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INTERVIEW WITH TATE MODERN DIRECTOR CHRIS DERCON TATE MODERN, 14TH OF DECEMBER, 2012

Lara Pawson

Freelance writer living in London

In 2012, freelance journalist Lara Pawson met with Tate Modern Director Chris Dercon. During the course of the interview, Dercon discussed the Tate's recent acquisitions in African Art alongside a series of exhibitions held in Britain, Nigeria, Ghana and Cameroon. In what follows, Dercon addresses the problem of canonification, the politics of location and reading the Tate as a "brand". As the exhibiting of art within Africa becomes increasingly privatised, what are the implications for its accessibility and sustainability across local and global arenas?

Last year, Britain's TATE galleries announced a new Africa programme comprising three elements. The first is the acquisition of a number of works by modern and contemporary African artists, including El Anatsui (Ghana), Ibrahim El-Salahi (Sudan), David Goldblatt (South Africa) and Samuel Fosso (Cameroon), among others. A second aspect of the programme comes in the shape of several major exhibitions held not only in Tate's British galleries but also in Nigeria, Ghana and Cameroon. From July to September, in London, the first major exhibition in the series will take place, a retrospective of over 100 works by the painter El-Salahi. *The Museum of Contemporary African Art* (1997-2002), a seminal work by Meschac Gaba (Benin), also goes on display in London this year. The final feature of Tate's Africa

programme is that a large chunk of funding has been provided by Nigeria's Guaranty Trust Bank. Chris Dercon is the director of Tate Modern, and the man credited by some for the museum's engagement in contemporary African art. Lara Pawson [freelance writer & journalist] went to meet him at his office by the River Thames. She began by asking him:

Lara Pawson (LP): Simon Njami credits you, very positively, with the Tate Africa projects. Have you come to Africa through the art market and your work in the art world, or do you have a deeper personal engagement with the continent?

Chris Dercon (CD): I'm Belgian! (Laughs) I was raised in Tervueren [in Flanders, Belgium] and in the backyard was the Musée de l'Afrique So, from a very early age, the musée was my playground. I've also lived in Brussels, so Matonge [a neighbourhood with a high population of people of African descent] was very normal to me. But much more interesting is that my father was an urbanist and he worked in Abuja [in Nigeria]. My brother also worked in Nigeria, and I started to go there myself when I was 23 or 24 years-old. And then this third thing was my own very deep interest in what's going on in other cities of the world, which is why I was one of the founding members of the Institute of International Visual Arts [a London-based cultural centre, which established in 1994 to address an imbalance in the representation of culturally diverse artists, curators and writers] . I was on the board with Gavin Jantjes and Stuart [Hall], who was seminal for me, and also Sarat Maharaj. And then, I was very active in Holland in organisations which worked in the Middle East and in Africa. For example, there is the



Chris Dercon, Tate Modern director, in a market in Lubumbashi, DRC. Photo: Sammy Baloji

film festival in Rotterdam which is the Hubert Bals Foundation, and which promotes films from other regions. And my nephews are very famous anthropological film makers who worked with Jean Rouch, so that is another contact.

LP: Right.

CD: – and then Rem Koolhaas with the Lagos project. I was very close to Rem when I was working in Rotterdam. And also, I have a very deep interest in textiles, and I started to go to those countries where I could find great textiles, so Mali has become very important. I always go to the Tuareg market and, for many years now, I only wear my "Tuaregi" [pulls out a wide piece of brown cotton, gathered into a scarf], which I bought for one Euro. I buy this stuff all the time [Laughs]. And these all add up, these things, and become normal. And I speak French!

LP: So that helps?



Meschac Gaba, Museum of Contemporary African Art 1997 - 2002 © Meschac Gaba. Photo: Nils Klinge

CD: Well, I was not going out consciously thinking “Now I’m going to take an interest in Africa.” No! I felt an obligation that I should know more about it. Oh, and my successor [at Haus der Kunst -- literally, “house of art”] in Munich is Okwui Enwezor [Laughs]. And with Simon [Njami] and others, I have, for many years, been doing the Goethe photography workshop in Africa. I just came back from Lubumbashi [DRC] a couple of weeks ago. So, in a way, it’s kind of normal isn’t it?

LP: I can see a certain trajectory.

CD: I started very early on to work with Meschac Gaba [a Beninois now living in Rotterdam]. I was the witness at his wedding to my curator Alexandra van Dongen, so in his work the *Musée d’Art Contemporain Africain*, where you see the wedding group in the Marriage Room, shown at the 2012 Triennial de Paris, that’s me! So it’s like [laughing] if you ask me, “Is it the art market?”, I’d say yes; “Is it politics?”, I’d say yes; “Is it Belgium?”, I’d say yes;

and “Is it family?”, again, yes! It’s all of that. It’s a very normal thing.

When Achille [Mbembe] says in [his book] *Sortie de la Grand Nuit* that there is something happening that is beyond pan-Africanism and beyond *la Négritude* – what he calls “Afropolitanism” – then I understand. Because even when I was a child, I was used to seeing people – the Belgian diaspora – moving back and forth, doing things here and there. But I wouldn’t call them the diaspora any more: I would call that whole thing Afropolitanism.

So, [claps hands, laughs], for me it’s nothing adventurous, it’s nothing folk-loric, it’s nothing exotic. It’s a very normal thing. Does that make sense?

LP: Moving on! Given that you are so familiar with the postcolonial and, as some say, post-postcolonial debates, why is this Tate programme still specifically titled “African”? As your own colleague, Elvira Dyangani Ose, has suggested, why can’t an African artist just be an artist?

CD: But don’t credit me with Tate Africa. Look at where Tate started, in 2000, with “Century City”. It made me incredibly jealous. It showed an incredible curiousness and willingness to open Tate to the rest of the world. I found it fantastic that they asked Okwui [Enwezor] to deal with Lagos in a way that the Nigerians are dealing with Lagos, with a mix of low and high culture. That was a very big opening shot. And then of course, if you look at London and Great Britain with Iniva, but also at Tate Britain, with “Migrations”, with all its flaws and whatever – there is a deep interest in Tate to take these things seriously and to stop talking about the NATO countries and to stop talking about the art from Europe

and to stop talking about the art from America. Especially, there is an interest to go beyond those artists who live here or who came here like so many museums, which say that they deal with the Middle East and with African artists, but which only look for the artists who are working here.

LP: You mean the so-called diaspora?

CD: Right. The so-called diaspora. It’s very important to go *there* [clicks fingers] because that means that you suddenly have something which Achille [Mbembe] discusses: All these artists who work here and there and here and there. And I would like to call that Africa! Because Africa is an amazing continent and inside that continent you have all these contradictions and conflicts and regions. It’s a region which deserves our attention.

LP: But this still doesn’t explain why you have to put those artists under the umbrella of “Africa”? Why can’t they just be selected as artists in their own right? Why do you have to have this special project, of acquisitions and projects that are particular to ‘African art’?

CD: Well, because we do that with acquisitions committees. We look at South Asia, we look at the Middle East, and at the sub-Saharan countries. We see a lot of collectors who are travelling back and forth, who want to help us establish a collection of artists who have been working for a very long time. For example, it’s very important for us to say, “Listen, Ibrahim El-Salahi, he lives in Oxford, but don’t forget that he used to live in Qatar and before that, he was one of the most important muralists in Khartoum.” And

the modernist architecture of Khartoum is so important. If you speak about urbanism and you don't look at what's happening in Dakar and Khartoum, you don't understand these countries. So, to say "African art" is a way to go to these oeuvres from the 1950s and 1960s – to [the South African-born avant garde artist] Ernest Mancoba and Ibrahim El -Salahi – where you need to look at *there*, not only *here*.

And to look at *there* is a danger, but it's an interesting danger because you know what's going to happen in ten years with everything which we call Afropolitanism? We will have to look into Chinese artists working in Congo, or Turkish artists working in Senegal. And Achille [Mbembe] is saying that all these things are going much more rapidly than we think!

We want to be partners as well! We want to be partners with local curators and local artists. One of the most important local curators is [the Cameroonian] Koyo Kouoh of Raw Material in Dakar in Senegal. So if you simply throw it all together and just look for "global artists" because everything is a utopia realised, you are not being precise.

LP: Tate is already a huge global brand. Are you saying that Tate's brand and Tate's logo will now be visible in various cities across the continent? I know that you are planning to go to various cities.

CD: We are going to Accra, yes. And to Lagos, where we did Level 2 with Guaranty Trust Bank, and that is a way to co-produce and co-realise together.

LP: So will there be more of that? Tate becoming a known brand in these African cities?

CD: I hate the word brand and I hate the word logo.

LP: I'm not mad about them either, but the fact is that Tate is a brand and has a very well-known logo.

CD: In the first place it has to be affective instead of effective. And affective means that people are keeping their eyes open to the fact that we are realising this acquisition of Meschac Gaba, for example. His *Musée d'Art Contemporaine Africain* is, in the first place, a critique on the way we perceive Africa – on the way we perceive things going on there, and sustainability and aesthetics. It was originally conceived in Amsterdam and makes much more sense in London than in Benin or Côte d'Ivoire, because here, it works like a mirror for everything else you do. That's why I'm really happy that in the summer of 2013, it will take up a whole wing – that's 12 rooms – of Tate! You cannot overlook that.

We will also have Ibrahim El-Salahi in the post-surrealist rooms. He is now hanging where he belongs, next to the COBRA [or CoBrA, the 1940s European avant-garde movement], next to Karel Appel, but also next to Robert Motherwell and in front of Dorothea Tanning. So we are taking out some of the local produce and showing it in a different context.

I don't think it's effective to just pour money into Africa to support another local biennial here and there. That's a form of postcolonialism which is becoming very dangerous. And if you speak to the Africans, they say, "Hey! Don't think you have to do things for us! We will work with you and that means sharing exhibitions and taking on different partnerships!" For example, the photo workshops I do with



Meschac Gaba, *Draft Room*, Museum of Contemporary African Art 1997 - 2002 © Meschac Gaba. Photo: Nils Klinge

Simon [Njami] in Africa – this is part of this new kinds of Afropolitanism. Does that make sense?

LP: Yes, totally. But I suppose one question to ask is why this is only happening now? There are galleries in London, like the October Gallery, who've been doing this for decades, working for example with EL-Anatsui for nearly quarter of a century!

CD: It's true.

LP: So I'm trying to work this out. We, in the global North, in Europe, are having to rethink our position in the world. Our economies are spiralling whereas in Africa, several countries are experiencing rapid economic expansion. There's a sense of incredible energy.

CD: Self confidence, you mean.

LP: There's a shifting taking place in the globe – of identities, of power and so on – so what I want

to understand is whether Tate is waking up to this, albeit a little late, and trying to catch up with the curve; or whether money coming out of the African continent is pushing Tate to work with African curators and artists?

CD: I think it has also to do with the fact that Tate is called Tate Modern, right? I think we have started to question what we mean by modernity. Suddenly we are becoming aware that there are different forms of modernities. And I am afraid that if we are not on the look-out for these different modernities – and these different economies because they are not the same as us, and these different forms of government – if we are not on the look-out for them and do not understand them, then we are going to miss the boat.

There is so much going on in Africa. There are so many possibilities that are created by individuals, who are much more mobile, both in spirit and in body; they keep crossing the world, popping up here and there, and we know that they are starting to have an influence. We want to be part of this excitement and this energy. We want to be part of this new form of radical thinking.

LP: Right. And it's also true of money too. Money is coming out in different places now. Hence, GT Bank's involvement in this Tate Africa project.

CD: Not only GT Bank!

LP: Who else?

CD: Well we are also investing our own money. So it's not just thanks to GTB that we are doing this.



Meschac Gaba, Museum Restaurant, Museum of Contemporary African Art 1997 - 2002 © Meschac Gaba. Photo: Nils Klinge

We want to be part of this excitement and this energy. We want to be part of this new form of radical thinking.

GTB is an amazing impetus and support, but if there was not GTB we would have looked for someone else.

LP: So the impetus didn't come from GT Bank? You're saying it came from you at Tate looking for partners?

CD: Yes! The impetus came from us looking for partners. It's not like someone comes to me and says, "Hey, I'm running an oil company on the North Pole, do you want to start collecting prehistoric utensils of the Inuit?" That's not the way it works! This is why I told you about Century City, to indicate that Tate has stuck its neck out quite early on, well aware that we've got to look at other modernities, other cities, and other forms of cosmopolitanism.

You know, London is reinventing itself constantly

and if we are not aware of the wider world then this city will become very precarious and will become a very strange, artificial city. Indeed, the recent census shows just how much London is now changing: It is now one-third completely different! And I want to know where these people are coming from, and where they are going back and forth to. Because this coming and going is a new form of pan-Africanism, a new form of *la Negritude*: it's definitely this whole beast which we don't know how to grasp yet.

LP: Just to get back to GT Bank for a moment. You went and you found them as a partner?

CD: Yes, these things fall together. If you put these signals out – that you would like to start opening up to the world – then suddenly these possibilities start coming.

LP: So will you tell me the percentage of GT Bank's investment?

CD: No. I can't tell you.

LP: Is it substantial?

CD: It's substantial. Absolutely.

LP: And are there other African companies providing funds?

CD: Not yet, but we are working with the Africa acquisitions committee to look for support beyond GTB, and of course we have partnerships with local organisations and also with really international, multilateral organisations that invest in these kind of international projects, such as the Goethe

Institute. In fact they are a good example. They say that it's not about an expansionism of German culture into Africa. They think about investing in infrastructure so that at some point they can take advantage of their investment in Africa. And that's why the Goethe is investing in these photo workshops in Africa – because we know that photography is one of the most mobile, important, engaging and one of the most free kind of disciplines. The photographers that Simon [Njami] and I work with are kids who are journalists, bloggers, and artists. They do all these things at the same time! Now, in order for me to understand that, I need to go there, to Africa. And we also need to buy art, not just an exchange of money, but so that people can start to feel they are being taken incredibly seriously.

LP: That leads us nicely to my next question. What criteria does Tate use to decide which works – I'm talking specifically about the current Africa acquisitions – it will acquire?

CD: We decided, first and foremost, that it's not a question of going out there as if you had shopping bags, looking for the newest of the new.

LP: Yes, I notice that some of the works you've bought are from the 1950s, for example.

CD: Yes. We're not trying to find the cheapest of the cheap so that we can buy low and sell high. We're trying to make an effort to reinforce our own collection. So, for example, looking at COBRA and looking at the post-surrealists and then trying to look at the stuff made in Africa at the same time, in the 1950s and 1960s, to consider what we might have missed.



Meschac Gaba, *Salon*, Museum of Contemporary African Art 1997 - 2002 © Meschac Gaba. Photo: Nils Klinge

So we are looking for oeuvres. So, this is why we are interested in Ibrahim El-Salahi, who is not a new artist on the block.

LP: Aina Onabolu: You have also bought a work of his?

CD: Yes. True. So it's not about buying the newest of the new, or jumping on the bandwagon either. It's also about trying to correct an image.

LP: But some have said that “jumping on the bandwagon” is precisely what it is. I've heard from a number of academics around the world, people working in this area, that Tate is following the market, or following the money.

CD: But when I started to be interested in Ibrahim El-Salahi [laughing], there was no market for him. When I started to work with Meschac Gaba – my God! 25 years ago! -- there was not a market!

There is no canon yet! We don't know what the canon is, nor should we. It's proof that there are so many understandings still, which is incredibly important.

LP: But we're talking about what Tate is buying now, when that work does have commercial value.

CD: I'm very aware of these arguments, but following the oeuvres of El-Salahi and Meschac is not really following the market. Indeed, many colleagues in the gallery world and the museum world have been saying “Oh my God! This looks way too African! This is too anthropological!” Oh yes! [Laughs] So I would really say it's the reverse of that. And you know what this means?

LP: What?

CD: God thanks: There is no canon yet! We don't know what the canon is, nor should we. It's proof that there are so many understandings still, which is incredibly important.

LP: To return to my question about the criteria for acquiring art from Africa, do you at Tate maintain the same criteria for choosing art no matter what part of the world it is from, or do you apply special criteria for so-called “African art”?

CD: We try to apply the same criteria, which is the reason why we have such an amazing Latin American collection right now – all these very important historical oeuvres of [Brazilian artist] Hélio Oiticica

and [Swiss-born Brazilian] Mira Schendel. We could also do the newest of the new from Rio de Janeiro, but we have these historical oeuvres because we try to look just as seriously into these oeuvres and into these regions as we do for our own stuff. But, of course, you cannot say that you can look at art made in South Africa in the same way as art made in Congo! Because the East African and Southern African legacy of colonialism is very different to, say, the West African one and the Middle East.

LP: So how did you negotiate your way through that very complex terrain and decide to pick the artists and works of art that you did?

CD: Ibrahim El-Salahi for instance. He's opening our eyes to this fascinating political fact that here's an artist who starts in Khartoum, ends up in Qatar, and then goes to Oxford. It's a mixture of African and Arabic and also western forms and interests, and it's always influenced by the trajectory he takes in his life, whether it be geopolitical, political or whatever. So his work is almost like a condition of our own existence right now. Everything is like a kind of temporary relief, right [Laughs].

And Meschac [Gaba] made his museum as a comment – I still remember him telling me this – on all these buyers from Paris, who had their consultants go and buy stuff in the context of “Magiciens de la Terre”. He was very critical of that and said, ‘Do you know what? I will give them my own fucking museum!’ [Laughs] But he decided to make it in Amsterdam so at least, they couldn't take it away under the pretext that they can preserve it better than the Beninois. So, in a way, it's also a reaction.

LP: And what about female artists? Apart from Otobong Nkanga, who performed at the Tanks last month, as far as I know, you are not acquiring art by a single female artist?

CD: We are starting to look into women artists, but some of them end up in New York. And it's impossible, now, to discover these young artists because of the visa problem. Even if they are excellent, this country doesn't want them. So, generally the women feel more comfortable in New York and in Berlin, in Paris and Brussels. And because of family and the sociological structures, when you look in Africa, for women artists, you find that they are much more mobile than even the young men. In contrast, the most interesting curators are women. Like Koyo Kouoh.

LP: Do you have any expectations for the way in which this work you are doing in and around African artists will impact on Tate's audiences?

CD: I think it will have an impact because when we did the so-called “Africa Weekend” in the Tate Tanks, we saw a much younger and more diversified audience. They are the researchers, the urban cool, and also the African communities in the UK. So I can see that we speak to different audiences and I don't think that's a bad thing. What we have to do now is to raise the question, through our activities, of visas into Great Britain. Unless individuals have a million dollars, this country doesn't want them, not even the really good ones. London is going to become precarious if we close it off and put an iron curtain around it. So what we are doing at Tate is creating an awareness. So our fascination and curiosity with Africa is

now also becoming a political fact! In a matter of a few weeks [clicks fingers at me]! Isn't that amazing! [Laughs] All the things we are loading on our shoulders!

LP: Finally, in the initial press release put out by Tate about the Africa acquisitions and projects, Tate stated that Africa has no contemporary art galleries. But in fact, that's not true is it? Lagos has a gallery of contemporary art, and Nairobi, and Johannesburg and Cape Town, to name a few. Why did you write that?

CD: My God! When I gave a speech at the art fair in Johannesburg, in all the discussions I had with people everyone was complaining. They all said that no serious work is being done in terms of Kunsthallen and museums in Johannesburg. So, there are some, but very few --and most of them are private! And that's what we meant. I mean, there's a great foundation in Cotonou -- but that's the Fondation Zinsou – and there are great, great, great, museum activities going on in Nigeria, but they are GT Bank.

LP: And what's the problem with that?

CD: The problem is that there are some organisations but they are private. What we meant is to say is that we have to keep investing in all these sorts of initiatives, both private and public. But it's very, tough for them to create something that is not commercial. I know how difficult it is for Raw Material in Dakar, for example. I've been trying to look for money for them everywhere. And let's not even talk about sustainability!

LP: Are you aware of efforts to build a museum of contemporary art in Luanda, Angola?

CD: I heard vaguely about it, but then Luanda is such an odd cup of tea isn't it? It's not becoming the Paris of Africa: It's becoming the Dubai of Africa, one of the most expensive cities in the world. And I don't think the art that we defend, that we are interested in, will have a place there. I think Luanda will become "blah blah" when it continues like that. I know a lot of Angolans who say they don't want to become part of the "blah blah."

END

TERRITORIAL RE-ARRANGEMENTS: A CHALLENGE FOR PAKISTANI CITIES

Zahra Hussain

University of London

Zahra Hussain explores the architectural and social challenges facing cities and their inhabitants under circumstances of chronic warfare.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary war poses new challenges to the built environment; this paper will explore the accelerated transformations that have been triggered in Pakistan's urban areas as a consequence of war. I will briefly discuss urban conditions in Pakistan by examining the political and cultural ramifications of social and institutional networks present in different cities responding to a situation of war. By reading the current condition through the lens of geo-politics, this paper engages these configurations by highlighting the regimes of authority performed through spatial assemblages within cities, and which threaten the concept of a modern democratic city.

In what follows, I will probe the effects of geo-politics on local spaces with regard to populations in urban settings, the extensive application of security apparatus and what this means for the survival of the city as a space of constant exchange.

HOW DO URBAN SPACES TRANSFORM THEMSELVES WHEN ACTING IN A THEATRE OF WAR?

Contemporary war poses new challenges for populations in urban areas, for this space is fragile yet resilient. It cannot be fully controlled by state-authorities nor fully bombarded by the insurgents. Events in



Source: www.hdnux.com

Contemporary war poses new challenges for populations in urban areas, for this space is fragile yet resilient. It cannot be fully controlled by state-authorities nor fully bombarded by the insurgents.

Iraq and Afghanistan have expanded this discourse of city and warfare to a great extent. A calculated warfare that has incalculable effects in contemporary urban spaces in particular, brings to the surface the concept of *asymmetric warfare* - planned strategies adopted by governments and the international community, such as low-intensity operations and international aid supply in conflict zones.

The North Western area of Pakistan shares a soft border with Afghanistan, and has encountered considerable turmoil in the last decade. As a result of this porous border's geographic proximity to the war being fought in Afghanistan against the Taliban, conflict has gradually spilled into Pakistan, thus giving rise to a huge zone of instability. The export of violence and terror to the cities of Pakistan has resulted in extreme measures taken by the state and

military to wipe-out terrorism from the cities and villages, by declaring military operations in targeted villages, and by introducing security systems in the cities.

A geo-politics that transcends the limits of borders and territories is increasingly becoming a contested notion where the sovereignty of states is seen to be at stake. The notion of "Contingent Sovereignty"¹ has brought state sovereignty under increased pressure in the last decade. This espouses the idea that a state does not have an absolute right over its territory, but must fulfill certain responsibilities and obligations; failure to do so may result in international intervention. The international community's "right to protect"² is the principle that allows foreign humanitarian intervention on grounds of operation and military presence on the basis of instability that poses a threat to the country itself or international peace and security. Boundaries and territorial borders are disappearing; their functions and roles are also transforming as they become open to trans-boundary movements and flows. Although the borders are becoming permeable at a certain level, regional and local groups are aiming to claim authority over their geographic territories. The so-called "War on Terror" declared in Afghanistan has had far reaching effects that transcend its national boundaries.

The relationship of war in Afghanistan to instability in Pakistan is no-doubt complex, and involves more than one factor or party. As cities become increasingly vulnerable to suicide bombings and bomb blasts, one might want to question the active making of the contemporary city alongside emergent forms of collective subjectivity. The scale of violence and trauma makes the whole situation more complex or



Source: The Gaurdian

different from the kind of violence associated with, for example, a street stabbing. Here the enemy is not known – the enemy is working on a large scale and large areas have to be modified in order for it to be contained. Mustafa has explicitly explained the nature of terrorism occurring in Pakistan:

“An act of violence, different from other acts of violence, e.g., genocide, war, war crimes, political assassinations etc. In that it is (1) a spectacle directed towards a wider audience than the immediate victims, (2) directed towards place destruction and/or (3) place alienation.”³

Those cities not dealing directly with the main area of war, and only used as a platform for acts intended to induce terror, behave differently. Sassen explains:

“With asymmetric war, the pursuit of national security has become the making of urban insecurity. Asymmetric war - war between a conventional army and armed insurgents, has made cities one

site in the map for warring. Cities worldwide are becoming a key theater for asymmetric war, regardless of what side of the divide they are on— allies or enemies.”⁴

It is a shared space of intense networks and exchange as the urban space lends itself to the theatre of war— so the task of urban design, planning, development and control becomes enormous.

Affected cities are located in the northwestern and upper Punjab in Pakistan. Peshawar happens to be one such city that is interlocked in local, national and international affairs due to its strategic location; on the crossroads of Central Asia and South Asia in a valley on the eastern end of Khyber Pass. Peshawar is a densely populated city in Kyber Pukhtoon-khwa (formerly known as the North-West Frontier Province) and the administrative centre and central economic hub for the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan. With war close by and situated several miles from the area of military operation, it serves as an important station for armed forces, migrants, internally displaced persons and aid agencies. The national highway and NATO supply line [N5 highway], also pass through the city exacerbating the threat to Peshawar’s safety and security. In upper Punjab, Rawalpindi being the military headquarters and Islamabad being the capital city of Pakistan are similarly strategically important cities where a large number of international, national, military and governmental bodies are present. In the recent past, these cities have been the site of numerous bombings targeted at military hubs or security personnel. Within this exchange of violence, the urban population has been extremely vulnerable. There have been several instances where

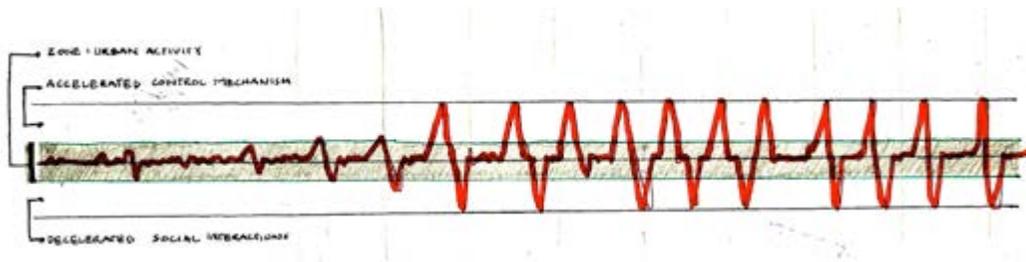
insurgents have inflicted violence upon a festive or religious gathering.

The threat to “gathering spaces” is alarming for a society that celebrates these spaces as religious and traditional domains, for the mosques and market squares are filled with men every Friday afternoon and the streets and main roads with processions on significant dates from the Islamic calendar – tradition calls for festivals such as *Mela Charaghan* (Festival of Lamps), *Basant* (celebration of the harvest) and *Urs* (gatherings and processions at Sufi shrines). Under current conditions, the task of urban governance is challenging, and cities redefine each other in complex, but poorly explored ways. Deep shifts can be traced out in the ways in which time, space, technology, mobility and power are constructed and experienced in our societies as a whole (Virilio 1986).

It is interesting to trace how urban inhabitants are affected by socio-spatial transformations. When crowds become the target of large-scale violence and public gathering spaces are endangered, seasonal festivities decrease. One conducts the body in certain ways of self-control, and these actions of self-control have developed collectively; people behave alike and share the same feeling as they move about the city:

“War has entered the city again – the sphere of everyday, the private realm of the house... we find ourselves nervous when we use public transports or mingle in crowds, due to frequent bomb scares.”⁵

Reading urban gathering spaces provides productive points of analysis as they disclose the multiple



Pulse of the city: *Diagram shows Rhythm of Urban Activity*

ways in which urban actors build a particular emotional field in the city by trying to restore the physical sense of connection to one another.

The evolution of new security paradigms has redefined urban zones not only in terms of a transformed visual culture but also in their capabilities to sustain social urban life. To elaborate upon visual culture, we may refer to the barricades and bomb-proof walls, known as the *naka-syndrome* (temporary barriers placed on roads to channel movement), that constantly disrupt movement in the city and also act as a reminder of the bleak conditions under which urban residents must live. A city choked with security alarms and gated compounds narrows the psychic spaces of that city with extensive mental barricades. Yet the driving force of modern city planning remains “conflict avoidance” and the “smooth space” of flows. In *Traffic and Democracy*, Michael Sorkin writes:

“Flow seeks to increase speed (and save time) by prioritizing faster means of movement. Safety is often foreground as the reason for this system of preferences; the potential for danger, confusion and slow-down resulting from undisciplined mix gives rise to elaborated structures for vetting what traffic engineers call ‘conflict’ between

modes. Typically, this means slower vehicles yield to faster ones and pedestrian to all, walkers deferring to cars, cars to trains, trains to planes and so on. Modern city planning is structured around an armature of such conflict avoidance.”⁶

The security apparatus has been plugged into our urban domain as a crucial agency that redefines the role of a boundary wall and the sense of place of a public space. With increased surveillance and check posts around the city, one may assume that the modern dream of a democratic city is dead when the movement in the city is controlled by the military.

Ten years of instability have ensured a conflicting rhythm between the life of urban dwellers and the evolution of the urban fabric. A market or a bazaar cannot be secured like an office building or a housing compound. The over-lapping activities in a mixed-use public space are open not only to economic exchanges but also, social engagements. The idea of a city can be analyzed by looking at the diagram of a market. The market offers a showcase to choose from, an opportunity of engaging in a possible exchange, a probable advancement. Market allows you freedom to roam around, to choose, to interact at will, to conduct your self in various ways. The multiplicity of this space lies in exchange and interaction,

The promise of the city— betterment, advancement, speed and opportunity— is visible in the market. The city happens in the market. Accordingly, this space can be understood as an accumulation of efforts, skills and energies that combine to counter economic social and political challenges.

economic and social ties, uncertainty and chance but most importantly the perception of opportunity. The promise of the city — betterment, advancement, speed and opportunity — is visible in the market. The city happens in the market. Accordingly, this space can be understood as an accumulation of efforts, skills and energies that combine to counter economic social and political challenges.

Democratic notions of the city are perhaps compromised when the sense of being able to conduct yourself in several different ways is delimited by strict security in our urban spaces. Although it ensures movement and is necessary to retain urban life, the *naka-syndrome* has implanted fear and stress across urban environments in Pakistan. How sustainable is the city when the markets, offices and mosques are bombed? How vibrant can social life be when fear enters the urban domain and brings to halt most social engagements? How are diverse urban actors assembled and how do they act? What is in the making as people constantly construct paranoid boundaries due to fear and how do they break certain boundaries and exceed categories in pursuit of everyday desires and needs? What sort of a collective subjectivity do we see emerging in the constant process of re-defining private and public territories in a space laden with war, politics and precarious life? How are we challenged to rethink

our urban future? These questions come to mind as we begin to think about the faculty of architecture and urban environments. What is at stake here, is not only the governance but also the sustenance of the urban environment. The challenges facing urban sustainability in Pakistan today are immense. We should not fear our urban populations, but the fear instilled in them that is making our cities affectively and psychically smaller.

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THOUGHTS ON THE CAPITALIST IMAGINARY: AN EXTRACT

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*The following extract is from a lecture given by Professor Arjun Appadurai at the Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism, Johannesburg 2013. Drawing on the theoretical orientations of his recent book *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (2013), Appadurai evokes the logic of the derivative in order to rethink the possibilities and utilities of debt.*

Capitalism today surrounds and saturates us in a way it never did before. In its home regions, notably in the United States, it has taken the form of deep financialization. Finance now far exceeds the sphere of production and manufacture of industrial goods. Since the early 1970's we have had the rapid development of a host of financial instruments, which were barely imaginable in the time of Karl Marx. The breakthrough that made this financial explosion possible was the idea that risk itself could be monetized, allowing a small set of actors to take risks on risks. This is the core of the logic of the derivative, an instrument that has allowed financial technicians and managers to make virtually every part of our everyday lives susceptible to monetization. In this way, housing has now been turned into a machine for monetizing mortgages, the environment has been monetized through carbon trading and many other derivatives, education has been captured through sophisticated methods of creating student debt, health and insurance have been thoroughly penetrated by



Photo: Madelene Cronje

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models of risk, arbitrage and bets on the future. In short, every day life is linked to capital not so much by the mechanism of the surplus value of labor but through making us all risk-bearers, whose aggregate risk can be endlessly combined and recombined to provide new forms of risk-taking and profit-making by the financial industries. We are all laborers now, regardless of what we do, insofar as our primary reason for being is to enter into debt through being forced to monetize the risks of health, security, education, housing and much else in our lives.

This situation is most visible in the advanced capitalist countries and hence the financial collapse of 2008 was primarily felt and amplified in these very countries. But very few countries in the world

escaped the effects of the collapse, since finance capital had been spreading its activities worldwide for at least the last 30 years. Still, many parts of the global South, including South Africa, did not experience the shock of the collapse as profoundly as did the United States and Europe. The buffers that created this measure of insulation were primarily that the new derivative logics, creating multiple loops between debt, risk and speculation, were less advanced in these countries. Another way to put it is that in the countries of the global South, the process by which all debt is made potentially monetizable, through derivative instruments, has been less rapid and more uneven than it has been in the countries of the North Atlantic.

However, the global spread of the capitalist imaginary has by no means been arrested or compromised. Banks, hedge funds and insurance companies are aggressively pushing their way into new markets, seeking to lobby for legislation that will allow them to bring the same untrammelled debt markets from which they profited (and which also crashed in 2008) to the countries of the global South. Thus, it is only a matter of time before the countries of the global South also find themselves fully exposed to the volatility, inscrutability and extra-legality of the derivative-based financial markets of the North. As James Baldwin once said in another context, "no more water, the fire next time".

One of the many challenges we now face is how to resist the sense that this global process is inevitable and that it cannot be subverted. The question is: what sort of politics needs to be produced to resist it? The main answer that has emerged in various parts of the world is debt-refusal, as in important segments of the "Occupy" movement. Debt-refusal

by mortgage owners, students, pension-holders and others certainly is a legitimate political tactic, insofar as it offers an immediate tool for starving the beast of financial capitalism. But is it enough? Is it even the best way of making capitalism work for the 99%?

In this lecture, I develop the outlines of a different view of financial capitalism, one that does not see the logic of the derivative as inherently inequitable or evil. My point of departure is to return to Marx, but through a financial lens. Marx's central insight about the workings of industrial capitalism was (in the three volumes of *Capital*) to notice the distinction between absolute and relative surplus value. In simple terms, absolute surplus value was to be found in increasing the amount of labor that a firm could apply to producing commodities for sale, as by increasing the number of workers or by increasing the length of the workday. Relative surplus value, on the other hand, was generated by improvements in technology, workplace organization or other means by which labor productivity could be increased without hiring more workers or paying for more labor time. This is how a given firm could compete with other firms which were producing the same commodity. The key to the appropriation of relative surplus value was to make a given amount of labor produce more profit, without increasing wages. The difference was profit in the hands of the capitalist.

Today's financial capitalism, which Marx could not have entirely foreseen in his day, does not primarily work through the making of profit in the commodity sphere, though a certain part of the capitalist economy still operates in this sphere. By far the larger portion works by making profit on

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the monetization of risk and risk is made available to the financial markets through debt in its myriad forms. All of us who live in a financialized economy generate debt in many forms: consumer debt, housing debt, health debt, and others related to these. Capitalist firms also operate through debt (since borrowing on the capital markets has become much more important than issuing stock or "equity"). The complex technical issue is how consumer debt becomes the basis of corporate debt and vice versa.

From this point of view, the major form of labor today is not labor for wages but rather labor for the production of debt. Some of us today are no doubt wage-laborers, in the classic sense. But many of us are in fact debt-laborers, whose main task is to produce debt, which can then be further monetized for profit by financial entrepreneurs who control the means of the production of profit through monetizing debts. The main vehicle for this form of profit-making is the derivative, and thus the derivative is the central means by which relative surplus value is produced in a financialized economy.

From this it follows that the key to transforming the current form of financial capitalism is to *seize and appropriate the means of the production of debt*, in the interest of the vast class of debt producers, rather than the small class of debt-manipulators. From this point of view, it is not debt as such which is bad, since it allows us to bring future value into the present. The challenge, rather, is to socialize

and democratize the profit produced by monetization of debt, so that those of us who actually produce debt can also be the main beneficiaries of its monetization.

OF RHYTHM AND AMALGAMATION: THE KNOT AS FORM OF THE URBAN

Filip De Boeck

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Relying on mathematical theories of the Moebius strip, Filip De Boeck unravels the complex weaving and knotting together of forms of sociality and survival in urban Congo. Inhabiting the urban, writes De Boeck, requires strategies of amalgamation that resist being mapped linearly. This text was part of the panel on 'The Form of Confusion,' convened by Jane Guyer, and including work by Moises Lino e Silva, Kabiru Salami, and Soumhya Venkatesan. It was presented at the Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism, WISER, 28th of June 2013.

In the urban-scapes of Central Africa, and most notably in its largest city, Kinshasa, 'disorder' and 'confusion' are two notions that immediately and irresistibly come to mind to capture the rhythms and flows of the urban surface and the forms of life it generates. These concepts are not only used analytically by anthropologists and social scientists, but they also belong to the daily vocabularies of the residents that inhabit the unsteady and bumpy terrains of urban life in this part of the world. Order, and even more its opposite, 'disorder', are terms commonly used by the members of Kinshasa's youth gangs, for example, to define themselves (as *bana désordre* – children of disorder) and to describe the unruly 'law' they impose upon the streets and neighborhoods of Kinshasa. In the towns and cities of neighboring Angola, *confusao* is a word often used to describe

the sense of an increasing lack of direction and orientation that characterizes everyday life in the urban context, a growing incapacity, also, to read meaning into the urban site, to understand the rules that govern life beyond the immediate surface of its chaotic appearance, and to give that life a purpose and finality other than mere survival. In Congo's urban context, people routinely translate this sense of confusion with the word *mystique*. For most in urban Congo it is increasingly common to designate people, things and situations as 'mystique', that is, as difficult to place, interpret and fully understand. As one of the organizing tropes of Central Africa's cityscapes, the word *mystique* seems to capture rather well the quality of urban existence, in all of its elusiveness and uncanny-ness.

As a basic structure of feeling and experience, to paraphrase Williams (1977), the 'form' of this *mystique* that permeates urban topographies may, perhaps, be best described as *rhythm*; the rhythms, paces, tones and echoes pulsating through the city's social life: its quickenings and thickenings of time and people, its releases and restraints, its sudden opportunities and eternal postponements, its ejaculations and constipations. Beyond the obvious level of the city's material infrastructures (its brick, its concrete, its cement and its corrugated iron sheets), and beyond the 'confusion' that the decrepit nature of this infrastructure constantly generates, the urban form is social as much as it is material. It is, therefore, of a much more ephemeral nature. Both spatially and temporally, it is constantly punctuated by the unpredictability of the waxing and waning of these rhythms; by the varying oscillations between connectedness and disconnection, between foreground and back- or underground, between surface, fold

and gap, between the wide and the close, the visible and the invisible, darkness and light, movement and motionlessness, continuity and discontinuity, flow and blockage, opening and closure. Urban living is ceaselessly rhythmized by its excesses and scarcities, its dispersals and immobilizations; by its homogeneity and heterogeneity, its total boundlessness and the totalitarian nature of its endless restrictions, its moments of -often violent- effervescence and the boredom of endless waiting that characterizes urban lives as well...

And since the city is rhythm, the urban form is often that of a verbal or musical architecture. A lot could be said here about the importance of rhetorics, both to exist in the city and to build the city (De Boeck 2011). Similarly, in the Congolese context, and particularly in the context of Kinshasa, both the historical material form and the lived form of the city is that of its music. In Central Africa, the city generated a new form of music, the *rumba ya lingala* that came of age with Franco and Tabu Ley, just like this music generated the novel form of the city, with its new iconic spaces (such as the bar) and its new time regimes (of labor and leisure).

To navigate successfully through all of the contradictions, the impossible possibilities and the changes of pace and rhythm that urban life constantly generates, demands a capacity of judgment that Kinnois (Kinshasa's inhabitants) commonly refer to as *mathématiques*... And indeed, to steer your life unharmed through all the pitfalls, all the possible and constantly changing parameters of your daily existence, seems to demand an advanced knowledge of higher mathematics and of topics such as chaos, fractals, and mobility, or of vectorial capacity and the dynamics of (social) transmission.

The often syncopal and staccato rhythms of the mental and material lines that people's lives describe within such urban terrain, with all of its 'bumpy incoherent surfaces and inexplicable narrow bottlenecks' (Guyer 2011: 477); the specific divisions and/or confluences of space, time, frequency and code that make and mark the form of urban life; and the multiple modes of transference, channeling, networking (or *branchement* as Congolese are more likely to call it) that characterize the urban world, have given rise to a pleiad of metaphors and images that social scientists, architects and urban planners have tried to apply to analytically capture the often paradoxical and rarely uni-directional or teleological movements the city undergoes, or to describe the thick layeredness of matter and time that characterizes urban existence. Think, for example of the notions of "entanglement" (Nuttall 2009), or of the rhizomatically non-orientable, the palimpsestual, or the multiplex, to name but a few...

What all of these have in common is **amalgamation**, or the process of combining or uniting multiple entities into one form.

In Central-African cultural registers, the idea of amalgamation and combination has always been expressed by the form of the knot, and by processes of knotting, tying, connecting, weaving and intertwining (De Boeck 1991). As 'limit situations,' knots are both conjuncts and disjuncts. They may simultaneously express the idea of interlinking, connecting, border-crossing and the transposition of meaning from one field to another. Or they might, on the contrary, express acts or states of disconnection, of the untying of integrative links. They may also represent closure, blockage, and suffocation. Throughout large parts of Central Africa, the notion of the knot

and the act of knotting are often used as metaphors to express states of physical health, of social well-being, of physical and social reproduction and, more metaphorically, of acts of 'world-making', i.e. the establishment and replenishing of social and cultural orders (through ritual, for example). But simultaneously, the notion of the knot might also express and denote the opposite of all this: it might refer to physical illness, social disintegration, witchcraft, conflict and death. In many Bantu languages, the words connoting the form of the knot or the idea of interlinking often derive from the proto-Bantu **-dungu*. The notion of 'underworld' (*kalunga*), or the name commonly given to the idea of a supreme being or energetic force-field (*nzambi mpungu*) throughout central Africa, share this same proto-Bantu root. Similarly, the idea of life and life-force itself (*mooyi* or variations thereof) is conceptualized in terms of the joining or knotting together of male and female complementary opposites.

I suggest that the knot, as polymorphic form of amalgamation, perfectly captures the rhythm of the city as well. It offers us the material form of an autochthonous conceptual meta-discourse about the specific nature of the rhythm of (urban) life. (And it should be noted that acts of knotting and weaving in this particular cultural setting are, above all, about balance, rhythm and the (corporeal) rhythm-ing of the world. This necessitates a more elaborate ethnography, but good starting points to ethnographically ground this idea would be Devisch 1993, for example, or Geurts 2002).

Knots bring us to processes of divination and to the divinatory apparatus itself, to the baskets or bags that diviners in this part of the world use (cf. Silva 2011). Like urban existence itself, these

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containers consist of a border-crossing amalgamation of various objects, materials and substances of human, animal and vegetal origin. Though often in a more underground way because of the hegemony of Neo-Pentecostalist discourses and practices, diviners continue to operate in the city, and they have incorporated, amalgamated and 'knotted' the city into their baskets by incorporating many of the commodities or objects the urban world produces (photos, for example, or locks, plastic dolls, car parts, and many other items such as batteries or cell phone parts that metonymically represent the 'modern' urban world and that allow the diviner to say something about the impact of that world upon one's physical and mental state.

But the inalienable part of the material object repertoire that constitutes the baskets diviners use during their divinatory séances all over Southern Congo and large parts of northern Angola and Zambia is, again, a particular form of knot, known as *kata* (a Cokwe word that refers to entwinement, enclosure, as well as the idea of rupture). In the divinatory context, this particular *kata* is of crucial importance as a representation of the rhythms of the flow of life, of energy, breath and vitality. The knot in question has a Moebius-shaped form, consisting of spooled – up strips of palm leaves that are woven into a single whole. Often these knots appear in pairs, representing the knot's double nature (of flow and closure etc –see above) (cf. Fig. 1 & 2).



Fig.1 Showing *kata* as part of a Shinji divination basket.
Photo: Philip De Boeck.

Webster describes the Moebius strip or band as “a mathematical object, or a physical representation of it, which is a two-dimensional sheet with only one surface. It is constructed or visualized as a rectangle, one end of which is held fixed while the opposite end is twisted through a 180 degree angle and joined to the fixed end. It is a two-dimensional object that can only exist in a three-dimensional space.”

Although the divinatory knot is a not pure Moebius shape, because, upon close inspection, it has two surfaces and therefore more than one side and one boundary component, it still seems to share the Moebius strip’s mathematical property of being non-orientable and endless or without origin. In the case of the divinatory knot, when one looks closely, there is an origin, a specific starting point for the winding of the various layers of the parallel lines that are woven into a knot, but this origin cannot easily be perceived; it is ‘forgotten’, and therefore the knot seems to be realized as a ruled surface, i.e. a surface in affine space (an affine space is what is left of a vector space after one has forgotten which point is the origin.)



Fig. 2 Showing *kata* as part of a Shinji divination basket.
Photo: Philip De Boeck.

In other words, such a Moebius-like shape or geometric structure forms a translation or permutation of the Euclidian map, generalizing the affine properties (the properties of parallel lines) within Euclidian space, offering projective maps to chart the particular rhythms of parallel, spiraling and yet intersecting lines without origin or end.

Such a Moebius form therefore seems to fit and describe the plane of the city rather well: its unsteady topology and the miraculous unfolding of the non-orientable lines of people’s lives within it. Non-orientable because never straight, these lives can indeed for the most part be described as deviations of straightness, always opening up to the unexpected, with all of the ‘mathematics’ that living in constant confusion and improvisation entails. Translating the necessity to connect and knot yourself into as many networks as possible, the knot also expresses the possible dangers that every connection may bring along. Here, the divinatory knot refers less to the structural properties of the Moebius ring that

Translating the necessity to connect and knot yourself into as many networks as possible, the knot also expresses the possible dangers that every connection may bring along.

so much inspired someone like Lévi-Strauss, but it brings us closer to the topological operation of inter-knotting that the Borromean rings represented for Lacan: urban living in the shape of a constant attempt at finding ways to ‘stitch’ lacks and losses together, to revert to the Lacanian notion of *suture*. Sutures suggest the possibility of closing wounds, of generating realignments, and of opening up alternatives, because sutures also point to new kinds of creativity with (spatial and temporal) beginnings, and therefore with new forms of interactivity, as Nancy Hunt (2013) reminds us. The lack needs, and demands, to be overcome in order to survive and form a collectivity in the city. But the same lack also constantly drives individual and collective desire, and therefore the very rhythm of the city itself, as dream and nightmare, the theatre of rise and fall.

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POOR FORM

Joshua Comaroff & Ong Ker-Shing

Directors, Lekker Designs, Singapore

In what follows, Josh Comaroff and Ong Ker-Shing critique the disavowal of ‘form’ in architectural practice by tracing moments in which failures in form—what they describe as “poor form” – may work as indicators of the historical conditions under which they were produced.

Our paper is somewhat different from the book that we have written, *Horror in Architecture*. In many ways, that work is more an exposition of sources than a meditation on the life of forms. Or rather, it is more a meditation on the life of certain forms, with some speculation about their relation to modernity—that is, why do built forms generated by modern processes come increasingly to embody horror, in one form another. What I’d like to try in this essay is an expansion of that subject theoretically, using the same materials, but with an eye to speaking more generally about the topic.

I will do this by taking a tour through the moments when form fails. That is, when the products of architecture turn out to be—in part or whole—awkward, comical, menacing, or sad. When designers cannot find an apposite expression for their commissions, when they are unable to get a handle on what we call the “program,” on function, on scale, or any of the other myriad elements that make an architect’s life tragically difficult. Or when the values to which the architecture would strive are horridly opposed to the logic of, say, the rentier economies that the building itself embodies.



Solon S. Beman, Washington Park Grandstand, Chicago.
© Chicago Historical Society

Of course, this is a kind of sleight-of-hand; what I am about to discuss are not “abject” failures, but articulate ones: moments when we can learn from the precise way in which the form becomes awkward, or fails to suspend its contents in a kind of anodyne or harmonious expression—what architects call a “resolution.” This failure exposes some very telling aspects about the conditions under which it was produced. These aren’t, in any simple sense, “bad” buildings. And they aren’t forms that fail simply because the designer wasn’t good at his or her work; these are the type that emerge under specific historical conditions.

To this end, I’d like to pose this question: what do we learn about the life of forms, when form itself appears to be challenged?

This moment, in fact, is why we chose to write a book about awkward or perverse architectures, in particular—these seemed to be the point when a soothing abstraction began to fail, to wear thin; in

this moment more becomes available to analysis. This will become clearer in our discussion of Mies van der Rohe versus the many lovely oddities of the Chicago Loop.

Now, I should take a moment here to clarify what is meant, in architecture, by “form.” For this is a usage that overlaps with its definition in other fields, but due to the specific nature of architecture as a tradition of aesthetic production, has its own unique historical density. When we talk about form in buildings, we generally refer to the organization of a building’s functional and spatial components into a series of related volumes and masses, produced from a selection of materials, and often including an expression of structure and ornamental elements. Traditionally, this is the “aesthetic” aspect of the building. Put reductively, it is the translation of “functional and technical requirements” into a coherent object, making use of a series of conventions from architectural language. These conventions have long been thought to give the building “form.”

When we talk about form in buildings, we generally refer to the organization of a building’s functional and spatial components ... Put reductively, it is the translation of “functional and technical requirements” into a coherent object, making use of a series of conventions from architectural language.

But while form is clearly a contingent matter, and as arbitrary as it may be in other walks of life, most architects have traditionally resisted the notion that form is a kind of superficial or separable aspect of the building. Until relatively recently, it did not connote a kind of “surface” that might be laid over a buildings “contents.” Architects have long strived, naïve

though it may be, to understand form as an integrated medium in which all elements of the building are united in a common expression. This is to say, an architect like Frank Lloyd Wright—as opposed to say, Denise Scott Brown or Robert Venturi—did not understand his own formal language, as personal and idiosyncratic as it might have been, as a “style” that was larded over a kind of given, unchanging core. Instead, the form of their architecture is understood—true or not—as a medium for shaping all of the parts of the building in concert.

And it is precisely this notion of a holistic formal enterprise that is under strange kinds of pressure, today. And this is felt, in part, because of the global development of architecture in places like China, where the relationship between a building’s form, and its contents seems more contingent than ever. Such architectures have emerged in great quantities in the world today. But of course, we have witnessed their rise over the course of the 20th century, and in rare cases before.

But it is now, again, being claimed, by many architects and architectural theorists, that form is in a kind of retreat. Most famously, recent architecture was marked by Rem Koolhaas’ rejection of form in favor of program. The idea, here, is that our responsibility is not to attempt to control the building in the manner of High Modernism, or Classicism... there should be no effort to provide a “unity” to the building through form. Fundamental changes, in scale, suggest that the architect should instead focus on the choreography of function, letting the form of the building emerge as a side-effect of a principally social experiment.

Of course, Koolhaas himself is a brilliant formalist, and this is one of those false “rejections” that are

a staple of radical architecture. The Dutchman is famous for his forms, precisely, which have changed the world of design. Form is rejected, only to be smuggled back through a narrow defile, as the apparent “effect” of other operations. Form is, in fact, recuperated through exile.

This is only one variant, though. We see form, also, relegated to being generated by computer programs. This is what the younger, hipper students, call “scripted” architecture, as it is generated by code in softwares such as Rhinoceros. In other cases, form is proposed to become simply “mimetic of nature.” Or to be a blunt by-product of other “requirements” in the commercial or functional life of the building. Most recently, the Danish architect Bjarke Ingalls, as well as Gurmeet Sian, a designer in London, suggested that the architects’ role be transformed to that of a “midwife,” who simply assists in the delivery of the clients’ own goals and ideas. Apparently, architecture doesn’t need architects. At least, if there are no more “formalists.”

[Apparently, architecture doesn’t need architects. At least, if there are no more ‘formalists’.](#)

This should be taken with a great heap of salt. The same computer programming that would seem to make of form an “effect” has assisted in the production of some of the most formally exuberant architecture in history. Technology is, if anything, the midwife, in the re-casting of architecture as a commodity spectacle.

But the idea, at the level of architectural culture, is that the gravitational center of our profession, and of our responsibility—and, maybe most importantly, in the hierarchy of the architectural object—has

moved suddenly away from form.

I bring up this moment in the life of forms, because it contains within itself two important theoretical consequences. The first is the notion that form is somehow separate from the rest of the artistic enterprise. At least in producing buildings, form-making is simply an aspect, as opposed to the essential undertaking of the architect. Contrast this, in your minds, with the High Modernist architect, for whom form is the intimate and determinate expression of the building as a totality, at a particular moment in history. Is it possible, in the same way, to imagine form as an independent element in the architecture of Mies van der Rohe—as simply one aspect among many?

Recent arguments, such as Koolhaas’, would put what we might call the “core” of the modern building—its organizational and technical requirements—at odds with form, and suggest a very clearly schizophrenic nature to the modern building. I will argue that this is not unique to architecture, merely more evident in it. But in the building a highly exaggerated schism has come to pass, one that is only now being digested through design theories and practices.

But there is a second consequence, of theoretical import. In the dispensation of this divorce, this internal break, *form is always poor*. It becomes a kind of second-class citizen within the complex of the artistic product, a sort of dubious or tiresome (if necessary) fellow-traveler. Gone are the days when form is seen as a total medium, for giving the building expression, for articulating it.

But again, strangely and ambiguously so. Form remains a special site for the production of the spectacular; it remains, in spite of its disavowal, the driver (or articulator, perhaps) of the building’s



Abandoned room at second storey, Bonn.
Photo: unknown.

fetishism. But, ironically, form always comes up short. It is never quite up to the job. The formal aspect of the commodity must remain temporary, promissory, unsatisfying. Iterative, provisional, and anxious.

This is most acute when the building is currency in a rentier economy. The more that the building becomes engineered toward the production of wealth, the poorer it becomes as a formal proposition. Here, as we will see, form must be continually renewed; it will always fail, sooner or later, to meet the needs of the commodity in its development, in its quest for renewal.

We read this rather clearly in the built environment, because the means and methods of architecture are continually struggling to recuperate, to express—or simply to come to terms with—typologies of building that are always growing and developing past the point of their control. Shing and I, too, believe that form is in crisis, but we believe that it is in long-term historical crisis, for reasons that can

be identified in architecture dating from the second half of the 19th century. Architects were articulate about this predicament, both in their works and in their statements about them.

2

The potential for awkwardness in the dynamism of the modern is nowhere clearer than in architecture. We have new typologies—think, for example, of the shopping mall, the condominium, or the mixed-use development, among many others—that are, in fact, born long before they are given a pleasing formal expression.

In architecture, the awkward form—and with it, by the way, the horrible or the *unheimlich*—frequently appears at the historical interface of language and type. In such a moment, the resources of an existing formal vocabulary are put under pressure by changes in scale or composition, required by accelerated socio-economic development. The transitional building appears ill-formed, as its devices are maladapted to its task. The good old tricks no longer work. The architect is forced to deploy conventions in ungrammatical assemblages, as a new language has not yet arisen that is capable of solving the aesthetic problem of the new type. That is to say: form appears “poor” when the techniques of one historical moment are applied to the needs of another.

So what does such a building look like? One can see this, for example, in the architecture of the so-called “American Commercial Renaissance” (approx. 1840-1929). Many of the first great palaces of trade—mushrooming arcades and office towers—rose during this period to meet the practical needs of the new industrial class, as well as to express the self-image of American financial power. New orders

of retail and recreational space came to prominence in burgeoning urban areas: department stores, auditoria, and museums. These were of unprecedented size, sprawl and height.

The resulting aesthetic—one of “crowding,” is seen throughout much urban American architecture of the period. But it is also seen elsewhere, in the new press of humanity around the *locus horribilis* of the commercial. As E.L. Doctorow later described it, in the novel *Ragtime* (1975), “there seemed to be no entertainment that did not involve great swarms of people.” In essence, the social problem of the age was one of unprecedented numbers, sizes, and densities; in architecture and wherever the moderns gathered. As such, the regnant language of neoclassicism collided violently with the hyperbolic proportions of the modern. The accommodation of architecture to new problems of scale and scope required prolonged experimentation and produced many rank failures; a menagerie of suggestive creatures sprang up along the way.

Architects of the period experimented wildly with the application of historical styles and compositional tricks to this problem. While a stubborn conundrum, the large and complex structure nonetheless created opportunities for innovation. This was particularly true of the tower. Raymond Hood, designer of many significant examples, “felt that the skyscraper problem was still a relatively new phenomenon in American architecture, lacking any established traditions or strict formulas.” Hood, for one, “was quite happy with the prevailing mood in which everyone could try out whatever idea came into their head.”⁵⁴ This was likewise the case with other emergent typologies.

This is not unique to the tower, however. This is

a period in which many of the nascent commercial typologies of the buildings are being born. There are many others. Take, for example, the grandstand of the thoroughbred racetrack at Washington Park, Chicago (1884). The latter illustrates precisely that moment in which a fundamentally new challenge faces vernacular conventions. This question is quite straightforward: how does one design a very large building? The answer is far from clear. Huge surfaces and volumes test the ability of the architect to create a coherent, harmonious composition.

In order to tackle the dilemma of scale, Solon S. Beman chose to replicate the configuration of a normal construction. He did so by scaling everything up, by enlarging all constituent pieces proportionally. Beman attempted to solve the problem of the large building by applying to it the familiar composition of something much smaller. In fact, the grandstand is not a great edifice, so much as it is a modest one inflated. Its massing and disposition of parts clearly suggests a more diminutive object.

In order to maintain this illusion, all the ingredients of a pitched roof were up-sized simultaneously; turrets, chimneys, and gables all acquired extraordinary dimensions so as to appear visually consonant with one another. The illusion might have worked, perhaps, if one were to see the stands unoccupied. The image is alarming precisely because it is inhabited; the expanse of Beman's super-roof is read against the crowd beneath. With visitors on the verandas, the grandstand looks like the product of trick photography, some clever photo-montage in which it has been populated by Lilliputians. The fact that one can read the massive gables against the human form contributes to the impression of the roof as a great looming behemoth. It looks as if Piranesi

designed a country club.

The illusion of a giant roof, and the artifice employed in its production, suggests an architectural folly. It is a kind of "special effect" used in circumstances where the normal rules do not apply: in whimsical garden pavilions, pleasure palaces, Vegas and the Vatican. The Grandstand's unique scalar expression creates a formal instability. It appears to be two things at once: a new typology that occupies (problematically) the skin of its forebear.

Beman's odd result was not due to lack of inventiveness or skill. Beman was, in fact, a brilliant architect. But the post-Victorian architect produced his work within a language dedicated to the articulation of specificity. In the lingering pre-modernist vocabulary, exceptions were the dominant object of architectural attention.

This language combined none too easily with a nascent architecture of repetition, system, and number. This did not merely have to do with questions of scale. The techniques of the pre-20th century designer were likewise strained by the tendency of the modern building to move away from the singular and the exceptional, in favour of the aesthetics of mass quantity.

In such examples, one can oppose the disturbing form of the early modern building with the cool towers of Mies van der Rohe that were later to come to the Loop. Mies' works solve the problems of size and repetition by assimilating everything into an aesthetics of system. Herein, all components of the facade are subsumed within the expression of the grid. The Miesian building signals the historical retreat of specificity into pattern. The lines of the window extend vertically and horizontally to the edge of the facade; the window thus appears merely as an

interpolation of continuous horizontal and vertical lines.

By contrast, early high-rises had a problematic multiplicity, a kind of schizoid or doubly-inhabited form. Still today, they present an anachronism. In scalar terms they are modern, in language they are neoclassical, "Saracenic," Gothic, or Romanesque.

This is not merely the quandary of a certain moment of American architectural history. Quite the contrary. Awkwardness, in architecture, asserts itself whenever the established language of building is overtaken by the historical rate of change, and by the consequent requirements of new typologies. It is a chronic symptom of modernity's violent and cyclical dynamism, its expansions and convulsions and metamorphoses. For this reason, unease remains endemic in the built environment.

The Chicago examples are strange, and articulate. But of course, they are simply a phase in an ongoing development—the logic of the commercial megastructure, as a typological evolution, has been ongoing. And the scale and complexity of its contents have recently taken a quantum leap forward.

This manifests in the contemporary iteration of the very large building, or "megastructure." Recently, the production of vast enclosures has shadowed a new cycle of commercial consolidations—beginning, perhaps, with the construction of buildings such as the Merchandise Mart in Chicago (which, when it was built, enclosed 4 million square feet of floor). It continues, though, to a radical degree in the sprawling mall, expo center, and airport complex of the late twentieth century.

I think we are all familiar with malls, they really need no introduction. But the sheer disorder of this globular totality becomes clear when it is studied as

architecture. Viewed from above, the modern behemoth is defined by modes of organization that appear at once locally systematic and generally incoherent. Its contents are loosely held by a compositional device, or diagram: a malleable grid of columns, perhaps, or a Benthamite branching of pinwheels.

The very complex building is characterized by an unnatural plasticity, within and without. Its body is elastic, or cartilaginous. It can stretch, bend, rearrange itself, migrate its limbs and organs at will.

Architecturally speaking, it is in direct contrast to buildings that are understood as consistent; that is, to have a formal language that defines all of their constituent spaces. It is the polar opposite, for example, of the Werkbund ethos of Henry van de Velde or of the Arts and Crafts movement, in which the idea of a *gesamptkunstwerk*, a “total work” of art or design, dominated. It can be opposed, likewise, to a product of mid-century institutional modernism—a school, for example—where all areas are treated to a common material standard. Instead, the megastructure is the landscape of exaggerated disparity, the architectural equivalent of a swollen GINI coefficient. The fact that the public only occupies specific portions, carefully staged areas and sequences within the plan, leads to a proliferation of “goo.” This is a sort of technical medium, a back-of-house. The latter contains support functions, storage, secondary circulation, what we call HVAC (heating, ventilation, and air conditioning), kitchens and staff rooms, and the like. Presentable areas are suspended in this medium; the two exist within a common envelope, as in the “upstairs downstairs” of the English manor house.

The organic development of the megastructure culminates in facilities such as the West Edmonton

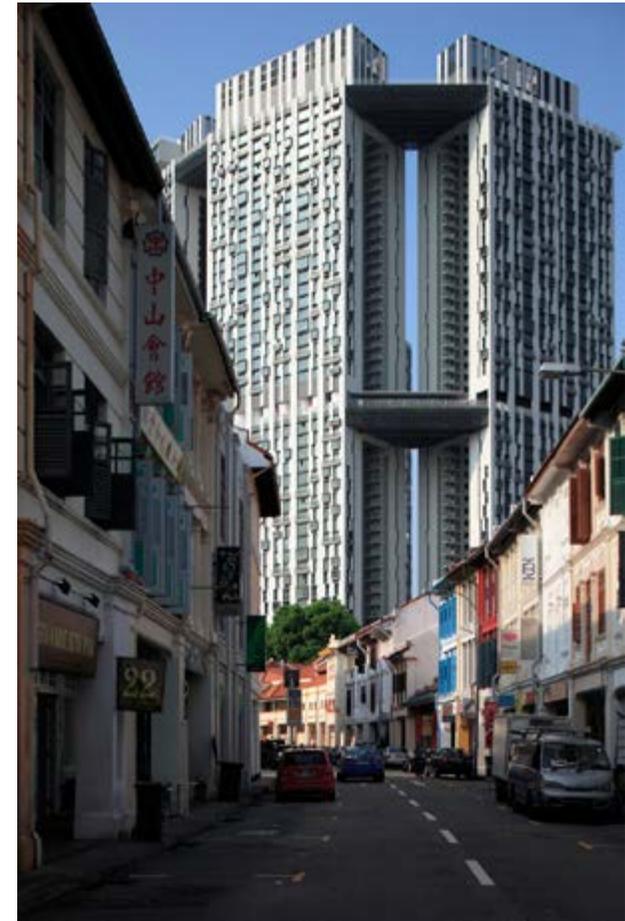
Mall or Mall of America. These have absorbed everything under their roofs: the roller coaster, the water-park, and the submarine ride, as well as the sports field and the hockey rink. Here, the concept of the exterior has become largely notional. What the vast scale and interiority of these projects appears to suggest is the diminished relevance of the outside world, particularly in barely inhabitable environments such as Ontario and Minnesota. This can be read in the impoverishment of their facades.

3

But this is not the entire story of the building as commodity. The stresses placed on form are not merely about accounting for size or for density. There are other forms of buildings as commodities, and these place different (although no less intense) pressure on inherited architectural languages. These have to do with problems not of size but of repetition. In particular, these have to do with the somewhat queasy status of the house, in a moment where it makes economic sense to subject it to reproduction on an enormous scale.

In our book, the question of the mass repetition of the home is discussed with respect to cloning, as a preoccupation of horror and fantasy media. The horror of cloning clearly raises issues of mass repetition that, in both architecture and the broader culture, deserve special consideration. As Benjamin and others have noted, reproduction—of people and objects, fake and real—is a pressing subject of late, and no less in modern architecture. For this reason, the clone remains a touchstone of the uncanny.

Just as much, perhaps, cloning is inherent in the productive matrix of modern architecture. Buildings, and their components, have come to be



ARC Studio, Pinnacle@Duxton housing project, Singapore.
Photo: Darren Soh.

replicated on a mass scale. Architects have made a virtue of necessity, often embracing repetition with a kind of religious fervor.

The placement of duplicate segments in horizontal, vertical, or gridded arrays has remained, for years, the basic DNA of construction. Images of Hilberseimer façades have perhaps been over-used in representing this vocabulary. Regardless, such buildings exist—not least, in “public” housing everywhere: the lugubrious slab of the Parisian *banlieu*, the London council estate, the Singaporean “HDB,” or the high-rise priapolis of São Paulo. Some instances have taken this to almost sardonic lengths, as in the anthills of Hong Kong, or Saenz de Oiza’s kilometer-long “El Ruedo” complex along Madrid’s M-30 (1986).

The other great example of cloned housing, the “terrace,” faces a similar problem. This type is now global. It remains a compact option for the development of low-rise urban parcels, and strange new versions continue to arise. The streetscapes of Chicago’s Old Town and Lincoln Park, for example, have been unhappily transformed by the “prairie po-mo” terrace, which exhibits a forced play of surface treatments and eccentric pediments.

The terrace must attempt to resolve the hairy predicament of the proto-house: a gathering of pieces, defined by adjacencies. The rowhouse (like the semi) struggles in the limen between one and many. It is often too narrow to be expressed as a house in its own right. Rather, as its frontage is compressed, it appears as a component of one.

As urbanism, the terrace attempts to collect a busyness of house-fragments into a whole. Unification has been attempted, via a range of techniques: a defining material or color, an unusual

roof form, a repeated element or iconographic theme. Such is the case at FAT’s Lindsay Road housing in Sheffield, UK, where outsized ornament incorporates a collection of small homes.

Large-order massing gestures provide another partial solution, as in the curves of Herzog and de Meuron’s Pilotengasse housing in Vienna. These work hard to overcome an awkwardness inherent to the type—a pull between family and collectivity, “indivisibility [and] individuality.” The worst cases present urbanism as proximity without society, the very notion of *anomie* in built form.

We can see this clearly at Corona Court in Singapore, from 1984. It is poignant that this terrace, an object defined by the act of living together, should be expressed as a symphony of boundaries. Party walls stand proud of the façade, and frontages are staggered such that they do not align. This makes them appear to resist incorporation within a unified block. Paradoxically, these are intended to work as a motif, a repetition that makes the complex read as a whole. They both join and separate.

This discomfort reaches a kind of apex in our last example, the semi-detached house. The interest of the semi is due to the fact that this typology is always-already a deviant being, born of modern compromise: the oddly forced intimacy of the “two-family house.” The dwelling looks bigger than it is, and lends an impression of upper-class gentility to an object defined by lower middle-class spatial possibilities. These might seem preferable to the crass repetition of the terrace or suburban subdivision. But while the latter appears uncannily de-personalized, it nonetheless avoids the press of two parties—dwelling instead in the modern anonymity of the masses.

The prototypical form of these demi-houses suggests a failure to osmose. “Semi-detached” is a funny negative. It implies a sort of inability to achieve, completely, the status of the individual—to free oneself from social dependencies. Houses, we would believe, strive toward a moment of disengagement; semis remain trapped within the entanglements of a socio-typical privation. By the norms of bourgeois aspiration, they are “halfway” homes.

In former British colonies such as Australia and Singapore, the semi-detached house is a special site of interaction. In many cases, owners on either side exercise their right to self-expression without concern for their neighbor. The result is a kind of mirroring. Anything can be placed along the horizon between the two halves: Classicism meets Mediterranean, modernism encounters Asian Village Baroque.

The inherently problematical nature of the semi is exacerbated in this context by a tendency to insist upon difference—the “warring” nature of the conjoined twins. The British version articulates a desire to disappear into the larger social order. Not so the Singapore semi-dweller, who creates, instead, a visual antipathy, a recoil from the architectural remnants of a shared history: common floor levels, dimensions, window positions, and the like.

Some of the best English examples were clever enough to present the double-home not as a mirroring, but as a single, eccentrically disposed composition of bays and setbacks, turrets and secondary masses. Although each half is given an equal allotment of floor area, their organizations vary to reinforce the illusion of dissymmetry. With the Asian example, this internal division—and the desire to hide

behind a shared image of one house—turns quite radically in the opposite direction.

These awkward forms—that provisional avant-garde in which the language of a given type is either finding itself, or failing to do so—show, in a rather stark way, is the effect of market logic on the formal proposition. And here, I hope, the notion with which I began might be clearer. In these examples, the resolution of buildings that have begun to come face to face with quantities which appear almost sublime—where sheer scale and number beggar the ability of the architect to express anything but quantity itself.

I'd like to close with two images. They show very clearly the violence that value asserts on the built environment, on the wholeness of a formal proposition; but interestingly they do so in completely different ways. The first example appears to be an abandoned room. In fact, this room is situated above a buzzing high-street in Bonn. The ground floor is at the peak of German property values. At the street is an expensive retail boutique. In fact, this room is a victim of the precision of such valuation. The ground-floor space, per square foot, has in fact become so high that the footprint of the stair (at the ground floor) is worth more than the entire second floor. The landlord then does what only someone with a purely rentier view of the world would do: he or she demolishes the stair, rents the space that it used to take up on the ground, and abandons everything above to a state of ruin.

I'd like you to compare that with an image of Singapore's new wave of public housing. This complex seems to approach a limit of maximization in architecture, a moment in which housing could not get more dense or more vertical. And it is the result of another extreme form of valuation—the

production of economically viable, publically-subsidized housing on a piece of Asia's most expensive real estate. This leads to a radical pressure toward maximization. There are five massive towers, more than five thousand units. And in a moment straight out of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), these buildings are made yet more incredible by their unification through a series of sky bridges, in fact linear parks, which link them.

I would like to close with this thought—in a sense, about the richness of “poor” forms—of forms that are struggling to domesticate the types and the contradictions thrown up by paroxysms of urban value. For all their strangeness, buildings such as these cannot help but to expose the problems of their making. The predicament is naked, and the urgency is not hidden behind the anodyne skill of the abstractionist. These two images would seem to show an inexorable march away from anything resembling an architecture of specificity, of humanism in a traditional sense. Within this, though, what exists comes, rather surprisingly, to serve another purpose—as a heuristic device. That is, our struggles as architects and of our architectures, come to resemble something like an analytical technique.

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOSH COMAROFF AND ONG KER-SHING

Jarad Zimbler

University of Birmingham

In the course of their interview with Jarad Zimbler, Josh Comaroff and Ong Ker-Shing expand upon the potential of ‘poor form’ to instantiate and animate critiques about the nature of architectural production. Inherent to form itself, they argue, are the critical tools that unsettle its capturing within the logic of commodity capitalism.

Jarad Zimbler (JZ): What is it about architectural failure that is horrifying, rather than simply disappointing? Or, to put it another way, when is awkwardness simply awkwardness, rather than something more dramatic (horror, menace etc.)?

Josh Comaroff and Ong Ker-Shing (JC and OKS): This is an important question. Our belief is that architectural failure can be *both* horrifying and disappointing. And that it can also be funny, exhilarating, beautiful, and instructive. In our paper—and to a greater degree, in our book—we try to make the case that “poor” or awkward form does not provide the same anodyne solutions as works that are situated comfortably within typological and linguistic traditions. The types have, in a sense, “run away” from the potentials of language to order them.

We have tried, though, to divorce this form of failure from qualitative judgements. We are trying to separate the notion of “poor” from the tradition of “bad” or “ugly.” In fact, the buildings that we describe are some of our favourites, and are the



Ong Ker-Shing and Josh Comaroff, Lekker Design Architects © Ong Ker-Shing and Josh Comaroff

precedents which inform our own design work. In this way, *Horror In Architecture* stands as a strange sort of manifesto. We argue that these works are able to articulate alternative ways of making architecture, and also to describe their own social and economic predicaments.

The passage into the dramatic, into horror and menace, might happen in many ways. Often, this has to do with the context in which the awkwardness of the building comes to be. The scale of Singapore’s Pinnacle housing is alarming. The same scalar effect in Speer’s Nazi war memorial program is genuinely terrifying. The mass repetition of Hilberseimer housing blocks in Chicago’s North Side can be exhilarating, or depressing, depending upon your reaction to Modernism. In Cabrini Green, it was acutely menacing.

JZ: You speak of an ‘unease’ that ‘remains endemic in the built environment’ and that arises as the consequence of an inadequacy of architectural languages to new typologies. Who is it that feels this unease?

The student of architecture? The city’s current inhabitants? Or anyone who has encountered or will encounter the building in question?

JC and OKS: This unease operates, and is perceived, on many levels. As we know, the notion of an urban malaise—such as Simmel’s “blasé attitude”—has become part of the originary myth of Modernism. The idea of the urban (and the urban building) as a locus of shock is not new. This can be perceived in a vague sense, or it can be understood more precisely by those who are able to describe the ways in which such shock is communicated.

An architect can understand the unprecedented—and by 19th century standards, post-human—scale of a building such as Marshall Field’s, in Chicago. We can articulate its unseemly repetition, its awkward position between Neoclassicism and Modernism, its peculiar use of scale and material. But likewise anyone who has spent a few hours shopping in it, or simply trying to understand its totality on foot, will feel utterly overwhelmed. This is even more the case in the hypertrophied contemporary equivalents, such as West Edmonton Mall.

Our understanding is that many of us feel the unease, but we do so in different ways. Our role as interpreters, hopefully, is to make the perception more precise and available to general criticism.

JZ: You relate the experience of architectural horror to an experience of the sublime, of magnitude or power in excess of understanding, but there is another way of understanding horror, as fright domesticated for pleasure and catharsis. Does this kind of horror play any part in contemporary experiences of the built environment?

JC and OKS: Yes, horror should be understood in a broad spectrum that connects Romantic ideas (which relate its experience to the sublime) to other experiences of horror in popular culture. The introduction to *Horror in Architecture* is, in large part, a description of this spectrum—in no small part a shift of emphasis toward pleasure and catharsis.

We invoke the Romantic notion of the sublime, in our book, as the starting point in a social history of horror. We conjure it, in particular, because we believe that a certain “politics of the sublime”—a perhaps post-political impulse toward the affective—is on the rise in the contemporary cultural moment.

But our own trajectory, and (admittedly) our own interest, quickly shifts to the moment when horror becomes a form of entertainment, pleasure, and imaginative exploration. We would not argue for the positive, or negative, benefits of horror as a sublime emotion; in fact, we make the point that Romantic discourses were perhaps too credulous about the moral benefits of shock. Moreover, we feel that the emphasis on the building as purely a conductor of emotion obscures the many other ways in which it may communicate aesthetic and cultural meaning.

For us, horror becomes most interesting in its “lowest” contemporary form, when it becomes a mode of contemplating bio-physical deviance. This would take place, for example, in the films of David Cronenberg. The buildings in our book are chosen because we feel that their awkwardness, their own deviance with respect to naturalized conventions, is articulate and compelling. It not only provides a testament to the changing conditions of their production, but it also contains within itself a certain tolerance toward alternative modes of being-in-the-world.

This is where we make a distinction between “horrifying” buildings, and those that articulate analogues of horror in other media. Whereas the former notion might invoke positive or negative associations, either due to aesthetic value or neo-Romantic sympathies, the latter have more to do with a transformative aesthetics that we feel to be both socially and architecturally productive.

JZ: You say that form has a particular and fairly straightforward meaning for architects, but what of content? What is comprehended by this term?

JC and OKS: Architects have many ways of speaking about the “contents” (frequently pluralized) of a building. Often, this term is used in a literal sense, referring to the collection of objects or activities that are housed within. These are often spoken of separately, however: the term “content” may be too expansive to be useful, as the contents themselves are of such diverse character. Architects have a quite complex and nuanced awareness of the interior lives of buildings: their decoration, space-making, social life, and technical infrastructures. The form-content dichotomy is rendered somewhat turbid by the fact that, at any moment, form can be multiply related to these independent and qualitatively different contents—and architects would probably consider the relation to each in distinct terms.

What is important to understand is that the dualism of form/content is not commonly understood, by architects, in a way that is analogous to other fields. This is, in part, because architecture is not a figural art in any straightforward sense. Buildings are not “representational” in the more direct ways that sculptural works, or paintings, or literary works

are. Of course, buildings represent things: ideals, values, social power, and the like. They can, as in the case of Holocaust museums, attempt to “represent” a specific historical incident through their form. But the way that buildings communicate is, at a basic level, different. They are inhabited objects, spatial and functional. And, as a result, their interpretations by Frederic Jameson and others are sometimes frustrating, because the building is often forced (almost like sculpture) to assume a representational role. In these, there is often an assumed core “content,” or message, about which the form of the building “speaks”. This can result in a simplification, and it is a type of reading that we would resist.

We would also point out that—as is the case with the other arts—there is a “content” to form itself, which is independent of the technical or social contents referred to above. Form is, after all, a great repository of meaning. It is, in many ways, our institutional memory, and our instrument of predication. For example, a form can reference past architectures, and be used to comment on them by invoking their conventions.

JZ: You address context in broadly socio-economic terms, but isn’t architectural context also important for aesthetic judgement? Doesn’t the success or failure of a particular building depend as much on the local topography and history of forms as it does on the adequacy of form to typology?

JC and OKS: For ourselves, we are not confident that one can talk about “architectural context” as something independent of economic context. It is certainly true that architecture is not, in any simple sense, reducible to economy. This would be a very

vulgar notion, and (hopefully) difficult to reconcile with the working experience of the architect. And certainly, there remain “cultures” of architectural practice, at locations around the world, that are distinct from one another.

But we must also acknowledge that many forces which face architects when they practice—not only of economy but of broader cultural logic—are increasingly trans-local. We all face the problem of the repetitive character of housing, for example. How architects approach this problem has a lot to do with architectural context, to be sure. Singaporean architects, for example, often embrace the aesthetics of repetition in a very direct manner, while their American colleagues tend to try and “humanize” or downplay it.

But it is very clear, in this example, that the root “problem” that defines this architectural object is the calculus of value placed upon the house, or on housing, when it becomes a commodity. And there is not, to our knowledge, an architectural context or tradition that has been—for historical or cultural reasons—more equipped to solve this problem than any other.

There remains a very interesting tension, however, between local and trans-local influences, and we remain fascinated by the variety of design responses that it informs.

JZ: The examples you analyse in detail come mostly from the US and Singapore. How might your understanding of poor form help architects and urban planners in South Africa and elsewhere in the global South?

JC and OKS: This is true; the examples given in the paper are mainly from outside the global South, and this was perhaps an odd choice for a paper presented at JWTC. The examples in the book are hopefully more wide-ranging, and speak to other circumstances.

We mention, for example — after Achille Mbembe — that many examples of colonial and post-colonial urbanism seem to develop under the “sign of the monstrous,” as they have so much to do with a forced re-adjustment of cultural and territorial inheritances.

More directly, perhaps, we discuss how the forces that generate what we call “poor form” exercise tremendous influence on the development of buildings and cities beyond the global North. This is particularly important in the burgeoning cities of Africa and Latin America, for example, where a convulsive urbanization is leading to a wild inflation of urban land values. This is combined with a heightened perception of risk, and creates precisely the kind of pressures that push buildings in unfortunate directions: toward, in particular, a fortress-like interiorization and an impoverishment of urban space.

The production of such “control spaces,” mixed-use developments and large-scale shopping centres, has been central to the Singaporean experience. But we see them now throughout South Africa, in Brazil, in Indonesia, Malaysia, Nigeria and Sri Lanka. These may be inevitable, but they do not need to come at the price of more conventionally “public” spaces. We hope that the planners and architects of the global South are less quick to relinquish these.

JZ: You speak of architectural failure as offering a means of exposing the badness of the present. To some extent, however, this is taken for granted from the outset, and your experience of horror seems primarily a response to the commercial purposes to which the new mega-structural typologies cater. What is it then that poor form itself tells us about the badness of the present? What might it teach us that we cannot not learn from, say, Fredric Jameson or the Frankfurt School?

JC and OKS: “Badness” is an interesting word to use as a descriptor of the present. While we generally do take for granted a negativity in our world-view, we actually avoid invoking this notion in our book, for a few reasons.

What we are after, analytically, is not a badness *for itself*, but an account of underlying pressures that shape architecture and the built environment. These stem, as we have argued, from the capture of buildings within a commodity logic, and they lead to the production of spaces of inhabitation that become, in many aspects, monstrous. But how they do so is not obvious; their effect on both form and the underlying typology are complex and mediated. Understanding how these forces shape the spaces in which we live is more our focus than a qualitative evaluation of the results.

We ask, moreover, why this effect should be so pervasive. Horror is much more far-reaching, in our estimation, than the “purposes” of commercial architecture. At the least, it extends far beyond buildings that are explicitly commercial—such pressures begin to affect a broad spectrum, from malls

to homes to properly “civic” buildings (for example, Koolhaas’ IIT student center, which eerily resembles a shopping centre).

In short, what poor forms show us is a process by which the built environment becomes post-human, alienating, or *unheimlich*, and connects it to trends in capitalism at large. Here, there is certainly great overlap with the Frankfurt School—although, to our knowledge, their work is more focused upon other cultural media. We find less analytical commonality with Jameson, although his broader theorization of the cultural moment is highly astute. In relating buildings *in particular* to larger shifts in capital, we would see our work owing more to Manfredo Tafuri’s, for example.

RADICAL WITHDRAWAL NECROPOLITICS, *CAPITALISMO GORE*, AND OTHER KINDS OF LIFE¹

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Marko Stamenkovic considers “economic suicide” as an indicator of the necropolitics that is the consequence of neo-liberal capitalism. Theorising crises of subjectivity attending the ongoing European recession, he argues that there are opportunities for forging the Self against hegemonic structures of power and governance.

INTRODUCTION

What is the political rationality and, accordingly, specific historical constellation of powers upon which contemporary theoretical debates about life and death are currently taking shape? Similarly, one could also ask how and why such debates differ from related theoretical concerns developed throughout the last four decades, most notably since Michel Foucault’s ‘invention’ of biopolitics at the Collège de France in 1970s Paris. This is only one among many possible questions that I would like to pose at the very outset of this paper. It explicitly tackles the configuration of relationships pertaining to the concepts of life, death, and politics. If the exercise of sovereign power depends precisely upon the technical apparatus administering a populations’ life and death, what interests me the most within such a configuration is the status of suicide: not only what is generally conceived by this term from a normative medico-juridical and scientific Western perspective (defined by the World Health Organization as “the

act of deliberately killing oneself. Risk factors for suicide include mental disorder (such as depression, personality disorder, alcohol dependence, or schizophrenia), and some physical illnesses, such as neurological disorders, cancer, and HIV infection. There are effective strategies and interventions for the prevention of suicide”) but any possible alternatives to it focused specifically upon the recently coined phenomenon of ‘suicides by economic crisis.’ Therefore, my preliminary question can also be re-phrased in the following way: what does a specific political rationality signify today in the context of theoretical debates around life and death since the turn of the new millennium? Here I want to point out the particular meaning of contemporary political rationality, understood as the matrix of ongoing colonial power, the function of which extends beyond the contemporary political economy, including the current Eurozone crisis. I want to address this matrix of power as a necrocapitalist engine of systematic destruction behind which so-called economic suicides occur today.

SO-CALLED LIFE

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century the world has been profoundly influenced by manifold expressions of the so-called global crisis. Its most deviant turn became evident under conditions of dramatic change taking place in the aftermath of the events of 11th of September in the United States of America, opening the doors for what has become an unprecedented yet defining form of contemporary global regime in the first decade of the 2000s: the so-called ‘war on terror.’ The so-called 9/11 decade was also marked by the so-called global financial crisis. This turned out to be a phenomenon



André Catalão, *Falling Lights* (2012). Acrylic on canvas, 30x20cm. Courtesy the artist.

that has not only determined our everyday life but made a fundamental impact upon the overall organization of contemporary life worldwide. The life itself has changed in general by taking a novel form: it has more prominently turned into an aspect of global citizenship mutating in relation to neoliberalism (as repeatedly pointed out by Aihwa Ong in her book *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*).²

In the European Union in particular this became significant – since the summer of 2008. The consequences of the crisis have become all the more prominent, both in everyday lives of the European citizens and in the official political agendas of their local and international institutional representatives. The current rise of unemployment, impoverishment, and general dispossession have taken an unprecedented turn. The regime of austerity, instituted in accordance with the requirements imposed by the European Central Bank and the International

Monetary Fund, have been intensified throughout the last few years across the continent. The measures proposed from the highest level of political and financial power were enforced in order to reduce spending while increasing taxes: they have left a common European citizen to face the austerity regime directly yet without much space for existential maneuvers. This has become all the more evident in the EU countries drastically hit by their national debts and financial downfall, namely in Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece, and Ireland, among others.

Gradually, our experience of being-in-the-world has come to be officially and popularly recognized as a way of living under the sort of crisis that is supposedly and exclusively characterized by its financial nature. However, if we want to understand the 'global economic crisis' as only one among many consequences of the dominant logic of neoliberal capitalism, then we also need to take into consideration another important point. Alongside the mutation of citizenship in relation to neoliberalism, humankind has also come to confront the limits of a political and economic system whose exercise of power over its subjects has reached a radical turning point. It is radical precisely in the sense of stretching beyond the mere administration of life – or indeed, in recalling Foucauldian dictum on biopower, "that domain of life over which power has taken control" (Mbembe 12). In other words, we are facing a situation that demands to be perceived from an alternative perspective to those already cemented biopolitical viewpoints centered on overall life-management. And this perspective, or counter-perspective, allows us to see yet another determining aspect of neoliberal imperial authority: its relation to death and, besides, our own exposure to death under sovereign

decision-making and control, all in the context of what has recently been recognized and analyzed by Subhabrata Banerjee as living under the regime of necrocapitalist world governance *par excellence*.

It is precisely at the intersection of these elements that suicide and suicide-related phenomena start occupying a dominant and often spectacular position in media, politics, and theory. Simultaneously, they exert an urgent need to profile our discussions regarding the effects of economic rationality precisely as political rationality over citizens' lives in the times of this *multidimensional* crisis. Our task is to take a look at those dimensions of crisis (including current waves of suicidal death popularly named 'economic suicides') from a radically different yet critical perspective. My argument is that such a perspective must aim towards disclosing a certain kind of rationality, different from the one pertaining to medico-scientific and health-care industries. The key to understanding the aberrant conditions under which suicidal death has taken such a prominent place in various agendas (in media, hospitals, preventive centers, and even parliaments) must lie elsewhere than the already pronounced regulatory institutional entities sanctioned to control humankind via life-oriented technologies of power. We must look for epistemologies other than the dominant ones, imposed by sacrosanct biopower regimes typical of the global North. We must aim towards "doubly transgressive sociologies [and] rival knowledges" (De Sousa Santos 47). While maintaining "two good reasons to keep a distance from Eurocentric critical theory: the loss of critical nouns and the phantasmal relationship between theory and action" (De Sousa Santos 47), we must embrace our own epistemology – the epistemology of the South - for the sake of

understanding the current political rationality that is stretching beyond the so-called economic crisis. This includes the historical and technological specificity and socio-ethical architecture upon which the current necropolitical power (under its biopolitical guise) institutes the so-called universal truth about citizenship under crisis. It is this power and its related dominant epistemology that must be put into question before we take any particular medico-juridical expertise for granted. This can lead us towards conclusions about why and how any 'mental health crisis' is caught up in the trap of the 'economic crisis'.

This is important for at least two reasons. First, because biopower is authorized to regulate and control a populations' behavior in what is left as a domain of life exposed, among other threats, to a suicidal death. Second, because its epistemology is rooted in hegemonic institutional discourses engineered and voiced by scientific, clinical/medical experts in alliance with other politically relevant actors (national governments, supranational organizations, financial institutions, etc.) that have literally monopolized and colonized the discursive domain of life and life-related issues. They have done so in an attempt to 'prevent' populations from what can obviously not be prevented as it is going beyond the limits of biopolitical reason. And what escapes biopolitical reason is exactly the *political crisis of neoliberal model of governing* hidden behind the mask of the 'global economic crisis' in an urge for austerity measures. In other words, I want to argue that contemporary forms of self-sacrifice are inseparable from other forms characteristic of necrocapitalism. Their mutual dependence exists at the level of *radical self-exposure*, i.e. exposing one's

own body in resistance to the biopolitical power through self-accomplished death. This constitutes some of the logic of necropolitics - the politics of the First World's neoliberal regime *par excellence* (Grzinic, *Biopolitics and Necropolitics in relation to the Lacanian four discourses*). In a rather drastic way, when analyzing Santiago López Petit's essay "Claiming Free Hatred For a Global Era" (published in 2008 in Spanish as *Reivindicación del odio libre para una época global*), Marina Grzinic concludes about the lethal tension of life between the governing and the governed, produced by such a regime:

Today life itself is the field of battle! Therefore, a proposal put forward to dismantle the total subsumption of reality by capitalism is a proposal to make of our life an act of sabotage. In what way? His [i.e. Santiago López Petit's] proposal is for hatred. Petit states that those that hate their lives deeply can come to the point of changing it (*Subjectivization, Biopolitics and Necropolitics: Where Do We Stand?*)

Necrocapitalism - or slasher capitalism (*capitalismo gore*), as suggested by Sayak Valencia Triana in relation to the contemporary situation in Mexico - is a neologism that was first proposed by Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee in the context of theories and practices pertaining to the most recent period of neoliberal globalization. The term itself derives from two words, *necro* (the Greek prefix applied to death) and *capitalism* (the English term for a particular economic system). Hence it denotes a connection between two basic elements: the neoliberal capitalist doctrine and death. The concept of necrocapitalism thus implies an intertwining relationship between

two systems of production in which global financial growth and economic accumulation of goods develop not only in parallel but *through* the global growth of dying and increasing worldwide production of death. Hence contemporary capitalist practices are inseparable from practices of death and dying. As necrocapitalist practices, they pertain "to different forms of power - institutional, material, and discursive - operating in the political economy [and] implying dispossession, marginalization, violence, and death" (Banerjee 1541). The number of suicidal victims of economic atrocities therefore increases with neoliberal politico-medical 'preventive crisis-management'. Moreover, the global populations' everyday life is the very characteristic of such management. This is one possible way to critically consider the lives of citizens who have *already* been killed but have yet to die - by their own hand, as it unfortunately becomes all the more apparent throughout contemporary Europe.

This is where we are obliged - theoretically, politically and ethically - to take a critical view on suicide and related phenomena: the view distanced from dominant clinical and medical impositions of truth surrounded by obsessive health-care concerns. Instead of approaching self-accomplished deaths as resulting exclusively from mental deviations proper to health-related disorders, imbalances and illnesses, we must look at the other side of the spectrum. We must attempt to pose different questions that search for the very origins of those 'deviating, imbalanced and ill' practices. We must look for other reasons and rationalities behind which the indirect submission to death occurs to those whose lives are governed by necrocapitalist regimes of life-organization and health-management. We must

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understand suicide as an instrument of necropower and the property of necropolitics, precisely in the sense that self-destructive practices take part among other "contemporary forms of organizational accumulation that involve dispossession and the subjugation of life to the power of death" (Banerjee 1541). This is what the concept of necrocapitalism implies in terms of one of its founding theoreticians.

THE SO-CALLED ECONOMIC CRISIS

The central point of this paper is the contemporary crisis of subjectivity as experienced through an increasing wave of self-accomplished deaths across Europe under conditions of the so-called economic crisis and related austerity regime. I would like to re-consider the supposed link between, on the one hand, suicides and suicide-related issues taking place in the European Union since 2008 and what is generally understood as the ongoing Eurozone economic crisis particularly aberrant across its Southern parts. The need to reconsider this relationship is of theoretical nature. Theoretically it is precisely in the way that, rather than being motivated by pragmatic or instrumental reason, in Enrique Dussel's critical terms, I consider my task reside in posing questions about the connection between suicide and political rationality behind it differently from expected canonic and normative views. This

not only applies to the context of so-called mental health crisis in Europe (as pronounced by medical experts at a recent high-profiled meeting in Brussels backed up by the World Health Organization).³ It also does not apply to the so-called economic crisis, behind which hides the actual crisis of authority of the global neoliberal capitalist regime. Instead, and even more importantly, this task applies to the context of another, *epistemic crisis* (or the crisis of knowledge, its production and re-production) which is inseparable from the neoliberal project as we are experiencing it today. It is the crisis of the logic of modernity as instituted by the colonial matrix of power. Since the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, this matrix has been operative in engineering and designing the political, epistemological, and ethical universe sanctioned by monolithic, rationalist, ‘civilizing,’ ‘progressive,’ violent and violently exploitative universalism of Western European and North American narcissism. It created a kind of self-sufficiency by which the undisputable central role of the global North has been cemented in two directions: making of the ‘universal history’ of the world and interpreting its future, as Dussel argues.

The crisis of humankind in the face of a financial downfall is but one extreme consequence of this narcissism, this self-sufficiency and this very logic – the one that has paved the way throughout the last five centuries by means of three related processes: capitalism, colonization, and Euro-Americanocentrism (Dussel 493). It is within this matrix of power, I would argue, that the supposed link between suicide and so-called economic crisis needs to be critically reassessed and reconsidered. This has already been taken into analytical consideration by numerous experts from various fields since the beginning

of the ongoing recession, predominantly voiced by medical, psychological and psychiatric professionals in normative, biopolitical and clinical discourses. However, the subjectivity-in-crisis and the severity of its effects, as experienced across contemporary Europe, must be re-articulated not only inside but also outside the normative health-care and life-care dominions of scientific knowledge. The proliferating quantitative logic, characteristic of preventive psychiatric concerns, statistical measurements and regulatory techniques, has subjected human beings (be they dead, alive, or at risk of self-harming) to the status of calculable living resources. Nonetheless, if we want to avoid normative epidemiological approaches we need other, less normative or till now silenced theoretical viewpoints and knowledge fields (philosophy, sociology, and ethics being the most urgent among them). We need to open up the gaps of *epistemic violence* prohibiting the causes of actual crisis to come to light behind the smoke screens of recession and austerity demagogues, on the one hand, and behind the medico-scientific power discourses, on the other.

This re-opening is to be activated by ways of de-linking and re-politicizing the existent normative interpretations situated in the comforting zones of hegemonic universalist rationality, including those within the theoretical and applied scholarship of suicide. The aim is to reach towards other possible ways of understanding the horizons of today’s political rationality from which one *is pushed* over the abyss by ‘pushing his/her own self’ into a death world - in order to withdraw, as dramatically and tragically as suicide can be, from the margins of *this* life. The notion of the abyss is understood here as being inherent to the very logic of such rationality

and constitutive of such modernity. What this rationality and its logic have therefore exposed is the vulnerability of the status of a spectator (the Western middle class observer) whose life, supposedly always immune, comfortable and secure, is now put into question. This is occurring today to Europeans as it used to occur to their colonial Other centuries ago: exactly by the same logic that exerts the power to decide “who should live and who must die” (Mbembe) and all in the name of “the transcendental spirit of capitalism” (Tlostanova) as preached by the International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization, and World Bank, among others. The only difference is the fact that, unlike in the colonial past, the logic of living-and-letting-die has taken a lethal (suicidal) turn no more over the oceans but here at home, in European territory, among and against the indigenous Europeans themselves, at the beginning of the twenty-first century:

Recent economic crisis made it obvious for the Western middle class observer that he is also vulnerable and not exempt from the logic of the late and exhausted modernity, his life also becomes dispensable and his rights inverted in its deadly game which sacrifices lives in order to save the transcendental spirit of capitalism. Yet, the zombification of modernity remains intact even today, even at the point when the global crisis has clearly demonstrated the void of its epistemic, ontological and ethical dimensions projecting its own irresponsibility, cynicism, and arrogance onto the rest of the humankind making us all hostages of the deadly game of modernity (Tlostanova 57).

SO-CALLED ECONOMIC SUICIDES

I propose to approach the points of intersection between actual suicidality and neoliberal matrix of power by two main criteria. Firstly, this should be done in a deliberately critical, *decolonial* detour around the pathologizing views pertinent to regulatory psycho-medical gaze and its contemporary biopolitical apparatus. Secondly, this detour should re-orient our broadly conceived *decolonial* view towards any possible alternative theoretical and empirical (necropolitical) gaze. A differing gaze is urgently needed so that it could, eventually, institute a counter-perspective to what has already been popularly termed ‘economic suicides’ or ‘suicides under economic crisis’.

These are the phrases I define as *radical withdrawal*. A modality of radical withdrawal to be taken into account in this context applies to corporal practices of resistance. Here I refer to self-destructive forms of public protest produced within civil movements on both micro- and macro-scales. Such forms are recognized by what contemporary sociology understands as self-immolation or self-sacrifice. More precisely, in terms used by Michael Biggs, self-immolation stands for “an act of public protest, where an individual intentionally kills him or herself – without harming anyone else – on behalf of a collective cause” (*Dying without Killing: Protest by Self-Immolation*, 174). Self-immolation will be considered in another, separate text in the future, complementary to the subject currently being discussed. I mention it here for the sake of demarcating two self-destructive types of necrocapitalist practices: the radical withdrawal under ‘economic crisis’ and suicidal protest through self-sacrifice unrelated to ‘economic crisis.’

As regards the radical withdrawal under ‘economic crisis’, I would like to add the following: in order to avoid falling into discursive gaps created by epistemological violence, so characteristic of neoliberal teleology, we must consider the properties of the very logic, political rationality and historical specificity within which reside not a single but “several more and less known models produced in the West, in the non-West and in the border zones in-between” (Tlostanova 55). All of these models are “focusing in different ways on defining the massive crisis of subjectivity, epistemology, and ethics, leading to much more devastating and far reaching consequences than the strictly economic or even social crisis” (Tlostanova 55). At least three of those models need to be taken into account, specifically in their relation to the rising and ongoing (ir)rationality of suicides as manifested throughout Europe during the last decade - the decade of neoliberal political crisis *par excellence*. This is valid if we are to undertake a task of suggesting possible alternative theoretical counter-visions toward the dominant readings of ‘economic suicides’.

Among such differing models, as suggested by Tlostanova, the most prominent and unavoidable will be those produced in the West (biopolitics), in the non-West (necropolitics), and in the border zones in-between (for example, the decolonial option, or decolonial (post)continental geopolitics and body politics of knowledge). The aim of this classification is not to confirm and re-confirm either Tlostanova’s or anyone else’s already articulated propositions. It is rather to focus our attention on the crisis of subjectivity as most prominently represented in the contemporary moment by suicidal regimes of behavior, and to address and re-address

their logic by critically analyzing, what she calls, “the interrelated epistemic and ontological dimensions of the global crisis of modernity and ... the possible ways out offered within various Western and non-Western paradigms” (Tlostanova 55).

In line with her thought, the imperative is to shift our *geography of reasoning* from hegemonic (universalist, normative, ‘modern’, regulatory, hygienic, calculable, statistic, instrumental, asymmetrical) rationality of Western psycho-clinical gaze towards trans-modern views (Dussel) and decolonial views (Mignolo) and thus a different civilizational paradigm (Tlostanova). If the unexplored horizons and avenues of thought and actions are now to be theoretically ‘colonized’ by epistemic subjects outside the Western logic of the gaze, such a radical shift shall open the gates of hope that there are indeed “other kinds of life” (as Tlostanova argues). Instead of opting for ‘final exit’ solutions in one’s own self-accomplished death, these gates of hope shall serve as a guide towards other possible kinds of life through other possible horizons of knowledge and other possible epistemologies – precisely the epistemologies of the South, the ‘South’ as a place to look and to envision other kinds of life.

The suicides (those who, once again, “deliberately kill themselves” according to the WHO definition) are neither those who deliberately erase themselves in the final acts of falling over the abyss of neoliberal modernity, nor those who are pronounced victims of the current ‘economic crisis’. They are precisely those who fall out of the ongoing logic of modernity and its colonial matrix of power by becoming misfit epistemic subjects and, therefore, no more desirable living resources. In the patriarchal and hierarchical system of neoliberal government their lives

become objectified and zombified, turned into the *living dead*, by the instrumental reason of exploitation-extraction-exclusion (as Banerjee defined this necrocapitalist triad). This is all in order to eliminate, erase, and push over the *global abyss* into the death worlds those who are no more useful, no more worth living, and no more human - according to the necrocapitalist logic.

THE POLITICS OF DEATH ITSELF

I intentionally use the term “global abyss” as suggested by Eric Cazdyn for this exploitative crisis in his book *The Already Dead: The New Time of Politics, Culture and Illness*. Additionally, rather than talking about ‘life’, I deliberately employ the phrase “living resources” following Aihwa Ong’s dictum by which “it is important to trace neoliberal technology to a biopolitical mode of governing that centers on the capacity and potential of individuals and the population as living resources that may be harnessed and managed by governing regimes” (Ong 6). Along the same line of reasoning, I understand the position of those caught in the trap of the to-live-or-not-to-live puzzle as being squeezed between what she proposes as two kinds of neoliberal optimizing technologies – technologies of subjectivity and technologies of subjection. This is the situation that she considers in terms of “implications for our understanding on how citizenship and sovereignty are mutating in articulation and disarticulation with neoliberal reason and mechanisms” (Ong 6). In her view, “as an intervention of optimization, neoliberalism interacts with regimes of ruling and regimes of citizenship to produce conditions that change administrative strategies and citizenship practices,” more precisely:

Neoliberalism as used here applies to two kinds

of optimizing technologies. *Technologies of subjectivity* rely on an array of knowledge and expert systems to induce self-animation and self-government so that citizens can optimize choices, efficiency and competitiveness in turbulent market conditions. Such techniques of optimization include the adherence to health regimes, acquisition of skills, development of entrepreneurial ventures, and other techniques of self-engineering and capital accumulation. Technologies of subjection inform political strategies that differently regulate populations for optimal productivity, increasingly through spatial practices that engage market forces. Such regulations include the fortressization of urban space, the control of travel, and the recruitment of certain kinds of actors to growth hubs (*Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* 6).

In the context of dramatically changing administrative strategies under the current austerity regime operating in the EU, even more dramatic reactions are being practiced by its respective citizenship in the zones most vulnerable to such strategies (the South of Europe). My argument is, moreover, that Ong’s account of two technologies clearly frames the predicament of citizens’ entrapment in-between subjectivity and subjection, so characteristic of those considering a fatal escape through ‘self-engineered’ death that it cannot be omitted from any critical account of the biopolitical rationality behind contemporary suicidality. Since they no longer serve the demagogy of capitalist self-interest and their lives are no more *living resources* of capitalist accumulation, their death - underlined by the slow process of marginalization, deprivation, and extermination

- needs to appear as ‘self-annihilating’. Hence, cynically, they are either no more human or no more worth living. Or, as defined by João Biehl in *Vita. Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*, they are simply “worth nothing”: they – the unemployed, they – the homeless, they – the immigrants, they – the poor, they - the sick and the deceased, they – the disabled, either mentally or physically, they – the damned and condemned, they – the *abandonados* (the abandoned), they - the living dead.

This situation, in which the described categories of supposedly useless living resources find their *raison-de-ne-pas-être*, corresponds to what is perhaps best described by Cazdyn. He argues that “as in contemporary medicine, which uses targeted drug therapies and biotechnology to manage rather than cure diseases, global capitalism does not aim for resolution but rather a continual state of crisis management that perpetrates the iniquities of the status quo. [...] In such exploitative crisis state, which he terms “the global abyss,” Cazdyn posits the concept of “the already dead,” a condition in which the subject (medical, political, psychological) has been killed but has yet to die” (*The Already Dead*, book cover).

Since “contemporary regimes of living are increasingly brought into interaction with neoliberal logic” (Ong 23) we need to re-position ourselves towards questioning the notion of life. We need to do so nowadays precisely by understanding life as an aspect of citizenship *mutating* in relation to neoliberalism under conditions of dramatic changes, whereas the increasing desire for change through suicidal potentiality corresponds to this mutation itself. The darker side of this mutation is manifested, among other symptoms, in the suicidal technologies

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of resistance. This mutation will not cease to disclose its darker side until we take a different view of what has been officially proposed as global economic crisis. Or until we recognize it by its most proper name and by what it really stands for: the political crisis of neoliberal logic as necropolitical colonial matrix of power at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I, discussed the status of suicide within contemporary theoretical debates about life and death in the context of the so-called Eurozone economic crisis, ongoing since 2008. The subject emerged from the need to scrutinize the specific political rationality and historical conditions under which the increasing practice of suicide or self-sacrificial death occurs in today's European Union. I focus on this practice as it occurs among those EU citizens squeezed between two technologies (of subjectivity and subjection, in Aihwa Ong's terms) and mutating negatively towards self-accomplished elimination induced and orchestrated by the necropolitical logic of neoliberalism. I have thus undertaken to question the link between the governmentality of the current state of crisis and suicidality of the governed. The paper's emphasis resides in the dominant necropolitical matrix of power (enforced by the historical roots pertaining to capitalism,

colonialism and Euro/North American centrism, in Tlostanova, Mignolo, and Dussel's terms) that currently extends beyond the contemporary political economy and so-called global financial downfall (including the current Eurozone crisis). Instead, while outlining readings of histories alternative to any singular, monolithic, and universal viewpoint, the current wave of 'economic suicides' is here no more perceived as an outcome of recession and consequent despair among those suffering the most. It is rather understood as the characteristic of all 'living dead' to radically withdraw from *this* life managed by a neoliberal death-world (according to Cazdyn), supposedly without any foreseeable alternative.

What I have proposed is a more optimistic perspective, stretching beyond the constraints imposed by an ill and 'irreplaceable' system of values administering populations' lives and deaths, while opting for our imagining other forms of living - resistant to the abyss of suicidal 'final exit.' Refocusing attention from the economic toward the crisis of *subjectivity* institutes a critical distance from the irreplaceability of normative systems of knowledge and governance. It also examines hidden epistemic gaps at the center of global power relationships, cemented for over five centuries by historical, epistemological and ethical violence toward the 'uncivilized' Other. I have approached the contemporary crisis of European subjectivity as a result of historically engineered misconceptions leading to the *political crisis* of the first degree (as we experience it today). I have also opted for less normative approaches around the Eurozone crisis to be examined and applied in the future studies of neoliberal necrocapitalism (in Mbembe and Banerjee's words), with particular attention to its suicidal counter effects.

NOTES

1. This paper was first presented on the occasion of the International Postgraduate Symposium *Writing Life* organized by the University of Malta, Faculty of Arts, Department of English (St. Julian's, Palm Suite - Intercontinental Hotel, 22-23 March 2013) in the framework of the public session "Writing Life Reflectively." See: 'Writing Life' Symposium 2013, University of Malta online, <https://www.um.edu.mt/events/writinglife2013> (accessed on June 2, 2013). The paper relates to my academic research started in 2011 at the Department of Philosophy and Moral Sciences, University of Ghent (Belgium), supervised by Prof. Dr. Tom Claes, Director of CEVI - Center for Ethics and Value Inquiry. The research makes part of my PhD project *Suicide Cultures. Theories and Practices or Radical Withdrawal - A Transnational Cultural and Media Paradigm (2001-2011)*, supported by Basileus Scholarship - an Erasmus Mundus Action 2 project for academic exchange between EU and Western Balkans funded by the European Commission.
2. See Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham, NC, 2006, pp. 1-27.
3. See *Mental Health in Times of Economic Crisis*. The European Parliament. 19 June 2012. Web. 12 Apr. 2013.

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'UBUNTU' AND 'RACE': BEING WITH OTHERS BETWEEN TWO DISCOURSES

The following conversation was held at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study, on June 23, 2011. The conversation was convened by Rosalind Morris (RM) and Antjie Krog (AK), and included Yvette Christiansë (YC), Jacob Dlamini (JD), Hlonipha Mokoena (HM) and Njabulo Ndebele (NN).

RM: This is the first conversation convened by the SEFIKA project on questions of race, blackness, whiteness and African philosophy. Thanks everybody for coming and agreeing under very short notice and difficult circumstances to get together. This discussion is about learning to ask questions, learning to think with others differently. Let's begin by putting the questions we wish to discuss on the table.

NN: The... question I'd like to pose is... partly embedded in the notion of dominance and opposition implied by the notion of race, and the fact that, if there's whiteness, then there is a notion of blackness, whatever that is. I'm intrigued by the fact that within the notion or the contemporary discourse of blackness, there's a silence about ethnicity. In all the talk about race and so on there's been no resurgence of a Zulu nationalism or a Sotho, Pedi – or whatever nationalism. Is it because the non-racial vision [espoused by the ANC] has partly succeeded in extinguishing ethnicity in favour of race? Is the silence about ethnicity a positive thing? Can we use the mechanisms that allowed us to move away from ethnicity to arrive at a genuine non-racialism?



Steven with Sight Seeing Bus, Doornfontein, Johannesburg, 1960. Photo: David Goldblatt

HM: I have more historical questions. One of the dilemmas that I find myself in is that I can't really think outside of the historical moment that we are in. Whether we like it or not, in South Africa, we are already racially inscribed by the moment in which we are living. It may sound strange to say, but in some ways I'm not particularly curious about the racial context that I'm in. Because it always seems to be just there - I can do nothing about it. What I'm curious about is what race has meant historically. Have we always thought that just because we have brown skin, we are therefore black? When in history can people identify themselves racially, and think of that as a political identification rather than a social identification? Take the slave society here in the Cape where, if you had a certain skin tone, you were not allowed to wear certain things. You had to wear shorts, for example, if you were a man, to signify that you were a slave. Two totally independent things are linked together by race and by social status. So I'm more interested in those kinds of issues

than in my current predicament, in 21st century in South Africa!

JD: Like Hlonipha I've also been seeking and finding solace in the archives. And one of the most interesting things for me about working in the archives, is the discovery that I make each time I look at the old records, especially of the Native Affairs department, about the emergence of blackness as a category of identification. What is remarkable about those records, especially the department's annual reports, is that these Native Affairs officials track what they called the emergence of race consciousness or racial consciousness. For example, the district officer for the northern district would say that, "The natives are starting to wear western-style clothing and building their houses in a rectangular fashion." But this is also the emergence of racial consciousness. What it says to me is that if we can have blackness emerging and someone tracking it - surely it should be possible to do the opposite. It says to me, there's nothing natural about this identity. I say this knowing that it's not easy, but we need a different kind of imagination; a different kind of thinking; a different kind of language.

YC: How can one not look to the archives, because that is where the languages we live with now are coined. And one of the things I find again and again in the archives is this anxious effort to fix a subject or persons into categories. You talk about the clothes and visible signs; this says to me that one doesn't know what a slave is intrinsically. You must make that person signify as such, so that you can then fold back into them an idea of something that

appears intrinsically to be a slave. This is why that kind of archival research is important, because there is a way of tracking a thought process that becomes a bureaucratic process; a systematic process; a philosophical system – and all of these things begin to overlap and produce real practices that go on and on. In another context they will become catch phrases, they will become labels and categories, from which there may also arise resistance and a desire to force change. When there's awareness of a need for something different, then the archive also begins to show us how those new languages begin to develop, not only in opposition, but often in a form of opposition that becomes an overdetermined and simplified binary. There's a persistent binarism in the languages that we use to speak of the archive. For example, there's no pristine south and pristine north, the idea of north and the idea of west always shapes itself by masking what it got and what it extracted from its others, in order to create its identities.

RM: I am the only person who comes from outside of this country, and I perhaps have a different perspective on some of the questions that animate local discourse in our conversation.

To talk about race now, for me, blackness, whiteness, colouredness (not just here, but elsewhere) requires always the question of what is being organised in terms of the allocation of rights, the distribution of resources, the question of social justice and, simultaneously, what has been foreclosed by those categories. I think race is probably the most powerful universal typology of human difference that has ever been produced because it lives at the intersection of biological and cultural discourse, and because they are always transforming one into the

[R]ace is probably the most powerful, universal typology of human difference that has ever been produced because it lives at the intersection of biological and cultural discourse, and because it's always transforming one into the other.

other, always masking enormous, complex differences within each category: by solidifying an image of a more radical difference between them, but by virtue of extreme sleights of hand and defacements of all the traffic that always goes on between them. As a social scientist, I'm especially concerned with the ways in which it is made to do a kind of work in the organisation of power and inequality. It's an enormous double-bind to use it as a basis for liberation. I'm very sympathetic with the ambition to find grounds on which one can act collectively in the interest of collective goals, to feel oneself part of a collective subject; this is a necessary and a desirable thing, always at the risk of annihilating the need to recognise the many differences, and the need for individual forms of agency and individual subjectivity within. But when undertaken on the basis of race, these drives to collectivity always risk re-inscribing the systems of exclusion by which they work.

Michael Herzfeld makes that point that people claim ethnicity and act on the basis of what he calls 'public intimacy,' primarily in the face of foreigners or others who are perceived as, in some ways, strangers. It's a complicated relationship, which one in another time would have called a shame and pride dynamic, but he uses the language of public intimacy to talk about the elaboration of a kind of defensive but publicly elaborated kind of performed ethnicity.

AK: That sounds like the Comaroffs' argument, that ethnicity allows people to bargain for some piece of the economic pie.

NN: I'm intrigued by the suggestion that ethnic blacks, underneath "the South African thing", feel comfortable, that a collective South Africanism gives them comfort, or that they don't feel that they need to justify their ethnicity, at least at a national level, because there is no ethnic fight. There is in fact an ethnic convergence, seemingly, around the nation. Do English-speaking South Africans actually feel ethnic? Is there an English ethnicity? There's a certain universalism about English, so there is a sense in which the English and the silent multi-ethnic black have an unspoken confidence - and the Afrikaner is uncertain.

HM: The South African public is a shifting set of identities. South Africans, I don't know how we do it, but it seems that South Africans are always changing their mind about things, and so one day it's okay to wear a T-shirt that says "one hundred percent Zulu" but the very same person will be in a shebeen in Soweto, drinking with people from all ethnic groups. And he'll say, "We are just here to drink, you know. Who cares that I'm Zulu and you are Sotho." I think somehow, ethnic identification isn't as much of a crisis as we may imagine it is. One of the reasons why we talk about these issues in terms of crisis is because we've actually escaped ethnic warfare or civil war. Now, it's almost like we want this self-fulfilling prophesy to happen: falling apart because of race and ethnicity. But because it isn't, we keep looking for it. And I think that is the real anxiety in South Africa: why is it that we are waiting for this moment

of strife and conflict? I think it has to do with the fact that we ourselves haven't quite internalised what has happened to us in the last seventeen years.

RM: I think one of the most powerful institutions mediating the emergence of ethnicity in this country is the museum. In the first five or ten years after the end of apartheid, most of the museological projects were devoted to the excavation of political histories: Robben Island, Constitution Hill, the women's jail, the District 6 museum and so forth. Oral history projects across the country aimed at finding out people's experience under apartheid, about their exposure to state violence. But increasingly, one sees museum projects devoted to cultural, ethnic and regional-specific kinds of issues. There's a risk in severing questions of ethnicity and culture from more political questions and from more general and generalisable questions, a risk of turning ethnicity into a fetish or at least an object of over-investment. I worry about those cultural histories that generate statements like: "In Europe, you were still painting yourself with woad but we were trading with China." It's a kind of empire envy. But globally-speaking, cultural preservation has become a powerful instrument not only for attracting international investment, aid and so forth - but for mobilising local sentiment.

I think another important question, which we have all mentioned at different moments, concerns the rural/urban divide. That seems to be one of the most powerful determinants, along with class, of these ethnicizing relations.

AK: Mandela started by drawing everybody in. When the Truth Commissioners were chosen he

insisted that there should be an Afrikaner, a Zulu. Tutu wasn't there because he was a Xhosa, he and Boraine had human rights records. It felt insulting to be allowed in on the basis of ethnicity. At one stage there was a debate among Afrikaners: Should we not also have a sort of king? Should it be Van Zyl Slabbert or FW De Klerk? Because obviously government can only deal with you as an ethnic group, and you need someone to negotiate on your behalf. I challenged the Afriforum to take up the case for a black and an Afrikaner person, but they said their only legitimate negotiation space with government depends on being Afrikaners.

JD: It seems to me the biggest challenge is how to place yourself in the shoes of another and try to understand what it means to live in a shack along the N2 on the Cape flats. And I think if there is a moral failure, never mind the failure of imagination, it is this inability to put yourself in the shoes of another — how do we help engender a new sense of empathy?

RM: But what you described now as a quintessential place of otherness is a place of complete economic destitution, and it's a class description and it's not a description of ethnicity or race. It's based on radically different life experiences, but not on anything that could be biologised or inscribed as a cultural tradition.

AK: I would say that race plays a role in the way that poverty is lived. A social worker once told me that the moment whites become poor they are degenerate, nothing holds them together. While just across the street would be black people who are even

poorer, but the way in which they deal with that poverty is through a structure of assistance.

YC: An anecdote. Peter Vale wrote about the Afrikaanse Christelike Vroue Vereniging and their anxiety in the 1950s about poorer Afrikaners, particularly those who lived in the grey areas. Having grown up in a grey area, Doornfontein, I don't think there is anything grey about it. There were Afrikaners and they were considered poor white people. But there were also non-Afrikaner white people, who were also considered poor whites. "Poor whites" was the lumpen category that was used. And the Afrikaanse Christelike Vereniging and different churches always came to look after the Afrikaner whites. Whereas, when we were very poor, nobody was coming to actually help us. We had stokvels: Okay, this week you go and you pool your pay cheque and you help; some of it goes to this person and that pays their groceries, the next week it's your turn to get the bit of money. I'm wondering what it means for those poor Afrikaners, who are now living next-door to poor black people. How do they see themselves? Are they embarrassed by themselves because they have let their whiteness down? Because the burden of whiteness must be profound for them. Historically, white was supposed to be privileged and white was supposed to rule the world.

But it was also flexible. After school, where I grew up, you could all go and play on the playground of Doornfontein primary school, except if the *madala* chased you off. But if that happened, then we all got chased off, regardless of what colour you were, because no children were supposed to play on the playground after classes. Playing was not going to school

though. If you were not white and you wanted to go to that school, you couldn't. Sometimes one of the children would turn around and say to you, "hey, fok off jou hotnot" or whatever, and then you would say, oh, okay, now you are white and I'm not. But then tomorrow you would just be playing together again.

HM: Part of the reason why it seems that black people live better with poverty is present in the way that we greet each other. For black people, it's totally acceptable to say, hey, *I'm Hlonipha ubika ukhlu-pheka* (you are reporting on your poverty). People will listen empathetically for hours. You can list all your troubles and how much money you are paying in rent. Whereas, I think in other communities, it is seen as shameful to report on your poverty. When I was a child we went to the house next-door because there was going to be a wedding at my house and we were going to ask them if we could use their tap and their basins - and then a cockroach crawled up the wall. Now there were no cockroaches in my house, so I started screaming to the child of the house: "There's a cockroach crawling up your wall. Kill it! Kill it!" And the adults were sitting around and talking about taps and basins, and I started screaming about the cockroach. When we got home my aunt told the story to my grandmother and my grandmother said: "You don't do that in people's homes. It's their cockroaches, you mustn't point them out. Leave them alone." And that's the first time as a child I got to realise that I was better off than other people, but that it was not my place to point out that I was better off than other people. But it has to do with a much bigger issue: That together with internalising what being black in South Africa means, black people in some ways have also internalised the

idea that being black involves being poor too. And so, in internalising that, you create a social language for talking about poverty that's not about exclusion. You don't exclude the poor and put them out by themselves. But it's about inclusion; when you see somebody who is poor, you actually bring them closer to yourself rather than distancing them and say, ooh, they are poor, therefore they should be out there somewhere.

RM: (L)ast night as we were driving home, during torrential rain, the first thing we said is "Can you imagine? The Flats are all flooded tonight. It must be hell." So this is what struck me, that that experience of poverty as exposure to the elements was the evidence of what you spoke about as the grounds for the greatest distance between you and that other person, the distance that would somehow obstruct your being able to imagine the consciousness of that other person. It's not that I don't think race is a factor, race clearly organises and determines that the vast majority of people - almost everybody who is in that predicament - is not white. That is the historical legacy of the organisation of populations and the distribution of power in this country. But when one says that those racial categories cause or enable capacities, that blackness enables one to deal with poverty in a way that is still generous and capable of caring for others and so forth, then it's a question of causality for me. Is it a matter of, as you say, the cultivation of and internalisation of an anticipation of poverty, which requires people to share resources and so forth? And also, to produce forms of hospitality and caring that make life liveable and also maybe worthy? I don't think that's a question one can ever answer. But what we have just been speaking about

is a concern with what some people call degradation, with the failure of whites in that same predicament. Is there a function or a causal structure of whiteness? Or is that a function of the expectation of privilege, which, when not experienced, leads to selfishness, anti-sociality and defensiveness vis à vis the privilege that was supposed to have been guaranteed in this country for those inhabiting whiteness or Afrikaner identity? Let me conclude the thought here, because it seems to me that is the case: that the expectation of privilege leads people in the moment of this loss to behave in the worst ways with other people. And I'm not sure whether racial solidarities and ethnic solidarities are not broken in the moment that you have the emergence of a very powerful, new black elite. In other words, solidarity in poverty can't be racialised in the same way when there is a black bourgeoisie. How much generosity is shown to the person who comes to the door of a BEE grandee looking for a cup of sugar, I don't know. But I assume that eventually there will not be a lot.

NN: I just want to interject a meaning that I read from the story of the sharing of poverty and escape, and Verwoerd saying let's not give these people any pension because they can take care of themselves. There's a sense in which they take care of themselves. There's a sense in which Verwoerd was doing and saying only what he knew because that is how he thought you handle pensions with your [his own] people: You set in place a structure of governance that supports that sort of thing, distributes pensions and so forth. But when it comes to others, Verwoerd didn't know them, but knew something about how they shared, so he advocated letting them take care of themselves. There is a certain historical logic

there, which I think I have an understanding for. But that understanding then poses another challenge for a so-called democratic society that is now projecting and representing a black interest. The question is: To what extent are we willing to create a political and economical system that is informed by the culture of sharing, even if it's driven by poverty or whatever, so that at a community level, the capacity to share is supported in a structured, political way that would change immediately and officialise the sharing and so on. I think that the black bourgeoisie who don't share, they are operating outside of the structure of sharing that we were talking about. To the extent that they are outside of it; they are working within Verwoerd's system. But what are the possibilities that they can work within another system, informed by the sharing that we see all over in the communities? That is the question.

JD: That, for me, raises another set of questions. A biography of Malema is coming out and the author [Fiona Forde's *An Inconvenient Youth: Julius Malema and the New ANC* was published in August 2011] is using the idea of the cannibal to help explain what Malema is doing. That is how we've come to consider the black bourgeoisie, and it is something that we are going to have to confront. What does that mean? It's beyond not sharing; it's consuming those around you. Then there is something else that historians have begun looking at in the archives. They are trying to establish, if it is at all possible, what the word *ubuntu* meant when it was first recorded by colonial historians. For example, the expression *inkosi yinkosi ngabantu*: a king is a king through the people – is recorded early on. But the terms and

discourses of *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* – a person is a person through the people – do not appear in those same archives. According to people like Jeff Guy, you don't find that until ZK Mathews's dissertation in the early 20th century. In view of a liberal humanistic ethos, while also trying to contribute something to the concept of universalism, people like Mathews took this idea that *inkosi yinkosi ngabantu*, and translated it into a liberal republican idiom, saying *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*. The king or inkosi vanishes and the egalitarian, collectivist people emerges. That is one possible source for where the idea of *ubuntu* as we now understand it, actually comes from. But we've come to understand it as something pre-modern. We say that it's something ancient. We make it define difference when we talk about what it means to be African and human. We don't talk about this historical emergence, but it's quite profound that you can actually trace the idea of *ubuntu* and the ethical responsibility that comes with it. If we can at least historicise it and say it comes from ZK Mathews and it comes from AC Jordan - these are the intellectuals – we can do something political with it.

AK: In fact, you cannot know where the word came from, or how it was used before the whites recorded it. That is the problem with the archive. We only have evidence of what interested the historians or the colonial authorities. It is possible that both senses of the word *ubuntu* were in use, or that one or another was being used in different contexts, but that only this particular meaning of *ubuntu* was granted importance. After all, the early whites were monarchists.

YC: I agree with Antjie. We cannot let ourselves be completely trapped by the self-referentiality of the archive. Otherwise, the archive merely becomes the proof of the success of the colonial project. The question for me is how we can learn to read these documents in a way that recognizes that they are all we have from this early moment, but that that is not all there is. Maybe we should start by asking what factors made the issue of *ubuntu* of such interest that it was actually entered into the archive. The other question is, what other phenomena are registered in the archives under names other than *ubuntu*, but that we might today understand to be evidence of its existence.

RM: Yes. And there are other questions. We don't have to argue that something must be historically specific and socially constructed, in order to say that it has political utility. Nonetheless, if there was a reason why early liberals turned to *ubuntu* as an idiom for the value of collectivity, that in itself deserves attention. Jacob, can you give us some dates? When do you think – or when do the historians think – *ubuntu* acquired this less monarchist meaning?

JD: This will be in the 1930s.

RM: This is the general moment of the emergence of African socialism.

JD: That's it, totally.

RM: Perhaps it is even more interesting to think about a possible inversion in the meaning of *ubuntu*. I think it is marvellous, that there are these germinal

possibilities in other forms of thought and practice that are not recognisable or don't originate from within the democratic order, but that can be mobilised and transformed and made to speak to the new contingencies and exigencies, and a more socialist communitarian kind of ambition. So, a kingly tradition can be said to shelter thought of its alternative. Not that the other (kingly) forms are not also still present as desires, but that there are elements of older traditions that can be made to function in the service of a different political form that is truly revolutionary: there is something within that old tradition that can be made to transform itself in a way that's enabling and liberating, and opens into an entirely different structure of possibilities.

AK: I would like to push the conversation around this interconnectedness. Magma Fuze said "nothing penetrates whites, so you cannot praise them." I found that an extraordinary formulation. Part of me wants to accept that we all share important values, but another part, that has grown up here and lived in this country, feels itself to be in the presence of something that nothing from where I have come, even the sharing, is similar. And there is something in me that feels that what I am experiencing is also not the Levinasian "you" calling forth the "I". Njabulo discusses the fact that the two Afrikaner generals who spoke to Mandela couldn't come up with a strategy of negotiations [in 2007's *Fine Lines from the Box: Further thoughts about our country*, Ndebele refers to a conversation described by journalist Allister Sparks in his 1994 book *Tomorrow is Another Country: The Inside Story of South Africa's Negotiated Revolution*]. Njabulo suggests that it was because they were raised in a culture oriented

around protecting white privilege. I want to push it further. Why don't whites come up with a new strategy about land? Because they cannot conceive of a world that they share with blacks in intimate ways. This notion of seeing oneself intimately connected with others brings about the possibility of a new space. But my fear is that in this attempt to formulate a concept of interconnectedness it will again be whites who are formulating it, but with the vocabulary that they have grown up with. Whites will start explaining *ubuntu* in terms of western philosophy. What is it then that we are talking about? Is it just a general, "Ja, we all care"?

JD: It seems to me that what we should be striving for is solidarity. We are looking for some notion of solidarity that's all-encompassing. And to do that, perhaps what we should be looking at is democracy, not as an end goal, but democracy as a process, a radical democracy that is constantly trying to evolve towards something better. I think this is connected to solidarity. It seems to me that what we have denied about our own history and what we continue to deny about our own history is a very strong tradition, and I'm using the word tradition loosely, in this country of racial intimacy.

NN: I'm fascinated by the notion of racial intimacy. I had lots of time to find out how to express this perspective recently when I was asked to do a short consultancy with Artscape. They have a project called the "Indigenous Arts Project" and were debating to paralysis what this thing is on the board. So they asked me to come in and assist. And as I was looking at the issue it suddenly struck me that the point of divergence was around the notion of indigenous.

One side is essentialist, and it defines what is indigenous as African and every other thing as not indigenous. It gets complicated in the Western Cape because if only Xhosa qualifies for indigenous, there's lots of other stuff that gets left out. And it suddenly occurred to me: Is there anyone among us who is a South African born here, or who has come from somewhere or other, who actually can claim not to have something in him of the other?

It struck me that there will be very few such people. That what we do actually share is a sense of having in each one of us what the other is. But in a sense we have been rejecting the implications of this, because it seems that each of us, to various degrees, wants to hold onto some notion of purity that has not been tainted by the other. But in fact, it's impossible to find such purity. And if we accept that, then what are the implications of that in redesigning the socio-political, economic realities? So I said, maybe what we should be looking for is not indigenous arts, but what constitutes the South African experience when it is articulated in the various media of art. One is looking for something totally different, which involves all of us in the journey, and that outcome does not exclude the ethnic. One does not exclude the other, but there is a constant cross-fertilisation and the bigger pool is being fed by the others. It gives me more possibilities for newness, innovation, creativity and so on, and finding it in places where you never thought ... that's what this expression of racial intimacy is germinating in my mind.

AK: To what extent will this be dominated by the people who dominated the discourse of the past? If you leave the thing to democracy, it's a particular kind that will then be underlined, emphasised

and strengthened. And although Afrikaners could be said to share a culture of sharing, it's a particular kind of sharing: I will do something and you will do something back. I want to say that it's not the sharing we talk about. It's bigger than that. The fact that this country is where it is at this very moment is because there is something bigger than the ordinary notion of ... even sharing.

NN: Racial intimacy is not an end point. You find it through the experience of interacting with others, and then over a period of time, sifting out what doesn't work and holding onto what works and gives results. And then partly also, some of the practical manifestations from that policy are about how you agree in a multi-lingual society. Let's take it at a community level, if we believe or entertain the notion that language carries these attributes, and a particular gaze. I know if that if I try to speak German the world changes ... when I speak Zulu... you keep changing the gaze. The world looks different each time you enter into another language. So if we accept the potential power of this, can we translate it into an agreement that South Africans should at least learn not less than four languages in the schooling system? But you will have the capability to enter at least four living spaces that will make you imagine the world in a different way. It's a policy issue — can we do that? If we say we will, can we spend? And if you're creating communities, can we agree that we have to pay for what we get? So it's crucial that you start a tax base where it never existed, even if it's ten Rand a month or a year. To go back to Verwoerd, who says let's not pay for them, we say we'll pay for this because it supports the intimacy that is there.

But right now, all that stuff is not paid for — or we are not paying for it.

YC: Who at this table can claim to be a hundred percent anything? Racial intimacy: it's not just racial, or ethnic, or cultural. At school you learnt one set of things, and at home or on the pavement you learnt a different knowledge. And you learnt to expect disappointment and at the same time not to be disappointed — because that was the way things were. You learnt that, today a white boy is playing with you, and tomorrow he will go in the gate of that school, and if you dare cross the threshold and greet him in front of his friends, you cannot be surprised if he smacks you in the face. But then tomorrow, you will play again. And you realise that he is humiliated and he doesn't even know why he's humiliated, except that it's something to do with white and black.

The notion of intimacy was always implicit in the immorality act, and we tend to think it — racial intimacy — meant sex. I'll never forget the famous case of the Indian woman nurse and the white young Jewish doctor at Baragwaneth Hospital. The immorality squad was hiding microphones in the bedroom of her apartment, and following them for months and nothing happened. They were perched in the tree outside her apartment. And one day he drove her home ... and somebody at Baragwaneth told on them - but they weren't intimate. The immorality squad saw her go into her bedroom and they saw the young doctor follow her, and, voila! carnal knowledge. Maybe nothing happened, but the idea of racial intimacy was always already carnal. And being coloured, you felt that you were the sign of that. You were the walking sign - you learnt this. In private, you see only family. Then when you go out

We have always been listening and exchanging, whether we like it or not.

into the street, you have to carry yourself in a certain way because you are coloured. That's where the big pressure to be respectable comes from. It's huge. The notion of racial intimacy was deflected in the long, complicated, history of apartheid and, because it was carnalised, it was for many people a thing of shame. I think that's why many people wanted to pass, because the passing was running away from this thing of shame towards something - what? Something that itself was hybrid: whiteness. The idea that whiteness was hybrid was also masked. There's something about mixed racedness that gives the public's secret away all the time. We have always been listening and exchanging, whether we like it or not. Whites too.

I want to touch on mixing, cross-fertilisation and exchange, and the idea of *ubuntu* in all its complexities and rupturings —even the idea of *ubuntu* that so animated Oprah in her very hokey interpretation of it. If we think about this, it is something that is part of an ongoing conversation, even when it's part of a cartoon. People are talking about *ubuntu* from all sides, and *ubuntu* is now not a foreign concept to all kinds of people. I do think that it is a possible point of convergence, because in some ways it is an imagined thing. It is a claim we make on ourselves, like the idea of nation. Or, to bastardise Benedict Anderson's anthem, it's an imagined community of horizontal relations and not only a community structured vertically by ethnicity, by genealogy, by bloodline and narrow notions of affiliation. But actually, it is a possible daring. Another language for it would be democracy in a political structure, and

maybe you can disagree with me. But I'm also listening to the way that we're talking, because I think even when we're talking about the burden that falls on Afrikaners ... and I just want to say that I wasn't only talking about Afrikaners as having a burden ... I think that one of the things that I've learnt is that at some point burden is also responsibility. Implicit in what we're talking about and what we are also trying to find a language for is that we are still happy to negotiate the notions of division: we say this group has this and that group that. At some point there is a slippage between Afrikaners and whiteness, and a slippage between Zulu, Xhosa and blackness. These things are still working their way in, and they are haunting the corridors of what we are trying to say. But we are also talking about the positive things that are born of cross-fertilisation and interpretation. We are in a moment in time when much of what we are talking about as pastness is actually translation.

HM: It's so difficult to explain why you have to let concepts like *ubuntu* live their own life. I'm trying to think of an equivalent. For example, *tsotsitaal*. It is a language in that you can sit down and chat in it for half an hour and have a decent conversation, but there are no dictionaries for this language. If you hear a *tsotsitaal* term and you go on line, you may find that somebody has put together a dictionary - but it's five years old. Nobody is bothering to update it. And the language has changed, so the dictionary is useless. I think the idea of having clear-cut definitions is in itself a western obsession. It is as if you want something to be defined so that you can be comfortable with the idea that you've been invited into that meaning, but the people who use the term don't really care much about whether or not you



Refugees from Zimbabwe given shelter in the Central Methodist Church on Pritchard Street in the city. 22 March 2009.
Photo: David Goldblatt

know *ubuntu* when you see it. When you fall and somebody helps to pick you up and puts your groceries back in the bag, people will say that is *ubuntu*. You have acted in a human way by helping somebody else. Now, how do you then write a dictionary definition of that? I mean, how do you sit down and say *ubuntu* is when you help somebody pick up their groceries if they fall or whatever. I think this obsession with specificity is in itself a problem, because you are constantly asking people to fix themselves and say this is who we are. And then once you have finished writing the dictionary, it has already changed and people have moved on and, like in *tsotsitaal* are constantly adding words. I'm trying to tempt us away from desiring definition. Maybe the thing that we should be desiring, is the doing.

RM: I also think the question changes when one is thinking about the project in terms of the future. And

that's the crisis of South Africa today, to the extent that one can't actually leave it to do its own thing. The problem is that, under quite transformed class and other social circumstances, one can't have any surety that solidarity or *ubuntu* is part of the repertoire of daily, habitual practice, even if it was originally so. Under those circumstances, unfortunately, something that was organically/consciously/culturally known suddenly requires formalisation. And it's a dangerous moment because you can formalise it and kill it. But what one needs to be doing is not so much formalising it or abstracting it, but delineating the possible ways in which it would manifest itself in practice. I think that teaching can be considered in its terms. It's a different question then, the pursuit of definitions, but it becomes a question when one wants to bring about a social transformation where there is a huge risk of producing something monstrous. You can definitely ossify something to the point that it is unusable. And every culture or every society that goes through radical change loses a great deal in that process, of formalizing what it fears will be changed unrecognisably. But it's a risk you have to take.

END

AFRICA IN THE WORLD: RIFFING OFF DAKAR

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‘[T]he colonial library negate[s] the possibility of a plural rationality and history’ Mudimbe 1988; 208

‘We own the library!’

Dakar 2013

Drawing upon the conversations emerging from CODESRIA’s Africa N’Ko: Africa in the World: Debating the Colonial Library conference held in Dakar in January, Kelly Gillespie reports on how cultural production, and in particular art, seemed to hold possibilities for subverting and re-imagining the colonial archive.

Valentin Mudimbe posed the problem of the ‘colonial library’ over twenty years ago in his 1988 treatise *The Invention of Africa*. Discourse about Africa, he argued, was mired in the colonial condition, could not overcome ‘the imperial power of Same’ (1988; 20) that consistently rendered African society, materials, thought, subject to domination by a resilient colonial register. The collection of terms and categories, styles and framings inherited from the European missionaries, explorers and ethnologists that emerged with the colonial project still formed, Mudimbe wrote, the central library for our description and measure of Africa. *The Invention of Africa* asked, in particular, for ways of reinventing the grand work of Sameness and Difference that plagued the colonial knowledge complex. Sameness was the incorporation of Africa under the sign of a



Nomusa Makhubu, *Omama Bencelisa (Mothers breastfeeding)*, 2007. Photo: Erdmann Contemporary

European-defined humanity. Difference was the externalisation of Africa as ‘not-Europe’, a kind of pseudo-difference that always collapsed into Eurocentrism. Both had the same function: to write Africa in terms of Europe, to disallow any properly Afrocentric tradition – modes of writing and thinking about Africa that could escape European categories and ways of knowing the world. Under the colonial condition, Sameness and Difference were bedfellows in the project of rule, constructing Africa’s difference from Europe – its lineages and histories, its languages, its modes of organisation and thought – not as a claim on the plurality

The aspirations of the conference were bold. What do we have to say about the state of African knowledge, of knowledge about Africa?

of global knowledge, but as signs in the repertoire of European knowledge. If we cannot refuse their incursion into contemporary modes of thinking and writing the continent, wrote Mudimbe, we reiterate colonial knowledge.

Consolidating a long tradition of anti-colonial critique that sought to decenter colonialist accounts of Africa and other parts of the colonised world, Mudimbe’s account of the persistent, live weight of the library insisted that we had made little headway in finding new ways of writing Africa. Drawing heavily on Foucault and Levi-Strauss, Mudimbe asked for us to consider how we could be ‘epistemologically inventive’¹ in devising ways for Africa to escape out from under the discursive conditions of colonial knowledge, to find new ‘modes of self-writing’² appropriate to Afrocentric knowledge.

In January 2013 a conference was held in Dakar to revisit the question of the ‘colonial library’ in Africa. It was titled *Africa N’Ko: Africa in the World: Debating the Colonial Library*.³ Hosted by CODESRIA and Point Sud, the event brought together a large group of scholars from the continent and its diaspora to consider the current state of the colonial library and to gauge the ‘epistemological inventiveness’ that marks contemporary scholarship on Africa. The event took place over four days, with twenty-one sessions, including roundtables and panels with many of Africa’s finest scholars, and a key-note address by V.Y. Mudimbe.

The aspirations of the conference were bold. What do we have to say about the state of African

knowledge, of knowledge about Africa? What has become of the weight of colonial category? What are our experiments in modes of writing the continent? Where are the places that are inventing new ways of shaping African knowledge? There are many older histories of the critique of imperial regimes of knowledge. Indeed, throughout the conference one could hear an incantation of ancestors: Senghor, Césaire, Glissant, Fanon, Du Bois, Pixley ka Isaka Seme, Said, many people of great integrity and mind who have turned this idea around and around. Collectively, they ask how we can escape the forms of knowing and writing that have accompanied the condition of rule, of domination, and of its attendant exclusions. The task of the conference was to diagnose a contemporary relation to the library, to test the innovations in knowledge that are accompanying the current moment of the continent.

A conference agenda concerned with epistemological invention is always tricky. Scholarly practice is bent on working along the logic of historical association. We hear something that reminds us of other things, but those things are older, integrated ideas, already layered in the map of concepts and theories we carry around with us. Our canonical predilections. It is easy to too-quickly bury a new idea in the weight of history, to close down a possibility with a barrage of hostile questions masked as rigour. The corridors of universities can be intellectually boring, dull to the possibilities for thought presenting themselves all the time in an innovative world. Many of the most important ideas, certainly from Africa, have been created not by individual scholars, but by small groups of intellectuals in intense, ongoing, hot conversation, often between the university, the living room, the street, the bedroom. At the

very least with an enormous amount of solidarity, of friendship, of trust, where authorship becomes less significant than the ideas themselves. A place where the urgency of the context of intellectual production prevents detours from the very core questions. Where the generation of the right question is paramount. A place where the concern with the right questions prevents professionalisation: prevents the grotesque way in which form so often takes precedence over content in the labour of the academy.

Despite our scholarly forms and pretensions, there was the thread of a good conversation woven throughout the conference. The conversation was anchored in a central tension: there was a deep ambivalence in the conversation about how to treat the African colonial library. Two quite distinct trajectories emerged. One the one hand, speakers used the idea of the library to refer to Africa's injuries, to the detrimental way in which colonial tropes have continued to plague the continent, to entrench it in permanent state of epistemological inequity to the north/west. This claim often accompanied a call to retrieve a fundamentally African knowledge, one based on the grammar of African society and form. On the other hand, speakers were tired of the trope of colonial injury and were seeking out ways to move into a different kind of relationship with the library, a relationship that could help to write the continent's potential rather than its damage, its worldliness rather than its autochthony. This latter was the more interesting conversation, although I imagine that it was precisely the presence of the ambivalence that allowed for this proposition to emerge so strongly. Seeing our moment as a time to read ourselves out of and into the library in unexpected and extraordinary ways, speakers argued that we

must move beyond the method of working 'against the grain' or 'along the grain', beyond counterreading and misreading, and look rather to the ways in which the library stands as a sign of an already cosmopolitan continent, a continent that has for centuries been in and of the world.

In this light, we heard 'We own the library! We were always in it, it was always co-engendered, so let us own it, see it as ours'. We heard 'We are also, even if in/of Africa, in the World. We are creoles!' We heard 'Who cares about the colonial library?' 'We are beyond the library!' Throughout, there was an insistence that, even as we take the signs of Africa seriously, we must not be trapped by a parochial Africanness. Our place is in the world, and the library can be drawn on in such a way that reads this African cosmopolitanism as a thick archival seam for our experimental use. Central to this proposition was a recognition that, despite an ongoing condition of African structural marginalisation, we must proceed as if the world is ours, as if we have the right to appropriate the library because it has always belonged, even if unrecognized, to Africans.

This *as if* is very important. If not straightforwardly idealistic, then it is at least cheekily dialectical, claiming the space to write into history as if that writing produced new grounds for the continent. It lays claim to an optimistic method that draws on a sanguine reading of Africa's relationship to knowledge as a way to write Africa into a new relationship with the world. It argues, that if we are to wait until Africa is on equal footing politically and economically to the rest of the world to be able to speak, for the perfect material conditions for thought, we will simply rehearse the prose of inequality, of harm, of victimisation over and over again. We will get stuck

The most provocative suggestion that emerged from the conference about how to go about this audacious work of writing African cosmopolitanism, was to take inspiration from contemporary African artists.

in the prose of injury. This is, I think, where Dakar took issue with Spivak. The claim was 'let us speak in spite of it all', as if our experiments might trick a hostile history into a new fate. Or at least provide some trace for a future yet to come.

The most provocative suggestion that emerged from the conference about how to go about this audacious work of writing African cosmopolitanism, was to take inspiration from contemporary African artists. In many of the most interesting presentations of the conference, the African artist was posed as harbinger of this method. Artists, particularly young Africans who have contact with other parts of the world, are using the library for their own purposes, playing with its possibilities, deploying it as a terrain upon which new imaginations can take flight, unencumbered by its tragedy. Or at least with a degree of farce that renders the injury toothless. A colonial photograph of an African woman as the basis for contemporary print, or music video, or hairstyle. An early colonial film of Africans dancing as the seed for a contemporary choreography. The African folk song as a starting point for a protest poem. Here, it was argued, lies the capacity to develop a powerful imagination about how to move from what was in one session called the African fragment - the word, the image, the plant, the scene, the movement - as an important beginning point for finding new ways of writing the continent. For finding a provocative new style that escapes the logic of rule that has

accompanied the library even as it uses the library as resource.

Anti-colonial and postcolonial intellectuals have often experimented with art as a mode of self-writing. Césaire himself developed *Discourse on Colonialism* as a surrealist poem. Many of Africa's finest scholars are also novelists or film-makers. This claim on art has a history, with art forms being long understood as creating different audiences, different registers, enabling different orders of expression. The claim on art that speakers in Dakar were exploring was about method and attitude. Art practice works by means of juxtaposition, of play, loosening the work of the deictic to expand the scene of connotation. It appealed to African scholars because of its flexibility, its audacity, its freedom to experiment, the speed of its production, and the risks it can take. Whereas scholarship can move like molasses, can be overly-obliged to carefully-wrought histories of thought, to canons and classical critique, art practice is attractive because its immanence to the world seems better able to capture the play, the parodies, the commentaries of this Africa-in-the-World.

There has also been a history of the reach towards artists by scholars, particularly towards novelists, in the discovery of new categories and terms of writing the continent. Geertz's interpretive anthropology recognised this, Archie Mafeje insisted upon it. A recent work by Andrew Apter makes the same move.⁴ It is as if, somewhere between the methods of classical scholarship and those of art there lies a zone of critical invention that can assist in the retelling of post-colonial society. The question posed to us is how to proceed with finding this zone, and mining its creativities for the kind of knowledge-production that can truly serve the continent's future.

NOTES

1. Mudimbe, V.Y. 1998. *The Invention of Africa*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, p.16.
2. Mbembe, A. 2002. 'African Modes of Self-Writing' *Public Culture*, 14: 239-273.
3. Part summary, part improvisation, this piece is entirely indebted to those who presented their work and engaged in conversation at the event, but particularly to Mamadou Diouf, Achille Mbembe, Salah Hassan, Françoise Vergès, Donna Jones, Jane Gordon, Salim Abdelmajid and Elsa Dorlin. <http://www.codesria.org/spip.php?article1730>
4. Apter, A. 2007. *Beyond Words: Discourse and Critical Agency in Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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TABLE RONDE LA BIBLIOTHÈQUE À VENIR

Pour respecter la demande de s'exprimer en dix minutes, j'ai concentré mon propos en quelques pages afin d'éviter d'avoir à vous renvoyer à un texte plus long. Ce sont donc des remarques et des questions nécessairement fragmentaires et incomplètes, de nature éphémère et temporaire. Écrites avant nos débats, elles s'inscrivent dans une réflexion collective en action et en devenir. Cette dimension d'incomplétude et de fragmentation n'est pas sans lien avec le thème de notre table ronde, *la bibliothèque à venir*, par principe toujours incomplète et fragmentaire. Le titre de la table ronde nous invite d'une part à une critique de la bibliothèque occidentale d'autre part à laisser notre imagination filer pour rêver, inventer la bibliothèque à venir.

Tout d'abord, la notion de *Palimpseste*. Elle désigne un parchemin qu'on a gratté dans l'intention d'en effacer le texte pour en écrire un nouveau. Le premier texte reste cependant souvent visible, par transparence, sous le second. Par métaphore, le palimpseste représente donc la relation hypertextuelle : on peut trouver dans tout texte littéraire la trace d'un autre texte littéraire plus ancien.

Un texte est donc toujours le produit de plusieurs textes. Un processus de superposition, sédimentation, déplacement et réémergence est toujours à l'œuvre dans l'écriture. Dans son essai de 1845 *Le palimpseste*, Thomas De Quincey décrit la structure du palimpseste comme un phénomène où

des textes sont étroitement liés, infiltrés les uns dans les autres. La nature du palimpseste est double: elle préserve la netteté des textes individuels, tout en exposant la contamination de l'un par l'autre. Par conséquent, même si le processus de stratification qui crée un palimpseste est né du besoin d'effacer et de détruire des textes précédents, la réémergence de ces textes détruits met à jour une hétérogénéité. Cette vision multiforme et diversifiée projetée par le palimpseste, en dépit d'être le produit d'une tentative de destruction et d'effacement, exige une révision des systèmes conceptuels basés sur les notions de fixité, de linéarité, de centre et de hiérarchie.

En archéologie, on parle de «palimpsestes cumulatifs» (par exemple: la Mosquée de Cordoue, les temples d'Angkor Wat, la Cité État de Kilwa...). Un palimpseste cumulatif est celui dans lequel les épisodes successifs de dépôt ou des couches d'activité restent superposées l'une sur l'autre sans perte de données, mais elles sont si retravaillées et mélangées qu'il est difficile ou impossible de les séparer en leurs électeurs d'origine. En d'autres termes, au lieu de fournir un récit d'origine ou de l'évolution, ces palimpsestes retracent les inscriptions et radiations de différentes cultures, qui à son tour entrent en concurrence et en conflit les unes avec les autres. Cette image et ce processus de traces cumulatives, d'effacement et de réécriture, m'ont été particulièrement utiles pour imaginer la bibliothèque à venir. Quelle architecture imaginer pour cette bibliothèque à venir?

C'est une question passionnante. En effet, il me semble impossible d'imaginer cette bibliothèque sans imaginer son architecture. Sa spatialisation est aussi importante que son contenu. L'architecture reflète la manière dont le savoir est conçu.¹

Lors d'un colloque sur «Architectures et bibliothèques» (Centre Pompidou, 2000), les intervenants se sont accordés sur le fait que la bibliothèque a cessé d'être un sanctuaire, que son image s'est démystifiée.² Mais pour tous la bibliothèque doit demeurer «un lieu rare, où se conserve non pas l'information, mais la pensée. C'est le lieu de la *mémoire de la pensée antérieure, à partir de laquelle on peut construire sa propre pensée*». «La bibliothèque,» déclarait l'architecte Pierre Riboulet, «est un lieu que l'on doit mériter» (souligné par moi). Elle doit jouer un «*rôle fédérateur, s'ouvrir à tous les publics, être ludique...*» L'architecture en *temple du savoir* qui par principe doit rendre le savoir accessible à tous, utilisant toutes les nouvelles technologies du bâtiment et du savoir mais qui a pour mission de *civiliser* ses usagers, de les transformer en *méritants* (que fait-on des « non-méritants » ?) est aujourd'hui à l'honneur. Est-ce cette architecture qui pourrait concrètement traduire les principes associés à la bibliothèque à venir dont l'objectif est de *reconstruire pour l'avenir, ce qui est commun aux différentes figures de la modernité* ? J'en doute, car in fine qui ne serait pas d'accord avec cette proposition d'ouverture ? Mais l'architecture d'une bibliothèque qui fasse place à toutes les modernités, à tous les vernaculaires n'est-elle pas plus difficile à concevoir? Dans les périodes de guerre et de conflit, que choisir de préserver? Quelle place sera faite aux langues vernaculaires? Le savoir va-t-il se dire dans les langues officielles de la «communauté internationale», celles de l'ONU? Quelle place faire au crime, au massacre, au génocide? Faut-il présenter les textes écrits autour de ces thèmes comme des textes d'éducation au bien? Opérer une division entre le bien et le mal, le mal étant renvoyé à un

monde irrationnel, de l'ordre de l'inhumain ou faut-il réfléchir à la place de la condition inhumaine? Quelles phrases sont inscrites sur son fronton? Quelles sont les figures qu'elle met en avant? La bibliothèque est-elle mobile? Ou bien installée dans la capitale du pays? Reliée à une université? Doit-elle être construite sous la forme d'un monument?

Le rêve d'une «bibliothèque idéale», exercé régulièrement suggéré dans les médias occidentaux, du style «*Les 100 livres qui comptent*» ou «*Les livres (ou LE livre) que vous emporterez sur une île déserte*» témoignent du désir de concentrer en quelques ouvrages un savoir nécessaire et suffisant pour vivre. La religion du livre unique, suffisant pour répondre à toutes les questions qui se poseraient à l'individu, est un autre signe de ce désir de pouvoir s'en tenir à une parole unique, révélatrice et consolante. La bibliothèque à venir devra, il me semble, éviter ces écueils et rendre *visible et lisible* la fragilité du savoir, sa construction palimpseste, son caractère accumulatif et novateur, en rupture. Dans cette bibliothèque, plusieurs sens seraient convoqués, la vision n'étant pas l'unique sens dont nous avons besoin pour lire; l'oreille, le toucher, l'odorat sont aussi présents. Le chant est aussi un texte à entendre, comme le poème. La bibliothèque est aussi là pour rendre concret sa place dans le monde, une place parmi d'autres, qui doit être exposée à l'altérité, une altérité qui me rende «étrangère» à des sons, des paroles. Écouter la scansion d'un poème, écouter un chant dans une langue que je ne connais pas et qui n'est pas traduite participe à la connaissance. Le monde n'est pas entièrement saisissable, il ne m'est pas automatiquement accessible.

Revenons à la question posée dans le programme pour penser les principaux axes architecturaux de la

bibliothèque à venir: **La critique de la modernité occidentale suffit-elle? La force de cette dernière ne dérive-t-elle pas de son propre pouvoir d'autocritique?**

La critique de la modernité occidentale a donné lieu à une littérature impressionnante qui a ouvert de nombreux champs d'études. Je ne reviendrai pas sur cette littérature. Elle est importante et elle va continuer à produire du savoir. Par contre, je voudrais effectivement interroger un mouvement qui se nourrit de lui-même et n'entraîne pas un déplacement radical de la cartographie du monde.

- L'Occident a établi ses comptoirs, ses plantations et ses missionnaires dans le monde entier; il est intervenu directement ou indirectement dans la vie des populations non-européennes; il a bouleversé de fond en comble des modes d'existence. Son but : prolonger et protéger la vie humaine (de ceux qui méritent d'habiter son territoire) et donc accroître continuellement l'accès à ce qui permet cette protection. Cette colonisation du monde a été inévitablement accompagnée de violence contre tout ce qui se posait comme frein à cette expansion. L'économie prédatrice et la mission civilisatrice sont allés de pair. Dans cette économie, l'intérêt ce sont les richesses des pays, pas leurs habitants. L'Afrique, c'est donc l'Afrique sans les Africains. Les peuples sont de trop.
- Cet Occident a construit plusieurs bibliothèques sur ces Autres qui l'ont à la fois fasciné et effrayé. La «bibliothèque de la race», celle qui contiendrait tous les ouvrages sur la *racialization* de groupes et d'individus y occupe une large place. Qu'en ferons-nous? Devons-nous imaginer une «bibliothèque des horreurs» où entreposer les

ouvrages misogynes, racistes, homophobes, ou qui professent une haine des «monstres», des personnes handicapées, des fous, des sorcières ?

- Une longue tradition critique existe au cœur de l'Occident qui interroge les prémisses et les conséquences de cette pulsion à coloniser le vivant, dont l'avidité s'est montrée sans limites. L'Occident s'est construit contre ceux de ses habitants qui refusaient sa logique : paysans, sans terre, sans voix, millénaristes, révolutionnaires, poètes, artistes... Cet Occident s'est inventé le long d'un axe Allemagne/France/Angleterre excluant son « est », son « sud » et son « nord » comme les voix de ses classes dangereuses. Ces voix comme celle des intellectuels Russes, Juifs d'Europe centrale, ou Grecs contribuent à une bibliothèque à venir.
- La critique qui consiste à interpeller l'Occident dans un face à face interroge-t-elle le narcissisme dont il se nourrit? En participant à cette critique, en l'initiant, en la renouvelant, l'Occident ne continue-t-il pas d'occuper une place centrale dans le dispositif de la pensée? Il ne refuse pas de s'asseoir à la place de l'accusé car celle-ci lui assure une grande visibilité (Au tribunal, l'accusé est en effet souvent la vedette).
- La critique est admise si elle se déroule dans un périmètre bien défini: celui du discours abstrait des droits qui implique que le « mal » peut-être vaincu par le triomphe du « bien », mal et bien étant des catégories universelles. L'Occident dans sa marche inéluctable vers le progrès peut s'autoriser à paraître devant le tribunal de l'Histoire tant que ce dernier met en scène la dramaturgie des droits de l'Homme. La culpabilité qui se dit sur cette scène s'efface dans le temps

même de sa mise en scène. Elle appartient à un passé, ce monde encore dans l'obscurité qui n'a pas encore reçu les dernières lumières. Le récit est entièrement clos, on en connaît la fin. Le discours des droits de l'Homme joue un rôle central dans cette dramaturgie ; Il « humanise » la condition inhumaine qui n'est alors plus le produit de choix économiques et politiques mais d'esprits égarés et fanatiques.

- De quoi l'Occident « est-il le nom »? Sans doute celui d'un monde qui refuse non seulement d'écouter, de lire et de converser avec des « Autres » qu'il a constitué comme radicalement différents mais qui reste autiste à sa propre subjectivité, à sa propre altérité (le peuple, les poètes, les révolutionnaires). Un monde qui ne veut pas penser la *condition humaine* et qui lui préfère l'*humanisme*. Un monde qui porte l'illusion très loin l'idée d'une maîtrise totale du vivant, à l'œuvre depuis des siècles et a entraîné des crimes, des destructions, et des bouleversements écologiques.
- Si nous regardons l'Occident comme une des provinces du monde, qu'il faut traiter ainsi en refusant par exemple d'entrer dans la logique d'opposition frontale qu'il recherche, sa modernité a une place dans la bibliothèque à venir comme l'expression d'une idéologie qui place au centre du monde l'individu prométhéen, l'homme d'acier, l'ingénieur des âmes, le rebelle incompris, toutes ces figures du monde occidental. Le succès d'Ayn Rand, figure centrale de cette idéologie, l'icône des dirigeants des grandes institutions mondiales et dont les ouvrages sont traduits dans toutes les langues, contaminant le discours économique, n'est pas sans

conséquence. Sa pensée : les droits de l'individu sont inaliénables. Ils ne sauraient être sacrifiés aux intérêts de quelque collectif que ce soit: nation, État, société... L'homme, écrivait Ayn Rand, « *doit vivre pour lui même, sans se sacrifier pour autrui, ni sacrifier autrui à ses propres fins. Il doit travailler pour son intérêt personnel avec la poursuite de son propre bonheur comme principe moral le plus élevé de sa vie.* » Elle défend le capitalisme et une société du laisser-faire qui permet à chacun de prospérer. Dans une telle société, toutes les relations sont volontaires. « *Les hommes sont libres de coopérer ou non, d'acheter ou non. son propre bonheur comme principe moral le plus élevé de sa vie* ». Cette pensée trace une frontière entre les forts et les faibles et imagine la condition humaine comme une lutte à mort contre tout ce qui est perçu comme obstacle à une force qui se veut force de vie mais est en fait, force de destruction. L'Occident qui propage cette pensée (qui a d'ailleurs du succès dans les Suds³) ne peut s'imaginer faible et interdépendant. La bibliothèque de cette pensée rassemble les ouvrages qui mettent en scène le pouvoir infini de l'être humain sur son environnement, sa capacité à maîtriser sentiments et passions, à surmonter les obstacles par la seule force de sa raison et de sa volonté.

- N'idéalisons cependant pas les « Suds ». Soyons prudents, ne cherchons pas à reconstruire un espace idéal. La réorganisation actuelle des pôles de pouvoir économiques semble affaiblir la position de l'Occident. Il est tentant de s'en réjouir de cela mais les capitalismes de la périphérie ne sont pas plus tendres avec leurs peuples que les pays occidentaux. Dans cette réorganisation du

marché, l'Afrique reste centrale, elle est utile pour le système mondial car elle est une source de richesses naturelles fabuleuses à piller.

- Les études sur les circulations d'idées et de textes entre les penseurs des « suds » tracent une cartographie plus complexe des réseaux intellectuels. Elles ont montré que l'hégémonie européenne dissimule un monde riche de débats et de conversations. Il est important de poursuivre ce travail et de montrer aussi toutes les circulations qui ont échappé à l'ordre hiérarchique.
- Je pense que la critique de toute vision hégémonique qui pourrait servir de fondation à l'architecture de la bibliothèque à venir. Non pas la seule critique riche, complexe, utile de la modernité occidentale, mais une vision de la *condition humaine*, de manières d'*habiter le monde* qui rendent visibles et lisibles nos vies et nos paroles palimpsestes.

En s'appuyant sur cette remarque, nous pouvons interroger les frontières disciplinaires et s'attacher à organiser notre bibliothèque autour des sujets qui rassemblent les êtres humains, ces sujets auxquels « ils » cherchent depuis toujours à apporter des réponses : les mystères de la naissance, la mort, la maladie, la vieillesse, la mélancolie, la joie, l'espoir, l'amour, la haine, la relation à la Nature, aux animaux et aux plantes, la richesse, la misère, le besoin des autres. Ce ne seraient alors pas les disciplines des « humanités » telles qu'elles ont été inventées par l'Occident qui guideraient l'organisation de cette bibliothèque. Il s'agirait en partant des mythes, des savoirs vernaculaires, des textes politiques, religieux et philosophiques, des chants, des paroles, des poèmes, des romans, de toutes ces expressions

dans lesquelles les êtres humains ont fouillé leurs âmes, rêves, et passions, il s'agirait d'imaginer une organisation qui accorde à l'infiniment petit, l'infiniment divers, l'infiniment complexe et au commun, une place égale.⁴

Étudier la place de la mort dans une pensée sur la condition humaine qui intègre son aspect absurde ouvre des perspectives. L'effacement des morts, leur disparition dans les images de la guerre, les meurtres par drones, les bombardements « chirurgicaux », les disparitions, la privation de paroles participent à un effacement de la réalité de la répression et de la guerre. Le soldat qui revient de la guerre est célébré et le récit de sa guerre marginalisé. Les morts qu'il a laissés derrière lui doivent être ignorés. Ce que des peuples savaient, que le guerrier doit se purifier des morts qu'il a laissés avant de revenir dans la communauté, a été oublié. Ce que ces gestes révèlent, c'est une éthique, celle de reconnaître une culpabilité envers ceux que nous avons tués. La guerre « juste » jette un voile sur cette culpabilité éthique dont l'absence nous éloigne du respect envers le vivant.

Pourquoi partir de la condition humaine, de son côté absurde, de sa fragilité? Pour ouvrir la bibliothèque à des pensées du vivant qui n'ont pas été encore entièrement contaminées par l'idéologie de l'individu tout puissant. À cause de sa place et son rôle dans l'histoire globale, l'Afrique a été à la fois point de référence et cible d'agression.⁵ Terrain d'une économie prédatrice, elle a été confrontée à une folie meurtrière. Ses habitants ont fait l'expérience de la mort et de la terreur pour servir une géopolitique de l'inégalité, ils ont été au centre de la première organisation à l'échelle mondiale d'une main d'œuvre

racialisée. Cette expérience a produit un savoir, que partagent à divers titre les peuples autochtones des Amériques, des Caraïbes et de l'Asie mais aussi avec les classes dangereuses de l'Europe. C'est un savoir qui ne fait pas de place à « *l'illusion de croire que ceux qui dominent soient jamais satisfaits de ce qu'ils possèdent, que leur supériorité offre une garantie de sagesse, car l'avidité des grands est sans limites et ne trouve un terme que dans la résistance de l'autre* ». C'est aussi un savoir qui rejette un optimisme verbeux et creux, celui du progrès infini qui ne connaîtrait aucune limite. Cette rencontre avec l'absurde (humain/non-humain), avec la fragilité de la condition humaine mais aussi avec la conviction qu'il existe une responsabilité mutuelle dessine une architecture du savoir qui fait place à *l'inattendu*, à la rupture, à l'accident sans lesquels il n'y aurait pas d'histoire. C'est un savoir des palimpsestes, des traces et des mémoires, qui reconnaît l'existence de l'oubli et de l'effacement sachant qu'ils agissent dans la conscience. Il porte nécessairement en lui, dans l'hétérogénéité même qui préside à son élaboration, la marque des langues, des rêves, des imaginaires qui ont présidé à sa naissance; versés en inconscience, souterrains, cryptiques.

Ensuite, c'est une bibliothèque qui doit faire place à ces « autres » qui ne sont pas des êtres humains qui seraient « étrangers » mais ces autres avec lesquels l'Occident nous a appris à avoir une relation utilitariste, les animaux, les plantes, les fleuves, la terre, la « Nature ». La « Nature » d'une part dans sa totale indifférence à la condition humaine, avec sa vie à elle, mais qui est cependant un élément central du discours politique, culturel et social et la Nature comme acteur de l'histoire. L'histoire environnementale est une histoire du pouvoir politique,

de fleuves détournés, de montagnes déplacées, de forêts détruites, de déplacements massifs de plantes et d'animaux, de bouleversements profonds pour inscrire sur le sol la marque de la volonté prométhéenne. L'idéal de la nature « sauvage » et « vierge » est une illusion, une création du culte de la virginité que l'ingénieur peut alors fertiliser. Le monde « civilisé » qui a créé les « parcs naturels », qui protège une nature « menacée par les peuples », est celui qui coupe l'accès à l'eau, justifie la destruction des forêts, pollue les rivières. Ici encore, les peuples ont d'autres savoirs qui témoignent d'autres manières d'habiter le monde. Ne soyons cependant pas naïvement idéalistes: il faut compter avec le désir d'être intégré dans une économie qui promet la richesse, la *notabilité*.

L'architecture à venir est aussi celle de nouvelles formes d'indexation. Gardons-nous les mêmes disciplines: anthropologie, philosophie, économie, sciences de la vie, sciences de la nature, business, géographie, culture, etc., ou faisons-nous l'effort d'imaginer un index qui rende visible les ancrages, les croisements, les circulations? Nous avons tous besoin d'être guidés dans nos recherches mais quel guide choisissons-nous?

Cette approche indique une architecture interne autour d'un itinéraire guidé par la sérendipité, une géographie de la conscience qui est celle d'une errance sans frontières, où la curiosité oriente les pas. Des espaces où le bruit et le rire sont permis comme les espaces dédiés au silence, la méditation, le rêve. Les « sciences de la vie et de la nature » ne sont pas exclues de la pensée sur la condition humaine ni les arts. La bibliothèque à venir doit nous offrir les ressources intellectuelles et existentielles qui vont nous permettre de confronter les nouvelles formes de colonisation.

NOTES

1. À propos de l'architecture, il n'est pas inutile de savoir que : le continent africain compte officiellement 55000 architectes. À elle seule, l'Égypte représente presque la moitié du contingent, autant qu'un pays comme la France. Loin derrière, l'Afrique du Sud annonce près de 5000 architectes en activité, suivie par le Nigeria (4500), devant le Maroc (2000) et la Tunisie (1400), tandis que l'Algérie, malgré le boom de la construction, n'en compte que 900. Selon l'Union internationale des architectes (UIA), environ 70 % des honoraires d'architectes perçus dans le monde proviennent de projets africains. Or seulement 10 % de ces revenus iraient dans les mains d'architectes du continent. Source : Jeune Afrique.
2. <http://bbf.enssib.fr/consulter/bbf-2000-03-0107-001>
3. En République Populaire de Chine, ses ouvrages sont traduits depuis 1993. Si son style est critiqué, sa pensée est vue de manière favorable par les journaux officiels. http://steelturman.typepad.com/thesteeldeal/2005/10/ayn_rand_in_chi.html. Voir aussi le site officiel de l'Institut Ayn Rand, <http://capitalism.aynrand.org/capitalism-works-chinese-edition/>
4. Je pense ici au magnifique film de Patricio Guzman Nostalgie de la lumière, 2010.
5. C'est une photo de l'artiste angolais Kiluanji Kia Henda qui m'a inspiré ces mots. Sur cette photo d'un restaurant populaire prise dans le sud de l'Angola, un slogan est peint : « África sempre era um ponto de referência e uns permanente designados de agressão ».
6. Claude LEFORT, Écrire à l'épreuve du politique, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1992, p. 198. La citation est de Machiavel, in Œuvres complètes. Paris, Gallimard, La Pléiade, 1978, V, 1.

REFUGEE CAMPS FOR DEVOURERS OF BOOKS

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INTRODUCTION TO THE FRENCH TEXT

Between the 1st and the 8th of May 2013, a delegation of 22 Canadian writers and poets, accompanied by as many editors and book industry representatives travelled to Haiti as part of a literary event organized by the independent publishing house Mémoire d'Encrier¹. Founded in Montreal ten years ago by Haitian born poet Rodney Saint-Eloi with the mission of “gathering the continents” by “thinking about the Other differently,” Mémoire d'Encrier soon distinguished itself by publishing and translating the works of authors who have tended to be ignored by the mainstream Canadian book industry or who were left out of the Canadian literary canon. First Nations writers, African, Arab and Caribbean-born writers, many of whom had been established for decades in Canada and in Quebec in particular, found a home in Mémoire d'Encrier, which has become one of the most important publishers of First Nations, transnational or “migrant” literature in Canada and of Haitian literature in and out of Haiti. This was accomplished by refusing to limit the writings of these authors to ethnic and community channels and by actively working with the mainstream industry and Canadian writers in order to open up the market for others ways of reading the world.

In order to mark its 10th anniversary, the publishing house decided to reverse the migratory flow of writers and intellectuals by inviting Canadian writers and representatives of the book industry for a week of literary encounters in Haiti. Montreal has



Book fair at FOKAL Centre, where most of the events took place.
Photo: Sean Mills

been a hub for some of Haiti's best known writers, poets, artists and scholars for decades, many of whom had been forcibly exiled by the Duvalier dictatorship. Mémoire d'Encrier's *Quebec Encounters in Haiti* was designed as a literary homecoming for its Haitian authors accompanied by as many Quebecois and Canadian writers. Authors were welcomed into Haiti's schools, universities and cultural centers, both in the capital, Port-au-Prince, and in the provinces, for theater evenings, poetry readings, collaborative writing workshops, conversations and roundtables². It was an intense celebration of literature, knowledge and cross-cultural meeting of minds and passions.

I was part of the delegation as an author and an anthropologist. The *Association Nationale des Éditeurs de Livres* (National Association of Book Publishers) in Quebec requested that I also report on my experiences as a participant in the event.

Given the short time period, it was tempting to give in to the intense emotion of those eight days in

Haiti and draw a naive painting like those that fill the streets of Port-au-Prince. If I had given in to my impulses, I would've described the sea that kisses the mountains, the vivid colours of the urban madness, the promiscuity that characterizes overcrowded cities, the almost surreal beauty of the provinces. To balance the sweet with the sour, I would've inevitably reminded the reader of the rampant poverty and slums crawling up the mountainsides. That is precisely why one has to take some time away to tap into something other than the five senses or the bank of easy *clichés* that we all carry within our imaginary.

Rather, in the following texts, two that are part of a series of three that were originally published in French³, I opted to describe the places where Haitians read and write. I called them refugee camps for devourers of books: schools, universities, Martissant public garden, the library and amphitheater of the Knowledge and Freedom Foundation (FOKAL) in Port-au-Prince where most of our activities took place, the *Passagers des vents* (Passengers of the wind) writers' residence, nestled among the trees a few feet from Port Salut Beach, in the southern province and the terrace of the Georges Anglade Pen-Haiti writers' residence, perched on one of Thomassin Common's mountain cliffs, overlooking the capital. If I were to summarize in one sentence what it took me three texts to write, I would simply say this: Haiti lacks many things, the agencies of global governance delight in reminding us. It lacks of everything except of places for reading and writing.

We arrived in Port-au-Prince twenty-two authors and as many editors and publishers, many of us having traveled on parallel paths. Even though we lived in the same country, Canada, our meeting would have been unlikely if not impossible were it not for

the love of literature. It would have been even less likely in Haiti were it not for poet Rodney Saint-Eloi who was returning to Haiti after more than a decade and had decided to mark his return by inviting all of us to accompany him. He had the courage to dream that literature would gather the continents. In prolific writer, poet and painter Frankétienne's words, Saint-Éloi "had the audacity of his cause", and by doing so, had broken the melancholic beat of the return home and rewritten the narrative of exile.

As for me, I had the honour of giving a lecture on Edward Said at the Faculty of Ethnology of the State University of Haiti. I had titled it *Crossing the postcolony*, referring to the experience of exile that too many Palestinians and Haitians had known. I reflected on the crossing as an open path to the future, in a way, looking to rehabilitate the condition of exile as the only one that allows true freedom. In Said's words, poets, writers, thinkers are in a constant state of exile. Not only are they out of place, I would say that they are also out of time, either lagging behind the immediate world they live in or skipping a beat before it. It is within that gap that a space of freedom opens up if one were brave enough to inhabit it. The undergraduate students and graduate students who attended the lecture did not hesitate to throw my idealism back at me, challenging me to position my reflections in relation to my own exile and go further by questioning human nature. Soon enough we left the much too easy terrain of identity politics and were locked in an animated debate on humanism, post-humanism, globalization, colonization, postcolonial criticism, modernism, postmodernism, hermeneutics, and so on!

Throughout their questions, incisive comments, thoughtful replies, it quickly became clear that they

did not use these terms and concepts lightly. They are part of their experience, have left concrete, tangible marks on the history of their country and will continue to do so today and tomorrow. In inviting me to speak on these issues and many others, they were asking me nothing less than to justify my existence as a researcher and an author. They were asking me to answer the impossibly difficult but fundamental question: why should one write? Each kept in his pocket his own collection of fetish thinkers, but all were convinced in the belief that knowledge had the power and the duty of emancipation. In this, they were decidedly modernist, their gaze firmly fixed on the future, not hesitating to defend the human capacity for reinventing the world.

I look upon Haiti from the perspective of someone who has been in several countries that have had their share of struggles, victories and failures, including Palestine and South Africa. In Africa, the specter of Haiti, home of the "only successful slave revolt in history", to cite CLR James in *The Black Jacobins*, fascinates as much as it strikes fear. Two hundred years later, some see in the example of Haiti a failed revolution, a failed state, the poorest country in the world. However, I have come to realize that this first moment of emancipation, the sheer audacity of the Haitian revolution, continues to provide a source of energy that has translated into an extraordinary capacity to create and recreate the substance of life, whether through the immensely rich body of literature Haiti produces despite constant reminders of high rates of non-literacy, the striking presence of art and painting in the public space or the depth of reading and listening that I witnessed among the Haitian youth I had the privilege of meeting.

Camps de réfugiés pour dévoreurs de livres

*J'ai ce pays
debout dans la paume de la main
géographie déjà tracée
le pays naît de la ligne de mon cœur
deux siècles depuis qu'il avance
j'ai vu ce pays de mes yeux
comme je te vois dans ta chair
rêve qui mûrit à la manière d'une révélation
une multitude de gens en mouvement
me reconnaissent
un pays mi-femme mi-homme
gouverne la rosée
ensemble avec tous les enfants
qui partent à l'assaut de la vie
pour tresser les rubans du soleil levant*

Emmanuel Eugène, *La voix des mystères*

Je devais écrire ce texte alors que j'étais encore à Port-au-Prince, mais il y a de ces expériences, comme d'un bon repas, qui refusent d'être avalées à la hâte. Ces expériences imposent leur propre temps, t'enveloppent de leurs arômes toute la journée alors que tu meurs de faim. Et lorsqu'on y plonge enfin, elles sont si chaudes qu'il faut se résoudre à les contempler pendant qu'elles s'ajustent à la température de ton corps. Là et seulement là, devient-il possible de les écrire.

Il est tentant, oh que si tentant de céder aux saveurs intenses de ces huit jours en Haïti, de se mettre à peindre une toile naïve à l'instar de celles qui ornent les rues de Port-au-Prince. Si je me laissais vraiment aller, je vous décrirais la mer qui embrasse les montagnes, les couleurs vivantes de



Students listening to a presentation by an author.
Photo: Jozué Azor

la folie urbaine, la promiscuité qui caractérise les villes qui débordent d'humains, la beauté presque surréelle des provinces... Et pour équilibrer le doux avec l'aigre, je rappellerais forcément la pauvreté et les bidonvilles qui rampent les montagnes. C'est justement pourquoi il fallait prendre le temps de s'éloigner, afin de puiser dans autre chose que les cinq sens ou encore pour ne pas s'appuyer paresseusement sur la banque de clichés faciles que nous portons tous dans l'imaginaire.

Je voudrais plutôt vous décrire les lieux où l'on lit et écrit en Haïti. Palestinienne que je suis, appelons-les camps de réfugiés pour dévoreurs de livres: les écoles, les universités, la bibliothèque et l'amphithéâtre de la Fondation Connaissance et Liberté (FOKAL) à Port-au-Prince, le jardin des Passagers du vent, une résidence nichée parmi les arbres à quelques pieds de la plage de Port Salut, au sud du pays, la terrasse de la Maison de l'écrivain Georges Anglade de Pen-Haïti, perchée sur l'un des belvédères de la commune de Thomassin au cœur des montagnes surplombant la capitale... Ce pays



Reading of Rodney Saint-Eloi's poetry in his home town of Cavaillon. Photo: Jozué Azor

manque de beaucoup de choses, les organismes de la gouvernance mondiale se délectent de nous le rappler. Il manque de tout sauf de lieux de lecture et d'écriture.

Nous sommes arrivés à Port-au-Prince, vingt-deux auteurs et autant d'éditeurs du Québec et du Canada français, plusieurs d'entre nous ayant parcouru des chemins en parallèle. Ce sont là autant d'histoires que de destins uniques, dont la rencontre aurait été improbable sinon impossible n'était-ce pour la passion de la littérature. Elle l'aurait été encore moins en Haïti si ce n'était pour l'enfant des Cayes, le poète Rodney Saint-Éloi, revenu après plus d'une décennie à Cavaillon et qui avait décidé de marquer son retour en nous invitant tous à l'accompagner. Il avait eu le courage de rêver. Il avait surtout eu l'audace de briser la cadence mélancolique du retour au pays natal. Il a osé sa cause, comme dirait Frankétienne, et en le faisant a réécrit le récit de l'exil solitaire.

Il avait fait le pari que la littérature rassemblerait les continents. Aussitôt à Port-au-Prince, nous nous

sommes éparpillés partout dans la ville, depuis la foire du livre à la FOKAL, épiscentre de nos activités, jusqu'aux écoles et universités.

À la FOKAL, lorsque nous n'étions pas en table ronde dans une salle comble discutant de paysages littéraires, de censure, de féminisme, de la littérature en héritage et de Georges Anglade, de Gaston Miron, de Marie Vieux-Chauvet, d'Émile Ollivier, de Mahmoud Darwich et d'Aimé Césaire, des jeunes venaient nous voir à la foire du livre, deux ou trois romans ou recueils de poésie sous le bras pour nous demander des conseils sur l'écriture et nous parler de leurs lectures. La majorité d'entre eux n'avaient pas l'argent pour les acheter. Même avec le prix ajusté au pays, les livres restent trop cher, beaucoup trop cher pour un peuple qui aime tant lire. Il n'y a rien de plus précieux pour une auteure qu'un lecteur qui ne demande rien de plus que de lui donner la chance de la lire. Et je le sais, comme chacun d'entre nous qui avons participé à cette rencontre, pas une phrase, un vers, un personnage ne sera négligé. Ils seront lus, aimés, détestés, mastiqués, répétés, contredits, mais jamais ignorés.

Tant qu'à moi, j'ai eu le bonheur de donner une conférence sur Edward Saïd à la Faculté d'ethnologie de l'Université d'État d'Haïti. Je l'avais intitulée *La traversée de la postcolonie*, en référence à l'expérience d'exil que beaucoup trop de Palestiniens et de Haïtiens ont connue. Je voulais aussi leur parler de la traversée comme une voie ouverte à l'avenir, réhabiliter en quelque sorte la condition de l'exil comme étant la seule qui permet une véritable liberté. Les poètes, les écrivains, les penseurs, disait Saïd, sont tous en quelque sorte des exilés étant souvent un peu en décalage par rapport au monde qu'ils habitent. Les étudiants au baccalauréat et aux



Poet Rodney Saint-EloiCavaillon.
Photo: Josué Azor

études supérieures n'ont pas hésité à me lancer le défi de me positionner moi-même par rapport à mon propre exil et d'aller encore plus loin en interrogeant la nature humaine. De fil en aiguille, nous nous retrouvâmes en plein débat sur l'humanisme, le post-humanisme, la mondialisation, la colonisation, la critique postcoloniale, le modernisme, le postmodernisme, l'herméneutique, et j'en passe!

Je voyais par leurs questions, leurs commentaires incisifs, leurs répliques réfléchies, qu'ils n'utilisaient pas ces termes et ces concepts à la légère. Ils font partie de leur vécu, ont laissé des marques bien concrètes sur l'histoire de leur pays et le feront encore aujourd'hui et demain. En m'invitant à me prononcer sur ces enjeux et bien d'autres, ils ne me demandaient rien de moins que de justifier mon existence de chercheuse et d'auteure, de répondre à la question : pourquoi donc écrire? Chacun avait dans sa poche ses penseurs cultes, sa vision, sa critique, mais ils étaient tous animés dans la conviction que le savoir avait un pouvoir et un devoir d'émancipation. Ils étaient en ce sens résolument modernes, le regard posé sur l'avenir, n'hésitant pas à défendre la capacité de l'homme de réinventer le monde.

Au lendemain, l'historien, journaliste et auteur Michel Soukar m'a embarquée dans sa voiture et nous partîmes à l'improviste visiter quelques écoles : l'Institut d'éducation classique, l'école Gérard Gourgue et l'école de Saint François d'Assise. Michel Soukar ayant concocté cette aventure autour du petit-déjeuner, les directeurs n'avaient naturellement pas la moindre idée que nous arrivions. Cela ne les a pas empêchés de nous accueillir les bras ouverts et de nous introduire dans les classes de philosophie où les professeurs, loin d'être agacés par l'interruption, se joignaient aussitôt à leurs



A day with students in a Port Salut secondary school.
Photo: Josué Azor

étudiants et s'engageaient dans les débats qui ne tardaient pas à s'animer. Je retiens de ces moments l'incroyable écoute de ces adolescents. Ils ne me quittaient pas des yeux, buvaient les mots, prenaient soin d'inscrire leurs questions sur un papier avant de me les poser. Assis le dos droit, debout la tête haute, prêts à foncer et mordre dans la vie.

Chacune de ces écoles avait été gravement endommagée par le séisme de sorte que les classes se tenaient en majorité sous des structures temporaires, recouvertes de planches en zinc. Je ne pus m'empêcher de penser à mon père qui, enfant, avait étudié sous ces mêmes toits au camp de réfugiés. À l'école Gérard Gourgue, j'ai fait la connaissance de celui dont l'école porte le nom et de sa femme devenue la directrice. En 2010, elle avait été coincée pendant deux jours sous les décombres. Là voilà aujourd'hui se promenant parmi les classes de l'école, le sourire radieux. Si Soukar ne me l'avait pas dit, je n'aurais jamais deviné l'enfer qu'elle a vécu. Son mari Gérard, avocat au regard lumineux, défendait les droits de l'homme alors que Duvalier était encore

au pouvoir. Malgré les menaces, les murs mitraillés de balles, il n'a jamais cédé aux sirènes de l'exil. Je lui avais quand même demandé si la lutte pour les droits de l'homme n'avait pas ses propres limites, ayant été manipulée de part et d'autre pour justifier des stratagèmes d'influence politique. Il me répondit avec la patience et la sérénité de quelqu'un qui ne se laissait pas distraire par les dérives d'autrui. Je devine que ce soit grâce à cette mine douce qui cache une force redoutable, celle de l'eau qui file sur la pierre jusqu'à y creuser un ravin, qu'il a pu surmonter des décennies de dictature. Nous étions, il est vrai, assis dans une maison entourée d'un grand mur, dans un quartier, où, comme me disait sa fille, les gens ne se connaissaient plus. Pourtant de l'autre côté de la rue, il y avait cette école qui portait le nom de son père et dans laquelle des jeunes filles et des jeunes garçons discutaient de philosophie.

Je pose sur Haïti le regard de celle qui revient de plusieurs pays qui ont eu leur lot de luttes, de victoires et d'échecs, dont la Palestine et l'Afrique du sud. En Afrique, le spectre d'Haïti, premier peuple noir à arracher par les dents sa liberté, fascine autant qu'il fait peur. Deux cent ans plus tard, certains ne voient en l'exemple d'Haïti qu'une révolution avortée, un État échoué, le pays le plus pauvre du monde. Moi je vois un peuple qui a fabriqué de son imaginaire la substance de la vie. Alors que les pays riches du monde se plaisent à leur envoyer des cartons de nourriture, de planches de zinc, de vêtements usagés et de tentes pour ériger des camps de réfugiés, les jeunes ne cherchent qu'à imaginer le monde et à voyager entre les poèmes et les récits.

J'avais écrit dans un texte précédent que je m'attendais à retrouver en Haïti une part de moi-même et c'était vrai. Au-delà des ressemblances

entre le destin des Palestiniens et des Haïtiens, leurs luttes surtout, cette visite m'a rappelé ma raison d'être de chercheuse et d'écrivain.

NOTES

1. See <http://www.memoiredencrier.com>
2. Videos and summaries of the daily events of the week-long encounter may be consulted here : <https://www.facebook.com/lesrencontresquebecoisesenhaiti>
3. The texts were first published here : <http://anel.qc.ca/blogue/author/elghadban/>

L'ART D'APPRÉCIER LA PIQÛRE DU MOUSTIQUE

*Dieu citharède – Apollon
Et vous, Muses de l'hélicon
Inspirez-moi, – je chante les flûtes muettes
Tombées
Des lèvres mortes, et glacées
Des poètes*

Carl Brouard, « Invocations », *Anthologie secrète*

Les moustiques en Haïti sont aussi petits et bruyants que ceux de mon enfance. Rien à voir avec leurs confrères de la forêt boréale, dont le silence camoufle une arme redoutable. N'empêche que j'ai quitté Haïti les bras et les jambes tatouées de baisers rouges qui m'ont démangé longtemps après mon retour. Haïti ne s'est pas contenté de marquer mes sens et mon esprit. Il s'est assuré de laisser ses empreintes sur ma peau.

Dans l'avion, j'avais du mal à rester tranquille, luttant contre le réflexe de gratter. Par désespoir, j'ai sorti mon ordinateur, espérant distraire mes doigts sur les touches du clavier. Dès que j'ai remonté l'écran, une série de documents s'affichèrent sur mon bureau comme autant de rappels à l'ordre. Un article demandé pour un collectif, un autre dont les éditeurs attendent toujours les modifications finales, un plan de cours en chantier, ma thèse de doctorat que je transforme en manuscrit depuis trois ans, des textes en anglais, des textes en français, des extraits copiés de quelque part, mais jamais recollés, me dévisageant avec ce regard culpabilisant des enfants abandonnés. Un après l'autre, je les ai réduits, les repoussant dans la marge de mon écran. Tout en



The streets of Les Cayes in the Cap region in the south.
Photo: Josué Azor

moi refusait de revenir à la routine, car on ne revient tout simplement pas d'un voyage comme celui des Rencontres québécoises en Haïti.

Demandez-le à n'importe quel immigrant. Il vous le dira: Vous avez beau rentrer dans votre pays d'origine, si vous avez voyagé, si vous avez osé laisser l'ailleurs vous habiter, vous n'y revenez jamais vraiment. Gare à ceux qui vantent leur capacité de se retrouver dans n'importe quelle ville. Il est bien plus facile de maîtriser l'art de passer à côté des choses que celui de voyager.

Loin sous ma pile d'obligations, se cachait un texte qui a beaucoup plus à m'en vouloir que les autres. Un texte qui me rappelait une promesse brisée. Autant d'univers que j'avais tendrement cultivés pendant ma résidence à Londres. De retour à Montréal, je l'avais relégué au fond de ma mémoire, ayant été trop occupée à me ré-enraciner. Du coup, je ne visitais plus aussi régulièrement mes personnages. Les paysages que j'avais commencé à peindre avec patience et minutie, restaient de plus en plus longtemps au niveau des grands traits. Tellement longtemps en fait que l'encre s'asséchait et se fissurait sur ma page.

Dans l'avion qui me ramenait de Port-au-Prince à Montréal, je l'ai retrouvé, écrasé par tous les autres textes. Malgré cela, il m'a paru souriant et accueillant. Pas une trace de rancune entre ses lignes. C'est à ce moment que j'ai compris ce que mon corps dévoré par les moustiques cherchait à me dire. L'écriture, voyez-vous, démange comme une vieille piqûre. Elle refait surface de temps à autre pour rappeler la cicatrice qu'elle a marquée dans la peau. La mienne est encore jeune et rouge sang. Je l'avais domptée pendant presque deux ans. Pourtant, il a suffi d'une semaine dans le pays des moustiques pour qu'elle resurgisse aussi fraîche et puissante que la première fois.

Les moustiques qui m'ont piquée venaient surtout de Port Salut et de Thomassin. Je le sais pour la simple raison qu'à Port-au-Prince nous séjournions dans des chambres climatisées. À Port Salut, à la résidence d'écrivains, *Les passagers du vent*, seul un rideau moustiquaire suspendu par-dessus le lit - assez romantique d'ailleurs - me séparait des petits monstres qui ne se gênaient pas de me chuchoter leur présence dans l'oreille toute la nuit. J'imagine combien le rideau devait les faire rire. Et que dire de la magnifique terrasse de la maison d'écrivains Georges Anglade à Thomassin? Pour respirer l'air pur au rythme de la poésie chantée, quelques piqûres s'imposaient.

Ce sont des lieux d'une grande beauté. Plus différentes, ces maisons ne peuvent guère l'être. Une est juchée à l'épaule d'une montagne, l'autre est bercée par le va et vient des vagues. Les deux, par contre, ont cela en commun : Point de frontière entre le dehors et le dedans, entre l'animal, le végétal et l'humain. Portes et fenêtres sont laissées grandes ouvertes. Les couloirs rattachent le ciel aux



The Passagers des vents author's residence in Port Salut
Photo: Yara El-Ghadban

chambres et les murs ne touchent pas tout à fait le plafond. Nous circulions au sein de ces lieux aussi librement que le vent.

Aux *Passagers du vent*, nous étions arrivés au cœur de la nuit après une belle soirée de poésie et de théâtre aux Cayes. Plus tôt dans la journée, la route vers les Cayes avait été plus longue que prévu, de sorte que nous étions rendus au rendez-vous avec un peu de retard. Malgré cela, malgré la chaleur aussi – ne l'oublions surtout pas – les gens nous avaient attendus. Ils étaient venus accueillir un enfant du pays, Rodney Saint-Éloi et écouter sa poésie récitée par une fillette de 10 ans dont la voix aurait déplacé les montagnes si elle le désirait. Dans une petite salle, pleine à craquer, nous avons eu droit à du chant qui nous a émus jusqu'aux larmes et à des mises-en-scène qui, baignées dans l'humidité ambiante, extrayaient la rosée des mots.

Tout un autre spectacle nous attendait aux *Passagers du vent*. Des centaines de grillons chantaient à la lumière des étoiles et les chiens, irrités de

nous voir envahir leur territoire, se sont mis à japper en symphonie à leur tour. Un, plus curieux que les autres, est venu nous visiter alors que nous nous installions dans nos chambres. Au lendemain, c'est la grenouille qui a annoncé le lever du soleil, ne se fiant pas aux coqs qui nous avaient fait de fausses alarmes la nuit durant. Quelques minutes plus tard, une poule qui semblait s'être égarée se promena un peu au salon avant de nous tourner le dos. Autour de nous, des arbres fruitiers de toutes les saveurs, amandiers, arbres véritables, arbres à pain, et un magnifique jardin de fleurs et de bougainvilliers. Nous étions au cœur de la campagne.

Avant nous, peintres, photographes, poètes avaient eu le bonheur d'y donner vie à leurs œuvres, parsemant la maison des *Passagers du vent* de petits souvenirs de leur séjour. Un nom inscrit sur le mur, des tasses de café usées dans la cuisine, des chaises côté-à-côte, face à face, au tour de la table, des mots griffonnés sur des bouts de papier, et des serviettes pour ceux qui aiment écrire en conversant avec la mer. Des traces laissées comme des bâtons de relais aux prochains résidents.

Cela étant dit, écrivains, soyez avertis! Si vous pensez vous installer à un bureau pour écrire, vous ne le trouverez pas. Si, pour écrire, il vous faut le confort d'une chambre d'hôtel et du déjeuner commandé par téléphone, vous aurez faim. Dans ce paradis sans frontières, la seule certitude est celle de la piqûre du moustique.

Alors, si vous voulez vraiment écrire, je n'ai que ceci à vous dire: Prenez le bâton et laissez tomber le bureau et l'ordinateur. Ouvrez le rideau moustiquaire. Pour écrire, il suffit de traverser la frontière des hommes, des bêtes et des fruits. Anéantir tout ce qui sépare le dehors du dedans de soi-même.

Laissez-vous dévorer par les moustiques qui portent le sang des poètes et savourez en autant de mots et de vers le désir de gratter.

THE ZONE (2) RELEASING DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

Juan Orrantia

Independent Reseracher

To view the three contemporary documentary photography pieces that make up The Zone 2, please visit the Audiovisual Section of The Salon Volume 6 on the JWTC website.

Since the 1980's much has been said and critiqued regarding the notion of documentary—from Trinh-Minh-ha's famous essay "Documentary is (not) a name", to Allan Sekula, Martha Rosler and others whose writings and work defied the traditional canon and power of the real. Since then, the divide between an objective truth and the subjective artistic expressive has been crossed, and the range of experiments and forms of interaction with the real continues to grow. Taking this history of critique seriously, the photographic documentary has since been living in a border zone where concepts like documentary essay, art and journalism nourish, pollute and complicate each other. The frictions produced by this blurring of genres and definitions, continues to make some people uncomfortable and others highly selected (in the art markets).

From a theoretical standpoint, recent propositions are also participating in a shift from what can be termed a John Tagg (aka Foucauldian understanding of photography) to an Azoulay (Benjaminian) perspective that emphasizes the space of photography as that which contains multiple positions and politics, where the triad photographer, the photograph(ed) and viewer establish different

relationships with each other, but also with history, aesthetics, violence and power. To that one might add the so-called democratization of photography, a name given in many discussions to a market driven craze and popularization of cameras and devices that has exploded the realm of the photographic image. This reality has by now come in contact with the growth and possibilities of new practices, where what used to be mere sub-disciplines are now fields of their own (like experimental documentary, or new forms of visual/sensory anthropology) with academic programs and organizations producing novel and exciting work. Thus, from initial bipartisan positions that saw photography (just) as-power/violence or as a form for the (purely) subjective expressive, the current state of documentary photography has expanded the critical intellectual possibilities of the medium, refined by what present day conditions permit regarding experiments with technology, aesthetics, devices and even the movement of people.

With this apparent revival and reconfiguration of photography and its means of distribution, this second number of the Salon's section *The Zone* presents different projects in contemporary documentary photography that unsettle prevailing understandings within the western mainstream. Sharing interests in long term projects, the so-called Global south, and more generally what one could define as an intellectual approach to the possibilities of photography, the works showcased here engage critically with the traces of photojournalism, documentary topics and traditions, ethnography, and the role of a reflexive stance that goes beyond the individual. For this I have invited three photographers whose work demonstrates the possibilities of a critical photographic project. These individuals—two American

born and one Ecuadorian—have engaged the realities of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Senegal, India and Ecuador as journalists, ethnographers or cinematographers, producing stories that go beyond the mere representation of place. Their understanding of these countries—which have also been their homes—and an approach to photography that relies on subtle and thoughtful methods, results in poetic engagements with histories—and here I mean histories of representation as well as personal, professional, and even national histories. As such, they present different vantage points from where to consider (and in my view complicate) the contemporary relationships and frictions between ethnography, photojournalism, documentary, poetics and location.

Danny Hoffman is an American anthropologist and formerly Africa based photojournalist who has worked on issues of youth violence and war in West Africa, particularly in Liberia and Sierra Leone. His photographic work is part of an experimental approach to the interplay of text and image, and his essays are forms that create alternative spaces for the visual and lyrical articulated in a theoretical manner that then creates its own form of poetic criticality (see his essay "The Brookfields Hotel. Freetown, Sierra Leone"). In this case, and following his former engagement with places, structures, bodies, and notions of reoccupation and movement, the former building of *The Ministry of Defense* in Monrovia is presented in its existing raw state, down to the bone, and yet still occupied by traces, lived and relived, inhabited by bodies that have over the years given it its many lives up to its most likely disappearance. Yet, the images elide the attraction of the ruin for the ruin's sake. This is a result of an approach to poetics that he sees as being "... *informed instead*

by a less fixed, emergent poetics of envisioning the built environment [...] this is a poetics that shifts the emphasis away from either the formal composition of built forms or the realist depiction of everyday living within them. The visual argument is a more ambiguous and ambivalent one about the ways people can and cannot inhabit constructed space". This is apparent in the image of two men sitting in the walls of what seems to be the top floor looking into the black hole of an abandoned staircase. The subtle colours of the image, the absence of facial expressions, and even the vultures up above all create a poetic vantage point into the future as well as the past of all of them in this building. Hoffman's piece thus positions the photographic essay as a critical intellectual form of intervention in current debates (in this case) about postcolonial cities, complicating the roles of how we understand the relationships between architecture, photography (aesthetics) and revolution.

Candace Feit is a photographer with a philosophy background, who left New York to work as a photojournalist in West Africa and later in India. She now pursues in-depth personal projects, which are shaped by the many years based in her southern homes (Senegal, India, and most recently Johannesburg). What, in my view defines her projects, is the possibility of articulating intellectual positions on people and place through the poetics of beautifully framed and lit images. Her use of colour and careful composition attracts the viewer in order to compel one to further reflection on the issues and contexts of these situations beyond what is being portrayed or presented in the frame. There is a reason why she uses film; taking advantage of a slow-paced notion of photography. In the ongoing

project she presents for this number, **Reportage in Wonderland** she is working through the notion of the "exotic" in its own existence. Carefully using the power of colours and moments of situations in religious ceremonies of Hijras (transgendered) in India, she opens up the space of excess to its own complexity. The strong images of ceremonies thus open up the surplus inherent to the intricate complexity of representations of India, which she juxtaposes with elements of simplicity and banality. Think for example of the image of a woman lying on the ground after a trance, shot at floor level, an image that opens up our imagination to current events in the country. The politics of gender and religious exoticism are therefore dealt with through their own poetics, creating a space of frictions, an alternative to traditional roles of seeing and being.

Similarly, in *Never a River*, Francois "Coco" Laso takes the traditional ethnographic representation of his own country's (Ecuador) internal *other* to abstract the banality of this setting, to highlight the poetic imaginary of the everyday in the Amazonian rainforest. Photographing Shuar and Wampi communities in the rainforests of Ecuador and Peru, his approach has been to elide what can be seen as unique or exotic. Rather, as he states, he prefers to take the risk of a banal poetic or rather a poetics of the banal, a more photographic position if you may, to explore and present diversity. For this reason his approach is risky, because " [...] *without any doubt these images might not be showing much, except maybe, the blurry evidence of a particular subject, his existential condition, the moment of a common photograph. These are bodies that always flow with the river; that cannot be seen clearly or in their entirety. And so, the photographs remain*

as something like the memory of an impossibility, of an impossible visual encounter". These encounters then are what draw one into these black and white images, where the subtle presence of people amidst the density of the rainforest is made less ethnographic and maybe more photographic. Where a portrait of a woman in a black headscarf unsettles the iconic imagery of the Amazonian context, releasing the elements that have framed these communities in languages of otherness through a common language of imagination and poetics that photography makes possible.

To view the three contemporary documentary photography pieces follow the links below:

THE MINISTRY OF DEFENSE
Danny Hoffman

NEVER A RIVER. BLURRED EVIDENCE
Francois Laso Chenut

REPORTAGE IN WONDERLAND
Candace Feit

THE MINISTRY OF DEFENSE

(A Work in Progress)

Danny Hoffman

University of Washington

Danny Hoffman continues to pursue the limits of the essay form, combining text and images as a critical form of intervention. In this case the relationships between architecture, photography (aesthetics) and revolution are at the center of his new work on the lives of an old governmental building in Monrovia.

I
“Architecture or revolution. / Revolution can be avoided.” The radical conclusion to Le Corbusier’s 1924 *Toward an Architecture* – arguably the most significant text of architecture’s Modern Movement – announces a project of global social and political design. Le Corbusier’s aphorism actually invokes two revolutions: the revolution in human habitation that he helped to inaugurate, and the political revolution he hoped to avoid by doing so. Today both of these “revolutions” are woven into the fabric of many, perhaps all, postcolonial cities. Certainly, as Nnamdi Elleh (1997: 72) points out, the so-called International Style of modernist architecture dominates the built form of African urbanism. And those forms are inextricably bound to sweeping projects of social and political engineering. Any consideration of the future of African cities therefore requires a reckoning with the revolutions, actual and virtual, expressed in the built forms of the past.

“The Ministry of Defense” is one in a series of four



explorations of those forms in Monrovia, Liberia. In the aftermath of the fighting that consumed this region of West Africa from 1989 to 2003, thousands of ex-combatants remain in the Liberian capital. For almost a decade, hundreds of fighters and their dependents occupied the ruins of downtown structures, squatting in the dismantled infrastructure of the city: bank buildings, government ministries, hotels, office blocks. These buildings’ modernist elements – open floor plans, non-loading bearing walls, the separation of service spaces from “served” spaces – meant that the buildings’ residents could carve and configure these structures into massive vertical settlements. Partitions made of salvaged materials created domestic spaces; large communal spaces were kept open for meetings, sports, or protests; utility spaces were appropriated for shops, bars, or private assignations. The population of Monrovia in the aftermath of the war far exceeded the capacity of the devastated city’s infrastructure, and so Monrovia’s residents, like those in many African cities, had to live “beyond” the city’s architecture (Rao 2009). Adaptive re-use of modernist buildings like the Ministry of Defense therefore

realized Le Corbusier’s “architecture or revolution” in a literal sense: it allowed for the mass housing of a militarized urban populace that might otherwise have laid more violent claims to the city.

II

And yet over the past several years these buildings have manifested a different consequence of the International Style. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf’s government has been slowly reclaiming the city’s architecture. With funding from the World Bank and IMF, or at the behest of American and Chinese corporations, the Government of Liberia has begun to “develop” many of the city’s largest squatter settlements. Populations of combatants and non-combatants who lived in the Ministry of Health building, the Ducor Hotel, and the Old Government Hospital have been moved out so the buildings can be refurbished or demolished. All but a handful of caretakers were evicted from the Ministry of Defense building by the end of 2011, and now the colossal structure stands empty. At present the government is undecided whether to demolish the building to make way for a Chinese funded complex or whether to keep the structure intact.

Residents evicted from the Ministry of Defense largely ended up in the mangrove swamps behind the building, an informal settlement of some 30,000 known ironically as Peace Island. Those removed from other structures now squat on Monrovia’s beaches, in its graveyards, or in the few interstitial spaces of the city’s older and more established slums.

What is striking about these mass relocations is how little opposition they met from the buildings’ residents. When I spoke with ex-combatants who

had made the Ministry of Defense building their home for years, they were not only unsurprised by the government's evictions but strangely supportive of them. "It's the government's building," said Major Sandi, a former soldier in the Liberian Armed Forces, when I pressed him on why residents had not fought harder against the evictions. "It should be given to the Ministry of Defense." To be sure, residents demanded compensation for vacating their homes. There was a great deal of talk about the value of occupying urban space and many efforts to calculate what a home doomed for destruction should be worth. But at a time when "Occupy" movements were staking claims to urban space in cities around the globe, there seemed little effort to contest the use and ownership of Monrovia's built environment. The Torre David building in Caracas or the Christiana settlement in Copenhagen offer stark contrast: militant insistence on the rights of the dispossessed to space in the city. And elsewhere in Monrovia, as is true across the continent, the creative appropriation of space seems a hallmark of contemporary African urbanism. Yet in the Ministry of Defense such claims failed to materialize.

Here, then, may be a second actualization of Le Corbusier's "architecture or revolution." The same modernist elements that allowed urban squatters to make these buildings livable may ultimately have made them uninhabitable in a meaningful way. This was not, in the end, an architecture in which Liberia's ex-combatants could "dwell," to use Heidegger's term. In their own minds the residents of the Ministry of Defense never belonged in the Ministry building and never claimed the space as their own. This was not simply an artifact of the building's social and political history. Other spaces associated

with the past, with the dead, or with political repression did not carry so strong a taint of the past that they could not be appropriated and inhabited anew. There seems, rather, to be something about these structures themselves that forecloses the possibility that they can be occupied in new ways. That they can be made the possession of the people, that they can be inhabited differently and fully. In this sense the Ministry of Defense represents an architecture that does, indeed, successfully avoid revolution.

III

Photography is an integral part of this story. The camera is an agent in both the revolution in living and the revolution foreclosed by certain modernist architectural design.

At least since the end of the Second World War, the still photograph has been the primary means by which modernist architecture circulates. Designers learned about the new aesthetic primarily from photographic images in the popular and trade presses. As a consequence it was the still photograph's peculiar rendering of space that instructed architects in how to design "modern" buildings. Wide angle lenses made the open plan of Mies van der Rohe's work appear even more vast, and the compression of telephoto images made the symmetry of columns and ceilings more pronounced. The aesthetics of the image became more and more pronounced as designers copied not buildings but images of buildings (Mostafavi and Leatherbarrow 1993: 111-112; Pye 1978: 66; Zimmerman 2004). By the 1950s, architects in the New Brutalist school of modernists, the aesthetic that most obviously influenced the design of Monrovia's Ministry of Defense, had begun

to think of buildings *as* images and to design for the way their buildings would circulate in photographs (Banham 1955; Zimmerman 2012).

What's more, as the Modern Movement developed in architecture, photography was an indispensable tool for convincing residents that the improbable new aesthetic was habitable at all. The photographer Julius Shulman's most famous image, of two well dressed women seemingly suspended in the night air in a glass box over Los Angeles, was primarily a visual argument that Pierre Koenig's outrageous building was safe (Shulman 1997). Photography simultaneously disciplined the residents of the new architecture in modern practices of living. The intimate scenes of domestic life in advertising images for the famous Eichler homes in California, among the first mass produced modernist housing, were meant not only to sell the homes but to instruct home owners in how to use their unfamiliar spaces (Adamson, Arbunich, and Braun 2002).

In Brasilia, in Chandigarh, Abuja, Dar es Salaam, and in cities across the Global South, the image-logic of modernist architecture became even more pronounced, while the disciplining apparatus required to inhabit it became more fractured (see Holston 1989). The Modern Movement was inextricably but unevenly bound to the project of modernization and understandings of modernity. Le Corbusier's maxim appears ever more complex in light of the ways the image-based architecture was cathected to modernity's revolutions.

IV

The camera is therefore a unique diagnostic tool for exploring the spaces of modernist architecture. The photographs here were made in April 2012, not long

after the building's residents were moved out. The project is part of my own long-standing interest in how young men's bodies and labor became part of this region's war economy, and an interest in the spaces that continue to make these men available for deployment in that economy.

The poetics of the essay are therefore not that of high modernist architectural photography with its studied lighting and its emphasis on form. That approach would have produced images that emphasize the Ministry's status as ruins, images that capitalize on the shock of seeing destruction rendered as unintended architectural art. (As, for example, in the Detroit work of Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre.) Nor is this project based on a poetics of straight documentary reportage, utilizing a deliberately messy aesthetic to offer a literal (though equally shocking) depiction of its subjects' lived experience. Both are useful projects, though at this point I am unconvinced that either has the power to raise new questions about what it means to inhabit Africa's urban spaces today.

The images collected here are informed instead by a less fixed, emergent poetics of envisioning the built environment. Exemplified by the work of the Ivorian photographer Ananias Leki Dago, South Africa's Guy Tillim and the Dutch photographer Iwan Baan, this is a poetics that shifts the emphasis away from either the formal composition of built forms or the realist depiction of everyday living within them. The visual argument is a more ambiguous and ambivalent one about the ways people can and cannot inhabit constructed space. Figures in these images make reference to scale and geometry, but mostly they raise questions about what may or may not be possible in such spaces, about what may

or may not come next. These are images that take seriously AbdouMaliq Simone's proposition that in African urbanism, people constitute the city's true infrastructure. But they do so by simultaneously asking what the limits to that constitution may be in an urban form like the Ministry of Defense. The camera becomes a tool for exploring the conceptual boundaries imposed by structures scaled to accommodate photography rather than the human form. A tool for seeing spaces sculpted to appear monumental in two dimensions rather than inhabited in three.

The camera becomes, in short, a means of exploring the complex relationship between architecture and revolution.

THE MINISTRY OF DEFENSE: PHOTO ESSAY

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NEVER A RIVER. BLURRED EVIDENCE (Nunca un río. La evidencia desdibujada)

Francois Laso Chenut

(translated by Juan Orrantia)

Independent director of photography for film and educator

Francois “Coco” Laso takes us to the Amazon, but defying the traditional ethnographic representation of this other, he focuses on the abstract banality of this setting in order to highlight the poetic imaginary of the everyday in the Amazonian rainforest.

The photographs of this series are about the Shuar and Wampi people that live in the Condor cordillera, running along both Ecuador and Peru. They were produced during the last eight years.

For me, what is interesting is not so much to imagine, photograph and edit a series that responds to a relationship between photography and the real, or the subject and his or her visible appearance. What is interesting is the relationship between photography and what is photographic, that is, the visual tale that is made possible by a few images that do not necessarily correspond to the idea of “that same reality” that one might have had before actually photographing. Thus, I tried to avoid the act of visually investigating what would be considered the most photographic qualities of the Shuar people: their “different” culture, the “surprising” territory, or their “amazing” geography. Rather, I focused on what is common or ordinary, on what is more photographic about photography.



Nevertheless, in this photographic poetics of the common, the indexical quality of the photographic image is always present. It is its ontology. For documentary photography to exist there must be, necessarily, an Other beyond me, in front of the camera. Thus, the preoccupation with the Other and its existence is marked beforehand, long before one begins to photograph. Yet, what is not so evident, is the construction of a tale based on that condition.

If to photograph is to prove and give relevance, the question remains the same. Of what importance are we talking about? Is it the importance of the gaze that relies on the exotic and makes a thing out of the other in purpose of its own wishes and fears? To be conscious of the making of this exotic other, and to report knowingly, assumes to leave aside all of these “beautiful” and surprising images. That is, all of those images charged with the tradition of what is photographically different.

This is a risky position. Because, without any doubt these images might not be showing much, except maybe, the blurry evidence of a particular subject, his existential condition, the moment of a common photograph.

These are bodies that always flow with the river; that cannot be seen clearly or in their entirety. And so, the photographs remain as something like the memory of an impossibility, of an impossible visual encounter.

NEVER A RIVER. BLURRED EVIDENCE: PHOTO ESSAY

LA EVIDENCIA DESDIBUJADA

Las fotografías de esta serie sobre el pueblo Shuar y Wampí que habita la cordillera del Cóndor en territorio Ecuatoriano y Peruano fueron realizadas a lo largo de los últimos ocho años.

Para mí lo interesante no es tanto imaginar, fotografiar y editar una serie en función de una relación entre la fotografía y “lo real” o el “sujeto” y sus apariencias visibles sino entre la fotografía y lo fotográfico, es decir el relato visual posible a partir de unas cuantas imágenes y que no necesariamente se corresponden con las ideas sobre “ese mismo real” que puedo tener antes de fotografiar.

Evito indagar visualmente lo más fotográfico del pueblo Shuar: su cultura “diferente”, su territorio “sorprendente” o su “asombrosa” geografía sino más bien en lo más común, en lo más fotográfico de la fotografía.

Sin embargo en esta poética fotográfica de lo común, la cualidad indicial de la imagen fotográfica está siempre presente, es su ontología. Para que la fotografía documental exista tiene que haber, necesariamente, un Otro más allá de mí, frente a la cámara. Por consiguiente la preocupación sobre el otro y su existencia esta marcada de antemano mucho antes de fotografiar. Sin embargo lo que no resulta tan evidente es la construcción de un relato a partir de esa condición.

Si fotografiar es probar y dar importancia, la pregunta sigue siendo la misma. ¿de que importancia estamos hablando?. ¿Acaso de la importancia de la mirada que exotiza y cosifica al otro en función de sus deseos y sus miedos?

Ser consciente de la exotización del otro y relatar sabiéndolo, supone dejar de lado todas aquellas

imágenes “bellas”, “hermosas” y “sorprendentes”. Es decir aquellas imágenes cargadas de la tradición de lo fotográficamente “diferente”.

Es una apuesta arriesgada, porque sin duda en estas fotografías no está mostrado nada, sino quizás la evidencia desdibujada de un sujeto particular, su condición existencial el momento de una fotografía común.

Estos son cuerpos que siempre se van con el río, que no pueden ser vistos del todo, claramente; y las fotografías que quedan son algo así como la memoria de una imposibilidad, de un imposible encuentro visual.

REPORTAGE IN WONDERLAND

Candace Feit

Independent photojournalist

Relying on the magical and absorbing qualities of ritual, Candace Feit presents a selection of her most recent work on the Hijras in India where she critically engages the politics of gender and religious exoticism through possibilities of the aesthetic.

I was invited to Devanapattinam, Tamil Nadu, India to photograph a celebration of the Mayanakollai festival. The festival, to celebrate the deity Angalamman, was put on by a group of Kothis - male born people who take on the female sex role with men, and who often dress as women.

Working in India, where I lived for almost three years, I was always struggling to capture the extraordinary visual kaleidoscope of the country without falling back on cliché or kitsch. On that score this project posed a particularly interesting problem. It was an exotic event - a colorful Hindu temple festival - put on by some of the most exoticized people in India, the transgendered/third sex/kothi community, which has been widely photographed and written about.

We arrived and were welcomed immediately, being enveloped into the scene. At first it didn't seem like much was happening. We saw them preparing for the festival: stringing garlands on idols, getting dressed, arranging offerings. The most fascinating thing about spending time in this community was how within the structure of religion, everything was embraced. At one point some of the performers were



teased by a group of drunk boys, and though they were upset, they told us that they would have been far more vulnerable to taunts had they been “actual” women.

It was never entirely clear, even with a translator and very cooperative hosts, what was always happening. There was an undercurrent of surprise and mystery. Much of it was a matter of letting go and looking for a beautiful moment to unfold. So much was lost within the explanation of the origins of the festivals and the stories of the Hindu gods and goddesses. To try to both illustrate, but also find an unguarded or vulnerable moment in the midst of what felt very much like chaos. There was a goat sacrifice and an “Indian Dracula.” There was a simulated fight over the soul of a baby that involved the destruction of a huge effigy of a man constructed out of sand and placing flowers on the graves of the dead.

That surreal scene provided a backdrop to a dressed up chase through the village cemetery at dusk. My goal during it all was to somehow absorb the exoticism of the event - while trying not to rely on or exploit that exoticism.

The men dressing like women in the context of a religious festival (where that would historically have been done), but in this case the men who are dressing up like female goddesses are doing so deliberately in order to express their own desires to dress like women and take up the female role in sex. I also felt concerned about showing the exoticism of this community without any other context. Because “kothis” are often treated as other, or forced to be outsiders, it became even more important to try to show the nuances. The idea was to make pictures beautiful and quiet, while also showing humanity in the people.

REPORTAGE IN WONDERLAND: PHOTO ESSAY

LE DEVENIR-NÈGRE DU MONDE

Achille Mbembe

WISER, University of the Witwatersrand

Achille Mbembe's forthcoming book, Critique de la raison nègre, will be published by Editions La Découverte in Paris on October 3, 2013. The following is an excerpt of the introduction.

L'on aurait voulu écrire ce livre à la manière d'un fleuve aux multiples affluents, alors même que l'histoire et les choses se tournent vers nous, et que l'Europe ne constitue plus le centre de gravité du monde. Tel est en effet l'événement ou, en tout cas, l'expérience fondamentale de notre âge. Et, s'agissant d'en mesurer toutes les implications et d'en tirer toutes les conséquences, nous n'en sommes justement qu'au début¹. Pour le reste, que cette révélation nous soit donnée dans la joie, qu'elle suscite l'étonnement ou qu'elle nous plonge plutôt dans l'ennui, une chose est certaine : ce déclassement ouvre de nouvelles possibilités – mais est aussi porteur de dangers – pour la pensée critique, et c'est en partie ce que s'efforce d'examiner cet essai.

Pour saisir l'exacte portée de ces dangers et de ces possibilités, point n'est besoin de rappeler que, d'un bout à l'autre de son histoire, la pensée européenne a eu tendance à saisir l'identité non pas tant en termes d'appartenance mutuelle (co-appartenance) à un même monde qu'en termes de relation du même au même, de surgissement de l'être et de sa manifestation dans son être d'abord, ou encore dans son propre miroir². Il importe en revanche de comprendre que, conséquence directe de cette logique de l'autofiction, de l'autocontemplation, voire

ACHILLE
MBEMBE
CRITIQUE
DE LA
RAISON
NÈGRE

De tous les humains, le Nègre est le seul dont la chair
soit faite marchandise. Au demeurant, le Nègre et la race
n'ont jamais fait qu'un dans l'imaginaire des sociétés
européennes. Depuis le XVII^e siècle, ils ont constitué,
ensemble, le sous-sol travaillé et souvent nié à partir
duquel le projet moderne de connaissance – mais aussi de
gouvernement – s'est déployé. La révélation de l'Europe au
rang d'une simple province du monde signifié à elle l'ac-
cession du racisme, avec la dissolution de l'un des deux signi-
fiés majeurs, le Nègre ? Ou au contraire, une fois cette
figure historique dissolue, deviendrons-nous tous les
Nègres du nouveau racisme que fabriquent à l'échelle
planétaire les politiques néolibérales et sécuritaires, les
nouvelles guerres d'occupation et de précaution, et les
pratiques de zonage ?

Dans cet essai à la fois subtil et iconoclaste, Achille
Mbembe engage une réflexion critique indispensable
pour répondre à la principale question sur le monde de
notre temps : comment penser la différence et la vie, la
semblance et le désassemblage ?

Achille Mbembe est professeur d'histoire et de science
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University (États-Unis).
Il est notamment l'auteur de *De la postcolonie. Essai sur
l'imaginaire politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine*
(Karthaï, 2005) et de *Sortir de la grande nuit. Essai sur
l'Afrique décolonisée* (La Découverte, 2010).

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ACHILLE MBEMBE CRITIQUE DE LA RAISON NÈGRE

ACHILLE
MBEMBE
CRITIQUE
DE LA
RAISON
NÈGRE

de la clôture, le Nègre et la race n'ont jamais fait qu'un dans l'imaginaire des sociétés européennes³. Désignations primaires, lourdes, encombrantes et détraquées, symboles de l'intensité crue et de la répulsion, leur apparition dans le savoir et le discours moderne sur l'« homme » (et par conséquent sur l'« humanisme » et sur l'« humanité ») a été sinon simultanée, du moins parallèle ; et depuis le début du XVIII^e siècle, ils ont constitué, ensemble, le sous-sol (inavoué et souvent nié) ou encore le complexe nucléaire à partir duquel le projet moderne de connaissance – mais aussi de gouvernement – s'est déployé⁴. L'un et l'autre, ils représentent deux figures jumelles du délire qu'aura produit la modernité (chapitres 1 et 2).

À quoi tient-il donc, ce délire, et quelles en sont les manifestations les plus élémentaires ? D'abord au fait que le Nègre, c'est celui-là (ou encore cela) que l'on voit quand on ne voit rien, quand on ne comprend rien et, surtout, quand on ne veut rien comprendre. Partout où il apparaît, le Nègre libère des dynamiques passionnelles et provoque

une exubérance irrationnelle qui, toujours, met à l'épreuve le système même de la raison. Ensuite au fait que personne – ni ceux qui l'ont inventé, ni ceux qui ont été affublés de ce nom – ne souhaiterait être un Nègre ou, dans la pratique, être traité comme tel. Du reste, comme le précisait Gilles Deleuze, « il y a toujours un Nègre, un Juif, un Chinois, un Grand Mogol, un Aryen dans le délire » puisque ce que brasse le délire, ce sont, entre autres, les races⁵. En réduisant le corps et l'être vivant à une affaire d'apparence, de peau et de couleur, en octroyant à la peau et à la couleur le statut d'une fiction d'assise biologique, les mondes euro-américains en particulier auront fait du Nègre et de la race deux versants d'une seule et même figure, celle de la folie codifiée⁶. Opérant à la fois comme une catégorie originiaire, matérielle et fantasmagorique, la race aura été, au cours des siècles précédents, à l'origine de maintes catastrophes, la cause de dévastations psychiques inouïes et d'innombrables crimes et massacres⁷.

VERTIGINEUX ASSEMBLAGE

Trois moments auront marqué la biographie de ce vertigineux assemblage. Le premier est celui du dépouillement organisé lorsqu'à la faveur de la traite atlantique (XV^e-XIX^e siècles), des hommes et femmes originaires d'Afrique sont transformés en hommes-objets, hommes-marchandises et hommes-monnaies⁸. Emprisonnés dans le cachot des apparences, ils appartiennent désormais à d'autres disposés hostilement à leur égard, en conséquence de quoi ils n'ont plus ni nom ni langue propre. Si leur vie et leur travail sont désormais ceux des autres avec lesquels ils sont condamnés à vivre, mais avec lesquels il leur est interdit d'entretenir des relations

de co-humains, ils n'en demeurent pas moins des sujets agissants⁹. Le deuxième moment correspond à la naissance à l'écriture et commence vers la fin du XVIII^e siècle quand, de par leurs propres traces, les Nègres, ces êtres-pris-par les autres, peuvent désormais articuler un langage à eux tout en revendiquant le statut de sujet à part entière du monde vivant¹⁰. Ponctué par d'innombrables révoltes d'esclaves et l'indépendance d'Haïti en 1804, les combats pour l'abolition de la traite, les décolonisations africaines et les luttes pour les droits civiques aux États-Unis, ce moment trouve son accomplissement dans le démantèlement de l'apartheid au cours des dernières années du XX^e siècle. Le troisième moment (le début du XXI^e siècle) est celui de la planétarisation des marchés, de la privatisation du monde sous l'égide du néolibéralisme et de l'intrication croissante de l'économie financière, du complexe militaire post-impérial et des technologies électroniques et digitales.

Par néolibéralisme, il faut entendre une phase de l'histoire de l'humanité dominée par les industries du silicium et les technologies numériques. Le néolibéralisme est l'âge au cours duquel le temps court est en passe d'être converti en force procréative de la forme-argent. Le capital ayant atteint son point de fuite maximal, un mouvement d'escalade est enclenché. Il repose sur la vision selon laquelle « tous les événements et toutes les situations du monde de la vie [peuvent] être dotées d'une valeur sur le marché¹¹ ». Ce mouvement se caractérise aussi par la production de l'indifférence, le codage forcené de la vie sociale en normes, en catégories et en chiffres, ainsi que par diverses opérations d'abstraction qui prétendent rationaliser le monde sur la base des logiques de l'entreprise¹². Hanté par un double

funeste, le capital notamment financier se définit désormais comme illimité aussi bien du point de vue de ses fins que du point de vue de ses moyens¹³. Il ne dicte plus seulement son propre régime du temps. Ayant repris à son compte « la fabrication de toutes les relations de filiation », il cherche à se multiplier « par lui-même » dans une série infinie de dettes structurellement insolubles¹⁴.

Il n'y a plus de travailleurs en tant que tels. Il n'y a plus que des nomades du travail. Si, hier, le drame du sujet était d'être exploité par le capital, aujourd'hui, la tragédie pour la multitude est de ne plus pouvoir être exploité du tout, de faire l'objet de relégation dans une « humanité superflue », livrée à l'abandon, et dont le capital n'a guère besoin pour son fonctionnement. Une forme inédite de la vie psychique adossée à la mémoire artificielle et numérique et à des modèles cognitifs relevant des neurosciences et de la neuroéconomie se fait jour. Automatismes psychiques et automatismes technologiques ne forment plus qu'un seul et même faisceau, la fiction d'un sujet humain nouveau, « entrepreneur de soi-même », plastique, et sommé de se reconfigurer en permanence en fonction des artefacts qu'offre l'époque, s'installe¹⁵.

Ce nouvel homme, sujet du marché et de la dette, se prend pour un pur produit du hasard naturel. Cette sorte de « forme abstraite toute prête » (Hegel), capable de s'habiller de tous les contenus, est typique de la civilisation de l'image et des nouveaux rapports que celle-ci établit entre les faits et les fictions¹⁶. Animal parmi d'autres, il n'aurait aucune essence propre à protéger ou à sauvegarder. Il n'y aurait, *a priori*, aucune limite à la modification de sa structure biologique et génétique¹⁷. Il se distingue du sujet tragique et aliéné de la première

industrialisation sur bien des aspects. D'abord, il est un individu emprisonné dans son désir. Pour sa jouissance, il dépend presque entièrement de sa capacité à reconstruire publiquement sa vie intime et à l'offrir sur un marché comme marchandise échangeable. Sujet neuro-économique absorbé par le double souci exclusif de son animalité (la reproduction biologique de sa vie) et de sa choséité (la jouissance des biens de ce monde), cet *homme-chose*, *homme-machine*, *homme-code* et *homme-flux* cherche avant tout à réguler sa conduite en fonction des normes du marché, n'hésitant guère à s'auto-instrumentaliser et à instrumentaliser autrui pour optimiser ses parts de jouissance. Condamné à l'apprentissage à vie, à la flexibilité, au règne du court terme, il doit embrasser sa condition de sujet soluble et fongible afin de répondre à l'injonction qui lui est constamment faite – devenir un autre.

D'avantage encore, le néolibéralisme représente l'âge au cours duquel capitalisme et animisme, longtemps difficilement tenus à l'écart l'un de l'autre, tendent finalement à ne plus faire qu'un. Le cycle du capital allant désormais de l'image à l'image, l'image est devenue un facteur d'accélération des énergies pulsionnelles. De la fusion potentielle du capitalisme et de l'animisme résulte un certain nombre de conséquences déterminantes pour notre entendement futur de la race et du racisme. D'abord les risques systémiques auxquels seuls les esclaves nègres furent exposés au moment du premier capitalisme constituent désormais sinon la norme, du moins le lot de toutes les humanités subalternes. Ensuite, cette universalisation tendancielle de la condition nègre va de pair avec l'apparition de pratiques impériales inédites. Celles-ci empruntent tant aux logiques esclavagistes de capture et de

prédation qu'aux logiques coloniales d'occupation et d'extraction, voire des guerres civiles ou de razzias des époques antérieures¹⁸. Les guerres d'occupation et les guerres contre-insurrectionnelles visent non seulement à traquer et à liquider l'ennemi, mais aussi à opérer une partition du temps et une atomisation de l'espace. Une partie du travail consistant désormais à transformer le réel en fiction et la fiction en réel, la mobilisation militaire par les airs, la destruction des infrastructures, les coups et blessures s'accompagnent d'une mobilisation totale par les images¹⁹. Celles-ci font désormais partie des dispositifs d'une violence qui se voudrait pure.

Par ailleurs, capture, prédation, extraction et guerres asymétriques vont de pair avec la re-balancisation du monde et l'intensification des pratiques de zonage – par quoi il faut comprendre une complicité inédite de l'économique et du biologique. En termes concrets, cette complicité se traduit par la militarisation des frontières, le morcèlement des territoires, leur partition et la création, à l'intérieur des États existants, d'espaces plus ou moins autonomes, parfois soustraits à toute forme de souveraineté nationale mais opérant sous la loi informelle d'une multitude d'autorités fragmentées et de pouvoirs armés privés, ou sous la tutelle d'entités internationales à prétexte ou à raison humanitaire ou, simplement, d'armées étrangères²⁰. Ces pratiques de zonage vont généralement de pair avec un maillage transnational de la répression, le quadrillage idéologique des populations, la location de mercenaires affectés à la lutte contre les guérillas locales, la formation de « commandos de chasse », le recours systématique aux emprisonnements de masse, à la torture et aux exécutions extrajudiciaires²¹. Grace aux pratiques de zonage, un « impérialisme de la

désorganisation » manufacture des désastres et multiplie à peu près partout les conditions d'exception tout en se nourrissant de l'anarchie.

À coup de contrats au titre de la reconstruction et sous prétexte de combattre l'insécurité et le désordre, firmes étrangères, grandes puissances et classes dominantes autochtones font main basse sur les richesses et gisements des pays ainsi vassalisés. Transferts massifs de fortunes en direction d'intérêts privés, dépossession d'une part grandissante des richesses que les luttes passées avaient arraché au capital, paiement indéfini de blocs de dettes, la violence du capital frappe désormais y compris l'Europe elle-même où une nouvelle classe d'hommes et de femmes structurellement endettés apparaît²²

Plus caractéristique encore de la fusion potentielle du capitalisme et de l'animisme est la possibilité, fort distincte, de transformation des êtres humains en choses animées, en données numériques et en codes. Pour la première fois dans l'histoire humaine, le nom Nègre ne renvoie plus seulement à la condition faite aux gens d'origine africaine à l'époque du premier capitalisme (déprédations de divers ordres, dépossession de tout pouvoir d'autodétermination et, surtout, du futur et du temps, ces deux matrices du possible). C'est cette fongibilité nouvelle, cette solubilité, son institutionnalisation en tant que nouvelle norme d'existence et sa généralisation à l'ensemble de la planète que nous appelons *le devenir-nègre du monde*.

LA RACE AU FUTUR

Le Nègre et la race ayant été deux figures centrales (quoique niées) du discours euro-américain sur l'« homme », doit-on penser que le déclassement

de l'Europe et sa relégation au rang d'une simple province du monde signera l'extinction du racisme ? Ou faut-il comprendre plutôt que, l'humanité devenue fongible, le racisme se recomposera dans les interstices mêmes d'un nouveau langage – ensablé, moléculaire et en fragments – sur l'« espèce » ? En posant la question en ces termes, l'on n'oublie point que ni le Nègre, ni la race n'ont jamais été figés (chapitre 1). Au contraire, ils ont toujours fait partie d'un enchaînement de choses elles-mêmes jamais finies. Par ailleurs, leur signification fondamentale a toujours été existentielle. Le nom Nègre en particulier flua, pendant longtemps, une extraordinaire énergie, tantôt chariot des instincts inférieurs et des puissances chaotiques et tantôt signe lumineux de la possibilité de rachat du monde et de la vie un jour de transfiguration (chapitres 2 et 5). C'est parce qu'en plus de désigner une réalité hétéroclite et multiple, fragmentée – des fragments de fragments toujours nouveaux –, ce nom signalait une série d'expériences historiques déchirantes, la réalité d'une vie vacante ; la hantise, pour des millions de gens pris dans les rets de la domination de race, de voir fonctionner leurs corps et leurs pensées du dehors et d'avoir été transformés en spectateurs de quelque chose qui était et qui n'était pas leur propre existence²³ (chapitres 3 et 4).

Ce n'est pas tout. Produit d'une machine sociale et technique indissociable du capitalisme, de son émergence et de sa planétarisation, ce nom fut inventé pour signifier exclusion, abrutissement et avilissement, voire une limite toujours conjurée et abhorrée. Honni et profondément déshonoré, le Nègre est, dans l'ordre de la modernité, le seul de tous les humains dont la chair fut faite chose et l'esprit marchandise – la crypte vivante du capital.

Mais – et telle est sa dualité manifeste – dans un retournement spectaculaire, il devint le symbole d'un désir conscient de vie, une force jaillissante, flottante et plastique, pleinement engagée dans l'acte de création et à même de vivre dans plusieurs temps et plusieurs histoires à la fois. Sa capacité d'ensorcellement, voire d'hallucination, n'en fut que décuplée. En le Nègre, certains n'hésitèrent point à reconnaître le limon de la terre, la veine de la vie à travers laquelle le rêve d'une humanité réconciliée avec la nature, voire la totalité de l'existant, trouveraient de nouveau visage, voix et mouvement²⁴.

Le crépuscule européen s'annonce alors même que le monde euro-américain n'est toujours pas arrivé à savoir cela même qu'il voulait savoir (ou voulait faire) du Nègre. En bien des pays sévit désormais un « racisme sans races »²⁵. Afin de mieux pratiquer la discrimination tout en rendant celle-ci conceptuellement impensable, l'on mobilise la « culture » et la « religion » en lieu et place de la « biologie ». Tout en prétendant que l'universalisme républicain est aveugle à la race, l'on enferme les non-Blancs dans leurs origines supposées et on ne cesse de multiplier des catégories effectivement racialisées dont la plupart alimentent, au quotidien, l'islamophobie. Mais qui parmi nous peut douter que le moment est arrivé de finalement commencer-de-soi-même, et pendant que l'Europe se fourvoie, prise par le malaise de ne pas savoir où elle en est dans et avec le monde, de prendre base et de fonder quelque chose d'absolument neuf ? Pour ce faire, faudra-t-il alors oublier le Nègre ou, au contraire, lui garder sa puissance du faux, son caractère lumineux, fluide et cristallin – cet étrange sujet glissant, sériel et plastique, constamment masqué, fermement campé des deux côtés du miroir, le long d'une frontière qu'il ne cesse

de longer ? Si, par ailleurs, au milieu de cette tourmente, le Nègre devait effectivement survivre à ceux qui l'ont inventé, et si, par un de ces retournements dont l'histoire a le secret, toute l'humanité subalterne devenait effectivement nègre, quels risques un tel *devenir-nègre du monde* porterait au regard de la promesse de liberté et d'égalité universelle dont le nom Nègre aura été le signe manifeste tout au long de la période moderne ? (chapitre 6).

Par ailleurs, de l'acharnement colonial à diviser, à classer, à hiérarchiser et à différencier, il est resté quelque chose, des entailles, voire des lésions. Pis, une faille a été érigée, qui demeure. Est-il certain qu'aujourd'hui nous pouvons entretenir avec le Nègre des relations autres que celles qui lient le maître à son valet ? Lui-même ne persiste-t-il pas à ne se voir que par et dans la différence ? N'est-il pas convaincu d'être habité par un double, une entité étrangère qui l'empêche de parvenir au savoir de soi-même ? Ne vit-il pas son monde comme celui de la perte et de la scission, et n'entretient-il pas le rêve de retour à une identité avec soi-même déclinée sur le mode de l'essentialité pure et donc, souvent, du dissemblable ? À partir de quel moment le projet de soulèvement radical et d'autonomie au nom de la différence tourne-t-il en simple inversion mimétique de ce que l'on a passé son temps à couvrir de malédiction ?

Telles sont certaines des questions que se pose ce livre qui, n'étant ni une histoire des idées ni un exercice de sociologie historique, se sert néanmoins de l'histoire pour proposer un style de réflexion critique sur le monde de notre temps. En privilégiant une manière de réminiscence, mi-solaire et mi-lunaire, mi-diurne et mi-nocturne, l'on avait à l'idée une seule question – comment penser la différence

et la vie, le semblable et le dissemblable, l'excédent et l'*en-commun* ? Cette interrogation, l'expérience nègre la résume bien, elle qui sait si bien tenir dans la conscience contemporaine la place d'une limite fuyante, d'une sorte de miroir mobile. Encore faudrait-il se demander pourquoi ce miroir mobile n'arrête pas de tourner sur lui-même. Qu'est-ce qui l'empêche d'aboutir ? Qu'est-ce qui explique cette relance infinie de scissions toujours plus stériles les unes que les autres ?

NOTES

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