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 Ileoluwe Canal at Oke-Afa, Ilorin-Egbu, 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 petioles 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 inclu-
sive 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 mantled 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, there 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. At the end of 2000, it was reported that there were 2,177 religious sects newly constituted in Kinshasa, many who meet during all-night prayer sessions, where bodies, money, and capacity appear and disappear to discordant logs. 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 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 sear the sweat and passion of hardworking urban bodies into networks of concrete becoming that go beyond the artificial citizenship.

Residents along the Isolo-Oshodi axis poured from their "indented" quarters, Shogunle, Jakande Estate, Egbejo, and converged on the canals because the lay-


out 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 "bunches." 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? In this spirit, cities like Lagos and Kinshasa, Freetowns 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 canization 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 hinge along vast circuits of connectivity. Identities and actions are situated in multiple loops of causation, opportunity, and constraint.2

4 Ibid.
The politics of instability. Indeed, across Africa there is a greater preoccupation with death. Deaths now by much the termination of life, although the intensity of suffering and the way of death is different from the way they experienced death. The threat of instability lurks in the background, of being unable to make ends meet. This is what people are saying, of being unable to feed their families. The threat of instability lies in the difficulty of maintaining a sense of security, of being able to rely on the government to do what is expected of it. The threat of instability is in the fear of losing everything, of being unable to provide for the future. This is what people are saying, of being unable to provide for their children. The threat of instability lies in the uncertainty of the future, of being unable to plan for the future. This is what people are saying, of being unable to plan for the future.
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 diffi-
cult and often oppressive urban world with stealth, invention, 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 recogniz-
ing 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 forestalled or relentless in its mimetic, its promises, or its desperate fear of taking shape. 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 ques-
tion through making visible that which has not, under the optics of a given per-
ceptible field, been visible. It is given a "name," not necessarily a "right name," but a designation nevertheless, a "xenohispanic," an instrument that allows some-
thing to effect and be affected. This instrument, and thus politics, cannot be traced back to embodying or representing specific social realties or organiza-
tions. It comes from the "outside," possessing, taking hold of a community in order for it to recognize itself, but always already seeing it away from itself.

So here I am concerned with forms of spectral instrumentality potentially capable of revitalizing an affective glue, a desire for social interchange and coop-
eration 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

10 Jen Chaplin, "Functional and Dysfunctional Commuwity Development's Normative Possi-
possibilities," paper prepared for the Community Development Department, City of Cape Town, 2000.


One must consider the role of national systems of education in promoting a more equitable and sustainable future. Educational systems are crucial in fostering critical thinking, innovation, and problem-solving skills that are necessary for addressing the complex challenges of global sustainability. Additionally, investment in education can lead to a more informed and engaged citizenry, which is essential for democratic participation and effective governance. Policies that prioritize education as a means of promoting economic development, social mobility, and environmental sustainability should be a key focus of national agendas.

The Role of Education in Achieving Sustainability

In order to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is essential to prioritize education as a means of promoting economic development, social mobility, and environmental sustainability. This includes investing in early childhood education, ensuring access to quality education for all, and promoting lifelong learning. By fostering a culture of lifelong learning, societies can better adapt to the rapidly changing world and make informed decisions that benefit both current and future generations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, education is a fundamental tool for achieving sustainability. By investing in education and promoting lifelong learning, societies can move towards a more equitable, sustainable, and resilient future. This requires a commitment from governments, civil society, and individuals to work together in creating a more just and sustainable world for all.
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, consultation, 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 exceedingly interwoven in local urban life? How can such political community be reimagined in a context where formerly valued modalities and practices of social cohesion disappear, as do the territorial parameters through which cohesion is recognized and performed?

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. Poisons of citizenship are important not because they impose an abstract framework of identity in which prior modalities of belonging and affective connectivity are subsumed. Nor are they important because they can instrumentalize these 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 antagonistic. 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. Propensities of decentralization and the "new localization" 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 Kabanda in Zambesi and Dzoukou in Côte d'Ivoire as to eliminate their presidential candidates, to the expulsion of "immigrants" in Gabon, to intensified ethnic claims of particular regions in Cameroon, to the fight over whether that's a "belong in Nigeria."

The restrictive emphasis on contents about belonging tends to underplay the ways in which African societies display a remarkable capacity to operate in the interspaces 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 scale reconfiguration, 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 reestablish local modalities of cohesion and solidarity to more regional and global frameworks. Some localities, such as Nima (Accra), Obelende (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 treacherous 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

were allowed to visit their families and correspond with them, although they reported being physically secured. On January 28, they were transferred as Operation Command post where all communication from them stopped.

the children, following the lead of the "Three Boys of Okinawa," were reunited with their families.

Ruddy Redd, the last survivor of operation Kommando, was hailed as a hero. He was awarded the Medal of Honor and became a national celebrity.

The events that unfolded were the result of a complex interplay of political, military, and cultural factors. The narrative, as told by the children, was a powerful reminder of the importance of maintaining strong family ties, even in the face of adversity.

The story of Ruddy Redd and his companions serves as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the enduring bond between family and friends. It is a tale of courage, determination, and the unbreakable ties that bind us together. In a world where we often take for granted the simple pleasures of life, this story reminds us of the importance of cherishing the moments we share with those we love.
there is a seeming insistence to stand apart, as very few are willing to work as brute force for more sophisticated networks or ring leaders. Detention and death are also not persuasive deterrents to the endless supply of youth from the area purportedly identified as addicts and perpetrators.

Not two minutes from the western entrance 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 suburban location. The demise of both has a sense of finality to it. The school kids would skip out of classes and crowd matinee showings of an endless face 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 authorities to at least close the place during school hours. But this was too a no go, especially as the very popular soft-porn showings on the weekends drew crowds of functionaries already disappointed that they hadn't gained the positions which would entitle them to the special twice-weekly strip shows and beyond featuring Paraisan 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 Nkongmendo, 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 in 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 beer 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 Doualaite, they were fascinated with this spectacle 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, For All Habitants, made a preliminary effort to organize some form of community association in Nkongmendo. 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 grand, nor did they think that, whatever they might do, anything significant would likely ensue. When asked if the large numbers of criminals who repeatedly 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 foods 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 communalist relationships have become increasingly murky and fragmented in how they actually operate. Autochthonous 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 car-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 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, smiles, tongue clicks, and grunts.

Pinned down by the zoning appearance of identity markers, yet footloose in the pursuit of those from whom one is escaping, there is little to be preserved, 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 Sotho residents would say. In other words, as Agamben points out in his notion of "deinvolution," what could have been and was becomes indistinguishable from what could have been but was not.17

The Doualais 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, and 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 has never happened but could be remembered 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 aspirations, 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.