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### A POLYVALENT MEDITERRANEAN, or the trope of nomadism in the literary oeuvre of Igiaba Scego and Abdourahman A. Waberi

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I argue that novelists Igiaba Scego and Abdourahman A. Waberi, building on the work of Nuruddin Farah among others, engage the trope of nomadism so as to propose a pre-colonial imaginary of a Somali polyvalent cosmopolitanism as a possible tool for thinking through our contemporary geographies of Africa, Europe, and the Middle East.

In this article, I conduct an inquiry into the words we use to designate those persons who have left one place for a supposedly more secure economic life in another. With the ever-increasing attention given to what is referred to as the migrant crisis, a term that functions in a co-dependent relationship to the security apparatus whose moniker ‘Fortress Europe’ reveals our ambivalent relationships to “bounded geography” (Hawthorne, 165) and the nation-state paradigm (Bonilla, Wilder), it seems increasingly important to examine contemporary deliberations on nomadism as a critical category of analysis. While the focus of my discussion is Abdourahman A. Waberi’s novel *Aux États-Unis d’Afrique* (2006) and Igiaba Scego’s novel *Adua* (2015), I also read their work alongside Nuruddin Farah’s novelistic work, and more generally what could be described as a Somali ethico-aesthetic<sup>1</sup> imaginary. In so doing, I argue that Scego and Waberi deploy a pre-colonial memory<sup>2</sup> of both the Somali peninsula and the Horn of Africa so as to promote a vision of the future, which is at once realistic and agile. A main through line of this article is to suggest that while neither Scego nor Waberi overtly write about Islam, their work inscribes itself into a space in which social actors are brought together who actively refuse the Huntingtonian theory of ‘clash of civilizations’, crafting a social space that “offers the best hope for a tolerant world” (Fernando, 261).<sup>3</sup> For although the phrase ‘clash of civilizations’ is associated most recently to the late Samuel P.

Huntington, it is generally attributed to Albert Camus's 1946 radio comments about Algeria, wherein the phrase used was "ce ne serait plus un choc d'empires, nous assisterons à un choc de civilisations" (Camus). This statement clearly suggests a cause-effect relationship between colonialism and postcolonialism, whereby the supposed incompatibility between and among cultures originates in the very teleology of the enterprise of empire-making. Moreover, Camus's use of the word 'shock' underscores the notion of surprise, and certainly intensity and even at times violence, but unlike the word 'clash', it does not necessarily entail sustained belligerent confrontation: one can be shocked without entering into battle, yet one cannot clash without entering into violent confrontation.

In focusing on the trope of nomadism in Scego's and Waberi's work, I explore two questions. First, how does nomadism come into play as a critical language that offers potentiality for collective benefit (Sexton, 3), but also runs the risk of promoting a form of exoticism (Miller, 192) that privileges primitivist notions of Africa? Second, how does the conceptual reworking of nomadism in Scego's and Waberi's novelistic œuvre reimagine the geographies and communities of the greater Mediterranean, so as to (further) sensitize their readers into (re)imagining Africa, Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Arab Peninsula as part of a less rigid geography? In examining Scego's and Waberi's work through the prism of nomadism, this article ultimately argues that the two novelists are able to imagine a realistic future, which is neither utopian nor fatalistic. In so doing, in step with the political philosopher Achille Mbembe and the philosopher Édouard Glissant, both Scego and Waberi refuse the paradigm of happiness (as material success) as an end-goal, but instead craft an ethical space that depends on fluidity and opacity (Benedicty-Kokken 2015a, 89-116).

Scego and Waberi have been extremely intentional in their reflections on how the trope of the nomad might lend itself to theorizing a more expansive ethical practice, one which notably understands ethnic, racial, and religious identity categories as overlapping and inextricably linked one to another. Subtly but forcefully, they assert an ethico-aesthetic practice which I argue is clearly anchored in a Somali *Weltanschauung*, one which is itself expansive in its understanding of its geopolitical place. That is, the Somali peninsula has historically and continues to interface with (the idea of) Europe: through Ancient Egypt<sup>4</sup>; through centuries of trade; through late nineteenth and early twentieth century colonialism, in which England, France, and Italy vied for power in Somalia (Samatar, 91); and more recently, through the transnational migrant networks in which Djiboutians and Somalis travel north — and die in

alarming numbers — on their way to mainland Europe.<sup>5</sup> From 2014 to 2015, the online database [Missing Migrants](#) notes a significant shift in the statistics rendered in studies of ‘Deaths by Region of Origin’. Whereas in 2014 the majority of the African migrants who died were from Sub-Saharan Africa, from 2015 to the present, the Horn of Africa constitutes the region of origin of the majority of individuals born in Africa and whose migrant trajectory ends in death. While the trope of nomadism might run the risk of romanticizing the experiences of migration, in what follows I argue that Scego’s and Waberi’s thought offers an alternative way of thinking our geographies by deliberating on nomadism in a *longue durée* approach, one that links the pre-nineteenth century Somali peninsula to a present-day reality of migration.

### **Toward a virtual ‘Somali’ ethico-aesthetics**

The obvious association to the trope of nomadism is Scego’s and Waberi’s, but also Farah’s connection to greater Somaliland, whose lifestyles and relationship to geography and built environment are often described using the dichotomy that opposes pastoralism/nomadism to sedentary culture (Samatar, x), a dichotomy which Scego conscientiously subverts in her novel *Adua* (2015). The three authors span three generations and each composes in primarily one European language. All three also have written in, or make reference to Arabic and Somali. Farah is the oldest, born in Baidoa, Somalia in 1945, which at the time was part of Italian Somaliland, and administered by the British military. He composes mostly in English, although he has also published original works in Somali. Waberi was born in Djibouti City in 1965, colonially part of French Somaliland, later named the French Territory of the Afars and the Issas until independence in 1977, and he writes in French, and also integrates Somali into his prose. For her part, Scego was born in Rome in 1974 and writes in Italian, and most of her work to date privileges a Somali-Italian relationship, notably through narratives that take place in the urban topographies of Mogadishu and Rome, as well as the Somali hinterland.

I suggest that Scego and Waberi purposely deploy the pre-colonial literary and historical legacy of greater Somaliland, so as to think through how their readers may reimagine the vexed relationships between and among world regions. Ultimately, I argue that their deliberations on the concept of nomadism strike a compelling balance between pragmatism, on the one hand, and imagining a better future, on the other. In other words, their novels reflect an awareness of the realities incurred by the nation-state paradigm, whose political mechanisms determine harsh power relations among the communities who have and continue to circulate across national borders. At the same

time, they conscientiously avoid the equally suspicious narratives of a delusional utopia or an alarmist dystopia.

One of the challenges to reading Farah's, Waberi's and Scego's literary production is that to date, in most scholarship, each is read according to the primary language in which he or she publishes: for Farah, in English (although he has also published in Somali); for Waberi, in French; and, for Scego, in Italian. As such, Scego's work is often contextualized as 'migrant literature' or 'postcolonial literature' from Italy; and Waberi's is read as 'francophone', 'postcolonial literature in French', or 'African'. Furthermore, in comparison to the scholarly output published in English, French, or Italian on French, Italian, and/or postcolonial literary aesthetics<sup>6</sup>, there is rather little scholarship on Somali literary aesthetic practices. As the present section suggests, for Farah, Scego, and Waberi, the very choice to make Somali history a major locus of their writing forces present-day readers to take account of how recent history has drastically transformed the international representation of greater Somaliland. Until at least the mid-twentieth century, scholars depicted the Horn of Africa as a cosmopolitan crossroads, which Farah's narrator in *Maps* (1986) describes as having "once formed part of a Mediterranean world of values" (229), a Mediterranean in which the Northern and Southern Mediterraneans were not yet pitted against each other, a topic to which the conclusion of this article shall return.<sup>7</sup>

However, since the 2000s, quite an opposite association has infused surface representations of present-day Somalia as an anarchic country lacking leadership (Farah, Readers Guide to *Maps*, 6), a breeding ground for Islamic fundamentalism. Generally, two paradigms inform a twenty-first century understanding of Somalia: the Cold War's heavy-handed geopolitics which pitted capitalism against communism, and a 'clash of civilizational theory', wherein the most violent clash is and will continue to be between societies that are historically supposedly Judeo-Christian (another troublesome category given the violent history between Christians and Jews over the centuries) and now supposedly secular, on the one hand; and Islamic ones, on the other. Moreover, the aforementioned dynamics have led to representations of Somalia that depict it as a land of disenfranchised citizens who have descended into a violent, terrorist moral destitution as per Ridley Scott's film *Black Hawk Down* (2001) about the 1993 US-American failed military raid whose goal it was to depose Mohamed Farrah Aidid, who remained in power until his death in 1996; or Paul Greengrass's film *Captain Phillips* (2013) also an historical fiction of the 2009 hijacking by Somali pirates of the US-American cargo ship *MV Maersk Alabama*.

Scego's and Waberi's literary projects then are grounded in what I suggest is a narrative practice of articulating the self as related to community, which is informed in part by a pragmatic relationship to the trope of nomadism. In an article on Somali narrative traditions, F. Fiona Moolla suggests that Somali aesthetic history has at some level been conditioned by the realities of a nomadic life: "where for practical reasons portable property is severely limited, greater importance has been attached to oral poetry than to the plastic arts" (438). Interestingly, while not dissonant with Moolla's reading, Waberi's narrator in *Aux États-Unis d'Afrique* subverts the notion that Somalis' aesthetic practice is only oral, asserting that the plastic arts exist in Somali tradition, only their medium is either, or at once, unusual and/or precarious: "Il t'arrive aussi d'écrire et de crayonner sur des supports insolites comme les os longs, les coquilles d'œuf et les carapaces de tortue pour vidanger ta mémoire" (21). An important element of the Somali imaginary is as a "nation of poets" (Laurence, 23) — whereby memory and the complex relationship of especially the novelistic genre to place and sense of self and community is in Farah's words "central to the telling of all stories" (Readers Guide to *Maps*, 12). An essential part of *Aux États-Unis d'Afrique's* reflections on Somali aesthetics is to work through how memory, both an individual's and a community's memory — regardless of whether this memory is preserved in the oral or the written — is at once persistent, but also unstable, and as such malleable. Most importantly, Scego's and Waberi's work illustrates that nomadism is less about whether individuals are mobile or sedentary, or whether their language is preserved on the written page, but instead is defined by how they engage their relationship to space and those people and communities with whom they share — and envisage sharing — their space.

While extremely divergent, a couple of through lines offer insight into how a Somali *Weltanschauung* informs both Scego's and Waberi's writing. Whether it is African Studies scholar Said S. Samatar's research about late nineteenth century Somalia; or, linguist and literary scholar Alamin Mazrui's or performance studies scholar Maggi Philips' extremely opposite readings of Islam in Farah's novels, what is clear is that Somalis' relationship to Islam represents "a rather anomalous case" (Mazrui, 208). For Samatar, the militaristic "rise of the Somali Dervishes" was a direct result of the colonial presence of Europeans. Until the late nineteenth century, the Somali peninsula was largely unaffected by European colonialism.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Samatar argues that it is precisely the nomadic lifestyle of Somalis, which cultivated an interpretation of Islam that led to co-existence and the resolution of conflict among Christians in the Horn of Africa (notably Abyssians) and Muslims (notably

Somalis). It was not until European colonialism violently and abruptly partitioned “their pasturelands into mini-imperial spheres” that Somali herders took on a militaristic and nationalistic stance (92). For his part, Mazrui reads Farah’s literary work as extremely critical of Islam. Mazrui contextualizes Farah’s skepticism as regards Islam in Somalis’ particular relationship to orality. Mazrui writes that within

Muslim Africa, however, Somalia presents a rather anomalous case. Despite their geographical proximity to the Arab world, and centuries of exposure to the Arabo-Islamic culture of literacy, the Somali people have remained passionately attached to the oral heritage. The greatest poetry in Somali literature has been primarily in the oral mode. (Mazrui, 208)

In other words, Mazrui suggests that Somalis’ deep attachment to oral culture, and hence to oral poetry, shapes a specific relationship to the Koran. For her part, Philips argues that it is precisely the oral and embodied practices of Islam that have allowed Somalis to nurture a deeply spiritual understanding of the Koran, one which meditates on the political space of the secular. Philips understands Farah’s novels as offering up an extremely erudite consideration of the holy book, in which the secular is understood as being “of the same substance as the sacred but only containing, as it were, half of what is possible in the totality of the sacred condition”(192).

Whether it is Samatar’s neutral stance as regards Islam, Mazrui’s severe criticism of Farah as “informed by a brand of Eurocentric ideology that has considered Islam as retrograde in its cultural dispensation”(205), or Philips’s reading of Farah’s work as learned Islamic intellectualism, all three scholars suggest that it is the Somali peninsula’s geopolitical relationship as between and among Africa, the Arabian peninsula, and the Mediterranean, which for centuries has led to a particularly fluid relationship to both Islam and to those understood as not Muslim. It is then not surprising that both Scego and Waberi turn to a specific imaginary of Somali philological, historical, and cultural memory to imagine how the polyvalency of the Somali experience might offer an alternative ethical model for thinking through the relationship between and among peoples who circulate across and between Africa, the Americas, Europe, and the Middle East.

To consider then a Somali philosophical imaginary as regards the relations among persons who perceive themselves as not-the-same is more expansively to deliberate on Paul Gilroy’s argument notably in the second chapter of *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005), wherein he proposes that we step away from an idealized notion of cosmopolitanism as unconditional tolerance. For Gilroy,

cosmopolitanism is not necessarily capable of “adopting a more generous and creative view of how human beings might communicate or act in concert across racial, ethnic, or civilizational divisions” (63). Instead, Gilroy calls for our explorations of “another quite different idea of cosmopolitanism” (67), one that is based in part on the absence of “origin and belonging” (69). The question though becomes: what role do nomadism and/or orality play in such an imaginary of Somali cosmopolitanism?

### **Waberi’s ‘nomadisme fertilisant’**

Although Waberi has published literary works whose titles directly address the theme of nomadism<sup>9</sup>, I turn my attention to *Aux États-Unis d’Afrique* because it subtly puts into play what I have argued above is the complex potential of a virtual Somali *Weltanschauung*, a memory which is predicated on the understanding of the polyvalency of Somali social space. Such a memory crafts a future world that purposefully refutes both the nation-state paradigm and what seems to have become its most disconcerting intendant other: namely, the hypothesis that a clash of civilizations between a supposed non-Islamic Global North and an Islamic Global South is inevitable.

The novel imagines a future — neither dystopian nor utopian — in which a young woman Malaïka (nicknamed Maya) is born into the most economically advantageous part of the world, Africa, and embarks upon a multi-year humanitarian journey to an extremely impoverished, degraded Europe to serve as an aid worker. In the novel, the African continent is presented as a privileged nation-state, akin to the present-day United States of America. In the first chapter, the narration inverts real-life prejudicial judgments practiced by Global Northern neocolonialism as regards the Global South. For example, the narrator explains that places such as Auvergne, Tuscany or Flanders are plagued by age-old animosities fueled by “leurs mœurs guerrières, aux coutumes barbares, aux comportements fourbes et incontrôlables” and that “les petits écoliers français, espagnols, bataves ou luxembourgeois” benefit from humanitarian actions from wealthier countries such as Vietnam, North Korea, and Ethiopia (12). For their part, wealthier Africans fear that the infiltration of poorer Europeans from across the Mediterranean and across the northern Atlantic will lead to their material demise (18). Despite the parallels between a contemporary geopolitics and *Aux États-Unis d’Afrique’s* fictional inversion of it, by the second chapter the narration makes clear the novel’s premise to deliberate on an ethical model that offers alternative ways to negotiate the material disparities among the world’s communities. Ultimately, the novel is about Maya’s coming to terms with the fact

that she cannot shed her privilege, nor can she turn a blind eye to the suffering taking place in Europe. The novel recounts her coming-of-age from infancy through her early twenties, in which she comes to understand that the only way to change the material destinies of the world's poor is to transform her own ethical relationship to materiality, but more generally to being-in-the-world. The goal shall be to achieve "la paix", a peace that will come in a "mouvement d'identification, de projection et de compassion, voilà la solution" (150).

However, even though the novel inverts the material circumstances of the actual world with that of a fictional one, it bases its proposal of an alternative ethics-of-being on a purposeful consideration of Somali intellectual history. Maya is born into an erudite, but not wealthy family in one of the wealthiest parts of the superbly wealthy African nation. She is from Asmara, which the narrative designates as the "capitale fédérale" (9). In choosing Asmara, the present-day capital city of Eritrea, as a geographic and philosophical grounding place for his novel, Waberi makes perhaps a rather subtle, but extremely clear decision to situate his narrative in a place whose very name suggests conflict resolution. The etymology of the word Asmara refers to a legend in which four warring tribes found resolution. The collaboration was the result of negotiations of four women, each representing a different tribe ('Asmara'). As such, the name gestures towards the acknowledgement of difference, and even conflict, yet it also imagines that conflict resolution is indeed possible.

Moreover, although Waberi is Djiboutian, he chooses Eritrea as the fulcrum of *Aux États Unis d'Afrique's* action. I suggest that this choice has to do with an active gesture to refute the clash-of-civilizational theory, for in Eritrea, the main religions are both Christianity and Islam, unlike Djibouti and Somalia, where the primary religion is Islam. He then clearly puts forward a space in which Christianity and Islam co-exist perhaps in 'choc' — as per Camus's original iteration of the phrase — but a shock which does not need to be understood as a Huntingtonian 'clash'. Furthermore, while Somali is not an official language of Eritrea, in *Aux États-Unis d'Afrique*, Malaïka/Maya learns to speak Somali through her "vénérable mère, amatrice de musique classique et de philologie somalie" (29). In the diegesis of the novel, Somali occupies a comparable role to Greek or Latin for learned Europeans (19; 143-46), Swahili for South African intellectuals, and Fon or Yoruba for West Africans.

For its part, although the narrative of *Aux États-Unis d'Afrique* flows as if from a single narrator, the narrator's identity remains highly ambivalent.<sup>10</sup> Often, it seems that the narrator may be a certain Doctor Papa who speaks to



Maya, yet from time to time the narrator refers to Doctor Papa in the third person. Although it is plausible that Doctor Papa is Maya's father, the narrative chooses to cultivate ambivalence as regards both the identity of Doctor Papa and his relationship to the narrator/s. All the reader learns about Maya's father is that: he is infrequently present; he is so dedicated to her mother that he ignores his daughter; and, he is a free-wandering soul (20-21). In offering a heroine who does not know her father well, as well as a narrator who withholds information about Maya's father from the reader, *Aux États* offers a blueprint for a future way-of-being-in-the-world that does need an origin story to legitimize itself. In fact, the very fact that Maya is childless and does not envisage childbearing for herself also undermines the importance of genealogy to creating a sense of community (a similar dynamic which takes place in both Farah's *Maps* and Scego's *Adua*).

Moreover, Waberi's use of the second person to bring Maya into being pays homage to Farah's novel *Maps* (1986), which also relies heavily on the second person. That is, the narratives of *Maps* and *Aux États-Unis d'Afrique* address a young protagonist: *Maps'* narrator speaks to Askar, an orphan boy who becomes a young man; and *Aux États-Unis'* narrator/s address the young woman Malaïka. The narrator of *Maps* interrogates Askar's understanding of memory: "Who is to say if you made the right inferences from various things which took place following the revelations?; who is to say if you *now* remember any of the stories told about your mother [...]?" (159). In *Aux États-Unis d'Afrique*, the direct address does not question, but rather uses the second person to listen to her, learning from her, holding her in awe, trying to make sense of what late anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot names "fundamentally new subjects" (94). That is, Malaïka understands the world in such a way that possibly offers both its narrators and its readers a way out of the violence of perceiving otherness as belligerent. For in fact, the very use of the novel's second person conflates Malaïka's subjectivity with the reader's through the use of the second person pronoun, *tu*. Whereas in the very beginning of the novel the direct address employs the formal *vous* to address the reader-who-is-not-Malaïka (and worried about the onslaught of migrants), quite quickly the direct address slips into the informal *tu*, conflating Malaïka's free-indirect discourse as dictated to her by the narrator's with the reader's. As such, the reader is put into a place of possible empathy. At the very least, in the fact that the narrator/s address Malaïka as much as they address the reader, the reader is forced to at least entertain a certain identification with her.

Waberi's narrative choices, which render the relationship among and between the author, the narrator, and the central protagonist ambivalent are

indicative of his very reflection on nomadism as a critical category. *Aux États-Unis d'Afrique* reveals a notion of nomadism as one which nurtures a type of instability, which in turn facilitates "une mobilité mentale" (151). The narrator writes:

Je dois te dire que ta logique et ton enthousiasme m'effraient quelque peu. Pourquoi, Maya, cette faim d'altérité, cette disponibilité constante, cette sensibilité si contraire à l'assurance hautaine de nos intellectuels africains qui ne nourrissent que sarcasmes et rancœur contre leur patrie ? Tu es un cas d'espèce, un être doté d'une mobilité mentale inconnue chez nos clercs figés dans l'orgueil de leur caste et l'immobilisme de leur fonction. Mais toi, tu es vouée à l'errance qui n'est pas déperdition. Tu es douée pour le nomadisme fertilisant, l'habitude du malheur familial et la compassion au malheur des autres. Cette quintessence toute à toi, on ne la retrouve pas au centre de l'empire africain, mais à sa périphérie, colportée par des personnalités amarres comme toi [...]. (151)

The citation although long is indicative of Waberi's longstanding meditation on nomadism as a viable ethos for the contemporary world. Indeed in 2005, a year before the publication of *Aux États-Unis d'Afrique*, Waberi published a short essay titled "Éloge du nomadisme" in which he disclaims any pretense to the romanticization of nomadism. In a sense, it is an 'anti-éloge' of nomadism. Waberi describes nomadism as the arduous process of displacement based on securing one's basic needs, understood to be mostly material needs. With great regret and reluctance, a nomad knows that what awaits her or him elsewhere might conduit into yet other hostile territories. Waberi writes:

les nomades ne font pas dans l'errance, bien au contraire. Ils ne s'ébranlent que dans la nécessité, n'empruntent que des chemins maintes fois éprouvés. Souvent à contre-cœur.  
[...] Alors le nomade dans tout ça ? Il est déjà loin. [...] Nomades transis, avec ou sans caméra, avec ou sans stylo, risquant d'être surpris par le gel des jours sans fin. (2005)

Given the foreboding description of nomadism, one wonders in fact if the 'éloge' that Waberi pays to nomadism in the title of his short essay is meant to quietly acknowledge the gross discrepancy between how the West has Orientalized nomadism and the reality of those whom Waberi clearly designates first as nomads, then as "étonnants voyageurs", then "le touriste", and finally in citing Derek Walcott as "the bitter memory of migration" (see Walcott, 41). Most notably, Waberi's meditation on the hardship of nomadism dialogues actively with philosopher Édouard Glissant's consideration of the experience of the Middle Passage in *Poétique de la Relation* (1990), in which Glissant inter-

rogates the validity of nomadism as a critical category, especially as regards conceptualizing the enslaved, forced migration of the Middle Passage.<sup>11</sup>

Most importantly, Waberi's sequencing of the terms, which leads from the human being nomad to the thingness of migration reflects an intellectual project that explores nomadism from various perspectives: Somali thought; Glissant's philosophical deliberations on it as regards the Middle Passage; and Deleuzian and Guattarian critical theory. In many ways, Waberi's articulations on nomadism resonate with Rosi Braidotti's Deleuzian and Guattarian-inspired reflections on nomadism as "the process of acquiring moral awareness" (361). More recently, in active dialogue with Deleuze, Braidotti has operated the notion of nomadism around an ethical practice that seeks "new forms of thought" (271). Braidotti's tone is almost celebratory, while Waberi's is more reserved; nonetheless, both think through the potentiality of nomadism as an ethical concept for reshaping our relationship to ourselves and to each other in an ever-ailing world. The difference in tone is perhaps related to the memory of nomadism, wherein Braidotti's philological relationship to nomadism is through the rather recent history of Deleuzian and Guattarian critical theory, while Waberi's thought actively invokes a centuries-old philosophical tradition that is grounded in the lived experience of pastoral nomadism as well as in his own understanding of a local Somali nomadism that Christopher Miller terms 'real' (188).<sup>12</sup>

The most notable change however in Waberi's working-through of nomadism as a critical category from his 2005 essay to his narrator/s' reflection on nomadism in the aforementioned passage from *Aux États-Unis d'Afrique* is that the narrative voice, which is meant to reflect back to Maya her own thought on the subject, clearly claims nomadism as an existential basic need. In other words, whether a nomad is forced into dislocation through the basic need to find food and shelter, or whether a nomad is forced into displacement due to the compulsion of the "étonnant voyageur" to seek out otherness, both experiences, at least as per the narrative of the novel, figure as basic needs. Most importantly, *Aux États* does not necessarily present these two as mutually exclusive. At some level, it is as if the goal of Waberi's essay is to work out the varying ways in which nomadism is used metaphorically; whereas the novel's work is to present nomadism as a veritable practice of thinking the world. For Malaïka, or at least in her narrator/s' description of her perspective, our ability to exist in a fluid rapport with those beings that surround us depends on cultivating the precarity of our place in the world.

### **Scego's nomadism as ethical practice**

Scego's *Adua* in a sense takes up where Waberi's *Aux États-Unis d'Afrique* leaves off. She considers the trope of nomadism alongside the notion of migration, wherein both designate experiences of persons who suffer, who never reach their final destination, and even in many cases die, as per the alarming aforementioned Missing Migrants data. Drawing on Régine Michelle Jean-Charles's scholarship on representations of rape in literary productions from the Caribbean and West and Central Africa, I argue that Scego's feat in *Adua* is to shift the focus to the vitality of the body that survives, rather than lingering on the pain of the body that is victimized, which in Jean-Charles's words "provides a critical methodology for understanding the way subjugated bodies self-assign meaning rather than always being caught in a field in which meaning is assigned to them" (3). And in Scego's work, even the dead person survives in memory through embodied practices of dream, mourning, and spirit apparitions. Scego's *Adua*, which recounts the story both of Adua and her father Zoppe, reclaims nomadic theory as a means of rendering the lives of at least four generations of Adua's family relevant for herself and her readers. The four generations are represented by the following protagonists: Adua's younger husband, a Somali migrant who survived his passage into Italy and whom she refers to for most of the novel as 'Titanic', using the pejorative term for migrants who have made it to the northern Mediterranean coasts; herself, a woman who migrated to Italy in the 1970s; her father, who lived in Rome in the years leading up to the Second World War, who returned to Somalia, and was part of a well-educated city-dwelling class<sup>13</sup>, her mother, born into a pastoral family; and her father's father, Hagi Safar, whose identity as city-dweller or herder is irrelevant to the story: what is instead emphasized is that he nurtures an embodied spiritual practice of Islam, which honors visions, dreams, and divinations as a means of knowledge acquisition.

I suggest then that *Adua* carefully reworks the very notion of nomadism as one predicated on much more than the physical actions of movement, wandering, and walking. While these words remain central to the narrative's imagery, the novel's feat is to illustrate how "l'homme bâillonné, mis à genoux et condamné au hurlement se ressaisit de lui-même" (Mbembe, 242), and is in fact she or he who has transformed the trope of nomadism into a veritable ethical practice. *Adua's* narrative resignifies her father's seeming failure as a person — what appears both to Adua and to the reader as his utter demise as a husband, father, and anti-colonial freedom fighter — into a much more complex narrative. If Adua's name signifies victory and virility (for her father named her after the Battle of Adwa fought on 2 March 1896 in which the King-

dom of Ethiopia defeated the Italian colonial power), then her father's name signifies quite the opposite, for his name, Zoppe, in Italian, sounds like *zoppicare*, which literally means 'to limp' or 'to hobble.' *Adua's* formal feat is to interlace the narratives of the father and daughter in such a way that each learns to appreciate each other's equally horrific, but completely divergent experiences of migration.

*Adua* begins by engaging the trope of nomadism in its most stereotypical terms, as it relates to Somali "nomadic pastoral society" (Moolla, 438). For example, Scego's *Adua* puts into play the tension between the city life of Magalo and the pastoral nomadism of its hinterlands. The novel's two first-person narrators are *Adua* and her father Zoppe. Like *Aux États-Unis d'Afrique's* Malaika, *Adua* is also the daughter of a city-dwelling father and hinterlands mother: Zoppe is well educated and lives in Magalo, whereas her mother, who died giving birth to *Adua*, was of a pastoral family. *Adua* is cared for by her mother's family, who work as herders, and live in a thatched hut or *tukul*. In a rather self-consciously Heidi-like storyline, *Adua* describes her move to the city of Magalo (where she is formally educated by her father's family) as an abrupt end to a perfect childhood. Scego, like Farah before her in novels such as *Close Sesame* (1983) and *Maps* (1986), stages the city as the ultimate space to be traversed and mapped out through walking. The novel even brings the exotic trope of the African savanna back into the city, wherein for example Bernini's *Pulcino della Minerva*, the little elephant of Minerva Square in Rome, becomes her principle interlocutor. The novel's initial premise operates the stereotypical Western notion that the nomadic, the primitive, and the pastoral represent some sort of infantile bliss, whereas the supposed fixity of the urban comes to plague the adult human subject with unhappiness.

It is clear that *Adua*, in her mid-fifties to early sixties, who lives in the Rome of the 2000s, is highly engaged in several theories of feminism — notably the various waves of African, Critical Islamic, European, and US-American feminisms. *Adua's* very practice traversing and recounting the space of the city becomes a means of crafting her own feminist — or rather humanist — practice. Her movements across topographical space, but also her father's mental meanderings through time, facilitated by a veritable embodied practice of the spiritual, may be likened to what Olga Solombrino, in quoting Palestinian lawyer and writer Raja Shehadeh, refers to in Arabic as *sarha*, meaning "to roam freely, at will, without restraints", so as to "nourish his soul and rejuvenate himself. But not any excursion would qualify as *sarha*. Going on a *sarha* implies letting go" (1).<sup>14</sup> The subtlety of her practice lies in her

strategic use of travel and wandering as healing practices that pave specific ways-of-being for women to self-actualize at the service of the communities to which they belong.

What is clear throughout Scego's literary œuvre is that walking heals, for walking, as Braidotti points out, is itself a form of narration (10). *Adua* then focuses her theorization on walking, whereby walking also refers to moving language in such a way that it de-pathologizes the experience of "l'homme bâillonné" (Mbembe, 242), what Emma Bond describes as "aligning migration-related discourse with the body" in such a way that it is not reductive (243). That is, even though, Zoppe sees himself as a failed person, both through his physically compromised capacity to walk, and through his inability to negotiate a life that was more clearly anti-colonial, the novel's retelling of Zoppe's story re-operates his story. Through a narrative undergirded by a lexicon of nomadism, *Adua's* multiple narrators are able to reconstruct both *Adua's* and Zoppe's lives as arduously essential journeys, which lead to "peace". Returning to *Aux États-Unis d'Afrique's* narrator/s' deliberations on nomadism:

De tes escapades au bord de la mer Rouge ou dans le ventre du Sahara, tu as ramené un petit carnet aux pages couvertes d'une écriture serrée et tremblante. Ce genre de carnet de moleskine, muni d'un élastique, rendu célèbre par Aimé Césaire, Chéri Samba, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Farid Belkahia et Kateb Yacine, selon les dires du Docteur Papa. Tout comme eux, tu y couches tes impressions, les haillons de tes souvenirs, tes coups de gueule, de griffes ou de blues. De ce voyage à travers les mots et les paysages, tu reviens éreintée mais gagnée par une sérénité à nulle autre pareille. (21)

It is no coincidence then that Scego's and Waberi's novels resonate with Mbembe's words:

Pour construire ce monde qui nous est commun, il faudra restituer à ceux et celles qui ont subi un processus d'abstraction et de chosification dans l'histoire la part d'humanité qui leur a été volée. Dans cette perspective, le concept de réparation, en plus d'être une catégorie économique, renvoie au processus de réassemblage des parts qui ont été amputées, la réparation des liens qui ont été brisés, la relance du jeu de réciprocité sans lequel il ne saurait y avoir de montée en humanité. (261)

## Conclusion

An important element which informs Waberi's and Scego's deliberations on nomadism is their awareness of the Somali experience as shaped by the Somali peninsula's cosmopolitan historical experience, which includes both Arab and European colonialisms, and a particular relationship to African and Islamic spirituality. Literary scholar Donez Xiques argues that "for centuries Somalia

derived great benefit from its geographical situation on trade routes from and to the Mediterranean and the Near East" (8). Waberi's and Scego's novelistic projects then imagine a virtual Somaliland, which understands Somalia as part of a more expansive geography, a cornerstone among continents. In fact, Waberi's and Scego's articulations of Somalia correspond to present-day scholarship's efforts to articulate a contemporary ethical space that seeks to decolonize the Mediterranean (Proglino, ix, 1). For her part, geographer Camilla Hawthorne's scholarship asks her readers to keep present the notion of a "black Mediterranean", which designates the inextricably intertwined experiences of what we understand as our received (and uncritical) understandings as the 'African' as distinct from the 'European' (164). For Hawthorne, the black Mediterranean interrogates a space that is as conscious of Africana and Arab intellectualisms as it is of European thought, asserting that the three experiences are actually one.

Scego's and Waberi's project is in part to re-narrate the story of the Mediterranean, wherein the Mediterranean is to be understood as a crossroads and not as part of Europe (and vice versa), but rather as a space connected to multiple places. In so doing, their novels keep present the complex matrixes that imbricate Christian, Jewish, and Muslim-informed identities one in the other, blurring the lines between our understandings of identity. Moreover, if contemporary conversations about minority discourses parcel out the areas around the Mediterranean according to non-organic national borders and/or identity categories, Scego's and Waberi's narrative project is to purposefully reveal how such categorizations are products of geopolitically imposed identity politics. Their novels not only cultivate a certain slippage amongst categories of identity, but also encourage their readers to become comfortable with such ambivalence.

In our contemporary and future worlds, as depicted in *Adua* and *Aux États-Unis d'Afrique*, the qualities of motherhood — notably nurturing helpless individuals to render them independent and let them go into the world — do not serve to procreate new physically whole human beings. Neither Malaïka nor Adua have birthed children (or at least the storyline does not make it explicit if they have or not). The very fact that *Adua* features a middle-aged woman as its heroine and that both novels present a strong but understated feminist chief protagonist reveals the successful individual as one whose focus is not on genealogy, but on what is called upon at the moment. Adua and Malaïka/Maya are heroines who are pragmatically and generously mercurial, as the name Malaïka suggests, for it means 'angel' in Swahili; yet they are also role models grounded in the translocal realities of today's world, a meaning

captured by the nickname Maya, which refers to the Greek and Roman goddess, mother of Hermes, and also of Buddha. Moreover, 'Maya' is a name whose variations are found across the globe, all with positively connoted meanings related to nurturing. It is this very role of hermeneutic angel, a being connected to reality, but able to theorize contemporary ethics that *Aux États* puts into play in its depiction of its main character. The novels, then, position Adua and Malaïka/Maya as nurturers not of their own biological children, but of a broken humanity. They are in Mireille Rosello's words the crafters of the "reparative in narrative" (1), or in Christian Flaugh's words, those who "re-operate narrative" (22) and as such rethink our very relationships to notions of success and failure (Benedicty-Kokken 2015b, 37).

As such, Adua and Malaïka's/Maya's redeployment of the trope of motherhood serves to mend the broken parts of individuals struggling to make it through, rather than the birthing of new beings. Whether it is Malaïka's dedication to the hopelessly poor migrants who have flocked to Asmara, or Adua's rehabilitation and letting go of her young Somali husband, one of the few migrants to make it not just to the coasts of the southern Mediterranean, but also to and through Italy, Waberi's and Scego's novels are about imagining an alternative ethical system. For some readers, such an ethos resonates with Philips's reading of Islamic secularism in Farah's work; for others, such as Glissant, such an ethos corresponds to age-old ways of dealing with migration and slavery; and still for others, such as Braidotti or Trouillot, it is 'new'. Subtly but actively, Scego and Waberi link their narrative practice to an imagined memory space of Somalia as imbued by a specific cosmopolitanism, emblematic of what it means to live with and alongside difference, without systematically assuming that such a 'shock' must be performed as a 'clash'. Their narrative project then seeks like Farah's not just to repair the relationships among the peoples of the Horn of Africa, but also among the peoples in a supposedly Global North/Global South relationship. Moreover, Scego's and Waberi's ethico-aesthetic project is an integral part and parcel of what Olivier Kramersch refers to as "border activist subjectivity", wherein "'activism' and 'theory' [are] *inextricably bound at the very heart of the most intense activist engagement*" (186). That is, Scego's and Waberi's literary project is essential to the recrafting of our physical, mental, and ethical geographies, so that we may begin to approach Hawthorne's and Kramersch's call for boundless geography.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The notion of aesthetics is inextricably linked to ethics, whereby ethics designates how as individuals we take on our ontological rapport to the world, which includes how we imagine our relationship to our own communities and those we imagine as different to ourselves.

<sup>2</sup> I draw on Michael Rothberg's scholarship on memory, which privileges the "dimension of imagination involved in acts of remembrance" (19).

<sup>3</sup> Fernando (2014) argues that Muslim French youth have and are reimagining French *laïcité* in such a way that does not undermine French Republicanism while all the way pragmatically working out paths of inclusivity for citizens who self-identify as Muslim. Moreover, as Leigh and Ahdar argue, secularism itself must learn to be tolerant of religious thinking (1070).

<sup>4</sup> I make the connection between Somali trading with Ancient Egypt and the idea of Europe through the chauvinism of civilizational theoretical models, which have classified groups of people hierarchically based on which societies constituted 'great civilizations'. Somalis traded with Ancient Egyptians notably during the reign of Hatshepsut.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that a comparison between the [Missing Migrants Project](#) data on 'Deaths of migrants recorded in the Mediterranean', versus 'in Africa' suggests that the majority of Horn of African migrants die before arriving on the coasts of the Mediterranean.

<sup>6</sup> I use the term literary aesthetics to refer to both so-called 'oral' and 'written' traditions. For a longer discussion of Glissant's considerations of how the notion of orality and the written constitute a false binary, see Benedicty-Kokken 2015b (34).

<sup>7</sup> The scene describes Uncle Hilaal's lesson as regards geography and the role of mapmaking in introducing "numerous distortions", and particularly Somalia's place among continents (229).

<sup>8</sup> Samatar explains that the "initial impact of European colonialism on the Somalis was mild compared to that of Menelik's Ethiopia, an inland power whose periodic raids of livestock frequently despoiled the Ogaadeen Somalis. The Dervish resistance movement [at the end of the nineteenth century], it will be argued shortly, was largely a Somali response to these raids" (92). For the particular motivations of Britain, France, and Italy in Somalia at this time, see Samatar (91).

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion on nomadism in Waberi's previous novel *Transit* (2003), see Treacy. See bibliography for Waberi's other works whose title includes the word 'nomad'. Also, for nomadism in Glissant's work, see Stevens.

<sup>10</sup> Moreover, some of the chapter titles designate the narrator as "l'auteur" (i.e. Chapter 1) and other chapter titles identify the narrator as the first person collective pronoun "nous" (11) and still others are purely descriptive (i.e. Chapter 29).

<sup>11</sup> Waberi actively thinks alongside Glissant, for example, in *Aux États-Unis Malaïka* runs "à perdre haleine le long du mémorial Édouard-Glissant" (84).

<sup>12</sup> In a meticulous reading of Deleuze and Guattari's references to supposedly 'real' nomads – i.e. "the Hopi or the Crow" (188) or "leopard-man societies" (193), Miller exhaustively illustrates how Deleuze and Guattari uncritically use outdated scholarship about the African continent to build a theory of a new human way-of-being.

<sup>13</sup> The city in which Adua grew up with her father is called Magalo, which is the word for 'city' or 'cosmopolitan' in Somali.

<sup>14</sup> Milton Cowan's *Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (4<sup>th</sup> edition, 1979) attributes the definition "to roam" to the three letter root *šarada* and not *šaraḥa*. *Šaraḥa* instead refers to the verb that means "to open, lay open [...] one's heart".

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