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Introduction

Urban Africans have long made lives that have worked. There has been an astute capacity to use thickening fields of social relations, however, disordered they may be, to make city life viable. 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 now 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 see “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 un-mooring 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 ambiguous. In other words, it is not clear just what is taking place. This ambiguity is not only a reality that urban residents must face but also seem to weave. In many cities, this process of obscuring is reflected in the architectures of movement and dwelling, where the layout of many quarters is meant to always confound and unhinge in face of the overwhelming threats of disappearance posed by both state and “mystical” authorities.

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.

The conditions that have been relied upon to sustain dynamic and stable urban quarters—fraught though most have been with major problems concerning urban services and ineffective management—are becoming increasingly strained. These strains are sometimes political as quarters are given more official responsibility to manage different urban services. This responsibility generates new modalities of collaboration, but also intensifies competition. In some instances, communities have become polarized along lines of social stratification that were more open-ended in the past.

The strains are also economic in that employment of any kind—formal and informal—is increasingly difficult to access. As a result, formerly highly elaborated extended family and residential support systems find themselves overburdened. It is estimated that roughly 75% of basic needs are provided informally in the majority of African cities, and that processes of informalization are expanding across discrete sectors and domains of urban life. Whereas unemployment has long been a persistent reality for African cities, available compensations now require more drastic action. Floods of cheap imports made possible through trade
liberalization are shrinking local productions systems. At the same time, various components of economic rationalization have opened up possibilities for the appropriation of formerly public assets—land, enterprises, services—by private interests, particularly for the emerging elite well-positioned in the apparatuses managing structural adjustment.

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 link 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.

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 makes them governable. As such, development is about assisting residents to meet their needs in a "good" way or a "moral" way. 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 bodies. As such, their salience of these local practices, and even their efficacy, must often be masked, turned into a spectre or acted on as a kind of urban heresy.

The Spectral

The spectral has conventionally been viewed as a haunting, a ghostly presence of past possibilities never realized but never put to death definitively or of a disembodied capacity or reality unleashed from the decaying forms of its once concrete manifestation. Here, I emphasize the spectral as a social intelligence, an ability to act and know in concert without clearly discernible maps or procedures. It is a form of what might be seen as "urban grace"—a living within a synchronization of movements, of fragmented work and tasks, and a passing on of materials, objects and opportunities in which many different people "get a touch."

This spectral dimension is not necessarily that of ruins or failed objectives. It does not necessarily refer to an ongoing haunting of the city with inclinations, agendas, or futures that failed to be actualized—this, despite the fact that African cities were neither completely "turned over" to colonial elaboration or without specific African imaginations for making the city. Rather, the spectral—itself multifaceted—may closer approximate Artaud's notions of an urban spatial language. According to Artaud, there is a specific point in urban crises where virtuality—always already present in the city's efforts to keep it at bay—installs itself as a tumultuous activity without specific purpose or end. Here, place is dispossessed of meaning and proper use; inside and outside, private and public fold into each other, and there is no clear vantage point from which to assess the efficacy of practices, interactions, and speech now intensely entangled as the barriers and moulds have fallen away.
Concerted efforts have been made to govern the city through zoning, cadastre, property, and administration, without completely erasing the unruly yet dynamic intersections among differences of all kinds to which the city offers both setting and cause. The choreographed coherence of the city wanes at the point at which the attempted control of space and bodies attenuates this dynamism and begins to erode the capacity of residents to navigate those spaces and realities of the city that will inevitably remain weakly implicated in every system of governance. For, in those urban territories and transactions of what Ash Amin calls “banal transgression”—i.e., the frontiers that proliferate across the city whose effective use and navigation require the suspension of familiar cultural assumptions and social strategies—that generate the real articulations among the different facets of urban life.\[13\]

Despite all of the development regimes that attempt to bring order and efficacy to African cities, they continue to live through a certain virtuality. For throughout urban Africa, order is essentially under-funded, and municipal governments have been disrespectful of appropriating an array of local practices and aspirations that could be the building blocks for some viable form of efficacy. African cities have learned, thus, to live close to those dimensions of urban life otherwise “cut off” and separated from the attempt to make the city productive—i.e., the city’s delirium, and its capacity for thickening complicities and collaborations that at go everywhere and nowhere simultaneously.

What Artaud sees as the city’s spatial language is a language that permits extension, that doesn’t represent the city’s dimensions in clear compartments, but includes the gestures, the positionalities, the into nations, and the rhythms that can constantly remix socialities, crossing and intertwining the particularities of the city in shifting webs of “upstream” and “downstream” circuits, assembling, disassembling, using all parts to piece together new machines which are constantly taken apart so those parts can be used and assembled elsewhere.\[14\] These mixtures extend in so many directions that it is impossible to discern an agenda being born, or a new dispensation or purpose. Even if the actors swirling through these economies indeed have a purpose or intention, their moves “forward” will only work if they know and then act as if they can exert little control.

Any intentional 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 doesn’t get around the need to create new cities even if the old ones are being dismantled. And so the visibility of collective action remains something that remains critical. How do people collaborate, on what basis, and with 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.

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 creativ in otherwise desperate maneuvers, small eruptions in the social fabric that provide new texture, small but important platforms from which to access new views.
Adjame Gare

From the Adjame gare routier—a warren of streets, half-streets, barely streets filling a vast cavity in near-central Abidjan—you can go nearly everywhere, at least in West Africa. But is not clear whether the “you” that leaves will be the same “you” who arrived at this vast zone of small and large buses. The operation of travel would appear simple: a prospective passenger knowing their destination and having some information about the various companies serving it would go the company’s depot, purchase a ticket, have one’s bags loaded and take off.

Instead a seemingly uncomplicated operation in a series of clear tasks is continuously interrupted by a network of touts, handlers, hawkers, porters, ticket agents, mechanics, cleaners, and messengers who recompose the act of travel in ways often difficult to anticipate or map. Whether entering the domain of the gare on foot, public transport or taxi, young boys and men functioning as steerers jockey for position in order to attain the best view of prospective passengers. Not only do they rush to vehicle windows or to those on foot and ask about their destination, but they also make rapid appraisals of the way the passengers are dressed, what they are carrying, their accents and ways of speaking.

For while the competition among different companies serving the same destinations fuels an almost frantic search for passengers, much more is at stake. The order of departure of buses heading to the same place can entail differences in the quantity of unofficial “road fees” paid to various “officials” along the route; the quality and price of various produce and goods to be both acquired and sold on the way. The objective is not simply to quickly filled buses but the supplement of particular passenger compositions of the buses as well—i.e., who is travelling, what appears to be the purpose of their travel, what kinds of possible interchanges amongst passengers might ensue, and thus, what kinds of resources might be put together or conflict and; how might drivers and their assistants benefit.

Conclusions that otherwise would take months of in-depth investigation have to be made in a matter of minutes. Once taxis, other vehicles, or feet are steered into specific depots, baggage must be unloaded and reloaded—another opportunity for assessment. Some passengers will want to leave quickly no matter where their baggage might be positioned or where their seats are located in the bus. For others, these considerations matter. As companies and their drivers prefer to minimize the lag time in their respective departures, balances must be struck among the touts who make deals amongst themselves for passengers with particular desires, as well as profiles. Then there is the issue of minimizing the wait for petrol, of clearing police checkpoints and inspections—and it here that the positioning of loads is particularly important, especially for buses heading toward borders or troublesome regions.

All of these mostly young men, acting at different points in these transactions, know that they can exert only a very limited control over how each passenger’s story unfolds. They know that they must quickly pass these passengers on to the next position in the game—the steerer to the tout, the tout to the porter, the porter to the baggage loader and so forth, each trying to derive the maximum potential benefit from a speculative reading of the passenger’s behavior and cargo.

Who is in a hurry; who is worried about possible theft; who is unlikely to report a theft of what may be illicit cargo; who seems uncertain of the final disposition of goods; who might appreciate advice as to more beneficial market opportunities; who is a frequent passenger; who is going to bury loved ones, who is going for celebrations—all of these are the elements of a “bet” all those who work the gare take in doing their part to compose the travel in ways where the journey produces an expansive supplement whose rewards might “trickle” back to them. At the same time, all those who work the gare know that their collaborations with each other are not fixed or institutionalized.

There are hundreds of youth involved in this game. They must constantly make split decisions as to how and to whom they pass on the passenger to the next position. History here has little currency, for they must constantly exceed their past abilities, and they can
never count on any specific turf belonging to them—for neither the companies, no any one else backs them up, identifies them as “their boys.” They know that they can be intercepted at any time, quickly replaceable by those showing greater muscle or skill in a game where the criteria for what constitutes effective skill is itself never clearly identifiable, is always being remade up along the way, as if a collective phantasm of a presumed efficacy hovers over and seeps its way into the crowd.

In professions requiring a capacity to displace oneself into a swirl of readings, guises, speculations, deceits and transactions, the young men must make themselves as invisible as possible in their very hyped-up visibility. For while they should constitute themselves as an unavoidable insertion into the operation of travel, they should always appear, not as an obstacle or a gatekeeper, but a conduit, without interests of its own, to the realization of the concrete aspirations of the passenger as well as some possibility the passenger did not expect but now discovers that they wanted all along. The toughness in the face, in the walk, and in the manner in which everything is dealt becomes both a mask for what are ghost-like sensibilities and ways of navigating the gare, the acts of travel and, unavoidability, the style of young guys desperately holding on.

**Ghosts in Lagos**

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 two thousand 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 soon later determined to be thousands of pounds of exploding armaments stored in the nearby Ikeja Military Cantonment, set off by a mysterious fire.

Even as mass panic took hold, there was general wonder why so many rushed into the canals; as most couldn’t 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 cm. long and 5-15 cm. 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. A single plant can produce five thousand seeds. 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 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 exceeding 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 extending itself rapidly across 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, but of rolling over, gliding along the surface, allowing the body to do things that it never thought it was capable of doing.
As one 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?

Residents along the Isolo-Oshidi axis poured from their “indent” quarters, Shogunle, Jakande Estate, Ejigbo and converged on the canals because the layout of these quarters meant that escape necessarily led them in this direction. Beyond the matter of people running into each other after years of not being in contact, of persons discovering that they were virtual neighbors, of people extending help and support on this day and even in the months after, 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 wake of this tragedy, has found various visible forms. Children were returned to families on the basis on “hunches”, mutual assistance connected quarters that were in close proximity, but due to the topography of the city could only be linked through highly circuitous navigation. There are hundreds of stories of people re-discovering each other, of a basis for connection in a city whose fragmenting pulls were substantially intensified in wake of the disaster.

Every city has its “wild topographies”, and thus its “wild selves.” For regardless of escalating crime, resurgent parochialism, the sprawl of urban areas and the cost of transportation, trajectories of individual movement across urban Africa appear to encompass larger distances and more of the city than one was prevalent.

In part, this is a process facilitated by the diminishing efficacy of neighborhood surveillance imposed on resident’s movements and activities, but which, at the same time, remains motivated largely by the very scrutiny that neighborhoods still attempt to exert. Whereas intensifying levels of insecurity may reaffirm the necessity of extended family and neighborhood ties, the insufficiency of these ties, as well as the constraints and costs of such dependency, “force” people out into the city at large. Such extension, coupled with the counter-balancing reassertion of more “traditionally-based” social organizations, will have a significant effect on the shape of urban politics.

Reform and Ruin in Johannesburg

The central city of Johannesburg is replete with images of violence, anarchy and decay. Nothing is what is appears to be. In an urban culture where everyone was assigned a particular place and time, and where places embodied narrowly circumscribed connotations, it is only reasonable to expect that in the post-apartheid era a massive and concrete “respatialization” of the central city would take place. It is clear that a contest has ensued in Johannesburg over who has the right to use the city in what kind of way. The rights of some are often seen as fundamentally illegitimate and, therefore, give others the right to do anything with those rights that they want. The order of some becomes the disorder for others, and vice-versa. It is an essential contest over who will ensure the stability of urban life.

A prolific micro-politics of contestation is seemingly normalized as the language through which one’s “right” to the city is expressed. It is as if people are saying, “we are in the city now; we must do whatever it takes to make the city work for us, even if it means by doing so, the city is less capable of working for others.” It is a “language” increasingly full of violent and brutal grammars tending to crowd out the new forms of civility ushered into South African cities during the times of the struggle for democracy. Images of young men running down streets afraid to walk and not knowing what lies around the next bend have become a dominant representation of several key residential areas. There is also an impressive, albeit distorted intelligence at work.

For example, there are “citizens” who look down Jeppe Street and can tell you exactly how many staff are out sick at a particular business, what time salespeople on a particular floor take their tea break, the varying temporal rhythms used by certain shopkeepers to lock and unlock their stores, the varying patterns used by banks to transfer cash—in other words, the most minute information and details that connote some sense of vulnerability, and thus opportunity for incursions of all kinds. Foreign Africans are known to complain about the way
people are scrutinized in public space—how one looks, how one is walking, what one is wearing. Such scrutiny is not done to assess conformity to some urban norm, but to assess weakness.

But it would also be a mistake to see the “excessive” only as an instance of violence; for the municipal is woven out a sense of the extravagance of individuals and communities extending themselves to each other, providing support beyond the call of duty. No matter how violent, for example, the Johannesburg inner city may be, it continues to function largely through such an extravagance of sharing space, resources and opportunities in hundreds of small stories of accommodation and non-threatening opportunism played day in and day out.

As prevailing paradigms of governance emphasize bringing management of public affairs and goods down to the most immediate and practical levels of where they actually take effect, what social units will actually practice this management? Who are the relevant social actors in highly fluid urban spaces? What kinds of effective institutional forms and identities of citizenship are possible? As the central city is a locus for diffuse and highly contested authority on a day-to-day basis, how do residents assess what it is possible to do? What kinds of assumptions about visibility, collaboration, affiliation, and mobility are operative in environments where it is not clear just who has the capacity to do what to whom? As a larger proportion of the population is made up of youth living on their own, how do more provisional forms of social life, affiliation and residence impact upon the mores and practices of all residents?

While these questions may have special resonance to the central city of Johannesburg, they are being increasingly asked in terms of a wide range of urban environments. As such, these considerations are a part of a recent history of important investigations on urban informal economies and social formations.

The central city is a place of great ethnic and national diversity. Perhaps some ninety percent of the area’s present residents were not living in the central city ten years ago. Foreign African and Asian immigrants and black South Africans coming from across the country are all vying to establish some foothold. All attempt to do so without substantive institutional support and with an urban infrastructure in severe decline. It also appears that most residents are also living in ways highly dissimilar to those to which they have been accustomed in the past.

Elaborate relationships are configured among hawkers, those with some form of formal employment, social networks organized around their patronage of specific bars and hotels, taxi drivers and passengers, railway workers, and the clients of the large number of hotels in the area. There are also large numbers of people operating in the central city, both residents and non-residents, who simply wait for something to happen, or aggressively pursue an opportunity to steal, work in somebody’s else scheme or live off of someone else’s income.

Thus, survivalist activities undertaken in highly provisional ways and with limited scope seem to be appropriated by “entrepreneurial” networks operating at larger scales. These scales would include, for example, in ascending order: the level of the specific quarter, e.g. Hillbrow, Berea, Yeoville; the translocal scale, e.g. flows between Hillbrow and Soweto; Yeoville and Alexandra; Berea and the central business district; and transurban scales, e.g., flows between Johannesburg and Durban; Johannesburg and Maputo; Johannesburg and Shanghai. Some groupings, like the so-called “Nigerian machine”, use thousands of their more marginal compatriots to mark and enforce complex territories of economic domination, obscuring the space and procedures of diverse but interconnected economic activities.

A great difficulty in assessing the character, composition and scale of such activities is the high degree to which these activities are illegal and are protected by various affiliations with legal institutions and transactions. Within the density of activities and population numbers, information itself becomes an important resource—who is going where, who comes and goes at what time, who guards what, who knows whom—for all of this can be converted into a potential “income-generating” activity. Concomitantly, there is an intricate economy of
managing impressions and the visibility of actions that accompany these broadly informal economic activities.

Take for example the following:

A warehouse in Dar es Salaam and a shipment whose waybill indicates origin from the World Muslim League. This is a shipment of thousands of sealed Qurans, religious texts to guide the Ummah throughout Southern Africa. Between the pages are counterfeit dollar bills. And take Bashir Taha, who comes to Fordsburg, Johannesburg in 1995 to take over the African Muslim Association after spending years in Malawi, where he built a series of fortifications all along the border with Mozambique that, on the surface, provided a bulwark of protection against the insurgency, but were also facades for the coordination of substantial illicit transborder exchanges. Taha, citizen of Kuwait, was the son of an enormously wealthy Iraqi family, who also owned sixteen major office buildings in Sao Paolo.

And take the 789 conversions to Islam officially recorded at masajids in Fordsburg by Angolan immigrants during that same year—some eventually housed informally on large tracts of land at Mia’s Farm outside of Neilspruit in Mapumalanga owned by a legendary Deobandi family, one of whose branches controlled the labor provided to reconstruct the docks in Dubai. Others ended up in Winterveld, a large peri-urban area north of Pretoria, which until today, has large sections of land owned and settled by successive generations of former Mozambican mineworkers. Indeed, many of these former mineworkers who settled in Winterveld, having heavily invested in mini-bus taxis, channel goods provided them “under the table” by today’s mineworkers to a wide range of buyers. These goods come either from their countries of origin or from the networks of other mineworkers with whom they once worked. On the other hand, goods acquired from compatriots and other various networks are sold to mineworkers throughout the country. Individual entrepreneurs are thus plying large territories. The trade continuously changes—from the smuggling of diamonds and precious metals, rhino horns, and guns to more conventional consumer goods such as electronics and packaged foodstuffs.

Some of this illegal activity is elaborately syndicated. Winterveld entrepreneurs constitute a nodal point in links between mineworkers, buyers, and workers at the Maputo port in Mozambique. Most of these activities seem to be loosely organized. Cooperation does exist, but on a deal-by-deal basis. These deals are rarely worked out in Winterveld; and, instead, there are frequent meetings either in Hillbrow or on Troye Street in the Johannesburg CBD. In part, these arrangements act as a mechanism of protection, since threats from more “endowed” syndicates and other competitors can be quite intense. Perhaps more to the point, loose cooperation provides a mechanism for the individual entrepreneur to access a more diverse and wider range of opportunities. For the most part, specific deals or activities are rarely repeated in the exact form in which they have already taken place. They rarely take place in the same location or with the same composition of “collaborators” more than a few times.

And take the story of a couple of Rwandese who walked much of the way to South Africa, and then find themselves in Cape Town dealing in cellphones from Malaysia on their way to Malawi (some counterfeit, others not) sold and re-sold in an ongoing flux of coming and going, and of visits by strange long-bearded Arabs in jellabiya bearing airline tickets to French Guiana via Sao Paolo and Caracas. And take the Winterveld owned long distance taxis, one a day, that ply the route from Johannesburg to Dar es Salaam, filled with Angolans. And take these Angolan at Dar airport with Kenyan passports and freshly minted dollar bills on their way to Dubai for one of the well-known shopping fairs.

This entire circuitry of exchange both finds anchorage in the central city and is also displaced from it; it has simultaneously everything and nothing to do with it. What does this double position mean? If these stories are indeed a small sampling of what is undoubtedly a much larger domain of translocal shadow economy, it would seem that a larger proportion of the overall economy seem to disperse urban resourcefulness across wider territory with unclear consequences.
On the surface such dispersal would appear to be a problem for a city that lacks strong histories of social cohabitation. The lack of social cohesion is often cited as the primary characteristic of Johannesburg. As Khetso Gordan, the city’s former top urban manager in the late 1990’s often said, no sector, community or group has any sense of belonging to the city as a whole, or anything good to say about the city. There is a fundamental absence of public life and of concrete opportunities for diverse populations to acknowledge that they share the same universe of operations. Daily life can be increasingly parochial for both rich and poor, although the rich retain enormous capacities to preserve a way of life that barely differs from a typically Northern urban existence.

In this situation where vastly different modalities of existence largely operate in parallel to each other, the overall global space of the city is increasingly privatized. In other words, the space of the city beyond work and housing-related enclaves is increasingly beyond the apprehension, use and affiliation of all but those whose capacities enable them to manipulate a “bird’s-eye” view of the city. Such manipulation entails intervening at the level of the city’s position within the larger abstract space of inter-urban flows and transactions. The city at large, then, becomes an increasingly dangerous unknown universe, full of threats and unseen circumstances, to the majority of inhabitants.

Urban residents become more defensive and particularized in their social and public relations. In Alexandra, one of Johannesburg’s densest black “townships,” there exist some 170 different community organizations. The multiplicity of these organizations represents different modalities of inhabitation—from homeowners, shack-dwellers, backyard tenants, renters, and squatters. They also represent different territories within the district and other divisions of interests. Cooperation and collaboration is rare; as the motivation for organization is largely the perception of threat and using associations as a means for engaging in a more intense competition for scarcer resources and opportunities.

Municipal authorities are faced with a situation where maintaining the ability to run the city requires keeping many of the trappings which excluded people from the city in the past. At the same time, they must allow the city to be radically re-arranged by very diverse populations and interests no longer forced to “stay in place.” Attempts then to make the city more livable for those who have been historically excluded often become perceived as yet another instrument to control those who have been excessively controlled in the past.

While households and communities may adamantly defend their “hold” on specific residential territories that have been informally settled, this “holding” is often mistaken as an expression of an intent to remain within that settlement over a long period of time. Such patterns are usually not the case. While rural to urban migration may have slowed, the South African labor force is increasingly mobile within and among cities, and such a defence of territory is more about defending the “right” to be in the city, to have a place in it—but without commitment to a specific place. Thus the subsidization of rudimentary housing structures, which has been the cornerstone of South Africa’s response to the country’s housing needs, largely misunderstands the bulk of the population’s approach to settlement. For example, housing sub-markets have become increasingly murky and complex as former shack-dwellers sell off their new homes for income and return to living in shacks.

Intensifying mobility is also reinforced by the diversity of strategies employed to secure basic needs, e.g., simultaneous participation in formal and informal economies, dispersion of dependents across different localities, and diversifying sources of borrowing and evasion. Such mobility, in turn, cultivates particular economic and social practices that can weaken customary modalities of social affiliation and social capital. Policy efforts to constrain the mobility of domestic private capital and to attract and maintain mobile external capital have had the effect of intensifying the mobility of the poor. This, of course, is not an upward but rather a lateral mobility—within and between townships and informal settlements, cities and regions, in an incessant hunt for livelihood.

In some areas, such as the inner city of Johannesburg, the extent of demographic shifts is certainly unprecedented in contemporary urban history. Also unprecedented is the degree to which social boundaries are marked by spatial arrangements in high-density quarters and the
ways in which the physical trappings of wealth and security can be penetrated by “roving bands” of “opportunists” taking whatever they can. The apparent wastage of large parts of the Johannesburg CBD actually house an increasingly vibrant sector of informal businesses engaged in a wide range of artisan production. Nothing is what is appears to be. In an urban culture where everyone was assigned a particular place and time, and where places embodied narrowly circumscribed connotations, it is only reasonable to expect that a massive and concrete “deconstruction” would take place. South African cities are certainly being remade, but by whom or how remains largely undecided.

The intense levels of contestation over who has the “right” to do what in South African cities produces a situation where things can happen very quickly. Urban dwellers don’t, as a result, feel constrained by the sense that specific places and resources belong to only certain kinds of uses or identities. There are constant and often violent arguments in apartment blocks, on streets, in taxis, in schools, and in stores about who can do what where. Such argumentation can open up places to greater flexibility as to their use, but it also can break down the integrity of places and a sense of propriety, which in turn, makes them vulnerable to incursions and distortions of all kinds.

Drawing on urban survival strategies used during apartheid to avoid pass laws and other forms of state surveillance, populations proficient in sending the “wrong” signals can continue to do so in order to “win” spaces of autonomous action. Who is a “real” police-person, security guard, domestic, gardener, deliverer, and who isn’t is not only increasingly hard to discern, but in many cases doesn’t matter, as levels of complicity between the real and the “pretender” intensify. At other times, things move slowly, since urban residents know that many people are paying attention to what they do, and they then try to conform to some sense of what can pass as conventional in order not to stand out. So in South African cities, spaces can change very quickly and also not at all.

Whereas this situation may be the case for all cities, there is a fundamental unwillingness to acknowledge these parameters of urban change or stasis within the collective South African imagination. Yet for the most part, the Johannesburg metropolitan government can do little to satisfy the interests and needs of one group without estranging those of another, who are more willing than ever to assume violent means of expressing their vulnerability. Efficacy in urban governance and planning now increasingly means that no single institutional or sectoral actor is likely to exert much control over how the urban is to be remade.

For, the sheer rapidity of demographic and economic changes in the central city has created uncertainty as to what is possible to plan for and do. The uncertainty has caused sudden and substantial divestitures of all types. These divestitures further impede adequate monitoring by adding a large volume of transactions to the quick pace of change. Insecurity is intensified and, with it, the practice of getting rid of property and position at a cheap price.

In an urban area with such comprehensive demographic change, there are few grounds for anyone to cite and enforce a superseding claim to belonging. But this relative vacuum of belonging, i.e., a situation where almost no one presently living in the inner city can claim an overarching sense of origin, of a protracted history of settlement, points out how, in the absence of effective governance, the “feeling” of belonging holds sway.

The narcotics enterprises that constitute an important component of the inner city economy are commonly seen as the purview of Igbo-dominated Nigerian networks. While such composition may be generally true, such enterprises are by no means ethnically homogenous or formed exclusively on the basis of national identity. Rather, in a business that has little recourse to appealing to law or official commercial standards, the appearance of ethnic or national homogeneity conveys a certain impenetrability. It detracts external scrutiny,
infiltration, and competition, and thus allows the enterprise to incorporate the diversity of actors it often requires in order to constantly change supply routes, markets, and so forth.

Such enterprises act as a parody of belonging. In the commercial culture of the inner city narcotics economy, the discrete tasks of importation, circumvention of customs regulations, repackaging, local distribution, money laundering, relations with legal authorities, territorial control, market expansion, and plotting traffic routes all are complementary yet highly territorialized domains. Usually, discrete “units” administer each domain so that disruptions in one domain do not jeopardize the entirety of trade. Nigerian syndicates, which use the hotels in Hillbrow to accommodate a large transient population that in turn serves as a mask behind which to consolidate a steady clientele of drug users including sex workers, have instituted an interesting governance structure.

The hotels, now largely managed by Nigerian syndicates, become discrete “localities”, housing not only workers in the drug trade, but also Nigerians working in a wide range of activities. The syndicates dominate the governing committees that are established for each hotel, with their concomitant sets of rules—for example, no-go areas are often established for Nigerians and fines for various infractions that are then used for legal fees. But, Nigerians who are not involved in the drug economy are also counted upon to provide a semblance of internal diversity, even if they are often used and manipulated.

Yet, the domains must be well integrated—in such a way that complicity and cooperation become the prevailing practices. But within each domain, each operator has a specific place and is expected to demonstrate unquestioning loyalty. This is the case even if the illicit nature and the practical realities of the trade create an incessantly open space for participants to “take their chances” and seek greater profits and authority outside the hierarchies that each syndicate must attempt to rigidly enforce.

Thus, it is apparent to most inner city residents what hotels, residential buildings, and commercial enterprises belong to which syndicates and to which nationalities these syndicates in turn belong. Yet, since any particular narcotics enterprise handles only certain facets of the overall trade, and leaves itself increasingly vulnerable if it expands its efforts to dominate more functions and more territory, spaces aiso must be maintained that clearly belong to “no one.” It is precisely within these spaces, however, that anything might happen, that are contested and unpredictable, and that are often subject to the most vociferous claims of belonging. This is often a “contest” over women. For as the vast majority of foreign immigrants are male, the impression is instituted that these immigrants, better off economically than most black South African male residents, are “stealing” local women.

Thus, the inner city is a complex geography, where residents must navigate according to constantly finely tuned series of movements and assumptions. There are places where they know they must not go, be seen—but in an often convoluted economy of safety, although a South African municipal worker living in the Metropolitan in Berea is unlikely to sit and read the paper in the lobby of the Mark or Sands Hotel—the domains of so-called Nigerian drug dealers—he or she may, in actuality be safer in this activity then making a telephone call from the public stand at the nearby petrol station.

The drug economy, with its “hyperactive” sensibilities and codes of belonging, could largely entrench itself in Hillbrow and Berea, because a highly dense, highly urbanized area with massive infrastructure was being vacated—both in terms of its former population and in terms of financial and governmental resources. The modalities of operation of the drug business tend to “provincialize” certain parts of the inner city—i.e., localize it in terms of clearly marked territories and “fiefdoms.” But the definitiveness of organizations and territories is more a necessary “performance” than descriptive of actual operational practices. The more entrenched and expansive the drug economy becomes, the more it must proliferate ambiguous interfaces. For example, these interfaces are those between supposedly discrete groupings, between illicit activity and legitimate investment, between declines and consumption patterns and increased availability, and between inner city Johannesburg as an
increasingly well known site of the drug economy and other more invisible and thus often advantageous sites of operation.

Here, the salience of belonging specifies the need for its own demise. While a frequently heard rallying cry in the inner city is for blocks and neighborhoods to be restored to those to whom they really belong, who are these citizens and what would they do with these neighborhoods? To what extent is the inner drug economy the most visible component of an otherwise invisible unfolding of the inner city onto the uncertainties of the metropolitan region. In a city preoccupied with questions about who belongs where, and where within a city where movement and operations is incessantly precarious and insecure, there is a heightened need to identify plausible spaces of safe residence. Yet, the drug operations don’t need the inner city—either as market or center of operation. Already, there is some indication that several syndicates are “moving on”, seeking other locales. Thus, the heightened sense in the past decade that specific territories within the inner city have exclusively belonged to specific agents is revealed as something arbitrary. One can even hear local sentiment that claims that at least the drug dealers stalled the demise of certain blocks, now vulnerable to an influx of petty criminals.

Within an inner city, where jobs are scarce, everyday life precarious, and the need to mobilize available social capital acute, the very act of counting upon those close to one becomes a practice which leaves individual vulnerable to further difficulties. As has been repeatedly pointed out by Graeme Reid, director of the Johannesburg Development Agency, a critical problem for local governance has been the instability of household composition within the inner city. Families who reside in an apartment unit for several months frequently disperse, with new household arrangements being established in other parts of the inner city or elsewhere.

In part, this instability is directly related to the intensifying uncertainty permeating everyday kinship relations. It becomes dangerous for a person to interweave the details of their daily life too closely to those of family members. If something goes wrong, if one member finds out that they are HIV positive, or if a growing divide in economic capacity becomes apparent, one then leaves themselves vulnerable to witchcraft accusations and thus vulnerable to being ostracized or even killed. As a result, the very process of mobilizing social capital that is needed in order to elaborate a viable sense of belonging is precisely that process which becomes the most difficult to perform. In this absence, the apparent capacity of foreign Africans to elaborate a sense of supportive social connectedness becomes particularly threatening, as it is perceived to provide immigrants with an undo advantage to thrive in this urban environment.

While immigrant networks do depend on always activating a sense of mutual cooperation and interdependency, such ties are also often more apparent then real—especially as a complex mixture of dependence and autonomy is a work in relations among fellow compatriots. For many foreign Africans in the inner city, Johannesburg is neither the preferred or final destination, especially at present. Its continental location and the degree to which the South African economy is increasingly intertwined with other African national and regional economies makes the city more accessible, despite the entry and stay regulations proffered by the government, than other European or North American destinations. The city’s geographic location facilitates the petty to medium-scale conventional and unconventional trade activities that characterize a significant percentage of immigrant economies. From official commercial markets to informal ones in both Congos, Zambia, Angola, Mozambique, to name a few of the predominant national settings, a substantial amount of their inputs either originate or pass through South Africa in a trade frequently controlled or at least mediated by South African-based immigrants.

Although most immigrants dream of a quick score that would enable them to return home with significantly enhanced prestige and purchasing power, such rarely happens. Instead, many years of toil in a series of low paid jobs is the norm, with the bulk of the limited earnings saved remitted back home to support an array of family members. Additionally, bribes to police often must be paid, as well as unofficial surcharges to certain landlords. For traders at any scale, goods are often seized, lost or stolen. The obstacles immigrants persist in dealing
with, especially in South Africa, amplify the enormity of the difficulties of home. While fellow nationals or even immigrants of various nationalities may band together to share living expenses, information and risk, the possibilities for corporate action are limited. Each is trying their best to make ends meet and deal with specific family, community, or political situations back home. Each is in some way a competitor, and cooperation is based on self-interest, self-protection and camaraderie, and not on solidifying a long-term investment in the cultivation of a place of operation in Johannesburg.  

The inner city largely represents a process of “running away”, where the inside and the outside make ambiguous any definitive sense of where residents are located, and what their identities and interests “really” are. Black South Africans are running away from the implosive sociality of township life—of a life for too long situated in a “nowhere”, i.e. places arbitrarily configured to be apart and to embody the essence of a culture long uprooted from the chance to continually remake itself. Foreign Africans are running away from the impossibility of being at home, i.e. to do whatever is possible to maintain the sense (and often, the illusion) that they can have maintain a home.  

All of this takes place is an urban area which, however fleetingly, once hinted at the possibility of a more cosmopolitan urban South Africa. But the country has long repressed what that cosmopolitanism might look like. Instead, it is re-imagined primarily in politically vacuous, “rainbow nation” terms. The inner city existed for too many years—and in this case, the seven years between 1988 and 1995 when the rapid demographic shift took place proved to be a “lifetime”—without any significant elaboration of urban policy or programming. Inner city life became increasingly informalized, and in this informalization increasingly illicit. In this interregnum, the caution exhibited by incoming residents, not quite knowing what to make of their new surrounding, gave way to the brashness of various “investors.” These investors knew how to “recuperate” the trappings of city blocks of hotels with huge discos, rooftop pools, basement wineries, underground car parks into a distorted Miami to be run to the ground by a flourishing drug economy whose proceeds would largely be diverted elsewhere. Ironically, what remains is an inner city ready for nearly anything.  

**Disappearing in Douala**

President Paul Biya established Operation Command on February 20, 2000 as a means of rectifying the alarming increase in violent crime taking place in Douala. At first residents across the city widely applauded this military operation, as they had become increasingly terrified 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 vast 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 greater suspicion. During raids on homes, if the residents were unable to immediately provide receipts for items like televisions or refrigerators, they would be immediately confiscated. Increasingly, the 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 23rd, 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 on 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 28th they were transferred to an Operation Command post whereupon all communication from them stopped. The parents of the children 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 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 whom 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 killings thousands.

It is common practice in Douala to take in young girls from the rural areas as unpaid domestic 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. As Marc Etaha, Frederic Ngouffo, Chatry Kuete, Eric Chia, Jean Roger Tchiwan, Charles Kouatou, Chia Efficac, Elysee Kouatou and Fabrice Kuete—the Bapenda 9—served as a kind of "last straw" for the public patience with the Operation Command, there was a uneasy mixture of guilt, anger, impotence, and mysticism wrapped up in the larger public response to their disappearance.

Whether people actually believed in the reputed sightings of the disappeared or not, 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. From one sighting to the next, from one part of the city to the other, these girls took the risk of their own disappearance on these feeding expeditions. In the process, however, they crossed Douala at night in ways that were 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 started being sought out by various officials, businesspersons, and even top personnel of the 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 for their dreams, advice on new ventures, insights on the wheelings and dealings of colleagues and competitors.

Girls of thirteen who not long before went hungry in rural areas experiencing thorough economic and social decline, bought and sold to fetch water for forever, now suddenly found 10,000 CFA notes pressed in their hands, and started demanding more. Although I never saw her, stories spread how one of the girls, Sally, would hold court by the pool at the Meridien Hotel, cellphone in hand and her entourage of body guards.

Nkongmondo is set back from the intersection of two major roads, one leading into the city, 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 “emissaries” 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 ambassador’s 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 prisoners attitude is what has earned the quarter it characterization as just a sullen dump of thuggery and its young male criminals the name, “head- bangers”. Few attempts at quarter “improvement” are initiated, 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 opportunities 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 even two minutes from the Western entrance to the quarter stands 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 suburban 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 next door 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 that there was an important way of life being depicted, the landscape and composition of which they would discuss 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 anyway 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 to get, how much the costs would be. As it was always difficult to try and hide money or to keep on 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, attempted to make 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 like 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 ephemeralized 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 excessive markers 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 of with the conviction that one has not yet “eaten well”, there remains the collective process of sitting down to eat. To locate a person—especially the increasing numbers of youth who are forced to float across the city in search of livelihood or who are running in a constant cat and mouse game, chasing those who owe them money, running from those whose money they have stolen—is to speculate when and where they will eat. In the midst of this speculation, and the uncertainty 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 and grunts, tongue clicks and glottals.

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 but was becomes indistinguishable from what could have been but not.*xxxvi

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 it is 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.*xxxvii
Concluding Note

In these brief case materials, 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 highly rooted in specific places and ascription to operate outside these confines? How are apparent realities of social coherence and cohesion maintained while opportunities, that would seemingly require behaviors and attitudes a nithetical the sustainability of such cohesion, are pursued?

Urban Africans are on the move, and the ability to move, either through their quarters, cities or among cities must draw on a capacity to see themselves are more than just marginal to prevalent global urban processes. Residents must see that deteriorating urban conditions do not simply mean that they become farther 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.

Notes


See particularly the following:


N. Webster, 1998, “In Search of Alternatives: Poverty, the Poor and Local Organisations.” Copenhagen: Centre for Development Research.


Based on work conducted by AbdouMaliq Simone as part of conjoint Planact/Foundation for Contemporary Research project on unconventional economic networks in the inner city of Johannesburg between 1994-1996.

Also see:


Data from the Johannesburg Development Agency


Michel Serres, 1982, *The Parasite*