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'Les lendemains de révolution avortée': Nathalie Etoke's bipolar narratives of doomed national romance

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Nathalie Etoke's novels *Un amour sans papiers* (1999) and *Je vois du soleil dans tes yeux* (2008) deal with the hardships of the African postcolonial condition in the global era through the trope of doomed romance. In these novels, the plight of the postcolonial nation-state drives people to emigrate in a search for more viable prospects. While the mobility theme addressed in her novels is typical of third-generation African literatures in general, Etoke's vision simultaneously struggles against the postnationalist currents informing this literary paradigm. Indeed, Etoke's novels are quite loud and didactic in their articulations of political commitment towards the nation and the continent. Etoke holds on to the anticolonial romance narrative, but at the same time cannot ignore its inevitable failures in the present. This leads to a tension that marks her work by giving it a bipolar character, one that manifests itself in the constant oscillation between utopianism and disillusionment. The bipolar quality of the texts betrays a discomfort that the narratives' promotion of an anticolonial struggle for nationhood and decolonisation generate in a postcolonial era that keeps witnessing the failures of these romantic discourses to realise themselves. A close reading of the novels reveals that this discomfort finds its articulation in the narrative fabric of the texts. **Keywords:** anticolonial romance narrative, bipolar narratives, Nathalie Etoke, postcolonial condition.

Compared to what has typified preceding writerly generations, nationhood is no longer the axiomatic centre around which the meanings of contemporary African authors' texts circulate. This shift from nation-related themes to more global approaches results from the transnationalisation of the African literary enterprise, but also from the fact that in many places, postcolonial African nationhood has eschewed its liberatory promises and lost its credibility as a narrative of vindication, as David Scott (*Conscripts* 29) expresses it:

Today nation [...] do[es] not name visionary horizons of new beginnings any of us can look toward as though they were fresh thresholds of aspiration and achievement to be fought for and progressively arrived at; to the contrary, they name forms of existing social and political reality whose normative limits we now live as the tangible ruins of our present, the congealing context of our postcolonial time.

Yet, it is interesting that despite this loss of credibility, there is currently a trend in which nationhood persists on the agenda of diasporic African women authors, as Ayo

A. Coly and Annie Gagiano observe in their respective analyses of contemporary African Franco- and Anglophone literary contexts. According to Gagiano, for writers such as Sefi Atta, Aminatta Forna and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “[t]he nation is neither romanticised nor sentimentalised, but it is nevertheless acknowledged as an ongoing emotional as well as cultural-political presence in the authorial imagination” (47). In a similar vein, Coly maintains that for Ken Bugul, Calixthe Beyala, and Fatou Diome, “the postcolonial nation [is] an important locus of identification” that continues to have “political, ideological, and emotional appeal” (125). In this sense, the trend stands in opposition to the postnational turn that informs postcolonial theoretical discussions in a profound manner. The Cameroonian diasporic writer, Nathalie Etoke, is also part of this tendency. Etoke, currently living in the USA where she is pursuing an academic career, has published two novels, *Un amour sans papiers* (1999) and *Je vois du soleil dans tes yeux* (2008). Both novels are marked by the processes of globalisation where the increased travel of people, ideas and goods connect the African continent more closely to the rest of the world. The texts address the issue of (e)migration from an angle that illuminates the reasons and the challenges of becoming/being an African mobile subject. Yet, her works simultaneously convey the idea that despite its failures, the postcolonial nation remains an attractive site of affiliation and hope.

Papiers and *Soleil* could be described as romance narratives. This said, there is a certain uneasy twist in Etoke’s romances: they are invested with a tragic essence that eventually dooms the budding romances to failure. The aspect of romance, as I posit, is not limited to the romantic relationship between the protagonists and their lovers, but can also be read as an allegory to Etoke’s way of holding desperately onto the vindictive narrative of nationhood that has lost its credibility in the postcolonial era. As David Scott argues, the romance mode is typical to anticolonial imaginaries—a narrative of resistance and vindication, “that link[s] past, present, and future in a steady rhythm of progressive [...] redemption” (“Tragic” 799). While Etoke holds on to the anticolonial romance narrative, she cannot ignore its inevitable failures in the present. This leads to a tension that marks her work by giving it a character that I would call ‘bipolar’. To define Etoke’s work as bipolar means that is constructed, so to speak, on the seemingly contradictory dialectic of melancholia and mania that manifests itself in the constant oscillation between disillusionment and utopianism.

Etoke’s novels give articulation to an anti-emigration discourse. While her texts are concerned with the question of (e)migration in the Afro-European contexts of mobility, they promote a strong sense of the “potential of the local” also articulated in the work of the diasporic Senegalese writer Fatou Diome (see Thomas 259; Toivanen). Etoke’s anti-emigration discourse culminates in her novels in the form of the protagonists’ returns to the African continent after living in France. Another

feature that marks Etoke's narratives in a pervasive manner is her excessive emphasis on African suffering. Indeed, Etoke's novels are so overwhelmed with portrayals of postcolonial African predicament that it would be very difficult to name a problem that would not figure in her texts. HIV/AIDS, transnational sex trafficking, domestic violence, deportations of illegal immigrants, alcoholism, bad governance, authoritarian rule, child soldiers, and famine are all mentioned in her texts—most often only superficially—forcing the reader to ask herself what the function of such an excessive display of suffering is.

Etoke has adopted the idea of political engagement in such a pronounced manner that she seems to become an author who “n'a plus qu'à attendre la prochaine calamité sur son continent [africain] pour commencer un livre dans lequel il (sic) blâmera plus qu'il n'écrira” (only has to wait for the next calamity on the [African] continent to write a book in which he (sic) criticises more than he writes), as the Congolese diasporic writer, Alain Mabanckou, aptly notes in his critical discussion on the obligation to political commitment (self-)imposed on African authors (see 76–7). Indeed, in terms of aesthetics, one must acknowledge that Etoke's work is far from being complex or accomplished. The narrative voice often takes on a didactic tone and the literary means used are, at times, of a particular clumsiness. For instance, *Je vois du soleil dans tes yeux* is rather tiring to read because of the long citations of music lyrics and name lists of important black historical figures that consolidate the spirit of revolt the narrative wishes to convey. Yet, despite the limited aesthetic means, the recurring trope of doomed romance as well as the author's use of excessive imagery of suffering are features that merit critical attention. The trope of doomed romance is symptomatic of the tension that informs the position of an overtly politically committed African writer in an era that has witnessed the failure of anticolonial nationalist projects. The narrative excess of African suffering, on the other hand, is an interesting feature in the sense that it betrays the complexities of the position of a committed African diasporic author, who, while living outside Africa, is concerned about the future of her continent of origin by positioning herself as its loud mouthpiece. In this setting, it is the strong anti-emigration discourse conveyed by Etoke's works that is particularly strained.

Un amour sans papiers is Etoke's debut novel, published by the Parisian publisher Cultures croisées. The topic of the novel, as the title itself suggests, is illegal immigration and the precarious situations of paperless African immigrants in France. As also suggested by the title, *Papiers* is essentially a romance novel. Malaïka, the novel's young protagonist, has left her native Cameroon in order to pursue studies in France, where she falls in love with Salif, a Malian man of modest background residing in France illegally—a condition he tries to hide from Malaïka. While most of the events take place in the diasporic space, the home country and the African continent in general are frequently evoked through the discussions that the

protagonist has with different interlocutors. The narrative tone in these dialogues is didactic: they seem to cite all the possible problems that can be associated with the African continent in a somewhat stereotypical manner. Through these dialogues, the narrative paints not only a picture of a committed and hopeful generation of young diasporic Africans, but also one of a clichéd, suffering Africa: a literary equivalent to the biased visual representations circulated by average Western media. While the subject of these passionate dialogues is the critical state of the interlocutors' home country (in this case, Cameroon), one kind of pan-African approach is also articulated. The protagonist asks herself whether "l'Afrique s'en sortira un jour..." (14) (Africa will make it one day), and sees empowering potential in the solidarity expressed by her African friends hailing from different parts of the continent.

By resorting to clichéd imagery of a dysfunctional Africa, however, the elaboration of a postcolonial pan-African consciousness is compromised and results in a rather poorly executed effort that hardly convinces the reader—or, effectively, the characters themselves. This disbelief is captured in a passage in which the protagonist first talks about the pan-African expressions of solidarity she observes in her own environment, and then suddenly becomes overwhelmed by nightmarish images of the Rwandan genocide (39–40). For a moment, the narrative almost seems to be feasting on the atrocious genocide imagery, reflecting the images that the narrator has seen on TV, the "voyeurisme médiatique" (40) (voyeurism of the media) that she criticises. Yet, by scrupulously reproducing these images verbally, the narrative ends up consolidating the very stance it is supposed to criticise. Moreover, by referring to the events in Rwanda in a novel that is not really about the catastrophe, the narrative equates the entire continent with genocide and simultaneously reduces Rwanda to "a metaphor for postcolonial violence" (Mamdani xi). "Je me croyais dans un film américain de série B" (49) (I thought I was in a B-class American movie), maintains the narrator when commenting on a scene in which one of her African friends is found dead with a drug syringe in his arm and a gun in his other hand. Yet, these words can also be read as an unwitting meta-commentary on the novels' ways of resorting to an excessive imagery of violence and suffering.

In *Soleil*, a similarly awkward pattern of criticism that turns against itself is repeated. While the narrative seems to be making a list of all potential African predicaments, the narrator criticises "cette image médiatique et racoleuse de l'Afrique misérable, l'Afrique affamée, l'Afrique à l'agonie" (169) (this mediatised and sensationalist image of a miserable, starving and dying Africa). This contradiction points to the fact that the narrative calls into question its own excessive display of suffering. A similar instance of (unwitting) self-critique also features earlier in *Soleil* when the narrative starts to comment on the excess of misery it produces: "Famille nombreuse. Études abandonnées. La rue à vingt ans. Ma meilleure amie morte du Sida. Mon homme emprisonné je ne sais où. Le Congo à feu et à sang. Guerre à

Soudan. Guerre en Côte d'Ivoire [sic]. Famine au Niger. [...] Bla-bla-bla". (131) (Big family. Abandoned studies. On the street at 20. My best friend dead of AIDS. My man imprisoned I don't know where. Congo on fire and bleeding. War in Sudan. War in the Ivory Coast. Famine in Niger. [...] Blah-blah-blah.)

The "blah-blah-blah" at the end of the passage can be read as a signal of the narrative's weariness towards its own loud and utopian agenda, adding in this way to the bipolar overall effect of the novel. Moreover, the "blah-blah-blah" in a context that cites both personal and collective tragedies marked by the constant threat of dying ends up banalising death. In an article focusing on the baroque practices in Achille Mbembe's theory on the postcolony, Isaac V. Joslin (642) argues that Mbembe associates the postcolony with an "economy of death that trivializes human life but contrastingly allows for the experience of pleasure". He goes on: "Since death no longer resides in the domain of fear and the unknown, it can be fully experienced and collectively celebrated as the final release of life's tensions to which the minor deaths of day-to-day strife serve as a preamble" (Joslin 643).

In light of the above quote from *Soleil*, it seems to be exactly to this sort of baroque practice that the excessive imagery of African predicament in the novel unwittingly leads. Generally speaking, the constant display of a conflict of opposing forces, in addition to a certain inclination to theatricals, in Etoke's work could actually be conceived in terms of postcolonial baroque aesthetics.

In *Papiers*, the protagonist's state of mind oscillates constantly between hopefulness and desperation. She feels that she carries in herself "les stigmates de la souffrance de mon continent" (40) (the stigmas of my continent's sufferance), but then, in the very next sentence, she is infused with a "flamme de l'espérance" (40) (flame of hope) that restores her belief in Africa's future. This example of the oscillation between hope and despair is by no means unique in the text: the oscillation marks the entire narrative, giving to it a bipolar overall effect in terms of mania and melancholia. While melancholia, in its critical awareness of the undeniable burden of the errors committed in the past, is an attitude that informs the field of postcolonial studies in a profound way, as Ranjana Khanna has argued, the manic side in Etoke's vision pertains to her simultaneous adherence to the anticolonial paradigm that promotes the ideas of overcoming and newness. In other words, Etoke's narrative seems to be constantly struggling with the contradictory discourses of anticolonial utopianism and postcolonial disillusionment, the latter often taking the form of Afropessimism. The discourse of Afropessimism sees the African continent as inevitably doomed to failure in political, economic, cultural, and medical terms (Schmidt and Garret 423). As Boulou Ebenda de B'béri and P. Eric Louw (335) maintain, there are different levels in Afropessimism, ranging from rejection of the concept as an unjustified Western construct to perspectives that see the notion as fully justified. Furthermore, de B'béri and Louw (337, 339) argue that Afropessimism is not simply a discourse,

but a state of mind according to which the continent is perceived as a lost cause not only in the eyes of the rest of the world, but also by Africans themselves, especially youths aspiring to emigrate.

Closely related to Afropessimism, it is significant that African "modes of self-writing," as Achille Mbembe expresses it, are essentially marked by the historical processes of slavery, colonialism and apartheid (241). This history also plays an important role in such Afropessimism that sees the continent as an eternal victim of circumstances; Mbembe calls this a cult or pathos of victimisation (243–4, 263). This paradigm of victimisation conceives African history as "essentially governed by forces beyond Africans' control," and the African as "a castrated subject, the passive instrument of the Other's enjoyment" (Mbembe 251, 252). While the authorial vision in *Papiers* explicitly stresses the romantic narrative of vindication and overcoming of such objectification, it is simultaneously disturbed by a disbelief that undermines these utopian aspirations and conceives the African subject as a mere victim without agency. This discrepancy can be observed both in the protagonist's rapid mood changes and in the novel's representations of the generational gap between the youth and the elders. This is illustrated in a discussion that the protagonist has with her uncle, the uncle maintaining that "l'Afrique ne s'en sortira jamais" (53) (Africa will never make it), condemning Malaïka and her like as "des brebis égarées par un idéalisme aveugle et suicidaire" (54) (lost sheep with blind and suicidal idealism). This tension gives voice to the idea that while the narrative of anti-colonial struggle is an exhausted one (Mbembe 263; Scott, *Conscripts* 57), it is a romance that continues to have some allure and currency in the context of diasporic African writing.

When reading Malaïka's and Salif's doomed romance allegorically, one notes that their favourite subject of discussion throughout the relationship is the future of the African continent. In its description of the first encounter of the future couple in a night club, the narrative voice adopts a didactic register in its portrayal of the topics they discuss, resulting, yet again, in a rather grinding list of the problems that the African continent faces in the postcolonial era. The passage culminates in a clumsy transition when the couple suddenly find themselves slow dancing to a romantic hit song by an African-American pop artist. When the song, which has taken the protagonist "sur une autre planète" (22) (to another planet), eventually ends, she feels that "[s]on rêve se brisait" (22) (her dream crashed), which is again symptomatic of the dialectics of utopia and disillusionment so central in the novel. Eventually, the couple starts to nurture hopes about a return to Africa, Salif filling Malaïka's head with dreams of "un mouvement révolutionnaire panafricain" (43) (a pan-African revolutionary movement), and elevating her to the position of an "Amazone des temps modernes [...], Jeanne d'Arc, la Marianne des Etats-Unis d'Afrique" (43–4) (Amazon of modern times [...], Jeanne d'Arc and the Marianne of the United States of Africa). What is noteworthy in these utopian imaginings is their gender-specific

nature: Malaïka's role in the struggle is merely symbolic. Indeed, when she is not with Salif, she feels desperate and without agency, "retombé[e] dans un univers infernal" (44) (falling again in an infernal world), and is unable to imagine utopian futures. This is a feature that marks the narrative of *Soleil* as well: both female protagonists become involved in the struggle for a political cause through their lovers, while their own roles remain those of mere bystanders and of a symbolic nature. In this sense, the novels replicate the gendered patterns of nation-building processes by relegating women to the margins (see Boehmer, *Stories* 3–4). Together the couple starts to fight the shameful conditions to which illegal African immigrants are subjected in France. The struggle bears no fruit, as the hunger strike they launch does not have the desired effect. After the widely mediatised hunger strike, Salif's illegal condition is no longer a secret, and his sudden disappearance surprises no one except the protagonist, who is unconvincingly unaware of the eventuality that Salif may have been deported. The trope of doomed romance surfaces again in this context. There is a rather sententious scene in which Malaïka becomes hysterical, lying on the ground and screaming repeatedly on the verge of a nervous breakdown, "Salif revient" (97) (Salif comes back), which is illustrative of the text's desperate belief in the anti-colonial romance narrative of utopian futures. Interestingly, towards the end of the novel, the belief in this romance narrative is put to the test. Just before the deportation, Salif starts to drink to heal his frustration over losing his job. When he hits Malaïka, the romance becomes truly endangered. The crisis, however, is quickly overcome and the couple has a romantic candlelight dinner, with Salif promising to marry Malaïka and to take her to his native Mali. Faithful to the novel's vision, the climax of the romantic evening is the couple's discussion of the African predicament instead of sex; in effect, Salif wants to abstain until they are married. From an allegorical standpoint, it is significant that the romance never reaches its consummation.

The novel ends with Salif's sentimental letter to Malaïka, in which he explains the reasons for his sudden disappearance. After the deportation, the figure of Salif becomes the vehicle for Etoke's anti-emigration and nationalist aspirations. "Restons chez nous et développons notre terre" (109) (Let's stay and develop our country), he states in his letter, also referring to a public speech given by the president of the republic to support his message. This anti-emigration discourse rises from the fact that Salif has been rejected and humiliated in France. As Achille Mbembe observes, to fight against a denigrated self-perception by disconnecting oneself from the world has often been a redemptive strategy in the politics of Africanity promoting "the mad dream of a world without Others" (252). In this sense, the narrative performs a gesture that has a parochial element to it. "J'étais au cœur d'une place africaine cosmopolite" (65) (I was in the middle of a cosmopolitan African space), observed the narrator earlier while discovering the abandoned house inhabited by illegal African immigrants; however, there is actually nothing cosmopolitan in *Papiers*. Rather, the

narrative turns inward towards itself, nationhood and Africanness and shuts the door on the world outside in its effort to “fight erasure” that condemns Africanness to a mere negative opposite of Europe/the West (see Eze 236). The ending of the novel supports this reading. The protagonist, after completing her studies, returns to her home country, and while her enthusiasm and sense of revolt are put to the test by the hard realities she faces, the last words of the novel swing the balance once more from disillusionment to utopian idealism: “Malaïka, garde la foi. Tout est à reconstruire” (115) (Malaïka, keep the faith. Everything is to be rebuilt).

Je vois du soleil dans tes yeux was published nine years after the debut novel, but it is a mere variation on the theme addressed in *Papiers* with a slightly stronger emphasis on anti-emigration discourse. This focus is due to the setting of the novel: the events take place mostly in an imagined African postcolony named Koumkana, although the diasporic dimension is also addressed in terms of the characters’ aspirations to emigrate and, ultimately, the protagonist’s short stay in France. Just as in *Papiers*, the protagonist of *Soleil* is a young woman. Unlike Malaïka, however, Wéli is from a poor family, and her only way out of “le royaume de la misère” (13) (kingdom of misery) would be to marry a *blanc* and flee the country. The degrading condition of the home country—and, Africa in general, as Etoke has the tendency to lump individual nations and the whole continent together—finds its embodiment in the prostitute trope. In order to support her poor and abusive parents, Wéli resorts to prostitution, her best friend, Val, serving as an example. Prostitution, as Val describes it, is the only imaginable way to reach happiness, which, in the novel’s context, refers to a consumerist lifestyle in the diaspora. It is noteworthy that Wéli’s first client—and the man who takes her virginity—is a white Frenchman. In this sense, the narrative casts Wéli as the symbol of contemporary postcolonial Africa, subject to neo-colonial operations and tempted by the consumerist lures of globalisation. As suggested by the narrative, these processes cause the continent to lose the ability to recognise its “true” self: “J’ai l’impression d’être une autre” (26) (I feel that I am someone else), as Wéli admits after her first night as a prostitute. In short, the novel paints a picture of a continent that has lost its dignity and belief in better futures. Resorting to prostitution can also be read as synonymous to the cynicism promoted by Afropessimism. Yet, this cynical, partly self-chosen disillusioned approach is represented as indefensible and harmful, as symbolised by Val’s death from AIDS later in the novel.

In effect, the very beginning of the novel is imbued with Afropessimism. Yet, just as in *Papiers*, the trope of doomed romance structures the narrative of *Soleil* as well. Here, the romance with the “lost continent” becomes actualised when the protagonist meets Jean-Marc aka Ruben, a rebel son of a corrupt minister. The name “Ruben” obviously alludes to Ruben Um Nyobé, the Cameroonian hero of anticolonial struggle—a detail that is symptomatic of the narrative’s yearning for a resistance narrative from the past. Unable to pursue academic studies or to find a

job, Wéli has already seen her own hopes of a better future dashed. So, when she suddenly comes across to Jean-Marc/Ruben and his harangues in the middle of her "white male hunt," her disillusionment turns into a utopianism that, as suggested by the ending of the novel, is every bit as hopeless.

The hopeless struggle for a "new Africa" in which the female protagonist of *Soleil* is engaged has gender-specific features. Like Malaïka in *Papiers*, Wéli becomes involved in political activities through her lover. She stops prostituting herself only once she meets Jean-Marc/Ruben, who fights against "l'Afrique prostituée" (77) (prostituted Africa). With his passionate speeches—initially considered by Wéli as mere hallucinations—Jean-Marc/Ruben charms her, promising her a position similar to that of the wives of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, or, even better, associating her with Harriet Tubman, the Afro-American abolitionist who saved hundreds of slaves from slavery. Wéli considers Jean-Marc/Ruben her saviour, and her love for him increases in synchrony with her love for the nation so that she is ready to renounce the white male hunt that would eventually help her in her aspiration to emigrate.

As is *Papiers*, *Soleil* is marked by melodramatic narrative twists and excesses. These lend the text a bipolar overall effect that betrays an uneasiness related to the loss of credibility of anti-colonial politics in a period that has witnessed the failures of postcolonial national projects and that is, consequently, profoundly touched by an affect of postcolonial melancholia. From this viewpoint, it is interesting that Etoke has published a study on what she calls "melancholia africana"—a condition which springs from the history of slavery, colonisation and "postcolonisation" that has affected black Africans in a profound manner (28). According to Etoke, these historical tragedies have bequeathed a heritage of loss (28) that marks the self-image and relation to the world of Sub-Saharan Africans and their descendants. In Etoke's hands, the notion of melancholia becomes so thoroughly revised that the element of pathology with which Freud initially invested the concept is evaded in a rather straightforward manner. For Etoke, *melancholia africana* is therapeutic instead; it is a form of resistance that enables African melancholic subjects to "move beyond the depressive conditions generated by founding violence" (29)—a form of existence where "everything is possible when starting from nothing" (31; translations mine). By investing the concept of melancholia with such empowering capacities, Etoke seems to lose hold of the subtle self-criticism that obliges one to remain alert against any overly facile "declaration of newness in the world" (Khanna 2006).

It is symptomatic of Etoke's optimistic revision of the concept of melancholia that in both her novels, the characters insist on an attempt to construct "une autre Afrique [...], [u]ne Afrique meilleure, une Afrique nouvelle, une Afrique différente" (*Soleil* 83) (another Africa, better Africa, new Africa, different Africa). They do this regardless of the obvious obstacles they stumble upon and the discouraging attitudes of the previous generations who have witnessed the rise and fall of the anti-colonial struggle

and national projects and who are almost ready to welcome back the colonisers in order to save their country—a form of Afropessimism of its own. In this sense, while the narrative acknowledges the failures of the anticolonial struggle, it simultaneously keeps turning to the liberatory promises of this very resistance discourse. As a consequence, the doomed, unconvincing romantic substance of the anticolonial resistance narrative is kept alive in a cumbersome, zombie-ish manner. This zombie existence finds its embodiment in the figure of Jean-Marc/Ruben, who, after being subjected to torture by his father's security services, loses his intellectual faculties and walks around naked, playing his guitar with bleeding fingers, singing Bob Marley's "Zimbabwe." The zombie image captures the essence of Etoke's novels' narrative attitude towards anticolonial struggle in a context that bears witness to the failures of the postcolonial national projects. Indeed, it is not so much the immaterial "specter of the nation" that, according to Imre Szeman, continues to haunt the "postcolonial problematic" (18) that manifests itself in Etoke's work, but rather a very material and messy, living-dead sort of refusal to let go of an ideal that is no longer entirely liveable. The novel's almost sententious and excessive ending where Wéli undresses herself and joins Jean-Marc/Ruben in his "madness" represents a rather bleak culmination to the failed romance narrative, signalling a tragically uncompromising way of clinging tenaciously to a lost cause.

"[L]es lumières du passé éclairent l'avenir" (97) (the lights of the past illuminate the future), argues Jean-Marc/Ruben in one of his speeches. While postcolonial revisions of the concept of melancholia have often emphasised the fact that melancholia's uneasy relation to loss and the past should teach us lessons about ethics (see Khanna; Gilroy), in Etoke's work the past is not scrutinised through the critical lenses of melancholia. Instead, this is done in a manner that pathologically wants to deny the loss of an ideal and refuses to see that "the futures anticipated by the past are now themselves a part of the past," as David Scott puts it in his article discussing the tragic essence of postcolonialism ("Tragic" 799). Etoke's work refuses to acknowledge the fact that the lights of the past are not the ones that will take us towards a brighter future—simply because they have already dimmed. Interestingly enough, at one moment the protagonist of *Soleil* articulates the idea that the time of the struggle they want to be engaged in may have passed. Wéli says:

J'aurai dû naître en 1940. J'aurai eu 20 ans en 1960, 30 en 1970. Et j'aurai tout fait pour disparaître avant les années 80. J'aurai vécu dans une ère où l'on croyait en de meilleurs lendemains. On n'avait pas peur de rêver les yeux ouverts. Le rêve était condamné à devenir réalité. (130)

(I should have been born in 1940. I would have been 20 years old in 1960, and 30 in 1970. And I would have done anything to disappear before the 1980s. I would have lived in an era when people believed in better tomorrows. One was not afraid of dreaming eyes wide open. The dream was condemned to become true.)

This moment of realisation is only transitory, as almost in the very next passage the protagonist exclaims to her cousin Rita, who suggests that Wéli should adopt a more humble attitude towards errors made in the past, "Tirer les leçons de ses échecs, n'importe quoi!" (134) (To learn from one's mistakes; nonsense!)

In terms of the politics of engagement, the position of a diasporic postcolonial writer is a complex one. Diasporic literature has often been criticised for being "a literature without loyalties, lacking the regional and local affiliations which are deemed so necessary at a time of mass globalization," as Elleke Boehmer suggests, and goes on to question the meaning of diasporic writing for the people who actually live in the "scenes of Third World confusion represented [in diasporic fiction]" (*Colonial* 232–3). At the same time, it must be acknowledged that a narrow view of diasporic/migrant literature as a field that "celebrates a national or historical rootlessness" (Boehmer, *Colonial* 233) simply does not hold true, as Boehmer herself admits in the afterword of the second edition of *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (250–2). Etoke's work, while belonging to the category of diasporic writing, certainly does not lack for expressions of political commitment. On the contrary, the commitment is present in such a loud and excessive manner that it may actually be taken for an expression of unease due to the contradiction between her pronounced anti-emigration message and her own writerly location outside the continent.

Both of Etoke's novels, then, vacillate between romantic resistance narratives and Afropessimism in a way that gives the texts a bipolar character. The trope of doomed romance is particularly pertinent to how Etoke's novels oscillate between utopianism and disillusionment. In both *Un amour sans papiers* and *Je vois du soleil dans tes yeux*, the romance narrative fails, and there is a final element in this failure, since the protagonists' lovers are both, so to speak, the only "soul mates" after whom there is no hope for another true love. What is also noteworthy is that in both novels, the loved one suddenly disappears—in *Papiers*, Salif is deported and in *Soleil*, Jean-Marc/Ruben is taken into captivity by the national security services—an event which marks a definitive turning point in the romance narrative. Moreover, both lovers eventually move out of reach of the female protagonist: the deported Salif marries another woman and Jean-Marc/Ruben goes mad. This element of finality is emblematic of how the narrative holds on to a lost cause, heedless of the *cul-de-sac* condition the fight for the cause generates. In my reading of the two novels, I have suggested that the bipolar quality of the texts betrays a discomfort that the promotion of an anticolonial struggle for nationhood and decolonisation generates in a postcolonial era that continues to witness the failures of these romantic discourses to realise themselves. A close-reading of the novels reveals that this discomfort finds its articulation in the narrative fabric of the texts. The novels engage in struggles whose causes seem to be lost for decades, and they strive towards futures that have been postponed for so long that they do not seem to have any credibility left in the present.

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