
TRANSVERSALS OF TRAUMA THROUGH URBAN AFRICA

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Urbanization itself often seems traumatized, as cities no longer appear to get away with seeming as if they were capable of enticing or inculcating residents into discernible modes of intersubjectivity or an ethos of conviviality and mutuality. Cities have largely become ex-cities – commodified renditions of social thickness or exceptions to the predominant conceptions of what cities should be. Fractured and fractious, polynucleated and dispersed, the sectorized definitions that arranged different social categories of residents into recognizable territories of operation, work, and residence give way to more diffuse, jumbled up urban formations that intertwine various kinds of actors, commerce, practices, and resources into proximities that seemingly have few substantive connections, but many points of view and parasitical possibilities eliding justice – something both constantly perturbed and stabilized.¹

1. GRAHAM, Stephen, «Constructing Premium Network Spaces: reflections on infrastructure networks and contemporary urban development», *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2000, pp. 183-200; NIELSEN, Tom; ALBERTSEN, Niels and HEMMERSAM, Peter (eds.), *Urban Mutations: Periodization, Scale and Mobility*, Arkitekt skolens Forlag, Aarhus 2004; PECK, Jaimie and TICKELL, Adam, «Neoliberalizing Space», *Antipode*, vol. 34, no. 3, June 2002, pp. 381-404; SWYNGEDOUW, Erik, MOUALAERT, Frank and RODRIGUEZ, Arantxa (eds), *The Globalized City: Economic Restructuring and Social Polarisation in European Cities*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2003.

At the same time, cities often become more available to modes of settlement and use capable of elaborating themselves according to rhythms and inclinations that may be subject to many different kinds of constraints but without great specification as to what they can or should look like. Thus these ways of being in and using the city are allowed to unfold in ways that need not be integrated into some overarching and systemic logic of urban development or governance.² While much of what unfolds is mere compensation for the lack of connection these modes of settlement have to other, usually more resourced spaces of the city, these diverse ways of living in and using the city often find ways of inserting themselves into under-regulated spaces or in activities whose productive and profit-making capacities come to depend upon substantial informalization.³

While cities increasingly demonstrate the ability to persist with extensive fragmentation and divergence – particularly as less urban space and workers can now generate greater percentages of gross city product – we know little about what transpires at an increasing number of interfaces and divides.⁴ What kinds of leakages, interchanges, and affective fields transverse across spaces within a city increasingly demarcated according to different logics, infrastructures, regulations, histories, and aspirations. With increasing differences in the speeds at which diverse spaces are marketized, developed, discarded, and remade, how do these temporalities rub up against each other. How do varying positions, logics and possibilities circulate?

For this question, we have much to learn from African cities. We know African cities can be the intense compaction of bodies, temporalities, dreams, delusions, and sediments of failed plans and improvisations wound so tight that nothing is able

2. AMIN, Ash, «Spatialities of Globalization», *Environment and Planning A*, vol. 34, no. 3, March 2002, pp. 385-399; BOERI, Stephano; PRODI, Romano and KOOLHAAS, Rem, *Uncertain States of Europe*, Skira editore, Milan 2003; BRENNER, Neil, «Beyond state-centrism? Space, Territoriality and Geographical Scale in globalization studies», *Theory and Society*, vol. 28, no. 2, 1999, pp. 39-78; COX, Kevin, «Territoriality, Politics and the 'Urban'», *Political Geography*, vol. 20, no. 6, 2001, pp. 745-762; SANDERCOCK, Leonie, *Cosmopolis II: Mongrel Cities of the 21st Century*, Continuum, London, New York 2003.

3. AUGUSTIN, Laura M., «A migrant world of services», *Social Politics*, vol. 10, no. 3, Fall 2003, pp. 377-396; KESTELOOT, Christian and MEERT, Henk, «Informal spaces: the geography of informal economic activities in Brussels», *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1999, pp. 231-251. MACGAFFEY, Janet; BAZENGISSA-GANGA, Rémy, *Congo-Paris: Transnational Traders on the Margins of the Law*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Ind., in association with the International Africa Institute, London 1999; NORDSTROM, Carolyn, *Shadow Powers: The illegal, the illicit, and the invisible*, University of California Press, Los Angeles, Berkeley, London 2003.

4. THRIFT, N., «Afterwords», *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 18, no. 2, April 2000, pp. 213-255.

to escape. We know that it is possible for everyone's lives to be so implicated in each other's that any gesture takes on too many meanings. We know that the ability of individuals or institutions to control a schema of interpretations necessary to perform a sense of coherence is nearly impossible. African cities often act as machines of fracture, scattering and circulating parts, gestures, bits and pieces of ritual, livelihood, and sensibility. Such circulation produces an incessant sense of incompleteness and haunting in whatever arrangements are momentarily put together by diverse residents trying to figure each other out and live together.⁵

This process coincides with urban regulation increasingly operating through the threat of a pervasive openness – where urban regimes withdraw from efforts to provide viable definitions to the city, either in terms of supporting publicity, territorial boundaries, social integration, or specific forms of emplacement. In speeding up such openness, the multiple dimensions of urban life simply seep into each other without channeling or guidance and, as such, urban actors lose a sense of exchange, reciprocity, and transaction, all of which depend upon certain definitional frameworks being in place, even provisionally. As the possibilities of mediation diminish – i.e., the possibilities to convert differences of intensity and flow into entities and fields of reliable interpretation – urban residents, their lives more potentially open to everything, sense that disaster is always immanent.⁶

Yet, the catastrophic character of African cities generates what Rob Stone has called a kind of «redemptive etymology» – where recognized tropes of urban life bring forward a great deal of cultural material that stays for a long time in a largely uncoded, undigestible, and unintegrable state – in other words material that has not yet been

5. FERGUSON, James, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles 1999; GESCHIERE, Peter and NYAMNJOH, Francis, «Capitalism and Autochthony: The Seesaw of Mobility and Belonging», *Public Culture*, vol. 12, no. 2, May 2000, pp. 423-452; GORE, Charles and PRATTEN, David, «The Politics of Plunder: The rhetorics of order and disorder in Southern Nigeria», *African Affairs*, vol. 102, April 2003, pp. 211-240; MBEMBE, Achille, *On the Postcolony*, University of California Press, Los Angeles, Berkeley, London 2001; ROITMAN, Janet, «The Garrison-Entrepôt», *Cahiers d'Etudes africaines*, vol. XXXVIII, no. 2-4, 1998.

6. ATHANASIOU, Athena, «Technologies of humanness, aporias of biopolitics, and the cut body of humanity», *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, Spring 2003, pp. 125-162; LEVIN, Thomas Y.; FROHNE, Ursula and WEIBEL, Peter (eds), *CTRL [Space]: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass 2002; MASSUMI, Brian, *A Shock to Thought: Expressions after Deleuze and Guattari*, Routledge, London, New York 2002; LIANOS, Michalis, «Social control after Foucault», *Surveillance and Society*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2003, pp. 412-430; MUKERJI, Chandra, «Intelligent Uses of Engineering and the Legitimacy of State Power», *Technology and Culture*, vol. 44, no. 4, October 2003, pp. 655-676.

allocated to certain understandable and administrable historical processes.⁷ Thus the weight of remaking urban everyday life lies in an attention to the gestural, contingent and shorthand annotation instead of the memorial; exchanged glances and murmurs rather than documents; deportments, practices, and trades – all a kind of emergency democracy.

Whatever the distortions inherent in African urban history, the urbanizing process generates its own combinatorial spaces and special *intercallary* entities by allowing these multiplicities to mesh with each other in an intersection of simultaneities, gatherings, convergence, and encounters that are, indeed, the virtual society. The truncated process of economic modernization at work in African cities has never fully consolidated apparatuses of definition capable of enforcing specific and consistent territorial organizations of the city.

Let us take the city, Freetown, well known for its recent history of disasters. In the history of Sierra Leone, the Krios have been made up of sundry groups of freed slaves from all over West Africa, Britain and North America, servants, and rag-tag entrepreneurs. They have either administered or ruled at least Freetown for over two hundred years and have had precarious relationships with indigenous groups. These relationships have largely been mediated through elegantly stylized hunting societies or high-society lodges that became a rubric for an adapted urbanized Yoruba intersection of magic, public display, and religious symbolism.

Here, school teachers who gave girls some of the best education in the world mixed with women merchants who won status as hajis to Makkah and dealt in body parts to devils. These devils would have to be placated by well-educated politicians who ran the country as a plantation, consigning the majority to backlands and back alleys where they haunted the Krios elite, dressed in fine aristocratic clothes, attending Sunday church dinners, well-ensconced in the most exaggerated grammars of English propriety. So Salonean history has mixed intensified class marginalization with the persistence of very public secret societies. In these secret societies, the disorders of rule are reworked, almost always to the advantage of those already in charge, but in a way that introduces a large measure of volatility to the relationships among the elite. Even today at the university and in the elite gender segregated schools, there is an incessant and highly theatrical struggle for power – over who will dominate the culture of

7. Personal communication from Professor Rob Stone, Department of Visual Culture, Goldsmiths University, London.

the institutions. These struggles are waged between the tendencies of the «liberal whites» – the well-behaved, well-spoken, properly dressed – and the «radical blacks» – the rude, recalcitrant, and promiscuous. What perhaps always lurked behind this urban theater was a violence that came to dominate the nineties, where all lines were blurred and culpability – despite the current efforts of an international tribunal – will be impossible to disentangle.

The country is the site of one of the international community's largest efforts at re-normalization – making things look right again, albeit with 16,900 U.N troops, special courts, truth and reconciliation commissions, almost seven hundred different national organizations on peace, youth, women, children, as well as the entire gamut of international organizations. Rebuilding the country through an array of measures constituting good governance that in turn will promote the confidence and security to make both local populations more productive and external investments more forthcoming is the official story. The vast majority of urban residents of Freetown either have almost nothing to do or too much to do in the labor intensive tasks of collecting the day's water at 2 in the morning or navigating the massive gridlock of the East End where the real day-to-day, albeit limited, market exchanges take place.

As governance is reorganized, social relationships amongst even those with some kind of employment and position are dominated by pursuit of money. In meeting rooms, taxis, bedrooms, bars, churches and mosques, everyone talks almost all the time about new tricks, new procedures, new opportunities – all which require some facility at crossing sectoral, familial, class, gender, and ethnic lines. On ministerial trips abroad, in business delegations, attendance at conferences of all kinds in Europe and elsewhere, diamonds are never far from the picture.

Freetown, never a big city, nevertheless tried to act as a conventional city, with its specialized quarters and sectors, its mannerisms and pretensions. That behind all of this were mechanisms that brought different identities and capacities into a proximity that enabled stratification from getting out of hand didn't change the fact there were big families that ruled, that made use of Lebanese merchants to get things in and out of the country, that Krios Muslims were to pretend either that they were not Krios, or at least not the majority; that methodists would not try to outspend Presbyterians, and that good behavior meant no politics. That a well-known Leonean historian had suggested that there was almost a half-century intertwining of subaltern gangsters and university students forged through a common celebration of violence was viewed as a kind of heresy to the predominant sensibility of Freetown, that still

offers a sense of incomprehension of how the city could have been invaded twice, how so many could have been killed, maimed and raped.

Yet the present pursuit of money, while requiring the cessation of hostilities, must, in part, assume some of the characteristics of warfare – its valuation of stealth, of a willingness to be many different things for many different people, of a dismantling of the highly defined roles and territories that the obsession with good governance attempts to impose.

Since diamonds are all that Sierra Leone really has, the pursuit of money inevitably centers on either the actual acquisition and sale of diamonds, the trade in the impressions that diamonds are attainable at certain costs or ease of access, or in the trade of what the sale of diamonds could bring – i.e., managing the proceeds, facilitating remittances, laundering money, manipulating accounts. The diamond business itself, despite the nascent Kimberly Accords that seek to better regulate the industry, remains a murky field of unaccounted transactions, diversions and deceptions. It is thus well-suited for an economy of elusive performances and dissimulation, just as stones themselves rely upon their articulation to various discourses of exaggeration. In a cut-throat world of potentially quick and enormous profits, it is important for actors in this economy not to display excessive greed, not to introduce debilitating competition amongst those who provide potentially new avenues and audiences, not to be clearly identifiable as entrenched in specific circuits or capacities.

One should also cultivate a certain amount of mystique, of an ability to be believably daring, and to move on quickly, avoiding a curiosity in evaluating with any sense of gratification the fruits of what one has set in motion. This was certainly the case with Ibrahim Bah, the purported intermediary between Al-Qaeda and Leonian diamonds – someone who managed to engender many different stories as to his origin, his skill, his allegiances, all at the same time, making himself palatable to those who wanted evidence of strong convictions.

So Freetown is a potent mix of co-impossibilities. There is the impossibility of really maintaining a conventionally stratified urban society – with its concomitant economic specializations, differentiated roles and institutions. There is the impossibility of cross-territorial transversals. For even with its hunting lodges, secret societies, carnivals, youth ghettos (where youth from different social classes mingle to take drugs and fuck), and highly ritualized public life, the potential liminality incumbent in these spaces threatens to elaborate an uncontainable implosive force for which the last decade's war operates as a metaphor. In other words, war is not the breakdown of

order but the reacquisition of a lifestyle that remakes everything by allowing almost nothing recognizable to exist.

Take an example from Lagos – a huge city 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 Isole 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, themselves 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 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 five thousand seeds can be produced by a single plant. Low oxygen conditions develop beneath hyacinth mats impeding water flow and creating breeding grounds for mosquitoes.

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

Rescue efforts proved exceedingly difficult as rescuers had to cut their way through the dense entanglement that had already encompassed individual bodies. It is perhaps ironic that morphology so capable of spreading itself rapidly across fluid surface can so impede another's mobility. As the reputed criminals, to whom these canals

have been conceded by local residents, pointed out in the aftermath of the tragedy, it is not a matter of trying to run across the matted vegetation. Rather, the key is rolling over, gliding along the surface, allowing the body to do things that it never thought it was capable of doing.

As one 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?

As residents along the Isolo-Oshidi axis poured from their «indented» quarters, Shogunle, Jakande Estate, Ejigbo and converged on the canals because the layout of their quarters meant that escape necessarily led them in this direction. 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 the wake of this tragedy, has found various visible forms. Children have been returned to families on the basis of «hunches.» Mutual assistance is now connecting quarters that may be in close proximity, but due to the topography of the city can be connected 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 the wake of the disaster.

These examples from Lagos and Freetown, I think, compel us to expand our notions of urban infrastructure. Urban infrastructure has been conventionally understood as those elements that articulate and enforce specific structures of connectivity among residents, and between residents and the urban environment. This infrastructure provides for the reproduction of life within the city as well as maintains specific forms of sociality through these specific modes of provisioning. Here, I would extend the notion of infrastructure to these practices of conjunction, where livelihood, its reproduction and the creation of opportunity are produced and enacted through the very intersection of different bodies marked and situated in diverse ways, and where permutations in the intersection of their given physical existence, their stories, networks, inclinations, and trajectories of movement produce specific value and capacity. This process of conjunction, generating highly singular social compositions with a range of singular capacities and needs, both enacted and virtual, always attemp-

ting to derive maximal resourcefulness from the most minimal set of elements is what I call «people as infrastructure.»

Lots of different kinds of activities, modes of production and institutional forms are intersected to provide provisional possibilities for how people live and make things, how they use the urban environment and collaborate with one another. The specific operations and scopes of these intersections are constantly negotiated. They depend on the particular histories, understandings, networks, styles, and inclinations of the actors involved. As a result, highly specialized needs arise, requiring the application of specialized skills and sensitivities that can adapt to the unpredictable range of scenarios these needs bring to life. Regularities thus ensue from a process of incessant convertibility – turning commodities, found objects, resources, and bodies into uses previously unimaginable or constrained. As such, the more things urban actors are willing or able to do, the more adept they become at operating within these intersections.

To circulate through the city means not only to transverse it as a geographical domain, as a series of distinct quarters, institutions, and times. Rather, to circulate has come to represent for many African urban youth the ability to pass through and under the often merely feigned efforts and then usually arbitrary applications of political power to define how the city is to be organized and used. Conversely, it also specifies a sense of regularity within a highly uncertain environment, where it is not clear what is likely to ensue from the usual prescriptions regarding commitments to particular ethical, livelihood and social welfare practices. Instead, just as many youth seize whatever chances may come their way, they also position themselves to be seized – that is, to be taken into various ensembles of trade, war, migration, proselytizing, and social settlement without having to possess a certain eligibility or genealogy. Bodies are drained of pasts and characteristics as they also can be imbued with substantial «undeserved» capacities and authority.

So, local institutions are constantly trying to come up with imaginative ways of making relations among people with varying degrees of prior connection with each other, knowing that people are always coming and going. But instead of coming up with a set of consistent norms and rules by which those incorporated should abide, localities – be they villages, towns, urban neighborhoods – try to find norms which best fit the particular hodgepodge of kin, strangers, passers-by, neighbors that they have on hand. Here, a sense of stability is forged from the very instability of the compositions and relations of those institutions that try to provide a platform for

social connectedness and collaboration.

To locate a person in urban African today – 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 who one is escaping, there is little to be presented, and achievement is not based on the figuration of a more comprehensive narrative. Instead of valorizing the cohesion of households or introducing economies of reciprocity or debt, eating is the site where one can get carried away.

The captain who has just slept with the fifteen-year-old daughter of his commanding officer in a bleak backstreet hotel, the university student who has packed a small bag and is meeting a truck that will deliver him across the first of many borders that lie ahead, the director of a women's marketing group faced with a choice of taking a small grant from a European country to send her daughter to university in France, the thief who worries that his father will identify him as the one who held up his office a few hours before, and the director of the recently opened stock exchange who has delivered a crate of chickens to the aunt who has cooked at this location for four decades – all sit in an unpredictable animation, each at the cusp of each other's trajectories, somehow ready to move and be moved.

Spatial and representational languages too often seem to point to fracture and divergence. And so we try to find ways to pay attention to different rhythms and speeds – their modulations and their times. For it is the intersections of rapid speculations, of trades that have assumed a specific place for generations, of rapid escapes and incursions, sudden disappearance or reappearance, of land being methodically tied down in squabbles without end, of neighborhoods appearing overnight, of ruins waiting seemingly forever to be cleared, of gatherings in the middle of the night where each participant unbeknownst to the others shows up at exactly the same moment – it is in these intersections that Africans have spread their cities everywhere.