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BETWEEN DISPLACEMENT AND IMAGINATION: EXILE AND IDENTITY IN CHEIKH HAMIDOU KANE'S *AMBIGUOUS ADVENTURE* AND ABDOURAHMAN WABERI'S *IN THE UNITED STATES OF AFRICA*

Abstract

From the mid-twentieth century, the independence of African states and the mobility of young intellectuals to Europe made migration a central site for negotiating identity and belonging. This article examines exile as a structural condition in two Francophone African novels: Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1961/1972) and Abdourahman Waberi's *In the United States of Africa* (2006/2009). In Kane, exile is framed as spiritual and intellectual displacement within colonial modernity; in Waberi, it is reworked through a satirical reversal in which Africa becomes a destination for European refugees. Engaging work on postcolonial subjectivity (Achille Mbembe), Afrotopian imagination (Felwine Sarr), transnationalism (Dominic Thomas), and recent studies on liminality and identity (Okechukwu Ugwuezumba, Nkiru Onyemachi, Joanna Suffern), the article argues that Kane and Waberi write from divergent positions (Afropessimism and Afrofuturism) yet address the same concern: how identity is reconfigured when social and cultural worlds are divided. The comparison shows exile as a continuing framework for understanding both decolonization and contemporary forms of global belonging.

Keywords: Exile, Francophone African literature, Identity and belonging, Postcolonial subjectivity, Afropessimism and Afrofuturism

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INTRODUCTION

In 1960, 'Africa's Year of Independence', the year of African independences, young students from across the continent boarded ships and planes to France, Europe, in search of education and opportunity.[3] Many, like Cheikh Hamidou Kane's generation, left their homeland, often encouraged by newly independent states striving to form a new generation of national leaders. Yet, this migration, while promising intellectual opportunity, also carried the heavy cost of cultural alienation and spiritual exile.[4] More than half a century later, images of African migrants in precarious boats crossing the Mediterranean dominate global headlines (Whitley, 2023). These men and women, fleeing war, poverty or ecological devastation, encounter new borders, surveillance systems and discourses of humanitarian crisis, exposing how the politics of belonging, survival and displacement remain defining questions of African subjectivity in relation to the West (Said, 2000; Mbembe, 2001).[5] Although separated by time yet bound by continuity, these two moments highlight exile and displacement as enduring conditions of African subjectivities in relation to the West. This temporal long arc, also part of 'the age of migration' – "[...] characterized as the age of globalization marked by the rapid movements of capital, commodities, and cultures, of images, ideas, and institutions" (Zeleza, 2002) – reveals two critical developments: first, the diversification of sending and receiving countries beyond the familiar South-to-North routes; second, the increasing prominence of skilled migration in both actual flows and policy-making.[6] However, in African contexts, migration is rarely only about physical mobility. It often takes the form of exile – whether

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[3] 1960 represents the year when numerous countries in Africa gained their independence from European colonial powers such as Britain and France. See: 'Africa's Year of Independence' (Ogunsuyi, 2023).

[4] Here, "alienation" means the psychological and spiritual disconnection often experienced by characters in exile, especially within postcolonial literature.

[5] Said (2000) and Mbembe (2001) both theorise exile and dislocation. While Said's approach involves the intellectual and affective impact of displacement, Mbembe's focuses on the fragmentation of African subjectivity.

[6] In his article 'Contemporary African Migration in a Global Context', Zeleza explains the recent global migration trends. He asserts that migration flows are no longer concentrated along old colonial or North-South routes; they're spreading across many regions of the world.

through the enforced departures of colonial schooling, the dislocations caused by war and authoritarian rule or the precarious journeys of today's migrants across borders and seas. Exile, unlike migration in its narrower sense, carries with it the experience of estrangement: a fracture in belonging, memory and spiritual continuity. It is this broader, existential dimension that Francophone African literature captures and reimagines, insisting that to speak of migration is also to confront the deeper wounds of exile (Vurm, 2024).

Considering the multiplicity of oral and written forms that define African literary landscapes, this article highlights two novels from the francophone African sphere – Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1961/1972) and Abdourahman Waberi's *In the United States of Africa* (2006/2009). Far from implying a monolithic African literature, this focus seeks to shed light on a rich yet frequently marginalised stream of African intellectual production – one that keeps engaging deeply with legacies of colonialism, cultural rupture and the politics of belonging (Thomas, 2007).

We put *Ambiguous Adventure* and *In the United States of Africa* in conversation because they each stress two distinct perspectives – *Afropessimism* and *Afrofuturism* – that challenge readers to confront the condition of exile from opposite ends of the spectrum. In African discourses, *Afropessimism* refers to narratives that depict Africa as a continent trapped in perpetual crisis – a vision of despair that forecloses the possibility of renewal (Gordon & Wolpe, 1998; Mbembe, 2001). *Afrofuturism*, by contrast, refers to narrative subversions that ground speculative imagination in futures envisioned through African cultures, histories and epistemologies from the continent rather than from outside it (Sarr et al., 2019).

Through an Afropessimist lens, Western critics read Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* as a narrative of irreparable breaking and cultural lassitude. Yet, the novel does not succumb to despair, warning against the dangers of Western cultural assimilation, stressing the breakings produced by colonial education while affirming the enduring value of African spiritual and cultural traditions (Suffern, 2024). Waberi's *In the United States of Africa*, conversely, mobilises an Afrofuturist inversion and satire to imagine an Africa that becomes a haven for displaced Europeans. In doing so, the novel exposes the hypocrisies of humanitarian discourse, disrupts assumed hierarchies and pushes Africa's ability to realise itself at the centre of global futures (Waberi, 2009).

Despite their differences in era and narrative style, both *Ambiguous Adventure* and *In the United States of Africa* examine fractured identities and respond ingeniously to the experiences of exile and displacement. Taken together, these works reveal that exile in Francophone African literature is not merely spatial dislocation, but an ontological state – one that destabilises identity, shatters memory and demands new forms of empathy and responsibility (Said, 2000; Gilroy, 1993).[7]

Relying on scholars such as Glissant (1997), Mbembe (2001) and Sarr (2019), this article considers how displacement subverts memory, reshapes prejudice and raises critical questions about relationality and representation.[8],[9] The article unfolds in three parts: first, it examines *Ambiguous Adventure*, tracing how spiritual belonging gives way to alienation under colonial education and how the protagonist reaches a state of profound liminality in his attempt to reconcile African (Senegalese/Diallobé) traditions with Western (French) modernism, illustrating the unresolved tensions of postcolonial identity, suspended between affirmation and fracture.[10],[11] The second section turns to *In the United States of Africa*, analysing how Waberi employs inversion and satire to critique global inequalities whilst also illuminating the existential toll of forced migration.[12] The conclusion offers a synthesis of both readings to argue that francophone African narratives invite readers to reconsider African subjectivities through exile by redefining its meanings in light of Africa's global circulations today.

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[7] In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), Gilroy theorises "exile" as a constitutive element of Black identity.

[8] Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1990/1997) explores "relation" and "opacity" as key concepts for understanding identity and exile.

[9] These outlined terms are central to postcolonial and decolonial literary analysis, where memory and identity are continually reshaped by displacement.

[10] Kane critiques colonial education as a source of epistemological rupture, leading to spiritual exile (Kane, 1961/1972).

[11] While Victor Turner introduced liminality in anthropological terms (*The Ritual Process*, 1969), recent postcolonial African literary criticism adapts it to identity studies. Onyinyechi & Onyemachi (2024) describe how characters in postcolonial African texts inhabit "interstitial" spaces – shaped by colonial legacies, cultural fragmentation and contested belonging – that align with the liminality Samba experiences between Diallobé spiritual traditions and Western modernism.

[12] Waberi's theoretical reversal analyses "neocolonial assistance" discourses and assigns Africans as global benefactors rather than beneficiaries.

AMBIGUOUS ADVENTURE AND INTERNAL EXILE
(JOACHIM FAUSSIGNAUX)

Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1961/1972) explores the spiritual, psychological and identity-based consequences of the violent clash between two seemingly irreconcilable worlds: the traditional society of Diallobé and the rationalist, colonising imperial France.[13],[14] Through the initiation journey of Samba Diallo – a young boy torn between the spiritual fervour of his homeland and the secular education imposed by colonial power – Kane constructs a narrative of inner exile, one that transcends geographic dislocation. This exile is neither physical nor external, but existential. It arises from a profound rift between fidelity to ancestral African values and forced immersion in a foreign, dominant and disenchanted worldview. As Samba's spiritual and cultural beliefs weaken under the weight of French colonial modernity, he finds himself unable to locate a coherent sense of self. Evidently, Samba reaches a profound liminality – an in-between condition where he attempts, but fails, to reconcile African (Senegalese/Diallobé) traditions with Western (French) modernity. In this sense, exile is not a passing episode – rather, it is a defining condition of postcolonial subjectivity. As anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) first argued, *liminality* refers to the transitional state of being suspended between conditions; more recent critics expand this concept to postcolonial contexts as a dynamic but unresolved tension (Bowling & Combs, 2023; Ugwuezumba & Onyemachi, 2024). Samba's journey, thus, reveals that assimilation without synthesis results in a liminal state that is often a site of tension, division and silent suffering.

This section reads *Ambiguous Adventure* through the lens of exile – as spiritual dislodgement, intellectual isolation and emotional disorientation.

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[13] The Diallobé are a fictionalised Fulani (Peul) community in Senegal, inspired by Kane's own cultural and religious background. In the novel, they embody a traditional Islamic society governed by both spiritual authority (the Teacher, Thierno) and political wisdom (the Chief). Kane uses the Diallobé to stage the philosophical conflict between African Islamic values and the secular rationalism of colonial education.

[14] In this article, *rationalist* refers to the Enlightenment-derived worldview promoted through colonial education, which privileges reason, logic and secular knowledge over spiritual, affective or metaphysical understanding. The term reflects the epistemological rupture at the heart of Kane's critique. It is distinct from *pragmatism*, which emphasises practical utility rather than a philosophical framework of truth.

It explores three interrelated dimensions of Samba's journey: first, the spiritual grounding of his belonging within the Diallobé tradition; second, the role of colonial education as a force of exile that destabilises his worldview and fractures his sense of identity; and finally, the condition of tragic liminality – hybridity not as reconciliation, but as an impasse.[15] In Kane's narrative, exile is not a transient episode, but a defining condition of postcolonial subjectivity – one that shapes the individual's relationship with the world and with the self.

I. Spirituality and Belonging: The Foundations of Home

In *Ambiguous Adventure* (1961/1972), spirituality forms the cornerstone of identity within the Diallobé community. It informs daily life and shapes education as a process of spiritual awakening through the divine Word. Thierno, the spiritual master, embodies this religious tradition; he is entrusted with passing on mystical knowledge through Qur'anic study, prayer and spiritual discipline. Achille Mbembe (2001) argues that such spiritual systems often resist colonial rationalism by preserving a relational, affective understanding of knowledge and being. Within this sacred framework, Thierno recognises Samba Diallo as a particularly gifted child, uniquely receptive to divine truth (Kane, 1972, p. 12). From this moment, Samba's path becomes a spiritual quest shaped by devotion, self-denial and a longing for transcendence. Though his religious education is harsh and demanding, it transforms him into a "vessel" of the "divine Word" (p. 109). While Samba embraces this role with humility and discipline, convinced that true human greatness lies in serving the Divine, Thierno imposes this vision of transcendence with a severity born of his own longing to produce a disciple worthy of divine mastery (p. 23).[16]

Beyond formal instruction, Samba cultivates an intensely intimate relationship with the Divine. He develops a mystical perception of the world,

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[15] In postcolonial literature, the term "liminality" often describes the existential and cultural ambivalence of characters caught between conflicting identities or worldviews. See Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process* (1969) and Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994).

[16] While *Ambiguous Adventure* emerges from an Islamic framework, this article uses *the Divine* to signify a broader cosmological and affective understanding of spiritual force. This framing emphasises relational and mystical dimensions that transcend fixed religious doctrine.

seeking the Divine not only in religious texts, but also in marginal spaces: cemeteries, ruins and nature itself. Death, far from provoking fear, becomes a site of revelation. For Samba, paradise is not a remote abstraction, but an extension of the Word (pp. 42–43).[17]

In this perspective, death is not a rupture, but a passage – one integrated into life. Samba's understanding of the sacred, shaped by his communion with nature, silence and the dead, produces a profound sense of belonging.[18] This spiritual rootedness offers him an identity that is whole, harmonious and divinely anchored. Yet it is precisely this wholeness that makes the later rupture so painful. When Samba encounters the rationalist, secular values of the West in France, the spiritual unity that once defined him begins to unravel. His exile begins not with geographic displacement, but with an internal destabilisation – a dissonance between the spiritually anchored world he came from and the disenchanted rationalist world he is forced to enter.

II. The Fractured Self: Colonial Schooling and the Dislocation of Meaning

Samba Diallo's entry into the colonial French school system begins a gradual process of dissension. The decision to send him to attend the French school, though made with hesitation, marks the first fracture in his spiritual grounding. While his early foundation is steeped in devotion, ritual and communion with the Divine, the slow shift towards the French secular, rationalist educational system forces a separation from the soundness of the Diallobé's cosmology. This colonial model, far from being an ordinary acquisition of knowledge, functions as a project of spiritual deconstruction – what Ngũgĩ (1986) describes as an epistemic rupture that disaffects the individual from their ancestral cosmologies and inner coherence.[19]

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[17] Thierno, the Teacher, sees Samba as a conduit of the Divine – someone through whom sacred words resonate beyond mere recitation and rise above expectation.

[18] Mabona (1964) explains that in many African spiritual traditions, the divine Word functions as a generative force that reconciles the visible and invisible, the living and the metaphysical. It is not simply recitation, but a sacred act that binds the individual to the cosmos.

[19] In *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986), Ngũgĩ speaks directly to cultural and linguistic alienation and how colonial education disrupts one's inner world and worldview. He explains that "spiritual deconstruction" is tied to a loss of coherence between language, identity and cosmology.

This rupture comes into focus when Samba thinks of his father: "My father does not live; he prays" (Kane, 1972, p. 94). For the Diallobé, prayer is not separate from life; it is the essence of living. Yet Samba instinctively frames prayer and life in terms of opposition, a binary rooted in Western rationalism. He immediately corrects himself: "Why did I think that? [...] Certainly, no one else in this house would have thought that way. I am the only one who could have this bizarre idea [...] This idea is foreign to me" (pp. 94–95). In this moment, Samba recognises that a new mode of thought has entered his consciousness, one that "distinguishes" and "specifies" categories unknown to his cultural tradition.

This perspective separates knowledge from wisdom, thought from feeling and being from belief. What Samba undergoes is not simply a cultural shift, but an ontological fracture – one that reshapes his way of knowing, his sense of self and his experience of the world around him.[20]

This sense of fragmentation intensifies in France, where distance from his spiritual values and homeland deepens the breach. Cut off from the rhythms and silences that once sustained him, Samba finds himself increasingly disoriented. The further he moves from the cosmology that once centred him, the more deeply exile embeds itself – not in geography, but in the interior of the self. Thus, the promise of intellectual enlightenment masks a deeper dispossession – of worldview, of language and of self.

This exile is epistemological, but also deeply unworldly. Samba is not simply displaced from his culture; he is estranged from the very cosmology through which he once understood the world. The modern, object-saturated and mechanised reality he encounters in France becomes a space of existential disconnection. As Fanon (1952/1967) explains, colonial domination produces a form of existential alienation, severing the colonised subject from the cultural, spiritual and psychic structures that once sustained a coherent sense of self.[21] The modernised West lacks vitality,

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[20] This moment in the narrative reveals a deeper rupture. Western education imposes a divided self – one that no longer moves in harmony with the Divine. It fragments the coherence between sacred purpose and lived experience, severing thought from faith and life from meaning. The dissonance becomes irreconcilable, reshaping Samba's understanding of the world and his place within it.

[21] See: *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon (1952/1967), which articulates how colonialism generates a deep alienation within the colonised subject – one that fractures identity, disorients perception and disrupts the individual's connection to both self and world. This concept underlies the existential disconnection that Samba experiences in exile.

rhythm and metaphysical resonance. The very air he breathes feels devoid of presence, flattened into material function.

This realisation captures the magnitude of Samba's spiritual exile. Death – once a companion, a teacher and a site of divine knowledge – has been exiled from life. In losing his intimacy with death, Samba also loses his connection to the divine order that once sustained his sense of self (Kane, 1972, p. 149). European modernity severs life from its sacred dimensions, dislodging the individual from meaning. The exile Samba endures is not merely geographic – it is ontological.

As this dissonance deepens, Samba becomes aware that he is no longer fully Diallobé, yet not entirely Western either (pp. 150–151). He has become a space of contradiction, of irreconcilable tension – what Bhabha (1994) describes as the unsettling condition of hybridity, marked not by resolution, but by ambivalence and internal division.[22]

Ambiguous Adventure highlights, in this moment, the profound tragedy of colonial hybridity. Samba is not enriched by his duality; he is fractured by it. The two worlds he inhabits do not communicate with each other, and he cannot resolve their divergence within himself. His exile, then, is not only a departure from place – it is a rupture in being. He becomes what we might call a *terrain de conflit*: a conflicted space where two irreconcilable systems of meaning – one rooted in sacred cosmology, the other in secular modernity – intersect and fracture the self.

III. Fractured Identity and the Search for Meaning

Samba Diallo's experience in France is not simply a severing of his spiritual roots; it leads to a deeper liminal condition. Disrupted from the cosmology that once anchored him, he finds himself caught between two irreconcilable worldviews. Neither the spiritual truths of his upbringing nor the rationalist values imposed by French modernity offer him stable ground. What unfolds is not merely a spiritual crisis, but a profound unmaking of his interior world.

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[22] See: *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha (1994) theorises hybridity as a third space of identity negotiation, where cultural meanings are neither fixed nor reconciled. Samba's dissonance reflects this paradox – he embodies a fractured hybridity shaped by both colonial violence and spiritual dislocation.

Upon returning to his homeland, Samba discovers that his former certainties have faded – not through forgetting, but through a transformation imposed by the epistemic force of colonial assimilation. Prayer, once a space of transcendence and rootedness, now feels empty with doubt. Values he did not choose but could not resist have disrupted the rhythms of his spiritual life, which were once natural and nourishing. As Ngũgĩ (1986) explains, colonial education functions as a mechanism of involuntary assimilation – reconfiguring thought and language in ways that estrange the subject from their cultural and spiritual origins. Samba's exile has reshaped him so profoundly that he no longer fully recognises himself within the spiritual world of his community. In this confession, he admits: "I do not believe – I do not believe very much anymore, of what you had taught me. I do not know what I believe. But the extent is so vast, of what I do not know, and what I ought indeed to believe…" (Kane, 1972, p. 173). These words capture exile at its most existential. Samba has not only lost faith in what once guided him; he can no longer articulate any alternative belief to take its place. His subjectivity is defined by negative knowledge: he knows what he does not believe, but not what he does. The result is a void of identity that exile has carved within him.

This moment reveals the depth of Samba's dispossession. He is no longer suspended between two worlds but is instead internally fractured by them. Identity, once grounded in spiritual continuity, has become a site of uncertainty – shattered by displacement and rendered illegible by the competing logics he carries. Yet within this fragmentation lies a paradox: exile, while eroding belonging, also strips away illusion. Samba comes to understand that he cannot return to the rootedness he once knew, nor can he fully inhabit the modern rationalism of France. What he becomes is something else – an ambivalent, unfinished subject caught between memory and modernity, belief and doubt. As Hall (1990) argues, postcolonial identity is not a return to origins, but a process of becoming – shaped through rupture, dislocation and the ongoing negotiation of selfhood.

Kane's portrayal of Samba's condition engages with postcolonial theories of hybridity but refuses to romanticise them. Identity here is not a space of fusion, but of estrangement – marked by loss, confusion and a dissonance that resists synthesis. Samba does not experience his liminality as possibility; he is destabilised by it. The process of reconstructing a self amid conflicting worldviews unfolds not as clarity, but as ache. What emerges is not a hybrid subject empowered by dual inheritance, but a fragmented individual

struggling to make sense of his transformation – one he can scarcely name, let alone reconcile. Bhabha (1994, pp. 1–2) notes that hybridity often takes shape in the "in-between" spaces where cultural meanings remain unsettled and identity itself becomes a site of negotiation and contradiction.[23]

The novel, thus, poses a troubling question: what happens when the self cannot be reassembled? What happens when exile does not end with return, but instead becomes a permanent interior condition? Gilroy (1993) suggests that exile is not a discrete moment of departure or arrival, but a fractured and continuous mode of existence. Likewise, Said (2000) speaks of exile as a "discontinuous state of being", marked by longing and disorientation. In this light, Kane suggests that for the postcolonial subject, exile is not a chapter to be closed, but a condition to be endured – one characterised by discord, forfeiture and the aching search for meaning in the absence of certainty.

IV. The Cruel Weight of Liminality: Fracture Without Synthesis

Rather than offering a space of mediation or creative renewal, what emerges in *Ambiguous Adventure* is not hybridity in the sense of a productive cultural synthesis, but liminality without resolution. Within Samba Diallo co-exist two ontological systems – the sacred cosmology of the Diallobé and the secular rationalism of Imperial France. Rather than integrating these worlds into a creative "third space", he remains suspended between them, destabilised by their mutual incompatibility. What Samba experiences is not the empowering "third space" of postcolonial theory – such as Bhabha's (1994) vision of hybridity as negotiation – but a state of painful contradiction. Ngũgĩ (1986, p. 3) argues that, when hybridity is born of colonial imposition, it often results not in synthesis, but in alienation.[24] The distance between the two systems within him cannot be bridged. Samba's return to

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[23] "It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experience of *nationness*, community interest or cultural value is negotiated" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2).

[24] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) offers a sharp critique of colonial education as a system of cultural erasure rather than exchange. In *Decolonising the Mind*, he describes how colonial languages and curricula function as a "cultural bomb", severing the colonised from their heritage and implanting self-alienation. Rather than producing hybrid consciousness, this form of education reorients the subject away from their cosmology and towards a fractured, imposed modernity. Samba's internal dislocation precisely reflects this form of epistemic violence.

the Diallobé community is not a restoration, but a painful realisation of his detachment from the Diallobé's fundamental values: he is too transformed to belong again and too rooted to fully depart. As Onyinyechi and Onyemachi (2024) argue, liminality in this context reflects the interstitial identities shaped by colonialism – identities suspended in unresolved tension, marked more by fracture than by synthesis (pp. 84–85). Samba remains in an in-between state – but not by choice.

The figure of the "madman", who silences Samba in the tragic conclusion of the novel, does not just represent chaos or insanity. As Samba wanders, the madman confronts him with a demand for absolute faith: "Promise me that you will pray tomorrow" (Kane, 1972, p. 174). Samba, caught in his inner void, instinctively responds aloud, "No – I do not agree." This refusal is not an outright rejection of God, but an admission of his inability to embrace belief as he once did. His words reveal the depth of his liminality: he can neither affirm the Diallobé's spiritual truth nor accept Western rationalism. As Dominic Thomas (2007) observes, "although Samba has not been seduced by the bright light of Western materialism, he has become exhausted in his struggle against it […] to preserve his religious values and African identity […] from which God seems to have disappeared" (p. 86). Samba's identity has become pure contradiction, suspended between affirmation and fracture.

The madman embodies a violent refusal of ambiguity. His presence is feverish, invasive and uncompromising: "I will not agree, alone for us two, to suffer from Thy withdrawal" (p. 174). Unable to tolerate Samba's hesitation, he draws his weapon and kills him. Kane's imagery is striking: "Suddenly everything went black around Samba Diallo." The madman enacts a form of unyielding fundamentalism that eliminates the potentiality of contradiction by erasing the liminal subject. In the figure of the madman, Kane exposes the rigidity of a society that cannot accommodate a world where deviation from purity, even if imposed from without, is punished from within. Samba's murder becomes allegorical: society resolves the unbearable instability of the in-between state not through reconciliation, but through elimination. Through Samba's death, Kane stresses the continuous intolerance of a postcolonial African world to dubiety and to those who bear the contradictions of colonial history within themselves.

In insight, Kane refuses to romanticise exile as a site of renewal or synthesis. In *Adventure Ambiguous*, liminality is not creative but destructive, a wound without healing. The madman's mercilessness symbolises the egregious injustice of contradictions in a world where Western modernity

and African tradition remain unreconciled. By silencing Samba, Kane not only underscores the cruel weight of liminality, but he also clearly warns that assimilation to Western culture erodes African foundations without providing coherence in return, leaving the subject wounded, exiled and ultimately extinguished.

EXILE AS A POSTCOLONIAL CONDITION

Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* offers a profound exploration of the rupture of the self of the postcolonial African subject encountering Western (French) colonial modernity. Through Samba Diallo's tragic journey, exile manifests not as a geographical departure, but as an existential condition: a state of painful liminality – caught between Diallobé (African) spiritual beliefs and French (European) rationalism – which destabilises and dismantles the foundations that once anchored Samba's identity and life purposes. Rather than presenting liminality as a space of renegotiation or renewal for the postcolonial African subject, Kane describes it as a site of tension, alienation and psychological dissonance – devastating products of cultural assimilation without resolution. Exile, in this light, is no longer a transitional phase but becomes a permanently troubled state – a feature of postcolonial African subjectivity.

If *Ambiguous Adventure* foregrounds exile as the internal unresolved disruption of the African subject, Waberi's *In the United States of Africa* turns outward – imagining exile, mobility and transformation through speculative inversion and satire – aligning with Afrofuturist aesthetics to reimagine Africa at the centre of global power. While Kane dramatises the collapse of the liminal subject, Waberi envisions exile as a lens through which readers can critique global inequalities and envision new futures.

IN THE UNITED STATES OF AFRICA: DISPLACEMENT AND EXILE (CYNTHIA AKWADAH)

Introduction

What if the headlines told of desperate European migrants crossing dangerous borders in search of safety, prosperity and dignity in Africa? This

is the Afrofuturistic world Abdourahman Waberi envisions *In the United States of Africa* (2006/2009). In this satirical and provocative novel, Waberi inverts reality to expose the underlying assumptions and power dynamics that shape Western perceptions of both Africa and the global refugee crisis. The Djibouti-born writer crafts a compelling counter-narrative in which the African continent has become a beacon of stability and opportunity for those fleeing a shattered West. This central premise of an inverted world order forms the basis for Waberi's insightful exploration of displacement, exile and the shifting dynamics of global power. According to Sarr (2016), African writers in the diaspora have embraced this counter-narrative strategy to offer a new perspective on the African continent through their view from elsewhere of their own exiles (p. 101).[25] Thus, after having a fair experience of the west, they get a better sense of their origin comparatively.

In *In the United States of Africa*, Waberi presents two forms of exile: a childhood exile, embodied by Maya, and a neo-exile – a displacement developed later in life as a response to new circumstances – represented by Yacuba. Both characters serve as key figures in the novel's exploration of dislocation and identity.[26]

At its core, the narrative follows Maya – a Caucasian-born French artist also known as Malaïka, a name given to her by her adoptive African father, Doctor Papa, a humanitarian. Maya's journey to find her biological family becomes a metaphor for displacement and exile, revealing the psychological toll of negative stereotypes and power imbalances. Her resulting identity crisis reflects the experiences of other exiles, such as Yacuba, a Swiss Caucasian refugee. Waberi's description of Caucasian refugees fleeing to Africa exposes the biases embedded in contemporary geopolitical hierarchies. Yet his satire does not idealise an Africa-dominated world; rather, it reveals that power structures – regardless of who holds them – continue to produce exploitation and conflict.

This article argues that exile in Waberi's novel is not merely a physical condition, but an existential one – shaping memory, self-perception and

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[25] In "Afrotopos", Sarr refers to these African writers living in the diaspora as "outgrowths" and "cuttings planted in faraway lands and nourished from other saps", which aligns with the theme of exile central to Waberi's novel (Sarr, 2016, p. 101).

[26] See: The Internal Family Systems (IFS) model, regarding childhood exile, developed by Richard Schwartz, who views the psyche as a system of diverse subpersonalities or "parts" that interact with each other, much like a family. (Schwartz, 1995).

interpersonal relationships. Through his strategic use of inverted displacement, Waberi achieves two objectives. First, he offers a sharp critique of neocolonial power structures and the discourses of humanitarianism. Second, he highlights the shared human vulnerability inherent in the experience of forced displacement, calling for a re-evaluation of empathy and responsibility in the context of contemporary global inequality.[27]

This section explores Waberi's satirical critique of Western-driven migration narratives through three interrelated dimensions of displacement and exile. First, it analyses power imbalances by examining how Waberi inverts the traditional roles of "donor" and "recipient" in global humanitarianism. In doing so, he challenges dominant Western discourses on aid and development, revealing that even in a reversed world order, patterns of exploitation and conflict persist – suggesting that power, wherever it resides, remains prone to violence.

Second, it considers the existential dimensions of exile by analysing Maya's journey as a metaphor for displacement that transcends geography. Her experience illustrates how exile can fracture memory, disrupt self-perception and strain relationships – highlighting the emotional and psychological costs of forced uprooting.

Finally, the section re-evaluates empathy and responsibility. It asks how Waberi's inversion compels readers to rethink global solidarity and calls for a more nuanced understanding of responsibility in the face of shared human vulnerability.

I. POWER REVERSED: A SATIRICAL CRITIQUE OF WESTERN HUMANITARIAN NARRATIVES

In *In the United States of Africa* (2006/2009), Waberi constructs a reversed world to critique global power imbalances and the historical dominance of the West, as the title of the novel reveals. He writes, "ever since our world has been what it is, little French, Spanish, …hit hard by kwashiorkor, leprosy, glaucoma, and poliomyelitis, survive only on food surpluses from Vietnamese, North Korean, or Ethiopian farmers" (p. 4). Thus, by flipping geopolitical roles, he reimagines socio-economic indicators, portraying Africa as prosperous – with strong economies, advanced infrastructure

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[27] In this article, *empathy* refers to the reader's understanding, sensitivity to and experiencing the feelings, thoughts and experiences of exiles and migrants at large.

and robust social systems that attract migrants in search of a better life. This inversion also reshapes humanitarian dynamics: figures like Doctor Papa provide aid to Western refugees and, in a striking gesture of reversal, adopt Maya at the age of four.

Waberi introduces this inverted world order early in the novel, immediately foregrounding the theme of exile through the character of Yacuba, an ethnically Swiss Caucasian who claims to have fled violence and famine in Europe to seek refuge in Asmara, the federal capital of Eritrea (p. 3). His desperation – and that of others like him – echoes the plight of real-world refugees, now mirrored in reverse. Their journeys resonate with Luis Roniger's (2023) definition of exile as "a journey across geographical spaces and cultures that have long been a primary reaction to ecological and social challenges" (p. 172). Within this framework, Waberi (2016, p. 5) reinforces the theme of exile through his stark description of "hundreds and thousands of wretched *Euramericans* subjected to a host of calamities and a deprivation of hope" who are enticed by Africa.[28] This captures the desperation that drives migration – rooted in the universal human pursuit of security and a better future. The arrival of these exiles and refugees across the African continent – a land historically defined by exploitation and emigration – exposes the novel's central critique of global inequality and the reversibility of power. By inverting the dominant narrative of South-to-North migration, Waberi challenges the ideological framing of the West as the default centre of stability, implicitly questioning the assumptions that portray Africa as a perpetual point of departure.

Yacuba's description in the opening chapter embodies important aspects of exile – loss of identity, negative stereotyping and social discrimination. Through him, Waberi signals the psychological and structural inequalities that often accompany displacement. His choice to begin the novel through the eyes of a European refugee disrupts expectations and reconstructs the readers' perspectives. Yacuba's encounter with racialised inequality in Africa reverses the familiar contemporary gaze on the continent and underscores the universality of power dynamics. This narrative strategy not only critiques inherited biases, but also sets the tone for the

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[28] In Waberi's satirical narrative, "Euramericans" designates the fictional population of Europe and North America who, in a reversal of real-world geopolitical hierarchies, are portrayed as displaced migrants fleeing poverty and violence in search of refuge in a prosperous and unified Africa (Waberi, 2006/2009).

novel's exploration of exile, dislocation and the inversion of global hier-archies. It compels readers to confront displacement from an unfamiliar angle – one that invites empathy and critical reflection (Thomas, 2007).[29]

Despite the inequalities, stereotypes and dehumanisation faced by mi-grants and exiles, Waberi introduces figures like Doctor Papa – an African humanitarian who provides aid and guidance to Western refugees, particu-larly Maya. After adopting her, he supports her through every stage of her education and encourages her dream of becoming an artist (p. 9). This in-version of roles not only highlights a shift in power and responsibility, but also challenges assumptions about who grants refuge and who receives it.

Waberi compels readers to confront their biases about displacement, reminding us that "in life you can gain everything and see it all disappear the next day" (p. 27). This confrontation is intensified by the narrator's direct use of the pronoun "you," which implicates the reader in Maya's experience and blurs the boundary between witness and subject. For example, when the narrator asks, "Maya, do you sometimes ask yourself, 'Who am I?'" (p. 38), or observes, "You would tell yourself that living is a hard job, but a wonder-ful one" (p. 39), the reader is invited into a reflective space – prompted to consider their own identity, place and possible proximity to exile.

II. Existential (Evidential) Dimensions of Displacement and Exile through Maya

Beyond the tangible losses of home, land and community, displacement and exile leave deep imprints on the very fabric of human existence. To be forcibly uprooted is not merely to change location – though physical dislo-cation is central – it is to experience a profound rupture in one's sense of self and belonging, which is a fundamental human need according to Sara K. Rankin (2016, p. 4), and meaning in the world. *In the United States of Af-rica* vividly illustrates how forced migration transcends geography, mould-ing the inner lives of those who endure it. Through Maya's journey, exile

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[29] Dominic Thomas's *Black France: Colonialism, Immigration, and Transnational-ism*. In Chapter 2, Thomas emphasises how Waberi "displaces established North-South divisions by reversing traditional hierarchies" and thereby critiques both historical and contemporary global power structures. His analysis of the "transnational imagination" in Waberi's work underlines how the novel deconstructs dominant humanitarian discours-es while exposing the persistent nature of systemic inequality even in reversed scenarios (Thomas, 2007).

emerges not merely as a movement across borders, but as an existential state marked by shattered identity, the burden of an irretrievable past and the fragile navigation of an uncertain future. By mapping these interior landscapes, Waberi reveals the universal human vulnerability at the heart of exile – what Said (2000, p. 173) calls "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place", a dislocation that reshapes both memory and self-understanding.[30]

To demonstrate that exile extends far beyond physical dislocation, Waberi constructs the character of Maya – a white girl adopted at the age of four by Doctor Papa, a wealthy African humanitarian. Though raised with love, access and privilege in Africa, Maya experiences a persistent form of cultural alienation. Her whiteness sets her apart, subtly estranging her from her surroundings. This layered condition of exile echoes Said's (2000) observation that "exile is strangely compelling to think about, but terrible to experience" – a rift between the self and its true home that "can never be surmounted" (*ibid.*). Despite the material stability of her life, Maya remains unmoored, her identity shaped by absence, dislocation and the ache of incompleteness.

Maya's journey to a poverty-stricken Paris in search of her birth mother dramatises this unhealable fragment. As Waberi writes, "one's place of birth is only by accident; you choose your true homeland with your body and heart" (Waberi, 2009, p. 10). Maya's dissatisfaction and her desire to understand where she comes from align with Said's reflection that exile is never a state of contentment: it is "a mind of winter in which the pathos of summer and autumn, as much as the potential of spring, are nearby but unobtainable" (Said, 2000, p. 186). Her quest becomes a metaphorical effort to reconcile the fragments of her identity – an identity formed in exile and defined by longing.

Even as Maya finds love and purpose in Africa, her return to France exposes the unresolved nature of her belonging. When the narrator asks, "But you, Maya, are you really from here?" (Waberi, 2009, p. 101), the question underscores her continued estrangement from both worlds. Her French name, Malaïka – given to her by Doctor Papa – embodies her hybrid existence caught between two cultures, two identities and two symbolic

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[30] See *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1958), in which Hannah Rendt observed that, exile and statelessness strip individuals not only of place, but of the conditions that allow them to be seen and to act meaningfully in the world (Rendt, 1958).

homelands. The dual naming reflects the layered negotiations of self that define the existential dimension of exile, reminding readers that displacement is not only geographic, but also ontological.

Maya's early separation from her biological family results in a fractured relationship with memory – one of the most vital elements in shaping identity and belonging. The absence of personal history leaves her adrift, untethered from a coherent narrative of self. She recalls only fragments of her past, noting that she must "gather the pebbles of memory to make a little pile [that she] can decipher" (p. 10). This poetic image captures how exile severs not only geographic and familial ties, but also the cognitive and emotional anchors that provide existential grounding. Without access to her cultural and personal origins, Maya struggles to construct a stable sense of self.[31]

While her circumstances are specific, the emotional aspect of her journey – marked by displacement, loss and the search for meaning – resonates with broader human experiences of alienation. Waberi uses Maya's story to explore the universal existential dilemmas that arise from forced separation: the longing for connection, the ache of identity rupture and the fundamental desire for belonging. Her quest to find her birth mother becomes a metaphor for reconstituting the self after dislocation – a process that mirrors the real-world struggles of those who seek to reconnect with lost families or reconstruct broken identities. The emotional trauma of separation leaves enduring scars, complicating Maya's ability to form secure attachments. Her story underscores that the experience of exile transcends geography: whether in the so-called "developed" or "developing" world, the need for rootedness, recognition and meaning remains profoundly human.

III. Reversed Humanitarianism: Re-evaluating Empathy and Responsibility

Waberi's *In the United States of Africa* moves beyond a mere reversal of global roles to offer a profound re-evaluation of empathy and responsibility in the context of human displacement. By casting the traditionally

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[31] Psychological studies on refugees confirm that family separation itself triggers deep emotional trauma, leading to anxiety, depression, attachment issues and a pervasive sense of hopelessness – even after reunification (Miller et al., 2017). This underscores how the loss of familial connection during formative years can leave lasting scars, complicating one's ability to form secure attachments and maintain emotional resilience.

dominant West in the figure of Yacuba, a struggling refugee, and portraying a prosperous Africa as a haven, Waberi invites readers to reconsider not only whom we empathise with, but also how responsibility is conceived within global power structures. This subversion urges a critical reassessment of which lives are deemed worthy of protection and who is expected to provide refuge in an increasingly interconnected yet unequal world.

One of the novel's most striking strategies is its deliberate inversion of stereotypes. By depicting Westerners – typically associated with wealth, power and stability – as vulnerable exiles, Waberi challenges conventional narratives about displacement. The reversal destabilises the assumed geography of migration and compels readers to confront their biases about who becomes a refugee and where refuge is found. In doing so, Waberi makes the experience of exile more immediate and less abstract. The image of Euramericans fleeing to Africa collapses the distance between "us" and "them", humanising the condition of displacement and reorienting moral imagination towards shared vulnerability. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag explains that empathy is not automatic – it is mediated by cultural narratives and visual framing that determine whose suffering we see and how we respond to it.[32] Waberi exploits this mechanism, asking readers to look differently, to feel differently and, ultimately, to rethink their ethical assumptions about global responsibility.

Waberi also advances a call for empathy by stressing relatability and shared vulnerability. By portraying Westerners in states of poverty, desperation and forced migration, *In the United of Africa* creates an unexpected point of identification for readers – particularly those from the West who may never have imagined themselves in such positions. This narrative strategy collapses emotional distance: when the displaced resemble familiar figures, empathy becomes more immediate and personal. Waberi reframes exile not as the experience of a distant "other", but as a universal human condition shaped by fear, loss and the struggle for survival.

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[32] In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag (2003) examines how representations of suffering in media and art shape public perception, noting that the ability to empathise is conditioned by visibility, framing and cultural proximity. Her insights are particularly relevant to Waberi's novel, which inverts the usual optics of suffering to disrupt established hierarchies of empathy.

These shared emotions transcend geography and culture, shifting the reader's perspective and deepening awareness of the complex forces that drive forced displacement. In doing so, Waberi not only critiques global hierarchies, but also encourages a more inclusive and reflective ethical stance towards migration and humanitarian responsibility.

BEYOND INVERSION: EXILE, EMPATHY AND THE ETHICS OF GLOBAL RESPONSIBILITY

Abdourahman Waberi's *In the United States of Africa* operates as a biting satire, reversing traditional narratives of migration to critique the historical dominance of the West and its often self-congratulatory humanitarian discourse. Through this inversion, the novel exposes the persistent nature of global power imbalances and the unsettling continuity of exploitation, regardless of who holds power. Yet, beyond this political commentary, Waberi explores the deeper existential consequences of exile – using Maya's journey to reveal the emotional ruptures and shared human vulnerability that accompany displacement. The novel ultimately calls for a re-evaluation of empathy and global responsibility, urging readers to look past entrenched hierarchies and engage more compassionately with the lived realities of forced migration.

CONCLUSION: EXILE, LIMINALITY AND THE ETHICS OF DISPLACEMENT

Taken together, *Ambiguous Adventure* (1961/1972) and *In the United States of Africa* (2006/2009) explore exile as a defining feature of postcolonial African subjectivity – one that is not simply spatial, but profoundly psychological, spiritual and ethical. Cheikh Hamidou Kane and Abdourahman Waberi approach this condition from different angles: Kane exposes the internal split of the African subject caught in a state of liminality between irreconcilable cosmologies, while Waberi reverses the global gaze to critique power, prejudice and humanitarian hypocrisy through Afrofuturist satire. Yet both converge on a shared insight: exile fractures the self, disrupts belonging and destabilises identity in lasting ways.

In *Ambiguous Adventure*, exile emerges as liminality without resolution. The protagonist's journey is not a passage towards synthesis, but a suspension between Diallobé's spirituality and French rationalism, a condition of "fracture without synthesis". Reading the novel through an Afropessimist lens, emphasising irreparable loss, blurs the issuance of a warning against Western ethos rather than conceding to despair. By dramatising the psychic costs of colonial assimilation, Kane insists on the enduring value of African traditions, even as he portrays their erosion. His protagonist's exile is ontological: a withdrawal of thought, belief and selfhood that leaves him permanently unsettled.

In *In the United States of Africa*'s reality, displacement takes on a satirical and conjectural form; yet its existential consequences remain serious. Maya's experience as a white refugee in Africa exposes the emotional turmoil, memory loss and crumbled identity inherent in exile. Her search for origin and meaning mirrors Samba's, suggesting that exile – as a disruption of the self – is not confined to any single geography or group. By imagining a world turned upside down, Waberi mobilises Afrofuturism to destabilise inherited hierarchies and provoke ethical reflection. His inversion asks readers to confront exile as a shared human condition, one that demands empathy across lines of privilege and power.

Both novels compel us to reimagine exile beyond the reductive binaries of departure and return, homeland and foreignness. They insist that exile is a structural condition of postcolonial life, marked by contradictions, unsettled tensions and continuous negotiations of meaning. Hall (1996) reminds us that identity is never fixed but always in process, a view echoed in the fractured trajectories of Samba and Maya. At the same time, Waberi's inversion offers an ethical provocation: if vulnerability is universal, then empathy and responsibility must be reconfigured across lines of privilege and power. As Said (2000) asserts, exile is a condition that may inspire vision but never peace.

Francophone African literature, as these two works demonstrate, does not solely represent exile; it challenges and redefines it. Through imagination and critical insight, Kane and Waberi invite us, the readers, to confront the affective, epistemological and ethical dimensions of displacement – urging us to consider how postcolonial subjects experience states of liminality and what it might mean to envision futures beyond fracture.

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