Nomadic Paths to Modes of Being and Ways of Cosmopolitan Becoming in La littérature-Monde : Youssouf Amine Elalamy’s Amour Nomade (2013)

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1. As in most developing countries, literature offers a barometer for socio-cultural change and a way to document social issues and the sometimes socio-political “schizophrenia” of nations on the fast-track of globalization. Since 1999, Morocco has witnessed huge socio-political transitions which have influenced democratic reform.

2. Encouraged by increased transparency, promoted by a more democratic monarchy led by King Mohamed VI, men and women authors writing in French and Arabic as well as Spanish, English, and even Moroccan Arabic (Darija), are not only exploring the sociocultural and political debates of their country, a nation like others in the Arab world in transition, they are also engaging with some of the most poignant human rights and environmental issues of our era. Their work represents a cosmopolitan world view that privileges transnational and transcultural exchanges.

Introduction: YAE and Moroccan cosmopolitanism

3. Youssouf Amine Elalamy, popularly known in Moroccan francophone literary circles as «YAE», is one of the most dynamic and transnationally known authors of French expression writing in Morocco today. YAE’s work is at the forefront of an engaged cosmopolitan discourse, defined by Anthony Appiah as englobing two ideas: One is the idea that we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship. The other is that we take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that
lend them significance. People are different, the cosmopolitan knows, and there is much to learn from our differences.

Today, in cosmopolitan Morocco, YAE’s work also engages with what philosopher Abdelkébir Khatibi designates as « une pensée-autre », an-Other way of thinking about otherness and marginality (Khatibi, 1983). In the last decade, this « pensée-autre » has inspired increased literary production in French on topics that extend beyond the country to include other parts of the Maghreb, Africa, and the globe : « Oui, trouver autre chose, se situer selon une pensée-autre, une pensée peut-être inouïe de la différence. Oui, oui, une telle libération est rigoureusement nécessaire pour toute pensée qui se réclame ainsi de sa volonté, en un risque qui ne peut qu’être grand, de toutes les manières » (Khatibi, 1983, p. 11).

YAE’s works, both as a novelist and a visual artist, capture the shifting boundaries and the winds of change taking place in Morocco and, indeed, across the globe. His novels, *Un Marocain à NY* (1998), *Les Clandestins* (2000), *Oussama, mon amour* (2011) and *Amour nomade* (2013), translated into multiple languages, are at the forefront of novels that thematically explore the challenges of the 21st century, while also experimenting with the very foundation of narrative form and language use. Themes tackling poverty, inequality, immigration, women’s rights and human rights, terrorism and the political tensions between the West and the Arab world in our post-9/11 era are just some of the subjects depicted on the pages of Elalamy’s works. For the purposes of this article, I will concentrate on *Amour Nomade* (2013), and cite his essay, *A Novel in the City* (2014).

Littérature-monde, afropolitanism and « making the story go » in our era of globalization

YAE’s novels, certainly the most recent, *Amour nomade* (2013) and *Oussama, mon amour* (2011), both of which place a young man in the midst of intense sociocultural as well as personal questioning, also represent a new kind of cosmopolitan African writing. This 21st century form promotes an Afropolitan world view construed through French expression that is inspired by the transnational exchange that takes place in what Michel Le Bris defines as « La littérature-monde » :

« Littérature-monde, très simplement, pour revenir à une idée plus large, plus forte de la littérature, retrouvant son ambition de dire le monde, de donner un sens à l’existence, d’interroger l’humaine condition, de reconduire chacun au plus secret de lui-même. Littérature-monde, enfin, à l’heure où sur un tronc désormais commun se multiplient les hybridations, dessinant la carte d’un monde polyphonique, sans plus de centre, devenu rond... (Le Bris, 2007, p. 41-42).]

Works produced by authors writing from/in « La littérature-monde » who hail from African, historically francophone, countries view French as a lingua-franca encouraging a pan-African spirit that reaches not only other Maghrebis who speak French, but beyond, to the larger diaspora. Writing today from a francophone, African transnational perspective, renders authors such as Elalamy and Fouad Laroui from Morocco, Malika Mokeddem and Boualem Sansal from Algeria, Calixthe Beyala from Cameroon, Alain Mabanckou from the Congo, Marie Ndiaye from Senegal and Abdourahman Waberi from Djibouti, among many others, as true Afropolitans, who are dedicated to a world view...
construed within the parameters of Cameroonian Achille Mbembe’s definition of Afropolitanism, as a « stylistic, an aesthetic and a certain poetics of the world. It is a manner of being in the world which refuses, on principle, any form of victim identity », but at the same time, « does not mean that it is not conscious of the injustices and the violence which the law of the world inflicted on this continent and its people » (2006).

According to Mbembe, the Afropolitan model offers a theoretical framework that disassociates itself from past literary moments which, today, have little relevance for globalized transnationally driven societies. Mbembe clarifies that the three previous literary movements that significantly shaped the themes of the novel after decolonization—anti-colonial nationalism, African socialism, and pan-Africanism—no longer qualify as helpful frameworks through which to study the position of authors who are often mobile, living and travelling constantly between continents, cultures, and modes of creativity. The Afropolitan novel of the 21st century defines a way of being African in the world that disassociates the author from the quotidian postcolonial tropes of previous decades.

For Elalamy and the authors writing in an Afropolitan framework, the French language is transnational, « absorbed », as Le Bris notes, « par un processus continu d’hybridations multiples » (2007, p. 40). Transformed and hybridized, novels in French cross linguistic and cultural boundaries to become, « une littérature nouvelle, bruyante, colorée, métissée, qui [dit] le monde en train de naître » (Le Bris, 2007, p. 32). Crossing borders, honing in on the human issues of our times, makes YAE’s novels relatable to readers all over the world.

Un Marocain à New York (1999) focuses on turning the stereotyping, Western gaze on the Arab-Other back on itself, creating a critique of American culture that is humorous and thought-provoking. Les Clandestins (2001) is a novel about illegal immigration and the dangers it presents to those who decide to leave their homelands for Europe in hope of a better life, only to discover that such a life is impossible. Oussama, mon amour is a work that engages with the topic of disenfranchised youth who often feel, no matter their country of origin, disconnected from their society and culture due to limited socioeconomic prospects. In the end, out of desperation, they are pushed to commit acts of violence. Amour nomade is a novel featuring a protagonist who seeks to nomadically trace lines between ways of telling a story that captures the elements of our common, human condition. These narratives all denote the author’s ability to cast his literary net wide. Elalamy’s net is one made from a fabric of mixtures and pensée-autres. Not totally rooted in any one identity (Moroccan, Arab, Berber, French), his novels, rather, exude a range of multiple human emotions recognizable by all who read them. YAE, as an Afropolitan author, working within the Littérature-monde ideal, knows that his creativity is generated through perpetual movement—déplacement. The author’s protagonist, Tachfine’s, very survival and sense of being-in-the-world are grounded in the knowledge that « en tant que nomade et fils de nomade, il sait que l’espoir de survie réside dans le mouvement et le déplacement d’un point vers un autre » (Elalamy, 2013, p. 155).

In general, what is evident about African authors writing in the 21st century, is not uniquely that the Afropolitan author’s world is « en train de naître », but also that his/her text is being born in a new form, as the very boundaries of the Western novel and the French language are challenged, fragmented, and reconstructed to reflect new systems and ways of looking at the world. Particularly YAE’s most recent novel, Amour nomade,
exemplifies a fusion of Western and African conceptions of narration, entreat readers to meld with narrators in order to traverse the unknown and the unexplored.

Elalamy’s most recent novel is not only a « novel » on paper, bound between two covers, it is also a parallel, visual, three-dimensionally conceptualized art form: Amour nomade was first a virtual novel that was « performed » and internationally « shown » across Morocco and Europe. As a three dimensional, live work, it encourages the active participation of readers, while also entreat participants to think about the reconceptualization of what The Novel is and will be in the future. YAE’s international project has physically taken a nomadic journey to Rotterdam, the Netherlands (April 2009), Rabat, Morocco (June 2009), Copenhagen, Denmark (December, 2009) and Cologne, Germany (October 2011). The author’s A Novel in the City on which Amour nomade is based, is his pictorial, interdisciplinary and cross- national artistic installation that challenges notions of reading a text while it promotes the visual representation of the written word.

For the first time ever, a novel is published in a « city format » rather than a « book format » Entirely handwritten, the novel occupies the walls, buildings and other spots of a city. The story unfolds as a gigantic ink worm that gradually « infects the city » As the storyline progresses, so does the literary virus that ends up contaminating the urban space. This latter becomes a narrative in itself, a place of encounters, emotions, discovery and exploration. Just as the walls of the city help read the story, the narrative, in its turn, takes the readers on a walk through the city; thereby helping them read the city as well. Entitled Amour nomade, YAE’s urban installation novel will enable the reader, who will have to keep on walking and progressing in space, to literally experiment nomadism. (Elalamy, 2014).

As a visual story written « on a city », YAE’s principal protagonist, Tachfine’s, journey becomes universally everyone’s to see—no matter their language or their nation. As conceptualized in the nomadic model framed in Mille Plateaux: Capitalisme et schizophrénie (1980) by French philosophers, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Elalamy’s story picks up speed « to deterritorialize », challenging borders as it carries us off to other places, times and ways of knowing. Readers, caught up in the visual experience of reading in/on a city, like nomads, are compelled to « faire avancer l’histoire ». Elalamy notes that with the novel on the city, Amour nomade obligates the reader ….. to move ahead through the city to keep the story alive and hopefully find the much expected food for thought. In both cases, the reader is taken on a journey, with a beginning and an end, with places to simply pass through, hurry, traverse, and places to linger in, dream away by, return to. By using the city as the story’s support structure, the project emphasizes that every city is an open book ready to be discovered (the different spaces, the architecture, the urban design, etc.). (Elalamy, 2014).

Nomadic thought and Becoming in Amour Nomade: Tachfine’s Becoming-Nomad and Being-in-the-World

« Moving ahead » to « keep the story going » are the defining characteristics of Elalamy’s Amour nomade which reflect also the larger commitment to the national and global transcultural contributions that Morocco today is making. YAE’s novel inspired by movement and deterritorialization that take the protagonist, Tachfine, to new ways of
being and becoming. Amour nomade is « une histoire entièrement écrite avec de l’eau » about a young man whose nomadic tribe, the Beni Maarouf, face great hardship in the vast desert of an unnamed country. In order to survive, the protagonist leaves the safety of the tribe to embark on a nomadic quest that takes him to other stories, adventures, and modes of being-in-the-world. Tachfine « n’est pas vraiment le héros mais c’est quand même lui qui fait avancer l’histoire » (Elalamy, 2013, p. 12). Although a modern tale, the novel is inspired by centuries of Maghrebi storytelling, reflecting the great narratives of yore such as Kitāb alf laylah wa-laylah (One Thousand and One Nights [Arabian Nights]).

The author’s novels are not just about one region, one continent or one tribe, but rather the nomadic lines of flight that are possible in the Littérature-monde that men and women, as narrators and protagonists, follow in order to enrich their own being as they enrich others’. In YAE’s words, « tout le monde est nomade » (Elalamy, 2013, p. 15). The nomad’s world is where the individual establishes what Martin Heidegger named long ago as a Being-in-the-world, wherein there is « an understanding of existence—an understanding of the being of all beings...other than its own » (Heidegger, 1962, p. 33). This being is understood as connected to and formulated by a Being-already-alongside with others. As the philosopher explains in Being and Time, « Being-in-the-world is not just a fixed staring at something that is purely present-at-hand.... [it is] fascinated by the world with which it is connected » (Heidegger, 1962, p. 88).

This article, thus, seeks to explore the intersection of Elalamy’s visual work and his prose by delving into what « makes his stories go ». I maintain that while he is a Moroccan author, and particular characteristics of his novels are inspired by his Moroccan identity, he is more an international, Afropolitan writer who seeks to connect with others across the world in order to establish new paths to and from narrative traditions, languages, modes of being and ways of thinking. These transnational connections are possible, in part, because they revolve around issues that appeal and are pertinent to our common humanity.

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