The Visible and Invisible: Remaking Cities in Africa

AbdouMaliq Simone

Part One: A Practicing Urban Politics

The Ghost in the (Political) Machine

Lagos is situated on a brackish, shallow lagoon drained by four major rivers and interlaced with a series of canals to evacuate overflows and waste. At the end of January 2002, nearly 2,000 people perished in the Isolo Canal at Oke-Afa, Ikotun-Egbe, and Ejigbo, as well as the Ajao Estate Canal in Mafoluku. People were fleeing massive fireballs, which to them at the time were of unknown origin, but later were determined to be thousands of pounds of exploding armaments stored in the nearby Ikeja Military Cantonment, themselves set off by a mysterious fire.

Even as mass panic took hold, there was general wonder why so many rushed into the canals — since most could not swim, what made them believe, even in their panic, that they could reach the other side? The general conclusion was that, as the canals were covered in water hyacinth, most believed that the vegetation provided a sound footing on which to cross. At the same time, even for those able to swim, death could have come from the extreme toxicity of certain industrial pollutants.

Water hyacinth is one of the most productive plants on earth, as well as one of the most problematic. The glossy green, leathery leaf blades grow to 20 centimeters long and 5 - 15 centimeters wide, and are attached to petiole that are often spongy-inflated. The plant can form impenetrable mats of floating vegetation, and numerous dark, branched, fibrous roots dangle in the water from the underside. It reproduces by seeds and by daughter plants that form on rhizomes. Individual plants break off the mat and can be dispersed by winds and water currents. As many as 5,000 seeds can be produced by a single plant. Low oxygen conditions develop beneath hyacinth mats, impeding water flow and creating breeding grounds for mosquitoes.

It is the very productivity of the water hyacinth — its rhizomatic structure that seemingly impedes any limiting effort based on cutting it off from the "roots" — that accounts for the mixture of fascination and alarm through which it is usually approached. For the mats are a surface that is both inclusive and structuring of new and open-ended relationships, providing a series of connections, switches, relays, and circuits for activating matter and information.

Rescue efforts proved exceedingly difficult as rescuers had to cut their way through the dense entanglement that had already encompassed individual bodies. It is perhaps ironic that morphology so capable of spreading itself rapidly across a fluid surface can so impede another's mobility. As the reputed criminals, to whom these canals have been conceded by local residents, pointed out in the aftermath of the tragedy, it is not a matter of trying to run across the matted vegetation. Rather, the key is rolling over, gliding along the surface, allowing the body to do things that it never thought it was capable of doing.

As one "area boy" told a reporter from the Vanguard newspaper, the canals had long been haunted — after all, these are conduits to a different world. The question is: What is this different world whose passageways are supervised by ghosts? What are the invisible circuits of navigation that haunt the city in its present form?

For, there is a ghostly order in the city. In many cities, trucks come and go in the middle of the night, and it is not clear what they carry or bring in, despite constant police checks.[1] At the end of 2000, it was reported that there were 2,177 religious sects newly constituted in Kinshasa, many who meet during allnight prayer sessions, where bodies, money, and capacity appear and disappear to discordant logics.[2] Urban quarters throughout the continent whisper to themselves, if at all, where did "so and so" go, having difficulty keeping track of the disappeared, while also barely accounting for a wide range of events that appear to have no responsible agent.

Yes, cities are full of the material. There is the materiality of fetching water, riding on overcrowded taxis, negotiating hard for a good price for tomatoes, avoiding the downpour seeping through a weathered tin roof, fighting off malarial fever, ignoring the stench of overflowing sewage drains, or taking apart an engine block in the hot sun. But across these activities, there is a large swathe of the ephemeral attempting to enroll the sweat and passion of hardworking urban bodies into networks of concrete becoming that go beyond the artifice of citizenship.

Residents along the Isolo-Oshidi axis poured from their "indented" quarters, Shogunle, Jakande Estate, Ejigbo, and converged on the canals because the layout of their quarters meant that escape necessarily led them in this direction. People ran into each other after years of not being in contact; acquaintances discovered that they were virtual neighbors; people extended help and support on this day and even in the months after. But additionally, there was also the uncanny ability of apparent strangers to identify precisely where the dead or where rescuers actually lived. An invisible architecture of connections, in the wake of this tragedy, has found various visible forms. Children have been, returned to families on the basis of "hunches". Mutual assistance is now connecting quarters that may be in close proximity, but due to the topography of the city can be connected only through highly circuitous navigation. There are hundreds of stories of people rediscovering each other, of a basis for connection in a city whose fragmenting pulls were substantially intensified in the wake of the disaster.

Every city has its "wild topographies". For practicing everyday urban survival always generates "ghostly correlates of unactualized possibilities" that collapse the difference between near and far.[3] In this spirit, cities like Lagos and Kinshasa, Freetown and Johannesburg, usually marked with great historical, economic, and cultural distance from each other, find ways of circling in the same orbit. It is usually the underside that wins the claim on visibility in terms of these connections between cities. Nigerian drug dealers in Johannesburg; Executive Outcome mercenaries and diamond dealers in Freetown; South African shady business in Kinshasa, and so forth. But if this canalization of illegality is the most visible architecture through which otherwise "distant" cities converge, what else might have happened? What other economies might have ensued; what other exchanges and collaborations might still be possible if the conventional maps of regionalization and urban economic development would, on the surface, seem to move them further from each other?

Urban theory now tells us that heterogeneous forces, surfaces, and spaces constitute each urban condition that exists as a structuring context. All cities are places of multiple intensities and layers. These layers and intensities pass through, settle, consolidate, and disperse across the diverse spaces to which their various intersections themselves give rise. These intensities include populations, sounds, machines, roads, discourses, buildings, grids of water and electricity, organizational forms and sites, nurturing and dispossession, as well as the emanations of nature, to name a few. The uses and implications of these intensities hurtle along vast circuits of connectivity. Identities and actions are situated in multiple loops of causation, opportunity, and constraint.[4]

The intersection of intensities is not that of fixed objects and identities with clear boundaries. Rather, it is an intersection which "frees" pieces of objects and identities from specific constitutive enclosures, opening them up to new layers and formations. Since there is no "real" difference between multiple formations and the criss-crossing of intensities — dividing up or connecting with other intensities — the multiplicities only grow by changing their nature.[5] For the "event" of this convergence of multiple intensities expresses itself only as that which is subject to variation.[6] A series of these variations is held together and set apart momentarily from a larger environment through enfolding connections and implications. The convergence of exteriors that do not belong together at a paradoxical element is an intensity opened to both increasing stratification, ordering, and dispersion. So at this intersection or coexistence of intensities in urban Africa, the discernible decline of living standards, the incessant politics of emergency and social dissipation, AND the emergence of singular capacities, of social cohabitation and general intellect take on and configure new conditions of possibility. As Deleuze would remind us, in the midst of every city, there is a substantial and groundless complexity of arrangements and interactions — among people, objects, territories, climates — which take that city outside of its confines. To draw upon this capacity is not an act of a particular remembering. It is not an act of repositioning or relinking an observer to a more perspicacious line of sight.[7]

Rather, such complexity is revealed in the moments in which a place is "blown apart" — the convergence of trajectories — movements, unfoldings, expulsions, gatherings — linked in an apparent impossibility — and thus redistributing what has come before and opening up to what is yet to come. Jean-Luc Nancy has stated that contemporary political existence is one of intersection — i.e., an incessant process of acting without a model, and is thus an environment also in the making. Instead of consolidating clearly discernible and bounded territories as platforms of action and interaction, there is a process of "spacing out", of generating, enfolding, and extending space in which mapping is always behind, struggling to "catch up"[8].

The Politics of Invisibility

Indeed, across Africa there is a greater preoccupation with death. Death not so much as the termination of life — although the intensifying difficulties faced by people in proliferating conflict, economic debilitation, and HIV/AIDs do amplify such a connotation. But more powerful is the sense of death related to the capacity for sudden transformation, of being able to completely transform oneself into something else, to go somewhere else. Cities are full of stories of sudden and inexplicable transformations and resurrections — of people who have nothing suddenly accumulating massive amounts of wealth only to lose it overnight and then have it "resurrected" at a later time. These oscillations are embedded in a context where the horizons of a reasonably attainable future and the capacity to imagine them have disappeared for many youth — now the region's largest population group. Urban Africans also appear increasingly uncertain how to spatialize an assessment of their life chances — i.e., where will they secure livelihood, where can they feel protected and looked after, where will they acquire the critical skills and capacities.

Given the heightened mobility of African populations among locations marked by ever-increasing disparities in economic capacity, the pressures for maintaining functional cohesion within the framework of extended family systems and the practices of resource distribution that go with it are enormous. There is a preoccupation on the part of many residents in African cities with the extent to which they are tied to the fates of others whom they witness "sinking" all around them. At the same time, they hope that the ties around them are sufficiently strong to rescue them if need be.

The very acts of mooring and unmooring social ties become the locus of intense contestation and concern — i.e., who can do what with whom under what circumstances becomes a domain so fraught with tension and even violence that clear demarcations are deferred and made undecidable. In other words, it is not clear just what is taking place. This ambiguity is a reality that urban residents not only must face but also seem to weave themselves. In the city of Douala, this process of obscuring is called *mapan.* The word refers to architectures of movement and dwelling where the layout of the quarter is meant to always confound and unhinge clear assessments about what is going on in the face of the overwhelming threats of disappearance posed by both state and "mystical" authorities.

Perhaps the overarching framework precipitating these concerns in African cities has been structural adjustment. Briefly, adjustment has been materialized in five areas of reform. There is the determination of prices by "free markets"; the reduction of state control on prices; the divestiture of state resources into the private sector; the absolute reduction of the state budget; and a reorientation of public bureaucracy toward support of the private sector.

But adjustment not only refers to policies that restructure the economy. It also refers to the restructuring of the time and space of African lives as well, with an adjustment in the economy of language itself — i.e., the instrument through which it becomes possible to construct subject positions and discernible relationships between things and value, the real and the symbolic. Out of the crises in the political field occasioned by floating currencies, financial fluxes at high velocities, and insurmountable debt emerges the concentration of value in hyperreal finance that comes to embody all the limits of what is imaginable.

In other words, seemingly the entirety of a nation's material resources is owed to foreign interests and, in the process, becomes owned by them as well. Spaces of transaction are effectively eroded, as whatever a nation possesses — its material, human, and cultural resources — is consumed in a spectral conception of value — i.e., the values of virtual financial capital. The spectral is channeled through the calculus of submitting the volatility of postcolonial societies in the making to the volatility of price fluctuations which constitute the standard through which derivatives, the primary instrument through which African resources are leveraged to an indeterminable future, are priced. In this mechanism aimed at objectifying all risk, the particularities and contingencies of locales are subsumed to a restructuring of the relationship between discourse and experience, words and things, in such a way as everything disappears in the face of this spectrality of value that mirrors the world as a totality.

This era of structural adjustment, then, frames the intense preoccupation across the region with a *politics of invisibility.* If a discernible future and a life outside of incessant immiseration have become unthinkable, then Africans must operate through the spectral in order to proffer some counter-reality. Invisibility as a practice does not reflect some intrinsic cultural predilection or capacity. Rather, invisibility is a political construction — a means of both configuring and managing particular resources and the medium through which specific instantiations of the political are deployed. In cities where livelihood, mobility, and opportunity are produced and enacted through the very agglomeration of different bodies marked and situated in diverse ways, how can permutations in the intersection of their given physical existence, their stories, networks, and inclinations, produce specific value and capacity? If the city is a huge intersection of bodies in need and with desires in part propelled by the sheer number of them, how can larger numbers of bodies sustain themselves by imposing themselves in critical junctures, whether these junctures are discrete spaces, life events, sites of consumption or production?

Invisibility is not simply an intrinsic condition of some unyielding tradition or alternative modernity. It is not the cloak of the clandestine adorned in order to carry out specific agendas, or to sneak through the surveillance of prevailing administrations, authorities, or "conceptual fields". It is not the articulation of a pragmatics which foregrounds the relative incapacity and marginality of African urban functions, residents, and places as a means to divert external attention away from a more "authentic" and efficacious version of urban life. Invisibility is both product and practice. Invisibility ensues from collisions among what are, on the surface, divergent trajectories. On the one hand, there are trajectories of resource disposition, trade, cultural recognition, and political power where African spaces seem excluded from active participation in flows and transactions at various larger scales.

On the other, there are trajectories where these spaces become frontiers in an often very deliberate experimentation of extending and reordering space. In these latter trajectories, African cities are engaged as openings onto the possibilities of the unconventional and the unrecorded — where urban dynamics are shifted away from actual cities to murky borderlands, and where new formulations of sovereignty, belonging, and nationhood are provisionally concretized. Exclusion and incorporation, marginality and experimentation, then, converge in ways that are not easily discernible to any kind of actor operating in this interstice.

These "collisions" are also of the infiltration among "inconsistent" temporalities.[9] What looks to be stasis, when nothing appears to have been accomplished, may actually be the highly intricate engineering of interactions among different events, actors, and situations. In such occurrences, events, actors, and situations may "pass through" each other and take notice of each other without discernible conditions actually changing. It is just these possibilities — of different actors and situations dealing with each other without apparent ramification — which make African cities appear dynamic and static at the same time. On the other hand, things can happen very fast, and where seemingly nothing has been brought to bear on a particular setting. In other words, sometimes conditions change with remarkable speed — e.g., the structures of authority, the alignments of loyalty and collaboration, the mobilization of money and resources — where it is not apparent just what is going on and who is contributing what to these changes.

Still, we must recognize that larger numbers of urban Africans are disconnected from both the post-independence narratives of national development and the collective social memories that had established an interweaving of individual life histories with the prospective and "eternal" return of ancestral knowledge. As stated earlier, possibilities of social reproduction are foreclosed for increasing numbers of youth. As such, the actions, identities, and social composition through which individuals attempt to eke out daily survival are incessantly provisional, positioning them in a proliferation of seemingly diffuse and discordant times. Without structured responsibilities and certainties, the places they inhabit and the movements they undertake become instances of disjointed geographies — i.e., subsuming places into mystical, subterranean, or sorceral orders, prophetic or eschatological universes, highly localized myths that "capture" the allegiances of large social bodies, or daily reinvented routines that have little relationship to anything.

At the extreme, as the material underpinnings of the confidence in once reliable local institutions dissipates, larger numbers of Africans "disappear" very visibly into a receding interior space — a kind of collective hallucination moving "away" from the world. This can be a highly volatile space, for even if marked by intricate geographies of spirit worlds, it can upend "civil life" in an inchoate mix of cruelty and tenderness, indifference and generosity. At the same time, new relational webs are pieced together with different cultural strands and references. These webs promote a capacity for residents to be conversant with sites, institutions, and transactions at different scales — in other words, a capacity to know what to do in order to gain access to various kinds of instrumental resources.

The African urban environment is increasingly one where it is difficult to ascertain just what social practices, alliances, and knowledge can be mobilized sufficient enough to produce outcomes conceptualized in advance. Similarly, the rapidity through which impressions can be fixed in the popular imagination, unanticipated resourcefulness organized, and the dispositions of behavior transformed often does not permit any certainty as to the identities of the ingredients or processes involved.

At the same time, the survival of these cities is increasingly predicated on the extent of their connections to a broad range of international organizations, bilateral and multilateral agreements that provide the funds for many of the basic urban services that are delivered. Thus, cities remain, at least "officially", inscribed in a narrative of development. But development, as a specific modality of temporality, is not simply about meeting the needs of citizens. It is also about capturing residents to a life-aesthetic defined by the state so that they can be citizens. It is about making ethical beings; about holding people in relations that make them governable. As such, development is about assisting residents to meet their needs in a "good" way or a "moral" way.[10] Yet, within African cities, the sustainability of communities largely means sustaining ways of associating and moving that are not conducive to such citizenship nor to the production of the moral beings of the type needed by states and other "supervisory" and/or donor entities.

The investment in a politics of invisibility — i.e., of trying to navigate a difficult and often oppressive urban world with stealth, inversion, and guile — may enable daily survival, but it does not get around the need to create new cities even if the old ones are being dismantled. And so the visibility of collective action remains critical. How do people collaborate, on what basis, and with what objectives and tools? How are these collaborations nurtured and extended, both in space and time? What will be recognized as useful and salient? People must still determine what information, experiences, and resources can be used to get by, or do more than get by. They must still establish a means of recognizing what can be used to create more opportunities, find out more things, and expand possibilities for better livelihoods, both in the short term and over the long run.

The Return of Sight

There is a need to talk about urban politics in the broad sense: about things in the making. Too many of the sounds emerging from African cities are rendered inaudible or inexplicable. Speech is often violently foreclosed or relentless in its mimicry, its promises, or its desperate fear of taking pause. Politics thus concerns the invention of a platform or scene on which the cacophony of urban voices are audible and become understood, and on which speakers are made visible. What is given as an objective status is put into question through making visible that which has not, under the optics of a given perceptive field, been visible.[11] It is given a "name", not necessarily a "right name", but a designation nevertheless, a technique, an instrument that allows something to effect and be affected. This instrument, and thus politics, cannot be traced back to embodying or representing specific social realities or organizations. It comes from the "outside", possessing, taking hold of a community in order for it to recognize itself, but always already steering it away from itself.[12]

So here I am concerned with forms of spectral instrumentality potentially capable of revitalizing an affective glue, a desire for social interchange and cooperation that might contain the seeds of social economies that extend themselves through scale, time, and reach. But this is not about civil society organizations and NGOs, micro-credit associations or people's associations. Rather, I am interested here in more diffuse but no less concrete ways in which diverse urban actors are assembled and act. What are some of the ways in which urban residents are building a particular emotional field in the city, trying to restore a very physical sense of connection to one another? This is a micropolitics of

alignment, interdependency, and exuberance. This is not the work of detailed ethnographic examinations of new social movements, new living arrangements, or new forms of urban productivity. It is a practice of being attuned to faint signals, flashes of important creativity in otherwise desperate maneuvers, small eruptions in the social fabric which provide new texture, small but important platforms from which to access new views.

In recent years, the development business has been replete with references to the importance of knowledge, knowledge management, and knowledge practices. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP), for example, is now officially a knowledge practice network. But knowledge is a tricky thing. In part because some 90 percent of our human ability to know what to do in any particular situation is tacit, outside the domain of cognition that centers on conscious reflection. Rather, most human knowledge is a kind of perception-in-movement, an ability to act based on how the body is positioned in specific situations, how it is concretely located in a heterogeneous network of other persons, information fields, physical forces, and so forth. Knowledgeable action is largely a practical activity involving the construction of new relations in the gaps that always open up in the process of conducting existing relations — of acting, gesturing, moving, and aligning. This is why the otherwise excluded, meaningless, nonsensical, or disturbing dimensions of urban life become critical perturbances, in that they provoke elaborate and potentially effective social relations and rituals.[13]

So urban collaboration does not simply reflect and institutionalize clearly identifiable social processes and forms. There are gaps and openings, room for collaboration and provocation, and this collaboration can take many forms. Sometimes people coalesce in organizations that have names, but where it is unclear to almost everyone what precisely the organization is and what it does. At other times, an event may trigger an entire neighborhood into apparently unfamiliar courses of action, but with a synchronicity that makes it appear as if some deep-seated logic of social mobilization is being unleashed. Still at other times, the arduous interplay of local social change and resistance, planned development and arbitrary decisions construct tentative platforms for people to collaborate in "silent" but powerful ways which have the potential of substantially altering the position of the locality within the larger urban system.

One must situate this focus in what has been a predominant emphasis in African urban development on reintensifying efforts to configure appropriate modalities of urban governance. Such emphasis includes not only the evolution of effective public municipal institutions but also the rationalization of land markets, investment in infrastructure, and more coherent laws, taxation, and planning. Particularly important is the ongoing entrenchment of specific norms of good governance capable of guiding institutional behaviors and decision making. A hard-won consensus within the international community specifies norms that appear to have general applicability to governance issues across the world. These norms include sustainability, decentralization or subsidiarity, equity, efficiency, transparency and accountability, civic engagement and citizenship, and security. Such norms purportedly enable practitioners, politicians, and residents to better compare heterogeneous urban contexts and work together to bring diverse resources, experiences, and skills to bear on the improvement of life in distinct cities. More important, these norms are to lay the foundations for viable urban citizenship, a sense that the city belongs to its inhabitants, with a framework of rights and responsibilities.

Despite the past decade of concentrated reform, African urban politics remains a rough-and-tumble world. Cities are not generating, nor have other access to, the kinds of finance necessary to pull off the sweeping restructuring necessary to substantially increase the number of jobs, opportunities, and services. As national and local states have long regulated urban spaces with such unreality and arbitrariness, this inability to provide at least a basic framework for sustainable urban livelihoods means

that public authority is rarely taken seriously, as public authority rarely takes a sense of urban citizenship seriously.

Despite emerging notions of governance, which at least cursorily point to the importance of mutual belonging — through the emphasis on partnerships — the status of the urban citizen largely remains a solitary one. Not only have formal public institutions largely "abandoned" urban residents, visible collective actions that might provide some alternative measures of belonging and provisioning are impeded. As African states must adhere to "disciplinary measures" enforced by the North and multilateral institutions, and as the North depends on displays of the apparent sovereignty and coherence of these states, the space for effective and visible alternatives for organizing urban life is often constrained.

At the heart of the challenge about governing cities is the issue of the political management of complex and incessant trade-offs that must be made by all cities in a context of sometimes painful global exposure. The trade-offs concern to what extent, for example, fiscal soundness takes precedence over the equitable delivery of urban services, or the extent to which managerial proficiency supercedes expanded popular participation in decision making.

The critical issue is how these trade-offs are defined. Who is involved in negotiating them? What are the appropriate forms of community organization and mobilization in a context where urban government is increasingly less capable of meeting the demands of all citizens? How does one combine, relate, and balance different forms of participation, negotiation, contestation, and partnership to ensure vibrant politics and constructive collaboration to solve real problems? How can forms of political community be reimagined, especially in a temporal period where the contradictions of expanding global capitalism are more extensively interwoven in local urban life? How can such political community be reimagined in a context where formerly valued modalities and practices of social cohesion dissipate, as do the territorial parameters through which cohesion is recognized and performed?"[14]

So while citizenship may be a necessary aspect of ensuring the long-term sustainability of African cities, it is not a sufficient condition in and of itself. Again, if the very constructs of sociality are increasingly scrutinized, challenged, and fragmented, the passions generated by issues of belonging cannot be adequately addressed simply by constitutional guarantees, particularly in political contexts which have limited resources and little will to enforce them. Notions of citizenship are important not because they impose an abstract framework of identity in which prior modalities of belonging and affective connection are subsumed. Nor are they important because they can institutionalize those modalities of belonging in a calculus of obligations, freedoms, and responsibilities vis-à-vis others who do not share them. Rather, citizenship is the acknowledgment of the artificial and contingent character of the rules that constitute social collaboration and cohabitation, allowing for the combination of perspectives and histories that are otherwise antinomies.[15] It is the question of how to remain oneself and not be inferior, even if unequal, when compared to others, and thus, the right not to be rooted, not to belong.

Struggles over which identities have legitimate access to and rights over specific places and resources are, indeed, on the increase. To whom does a particular place belong? Who belongs to a particular place? In part, the trend toward subsidiarity in governance amplifies such questions of belonging. Proponents of decentralization and the "new localism" argue that it is difficult to engage in the kinds of sustained behaviors and cooperation needed over the long term to ensure effective planning and implementation of economic projects. Yet, the proliferation of disputes concerning belonging all reinforce the need to secure and consolidate particularistic identities, which would seem to limit maneuverability and reach. This dynamic can be seen from the contested citizenship of Kuanda in Zambia

and Ouattara in Cote d'Ivoire so as to eliminate their presidential candidacies, to the expulsion of "migrants" in Gabon, to intensified ethnic claims of particular regions in Cameroon, to the fight over whether sharic a belongs in Nigeria.

The restrictive emphasis on contests about belonging tends to underplay the ways in which African societies display a remarkable capacity to operate in the interstices of stability and instability, individuation and forms of social solidarity, the material and spiritual. It underplays a substantial history where many African societies elaborated intricate relations between the rural and the urban, colonial zones of domination and spaces of relative autonomy, among highly diverse localities and social practices, as well as between home and nonhome. How are various African actors and social ensembles using this period of scalar recomposition, emerging from the rearticulation of capitalist expansion and political regulation, to configure new modalities for pursuing economic opportunity, expand the scope and reach of trade and mobility, and activate new forms of political coordination?

For example, religious brotherhoods and fraternities, ethnically based trading regimes, syndicates, and even community-based and multi-association operations are functioning with increasing scope. Urban quarters not only serve as platforms for popular initiatives — e.g., waste management, micro-enterprise development, and shelter provision — but readapt local modalities of cohesion and sociality to more regional and global frameworks. Some localities, such as Nima (Accra), Obalende (Lagos), Texas-Adjame (Abidjan), and Grand Yoff (Dakar), reflect a strong relationship between the elaboration of local associations and the generation of new economic activities and resources. Here, associations become important in configuring new divisions of labor. They help coordinate the cross-border, small and medium-scale trade of individual entrepreneurs. They pool and reinvest the proceeds of this trade to access larger quantities of tradable goods, diversify collective holdings, and reach new markets. The mechanisms through which local economies expand in scale are, albeit, often murky and problematic. They can entail highly tenuous and frequently clandestine articulations among, for example, religious and fraternal networks, public officials operating in private capacities, clientelist networks mobilizing very cheap labor, foreign political parties, and large transnational corporations operating outside of conventional procedures.

Through this lens, to what extent are conflicts about belonging only fights over the disposition of particular places for their own sake — i.e., about what can be drawn to and developed within a specific place on the basis of controlling key natural resources? Rather, to what extent are fights about belonging and the rights incumbent to belonging for access to resources more about what the control of these resources means to enhancing the possibilities for actors to operate on the level of the larger world? Here, the focus is not so much on how place is brought under the singular control of a particular force, but how place is linked to a plurality of allegiances and opportunities. The question is, rather, how can local actors feel that their operations in localized spaces are also conduits to or extensions of a much larger world? To what extent are such struggles, then, not so much over the terms of territorial encompassment or closure, but rather maintaining a sense of the open-ended?

However, citizenship, even if it encompasses the interface between heterogeneous systems and directions, does not itself make up its own desire. The desire for citizenship is the desire for a space of maneuverability and becoming for the kinds of collaborations, the kinds of being-with others — in work, residence, movement, worship, and so forth — that one wants. The issue becomes, quite simply, what kinds of political assemblages most effectively embody the urban worlds that Africans seek to conjure on the basis of their memories, skills, and aspirations? What kinds of political mechanisms best facilitate the capacity of urban residents to act, and act with the autonomy necessary to make best use of the particular resources present within a given city?

From the vantage point of various histories of urban youth associations, from the Leopards of Léopoldville to the *garçons du fôret* of Bandalwunga (Kinshasa), of the Tsotsi of Kliptown to the *kole se koko boys* of Hospital Hill (Johannesburg), from the area boys of Oshu-Elegba to the Dankasas of Mushin (Lagos), from the Rarray Boys to the West End Boys in Freetown, what are the conduits that can lead them to each other? If youth without anticipation now constitute the majority of African cities — perpetually exposed to political manipulation, proliferating spaces of criminal activity, and the disconnection from extended family — what ghostly leadership is coordinating action on the fronts of these cities?

What ghosts say about the city, what they speak about themselves, is that the past is not really past. What is thrown away has not really been disposed of, and as such, it stands outside any knowable sequence of events, pointing to the possibility that what could have happened but did not can still take place — i.e., where actuality and possibility become indistinct. There is autonomy from the maps imposed and autonomy from the dominant systems of representation, that is, the dominant paradigms of city making. As such, it is in the apparent ruins of the city, its places of marginalization, and the interfaces where the most mundane activities are unsettled or disrupted that these ghosts command. Impoverished urban youth fight off their disappearance in very desperate gestures. They intervene into those urban practices and gestures most taken for granted — a husband greeting his wife at the door; a merchant opening his shop in the morning; a businessman placing a letter in the post; a congregation commencing to kneel in prayer. They turn these everyday events into a ruin, or, at least, unsettle them, open them out to unanticipated implications.

Whatever wear and tear is placed on the social fabric by these disruptions, they open the terrain of the urban to a compulsion to imagine differently; to place the stories of decades upon decades of urban settlement at the "disposal" of those barely making it day after day. Traders emerge with air tickets to China and empty suitcases. There are those who walk for months from city to city in search of a different life; those who wait hours at the few Internet cafes in Kinshasa, having practiced a particularly difficult combination of numbers to be sent to bewitch a distant European with a good apartment. There are those who piece together extended family networks from years circulating various Mano River Union refugee camps, with each "member" placed strategically in small towns and cities across the region, talking to each other constantly.

Part Two: Douala, Cameroon

The Disappeared

President Paul Biya established Operation Command on February 20, 2000 as a means of rectifying the alarming increase in violent crime in Douala. At first residents across the city applauded this military operation, as they had become increasingly frightened of venturing anywhere in public, even during daylight hours. It was common for people from all walks of life and in all quarters to tell stories of being held up at work, on the street, or in their homes. Equipped with vast powers of search and seizure, as well as arbitrary detention, Operation Command quickly zeroed in on a huge network of warehouses harboring stolen goods, as well as illicit acquisitions of cars, houses, and consumer goods.

As the net widened, almost everyone came under suspicion. During raids on homes, if the residents were unable to immediately provide receipts for items like televisions or refrigerators, they would be confiscated. Increasingly, Operation Command appeared to Doualaise as organized military theft.

There were also reports about large-scale extrajudicial killings, of detainees disappearing from prisons. Bodies of suspected criminals were often found in the streets with signs of torture and bullet wounds.

On January 23, 2001, nine youths from the Bapenda quarter were picked up after a neighbor had reported them as having stolen a gas canister. They were taken to a gendarme station in Bonanjo, on the other side of the city, where they were allowed to visit their families and correspond with them, although they reported being physically tortured. On January 28, they were transferred to an Operation Command post whereupon all communication from them stopped. The parents were unable to find out any information as to the location of their children. Following the disappearance of the "Bapenda 9", Douala witnessed the first in a series of marches and demonstrations which were brutally suppressed by the police.

During this time, there were many reputed sightings of the disappeared, usually at night and usually in quarters considered highly dangerous. The sightings would describe the boys as beaten and emaciated, but desperate to hide from the expected onslaught of Operation Command from which they inexplicably slipped. There was widespread concern that if there were any validity to these sightings, that all should be done to keep the boys alive as testimonials to what was assumed to be a practice killing thousands. As Marc Etaha, Frederic Ngouffo, Chatry Kuete, Eric Chia, Jean Roger Tchiwan, Charles Kouatou, Chia Effician, Elysee Kouatou, and Fabrice Kuate — the Bapenda 9[16] — served as a kind of "last straw" for public patience with Operation Command, there was an uneasy mixture of guilt, anger, impotence, and mysticism wrapped up in the larger public response to their disappearance.

Whether or not people actually believed the reputed sightings of the disappeared, in some quarters of the city a ritual developed where efforts were made to feed the disappeared. Because the sightings were most frequently in very dangerous parts of the city, households would send their girl domestics, often great distances, to deliver food. It is common in Douala to take in young girls from the rural areas as unpaid servants. Many rural households can no longer provide for their children and so either throw them out of the home or sell them to intermediaries. These girls remain the "property" of the households they work for and are usually badly mistreated and have little freedom of mobility. From one sighting of the disappeared to the next, from one part of the city to the other, these girls took the risk of their own disappearance on the feeding expeditions. In the process, they crossed Douala at night in ways that at the time were without precedent. Sometimes they would meet up with other girls they had met on previous journeys and share what they had seen, as well as embellish stories and invent new ones. The danger entailed was secondary to the flush of this sudden and usually daily freedom, for soon they would meet up in particular spots and go where they wanted, never mind whether it corresponded with the destination they were instructed to seek out.

They would leave ciphers and other marks on cars and household walls, on store windows and security grates, or pile up empty pots and pans at key intersections. They would then tell their respective employers that the disappeared were attempting to leave messages, to communicate with the residents of the city about what was really taking place. Word spread that these girls had become interlocutors between the disappeared and the city and not merely deliverers of food. Their capacities were greatly inflated in a city where the reputations of those able to navigate the world of the night were already inflated. And so several of the girls began to be sought out by various officials, businesspersons, and even top personnel of Operation Command itself. They came not so much for direct information about the disappeared themselves nor to interpret their supposed conveyances. Rather, they wanted interpretations of their dreams, advice on new ventures, insights on the wheeling and dealing of colleagues and competitors. Girls of thirteen who not long before had gone

hungry in rural areas experiencing thorough economic and social decline, bought and sold to fetch water, now suddenly found 10,000 CFA notes pressed in their hands, and started demanding more. Stories spread how one of the girls, Sally, would hold court by the pool at the Meridien Hotel, cell-phone in hand and surrounded by her entourage of body guards.

Illuminating Nkongmondo

Nkongmondo is set back from the intersection of two major roads, one leading into Douala, the other to Yaounde. During the rains, the area floods easily and is traversed with great difficulty. It is a quarter with a reputation for thieves, killers, and malaria. What success these neighborhood "emissa-ries" have had in the past has not been necessarily attributed to deft skill or astute planning. Instead, twenty guys will show up somewhere completely improbable — a formal luncheon for ambassadors' wives, payday at the bank — during times where places are either crowded or full of security and simply bully their way to some relatively modest cash, usually taking significant casualties on the way. Sometimes the ruthlessness will result in a big score. But the brutal intrusiveness and take-no-priso-ners attitude is what has earned the quarter its characterization as a sullen dump of thuggery and its young male criminals the name "head-bangers". Few attempts at quarter "improvement" are initi-ated, though both the police and security command have repeatedly tried to clean out the growing criminal element.

Given the number of schemes, syndicates, and confidence games that often have occasion to make use of such "blind determination", one might think there would be safer and more lucrative oppor-tunities for the young men here. But there is a seeming insistence to stand apart, as very few are willing to work as brute force for more sophisticated networks or ringleaders. Detention and death are also not persuasive deterrents to the endless supply of youth from the area purportedly identified as assailants and perpetrators.

Not two minutes from the western entrance to the quarter stand the remains of what was once Douala's largest cinema, now closed for the past several years. Next door stands a four-story building that once housed one of the city's better Catholic high schools, now moved to another, more subur-ban location. The demise of both has a lot to do with the relationship between them. The school kids would skip out of classes and crowd matinee showings of an endless fare of cheap kung fu movies. The kids would barely pay attention to the films; it was more a place to smoke marijuana and have sex. Some efforts were made to get the authority to at least close the place during school hours. But this was to no avail, especially as the very popular soft-porn showings on the weekends drew crowds of functionaries already disappointed that they hadn't attained the positions which would entitle them to the special twice-monthly strip shows and beyond featuring Parisian women held in Bonanjo.

While over the years the cinema had been stripped clean of seats, carpet, even major sections of the roof, the locked projection booth strangely remained intact. Given its proximity to Nkongmondo, the cinema was a convenient hangout for neighborhood youth, a beguiling place of refuge given how, despite its present locked-down fortress appearance, its status as a gathering spot of criminals was well known to the police. But as far as I could make out, there were no raids, no arrests. Unlike the high school kids, these youth actually came to watch cinema, perhaps as a respite from just how much their lives had become clumsy imitations of grade C movies. The thing was that there were no movies per se to watch. Rather, they had managed to attach the projector to a small generator to simply get it running and would then sit, often for hours, watching the rays of light as they reached the surface of the screen. Afterwards, they would get beers and have long discussions about what they had seen, arguing over plot lines and characters. But what was clear was that an important way

of life was being depicted. The landscape and composition of this life, imposed on the screen from their imaginations, was discussed in great detail following these "showings".

Like most Doualaise, they were fascinated with this specter of distant lands, and also like most, they were determined to save money any way they could in order to buy tickets and secure visas. But unlike these others, they never could identify the name of the destination or figure out how far away it really was, or conversely, the name and distance would change all the time, as would the relevant authorities and the ways of getting there. So it would never be clear just how much money they needed, what the cost would be. As it was always difficult to hide money or to keep from spending it either to be left alone or buy one's way out of trouble, the problems seemed endless.

In the summer of 2001, a new organization, Forum for Inhabitants, made a preliminary effort to organize some form of community association in Nkongmondo. It consulted the village chief and with his assistance put together an initial assembly of over fifty residents to talk about what they could do about the insalubrious conditions that prevailed. Unlike most such meetings across the city, and across most cities in the region today, the complaints about present conditions were muted. Sure there was flooding and the lack of basic services, but the community had long been able to get by with being what they were; their aspirations were neither great, nor did they think that, whatever they might do, anything significant would likely ensue. When asked if the large numbers of criminals who reputedly operated from the community and subjected the community to harassment and a bad name put a damper on their motivation, a gray bearded man of about seventy forcefully responded, "no, not at all, they are invisible to us".

How does one locate this invisibility and to what ends? Within cities, the process of making individuals strangers to each other has been critical to incorporating their bodies and energies as labor for production of increasingly ephemeral commodities without referenced value, and the consumption of which grows more frenetic and dissociated from the stabilization of place or livelihood. Even across the impoverished quarters of Douala, there is an obsession with eating well, and neighborhoods become identified through the particularities of the foods cooked and the ways in which they are presented. From fried plantains served on images of the President's bare ass in specific humorous newspapers to the specific colors of plastic forks which must be used to eat certain stews on specific days, this incorporation of bits and pieces of quotidian objects into a complex economy of consuming basic meals makes the act of eating something potentially fractal — spacing out in all directions without clear aleatory channels or implications.

On the other hand, the unleashing of signifiers also is deployed as an excessive marker of belonging; excessive evidence of narrow genealogies cited to explain just where residents should be fixed. Fixed in the sense of specifying clearly eligible domains where the "broken" nature that characterizes most residents lives can be "repaired". But also fixed in the sense of being able to be pinned down and summed up, even as kin and communitarian relationships have become increasingly murky and fragmented in how they actually operate. Autochthony increasingly becomes a vehicle through which claims on resources can be made and legitimated.

But between the estrangement of labor and the reparation of belonging is the space of remembrance. Between embellishing anticipation of the next meal with traces of the "news" of yesterday and the undoing of the news of yesterday with the conviction that one has not yet "eaten well", there remains the collective process of sitting down to eat. Increasing numbers of youth are forced to float across the city in search of livelihood or run in a constant cat-and-mouse game, chasing those who owe them money, running from those whose money they have stolen. To locate someone, then, is often to speculate about when and where they will eat. In the midst of this speculation, and the un-

certainty as to who is allied with whom, who knows what in an economy of appropriation and theft, sudden accumulation and loss, those who stop to eat must be careful about what they say. They may inevitably share their food, but they will make sure to say nothing to give themselves away. Sitting down to eat is then engineered with a complex toolbox of declensions, fragmented words, smirks, tongue clicks, and grunts.

Pinned down by the oozing appearance of identity markers, yet footloose in the pursuit of those from whom one is escaping, there is little to be presented, and achievement is not based on the figuration of a more comprehensive narrative. The circulation of communication's materiality "clears the bush for the bush to return", as the Sawa residents would say. In other words, as Agamben points out in his notion of *decreation*, what could have been and was becomes indistinguishable from what could have been but was not.[17]

The Doualaise know that they cannot go it alone, but who exactly to go with is another matter. For we have seen the pulling apart of conventional social ties. This is the place, then, of remembrance. There are no maps, no grand visions for a viable future, as in turn, there is nothing intact from the "archive" to be returned to life or to be reinvented. Rather, the boundary between the actual and the possible is effaced, as that which never happened but could is remembered as if it were about to happen now. The flickering projection in the cinema, the punctuation of meals by unnecessary language, the feeding of the disappeared and subsequent valorization of domestic girls — all point to a repositioning to call upon possibilities that have been there all along. It is a repositioning that releases a multiplicity of active forces to be in play, rather than assigned to reiterate existing values and differentials.[18]

Concluding Note

New trajectories of urban mobility and mobilization are taking place in the interstices of complex urban politics. Distinct groups and capacities are provisionally assembled into surprising, yet often dynamic, intersections outside of any formal opportunity the city presents for the interaction of diverse identities and situations.

Across urban Africa, there is a persistent tension as to what is possible to do within the city and the appropriate forms of social connections through which such possibilities can be pursued. Increasingly, more ephemeral forms of social collaboration are coming to the fore, and more effective formal governance partnerships often succeed to the degree to which they can draw on them. This emergence is a means of circumventing the intensifying contestation as to what kinds of social modalities and identities can legitimately mobilize resources and people's energies. Throughout these efforts lingers the question as to how urban residents reach a "larger world" of operations. What happens within the domain of the city itself that allows urban actors, often deeply rooted in specific places and ascriptions, to operate outside these confines? How are apparent realities of social coherence and cohesion maintained while opportunities, that would seemingly require behaviors and attitudes antithetical to the sustainability of such cohesion, are pursued? Urban Africans are on the move, and the ability to move, through their quarters or cities or among cities, must draw on a capacity to see themselves as more than just marginal to prevalent global urban processes. Residents must see that deteriorating urban conditions do not simply mean that they become further removed from where the real power or opportunities lie, and that access to expanded domains of operation is not fixed to specific "development trajectories", institutional memberships, or transportation circuits.

There are multiple geographies pieced together and navigated through the particular ways in which urban residents constitute the connections among themselves and the ways in which these connections are folded along a series of other daily interactions.

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