Afrique" is not just conceptualized in a new and unmapped utopia, it also has its roots entrenched in the "ancient Hamite kingdom of Chad", which now in the author's fictitious space is "rich in oil". In their futurist environment, "the golden boys of Tananarive" play on the shores of the island of Madagascar, a center for tourism from the continent ([7], p. 15). Waberi creates an Africa that is both capitalistic (touting its 1 percent of the very rich who hold power and money at every level) and moralistic, purporting ethical, universal understandings of human rights. The continent is also intellectually rich in scholarly institutions founded in countries like Kenya, where the "*The Kenyatta School of European and American Studies*" produces eminent specialists, and where the "vertus de la démocratie parlementaire" (virtues of parliamentary democracy) are practiced in Eritrea and Senegal alongside "on-line stock markets" that are the fruit of "the *high tech Keren Valley Project* and the military-industrial complexes of Assab" (author's italics) ([7], pp. 14–15).

These cosmopolitan establishments and institutions (which curiously continue in the future to remain tied to functioning in their former colonial languages, either English or French depending on the region) have all contributed to the continent's successes as well as failures. On the dark side of cosmopolitan largess, though, Africa has also been corrupted by its rampant, excessive capitalism. Thus, the utopic African world Waberi proposes is but an "imagined community" that cannot escape "the depravities of global capitalism and imperialism" as well as its inability to improve the human condition. His futurist Africa fails because it was unable to find solutions to real world crises ([18], p. 454). Utopian ideals are unable to come to fruition because, as Khatibi suggests, certain "values and hierarchies" must be overturned in order to "free ourselves from colonization" and "Western reasoning about the Third World" ([12], p. 50). Waberi's African world is stuck in the bogs of victimization and the usual cycles of capitalist exploitation that exist in the present as legacies of the colonial, imperial past.

In Belkhodja's novel, Carthage has prospered, its political machine founding universities in Tozeur and Tunis and remarkable "cités du désert" (desert cities) where "highways traverse the Sahara". The vast desert has been transformed into a green and fertile land by irrigation and amazing advances in ecological science ([15], p. 87). "In 2070, North Africa became an enormous garden. It was the end of plastic and pollution, where oil fields have been replaced by large solar energy panels which saved the Mediterranean Sea" ([15], p. 86). This fertile space is where "Le retour de l'éléphant" (the return of the elephant) has taken place. As a metaphor, Carthage, like the elephant, believed to be extinct, has now "come back to its home" ([15], p. 87). The Tunisian city's greatness, though, has only been able to be achieved at the expense of others. It is a "paradis" that promotes "une prospérité non seulement matérielle, mais intellectuelle, spirituelle et même environnementale" (a prosperity that is not only material, but also spiritual and environmental). However, at the same time, this status, notes Belkhodja, has been achieved by "superiority and coercion". The city and its society built by exploitation on the backs of others, like the lost city of Atlantis discovered to be underneath where Carthage now stands, will only know "une chute inévitable" (an inevitable fall) ([15], pp. 174–75). At the end of the novel, John's Tunisian friends Chams and Mouna tell him that morally and economically, "things have to change" ([15], p. 178), since Carthage has become too much of an exploitive bully, leading to failure in its humanist endeavors. Like the kingdoms of the past, in the modern age of 2103 this golden city is responsible for assuring the well-being of the less fortunate of the world, yet it has botched its mission ([15], p. 178).

Western utopian myths present a paradox for African authors. While the trope offers the possibility of liberation because it allows the writer to explore another way of being-in-the-world, utopias are also doomed to failure because they inherently always become "degenerate" ([16], p. 8). As much as the author is invested in creating a new possibility for his country and people, this space is inevitably haunted by the reality of the homeland's challenges. Attesting to this intrinsic quality of failure in his

utopian ideal, Belkhodja notes in his novel's disclaimer, that the "book [is] pure fiction. The names, characters, places, organizations and described events are the products of the author's imagination, or are used in a fictional context" ([15], p. 12). He therefore places his novel in a context of impossibility before the reader even turns the first page. Through their works' fictionality, Waberi and Belkhodja reveal what Ashcroft notes is "increasingly obvious in postcolonial literatures" ([16], p. 8)—that utopias are myths that can never be fully realized.

Like Western authors who have drawn on the utopic space to explore alternative ways of being for contemporary humankind,[6] African writers are confronted with the fact that these very same utopias are fraught with contradictions that emerge when an author attempts to define what he wants his alternative space to be. The first lies in the inherent flawed meanings of utopia and utopianism, or in ideal versus practice. The very terms themselves create a binary stipulating that myth is one thing and reality is another. The second contradiction arises when authors attempt to negotiate their idealized worlds between their imagined futures and the real memories of their pasts. With respect to these narratives, the colonial past forever haunts the postcolonial present and thus cannot be dislodged. A third incongruity manifests in the tension between the individual's and the collective's aspirations and desires for a utopic world. These are at odds because a utopia can only be realized by the individual renouncing his individualism to adhere to the will of the collective majority. Despite these three contradictions faced by postcolonial authors, utopianism for Waberi and Belkhodja still manages to provide a means to explore a universal possibility that "lies deep in human consciousness" and remains a hopeful beacon countering tales of despair ([16], p. 9). Unfortunately, as both writers demonstrate, the actual utopia created within the pages of a text cannot be achieved through future hopes alone. Dislodging their narratives from the past is virtually impossible since, "in traditional post-colonial societies the radically new is always embedded in and transformed by the past" ([16], p. 9). Khatibi affirms this reality, stating that "the patriarchal, the tribal, the rural feudal" became in the postcolonial era the "instruments and techniques of a force left by imperialism" ([12], p. 52). Although the "nation is often conspicuously absent" in contemporary novels, the author is still haunted by residual colonization and later nationalist ideals that became broken promises ([16], p. 12). In the storylines of both novels, the disjunctive haunting that oscillates between residual colonialism and postcolonial disappointment is omnipresent. Waberi and Belkhodja fail to tell a different story other than the lived one in African reality. This is the danger of an alternative-history because, as a reversed image in the mirror, it still reflects back a certain truth. Khatibi underscores this conundrum, which he articulates as "the division of the world" marked by living "between the nostalgia of a totalizing identity", that of the colonizer, and "an unelaborated difference that informs what cannot be conceptualized"—an "au-délà" (a beyond), that is still unarticulated in the postcolonial era ([13], p. 14).

For the dejected immigrants from Europe and the North American continent described in both novels, coming to Africa to find work and a better life, "utopia may be...within the boundaries of the possible," but it remains "a wish-image", functioning as nothing more than "a fantastic longing or urge or desire that remains unknowable" ([17], pp. 148–50). In Waberi's novel, "les primitifs, les païens, presque toujours blancs, sont ravalés au rang de parias" (The primitives, the pagans, almost always white, are second-class to the rank of pariahs) ([7], p. 55). They will never enjoy, as Docteur Papa tells Maya, the satisfaction of building their utopia. Confirming this, Maya realizes that the evil-side of African greatness, the supposed perfect world in which she lives, has meant the "wiping away from the streets" all the undesirables; these immigrants from far off lands who are "les sous-développés [et les] miséreux" (the under-developed and the miserable) ([7], p. 55). This human dejection has been effaced by political machines making laws to keep Africa pristine ([7], p. 75). Waberi's utopia has

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[6]　In the French context, Michel Houellebecq is the most well-known author writing today who repeatedly uses utopias and dystopias to explore contemporary humankind's sociocultural ennui in the age of rampant neoliberal capitalism and failed states.

fallen victim to the real scenarios of immigration, exile, poverty, and dehumanization we see daily on our television screens in our own real time.

Utopian spaces are dismantled when the individual seeks to challenge the monolithic collective whose power is integral to maintaining its vitality. Giving into the will of the collective is a caveat to the success of all utopian narratives because "while the equality of the individuals in the collective is a fundamental principle of utopian thought, the collective is always inimical to individual fulfillment". In general all members must buy into its ideology, and there is no room for dissent ([16], p. 11). This very salient fact links utopias to dystopias because for utopias to fulfill themselves, "the mobilization for the common good" must take place. Yet the price of total social cooperation means that individualism "is always denied as a condition of [fulfilling] a collective utopian dream" ([16], p. 11). In *Le Retour de l'éléphant*, when John reveals to his friend Chams that he is a member of the resistance movement in America striving to overthrow his repressive government, she responds enthusiastically, emphasizing that only the unity of the people will change the destiny of his despotic nation: "il faut sortir le peuple américain de sa peur, lui apprendre qu'il est seul maître de son destin" (it is necessary to bring the American people out of their fear, to teach them that they are the only master of their destiny) ([15], p. 179). John takes this to heart. He trades his own possibility of a better life in Carthage in order to return to the USA to cultivate the opposition that contains people "who are ready to die so that our children can live in a just and free world", a dream he knows is fraught with impossibilities ([15], p. 179). As a novel that predates the Arab Spring ignited in Tunis in December 2010, when another young man lit himself on fire in order to fight for a cause, this message takes on prominent meanings even in the pages of a novel of fiction.

Waberi's and Belkhodja's characters struggle to build the utopias of which they dream: "the mobilization of society for the betterment of all, for the common good." Ironically, though, how the common good is achieved "is virtually indistinguishable in utopias and dystopias", no matter if conceived of in a Western European or postcolonial African narrative ([16], p. 11). As explained above, both require individuals to make compromises for the larger collectives, which ultimately fail in their altruistic endeavors and hopes for a better society. The characters in both authors' novels ultimately realize that similarly to their writers' realities, collective unity and prosperity for all are virtually impossible to achieve. Ironically, though, they also send the message that hope rings eternal, particularly for younger generations on the African continent. Waberi concludes his novel through the voice of Docteur Papa, who assesses the life of his adopted daughter, Maya. She has traveled to France to look for her biological mother, whom she eventually finds trapped in destitution and poverty in the back alleys of a dingy and lawless France. Maya is resigned to return to Africa and make her fortune so that she can help her mother and other "whites" like Titus, her distant cousin. She will "use her influence" to help him enter a university in Africa. Docteur Papa wistfully tells her: "you will make everyone confident in the human race by your dedication. And you too will benefit from your dedication...this will help lift some of the burden of culpability. Ah! Culpability, my little Malaïka, this is what eats away at your guts, it sucks your blood" ([7], p. 180). Titus, like the few immigrants who make it to African shores, will "se cramponner" (climb) up the social ladder in his adopted land in order to "vaincre la chiennerie de la vie" (overcome the doggedness of life). He must realize his goals, or he will "glisser sous l'eau et se noyer pour toujours" (slip under water and drown forever) ([7], p. 180).

In both novels' reversed history, the African continent adheres to basic truths about capitalism and global markets which, in the end, are their utopias' downfalls. Greed and corruption are inevitable in the ultramodern societies these landscapes portray. Belkhodja and Waberi offer us a dark side to the fantastical, gleaming African world they create in order to bring to the fore some prominent messages about the human condition in the 2000s. These lead readers to ask, are we doomed forever to live in a world (even when fictionalized) where there will always be haves and have-nots? As in our geopolitical and economically strained global reality, their African utopias are tainted by what Mbembe stipulates is the antithesis of the Afropolitan ideal: "the violence and the victimization" meted out by the "torturers" of "so many countries—not only African". These negative forces "spur on the pulse of

genocide...the incredible power of destruction" ([14], p. 2). Waberi's and Belkhodja's novels' utopic worlds fail because they are rooted in a one-model, capitalist system that does not allow for equality and equitable distribution of wealth. Their utopic fantasy-Africa can only project back a mirror image of the global realities in which we live. These authors' salient messages reflect the reality of the grave humanitarian crises of our era: the plagues of Ebola and dengue fever, poverty, urban blight, religious fanaticism, and environmental catastrophe that are destabilizing the continent.

The momentous African realities that haunt both narratives do, though, entreat thinking about the humanist stipulation that "one has obligations to others" ([6], p. xv) because s/he is "alongside others" in the world, and it is from this being with others that one fulfills his/her being-in-the-world. Although set in unreal spaces, both narratives are socioculturally and politically committed to educating their readers. They force us to think about possible solutions to the calamities raining down on humankind. For the well-being of the world's collective, we are all implicated in defining resolutions.

In Waberi's reversed history, something must be done to accommodate the Western-other who migrates to Africa to save himself. These poor and desperate "refugees" who make their way to Africa, primarily clandestinely, as "skeletal boat people", are part of the masses of "caucasiens d'ethnies diverses et variées (autrichienne, canadienne, américaine, norvégienne, belge, bulgare, britannique, islandaise, portugaise, hongroise, suédoise)" (whites of various and diverse ethnicities [Austrian, Canadian, American, Norwegian, Belgian, Bulgarian, British, Icelandic, Portuguese, Hungarian, Swedish]) for whom hope for a better life is elusive ([7], p. 12). In a continental effort to elicit aid, reports are written by scholars of migration at the University of Gao. In research groups, they publish papers such as "*Les Frontières invisibles ou le défi de l'immigration en provenance de l'Alaska*, Kigali, University Press of Rwanda/Free Press, 1994, 820 pages, 35 guinées)" in their efforts to document African aid work and its challenges ([7], p. 17). The shared citizenship of cosmopolitan communitarianism means finding ways, as revealed in Belkhodja's novel, of sharing wealth with poorer European and North American nations, ending the civil wars there, and "the corruption that ruled and caused an enormous proportion of the social problems until the middle of the 21st century" ([15], p. 78). While both utopias are founded on humanist principles that rely on sacrifice for the good of the collective whole, the characters realize that such martyrdom is unattainable. Africa has become the world's gate keeper, a beacon of light on a planet of civil strife yet, despite its socioeconomic strength, instability, and poverty elsewhere have slowly crept into its humanist ethos, forcing the continent into the same past cyclical failures with respect to helping others. In Belkhodja's novel, the technological advances Carthage has made could not keep the "affaissement des USA" (the wiping away of the USA) from happening in the 21st century. Victim of its lust for control, America and the greater "Occident...were unable to take the reins", which caused their "inevitable downfall". Such catastrophes as "les manipulations de virus, manipulations génétiques et frénésie du profit" (manipulation of viruses, genetic and frenzied manipulations for profit), as well as a politics that became increasingly "nationalist", even considered "fundamentalist", not to mention "racial and religious strife", allowed "Arabs to take up the challenge and to vanquish". However, Carthage's victory could not assure that its advances in technology would be able to "help the West, since its regimes were less and less democratic" ([15], pp. 89–90). By the end of the 20th century, the West was completely consumed by its backwardness.

4. The *Unheimlich* of Otherness

Mbembe suggests in his work that for the Afropolitan to realize a being-in-the-world that escapes insular thinking, "our activities" must "not be measured by the village next door, but rather by the extended world" ([14], p. 3). Both Belkhodja and Waberi compel readers to "know the other"—those of the extended world—by "putting oneself *in [the other's] place*" ([19], p. 25) (author's italics). Through these narratives we confront our fear and loathing, what Julia Kristeva names as the *unheimlich* (the uncanny and uncomfortable) space occupied by the "étranger" (foreigner) ([19], p. 282): "The uncanny strangeness allows for many variations: they all repeat the difficulty I have in situating myself with respect to the other" ([19], p. 187). Waberi's novel, in particular, engages with the fear

and loathing that often manifests in the relationship between Self and Other: "La peur irrationnelle de l'autre, de l'indésirable, et qui continue à être la plus grande menace pour l'unité africaine" (the irrational fear of the other, the undesirable, and that continues to be the greatest menace to African unity) ([7], p. 16). This menace is encapsulated in Yacouba, a Swiss, white, illiterate, migrant worker who can only speak in his native "German patois" and who has clandestinely come to Africa, "fleeing violence and famine" hoping to find work in the fields of the continent ([7], p. 11). His story intertwines, yet never intersects, with the more dominant oppositional one of adopted, white Maya who has been saved from inevitable poverty by the powerful and well-off Docteur Papa. Yacouba is invisible, "unable to speak the language of the Federation of Africa" ([7], p. 39), forced to live in the shadows, on the borders of rich neighborhoods, victim to "alcohol made from khat that pollutes the body" ([7], p. 43). He finally dies in the street, dejected and unnoticed by the inhabitants of the rich high-rise apartments overhead. Where Yacouba and Maya share affinity is that their stories are told for them by Docteur Papa. He alone possesses the Master Narrative of Africa. Their deposed first-person narratives disrupt the European, logocentrality of white stories that have dominated Africa for centuries. Waberi displaces long-accepted "representations of whiteness in the black imagination" by displacing the history of the power of whiteness on the African continent. Embodied for centuries through a "critical ethnographic gaze", the narrative destabilizes the legacy of Western colonial ideals and neocolonial globalization that promote stereotypes about African inferiority woven into racial prejudice ([20], pp. 167–68).

Although he proposes a reversed history, throughout *Aux États-Unis d'Afrique* Waberi insists on engaging with Western conceptions of "Africa as an idea, a concept", which Mbembe affirms, "has historically served, and continues to serve, as a polemical argument for the West's desperate desire to assert its difference from the rest of the world" ([14], p. 2). In the novel's counter-narrative, European stereotypes of Africa haunt the mirror-image descriptions of decrepit Europe and the impoverished USA. These descriptions are meted out through dialogues among xenophobic African politicians and the interior monologue of Docteur Papa, who reflects on his society's failings as he expresses his concerns for the life choices his adopted daughter is making as she wanders across Africa and, later, to Europe in search of her birth mother. Many of these choices, and her general nomadic lifestyle, Docteur Papa attributes to her alterity: her difference embedded in her whiteness even though she has been separated her entire life from the Europe of her past. "Why, Maya, this hunger for difference, this constant availability, this sensibility that is so contrary to the haughty assurance of our African intellectuals who are nourished only with sarcastic force and disdain for their countries?" ([7], p. 162). Maya in her difference will always be marginalized in Africa.

Notwithstanding the subtexts of their novels, narrating very striking realities about the state of transnational, economic relationships between the West and Africa, Waberi and Belkhodja write new signs and signifiers that counter the standards of Western conceptions of Africa. These new signs challenge, as Mbembe notes, Africa as "one of the metaphors through which the West represents the origin of its own norms, develops a self-image, and integrates this image into the set of signifiers asserting what it supposes to be its identity" ([14], p. 2). Displacing these codified, spatial signifiers of African and Western realms in order to posit an alternative space that is not bound by racial or geographical binaries, Waberi uses Maya to create his "what if" and to make a point about the human condition in our modern world. Although she never speaks directly in the novel, the young woman metaphorically depicts the possible weaving of Self and Other, the fruition of Khatibi's pensée-autre. She is fluid, operating in a transnational realm where white and black skin, Europe and Africa, French and African could meld and shape a singular identity that is from everywhere and nowhere at the same time if only she were allowed to do so. Her essence evokes an Afropolitan being-in-the-world that represents shared citizenship with the world of others. This ideal remains, though, an unfulfilled reality for her. All the love and means given to her by her African parents cannot overcome the fact that she still feels and suffers from being "exiled" by her experience as a young woman "whose root is no longer anywhere" ([7], p. 168), as Docteur Papa remarks:

> Tu es et tu restes une exilée, une exilée à la racine qui plus est. Tu aurais le choix, tu
> dirais aux os blanchis sous la dalle froide de tes ancêtres: "Levez-vous et suivez-moi sur
> les terres d'Afrique bénies par les Dieux et par le soleil douze mois sur douze"...Exilée
> à la racine, bannie dès l'origine...Tu seras une jeune pousse prête à avaler les nouvelles
> règles, les nouveaux labels et les plus récent poinçons. Tu seras une autre et toi-même à
> la fois ([7], p. 168).

> (You are and you will remain exiled, an exiled woman whose root is no longer. You would
> say that you have the choice of whitened bones under the cold slab of your ancestors:
> "Get up and follow me on the African lands blessed by Gods and by the sun twelve months
> out of the year"...Exiled to the root, banned of origin...You will be a young shoot ready
> to swallow new rules, new labels and the most recent stamps. You will be an Other and
> yourself at the same time.)

Maya's transcultural ties as well as her exiled displacement compel her to crisscross continents in search of her mother and relearn "les rudiments de cette langue" (the rudiments of this language) of her childhood ([7], p. 151): a French that is "lacking...glosses, analyses...without an academy or a pantheon" ([7], p. 155). She is forced in this transcontinental space to engage with the "Other" that is really part of her Self, in a Europe that is both foreign and home. Even in Europe, though, she will not be able to claim her own narrative. Docteur Papa tells her, "tu as la couleur locale, tu le sais bien. Tant que tu n'ouvres pas la bouche, personne ne peut soupçonner ton statut d'étrangère" (you have the local color, you know this. As long as you don't open your mouth, no one will suspect that you are a foreigner) ([7], p. 150). In the end, despite her cosmopolitanism, her will to be a citizen of the world, and her attempts to bridge her African present with a decrepit European past, Maya remains alienated and alone, unable to articulate—to speak—her biculturalism. She is destined to wear her "origin like a wound and a defeat" ([7], p. 173). The trap of transnationalism, of being from "nowhere", Waberi warns, also assures a certain alienation of the subject: the potential failure to *be alongside others* that is unfortunately a reality of the postcolonial reality in which we live. Although perhaps liberating, Waberi warns that transnationalism, the presence of self and other in the same individual, also means inevitable disjunction from nation and tribe. Can the multicultural subject, then, really forsake "kith and kin", as Anthony Appiah would have her do, in order to embrace the cosmopolitanism for which she strives as a person who can live perpetually in the *elsewhere*? Utopic dreams of wholeness and Khatibi's "bringing to light" the plurality of a transnational existence that allows for *becoming something other* are still elusive in Waberi's and Belkhodja's narratives. They show what potentially could be but that is destined to exist only in the utopias of a future world.

5. Conclusions

The dystopic utopias proposed in *Le Retour de l'éléphant* and *Aux États-Unis d'Afrique* reveal that the postcolonial African author of French expression finds himself at odds, caught in a "double attachment", in the middle of what Khatibi defines as "the constantly reemerging world of the colonizer" and the "tribal, Makhzen [state power] of the postcolonial nation" ([12], p. 53). However, if we consider Waberi's and Belkhodja's novels as proposing alternative realities for Africa in order to study the challenges of contemporary issues that need to be addressed, then we can say they have met their goals as works that are universally humanist. Through these fictions, not only is Africa forced to confront its failings, the West, too, as it looks in the mirror and sees its image reflected back, is compelled to consider the potential that the African continent could offer if the tables were turned. Dystopic utopias compel us to think about colonial coercive pasts and the failures of postcolonial present. These 21st century Afropolitan novels written in French engage with transnational cosmopolitan ideals that ground Africans' being-in-the-world as multicultural, plural-lingual and open to a postcolonial world that is leaving the "post" behind. And while their novels are set in a distant future, they do not hide

these authors' commitment to tackling the new challenges of our age that extend beyond the borders of nations and continents to embrace being a "citizen of the world".[7]

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[7] As promoted in Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism*.