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Recontextualising migration: decolonial insights from a postcolonial African novel

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ABSTRACT

The article considers the role that literary geographies play in the study of migration. It explores the possibilities offered by a non-representational analysis of the postcolonial novel *Congo Inc. Bismarck's Testament* by In Koli Jean Bofane, aiming to shed light on the potential of decolonizing the perspective on migratory issues. Bofane's novel treats population mobility as woven into the country's everyday life; rather than something extraordinary, migration is seen as a component of human life. The work recontextualises specific narrative contents, paying attention to how the novel can be used. Intersecting with mobility studies and the most recent reflections in migration studies, in particular demigrantisation, the analysis makes the transformative potential of the novel emerge by relating the aspects of migration extracted from literary fiction to the socio-scientific discourse on migration in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Africa. This potential concerns the deconstruction of given contexts, geographical or content-wise, and the recontextualisation of migration through decolonial imaginations, by reframing it as a functional condition which can be experienced by anyone in specific moments of life. While emphasizing the novel's contribution to presenting other scenarios, the paper complexifies our contextualization and further articulates our vision of migration.

Recontextualiser la migration : Renseignements décoloniaux d'un roman postcolonial africain

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article considère le rôle que jouent les géographies littéraires dans l'étude de la migration. Il explore les possibilités offertes par l'analyse non représentationnelle du roman postcolonial *Congo Inc. : Le testament de Bismarck* de In Koli Jean Bofane, en vue d'apporter un éclairage sur le potentiel de décoloniser la perspective sur les questions de migration. Le roman de Bofane traite la mobilité des populations comme un fil cousu dans le tissu de la vie quotidienne du

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pays ; plutôt qu'extraordinaire, la migration est vue comme un composant de la vie humaine. Le projet recontextualise certains contenus spécifiques de l'intrigue, en prêtant une attention particulière à la manière dont le roman peut être utilisé. Au carrefour des études des mobilités et des réflexions les plus récentes sur les études migratoires, notamment la démigranticisation, l'analyse fait surgir le potentiel transformateur du roman en reliant des aspects de migration extraits de la fiction littéraire et le discours socio-scientifique sur la migration en République Démocratique du Congo et en Afrique. Ce potentiel porte sur la déconstruction des contextes donnés, soit géographiques soit liés aux contenus, et sur la recontextualisation de la migration à travers des imaginations décoloniales, en la redéfinissant comme une condition fonctionnelle qui peut être vécue par toute personne dans des moments spécifiques de la vie. En mettant un accent sur la contribution du roman à la présentation d'autres scénarii, l'article complexifie notre contextualization et exprime plus notre vision de la migration.

Recontextualizar la migración: perspectivas decoloniales desde una novela africana poscolonial

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina el papel que desempeñan las geografías literarias en el estudio de la migración. Explora las posibilidades que ofrece un análisis no representacional de la novela *poscolonial Congo Inc. Bismarck's Testament*, de In Koli Jean Bofane, con el objetivo de iluminar sobre el potencial de descolonizar la perspectiva sobre las cuestiones migratorias. La novela de Bofane aborda la movilidad de la población como un elemento entretelado en la vida cotidiana del país; lejos de ser algo extraordinario, la migración se concibe como un componente de la vida humana. La obra recontextualiza contenidos narrativos específicos, prestando atención a los usos posibles de la novela. Al articularse con los estudios de movilidad y las reflexiones más recientes en los estudios migratorios, en particular la desmigrantización; el análisis revela el potencial transformador de la novela. Para ello, relaciona los aspectos de la migración extraídos de la ficción literaria con el discurso socio científico sobre la migración en la República Democrática del Congo y en África. Dicho potencial reside en la deconstrucción de contextos dados, ya sean geográficos o temáticos, y en la recontextualización de la migración a través de imaginarios decoloniales, replanteándola como una condición funcional que cualquier persona puede experimentar en momentos específicos de su vida. Si bien destaca la contribución de la novela a la hora de presentar escenarios alternativos, el artículo aporta complejidad a nuestra contextualización y profundiza en nuestra visión de la migración.

Introduction

This article considers how literary geographies can contribute to the debate on migration within social and cultural geography and migration studies. Drawing on the concept of de-migrantisation, and intersecting with mobility studies, it discusses the transformative potential of the postcolonial novel and how this potential can be revealed and activated through a non-representational literary geographies-based approach. The paper asserts that an oriented analysis of postcolonial literary texts could offer a different perspective on migration and contribute to the discourse on de-migrantisation. Through a non-representational reading of the postcolonial novel *Congo Inc. Bismarck's Testament* by In Koli Jean Bofane (2018), and by engaging with contemporary debates in mobility and migration studies, the analysis explores the insights that postcolonial fictional literature may offer in decolonizing the perspective on migration. In the context of this article, decolonizing migration involves critically interrogating the term 'migrant' as a politically charged category shaped by colonial and postcolonial legacies, which flattens diverse subjectivities and erases histories, aspirations, and desires. Indeed, postcolonial fictional literature can participate in de-objectifying the figure of the migrant, unveiling the cultural construction hidden behind the term. The article's contribution is to create a space for a preliminary investigation and foster future theorization on how literary geographies may intervene towards a 'mobilisation' of studies on migration.

Congo Inc. Bismarck's Testament by In Koli Jean Bofane was published in French in 2014 and in English in 2018. The novel is set in the Democratic Republic of Congo, mainly in the capital Kinshasa, and is centred on the story of Isookanga, a Twa pygmy who lives in a village in the Congolese Equatorial forest in the province of Tshuapa. As the nephew of the chief of the village, the protagonist is the heir to the leadership, but he dislikes the forest and tradition, loves technology, and dreams of the city and modernity. For this reason, as soon as he has the opportunity, Isookanga leaves his village for Kinshasa. Once in the city, though, he becomes homeless and sleeps rough in the central market, joining a group of street children. Henceforth, several events occur, and numerous characters intervene in the story. While the plot develops almost entirely around the protagonist, the other characters' stories convey threads that refer to the rural-urban dynamic, the dominion of multinational corporations, the Chinese presence, the conflicts in the eastern areas, mineral exploitation, environmental devastation, and corruption. These are all significant issues in contemporary Africa, linked by a common matrix in neocolonial and power dynamics. The scenario resulting from these themes drafts a clear image of the country and its colonial legacy.

According to the migration turn, which has been identified in African cultural production since the beginning of the new millennium (Iheka & Taylor, 2018), *Congo Inc. Bismarck's Testament* has been located within African migration narratives (Taylor, 2024), a corpus of literary works that use migration to frame other social and political matters. Nonetheless, Taylor specifies that African migration novels resist classification in terms of migration narratives as they continuously incorporate emerging issues; he uses the expression 'migratory imagination' to describe the ability of African authors to work beyond the genre. In fact, neocolonialism, globalization, war, and dispossession are the core themes around which the story develops.

The selection of the novel is largely due to this aspect. Indeed, while my analysis recognizes the narrative role of the migratory component in the literary text – for instance, in the organization of the plot around the protagonist's circular migration – and seeks to emphasize the presence of other migratory typologies within the narrative, it also insists on the novel's ability to present population mobility within the country as an ordinary and an inescapable component of everyday African life. The narrative treats human mobilities not as something extraordinary or particularly relevant, but rather as a fact, woven into life's ordinary course. This makes Bofane's novel significant for my analysis, as it allows me to relate to the idea of de-migranticisation and consider the contribution to decolonizing the perspective on migration. By *decolonizing*, I refer to a critical interrogation of the term migrant – not as an innocent word, but as a category produced within colonial and postcolonial histories. In this sense, the label migrant can be understood as one form of the production of governable subjects (Mbembe, 2001).

I adopt a non-representational reading of the novel. This methodological approach engages with the literary text by decontextualizing selected passages from the story. I identify the migratory typologies within these literary passages and amplify them through socio-scientific digressions. Drawing on the thought of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the literary excerpts become lines of flight through which I go beyond the novel by expanding the content, engaging with related socio-scientific literature on migration in the Democratic Republic of Congo and across Africa. While investigating these reconstructed migrations, I reflect on how the novel transcends established migratory categories. Indeed, the migratory patterns identified in my analysis are not represented or thematized as such in the novel; rather, they are embedded in the narrative, where they function as elements of ordinary life in the intra-African, and more specifically Congolese, context. That is to say, the author does not classify them according to the terminology of the socio-scientific literature on migration.

Drawing precisely on that terminology, the categorization I provide in this analysis seeks to reconstruct certain migratory categories retrospectively, through a movement that runs counter to the literary one, in order to emphasize the differences between Bofane's literary language and the canonical discourse of migration studies. This enables me to demonstrate how postcolonial literature can be used to foster reflection in the same direction as that proposed by mobility studies and the de-migranticisation approach.

In the following sections, I begin by considering the critical perspectives in the geography of migration and migration studies, paying particular attention to the concepts of de-migranticisation and mobility. I then outline my methodological approach, drawing on reflections concerning text, space, and representation emerging from both literary and non-representational geographies. Finally, in the analytical sections, I put this into practice, reconstructing and investigating the migratory typologies encountered in the literary narrative and discussing the analysis's contribution.

Dismantling migration

During the last decade, the critical geography of migration has drawn attention to migration governance practices, analysing their capitalistic nature and highlighting the perpetuation of colonial power dynamics. Recent studies have emphasized the extractive

and racial character of these practices. In particular, extractive attitudes have been recognized through the analysis of labour-power relations (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2019), the industry of illegalization and differential inclusion (De Genova, 2013; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013), the humanitarian apparatus (Cuttitta, 2017; Tazzioli, 2022) and the spectacularisation of the border and the migratory 'crisis' (Cuttitta, 2014; Pallister-Wilkins, 2020). Indeed, all of these components contribute to fuelling various forms of exploitation, which relate to a common capitalist and colonial matrix. The nexus between migration governance and neocolonialism has been foregrounded by works that invoke a challenge to dominant epistemologies by appealing to postcolonial theories (Mains et al., 2013), highlight the legacies of imperialism and the role of race in border politics and camps (Davies & Isakjee, 2019), and reveal dynamics of objectification, othering, and racialization through analysis of the asylum system (Piccozza, 2021; Tazzioli, 2015).

In exploring the making of migration, Martina Tazzioli (2020) emphasizes the processes through which individuals are constituted as subjects via entangled practices of power and knowledge. This entails the systematic categorization, identification, and profiling of migrants through institutional mechanisms such as asylum systems, detention regimes, and reception structures. These *dispositifs* do not merely assign legal labels – such as 'economic migrant', 'asylum seeker', 'refugee', or 'undocumented migrant' – but actively participate in the production of subjectivities. That is, they generate specific political and social identities, rendering individuals governable within established regimes of control and administration. Subjectivation, in this sense, is a performative act that shapes how migrants are seen, treated, and positioned within the broader biopolitical management of mobility (Tazzioli, 2020).

These approaches have in common the tendency to deconstruct the normative, discursive, and epistemological apparatuses that revolve around migration, escaping normalization and reinvigorating migration studies. Indeed, behind migration governance practices and their regenerative ability lies a sophisticated exercise of coloniality as a form of the colonial matrix of power propagating through trans-historical and trans-spatial directions (Quijano, 2007). Through the lens of coloniality, scholars have also identified migration studies as an intrinsically problematic field due to the legitimization of spaces and knowledge originating from a colonial mindset (Bashi, 2023). In this direction, they have pointed out that the goal of decolonizing would be dismantling migration studies as a distinct field (Collins, 2022), and have questioned categories previously taken for granted, such as 'integration' (Astolfo & Allsopp, 2023).

Within the social sciences, this reflection has been undertaken via the concept of de-migrantisation, which shifts attention away from migration as a defining or central category of analysis. De-migrantisation challenges the migrant/non-migrant binary and the tendency to treat migrants as exceptional subjects, and emphasizes studying everyday practices and experiences. It calls for analysing mobile and immobile experiences, interpreting them as intertwined rather than oppositional, and as dynamic states rather than fixed categories. Moreover, while stressing that migrants are a constructed category centred on the national state and ethnicity, this approach calls for de-migrantising migration studies (Dahinden, 2016). From this perspective, as the field's institutionalization reproduces the categories that contribute to the migratory apparatus within a normalized discourse, the focus on migration should disappear, along with the specialized scholars (Dahinden, 2016).

This perspective benefits from mobility studies and the mobility turn. In modern societies, sedentism tends to be considered the norm, whereas mobility is controlled, regulated, and moralized. In contrast to this methodological sedentism, the new mobilities paradigm places mobility and immobility at the centre of social analysis. Unlike movement, as the physical act of displacement, mobility is imbued with social, cultural, and political meaning (Cresswell, 2006). Indeed, mobility is not a singular and undifferentiated concept, but is 'the entanglement of movement, representation, and practice' (Cresswell, 2010, p. 19). Moreover, it has political implications, as it is structured by power dynamics, some of which are celebrated and others stigmatized. Therefore, mobility implies who can move, how they move, what social meaning the act of moving carries, and what political consequences it entails. In this framework, migration is a specific form within a broader paradigm of mobilities hierarchically organized (Urry, 2007).

The mobility approach moves beyond linear perspectives on migration, which generally focus on places of origin, destinations, journeys, and borders; instead, it considers spatial dynamics as open, evolving processes and stresses plurality (Schapendonk et al., 2020). By centring attention on trajectories in their ongoing unfolding, the mobility lens challenges sedentary, state-centred approaches (Dahinden, 2016) and 'de-migrantise peoples' mobility by not starting from a typical migration framework' (Schapendonk et al., 2021, p. 3244). Indeed, mobility trajectories emerge from the interaction alongside individual aspirations, social networks, and mobility regimes.

Most importantly – and this is arguably the strongest point of connection with Bofane's novel – mobility practices are not necessarily experienced as 'migration' by the actors themselves, but rather appear as the continuation of other practices rooted in their livelihoods. These actors only become 'migrants' when their movements are regulated and labelled by policies and bureaucracy (Schapendonk et al., 2021). Thus, mobility is 'migrantised', and migrancy takes shape as a normative category produced by mobility regimes, rather than as a pre-existing identity. Within this framework, migration is no longer considered a given category, but as a phenomenon that acquires relevance when specific regimes of power intervene to regulate, classify, and politicize mobility. This approach implies a call for de-exceptionalisation in migration studies and for moving beyond a perspective that 'others' migrants, treating them as an exceptional group, different from the rest of the population.

From a mobility perspective, societies are inherently dynamic (Mazzuccato & Schapendonk, 2025) and 'migration is just one of many forms of movements that shape and produce the daily lives we live' (Schapendonk et al., 2021, pp. 3244–3245). This allows us to recognize that the category of 'migrant' itself is problematic and tied to methodological nationalism, as it is produced through borders and visa regimes. Moreover, the assumption that migrants are exceptional subjects is reinforced by academic, institutional, and political discourses, which limit our capacity to grasp the complexities of social practices (Hui, 2016). Finally, this tendency to reduce the broader concept of mobility to migration is also identified within postcolonial studies by Toivanen (2021, 2025), who advocates for a dialogue between postcolonial literary studies and the new mobilities paradigm, highlighting how differential mobility reflects hierarchies of power while actively shaping subjectivity.

Attempts at de-migrantising research in practice have focused on immobility as a liminal concept, that exists in a dynamic and interdependent relationship with mobility

(Raghuram et al., 2024). This shift marks a significant departure from traditional approaches centred on the categorization of migrants or migration. In fact, the emphasis is placed on immobility/mobility, viewed not as fixed states but as fluid conditions shaped by multiple contingent factors. As such, these states are better understood as assemblages, characterized by hybridity and indeterminacy (Raghuram et al., 2024). The de-migrantisation approach reveals the potential of immobility/mobility as a trait inherent in everyday practices and, therefore, omnipresent in our lives. This makes migration a condition, emphasizing that the boundary between migratory and non-migratory behaviours is indeterminate. Displacing the reified figure of the so-called migrant from the centre of scholarly analysis, it challenges the categorical logic through which individuals are reductively classified as migrants based on legal status, national origin, or mobility trajectories. Instead, it foregrounds the condition of migration – understood not as a discrete or bounded identity, but as a set of situated, relational, and often ambivalent experiences embedded within broader socio-political and spatial contexts.

Indeed, while mobility and immobility affect everyone, they constitute particular phases in individuals' lives, that can give rise to manifold combinations. One form of this complexity is the so-called 'sometimes migrants', individuals for whom migration is not a permanent condition but a fluctuating status and part of their biography (Hui, 2016). The point of who is a migrant, then, is drastically problematized. Framing migration as a condition allows for a more nuanced analysis of how mobility and immobility are negotiated, experienced, and politicized in everyday life. It recognizes that the effects of migration – such as precarity, marginalization, or aspiration for movement – are not confined to those formally designated as migrants but may extend to a range of subjects whose lives are shaped by global inequalities, border regimes, or transnational imaginaries. In this sense, de-migrantisation calls for an analytical shift from *who* is a migrant to *how* migratory conditions are produced, sustained, and contested across time and space.

The keystone identified within the de-migrantisation approach and mobility studies constitutes the focal point around which the following analysis revolves, aiming to shed light on how Bofane's narrative transcends established migratory categories, immersing the reader in the everyday life of a capital city in the global South, and pre-emptively incorporating a de-migrantising perspective. Moreover, de-migrantisation shares an epistemological orientation with both the literary geographies' opening of the text and non-representational approaches. Indeed, all of these aim to destabilize fixed categories, decentre dominant narratives and foreground process, fluidity, and becoming over static representations.

The methodological approach

Influenced by the wave of poststructuralism, literary geographies have integrated deconstructionist and non-representational approaches. Literary texts are no longer considered in their intrinsic character, but rather as having an agency that interacts with a context. This articulation triggers contextual geographies of power, which can concern different aspects, from the text's production to its consumption and impact (Aijaz, 2018; Hones, 2008). The fictional text has been considered a spatial event involving multiple interactions and spatial relations. It is a multidimensional space, as it contains a plurality of texts at different levels of textuality, and the possible interpretations are functions of the

context of reading (Hones, 2008, 2011, 2014). Primarily concerned with how literary texts produce rather than represent space, this approach diverges from geocriticism, which is more focused on how literary places are constructed and their influence on both real and imagined geographies (Westphal, 2007, 2011). In fact, despite its dynamic perspective – based on multifocalisation and attentive to the multidimensionality of literary space – geocriticism remains centred on spatial representations, and thus stays more firmly anchored at the textual level.

Literary geographies propose different perspectives. For instance, through the book-as-*assemblage* framework, grounded on Deleuze and Guattari's *assemblage* theory, the focus is put on the valency of fiction in extra-textual geographies (J. Anderson, 2015), and the interest lies in analysing how texts intermingle with places through the geographical relations between books and readers. This perspective is of particular interest, as it points out literary texts' capacity to enter the collective consciousness, influencing the identification of places and engaging with the world. Although my analysis does not address the novel's territorial consequences in a narrow sense, the book-as-*assemblage* approach allows me to consider the influence of the text in the socio-spatial context of material geographies. In my textual analysis, there is no direct correspondence between these geographies and the novel's intra-textual ones; nonetheless, intra- and extra-textual geographies interact when considering them in broader terms, and when considering places as ongoing processes rather than portions of space caged by coordinates. Over the years, scholars within literary geographies have been working on the impact of imagination on cultural and material practices; in this direction, the approaches mentioned above suggest that not only can texts imagine, but they can also create a world and invite us to live in it (Aijaz, 2018).

The outlined literary geographies approach aligns with the perspective of non-representational theories, which considers representations as immanent and relational configurations, subject to change, and regards what they do as being more significant than their meaning (B. Anderson, 2019). Action in the world is a characteristic trait of the non-representational approach, which encourages a relational-material understanding of what is social (Anderson & Harrison, 2010). This focuses attention on what happens after representations, rather than before, and how they may transform knowledge (Vannini, 2015). Therefore, I combine the opening of the text promoted within literary geographies with the non-representational conception of place as a process, focusing on how literary texts can be used. Indeed, my interest is directed towards the contribution the novel can offer to the discourse on migration rather than to its literary contents.

I ground the reading of the novel *Congo Inc. Bismarck's Testament* on Derrida (1976, 1978) deconstruction and Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) reflections on rhizome and *assemblage*. On the one hand, through deconstruction, context becomes a 'temporary stabilisation of meanings', as any context can transform and recontextualise (Dixon & Jones, 2005, p. 243). This aspect perpetuates the possibility of intertextual levels and directly concerns the act of reading, involving the production of different meanings by the reader (Woodard et al., 2009). Deconstruction allows the articulation of new connections (Barnett, 1999), questions the division between text and context, and transforms text into a differential network. On the other hand, Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) rhizomatic thought considers the possibility of creating connections at any point and through systems of codification belonging to different

fields and regimes of signs. This active philosophy is focused on how things work and what can be done with them, and calls for all forms of experimentation and assemblage.

I consider the novel not exclusively as a whole. Instead, I extract selected fragments that may be secondary or less relevant to the main story, but which become essential starting points for analysis. Thus, I analyse the novel by opening the original context and examining how specific contents can be recontextualised. This recontextualisation regards, on the one hand, an intertextual dimension. Accordingly, I propose a Deleuzian reading that, while emerging from the literary text, extends outward by drawing on socio-scientific literature to unfold the migratory dimensions in the Democratic Republic of Congo. On the other hand, the recontextualisation concerns the extra-textual dimension of the discourse on migration. In this way, I direct the analysis towards the transformative agency of the fictional text, focusing on what the novel can become and how it can be used rather than on its meaning.

Therefore, rather than analysing the plot or the novel's major themes, I read the novel through a non-representational perspective and investigate Bofane's text in relation to its mobility components. By using lines of flight, I attempt to bring these components to the foreground, decontextualizing selected passages from the story and amplifying them through socio-scientific digressions. I reconstruct established migratory categories, looking at things that the novel evokes but does not conceptualize or describe as migration. This allows me to emphasize the difference between Bofane's literary framework and the canonical discourse on migration studies, and to consider the contribution of literary geographies – specifically, a non-representational analysis of postcolonial literature – to the debate on human mobility within and outside social and cultural geography.

For this purpose, I have roughly identified four forms of migration in the text: rural-urban, temporary and commuting for trade, war displacement, and intercontinental. This identification aims to focus exclusively on their characteristics rather than aspire to any classificatory precision. In fact, regarding national boundaries, the first three typologies are internal; technically, being displaced is not equivalent to being a migrant; temporary is an umbrella term, and commuting cannot be considered a form of migration in a narrow sense. However, all of these are expressions of population mobility that significantly shape the country's everyday life and can be brought out through the novel.

Rural-urban and temporary migration

Only the contours of the huts were now visible. They followed one another here and there in gloomy clustered groups along the red dirt road, making up the village of Ekanga where the Batwa lived . . . Once darkness was complete all around, the immense majestic mass of forest would soon appear to be encroaching and then be perceived as an unmanageable, dangerous vise by some, as a protective and loving mother by others. It just depended; it couldn't be controlled (Bofane, 2018, p. 9).

And then he was going to think about what he needed to put in place to get to Kinshasa; there, at least, he and his friends talked about network and no network, about USB ports, and compatible interfaces. There, at least, virtual shadows didn't scare wary, retrograde old men who could prevent a serious youth from moving ahead in life as he should (Bofane, 2018, p. 5).

Although migration is not a theme in the literary text, the protagonist's journey from the village in the Equatorial forest to the city is the plot's axis. In this sense, it is the condition *sine qua non* for the story. The first line of flight considered is Isookanga's transfer, which, under a migration-focused lens, can be understood as a rural-urban migration. Starting from his village, he first reaches the Equatorial city of Mbandaka by river and then embarks on a trip to Kinshasa. As in many African countries, Congolese internal migration is primarily rural-urban. The relationship between urbanization and rural migration characterizes the continent due to the rapid growth of cities and the lack of investment and interest in the rural world (Sakketa, 2023). Moreover, the peripheral urban network in the DRC contrasts with its almost empty central areas, scarcely inhabited and lacking in infrastructure. This creates an imbalance of population and human potential that is inappropriate for the country to function (Kakese Kunyima, 2006).

In common with international and intercontinental migration networks, internal ones follow the colonial track (Lututala Mumpasi, n.d.). During Belgian colonialism, exploitation was concentrated in productive mining or agricultural areas where workers were required. Subsequently, the arrival of families contributed to urban growth, particularly after independence (in 1960), when rural-urban migration was promoted by political networks seeking an electorate (D'ascenzo, 2019; De Boeck & Plissart, 2005; Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002). This rural-urban dynamic, triggered by colonialism and accentuated after independence, remains active today and contributes to the African urbanization rate, which is lower than the world average. Internal migration can be related to international migration, as it would offer the conditions to continue the journey abroad (Adepoju, 2006, 2010; Cirillo et al., 2022; Lututala Mumpasi, n.d.). The contribution of this form of mobility to reducing poverty through remittances has been recognized but is still largely unrecorded (Adepoju, 2010). Moreover, internal migratory patterns may also be circular when they are characterized by non-permanent moves back and forth between home and host areas, or result in a voluntary return. This is largely due to the challenges of the labour market or integration into urban life, where livelihoods are not guaranteed in the same way as in the village.

The character created by Bofane faces this type of migration, although the author does not define it in these terms. Instead, it is a journey with a substantial symbolic value, as it goes down the river and, in part, retraces the one undertaken by Henry Morton Stanley between 1876 and 1877 during the exploration of the Congo, which made it possible to reach the ocean. Isookanga's internal migration is driven by a strong sense of 'right to the city' (Lefebvre, 1968). His claim to modernity condenses a feeling of non-belonging and non-recognition with the values and traditions of his place of origin (Bizék-Tatara, 2025; Mapangou, 2019). This feeling is exacerbated by his borderline condition within the social group and by the different forms of diversity embodied by the protagonist, starting from the phenotypic one, which makes him taller than a normal pygmy, and continuing with a series of cultural traits that remark on his distance from the tradition (Bizék-Tatara, 2025). and social life of the village. The centrality of the diverse dimensions of subjectivity is maintained, rather than flattened, by the label of migration. Isookanga is not circumscribed; unlike his peers, he has not yet started a family at twenty-five and dresses as if he were in an urban environment (Kuenen, 2018). All these aspects fuel his desire to reach the capital, be successful, and part of the globalized world rather than on its margins (West-Pavlov, 2017). Isookanga's migration is not economic, but an attempt to realize a dream; at its

origins there is a condition of discomfort towards the place where he lives due to his situation, character, vision of the world, aspirations, and hopes. This condition concerns a large proportion of young Africans who leave or dream of leaving the rural areas (Mussa, 2020).

Moreover, unlike the narrative that characterizes the discourse on migration in the global North, Isookanga's aspirations are not directed towards the affluent countries that typically dominate migration imaginaries. The international dimension, of which he wishes to feel part, is widely present in Kinshasa. Indeed, globalization is the actual great theme of the novel, which reigns supreme in the capital and innervates the entire country. Therefore, while the socio-scientific discourse on migration is generally centred on intercontinental migrations, categorized into economic migrants and refugees, the novel maintains the focus on the Democratic Republic of Congo alone through a protagonist who is neither an economic migrant nor a refugee. Isookanga should be defined as an example of internal migration, a migratory typology almost absent in the mainstream and still minoritarian in socio-scientific discourse due to an ethnocentric perspective which tends to perceive the phenomenon solely from a global North-centred standpoint (King & Skeldon, 2010; Ochieng et al., 2022). This tendency is also observable in the orientation of literary migration studies towards the West and the consequent marginalization of intra-continental migration within academic criticism (Fasselt, 2019, 2022; Toivanen, 2021). Nonetheless, contemporary African authors can reposition the question of belonging within the context of intra-continental mobility while maintaining a certain caution regarding 'totalising categories' and 'the porous boundaries between different forms of migration' (Fasselt, 2019, p. 75).

Other aspects related to the migratory human typology are embodied by the protagonist. Rather than being defined by traits that point to conditions of poverty or danger, through which migrants or refugees are usually identified, Isookanga has the potential to play an essential social role and leadership position in his village, and his need to leave is driven by cultural factors and a palpable sense of otherness within his own community. For these reasons, he yearns for the city, perceived as the embodiment of modernity, progress, and, ultimately, the future. This perspective works against the conscious or unconscious processes that tend to inferiorize migrants by status, and considers that the need to move can also be an issue of exclusion, discomfort with one's own environment, and desire to access other resources. Through Isookanga, mobility can be seen as a practice and a right rather than exclusively as a necessity. Finally, the protagonist's journey starts and ends in the forest, shaping a case of return migration. This typology of mobility can be considered in terms of failure or success, depending on whether it is associated with the abandonment of the migratory project due to the difficulties of integrating into the labour market and city life or, conversely, it facilitates better life conditions and thus allows a return (De Haas et al., 2015). Isookanga's experience, though, is ultimately one of empowerment. His return to the forest does not represent the failure of his mobility project but the outcome of a transformative journey through which he acquires new knowledge and critical awareness, enabling him to reinterpret the forest not as a peripheral space to escape from but as a place from which alternative futures can be imagined and enacted. Rather than remaining trapped in the urban model he initially idealized, Isookanga re-connects with his local environment, imagining new forms of development rooted in the forest while engaging with global networks.

A second line of flight identifies a form of mobility that can be broadly defined as temporary migration, mostly linked to trade between river villages and the capital. Temporary migration could be long-lasting, circular, or permanent, but the author says nothing about its duration. The protagonist embarks on a tugboat, defined as a 'floating city', within which multiple figures coexist. Bofane lists them along with migrants and war refugees; therefore, who is everyone else? How do we classify those who are not migrants or refugees?

There were thousands of people covering every inch of the deck. Merchandise of all kinds to supply the capital was strewn about and dangling from parts of the vessel: bunches of plantains, stocks of dried fish, live goats, various sorts of game, sacks of coal and manioc, exotic birds, palm oil in PVC barrels, and near the bow a captive monkey with a cord around his neck. People were milling about: shopkeeping mothers, rural emigrants, Mongo streetwalkers from the Mongando clan, hair stylists, aspiring law and maths professors, talisman vendors, runaway minors, discharged intellectuals, two Maï-Maï who had broken with their group, men and women of the cloth, war refugees, and more. [...] People were holding forth in every language the river siphoned off along its course, and even beyond (Bofane, 2018, p. 18).

This floating Babel seems to remind us of the illusoriness of categorizing human movements because human beings escape categorization. Furthermore, together with people, the tugboat transports all sorts of animals and goods and is an element of great importance for the city's functioning, in terms of supply and exchange with both the villages scattered in the Equatorial forest and the localities along the river. In this specific case, Mbandaka-Kinshasa is one of the navigable traits of the river, in a segmented colonial communication system made up of river and railway connections and designed solely for an economy based on exploitation and extraction (Bruneau & Simon, 1991). The city attracts goods and people and reiterates a direction somewhat determined during the colonial period. Soldiers, guerrillas, refugees, intellectuals, rebels, and traders, together with the protagonist, go back down the river and follow the course of history. This floating microcosm of humans, animals, and goods, that flows along the river from time to time, is part of the normality of Congolese life. Therefore, even the protagonist's journey, on which the entire narrative is built, does not seem to be extraordinary; it is just part of a flow. It occurs naturally within other broader forms of population mobility, heterogeneous and not always identifiable. Bofane's writing underscores the volatility of the categories devised to describe and analyse human mobility, thereby endorsing the approach advocated by de-migranticisation.

Displacement and international migration

Once in the city, the protagonist's trajectory intersects with the journeys of different characters; among these is Shasha, an adolescent who fled with her brothers from the war-torn eastern areas of the country to the capital. A further line of flight concerns what, within migratory terminology and classification, would be defined as internal displacement.

The entire village had been massacred. The girl had heard nothing. The killers had used bladed or blunt weapons so as not to be heard, or quite simply to vary their method. They had slit throats and used clubs and bludgeons to crush skulls [...].

Leading her brothers on a blind trail, she chose a path that disappeared into the shrubbery. Those who had committed what she'd just seen were certainly not far away. She, who would soon be called Shasha, figured she'd need to put some distance between herself, her brothers, and the area that had witnessed such a paroxysm of savagery. That's how they left their region near Butembo that day, with bare hands and their heads burning. [...] On several occasions, they'd been forced to leave the village with their parents because of clashes that were accompanied by the persistent echo of machine gun and mortar fire. This time there had been no sign of what had happened, but the armed groups that performed ethnic cleansing were roaming through the region and forcing families to leave their land or to submit to the worst abominations [...]. That is how the children started off on their journey towards the west, towards Kisangani, towards the river, looking for a kinder haven. They walked all day without stopping, the older of the boys almost running to keep up with his sister while she carried the smaller one in her arms like a precious possession. To rest every now and then, the girl put the boy down and, without complaining, he would toddle along as best he could. They avoided the roads, hoping to escape the horror that hung permanently over this part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (Bofane, 2018, pp. 73–75).

According to UNHCR (2024), the number of internally displaced persons in the Democratic Republic of Congo as of 31 March 2024 was 7.2 million. The greatest concentrations are in the eastern areas affected by conflicts, namely the provinces of North Kivu (33.1%), South Kivu (19.5%) and Ituri (23.5%), as well as neighbouring ones, such as the province of Tanganyika (5.0%), and the administrative territory of Kinshasa (5.6%). In smaller percentages, the displaced are also distributed across the country's other provinces (DTM-IOM, 2023). This figure makes the Democratic Republic of Congo the country with Africa's most internally displaced persons. Moreover, another million Congolese refugees and asylum seekers are sheltered across the continent (UNHCR, 2024).

The conflicts in the eastern areas of the country are one of the outcomes of the genocide which occurred in Rwanda in 1994 and of the two Congolese and inter-African wars between 1996 and 2003 (Lecoutere et al., 2009). Since then, the fate of the two countries has been ambiguously linked. On the one hand, Rwanda, a small country subjected to intense demographic pressure, is apparently concerned by the presence of armed Hutu groups who had fled to the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo. On the other hand, this vast and difficult-to-manage country fears Rwandan incursions into its fertile and resource-rich eastern territories. Furthermore, attracted by the exploitation of resources, the economic appetite of Western multinational corporations aligned with the political interests of the two national actors (Cuvelier, 2010; Vogel, 2021). This presence benefited from the crisis, fuelling a variety of dividends that prolonged and complicated the situation. Over the years, the number of rebel groups in the area, competing for weapons and resources under ethnic and political shielding, has multiplied (Vlassenroot & Raeymaekers, 2005). All this is at the expense of local populations, who have been subjected to massacres, harassment and forced displacement for decades. The widespread violence makes it arduous to distinguish between the attacks of the rebel gangs and those of the regular army. This leads people to cyclically move away from their homes and walk in search of refuge. Sometimes, these movements are temporary, subject to return, sometimes recurring, while others translate into endless journeys for hundreds or

thousands of kilometres until they become permanent transfers (Büscher & Mathys, 2019; Lututala Mumpasi, 2010; Vlassenroot et al., 2020; Schouten et al., 2022).

Shasha sets out westward through the forest, looking for the river to follow its course. Only one of her brothers will survive during their extenuating journey, and upon arriving in Kinshasa, they will become street children. When Isookanga meets them in the central market of Kinshasa, Shasha is an adolescent and is working as a prostitute. Through this character, Bofane stages the condition of millions of involuntary migrants who must move within the country daily. This forced migration within the national borders involves the so-called internally displaced persons (Pinduka & Nhema, 2020). However, once again, they are not classified or defined by the author, who is more interested in bringing together aspects of the country's and capital's life and adding a piece to the complex mosaic of the contemporary postcolonial dimension in a globalized world.

The last line of flight and typology of human mobility extracted from the novel is linked to the character of Zhang Xia, a Chinese worker who left his country to reach the Congolese mining province of Katanga. Zhang Xia was employed as a digger machinist in a Chinese company, and he did not know that his work contributed to his boss's trafficking of soil exports.

Zhang Xia had arrived in the DRC as baggage of Mr. Liu Kai, both a civil and private engineering contractor. First he'd learned some bits of French, then landed in Lubumbashi in Katanga, paradise of strategic minerals. After laying out large amounts of money to acquire a concession for himself, Liu Kai had ordered an enormous mechanical digger from China. He put Zhang Xia in charge of the machine, and together they had moved tons and tons of soil by truck through Zambia and Tanzania to Dar es Salaam, from where it was shipped by freighter across the Indian Ocean to Singapore to end up in Guangdong on the South China Sea. His boss maintained it was rare soil, but Zhang Xia didn't understand this designation, considering there was nothing else to see for miles and miles and they could take as much of it as they wanted at modest cost. Zhang Xia knew that in order not to incur taxes too exorbitant for his liking, Mr. Liu Kai, a smile frozen on his lips, maintained to the local authorities that he was looking for copper but hadn't yet found any, that the signs weren't exactly positive, and that the tons of soil hauled away consisted merely of samples to be analysed (Bofane, 2018, p. 85).

Chinese companies have set up all over the African continent, particularly in the last twenty years, involved in mining, building, trade, and services (Jackson *et al.*, 2020; Kernen, 2007; Michel & Beuret, 2008; Van Dijk, 2009; Xiaoyang, 2016). The author openly refers to this foreign presence through a particular character in movement among all the others, a worker whom we would define as an international economic migrant. Interestingly, thus, the only reference to international migration in the novel is made through a case of immigration towards Africa rather than of emigration from. Moreover, besides exploitation and the Chinese presence in Africa, the narrative segment referring to Zhang Xia also introduces the informal dimension. Indeed, after the company's bankruptcy, the worker is abandoned by his boss and finds himself without a fixed abode, selling bags of drinking water on the streets of Kinshasa to make a living.

Therefore, even the image of the presumed (neo-)colonizers is overturned; far from the standard narrative on the Chinese great investor, Zhang Xia is initially a simple immigrant who then becomes a homeless street vendor in the capital. Unlike the common discourse on migration, which is generally over-focused on intercontinental mobility, the novel's

only example of intercontinental economic migration, embodied by Zhang Xia, is reported through a case of immigration to Africa. This highlights the under-considered fact that, far from being exclusively places of emigration, African countries are also countries of immigration and that, in the era of globalization, they attract not only investors but also foreign labour (Kuang, 2008; Park, 2021). Finally, Zhang Xia is forced to leave the country and return to China to stand trial due to false accusations by his boss. Following this episode of corruption, Isookanga's perception of globalization and modernity changes. Having received from Zhang Xia a map of the subsoil's resources from the company where he previously worked, the protagonist decides to return to his village and starts imagining his future role as chief, far beyond what traditions would have reserved for him. The novel culminates in this open end, a climax where nothing is revealed, but all is charged with potentiality. This is the most compelling point at which the reflection on decolonizing can connect further. Indeed, a different image of the African migrant is released, as somebody who can acquire the tools to fully participate in the economic and political dimensions of the contemporary world. The literary dimension is open to multiple interpretations and perspectives in conceiving the world as fictionable (Noxolo & Prezioso, 2013). It provokes a comparison not only with the actual but also with the possible (Wood, 2005) and, in so doing, offers alternative visions by relating imagination and practice.

Conclusion: decolonial contributions

The article has proposed a non-representational reading of the postcolonial novel *Congo Inc. Bismarck's Testament* by In Koli Jean Bofane, discussing how literary geographies can contribute to the debate on migration within social and cultural geography and migration studies. It has focused on the recontextualisation of specific narratives, paying attention to how the novel can be used and what it can do to de-objectify the image of migrants.

During the last decade, the critical geography of migration has highlighted the perpetuation of colonial power dynamics in migration governance, deconstructing the normative, discursive, and epistemological apparatuses that revolve around migration (Cuttitta, 2017; De Genova, 2013; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Pallister-Wilkins, 2020; Tazzioli, 2022). Moreover, studies on mobility and de-migrantisation have stressed that migrants are a constructed category centred on the national state and ethnicity, emphasizing that the boundary between migratory and non-migratory behaviours is indeterminate and mutable (Dahinden, 2016; Mazzuccato & Schapendonk, 2025; Schapendonk et al., 2020, 2021). At the same time, literary geographies have integrated deconstructionist and non-representational approaches, destabilizing fixed categories, such as those of text or context, and considering texts as having agency and interacting with a context (J. Anderson, 2015; Hones, 2008, 2011, 2014).

In this work, I have argued that literary geographies can contribute to the debate on migration by focusing on the potential of postcolonial novels to decolonize perspectives on migration. Specifically, a non-representational literary geographies-based approach may activate the transformative potential of postcolonial fictional literature and participate in the discourse on de-migrantisation by de-objectifying the image of the migrant and unveiling the cultural construction hidden behind the term. Indeed, considering that the legitimization of spaces and knowledge related to migration originates from a colonial

mindset, the shift in focus on mobility in everyday practices proposed by *Congo Inc. Bismarck's Testament* aligns with approaches oriented towards mobility and de-migrantisation. Through non-representational reading, the analysis has decontextualized selected fictional fragments and extended them beyond the novel, interacting with the extra-textual level of the discourse on migration. This process causes the potential agency of the novel to emerge, and enables recontextualisation of the discourse on migration through decolonial imaginations.

As is generally the case with postcolonial fictional narratives, *Congo Inc. Bismarck's Testament* presents facts from a non-Western viewpoint, illustrating aspects excluded from the big picture, political agendas, and official narratives on migration enclosed within the global North's horizons. Moreover, by focusing on internal mobility, it contributes to the deconstruction of a discourse geographically centred on the Mediterranean and, content-wise, on the refugee crisis, intercontinental migration, and the African international diaspora (McAuliffe & Kitimbo, 2018). Finally, while mobility makes the story possible, no particular emphasis is put on it, whereas other issues appear in the foreground, such as globalization, war, exploitation of resources, arms, and raw materials, trafficking, and corruption.

In Bofane's novel, mobility is seen as a human component woven into the country's everyday life rather than as something extraordinary, one of the many aspects that shape the country's life. This perspective allows us to consider the contingency of migration, conceptually reframing it as a typology of mobility that may be experienced by anyone at a specific moment in life, or as a functional condition for individuals' enrichment and self-development, not inescapably long or permanent. This contributes to recognizing the colonial genealogy of the term 'migrant' and to deconstructing migration as a category shaped by the legitimation of colonial- or nation-state-centred spaces of knowledge. Most importantly, the novel presents a different image of the African migrant that does not necessarily follow the course traced by history, colonialism, and neocolonialism. Conversely, the migrant can be somebody who acquires the tools to fully participate in the economic and political dimensions of the contemporary world, an image still far removed from the majority of public opinion; in these terms, fictional literature may help to restore centrality to subjectivity. Indeed, as diagnosticians, writers intercept symptoms and work with them, producing new modes of existence (Deleuze, 1998; Smith, 1998).

The proposed literary approach is not an alternative to critical migration studies. However, if the conceptual apparatus and terminology of migration still need to be used when analysing population mobilities, it would be opportune to start making the social construction of this vocabulary explicit and positioning it within the contingent research and perspective. Talking about migrants and migration can imply racial, ethnic, and class assumptions which need to be investigated urgently. In this direction, the article has attempted to illustrate the critical charge of a possible literary textual analysis, which, while emphasizing the novel's contribution to presenting other scenarios and realizing other possible worlds, complexifies our contextualization and further articulates our vision of migration. Indeed, this non-representational reading of a postcolonial novel has revealed affinities with recent developments in mobility studies and the de-migrantisation approach. By staging lived situations rather than explaining them conceptually, postcolonial fiction enacts ways of crossing and inhabiting space, offering decolonial insights into

contemporary debates on migration and mobility. Nonetheless, this line of analysis deserves further investigation, as the relationship between imagination and the possibility of different *modi operandi* appears to be rich in still under-considered potentialities.

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