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Ecotone and Afrotopia : conceptual connections (around Felwine Sarr and the Ateliers de la pensée)

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Abstract: In his essay *Afrotopia* (2016), Senegalese writer Felwine Sarr attempts to sketch out the contours of an "active utopia" aiming at "fertilising the vast spaces of possibility in African reality". While the book is among the intellectual foundations of the research platform 'Ateliers de la pensée' in Dakar, this interdisciplinary forum establishes a space for reflection, reinvention, and possible transformation about African societies and global cohabitation. In its afrotopian/utopian ambition, the platform appears to be a kind of conceptual "ecotone" – a hybrid and transitory space – within which alternative visions and narratives to neoliberal realpolitik are developed. This paper will identify and discuss various conceptual connections between Afrotopia and the ecotone. Sarr's and the Ateliers' positions reveal indeed significant resonances with the ecotone, which, deterritorialised from its primary habitat (ecology), opens a range of perspectives for reflecting on today's socio-historical and ethno-cultural identities. The ecotonal characteristics (the interconnection of the living, the relational logic, the tension of the plural, etc.) thus become a critical tool for reading the scope and vision of the Afrotopian project: the "radical newness" of the continent's epistemological renewal, a genuine plural democracy, planetary hospitality.

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> « Where is the imagination?
> Where is the rebellion?
> Where is the heart? »
> (graffiti anonyme, bibliothèque Bodleian, Oxford)

> « What can I know? What may I hope? »
> (Zygmunt Bauman)

It is a truism that the material and virtual flows of our contemporary world have contributed substantially to the circulation of thought, knowledge and critical postures. In the labyrinth of postcolonial studies, for example, there used to be talk of 'travelling theories', meaning, for example, that a Spanish literary critic in Francophone studies could productively read a West African novel thanks to the theoretical tools of cultural studies established by a researcher from the Indian diaspora in the United States, articulating Marxist political thought, Fanonian psychoanalysis, differentialist feminism and poetic formalism. Notwithstanding the complexities of such methodologies and the question of the relevance and limits of these 'travelling theories', it must be stressed that these circulations are linked to other phenomena, including the extension (in the world at large) of democratic values and their plural and dialogical logics, and the intensification (in the academic world, among others) of interdisciplinary approaches. We should also highlight the practice of borrowing as an established method of epistemological relocation and the creation of novelty.

Here too, postcolonial studies and their politics and poetics of (re)appropriation[1] can serve as a telling example; not forgetting their intersections with other theories (feminist, for example), thus forming part, more broadly, of phenomena and approaches to intersectionality.

Finally, it should be noted that these circulations are also the fruit of comparative methods and the philological tradition - Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak are in direct lineage here to Erich Auerbach - whose contributions, for example in the field of intertextuality and translation, seem somewhat forgotten in the current context of epistemological transformation in the academic world. In particular, let us mention the interesting proposal of a 'constructive comparatism' by the historian Marcel Detienne, who opposes the supposed incommensurability and incomparability of different historical, anthropological and cultural experiences and representations[2]. If Detienne defends the idea of "an ethical value of comparative activity" (2009: 62), it is certainly because of its multi-perspectivist modalities, its relativisation of claims to uniqueness, monolithism, hermetic exclusivity and essential originality. As well as deconstructing the absolute nature of things - we are reminded here of the adage in the biblical 'Ecclesiastes' that 'There is nothing new under the sun' - the ethical dimension of comparatism therefore lies in the exercise of relating and contextualising, in the attempt to translate, in the knowledge that, as Homi Bhabha says, the transfer of meaning between different systems of meaning can never be total[3].

This article is part of such a 'constructive' comparative approach and subscribes to interdisciplinary dialogue, to the circulation of ideas, to the confluence - conscious or unconscious - of concepts and intellectual postures. We will be proposing a critical articulation between two notions with different origins, paths, scopes and intentions: the ecotone and the afrotopia. It will look at the elaborations of the notion of 'Afrotopia', developed by the Senegalese researcher and writer Felwine Sarr and disseminated in an essay of the same name in 2016, as well as a selection of critical writings produced as part of the Ateliers de la pensée, an interdisciplinary research platform launched in Dakar in 2016 by Sarr and the Cameroonian historian and political scientist Achille Mbembe. It will then be shown that these critical positions, which contain a more or less manifestly utopian component, allow on various levels - thematic, identity, cultural, formal, symbolic - a productive interconnection with the ecotone, a notion originally developed (and still used) in botany to describe certain biological and ecosystemic realities, but now deterritorialised - in the Deleuzian sense of the term - to serve as a metaphor of both descriptive and prescriptive value in various fields of knowledge, notably the ethno-cultural domain. The aim will therefore be to identify and discuss a number of convergences and resonances between these notions and positions that bear witness to the critical and rhetorical fertility between the Afrotopian posture and the ecotonal perspective. While the link between the ecotone - its features and figures, its processes and mechanisms - will focus on theoretical and critical postures of Afrotopia, we will conclude by proposing an overture on the articulation between the ecotone and Sarr's literary production.

Focus n°1 - ecotone, political plasticity, cultural ecosystems

To begin with, it will be useful to briefly recall ecologists' conceptions of the ecotone; after all, this is the field that shaped the notion and continues to use it, both in practice and in theory.

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[1] In addition to the elaborations on appropriation strategies in postcolonial writing by pioneers in the field (ASHCROFT Bill, GRIFFITH Gareth & TIFFIN Helen, *The Empire Writes Back*, London at New York, Routledge, 1989, ch. 2), the anchoring of the postcolonial text in a "temporality of active appropriation" is highlighted by Jean-Marc MOURA (*Littératures francophones et théorie postcoloniale*, Paris, PUF, coll. "Écritures francophones", 1999, p. 131).

[2] DETIENNE Marcel. *Comparer l'incomparable*. Paris, Seuil, coll. « Points essais », 2009.

[3] BHABHA Homi. *The Location of Culture*, London & New York, Routledge, 2008: p. 234. As for the aforementioned question of appropriation, Bhabha's thought also reveals its ambivalence and instability in areas of cultural contact. (*Ibid.*, p. 125).

Originating in the early 20th century, the ecotone is heir to earlier notions such as 'stress zones' (tonos = stress) and 'contested zones'[4]. In 1971, the American biologist Eugene Pleasants Odum, who helped popularise the concept as a way of studying the relationships between different ecosystems, coined the term "ecotonal community" (defined in relation to external communities) and attributed two major characteristics to the ecotone: on the one hand, it is a place of transition between diverse communities; on the other, it is a junction zone, a belt of tension[5]. The reality of contact at the border between ecosystems is therefore first and foremost a question of *processes*: transitions (moving from one place or state to another; some even speak of a "migration corridor"[6]), junctions (or confluences, convergences, connections), tensions (or elasticities, pressures). Then, as a result of these processes, the definition is extended as follows: the said ecotonal community contains, firstly, several organisms from the communities that intermingle, then, those only present in the ecotone. So there is *inclusion from the outside* and incorporation from elsewhere, but also uniqueness and *originality from the within* (exclusivity, because it is restricted to the ecotone). To describe these elements that are unique to the ecotone and therefore somewhat unprecedented, we could use a vocabulary that is more usual in cultural and literary studies: within the *contact zone* that is the ecotone, a third space emerges, with exogenous and familiar objects as well as novel and properly endogenous objects resulting from *hybridization* processes.

From the processes (transitions, junctions, tensions) we come to the *features* of the ecotone. These are made up of elements that are distinct (from elsewhere) and fusional (unique within), and this in great variety/diversity and density. This again raises analogies with the socio-anthropological and ethno-cultural field, insofar as we might see the ecotonal space as the meeting place and tension between two major logics and phenomena: on the one hand, multiculturalism and diaspora (*the distinct elements*); on the other, métissage, post-diaspora, creolisation (*fusion*). The island spaces of the plantation colonies, but also a number of post-colonial metropolises and urban centres, bear witness to this, as do specific places of exchange such as ports and even border areas[7].

To go even further, we could see a genuine democratic logic at work in the zone of tension that is the ecotone; it is indeed a social dynamic and a political formation of the encounter, the exchange, the confrontation, the conflict, the possible agreements and understandings (*fusion*) being nourished by distinct positions (external, opposing, even polarising) and emanating from a specific space of negotiation. The democratic vision stands apart from and dissolves the certainties of identity; it undermines the foundation of essentialist singularities and embarks on a new space, outside the reassuring differences. As the Italian sociologist Simonetta Tabboni puts it, the democratic idea, through its contradictions, imperfections and insoluble problems, requires "the recognition of continuous imbalances maintained within a field of tensions, results that are unstable by definition"[8]. Similarly, Ernesto Laclau's theories on the contemporary democratic ideal explicitly imply a logic of hybridisation which, far from being a marginal phenomenon, is in fact the very ground on which political identities are constructed. The Argentinian philosopher sees hybridisation as the symbol of a truly democratic politics, in other words, a permanent oscillation and mediation between particularist and universalist identities; an acceptance of the plural and fragmented nature of contemporary societies; the overcoming of particularism in a quest for spaces of relative

[4] LACHAVANNE Jean-Bernard, « Why study biodiversity in land-inland water ecotones? », in Lachavanne J. B. & JUGE R. (eds.). *Biodiversity in Land/inland Water Ecotones*, Paris, UNESCO at Parthenon, Coll. « Man and the Biosphere », 1997, p. 8.

[5] ODUM, Eugene Pleasants, *Fundamentals of ecology* (3e éd.). Philadelphie, W.B. Saunders Company, 1971.

[6] LACHAVANNE J. B. & JUGE R. 1997. *op. cit.*, p. 281.

[7] We refer here to some of the conferences organised as part of the "Ecotones: Encounters, Crossings, and Communities 2015-2022" programme, which focus precisely on such places: e.g. island spaces (La Réunion 2018; Manhattanville 2019), borders (Kolkata 2018), ports (Montreal 2019), urban spaces (Cape Town, 2021). See: https://emma.www.univ-montp3.fr/fr/valorisation-partenariats/ programmes-europ%C3%A9ens-et-internationaux/ecotones.

[8] TABBONI Simonetta. « Le multiculturalisme et l'ambivalence de l'étranger », in Wieviorka M. (dir.), *Une société fragmentée ? Le multiculturalisme en débat*, Paris, La Découverte, 1996, p. 250.

universalisation of values[9]. Echoing this 'radical' political science, it is also worth noting that socio-anthropologists Robin Cohen and Nicolas Van Hear also refer to ecotonal perspectives in their recent proposal for a series of 'radical solutions' to current and future migratory flows[10]. Given such *political* and *anthropological* elaborations on the features and requirements of democratic space, *biologist* theories on "ecological plasticity"[11] in the ecotone - to describe the requirement for high adaptability of species in this particular zone - again seem a fruitful analogy. Once again, theory becomes a traveller. But let's (re)move on to the cultural and conceptual domain.

For the ecotone as a "junction of communities" (i.e. initially as ecological and biological communities, i.e. ecosystems) can be extended productively to other communities (i.e. ethno-cultural, social, linguistic) and their creations, performances and mediations (cultural, linguistic, artistic, literary, etc.). This is the main approach of the multiannual programme 'Ecotones: Encounters, Crossings, and Communities' and other innovative perspectives, such as those of the feminist educationalist Florence Krall and her auto-ethnographic elaborations on travel, or of the historian John R. Gillis and his exploration of human societies in coastal spaces[12].

Moreover, such a symbolic extension of the ecotone can also be applied to other *(eco)systems* or *systems* (i.e. ensembles, devices, organisations), in an even more formal and conceptual way. One of the main figures in Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory - the third space - is a third space of *enunciation*. Although intimately linked to physical realities (diasporic, cosmopolitan and multicultural, for example), it is above all a *scriptural* posture, a *discursive* phenomenon, a space of *representation*[13].

Finally, let's add two revealing aspects about ecotones, again coming from ecologists. Some studies have emphasised the fact that ecotones, as key living spaces in ecosystems, can firstly offer 'creative solutions' for disturbed ecosystems; secondly, they can be useful resources for 'managing situations of uncertainty'[14]. In short, these ecologists are promoting an inclusive "ecotone perspective" which, moreover - and this is a major aspect - supports a broader ecological conception insofar as they also integrate economic and social factors into their reading of environmental issues. This ecotonal perspective appears to be more sustainable, providing a better understanding of variability, rewarding a non-abusive and more balanced use of resources, and ultimately reducing conflict between the uses of these resources[15]. That said, as ecotones are also characterised by discontinuities and inherently unstable dynamics[16], more recent work points to ambiguities in the concept, requiring different approaches and different scales. As a result, even in the natural sciences, we can neither freeze the ecotone nor grasp it perfectly. This also speaks volumes about the complexity of the concept's symbolic extensions, not forgetting that in all the dynamics, negotiations

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[9] LACLAU Ernesto. *Emancipation(s)*, London & New York, Verso, coll. « Radical Thinkers », 2007, p. 50 et 65.

[10] COHEN Robin & VAN HEAR Nicholas. *Refugia. Radical Solutions to Mass Displacement*, London, Routledge, 2020, p. 23-26.

[11] LACHAVANNE J. B. & JUGE R. 1997. *op. cit.*, p. 281.

[12] « Ecotones 2015-2022 », *op. cit.* For Krall, see her book *Ecotone: Wayfaring on the Margins* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1994), for Gillis, in particular his study *The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2012). For a genealogy of these different ecotonal notions, see the introduction in *Borders and Ecotones in the Indian Ocean: Cultural and Literary perspectives* (ARNOLD Markus, DUBOIN Corinne and MISRAHI-BARAK Judith (eds). Montpellier: PULM).

[13] On cultural hybridity as constitutive of third space - and vice versa - and on the ongoing negotiation of meaning and cultural symbols, see Bhabha's elaboration on the construction of cultural*statements* in a contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, whose *politically* and *symbolically* contentious and emancipatory power he emphasises (BHABHA 2008, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-55).

[14] HOLLAND Marjorie M., RISSER Paul G. & NAIMAN Robert J. (éds.). *Ecotones : The Role of Landscape Boundaries in the Management and Restoration of Changing Environments*, New York at London, Chapman at Hall, 1991, p. 130-131.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 135.

[16] LACHAVANNE J. B. & JUGE R. 1997. *op. cit.*, p. 9.

and movements involved, the ecotone will occupy a space that - however fluid and complex - will always be defined by and require another space, one that is fundamentally less or not ecotonal [17].

Focus No. 2 - Felwine Sarr's African utopia & socialist excursions

The second critical concept at the heart of this work is Afrotopia, according to Felwine Sarr from Senegal. An economist by training, but with an artistic practice and a broader societal and philosophical reflection, Sarr attempts in his book *Afrotopia* to re-found an African way of thinking that distinguishes itself from the rationalisation and productivist standardisation of Western modernity and its developmentalist narrative. In the face of this paradigm, which now seems to have 'broken down', particularly when it comes to thinking about Africa, he calls for a…

> African utopia [which] consists in carving out other ways of living together, in re-articulating relations between the different orders: the cultural, the social, the economic and the political, by creating a new space of meanings and ordering a new scale of values, this time based on cultures and their fertile onto-mythologies.[18]

His assertiveness against exogenous powers and the injunctions of neo-liberalism inspire him to think manifestly about place, the common good and ethics: "Building societies that make sense to those who live in them. Against the tide, set sail"[19]. In other words, he takes a stand against the fatalistic acceptance of a failing system that overwhelms us, and invites us to imagine new horizons and to set off on the right path.

We can already see in this extract the main points of his proposal: firstly, to adopt a more inclusive perspective (i.e. not just an economic and productivist one) to describe, name, imagine and project things (in this case, the state of African societies); secondly, to think more in terms of sharing and establishing relationships (between what he calls the "different orders", but also between systems and actors); finally, to reconsider what seems fundamental for "living together": rediscovering values and meaning through a rehabilitation of culture, symbolic systems and territories - all condensed into the term 'habitation'. The dual movement of the emancipation project is clear here: *distance* and *rupture*, on the one hand; *re-articulation* and construction of an *alternative foundation*, on the other.

If the passage quoted already contains the key terms and ideas of a social utopia - novelty, alternative, reorganisation, equality, interconnection, restoration, refoundation, edification, productivity, moral and even spiritual elevation - then the notions of "African Utopia" (note the capital letter), "Afrotopos" or the eponymous "Afrotopia", as well as their extensions, criss-cross the book. In Chapter 8 ('Afrotopos'), Sarr defines the notion as 'the *atopos* of Africa: that place not yet inhabited by the Africa that is *coming*', a place that must be 'made to happen'; the future is presented as the configuration of a 'mental space', as 'prospective thought'[20]. The term 'future' and its synonyms ('avenir', 'devenir') appear some fifty times in the text, along with other recurring declensions such as 'destiny' and the lexical field of 'projection'. At the same time, the author warns

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[17] Following the example of hybridity, for which certain critical theorists (such as Paul Hutnyk) have clearly shown the definitional and existential necessity of less or non-hybrid spaces and identities, or the irreconcilable ambiguity between universalism and particularism as the basis of democracy according to Laclau, the two polarities *requiring* each other (LACLAU 2007, op. cit. p. 35), it cannot, of course, be a question of turning the whole world into an ecotone. Or else, it would be a question of different scales and types, a kind of ecotone within the ecotone). In other words, consideration of the ecotone - or even its very existence - as a *dynamic* system at the hinge, an *inclusive* but *specific* system, requires consideration of neighbouring and bordering systems that are more *vast*, more *general* and more *stable*.

[18] SARR Felwine. *Afrotopia*, Paris, Philippe Rey, 2016, p. 27-28.

[19] *Ibid*., p. 28

[20] *Ibid*., p. 133.

against an inflationary and euphoric rhetoric of the 'future', the disabling lure of relegation to a 'perpetuated future', or the 'blissful optimism' of the 'Africa-land-of-the-future-of-exploitation-of-resources' narrative, which he sees as nothing more than the 'inverted double'[21] of the catastrophism about Africa (misery, disease, drought, war, etc.).

What's more, the Afrotopian proposal is not just a "prospective reflection", a "vision", a posture of "conceiving", the investment of a place by "thought and imagination", but it is also a question of "acting" or "working" "in the present time"[22]. As Sarr points out: "To found a utopia is not to indulge in sweet daydreaming, but to think of spaces of reality to be brought into being through thought and action"[23]. Afrotopia is therefore based on "the present time"; it is "an active utopia that sets itself the task of uncovering the vast spaces of possibility in African reality and making them fruitful"[24]. As an "active utopia", Afrotopia is seen as a utopia of agentivity, not a quest for the impossible.

This brings to mind a book by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who describes socialism as an "active utopia", with four features[25]. For this image of a future and better world, it is first and foremost a world that is perceived as still *unfulfilled* and requiring *additional effort* to achieve. Secondly, it is a world that is perceived as *desirable*[26]; not so much a world that is destined to or likely to come, but one that *should* come. In other words, it is a question of shifting the gaze away from the rationality of ends alone, from the fatalism of realpolitik, from the conservative perspectives of the 'probable', from the paths mapped out by the prognoses of historical continuity. Thirdly, Bauman speaks of a world that is *critical* of *current society* - the author points out here that a system of ideas can only remain utopian and generate activity if it is perceived as representing a system that is essentially or radically *different* from, or even *antithetical* to, the current system. Finally, active utopia means a world that involves a measure of risk, an uncertain and unpredictable side (*hazard*) and that will only come about if it is encouraged by *deliberate*, intentional, voluntary *collective action*. Unfulfilment and the imperative of effort; desire and breaking the chains of historical logic; criticism and radical difference; uncertainty and collective commitment: these four features of the active socialist utopia according to Bauman find various resonances in Sarr. Let us briefly highlight a few of them.

This can be seen, for example, in the need to think of contemporary Africa in terms of "radical novelty", to view complex African dynamics and practices through the prism of its "happy potential", and to aim for the horizon of "positive transformation"[27]. This is also evident in his openly anti-establishment rhetoric, for which African intellectuals, thinkers and artists are primarily responsible. Indeed, his project to (re)found identity, culture and epistemology involves "a revolution in paradigms and practices", "a revolution in modes of knowledge", a "cultural revolution" and even a "spiritual revolution"; and this revolution is "urgent" and must be "profound"[28]. Finally, for what he describes as a genuine "civilisational turning point" in the world, for which Africa will act as a "positive driving force", we will need "boldness", "the ardour of faith and hard work", a "collective intelligence" based on a relational economy and "acting together"[29].

At the heart of Sarr's African utopia, then, are a rhetoric, a form and a method: decentring, autonomy, the restoration of areas relegated to the margins, the re-articulation and pooling of artificially separated fields. But there is also a basis, specific areas for investment: a more equalising

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[21] *Ibid.*, p. 11.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 15, 133.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 14

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] BAUMAN Zygmunt. *Socialism. The Active Utopia*. London, Routledge, 1976, p. 17

[26] This ties in with the second meaning of Thomas More's 'utopia', which is not just 'the place that does not exist' (*u-topos*), but 'the desirable place' (*eu-topos*).

[27] SARR 2016, *op. cit.*, p. 14 et 15.

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 99, 118, 153 et 155.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 154, 152, 123 et 84.

management of resources, the restorative use of memory, myth and vitalism[30], investment in culture and the arts. Utopian, his proposal is also peppered with prescriptive, even injunctive, terms, and is therefore part of a manifesto rhetoric and posture that can also be found in other critical and emancipatory texts from the South[31]. Active, its utopia is not only reminiscent of Bauman's elaborations on socialism, but echoes the more recent work by Cohen and Van Hear, who refer to their innovative and radical initiatives on migration issues as "concrete utopia"[32].

Focus no. 3 - African utopia according to Les Ateliers de la pensée

These Afrotopian considerations find a definite extension in the Ateliers de la pensée dakarois, which effectively contribute - if only in part - as Françoise Vergès puts it, to developing "new utopias"[33]. The initiators of the Ateliers defined them as a "free platform" that encouraged "the expression of a necessarily plural discourse"[34] and aimed to "examine the present and future of our world from an African perspective". Critical renewal takes the form of a re-reading of the world through a "new cartography"[35] that is decentred and more inclusive - a decentring that echoes the projects of postcolonial historiography and anthropology[36] and South American decolonial theory. For Mbembe and Sarr, in addition to a more global democratic plurality that extends across Africa, openness and experimentation are also associated with this positioning. The utopian nature of the project is expressed not only in the frequent references to the imagination or in the resolutely forward-looking perspective. But it is also evident in its "thinking of togetherness" (l'en-commun)[37], which - openly inspired by Glissant's "Tout-Monde" ("All-World") - turns the African question (a better habitability of the continent) into a global question (a better habitability of the world). The title of the first volume to emerge from the platform, *Écrire l'Afrique-Monde*, makes this clear.

For our purposes, I would like to highlight three central aspects that emanate from the twenty texts in this first volume. They are partly intertwined, and are reminiscent of other emancipatory notions and thinking. Firstly, if the epistemic renewal of Africa and the South means a decentralisation of Western frames of reference - it is therefore a priori a theoretical, conceptual and disciplinary approach - it ultimately aims at a new politics of memory. Philosopher Nadia Yala Kisukidi refers to this as a "policy" against the "brutalisation" and "repeated erasure of mutilated bodies and memories"[38]. There are convergences here with Séverine Kodjo-Grandvaux's idea of the 'world-memory' and, more broadly, Sarr and Mbembe's call for a multiplication of memories and an acknowledgement of Africa's diverse temporalities[39]. Utopia is thus conceived as a broader awareness of memory. Then there is the emphasis placed on reinvesting in the social bond and the

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[30] Anthony Mangeon sees a "retroprospective" dimension in Sarr's Afrotopia, insofar as it "seeks above all to break with the errors of a past under influence". (*L'Afrique au futur. Le renversement des mondes*, Paris, Hermann, 2022, p. 250).

[31] ARNOLD Markus. « Entre créolisation, Afropolitanisme et Afrotopia : résonances et lignes de partage entre trois « stylistiques du monde » », *French Studies in Southern Africa*, n°51.1, 2021, p. 25-43.

[32] COHEN & VAN HEAR 2020, *op. cit.*, p. 30. This is a reference to Ernst Bloch.

[33] VERGÈS Françoise. « Utopies émancipatrices », in MBEMBE A. & SARR F. (dir.), *Écrire l'Afrique-Monde*, Paris & Dakar, Philippe Rey & Jimsaan, 2017, p. 247.

[34] MBEMBE & SARR 2017, *op. cit.*, p. 7 and MBEMBE Achille & SARR Felwine (dir.). *Politique des temps. Imaginer les devenirs africains*, Paris & Dakar, Philippe Rey & Jimsaan, 2019, p. 7.

[35] MBEMBE & SARR 2017, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

[36] See, for example, Dipesh Chakrabarty's call for 'provincialisation' (*Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000) or Boaventura de Sousa Santos's need for a 'gigantic effort at decentring' for an epistemology of the South. (*Epistemologies of the South. Justice against epistemicide*, London & New York, Routledge, 2014, p. 125).

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

[38] KISUKIDI Nadia Yala. « *Lætitia africana* – Philosophie, décolonisation et mélancolie », in MBEMBE & SARR 2017, *op. cit.*, p. 66 et 67.

[39] KODJO-GRANDVAUX Séverine. « Mémoires du monde, mémoire-monde », in MBEMBE & SARR 2019, *op. cit.*, p. 257-275 ; ARNOLD 2021, *op. cit.*, p. 35-36.

en-commun, as in anthropologist Abdourahmane Seck's project to rehabilitate democratic culture, which speaks of an enhancement of "ordinary social transactions" and "everyday tools and knowledge that express the social bond"[40]. Utopia therefore means strengthening relationships from below. Lastly, the idea of not just thinking about, but, as Seck puts it, 'healing' the community (*l'en commun*) links the vision of a rediscovered community to that of reparation. This ethical aspect echoes the work of decolonising philosophy, according to Kisukidi, which also contains a 'reparative dimension'[41]. Utopia is therefore an ethical space via and for the community - for, as Deleuze would say, "*a people that is missing*"[42].

Unsurprisingly, these new memorial, social and reparative logics extend to other emancipatory thinking: Léopold Sédar Senghor's updating of the "en-commun"[43]; Glissant's reconsideration of the "Tout-Monde" and "archipelagic thinking"; the ongoing quest for "truly universal universalism"[44] via Aimé Césaire and Immanuel Wallerstein; Paul Gilroy's ambition for a "new planetary consciousness"[45] - among other tutelary figures including Frantz Fanon, of course. They are all part of the Afrotopian project, contributing to the "deconstruction of the world" (*déclosion du monde*)[46] envisaged for and from Africa. And let's not forget that creation plays a key role in these theoretical, political and social demands. As Kisukidi puts it: it's "a creative activity" with "joyful" emotional manifestations that will help to "[f]orce the blossoming of the future against the night"[47].

Connections: links between the ecotone and afrotopia

To what extent can these Afrotopian proposals, by Sarr and Les Ateliers de la pensée, resonate and articulate with the notion of the ecotone? Let's start with the second volume to emerge from the Ateliers de la pensée, *Politique des Temps* (2019) (Politics of Time), which extends this emancipatory thinking by placing even greater emphasis on foresight - the subtitle, *Imaginer les devenirs africains* (Imagining African futures), is clear proof of this. A number of reflections in the book reveal a certain analogy with the ecotone.

Thus, in their affirmation of a complex and multiple contemporaneity (there is talk of "entanglement", "*migration*" and "*concatenation*"), the editors of the book turn away from postures of "refutation" and instead invest a time of "conditional affirmation"[48]. This is defined as "the exploration of a future yet to be written, a future without guarantees or promises, the future of the emergence of fertile, life-giving possibilities"; at the heart of this ambition, the authors place "the quest for new dwellings and new chains of relationships"[49]. Clearly, both temporality and spatiality are moving towards new configurations. These proposals already reveal certain similarities with the ecotone in terms of processes (the question of transition, junction, tension) and characteristics (diversity, density). The other place we are looking for is a place where contact is *operational* and, above all, where this contact is *recognised* as such and as producing unique identities and relational positions.

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[40] SECK Abdourahmane. « Panser l'en-commun. Contribution à une anthropologie de la forfaiture politique au Sénégal », in MBEMBE & SARR 2017, *op. cit.*, p. 332.

[41] KISUKIDI 2017, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

[42] DELEUZE Gilles. *Cinéma 2. L'image temps*, Paris, Les éditions de Minuit, 1985, p. 282.

[43] See for example. SARR 2016, *op. cit.*, p. 129 and MBEMBE Achille. « Penser le monde à partir de l'Afrique », in MBEMBE & SARR 2017, *op. cit.*, p. 388.

[44] DIAGNE Souleymane Bachir. « Pour un universel vraiment universel », in MBEMBE & SARR 2017, *op. cit.*, p. 71-78.

[45] MBEMBE 2017, *op. cit.*, p. 389.

[46] *Ibid*.

[47] KISUKIDI 2017, *op. cit.*, p. 66. Similarly, for Deleuze, it is creation that tends towards the "missing people".

[48] MBEMBE & SARR 2019, *op. cit.*, p. 8 et 10.

[49] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Two contributors to the volume give even more substance to these ideas. Firstly, for the philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne, the question of the "African presence"[50] is at a key moment in its evolution: in addition to the resistance, defence and illustration of a fixed identity, Africa is now moving towards the question of future and multiplicity. Updating Senghor's thinking, he urgently calls for "reinventing an African sense of multiculturalism, ethnic and religious pluralism", and even uses the term "hybridity"[51] to refer to the multiplicity and entanglement of North African and sub-Saharan identities. Diagne's proposal seems to speak of the need to recognise ecotonal logics and realities on a specifically cultural and religious level - and to do so against identity-based conservatism.

Achille Mbembe, for his part, extends this question of belonging even further in his paradigm of "circulations", which lies at the heart of his imagination of African futures. Indeed, Mbembe refers not only to phenomena of movement, displacement and mobility (a kind of physical and geographical itinerancy), but more generally to "practices of extension" and "practices of complementarity"[52] (referring to broader cultural issues).

He speaks of spaces where "the spatial relationship will be one of *comings* and *goings*, of *intersections* and *crossings*", specifying that this relationship - one might say ecotonal - will have been "structured [...] by complex polarities"[53] - in other words, the outside of external ecosystems. Finally, his call to "weave networks of transnational communication", to encourage the constitution of an "Afropolitan public space", to recognise the "principle of intermingling" for the African continent finds its global counterpart in the incitement to "invent other ways of inhabiting the planet"[54]. This other way of inhabiting the world, conceived more in terms of relationships and interconnections, will require us to imagine political forms and models of belonging that are "more flexible, foldable and mobile"[55].

As we can see, Diagne's and Mbembe's positions on identities and living together bear a striking resemblance to the logics, mechanisms and characteristics associated with the ecotone. And they are echoed on a number of points by other contributors to the Ateliers de la pensée: a platform which, by virtue of its interculturality, interdisciplinarity and intermediality - and the original thought and production that emanates from it - can be seen as a veritable conceptual ecotone. To use the rhetoric of the above-mentioned biologists, such an ecotonal perspective can offer 'creative solutions' for disturbed ecosystems (i.e. communities disrupted by atavistic reflexes, nationalist revivals and neo-liberal violence). Such thinking can provide useful resources for dealing with the many 'situations of uncertainty' of our contemporary times.

Let's return now to Sarr and the ecotonal resonances in his work. In *Afrotopia*, four aspects seem particularly significant in this respect. First, his conception of African contemporaneity - or 'Afrocontemporaneity' - which he links to Chakrabarty's idea of 'alternative modernities'. Anxious to detach the narrative of modernity from its supposed exclusive link with the Western paradigm, resulting in a diversity of 'incarnations' of the modern in 'peripheral' places, Sarr sees in African modernity various hybrid forms that are of the order of the 'unfinished' or 'in gestation'[56]. In its "quest for a better way of living together", this African modernity is also characterised by "contradictory tendencies" and is "always under negotiation"[57]. For what he calls Afrocontemporaneity, let us quote a longer passage:

> the notion of the *contemporaneity of several worlds* seems to us to describe contemporary African societies fairly well, characterised by a *process* of political, social and cultural *change*, an unfinished *transition* from the old to the new; a juxtaposition within the same society of different temporalities

[50] DIAGNE Souleymane Bachir, « De la pensée de l'identité à celle des devenirs africains », in MBEMBE & SARR 2019, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

[51] *Ibid.*, p. 22 et 29.

[52] MBEMBE Achille. « Circulations », in MBEMBE & SARR 2019, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

[53] *Ibid.*

[54] *Ibid.*, p. 144 et 145.

[55] *Ibid.*, p. 145.

[56] SARR 2016, *op. cit.*, p. 34 et 37.

[57] *Ibid.*, p. 38.

and epistemologies [...] where *several reference systems* can *cohabit*, *negotiate*, *enter into conflict* or *cross-fertilise*. Some people live in a traditional time, a so-called modern time and a postmodern time all at the same time. As a society's cultural values are *constantly* being *redefined*, changing African societies are symptomatic of this *ongoing renegotiation* of their cultural references and the contemporaneity (transversality) of several worlds. One of the challenges of this Afro-contemporaneity is to succeed in asserting its fertile differences without falling into the extreme of communitarian confinement.[58]

To read this in ecotonal terms: in African society, there are several ecosystems ("worlds", "reference systems") whose encounter ("juxtaposition") is materialised by different processes (simple "cohabitation", "negotiation", possible "conflict" or possible "cross-fertilisation"). And this process, with its possible outcomes (= distinct forms and new forms), is "permanent". These ecosystems are "mutating" and "redefining" themselves, and consequently the encounter between them and the possible results are also "mutating". We are in an inevitable process of "transition" towards an "unfinished novelty". As for the African "affirmation" at the end of the statement (in this case, in particular, an affirmation of oneself), it is manifested not through hermetic and immutable differences (i.e. distinct postures and systems), but through their "fecundity", i.e. their plasticity, their openness to inclusion, or even their syncretic potential. Indeed, in this conception of identity informed by an ecotonal reading, the idea of 'fertile differences' is a major element. The second point shows this.

In his cultural analysis, Sarr draws on the idea of a "dynamic system"[59] that will never return to its original state, which distances him from the nativist claim. He sees Africanness as "syncretic", and sees in it, since the arbitrary fixing of borders after the Berlin Conference, "the fluidity of notions of belonging stemming from its cultures"[60]. At the same time, despite this syncretism and fluidity of identity, the author emphasises a particular Africanness, a "specifically African" identity that enables it to contribute its "singular voice"[61] to humanity. This claim that Africa is a recognised actor who, through its identity, its territoriality and its specific culture (however syncretic it may be), contributes to the existence of a global common is reminiscent of what Jacques Rancière calls "the sharing of the sensible"[62].

Then (third connection with the ecotone), Sarr's Afrotopia, despite its prospective (and therefore temporal) dimension, is a thought of place[63]. The 'location of culture' (Bhabha) that is Afrotopos means first and foremost an emphasis on inhabited space, on the 'dwelling to be inhabited'. And if African identities can be read through the prism of the ecotone, this applies even more so to urban spaces, to which the author devotes an entire chapter. Drawing on an entire biogenic field, the rhetoric deployed here resonates with ecotonal characteristics. The city is seen as an 'organic whole', described as 'a living body engaged in a process of growth and metamorphosis', referred to both as a place (defined as a 'space' in which a 'relationship of coexistence' between elements operates) and as a territory (defined as a 'space of circulation'); according to Sarr, these are territories with 'shifting [...] configurations'[64]. More specifically, echoing the aforementioned idea of Africa's multiple contemporaneity, he speaks of "palimpsest cities" characterised by plurality and entanglement: "several eras stand side by side, several architectural styles, several ways of inhabiting public space,

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[58] *Ibid.*, p. 41, emphasis mine.
[59] *Ibid.*, p. 60.
[60] *Ibid.*, p. 136 et 150.
[61] *Ibid.*, p. 129 et 149.
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The 'system' that the philosopher describes as 'sharing the sensible' is based on a productive articulation between particularity ('exclusive shares') and universality ('a shared common'). It is a "distribution of shares and places [that] is based on a sharing of spaces, times and forms of activity that determines the very way in which a common lends itself to participation and in which people share in this sharing" (Rancière Jacques, *Le partage du sensible. Esthétique et politique*, Paris, La Fabrique Éditions, 2000, p.12).

[63] Sarr 2016, *op. cit.*, p. 111-122.
[64] *Ibid.*, p. 140.

between town and country, between *bric and broc*..." [65].. On the one hand, we are reminded of the idea of bricolage, conveyed by various designers of *métissage* or *croolisation*[66]. On the other hand, we are reminded of Salman Rushdie's famous phrase "Mélange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world"[67], which has become a kind of motto for postcolonial cultural hybridisation and the writing that emanates from it.

According to Sarr, in African cities and their *diversity*, there is a particular sense of *density*: above all, there is "an intense circulating energy, an overflowing vitality, a dynamism, a buzzing"[68]. Heterogeneity and mobility, struggle, confusion and clashes, but also concentration, density and intensity, all associated with an organic universe (energy, vitality, the senses...): as we can see, these are some of the features and processes of the ecotonal environment.

Finally, if the plurality of palimpsest urban spaces, with their superimposition and sedimentation of strata, conveys the characteristics of the ecotone, let us mention one last point where Sarr's Afrotopie resonates with the ecotone: the temporality of the threshold. At their various scales, ecotones are thresholds, certainly from a physical and material point of view. But the ecological processes that are set in motion, with their different outcomes and possible forms (or presages), also designate a moment: a moment of intensity that opens up towards something new, a liminal time of transition towards the new. In Sarr's Afrotopie, this temporal threshold is materialised in a rhetoric of the "dawn", clearly anchored in the last chapter of the work entitled "Les leçons de l'aube" ("The lessons of the dawn"). This is, it should be emphasised, the conclusion, and it is presented not just through the prism of movement, but that of instability, of faltering. There is no solemn moment of launch, imbued with deterministic enthusiasm, but rather questioning and uncertainty, despite the strong positions and visionary voluntarism without which, after all, this would not be a utopia. This imaginary of the dawn is part of, and an extension of, a way of thinking about the 'coming out of the night' (the 'great' and 'long' African night), a figure that - unconnected with the notorious Conradian 'darkness', or even in refutation of its problematic connotations - is at the heart of Mbembe's decolonial proposal, himself inspired by Fanonian elaborations that also convey this image. For Sarr, this dawn constitutes an "awakening" for Africa, in order to "complete its colonisation through a fertile encounter with itself"[69]. The African utopia is therefore a space-time of the threshold; it is carried by "intermediate men", on the way, with the aim of "bringing about" not the "impossible", but the "extraordinary"[70]. The ecotonal process has begun.

Conclusion (and fictional openings)

Whether it's a question of the meeting of diverse elements, whether it's conflictual or fruitful, of a difference and multiplicity that circulates, communicates and possibly mixes, or of a transformation and redefinition of both the singular and the common, all in a space-time of liminality and threshold: ecotone and afrotopia converge in the way they renew modes of representation and open up perspectives for innovative ways of reading complex phenomena and imaginaries in a variety of fields.

While the ecotone - its characteristics, logic and processes - can be read in conjunction with the conceptualisations of African utopia by Sarr and the contributors to the Ateliers de la pensée, the diversity and complexity of the work undertaken by these (mainly) African and Afrodiasporic authors naturally goes beyond the reflections developed here. What's more, the analogies between ecotone

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[65] *Ibid*., p. 141 (nous soulignons).

[66] See for example LAPLANTINE François & NOUSS Alexis. *Le métissage. Un exposé pour comprendre. Un essai pour réfléchir*, Paris, Flammarion, coll. « Dominos », 1997, p. 75 ; VERGES Françoise & MARIMOUTOU Carpanin. *Amarres. Créolisations india-océanes*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2006, p. 58.

[67] RUSHDIE Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London, Granta & Penguin, 1992, p. 394.

[68] SARR 2016, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

[69] *Ibid*., p. 152.

[70] *Ibid*., p. 151.

and afrotopia remain somewhat vague and should not be idealised. This can be explained, on the one hand, by the fact that the objects designated by utopia and ecotone escape a certain definitional fixation and are understood in terms of spatio-temporal scales. On the other hand, there is also a certain difference in nature. Utopia remains a *horizon*. Even if it is active and concrete, it is not yet part of the present, of the real; it takes shape as a possibility, a desirable future. It has a mobilising force that can move reality in a certain direction and comes with a series of objectives. Utopia is therefore less descriptive than prospective or prescriptive (guided by emancipatory political positions); it has a teleological dimension, presenting itself as a *model for* (an ideal city, a fairer society, etc.). Utopia therefore poses the question "What can I hope for? - to quote Bauman's epigraph - and even flirts with the question posed by ideologists and politicians, "What should I do?[71] However, in its active and concrete dimension, it avoids illusory and prophetic projection, aiming instead to "think of *spaces of reality* to make happen"[72]. This is not only critical, but also epistemological.

The ecotone, on the other hand, is a *reality* in many contexts, but it does not remain stable: its contours and even its internal edges can move. In reality, the ecotone can be understood descriptively, as a *model of*. If it poses a question, it is a priori that of the philosophers: "What can I know?"[73] But this descriptive and epistemological model can have prospective and prescriptive value for other areas - particularly in the cultural extensions highlighted by the 'Ecotones' series of conferences. Indeed, while taking care not to embellish or exalt ecotonal realities, their very heterogeneity, complexity and therefore potential unpredictability - can productively inform other, more homogeneous and more static ecosystems, both present and future. The *model of* operates here as a *model for*, and not only for, those who deterritorialise the ecotone from its primary habitat to other places (anthropological, cultural, symbolic...), but also for phenomena linked to the primary scientific places of the notion: ecology. Here, the field of knowledge is complemented by that of the imagination.

That said, in the context of Afrotopia, the concept of the ecotone provides numerous resonances and common denominators at the rhetorical, symbolic, representational and conceptual levels. It appears to be productive from a critical and epistemological point of view, but also from a political one, since it allows new readings of identity and cultural phenomena, thereby nourishing a plural and democratic consciousness. In addition to Laclau's aforementioned link between hybridisation and democracy, we should mention Stuart Hall's definition of democracy as "*an authentically heterogeneous space*"[74]. And let's not forget the potential or benefits of the 'ecotonal perspective' advocated by ecologists: sustainability, understanding through variability, balancing resources, reducing conflicts.

If Sarr's Afrotopie and the critical postures around the Ateliers de la pensée enable a productive articulation with the ecotonal perspective, such connections will find multiple resonances in the fictional texts of many writers from the South, which it will be promising to explore beyond the conceptualisations proposed in this article[75]. Felwine Sarr himself is an interesting case in point, for his literary writing does indeed bear witness to ecotonal traits at several levels. We see this from a thematic point of view, via his investment in multiple affiliations (both conflicting and fusional), via his reflection on religious and spiritual syncretism, via the complex articulation between cultural, historical and political reference systems (especially between Africa and Europe, but also involving Asia), and finally via his staging of specific geographies (mangroves, deltas, islands, cities). But ecotonal logics (the interconnection of living things, relational logics, the tension of the plural, singular fusion) are also expressed metatextually and formally. His writings elude generic fixation,

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[71] BAUMAN 1976, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

[72] SARR 2016, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

[73] BAUMAN 1976, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

[74] HALL Stuart. *Identités et cultures. Politiques des* cultural studies, Paris, Éditions Amsterdam, 2008, p. 408.

[75] See for example the study of Léonora Miano's *Rouge impératrice* (2019) by Justine Feyereisen (« Écotopie : Utopie et écotone urbain en Afrique subsaharienne », in ARNOLD Markus, LACROIX Thomas & MISRAHI-BARAK Judith, *Reconfiguring, Repurposing the City. Urban Ecotones in the Global South*, Leiden, Rodopi/Brill, 2023 (forthcoming).

borrowing from a diversity of enunciation postures (critical, analytical, descriptive, lyrical, visionary), registers and also languages without blissfully celebrating textual hybridisation. *Méditations africaines*[76], for example, has no fixed format and blithely mixes narrative, portrait painting, aphorism, mythology and speculation. It is more akin to thought in motion, resembling nomadic writings and possessing a certain rhythm and musicality - one thinks here of the tonality of the eco-tone. Finally, the Afro-contemporaneity of Sarri's characters (and also of his autobiographical self) is nourished by identities at the confluence of different and sometimes very heterogeneous reference systems, referring as much to Nietzsche as to Senghor and Aimé Césaire, as much to Milan Kundera as to Rûmi and Khalil Gibran. As we have seen, this is a textual and literary echo of the "juxtaposition of different temporalities and epistemologies"[77] characteristic of the Afrotopian vision. What emerges from all this is an active, concrete utopia of *living together* and thinking together, which, for Sarr, is first and foremost a question of thinking and living together with oneself. According to the end of his recent work *La saveur des derniers mètres*, this question is negotiated in particular by means of the "zero point of wandering" that is writing: this scriptural quest that is both fixed and opens up circulation; this ecotonal place "where movement and immobility become one"[78].

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[76] SARR Felwine. *Méditations africaines*, Montréal, Mémoire d'encrier, 2012.

[77] SARR 2016, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

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