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“Fictions of the Untold City in Postcolonial Sub-Saharan Africa”

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

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This dissertation examines how urban novels from five major Sub-Saharan African cities rewrite their respective imaginaries to foreground possibilities. This project engages seven novels from Francophone, Anglophone and Lusophone Africa to conceptualize how contemporary African authors write the places, people and stories at the heart of urban everyday life. To what extent can literature reshape our understanding of African cities and the people who inhabit them? As the African continent becomes increasingly urbanized, its literary fiction gives voice and place to the concerns and strategies of its oft-neglected urban dwellers, as expressed through the literary works of contemporary African writers such as Ken Bugul, Aminata Sow Fall, Calixthe Beyala, Marie-Louise Mumbu, as well as Angolan writer Ondjaki and Nigerian writers Chibundu Onuzo and A. Igoni Barrett. I argue that attending to an urban literary imaginary is all the more needed when dominant discourse is disproportionately steeped in an ethos of lack and failure, as is especially the case of Sub-Saharan African cities. In the five chapters that comprise this dissertation, I analyze writing from Dakar, Kinshasa, Douala, Lagos, and Luanda as generative of a new ecology, brought about through the efforts of the most vulnerable inhabitants, who manage to ingeniously negotiate their way out of and through hostile socio-political and economic conditions. In doing so, I conceptualize a poetics of African urban literature that brings to the fore literary forms of vulnerability, resistance, solidarity, and survival that draw from and expand upon the creative potentialities particular to the urban.

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Introduction: Novel Imaginaries of Urban Africa

*Chaque ville a son âme.
Chaque ville a son corps, sa peau,
son intelligence, sa bêtise, son côté monstre,
sa poétique, sa part de mystère...*
—Sony Labou Tansi, “Kinshasa ne sera jamais”¹

“Il est des villes qui n’ont pas besoin de littérature: elles sont littérature. Elles défilent poitrine bombée, la tête sur les épaules. Elles sont fières et s’assument en dépit des sacs-poubelles qu’elles promènent. La Ville-Pays, un exemple parmi tant d’autres... Elle vibrait de littérature” (Mwanza Mujila 125). These words, which appear in Congolese writer Fiston Mwanza Mujila’s acclaimed novel *Tram 83* (2014), point to an intricate relationship between literature and the urban, one in which cities are literature, or vibrate with literature, a vibration that is in turn reflected in fiction. Through metaphor, Mwanza Mujila personifies cities, giving them a body and sensations, as well as a personality. Mwanza Mujila does not choose any body for the city; the gendered female body drags garbage bags, yet proudly, fiercely holding her head high. This combined image of vulnerability and force that urban bodies best translate into fiction guides the heart of this dissertation. Mwanza Mujila’s city, the fictional “Ville-Pays,” allegedly represents the southeastern city of Lubumbashi in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Though Mwanza Mujila writes that there are many such cities, his own fictional creation, like the literary cities that constitute the main body of work of this dissertation, is located in postcolonial Sub-Saharan Africa. Christina Horvath defines urban novels by writing, “Ce qui distingue cependant le roman urbain de ces autres genres [littéraires], c’est son souci particulier de faire de la ville le véritable point focal, voire le protagoniste du récit” (9). The embodied fictional city of *Tram 83* perfectly corresponds to this definition as the city comes to life through the stories of some of its iconic inhabitants and some of its most dynamic spaces. There, as in many of the novels this dissertation will

¹ This poem was published posthumously as part of the collection *L’Autre-monde: écrit inédits* (1997).

analyze, urban dwellers appear at once as the living bodies that animate the city, and as body parts that establish the city as protagonist.

The epigraph for this introduction, an excerpt from a posthumous poem entitled “Kinshasa ne sera jamais,” penned by fellow Congolese poet and novelist Sony Labou Tansi, similarly appeals to the body of the city, this time clearly identified as Kinshasa. Again, the city has its own body (“chaque ville a son corps”), but this body is energized through the practices and movements of “cent mille merveilles, quatre millions et demi de miracles qui chantent, pensent et dansent” (22). In the poem, Labou Tansi rejects aspects of the built environment of Kinshasa he nevertheless enumerates, to celebrate the “merveilles” and “miracles” of Kinshasa: the Kinois. In Labou Tansi’s poem as in Mwanza Mujila’s novel, what animates and regenerates the city are the urban experiences and stories that, for the two writers, are anchored in street-level practices of the city. These practices, as well as the urban body and literary imaginaries they compose, are the focal point of this dissertation.

In an introduction to an edited volume of the literary journal *Itinéraires*, Aline Bergé, Xavier Garnier and Marc Kober write, “Les pratiques de l’espace qui s’inventent dans les métropoles en mutation de notre monde postcolonial sont indissociables de textes qui en formulent les poétiques” (1). This claim, which I adopt in this work, implies perhaps controversially that one of the ways of understanding African cities would be by way of these urban poetics, as they uniquely reflect and echo—to deploy visual and auditory metaphors—spatial practices unique to the postcolonial world. In this dissertation, I argue that attending to an urban literary imaginary is all the more needed when dominant discourse is disproportionately steeped in an ethos of lack and failure, as is especially the case of Sub-Saharan African cities, which I will demonstrate in a later section of this introduction. Therefore, this dissertation engages in a rereading of the literary fiction of African cities in search of the creative strategies inhabitants devise to survive and flourish, in spite of the

difficult conditions that determine and sometimes endanger everyday life. In the five chapters that comprise this dissertation, I analyze writing from five Sub-Saharan African cities—Dakar, Kinshasa, Douala, Lagos, and Luanda—as generative of a new ecology, brought about through the efforts of the most vulnerable inhabitants of these cities who manage to ingeniously negotiate their way out of and through hostile socio-political and economic conditions. In doing so, I conceptualize a poetics of African urban literature that brings to the fore literary forms of vulnerability, resistance, solidarity, and survival that draw from and expand upon the creative potentialities particular to the urban. Using Michel de Certeau's theories of everyday urban practice as a guiding light, my analyses borrow from the optical metaphors of zooming to move in and out of various city spaces, changing scale to focus on parts of cities—the streets of Marie-Louise Mumbu's Kinshasa, a particular neighborhood in Calixthe Beyala's Douala, a single building in Ondjaki's Luanda—and then right up to the people, objects and relationships that live, occupy space and grow within them.

By “new world ecology,” I mean to recast the notion of ecology as a holistic concept that encompasses the natural and built environment, as well as all the encounters and interactions that constitute lived space. This project seeks to recognize what urban geographer Garth Myers alerts us to in the introduction of *African Cities*: “As African cities urbanize, it becomes evident that they do so in ways that challenge prevailing theories and models of urban geography, sociology, anthropology, and planning” (1).² It is my contention that the literary urban imaginaries of African cities as expressed through the fiction of contemporary African writers defy Global Northern concepts of ecology, and that a responsible eco-critical reading of these novels must be at once decolonial and intersectional in order to truly account for the diverse and original rewriting of ecologies of urban space that these novels perform. For instance, in Aminata Sow Fall's *La Grève des bâttu*, the beggars of

² In *African Cities: Alternative Visions of Urban Theory and Practice* (2011), Myers compiles a history of African Urban Studies that acknowledges different trends, including the shortcomings of some of the scholarship in accounting for the diversity and vibrancy of African urban spaces.

Dakar epitomize the city despite the institutionally backed discourse of waste and inhumanity that dismisses them. Sow Fall's narrative creates a social and ecological equilibrium in which the beggars are crucial to the moral and ethical prosperity of the urban community. In Calixthe Beyala's novel *Les honneurs perdus*, the ecology of the slum appears to evade all those who do not thrive there, as she writes the neighborhood of New Bell through the trope of creative repurposing. To show the frailty of urban ecologies that cannot function when the needs of their population are ignored, Ondjaki literally sets the city that ignores its most vulnerable voices on fire.

This dissertation makes an intervention at the crossroads of African urban humanities and literary criticism by examining how city novels from five major Sub-Saharan African urban centers rewrite their respective imaginaries to foreground hidden possibilities. Labou Tansi's poem reminds us that "chaque ville a sa poétique." This dissertation seeks to complement the breadth of considering the urban literary imaginaries of Dakar, Kinshasa, Lagos, Douala and Luanda by examining in depth the unique rhythms, languages and (his)stories of each city, opening critical space for a discussion of their individual poetics while allowing for crucial connections between them. Through an interdisciplinary critical framework, my approach to the literary text anchors interpretation in spatial analysis, urban policy and theory, literary criticism, and African discourses of thought. This porous framework attempts to move beyond disciplinary boundaries that have often dominated discourses about African texts. Its comparative structure brings together different regions and languages for an overdue conversation about African urban imaginaries beyond national and linguistic borders.

Fictions of the City

In *Espèces d'espaces* (1974), Georges Pérec warns against defining cities too quickly, “Ne pas essayer trop vite de trouver une définition de la ville; c’est beaucoup trop gros, on a toutes les chances de se tromper” (83), at the beginning of a section that offers multiple definitions by way of the relationship between cities and us. Pérec begins with fragments that appear to aim towards a totality: “Une ville: de la pierre, du béton, de l’asphalte. Des inconnus, des monuments, des institutions. / Mégaloilles. Villes tentaculaires. Artères. Foules” (83). Immediately afterwards, he questions his previous assumptions, moving away from the built environment: “Qu’est-ce que le coeur d’une ville? L’âme d’une ville?” (Pérec 85). Pérec proposes a method that will orient my own lack of an overarching definition, “Méthode: il faudrait, ou bien renoncer à parler de la ville, à parler sur la ville, ou bien s’obliger à en parler le plus simplement du monde, en parler évidemment, familièrement. Chasser toute idée préconçue. Cesser de penser en termes tout préparés, oublier ce qu’ont dit les urbanistes et les sociologues” (85). My hope is that the various definitions that will appear, complementing and sometimes contradicting each other over the span of this dissertation, will reflect the porosity, fluidity, and mobility that I think best define the city as object of everyday practice and of intellectual inquiry. One of the beliefs that underpins this entire project is that literary works bring about some of the most evocative—if not the most concise—definitions of the city.

The relationship of urban space to the acts of reading and writing is intimate and intricate. Many scholars have attempted to conceptualize that relation, although arguably few thinkers committed to investigating the many echoes between cities and stories (but also language and writing) as profoundly as Michel de Certeau did, which explains the continued

relevance of his scholarship for urban literary studies.³ Several chapters directly draw on de Certeau's conceptualization of the everyday practice of the city. In a section entitled "Récits d'espaces," de Certeau relates stories to spaces via the metaphor of *metaphorai*, a term that etymologically translates as "to carry across" and is now used for the public transportation in modern Greece. De Certeau writes, "Les récits pourraient également porter ce beau nom ["métaphore"]: chaque jour, ils traversent et ils organisent des lieux; ils les sélectionnent et les relient ensembles; ils en font des phrases et des itinéraires. Ce sont des parcours d'espace" (170). This spatial reading applies to all narratives for de Certeau, but explains why novels are so apt at rendering cities into words. More importantly since perhaps less evident, de Certeau adds, "Ces aventures narrées [...] ne constituent pas seulement un 'supplément' aux énonciations piétonnières et aux rhétoriques cheminatoires. Elles ne se contentent pas de les déplacer et transposer dans le champ du langage. [...] Elles font le voyage, avant ou pendant que les pieds l'exécutent" (171). The argument that narratives are practices of space goes against the accusation that literature somehow stands outside of a "real" space that exists in isolation and that narration at best supplements. In fact, de Certeau insists as much on the fact that narratives are practices of space as he does on the fact that spaces are fictional constructs. To reflect that ambiguity, I have chosen the term "fiction" in the title of this dissertation, "Fictions of the Untold City in Postcolonial Sub-Saharan Africa."

Going even further, de Certeau argues that narratives do not merely "describe"; they perform and create spaces. Descriptions are, he writes, "fondatrices d'espaces" (182). In a later section, de Certeau defines writing as "l'activité concrète qui consiste sur un espace propre, la page, à construire un texte qui a pouvoir sur l'extériorité dont il a d'abord été isolé" (199). This power of writing is at the heart of my hypothesis that urban African novels can bring to the fore alternative, poetic, discourses on African cities. And that poetic discourse

³ Others include Jean-Claude Bailly's comparison of streets to sentences in *La ville à l'oeuvre*, Barthes' short text on semiology and urbanism, or Olivier Mongin's likening the city to a blank page upon which subjects leave a trace like a pen would.

not only affects a world of literary images, but can also perform cities in a subversive way, ultimately acting upon all of the fictions of the city, beyond representations identified as “literary.”

I have chosen the literary medium of novels because they are remarkably apt at conveying the polyphony of urban experience (Mongin 21), its layers of sensations (Mongin 24) and the narration of spatial practices. I am aware that in doing so, I do not address the lesser visibility of postcolonial poetry that Jahan Ramazani notes in *The Hybrid Muse*. This dissertation’s focus on vulnerable spaces and characters and on the ways fiction counters their discursive invisibility requires longer character development and the presence of a narrative, both of which are more often components of longer works of prose, specifically of novels. To her earlier definition of “urban novel,” Horvath adds,

On a vu que la ville seule ne fait pas le roman urbain: si la situation de l'intrigue constitue un important critère de classement, celui-ci est loin d'être le seul. Un récit qui se déroule dans une métropole n'est pas nécessairement un roman urbain; pour le devenir, il doit également s'ancrer dans l'époque contemporaine, s'intéresser au quotidien ordinaire de ses personnages citadins et porter des marques intrinsèques de l'actualité. Le décor comme critère générique reste cependant indispensable: il serait difficile d'imaginer un roman urbain sans aucun lien à la ville. (23)

Horvath’s reference to the everyday further explains de Certeau’s theoretical relevance in the study of urban literature. Her claim about contemporaneity works within the context of the novels I analyze in this dissertation. Despite significant heterogeneity in style and time period, as well as linguistic, national and regional backgrounds, all the novels I study are situated in a close present to that when they were written, with the notable exception of Beyala’s *Les honneurs perdus*, which spans several decades, starting before Cameroon gained independence.

The multiple resonances between writing and the urban have not been lost on literary scholars, and even more significantly on scholars of urban literature.⁴ As Hana Wirth-Nesher argues in *City Codes* (1996), the reader of an urban novel also reads the character's "reading" of the city. This plural reading experience is critical to this project, as it offers another layer of reading, this time one that rethinks and analyzes urban and literary interpretation. As far as literary criticism of Sub-Saharan African urban fiction is concerned, one cannot forget the foundational work of Roger Chemain in *La Ville dans le roman africain* (1981), nor Claire Dehon's section on "romans de la ville" in *Le réalisme africain: le roman francophone en Afrique sub-saharienne* (2002), which I discuss more in chapter 2. Several journal articles and at least one edited volume engage with literature set in Sub-Saharan urban spaces other than the cities under discussion in this dissertation.⁵ Most recently, Madhu Krishnan's *Writing Spatiality in West Africa* (2018) aims to "explore and unpack both the significance of space to conceptions of the (post)colonial world and the extent to which literature itself is shaped by and constitutive of these forms of spatiality" (2). Although Krishnan does not specifically focus on cities, the fact that her project draws from various literary traditions and languages, combines use of social sciences and literary analysis, and claims that spatiality in literature enacts a "worlding of the (post)colonial world" (*Writing Spatiality* 2) all put her work in conversation with what I undertake in this dissertation. Others, such as Ato Quayson

⁴ In the English-language critical tradition, Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* (1973) and Burton Pike's *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* (1981) were early attempts at taxonomies of urban literature, followed by Hana Wirth-Nesher's *City Codes* (1996) as well as Richard Lehan's history of *The City in Literature* (1998). This list is by no means exhaustive and does not include many recent examples of literary criticism on city literature, nor does it mention literary critical works primarily based on the fiction of North American, Latin American or Asian spaces. In the metropolitan French-language critical tradition, Pierre Citron's *La Poésie de Paris dans la littérature française de Rousseau à Baudelaire* (1961) and Karlheinz Stierle's *La Capitale des signes* retrace a discourse on urban literature centered in Paris. Of course, Honoré de Balzac's "La Fille aux yeux d'or" and Walter Benjamin's work on Baudelaire's poetry represent foundational examples of conceptualizing a writer's take on the city. Other scholars have looked at specific aspects of city life and cultural production, including the influence of the aural (Aimée Boutin). Christina Horvath's recent *Le Roman urbain contemporain en France* (2007) builds upon this longstanding history to bring less discussed spaces, in particular the banlieues, into the scholarly conversation.

⁵ Aurélie Journo and Xavier Garnier have both written about urban literature in Kenya, Ramcy Kabuya Salomon about Lumumbashi as literary epicenter, and Garnier has also written about colonial and postcolonial African cities in literature. Worthy of note is also the collected volume *African City Textualities*, edited by Ranka Primorac.

in *Oxford Street, Accra* or Garth Myers in *African Cities*, draw on literature for a sociological reading of African cities. In this dissertation, I strive to reverse that impulse; although I work with Quayson and Myers' analyses of African urban spaces, I foreground literary texts as the primary sources for this study of African cities. How and how differently do we "read" African cities if we give priority to their literary imaginaries?

One can also mention the field of literary geography, as defined by Michel Chevalier and Michel Collot, and the associated, and sometimes synonymous, field of geocriticism. Collot identifies three different areas of research:

celui d'une géographie de la littérature, qui étudierait le contexte spatial dans lequel sont produites les œuvres, et qui se situerait sur le plan géographique, mais aussi historique, social et culturel ; celui d'une géocritique, qui étudierait les représentations de l'espace dans les textes eux-mêmes, et qui se situerait plutôt sur le plan de l'imaginaire et de la thématique ; celui d'une géopoétique, qui étudierait les rapports entre l'espace et les formes et genres littéraires, et qui pourrait déboucher sur une poétique, une théorie de la création littéraire. (8)

This dissertation performs all three, putting them into conversation with each other, although I am in part reluctant to adopt Collot's terms, as they favor spatial analysis over a more holistic textual analysis that also accounts for the importance of space. Nevertheless, the introduction to Dustin Crowley's *Africa's Narrative Geographies* (2015) makes a compelling case that "the central questions of African literary study have fundamentally geographic components" (2); this is the reason why this dissertation draws on many theorists of urban humanities and African urban studies.⁶

That being said, this dissertation rethinks the fictions of cities partly from the point of departure that cities are fictional constructs. African urban studies and theories of the urban inform and ground this work in the historical, economic, political, and social contexts to which they belong. Quayson also relates postcoloniality to spatiality because of "colonial

⁶ Some of the most prominent scholars of the nascent field of spatial literary studies include Robert Tally Jr. and Bertrand Westphal. However, in her review of Crowley's monograph, Madhu Krishnan suggests that through his geocritical framework, Crowley considers space in an abstract way and that his literary analyses lack the social and political context they require. Krishnan's reticence echoes my own reticence about the term and concept of geocriticism.

space making,” which he defines as “first and foremost the projection of a series of sociopolitical dimensions onto geographic space” that “involve not just society and politics but also economy, culture, and a wide range of symbolic and discursive practices” (“Periods versus Concepts” 344). However, and although Quayson explains that postcolonial literature refracts the “new spatial dynamics” brought on by independence, he also warns us of “misapprehending postcolonial literature as being a simple reflection of conditions in postcolonial societies” (“Periods versus Concepts” 346). In the words of Quayson,

In my opinion literature, postcolonial or otherwise, must be viewed first and foremost as a textual tapestry of particularities and thresholds. Particularities inhere in cultural or sociohistorical details but may also open under pressure onto thresholds of literary signification. [...] Furthermore the relations between particularities and thresholds are also rendered unpredictable, or short-circuited, particularly in the literary engagement with the sublime, violence, and disability. (“Periods versus Concepts” 346)

The expression “textual tapestry of particularities and thresholds” befits a comparative project that does not mean to exhaust the genre, or flatten out particularities, but instead hopes to bring to the fore the kind of thresholds and unpredictable relations that Quayson mentions.

Some of the most difficult challenges in this project come from within. Urban fiction muddles categories, leaning into the sociological bent that reinforces readings of African literature as sociological data, even though this dissertation aims to show that literature enriches the epistemology of Africa in new and original ways. In other words, throughout the five chapters that constitute this project, I perform a reading of urban novels by writers Ken Bugul, Aminata Sow Fall, Marie-Louise Mumbu, Chibundu Onuzo, A. Igoni Barrett, Calixthe Beyala, and Ondjaki in order to understand the literary imaginary of cities. In no way do I claim to have access to any “real” city that does or does not exist outside of the stories that are told about it. In the footsteps of de Certeau, I even doubt the existence of such a city. A variety of urban experiences—some lived, some transmitted, some imagined—inform the literary texts that I read. This dissertation makes use of all forms of data to better

understand the manners in which writers reclaim facts and discourses about the cities they narrativize.

For however much I refuse to treat the literary imaginaries of Dakar, Kinshasa, Lagos, Douala and Luanda as either exemplary or exceptional of an otherwise defined urban entity, I also do not believe that cities exist as neutral or coincidental literary objects. Insofar as fictional urban spaces and people who inhabit them relate to concrete experiences of space, all these experiences matter to this critical study. But it is my contention in this dissertation that urban literary imaginaries challenge, take liberties with, exaggerate, and most importantly poeticize urban spaces and experiences. It is that poetic gesture, as well as its corollary repercussions—both literary and political—that constitute the heart of this project.

Textual creations, and the fictional cities that writers build through their literary imaginary, can and do stand on their own. Literary cities can be read, enjoyed and valued for what they bring aesthetically, stylistically and narratively to the stories for which they provide the setting, or a character, as per Horvath's definition. But to read these literary imaginaries in isolation is not what I propose to do here. This is the reason why I draw on the scholarly disciplines of sociology and anthropology for my literary analyses, and why literature can complete what is sometimes missed in these social science-oriented readings of the city. Writers—African writers probably less so than anyone else—do not write in a vacuum. All writers grapple with the realities of the cities they write about, and in turn they build and/or deconstruct—sometimes both at once—the mythologies to which these cities belong. African writers in addition must deal with postcolonial legacies, problematic or missing archives of knowledge production, a lack of global recognition, and a history of erasure. The material conditions of life in these cities, and the way these conditions are perceived abroad, impact writers, permeating the novels they write, often intentionally so, especially in the case of urban novels. African writers are least forgetful of all as to how

much representations matter. Many scholarly discussions about audience, publics and intentions attest to this fact, with particular emphasis on concerns about extroversion and linguistic choices.⁷ Any doubt about that could easily be dismissed by looking at the frequency with which African writers are asked to represent, explain, or justify the countries, cities, and even continent from which they originate, regardless of how long they lived there or how familiar they are with cultural traditions and current events. Countless news articles penned by Nigerian writers attempt to defend Lagos, and one of the ways that is done is by referring to its vibrant cultural life, especially its literature.⁸ However much fictional renditions of Dakar, Kinshasa, Lagos, Douala and Luanda may indeed be read as literary objects and little else, this is not what this project aims to do either precisely because the African writer of her or his city is deeply enmeshed in the political workings and global yearnings of urban representation.

The novels that make up this dissertation work at capturing and echoing the buoyancy of the streets, the almost imperceptible minutiae of the everyday, where people meet, fight and create; they hold a lens as it were, zooming in and out, changing scales and focal point in order to show the unseen, reverberate the sounds of the unheard, tell the untold story, write the unwritten city. What kind of new urban imaginary can literature then bring forth in Lagos and Kinshasa? What otherwise overlooked voices and experiences does fiction foreground in Dakar, Douala and Luanda? Contemporary African writers, I argue in this dissertation, enter the discursive realm of the African city by reconfiguring its space and time, conjuring up its neglected voices, forgotten spaces, and overlooked social connections, zeroing in on the urban interstices of African experience. This dissertation suggests that the narrative paradigms that hone in on urban African daily lives, micro solidarities and unheard voices

⁷ Amongst many examples, see for instance the influential scholarship of Karin Barber, Eileen Julien, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o.

⁸ See for instance an interview with writer Okey Ndibe for Words Without Borders.

constitute a necessary intervention into African urban scholarship, and one for which only fiction can translate the multiple, embodied, and also metaphorical layers.

African City Narratives: New Maps, New Archives

This dissertation exists at the intersection between urban theory writ large—including the same theories that have been used to “read” urban spaces in the Global North—and African urban studies. There is a longstanding practice of applying models of cities and urban planning from the Global North to analyze and evaluate urban spaces on the continent, a trend that Achille Mbembe and others denounce in the scholarly treatment of African cities.⁹ In the introduction to *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe spells out an overarching issue: “In the very principle of its constitution, in its language, and in its finalities, narrative about Africa is always pretext for a comment about something else, some other place, some other people” (3). The criteria for evaluating Africa reproduce colonial forms of oppression and assumptions of Western superiority. As such, African spaces are always described in terms of “lack” (Mbembe *On the Postcolony* 8) and worse, as Richard Priebe explains, “the very idea of Africa in Western discourse has Africa geographically situated as a place of violence” (Priebe 46). Of course these pervasive representations are inherited from colonial discourses that reduce Africa to an “Afrique éternelle, rurale et archaïque, mais aussi belliqueuse et ravagée par divers fléaux, justification aussi bien de la mission civilisatrice que de la vision exclusive de la ville” (Goerg “Domination coloniale” 18).

In their 2004 article “Writing from the African Metropolis,” Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe famously denounced the “epistemological abyss” (349) of the African continent, continuously described as “a failed and incomplete example of something else” (348).¹⁰ To

⁹ For instance, see Robinson, Pieterse, or Myers.

¹⁰ More precisely, they define the “epistemological abyss” as one that does not simply come from the fact that “life changes rapidly and vast domains of human struggle and achievement are hardly the object of documentation, archiving, or empirical descriptions—and even less so of satisfactory narrative or interpretive

account for the continent's *creativity of practice*, Nuttall and Mbembe suggest identifying sites that “defamiliarize common sense readings of Africa” (352). “Identifying such sites,” they write, “entails working with new archives—or even with old archives in new ways” (352). In fact, Nuttall and Mbembe themselves point to the metropolis as one of these archives.¹¹ Through close readings of characters and spaces in the novels that constitute my literary archive, and an examination of stylistic strategies mobilized by their authors, I show how contemporary Sub-Saharan African novels challenge traditional perceptions of the city and create a new urban literary imaginary where the city itself acts as a vector of unforeseen possibilities for the continent.

From the arbitrary drawing of political boundaries that occurred before, during and after the Berlin Conference of 1885 and the “Scramble for Africa,” and the subsequent urban planning of African spaces in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the continent was repeatedly conquered, assimilated and controlled through the drawing and redrawing of physical maps.¹² France’s venture into Africa was in fact legitimized through the work of geographer and cartographer Onésime Reclus who devised a moral justification for the rose-colored colonial maps of the French empire through the notion of a linguistic community known as “Francophonie.”¹³ Reclus summoned language as the heart of a common identity

understanding. It is also that uncertainty and turbulence, instability and unpredictability, and rapid, chronic, and multidirectional shifts are the social forms taken, in many instances, by daily experience” (349).

¹¹ Nuttall and Mbembe’s example of an African metropolis is Johannesburg and they use the term “metropolis” to underscore its heritage as a late nineteenth-century city (industrial, modernist), and as a global city, according to Saskia Sassen’s definition: inclusion within global flows of capital and site of production. They also relate the term to de Certeau, to rhythms and to a bodily experience of the city. While their account is fascinating, it focuses on modes of exchange far more visible on the global scene than those I will focus on in this dissertation. I will therefore not retain the term “metropolis” in the remainder of this project, but the more inclusive term of “city.”

¹² The widely used expression “Scramble for Africa” is problematic inasmuch as it presents Africa as a hitherto open land for the ownership of which various European colonizers could fight. It omits that the African continent had been inhabited and governed for many centuries prior to European colonization.

¹³ “Francophonie” as it is known today was not born of a celebration of diversity as it can sometimes be presented; rather, it was constructed as a descriptive category and as a prescriptive instrument of unity and domination. This epistemological difference is key to understanding the postcolonial resistance to the use of the term “francophonie” to qualify a community of speakers, particularly in the literary context. Writers and thinkers have argued that when the only definition of Francophone writers is a negative one, where Francophone writers are writers who write in French but are not considered French (despite the fact that some of them are

throughout the empire, thereby marshaling linguistic unity as a tool for colonial expansionism, unabashedly following on the model of the Roman Empire in the Ancient World.¹⁴ In *Un grand Destin commence* (1917), Reclus writes “l’usage de la langue nationale nationalisera nos Africains” (88), and “l’unité du langage entraîne peu à peu l’union des volontés” (95), thus celebrating “Francophonie” as a garrison of national solidarity rather than a veiled attempt at ongoing territorial control.¹⁵ In his essay “Deconstructing the Map,” J. B. Harley draws on postmodern literary criticism, and especially on the work of Michel Foucault, to expose maps as objects of power-knowledge.¹⁶ Harley’s work, when considered for Africa, suggests that mapping held a prominent role in asserting and maintaining colonial domination, complementing other forms of regulation and planning. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said wrote:

Imperialism after all is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control. For the native, [...] its geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored. Because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, the land is recoverable at first only through the imagination. (225)

French citizens), the system ensures its own perpetuation and continues to substantiate a power differential. For a starting point to this conversation, see “Pour une littérature-monde en français,” a manifesto published in 2007 in the newspaper *Le Monde* and the follow-up collections of essays *Pour une Littérature-Monde* and *Je est un autre: Pour une identité-monde*. Let’s also note that Calixthe Beyala opens up *Les Honneurs perdus* with the sentence: “Le Français est francophone mais la francophonie n’est pas française.” Although each former colonial language has specificities of its own, debates regarding large linguistic areas can be found in the Anglophone and Lusophone worlds as well.

¹⁴ For Reclus, peace and a stronger French nation could only be achieved by expanding France to include its African colonies. Indeed, expansion was meant to counter the decrease in birth rates that plagued France more than some of its European neighbors. Reclus’ manifesto, paternalistic in tone and overtly expansionist, can be surprising for its refutation of the importance of race. In doing so, he anticipated and helped construct the so-called color blindness that still characterizes contemporary France in discourse and law. For more on this topic, see Pap Ndiaye’s *La Condition noire* (2008), Dominic Thomas’ *Black France* (2007), or even Léonora Miano’s *Habiter la frontière* (2012).

¹⁵ To claim, as Reclus did, that *lingua gentem facit* or, “la langue fait le peuple” (116), is to assume that one common element, even an element imposed through violence and repression, suffices to create unity. A similar move would be to believe that having common borders, or the same color on a map, suffices to create national unity. The fallacy of such a claim—and its strong colonizing rhetoric—explains why we need to look beyond “Francophonie” in establishing the corpus for this project, and also calls for a gesture of remapping.

¹⁶ In “Prison Talk,” Foucault describes the relationship between power and knowledge as such: “Now I have been trying to make visible the constant articulation I think there is of power on knowledge and of knowledge on power. We should not be content to say that power has a need for such-and-such a discovery, such-and-such a form of knowledge, but we should add that the exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge and accumulates new bodies of information. [...] The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power. [...] It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power” (51-2).

A postcolonial reading of African spaces must necessarily question conventional maps for their colonial legacy and established spatial and temporal boundaries for their untold stories.

City maps, the earliest records of which date from the Ancient Near East according to Harley and Woodward, tend to provide readers with a fixed bird's eye view, or what de Certeau called the point of view of the "ville panorama" (141). Due to an obsession with mathematical accuracy and to the interdependent relationship between knowledge production and power, some parts of a city's story are lost. This is especially true of those areas that are not quite visible or accepted enough to be represented on maps, which above all serve an administrative, commercial, or touristic function. Presented with a map of Paris, a group of Sudanese migrants finally recognized something on the otherwise tourist-oriented map, and exclaimed "La Chapelle! La Chapelle!," pointing at the drawing of the Sacré-Coeur Basilica.¹⁷ Of course, the neighborhood of La Chapelle, known for its vibrant markets and immigrant communities, did not appear on the map. Yet, an unforeseen link emerged between the visible and the unseen, between the impressive white church and the men who literally see it from below, from the streets of La Chapelle. De Certeau sets up a theoretical apparatus, of which several concepts inform this dissertation, to address the paradoxical threshold between visibility and invisibility. The ordinary practitioners of the city (or, if we follow Foucault, the powerless practitioners, or perhaps, the unmapped ones) are best seen, de Certeau argues, from the "seuils où cesse la visibilité" (141). To engage with this threshold, one must change perspectives, replacing the bird's eye view of the "ville paranorama" with itinerant trajectories, and the stories that compose them.¹⁸ In order to do so, we must turn to what Said called "new maps":

¹⁷ This anecdote took place in Paris in December 2016, in the context of a French course for asylum seekers and refugees.

¹⁸ De Certeau drew his inspiration from medieval and renaissance maps, which read more like guidebooks or even travel stories. Indeed, he writes that the modern map "s'est lentement dégagée des itinéraires qui en étaient la condition de possibilité" (177). This is thus another way of reclaiming a temporality that does not rely on colonial structures.

Once we accept the actual configuration of literary experiences overlapping with one another and interdependent, despite national boundaries and coercively legislated national autonomies, history and geography are transfigured in new maps, in new and far less stable entities, in new types of connections. (317)

As hinted by Said, these maps will be different. They will be literary, and aim to echo the movement and porosity inherent to a plurality of human experiences. This narrative remapping suggests a radical departure from old colonial archaeologies of mapping that have historically defined the African continent.

De Certeau writes, “Là où la carte découpe, le récit traverse” (189). Maps and stories are not mutually exclusive. In his introduction to *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said wrote that “stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history” (xii). Stories can be a means of resisting, or at least negotiating, a system of lines drawn so that some within it are not seen, found or even recognized. My dissertation thus studies contemporary African literary production set in Dakar, Kinshasa, Lagos, Douala, and Luanda through its focus on disenfranchised characters and spaces, as a way to navigate—even appropriate—the interstices of urban systems that are built for the privileged and for those who live to be seen.

This project answers the call for a different epistemology of Africa, particularly of African urban spaces. Jennifer Robinson laments that African spaces are often construed as spaces of enacted dystopia, through “stereotypical and one-dimensional representation of urban spaces” (211). To counter this tendency, Robinson argues for an anti-dystopia that she sees in the writing of South African fiction writer Ivan Vládislavíc for example. In this kind of representation,

the potential for new urban futures lies at the very least in the city itself, as a site of assemblage, multiplicity, and social interaction that offers the potential for something different to emerge. Not necessarily utopian, with an indeterminate future and many troubling tendencies at play in contemporary urban life, but directing us to attend to present sources of hope and to lend support to potential future trajectories. (Robinson 204)

This potential, Robinson explains, often stems from “the mundane and often immanent elsewhere of urban practice and the urban imagination” (196). Using David Harvey’s *Spaces of Hope* as reference, Robinson identifies three criteria for “writing the city in the spirit of anti-dystopia: first, a narrator whose viewpoint is contestable; second, inspired by the spatiality of the city itself, a presence replete with complexity and multiplicity; and third, following Harvey’s assessment, a politics of the future that encompasses both possibility and limits” (205).¹⁹ A specialist of African Urban Studies by training, the South African scholar nevertheless turns to fiction to think the kind of urban imaginary that speaks to the complexity of African cities.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, African urban studies took a turn towards a decentered and decolonial analysis of African urban spaces. The recent galloping urbanization of Africa and remnants of colonial discourses about Africa as a backwards, primitive continent obfuscate two facts that two leading historians of Africa in France, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch and Odile Goerg, underscore in their respective work: cities have long existed in Africa and, although they were home to a demographic minority, they have always held important strategic roles as economic and political centers.²⁰ The three historians attempt to dislodge Eurocentric definitions of the city that place disproportionate emphasis on built environment to the detriment of other factors. Goerg explains, “La ville n’est pas faite que de terre ou de pierres mais bien aussi d’usages, de gestes ou de stratégies. Les modalités décisionnelles, les productions culturelles et les interventions artistiques sont désormais au cœur de la définition de la ville et du rapport que les citoyens peuvent entretenir avec elle” (“Villes, circulations et expressions culturelles” 8). Goerg insists on the

¹⁹ Myers warns us that although Harvey has inspired many African urban scholars, his own treatment of Africa is stereotypical (5).

²⁰ Here, I am referring specifically to Coquery-Vidrovitch’s *Histoire des villes d’Afrique noire* (1993) and “De la ville en Afrique noire” (2006), and to Goerg’s “Villes, circulations et expressions culturelles” (2006) and “Domination coloniale, construction de ‘la ville’ en Afrique et dénomination” (2006). See also Hull’s *African Cities and Towns before the European Conquest* (1976).

potentiality for a decentered gaze on Africa that brings about new paradigms about cities, “De ce continent surgirait un paradigme insistant sur la mobilité, l’éphémère, l’entre-deux et même le difficilement saisissable, dans un univers de flux et de reflux, de bifurcations et de recentrage, entre ancrage local et ouverture mondialisée” (“Villes, circulations et expressions culturelles” 7). Fiction is particularly equipped for the nuances of this new paradigm, and as such offers unparalleled opportunities to express what is otherwise “difficilement saisissable.”

Concepts of possibilities, or potentialities, radiate through all the chapters of this dissertation. In his 2004 book *For the City Yet to Come*, AbdouMalik Simone conceptualizes the African city to better interpret its many possibilities. According to Simone, African cities are stalled, yet throbbing; they are full of constraints and vulnerabilities, yet they also function as “the conjunction of seemingly endless possibilities of remaking” (*For the City* 9). These apparent contradictions are constitutive of urban experience. The possibilities at the heart of Simone’s work often exist outside of formal or institutional, or even named, alliances. This emphasis does not mean to negate bleaker sides of urban African spaces, as the novels under study in this dissertation also open up narrative space for all the obstacles and disappointments pertaining to the urban experience. The discursive imbalance that led to the “epistemological abyss” has been so strong in the past that any mention of possibilities can be construed as too optimistic or naive. Postcolonial novels set in complex locations also open up narrative space for possibilities and potentialities that stem from the creativity of daily urban practices. As a result, this dissertation studies the creativity of the narrative gesture, arguing that it mirrors the creativity of urban practitioners, negotiating an interstice of its own.

This new epistemology of Africa must come not only from the vibrancy of its literary imaginaries, but also from responsible, reflexive scholarship that recognizes and gives space

to African scholars, and even more crucially when they are based on the continent, with more difficult access to academic visibility in the Global North. Jeremiah Arowosegbe reminds us that “there is no neutrality in scholarship” (325), a fact which this dissertation acknowledges and engages with by turning to a variety of theoretical and sociological sources from African-based scholars and scholars of the diaspora. Insa Nolte insists on the importance for non-African and African academics to use footnotes and citations to underscore forms of knowledge production that are otherwise at a systemic disadvantage by virtue of not originating from the academic Global North.²¹ While imperfectly and incompletely so, this dissertation takes to heart the task of forefronting African and African diasporic scholarship throughout its constitutive chapters.

Corpus & Chapter Breakdown

Each chapter of this dissertation takes as its focal point the urban literary imaginary of a Sub-Saharan African city through a close reading of one or two postcolonial novels that best express the urban poetics of that city. Simone writes, “increasingly, African cities, particularly in the West and Central regions, have something to do with one another, participate in a mutual shaping of ebbs and flows” (“Reaching Larger Worlds” 39). The in-depth view of each city is further complemented by the connections that emerge between different cities, and thus, between different chapters, ultimately suggesting that the intervention into urban African discourse I make is less dependant on individual cities in sub-Saharan African than on how the African urban is figured and transfigured by the literary.

All the literary works under consideration in this dissertation are postcolonial novels. However, the corpus for this project is not brought together by a quest for historical homogeneity. Almost four decades separate Aminata Sow Fall’s *La Grève des bàttu* (1979)

²¹ Of course, and as Nolte also develops, this is only a small fraction of the work necessary to counter the imbalance in how much the visibility of knowledge production on the African continent depends on the location where knowledge was produced. Paulin Hountondji goes into the details of what he called the African “theoretical vacuum” in a 1995 lecture; while he mainly addresses scientific knowledge, many of his observations would apply to the humanities as well.

from Chibundu Onuzo's *Welcome to Lagos* (2017). The two female writers were born fifty years apart, a significant gap, even more so within the limited historical range of postcolonial African literature. Although the corpus leans towards the contemporary period, with all but one novel published in the two decades between 1996 and 2017, this is a consequence of the selection, not a primary objective. The novels that most grabbed my attention as I was putting this corpus together shared several features. Firstly, they were all recognizable as urban novels, that is to say as novels where the city is at the stylistic foreground of the narrative, often playing a determining role in the plot, and where the relationship between the characters and the city is one of the most important traits of the novel. Secondly, I chose novels that were less invested in creating and establishing a national literature or even the genre of postcolonial African literature, than some of their predecessors.²² A common feature of all the novels in this project is that they are not the first urban novels to be published in and about their respective cities. As such, several chapters consider how these novels write back to and twist codes and genres established by their literary ancestors. One consequence of that is a certain form of playfulness that appears throughout all seven novels and that I attribute at least partly to the fact that none of these novels are trying to establish what it means to write postcolonial African literature. The only significant exception is Aminata Sow Fall, who of course participated in shaping Senegalese and Francophone African fiction as early as the 1970s. The reason her novel nevertheless belongs to this corpus is that *La Grève des battus* is not as invested in this project as other works of hers, in part because it is already a rewriting of Ousmane Sembène's earlier short novel *Xala*, and as such adopts the kind of playfulness that resonates throughout this entire corpus.

The seven novels that I selected are set in five cities, all of which are next to or relatively close to the Atlantic Ocean, albeit across various regions of Sub-Saharan Africa. In

²² Here I am thinking of consecrated writers such as Ousmane Sembène in Senegal, Mongo Béti in Cameroon, and Chinua Achebe or Wole Soyinka in Nigeria.

fact, all cities except for Kinshasa stand on the Atlantic shore. Dakar, Kinshasa and Luanda are capital cities, while Lagos and Douala are economic but not administrative capitals. All five cities were chosen because they are metropolises with influence beyond their national borders. The five cities are literary cities in more ways than one. All of them are important centers of cultural creation, production and circulation. As such, the literary investment in the fictional city also comes from and complements an urban investment in literary creation.

Furthermore, this dissertation refuses to limit its object of analysis to a single language, country, or city, in order to open itself up to readings of African urban imaginaries across the continent. For instance, novels on Lagos are studied as a corpus; however, they are seldom brought into conversations with urban literature from other locales, especially not outside of Anglophone Africa. There is less scholarship available on the topic but novels set in Luanda also make up most of the Angolan literary tradition, prompting for connections with Lagos novels that have not yet been made. At the same time, and although their literary production and history differ widely, Kinshasa and Lagos are two of the three most populated urban areas in Africa, sharing many common features.

One aim of this project is to reclaim the imaginary of Luanda within scholarship on Sub-Saharan urban African literature, and particularly city novels. Fernando Arenas attributes the isolation of Lusophone African Studies to the “doubly ‘subaltern’ status of Angola and the other former Portuguese African colonies” (xxvii), originating from these countries’ subaltern status as part of the continent, doubled by the global subaltern status of Portugal and Portuguese. As such, Angola is often ignored, including “Lusophone African literatures, which have remained obscured by virtue of being both African and written in Portuguese (a language traditionally lacking the prestige of French or the widespread dissemination of English)” (Arenas 161). Within that context, the identity of Luanda as a “cosmopolitan city with a long experience of racial and ethnic mixing and a culture which reflect[s] this

experience” (Chabal *Post-colonial Literature* 18) is important to understanding how the capital of Angola differs from other Sub-Saharan African cities, and even from other Lusophone cities. Indeed, the correlation between race and class that prevailed in other areas worked somewhat differently in Luanda where the elite was *mestiça* and where immigrants were poor Portuguese workers, some of whom lived in the slum areas called “*musseques*.” This influenced the development of nationalism and of literature. As Patrick Chabal and Arenas show, and as Russell Hamilton argued before them, there are many distinctive factors in Lusophone African literature, and within that category, of Angolan literature in particular. I do not seek to erase them anymore than the linguistic, cultural, political, and historical specificities of Dakar, Kinshasa, Lagos or Douala. In fact, in a project that pays particular attention to how urban imaginaries can reconfigure spaces and narratives often dismissed by other kinds of discourses, I want to include the doubly subaltern fiction from and about Luanda, as a way to push the boundaries of Africanist scholarship in order to put it into conversation with literary and critical traditions otherwise separated by different colonial languages.

Throughout this project, the term “African” does not seek to universalize, nor to negate the particularities of each city, each neighborhood, each street as well as their fictional renditions. Simone, Myers and others argue in favor of studying together cities from a common region with many common policies, and a common perception on the international scene; that is to say cities marked as “African.” However, in order not to reproduce a homogenizing discourse, this dissertation will complement the breadth of its overall argument with detailed analyses that address what specific cities share, as well as their incommensurable differences. Since they differ not only from each other, but also from themselves, any attempt at fixing them is going to partially fail. Plurality here is not seen as an obstacle to this project, but rather as constitutive of it. As a literary scholar, as a

postcolonial scholar and as an Africanist, I see the need for an intervention that goes beyond linguistic barriers. While I cannot claim expertise in each “national” or “linguistic” literature I include in this project, I hope that studying the literature of Lagos, Kinshasa, Dakar, Douala and Luanda alongside each other, without privileging language or nation, can change the paradigm under which we study these literary texts. In doing so, I want to engage with the challenges of world literature and postcolonial studies, and, despite some resistance to fiction-based scholarship, also with those of the field of urban studies. I think that languages, trajectories, and fragments are not simply descriptive of a literary imaginary. They can also help us push the boundaries of our own scholarship, address the challenge of the global and, at least at this point, I believe they can help us negotiate Nuttall and Mbembe’s “epistemological abyss.”

My first chapter follows the literal footsteps of fictional characters in two novels from Senegal, Ken Bugul’s 2013 novel *Aller et Retour* and Aminata Sow Fall’s iconic work *La Grève des bâttu* (1979). Here, I analyze the ways in which urban resistance takes shape in the pedestrian trajectories of Dakar’s most vulnerable inhabitants, its beggars and loiterers. Michel de Certeau presents walking as “espace d’énonciation” (148) that “affirme, suspecte, hasarde, transgresse, respecte, etc. les trajectoires qu’elle parle” (150). I conceptualize the characters’ walking rebellions from the fictional spaces of Ndakaaru and la Ville—the names Bugul and Sow Fall use for the city of Dakar in their novels—with the help of de Certeau’s theories of ordinary practices of the city and the concept of “horizontal archeology” that Ato Quayson develops in *Oxford Street, Accra* (2014). By paying attention to the actions and voices of those urban dwellers the city seeks to reject, this chapter also rethinks the ecology of the city as one that needs to encompass all of its participants, including those whom city officials deem inhuman or wasteful, in their futile quest for order and equilibrium.

The next chapter examines Congolese Marie-Louise Mumbu's debut novel *Samantha à Kinshasa* (2008), exposing local tactics of urban survival, in order to reread and rethink urban delinquency in Kinshasa. "Article 15" is a popular phrase that represents the many tactics that urban occupants, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and in Kinshasa in particular, use to bypass apparent powerlessness in the face of hardship. The organic, haphazard, pervasive concept of Article 15 provides a way to think through the manners in which urban characters respond to chaos and "reinvent order" (Theodore Trefon) in Kinshasa. I then move on to a queering of Article 15 through a character analysis of the women known as the Filles de Molokaï, whose urban experience directly ties into the five streets from which they get their nicknames. As they create new forms of urban solidarity and reappropriate their vulnerability into strength, they perform a queer embodiment of the city that occupies a delinquent yet thriving interstice. Here, black and queer feminism provides the necessary theoretical framework to read the radical ways in which the Filles de Molokaï walk, live and breathe the city. This analysis follows an examination of Kinshasa's *shégués* children, who along with the female sex workers counter discourses of the capital city as "black hole" putting embodied experience and urban inventiveness at the heart of everyday life in Kinshasa and its creative representations.

Chapter three turns to Lagos and to two recent urban novels from Nigeria—Chibundu Onuzo's *Welcome to Lagos* (2017) and A. Igoni Barrett's *Blackass* (2015) that reimagine the longstanding tradition of Lagos as allegory for the twenty-first century. Echoing Nigerian writer Dami Ajayi's metaphor of the palimpsest, I argue that the city of Lagos is a palimpsestic construction constantly erased and rebuilt, a trope that extends to its literary imaginary in the works of contemporary Nigerian writers. I focus on transitions, namely the ways in which the spatial and social transitions that the characters of *Welcome to Lagos* and *Blackass* undertake to bring different themes, concerns and approaches to the genre of Lagos

novels. I then move on to question how these transitions are mapped on to specific spaces in Lagos, reading them for their subversive narrative power. Finally, I argue that Onuzo and Barrett seek to defamiliarize Lagos, bringing attention to the constructedness of all narratives.

The fourth chapter suggests that the Ville-Bidon in Franco-Cameroonian Calixthe Beyala's *Les Honneurs perdus* (1996) calls for a rethinking of the ecology of the slum from deprivation and disrepair to creativity and abundance. Beyala describes life in impoverished New Bell through vivid depictions of a space where chaotic material conditions are, despite all odds, turned into a functioning environment. New Bell is made, Beyala writes, of what the rest of civilization throws up. This process, which I recast as a literary form of creative repurposing, turns scarcity into abundance. Indeed, New Bell has little in terms of conventional wealth, but it gives value and purpose to what no one else wants. In the narrative, references to New Bell's lack of resources are always followed, complemented or contradicted by the creative and often humorous ways in which its inhabitants turn every situation around. I then explore the ways in which the slum dwellers take ownership of their stories and reclaim an overdetermined space as theirs and that of their community. The act of repurposing meaning and function that have been stripped away from objects and inhabitants is therefore not simply a question of material survival. In fact, Beyala establishes New Bell as a space of unwitting, playful resistance that often gains its full-fledged force in language, as New Bell becomes in her writing the performative, recycled, deeply literary Ville-Bidon of Couscous. Beyala's gesture in *Les Honneurs perdus* can thus also be read as her own way of reclaiming the city by changing the paradigms according to which it is being read and the voices that get to tell its story.

Finally, chapter five turns to Angolan Ondjaki's *Os Transparentes* (2012) as interpreted through its "choir" of fictional voices, a counterpoint to the emptying out of Luanda carried out in the name of corporate and political interests. Angolan literature finds

its roots in a rich tradition of Luanda-focused texts, including seminal texts such as Luandino Vieira's *Luuanda* (1963) and Manuel Rui's *Quem me Dera Ser Onda* (1982). With *Os Transparentes* (2012), Ondjaki reflects on postcolonial Luanda through the eyes of the inhabitants of one building in the neighborhood of Luanda. I argue that the Angolan writer attempts to poetically and fictionally echo the transparent voices of Luanda through an embodied and environmentally threatened narrative. I mobilize the term "Luandanidade" to express Ondjaki's twist on "Angolanidade" as it relates to nation building. Ondjaki's poetics take some distance with the myth of the Angolan nation to zoom in on Luanda personified. Ondjaki fills Luanda with texture and color as the Angolan capital simultaneously resists and succumbs to being hollowed out.

Walking Rebellions: Dakar in Ken Bugul's *Aller et Retour* and Aminata Sow Fall's *La Grève des bàttu*

*La ville ressemble à un immense marché ambulant
de boubous, de voiles et de mollesse.
—Ken Bugul, *Aller et retour**

Though they were published some three decades apart, Ken Bugul's tenth and penultimate novel *Aller et Retour* (2013) and Aminata Sow Fall's iconic second novel *La Grève des Bàttu* (1979) both engage with the city of Dakar as tantamount to a novel-worthy protagonist. Rather than treating it as setting or background to the respective plots of their novels, both writers breathe life into Dakar within a narrative constructed around bodies circulating on streets. If we are to read the city as an intersection of urban experiences, or as Edward LiPuma and Thomas Koebler define it, as "this fictional interrelationship among strangers" (156), it is necessary to read the city through fiction, to better understand the fiction of the city. In this chapter, I will analyze Ken Bugul's *Aller et Retour* and Aminata Sow Fall's *La Grève des bàttu* to reflect upon the creative possibilities of pedestrian trajectories and urban resistance. These two novels of urban fiction walk us through the streets of Dakar, infusing their narratives with rebellion that comes by way of some of the city's most vulnerable characters. In doing so, they question the accessibility of public municipal spaces that enact, or at least display, the oppressive politics of their time, while focusing on the characters' performance of space as crucial to the urban ecology of Dakar. This chapter endeavors to put the urban at the foreground of the literary hermeneutic so as to shed light on the postmodern city as "the site of multiple, transversal, and reflexive circulations that are variously and provisionally stabilized to engender the urban imaginary" (LiPuma and Koelble 154), and on the African novel as a unique echo chamber of that urban imaginary.

Cities emerge from a lack of movement; they are the structural consequence of settlement culture.¹ Cities concentrate people, opportunities, and power; as a result, they foster diversity.² Cities encourage—or perhaps even force—the interaction of the individual with the collective, and hence urban scholar Peter Marcuse defines “urban” as the “shorthand for the societal as congealed in cities (...) the intersection of everyday life with the socially created systemic world about us” (185). The concentration and intersection of diversity paradoxically render cities necessarily mobile. Some scholars argue that African cities might be especially apt at accommodating movement.³ Historian of Africa Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch redefines the city as a place where economic and political power is practiced, decisions are taken and people from various origins meet.⁴ Coquery-Vidrovitch offers that cities in Africa are defined more by “l’ensemble de ses habitants qu’un territoire précis ou des bâtiments monumentaux” (“De la ville en Afrique noire” 16). Alexandra Boutros and William Straw, editors of a collection of essays on urban culture, thus write, “the city never is, but is always becoming through the circulation of images, things, languages, ideas, and perhaps, above all, people” (Boutros and Straw 20). This becoming of the city constitutes a fiction at once diachronic and synchronic, which can best be rendered through the word of literary fiction. Sow Fall and Bugul unflatten the fiction of the city by showing how its memories and resistances get inscribed in the very space of the city and how they can therefore be read from the same spaces.

¹ Although historians argue about the exact conditions of the rise of cities, V. Gordon Childe attempted in a 1950 paper to establish ten traits that define a historic city. The first and most crucial one was that “[t]he first cities represented settlement units of hitherto unprecedented size” (Childe 4). See Childe, “The Urban Revolution” (1950).

² On urban diversity, see for instance Jane Jacobs’ canonical *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961).

³ For example, see Simone, Goerg, Coquery-Vidrovitch.

⁴ She bases her definition on the work of medieval historian Jacques le Goff. Coquery-Vidrovitch attempts to reclaim the African city away from preconceived and over-determined visions inherited from and imposed by Global Northern models of 19th-century industrial cities. Through this process, African cities that otherwise might not have been considered urban enough, thus integrate a long urban history that reaches far beyond colonization.

French philosopher Michel de Certeau further illuminates the importance of the circulation of people, by conceptualizing the city for and of “l’homme ordinaire. [...] Marcheur innombrable [...]” (11). Henri Lefèbvre paved the way when he devised the category of *representational space*, in other words space as it is lived.⁵ De Certeau expanded on Lefebvre’s concept by placing practiced space at the core of his scholarly inquiry, by studying how ordinary urban dwellers “walk in the city.”⁶ His novel approach explains the relevance of de Certeau to the field of urban studies even decades after his passing, as well as the specific relevance of his scholarship to the literary analysis of the ordinary practitioners of Bugul and Sow Fall’s literary cities. De Certeau identifies and deconstructs binaries in order to work out how they depend and act upon each other. In particular, his more spatial work targets the tension between what he calls the *place* and the disrupting effect of *spatial* operations. The paradox revolves around stability—the power to structure, to organize, to regulate, to fixate—and circulation—the possibility of change and agency, the destabilizing force of movement and incertitude.

Literary texts also share a paradoxical relationship to circulation.⁷ Set in paper if not in stone, texts nevertheless circulate through physical movement, translation and perhaps the most mobile of circulations, reading. Does this parallel mean that words can accurately grasp and organize excerpts of urban life so as to retain and express movement? Bugul and Sow Fall are amongst the writers who attempt, and I will argue, succeed, in creating profoundly “urban” novels. My contention is that the literary medium is particularly adept at capturing the ebb and flow of city life precisely when it most escapes fixity. Writers like Bugul and Sow Fall attempt—much like an experiment—to put collective human experience at the core of their writing. That

⁵ On this and for Lefebvre’s spatial theories, see *La Production de l’espace* (1991).

⁶ As per the translated title of the most read chapter of *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

⁷ And to cities, since Childe in “The Urban Revolution” explains that many historians arguably relate the birth of cities to the access to writing.

both writers focus on giving space to traditionally unseen, unheard urban dwellers, is no mere coincidence. The recourse to storytelling and social critique in *Aller et Retour*, and to collective action and centuries-old values in *La Grève des battus* all confirm that the two female authors are interested in the πόλις (*polis*), that is to say not only the city in the legal and administrative sense, but the body of citizens that constitute it. From the works of Bugul and Sow Fall, as well as the theoretical input of de Certeau, it seems the *polis* and movement are intrinsically related to each other, as to the sensory—bodily—experience of the streets.

Nevertheless, the weight of the postcolonial state can be felt in Bugul's and Sow Fall's novels, through the lens of its detailed influence on individual lives and communities. Urban centers are associated with many tropes and fictional representations, and postcolonial cities even more so. Once the metonymy of colonial power, often also the seat of the failures of postcolonial regimes, their presence in African fiction is not recent but always loaded. Bugul and Sow Fall's novels both build upon the well-documented tension between the city as a collective, or even as an ecosystem, and the city as structural and structuring—as represented by its built environment or its government. The latter strongly affects the characters in the novels. Appadurai writes that the nation-state

works by policing its borders, producing its people (Balibar 1991), constructing its citizens, defining its capitals, monuments, cities, waters, and soils, and by constructing its locales of memory and commemoration, (...) The nation-state conducts throughout its territories the bizarrely contradictory project of creating a flat, contiguous, and homogeneous space of nationness [which helps to] create and perpetuate the distinctions between rulers and ruled, criminals and officials, crowds and leaders, actors and observers. (189)

Cities are instrumental in this construction that attempts to circumscribe experience within a set of rules. Whether via the power of nation-states or through their own power, cities can remain a pervasive, or even oppressive, force in the lives of their inhabitants, as literature has often

shown. Of course, none of the characters in the novels are immune to the pressure of state or city power; yet they are often shown to resist or subvert such power. In doing so, Bugul and Sow Fall concentrate their urban novels on people—and stories, rather than structures.

If a city contains almost an infinity of elements, or at least more elements than could ever be captured by, for example, a novel, then the choice to focus for Sow Fall on how beggars are a crucial part of the ecology and for Bugul on the History and stories that a homeless woman perceived as mentally unstable can transmit to another woman—then those perspectives are not neutral, and I argue, must be read as rebellious narratives that attempt to reimagine available discourses about African cities.

The city of Dakar lends itself to an intersection of literary and urban interest. The two novels under study are not the only Dakar-based novels to have been published. One of the earliest and most sustained engagements with Dakar comes through Abdoulaye Sadjì's *Maïmouna*, published in 1953. In this coming-of-age tale, the young Maïmouna leaves her village to join her older, wealthy sister in the capital city. Her desire for the city, born at the same time as her body started to change, relates to hormones; the city seduces Maïmouna as she becomes nubile and the young girl will leave Dakar upon learning that she is pregnant. In Sadjì's novel, Dakar attracts Maïmouna but ultimately leads to disillusion, for the city can only be "ville dangereuse, ville de perdition" (Sadjì 189).⁸ This literary imaginary of anonymous crowds (Averett), entrenched in the key binarism of village/city (Adesanmi) paved the way for urban writing in Dakar. In contrast, Sow Fall and Bugul anchor their writing in postcolonial Dakar; the two writers explode formerly prevailing binaries towards a critique of the postcolonial political system, and write resolutely urban narratives where the city no longer appears as a question.

⁸ I will explore the stereotype of the city of vices that seduces those who arrive from afar more in the third chapter on Lagos novels.

Besides Sow Fall and Bugul's novels, Dakar led to numerous powerful literary treatments of trajectories, such as Nafissatou Diallo's *De Tilène au Plateau* (1975), the first novel published by a Senegalese woman; Pape Pathé Diop's *La poubelle* (1984); and many of Sembène Ousmane's works, including the short stories of *Voltaïque* (1992) and *Xala* (1972), the novel that inspired *La Grève des bàttu*. All of these works have contributed to building the plural urban imaginary of Dakar, over the span of several decades of writing and much urban change. Some of the reasons for this abundance may be structural: Dakar exhibited attempts at urban planning (e.g. the World Bank-supported urban project of Parcelles Assainies); underwent an impressive and often unregulated expansion after Independence; was somewhat constrained within the physical limits of the Cape Verde Peninsula. The capital city also acts as a cultural center for the entire sub-region. As this chapter will demonstrate, Bugul and Sow Fall's novels are nevertheless unique in their engagement with the city, not only insofar as they differ from other writers' attempts at inscribing Dakar in fiction, but also inasmuch as they differ from one another. The discursive decision to read them together does not negate these differences. Indeed, Sow Fall's deeply urban novel takes distance from conventional narratives about the city, but still relies upon archetypal characters and traditional plot structure. Bugul, on the other hand, takes the reader on a postcolonial journey that has lost all reference to a stable temporal, spatial or political model and anchors itself in memories and details instead. Yet, both texts place women at the center of the urban and literary experience, and write the streets of Dakar from perspectives of vulnerability *and* resistance, and further even, vulnerability *as* resistance.

I. Urban Trajectories: Dakar via Ken Bugul's *Aller et Retour*

From the cobbled sidewalks and tile roofs of the centrally located Plateau of Dakar, to the Corniche that surrounds the city and absorbs its peripheral traffic, by way of sandy streets in neighborhoods born as the country gained Independence, Ken Bugul invites readers of *Aller et Retour* to a literary journey through Dakar. Throughout the novel, the city, for which Bugul systematically uses the Wolof spelling of *Ndakaaru*, is compared to an eldorado (A&R 9), a sinking ship (A&R 39), an ambulant market (A&R 91), an effervescent city (A&R 101) and a greenhouse (A&R 149).⁹ The city is undoubtedly the main character of *Aller et Retour*. In order to grasp to the fullest extent the stakes of such a statement, one must commit to a meandering, plural reading journey, and read the city through the lens of the novel and the novel through the lens of the city. Amidst the narrow streets of the Plateau and the large avenues that lead to Baye Gaïnde, Bugul's protagonist Bigué traces and retraces 1980s Dakar in 2013. Published the same year by the now defunct Senegalese press Athéna, the novel narrates the quest of two young women through the streets of Dakar.¹⁰ Bigué returned from France without her *xel*, her "reason" or "sanity" in Wolof; she wanders in hope that she will encounter it. Bigué is perceived as mentally unstable, a state furthered by her homelessness and differences that her time in Europe sharpened.¹¹ She is joined by Ngoné, a newcomer from the small village of Kayar who came to

⁹According to Papa Samba Diop's *Archéologie du roman sénégalais*, the use of the Wolof "Ndakaaru" here is more than anecdotal. Indeed, he writes, "L'hypoculture tente ainsi, dans son usage du français, de ne pas perdre de vue ses repères linguistiques, géographiques ou historiques [...] Ces écrivains [...] n'écrivent pas Dakar, mais cherchent à restituer la fébrilité de Ndakaaru. Le nom entraînant avec lui une certaine histoire, le choix (...) de *Ndakaaru* est toujours significatif: il met l'accent sur l'existence de deux univers différents, celle de deux acceptions de l'Histoire. Enfin, il peut être une invite au lecteur, pour l'alter de ce que le passage d'une langue à l'autre signifie: la proclamation d'autres modes de représentation, de pensée et d'action, une autre forme de culture" (P. S. Diop, *Archéologie du roman sénégalais* 82—83). We must therefore read Bugul's choice here as one that is ideologically postcolonial, and historically and culturally reaches out beyond colonial influences and city making. The desire to restore the restlessness of Ndakaaru can be perceived in the detailed, vivid descriptions that can be found throughout the novel.

¹⁰ A new, and slightly revised, edition of the novel came out in 2018 with Nouvelles Éditions Africaines du Sénégal (NEAS), another publisher based in Dakar.

¹¹ This is a common point between the character of Bigué and her writer, Ken Bugul. The latter wrote about being perceived as mentally unstable in her autobiographical trilogy *Le Baobab fou*, *Cendres et Braises* and *Riwan ou le*

Dakar to find her younger brother, whom she must bring back to the village “coûte que coûte, mort ou vif, même ses os” (*A&R* 11). This double quest guides the two women’s steps even though the quest soon gives way to Bigué’s stories. Each building, each street becomes a reason for Bigué to recall personal memories, while also engaging in a socio-political analysis of the city and by extension, of the country. The two women walk “bras dessus bras dessous”; Bigué speaks and Ngoné smiles.¹² The novel repeatedly alludes to their complicity and to the unbalanced nature of their relationship. Bigué narrates Dakar at/with her own pace, from references to the *lébous*, whose presence on the Cape Verde Peninsula predates colonization, to the consequences of the independence that “ne fit qu’accentuer la dépendance” (*A&R* 57). With Bigué, Ngoné walks through the city’s stories, its History. Ngoné is so carried away by the experience, and the world that opens up in front of her, that she even momentarily forgets her initial quest for her brother.

Although *Aller et Retour* has not received a lot of critical attention, Bugul’s other work has in ways that can shed light upon *Aller et Retour* as well. The themes of madness and home recur in Bugul’s writing, a symbol of what Christopher Hogarth has called her “original unbelonging” (102), which he and Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi relate to the lack of the mother. However, in *The Pull of Postcolonial Nationhood: Gender and Migration in Francophone African Literatures* (2010), Ayo Coly argues that Bugul exaggerates the impact of her mother’s abandonment, which is indeed very present in her work as in the literary criticism. Interestingly, the figure of the mother is not mentioned throughout *Aller et Retour*, showing perhaps a shift in Bugul’s writing obsessions. Bugul nonetheless continues to rework madness through fiction, and

chemin de sable. For more on this topic, in particular in the aptly named *Baobab fou*, see Ngue; Kalisa, *Violence in Francophone African and Caribbean Women’s Literature*.

¹² The novel resembles a *bildungsroman* through the political awakening of Ngoné via her mentor Bigué, except that Ngoné remains mostly silent and Bigué’s voice often sounds monological. This repartition of roles espouses the trope of the more knowledgeable urban dweller, versus the ignorant rural newcomer.

tying the two together in a 2003 interview, “pour écrire aujourd'hui, il [faut] une dose de folie.”¹³ Shirin Edwin treats the quest of a Muslim space for a writer in constant exile, which is interesting in the context of *Aller et Retour* since the novel does *not* end in Dakar but in Darou Rahmane, just outside the religious city of Touba.¹⁴ Christian Ahihou hypothesizes on the creation of a transgressive language, neither French, nor Wolof, which he calls “langue bugulienne” (77). Finally, scholars have been interested in the use of the pseudonym Ken Bugul, which translates to Wolof as “Nobody wants (me)” and gender as it pertains to Bugul’s female characters and her own identity as a feminist writer.¹⁵ As noted by Mudimbe-Boyi, Ken Bugul had already written about exile and wandering in her debut novel *Le Baobab fou*. In her first autofiction, Bugul wrote about the character’s migration to Europe, in what would become a decade later a trope in Francophone African novel writing. The importance of space in Bugul’s work has been noted mainly in the case of journeys, about which Mildred Mortimer writes, “the protagonist attains lucidity and conquers solitude by concluding the written record of her physical and spiritual journey” (176). The following close reading and literary analysis of *Aller et Retour* will provide an opportunity to build upon Mortimer’s statement that healing, writing and journeys are intimately related for Bugul, through a reading of the novel grounded in Dakar trajectories. These trajectories, which can at first seem trivial images of daily urban life, are simultaneously spatial trajectories and intimate journeys, during which intimacy can relate

¹³ In the same interview, she declared regarding her novel *Riwan, ou, Le chemin de sable*, “Comme le Sérigne avait guéri Riwan en lui donnant des ordres qu’il devait exécuter dans le mouvement, je me suis dit que moi aussi, c’était peut-être dans les mouvements dans ces allées et venues qu’il me guérirait de mon aliénation, de ma folie” (Bugul et al. 358), already tying back-and-forth movements with overcoming alienation.

¹⁴ Touba is the headquarters of the Mourid brotherhood, as well as a very vibrant economic center in inland Senegal. Considered a holy city, Touba is governed by religious leaders and, every year, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims head to Touba to celebrate the birth and death of Cheikh Amadou Bamba, the funder of the Mourid faith. Bamba appears in *Aller et Retour* through the film adaptation of his encounter with another defender of Mouridism, Cheikh Ibra.

¹⁵ See for instance Irène Assiba d’Almeida’s *Francophone African women writers: destroying the emptiness of silence*, Coly’s aforementioned monograph, and Nicki Hitchcott’s “African ‘Herstory’: The Feminist Reader and the African Autobiographical Voice.”

equally to buildings as it can to people, and spatial movement becomes the rhythm for life and its narrative echo. The novel, which espouses that rhythm, then translates the city even beyond the words that explicitly describe it. In doing so, it also perhaps responds to critical readings of transnational movement, mental health and gendered presence in Bugul's previous work by asserting the intricate link between narrative gesture, gendered movement and one's intimate sense of self through the translated fiction of the city. These themes and paths of reflection, while useful, need to be complemented by patterns specific to this novel. In particular, *Aller et retour* performs Dakar through narrated trajectories and back-and-forths across time, the analysis of which will also unveil Bugul's urban poetics of time through space, in a circular motion the title of the novel already announces.

The Pace of Orality

The geographic precision of *Aller et Retour* can compare to that of guidebooks, to the point that it is possible to walk around certain neighborhoods of Dakar with only the novel as a guide. And yet, the comparison falls short. Guidebooks often provide normative content that aims at a touristic easy consumption; Bugul stretches each trajectory, written out at the pace of walking. Bugul does not linger over tourist sites or landmarks, choosing instead to mention the medical laboratory of the rue Victor Hugo.¹⁶ In lieu of a mass message for a Global Northern audience, Bugul writes a deeply intimate and sensory tale, where each detail elicits a memory, and where the shared trajectories of Bigué and Ngoné, of Bigué and the reader, reinforce a logic of oral transmission.¹⁷

¹⁶ Guidebooks can address a variety of readers and adopt appropriate styles accordingly. However, in *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes denounces what he calls the bourgeois mythology of *Le Guide bleu* and others; he writes, "Le Guide bleu ne connaît guère le paysage que sous la forme du pittoresque [...] de même l'humanité du pays disparaît au profit de ses monuments" (144). It is this trope of the guidebook against which I pit Bugul's intimate text.

¹⁷ See for instance in D. T. Niane's transcription of the epic *Soundjata*: "D'autres peuples se servent de l'écriture pour fixer le passé ; mais cette invention a tué la mémoire chez eux ; ils ne sentent plus le passé car l'écriture n'a pas la chaleur de la voix humaine" (78). The narrative tools and style of *Aller et Retour* indicate that Bugul tends

Interrupted memories and personal anecdotes also represent a way of telling History that differs significantly from History books, which have theretofore told the History of Dakar from the male and colonial perspective. By favoring oral transmission from one Senegalese to another, Bugul also features the potentialities of History when told by those who have experienced it firsthand. The accumulation of details and sometimes oft unexplained cultural references encourage the reader to learn more on the context outside of the novel, thus doing some of the work and directly engaging with History.

Written transcriptions of Bigué's monologues, present throughout the novel, convey to the reader the importance of oral transmission for Bugul; additional narrative strategies contribute to a feeling typical of orality, one of instantaneous transmission which follows the narrator's train of thought, including mental associations that can surprise the listener, or here, reader. The story does not appear chronologically on the page; the temporality of analepses and ellipses is vague; and the markers of temporality are rare.¹⁸ Some elements hint at an *emboîtement du récit*, whereby the framing story and the framed stories would share a narrative voice and the imperfect as grammatical tense.¹⁹ The very temporality of the story remains unclear throughout and can at best be approximately inferred. The first detailed trajectory takes place on an afternoon of April. Bigué and Ngoné met prior to that time, first in Kayar, then again in Marché Kermel. Their time together ends when Ngoné goes home on Tabaski, which would have taken place at the very end of September or early October, if we are to infer that the story

towards writing that echoes "la chaleur de la voix humaine" and thus "sent le passé."

¹⁸ To borrow from Russian formalism, the *suyzhet* does not correspond to the *fabula*. The latter is the story as it unfolds when replaced on a chronological axis. The *suyzhet* is the story as it gets organized, structured on the page, including its ellipses, its back-and-forth movements in time, etc. The gap between the *fabula* and the *suyzhet* often acts as a narrative tool and, like it does in *Aller et Retour*, it can accentuate the orality of writing, making it resemble more human memory and storytelling practices.

¹⁹ Of Gustave Flaubert's use of imperfect, Proust wrote: "Cet imparfait sert à rapporter non seulement les paroles mais toute la vie des gens." Bugul borrows from Flaubert the use of free indirect style and that imperfect that appears to say everything. As a consequence, it is difficult to assign the comment in the imperfect tense to either Ken Bugul the writer, or Bigué her fictional double.

takes place in the early 1980s.²⁰ This temporal blur is reminiscent of oral transmission, especially when memories are involved, while at the same time reasserting the story as fictional, away from anthropological or biographical readings that the level of spatial precision could encourage. Indeed, fiction much like oral transmission does not abide by the rules of the scientific method or authenticity as it develops from the autobiographical pact.

After an overview of the city, the two female characters' first detailed trajectory describes a return trip. By starting with this return, Bugul implies that there have been extra-diegetic trajectories, and inscribes the novel in a circular dynamic—*aller et retour*, all while announcing the imbalance—here, *retour sans aller*. Incompleteness remains throughout the novel, since some trajectories are interrupted by digressions, others are simply alluded to, and it becomes less and less clear as the novel unfolds that each narrated trajectory is embodied. Bigué's gaze or memory sometimes seem sufficient to draw out a trajectory that—physically—has stopped. In these cases, Bigué's steps no longer bring stories about, but stories guide the trajectory, a trajectory sometimes only made of words. Spatial considerations, which seemed at the heart of the novel, are subjected to the word that writes it, redefines it sometimes, and ultimately rethinks it. Space is recreated, a literary Other, through the words of the writer.

In this novel, walking is at once the only mode of transportation, as well as the mode of transmission of Bigué's stories, and even the mode of creation of the narrative, which then circulates in the form of a book allegedly written by Bigué.²¹ The novel follows the rhythm of walking. Bigué describes trajectories with a precision only possible when movements are not

²⁰ *Aller et Retour* is loosely inspired from Bugul's own time in Ndakaaru after she came back from Belgium and then France. In an interview, Bugul places that time of her life when she was 33, which, considering that she was born in 1947, would indicate 1980. Bigué alludes to a social and cultural context that concurs with the early 1980s.

²¹ To follow up on the parallel between Bugul and her main character, this would be when Bugul started writing her first novel *Le Baobab fou*, published in 1982. During that time, Bugul was homeless and she started writing her novel on the street with a cahier and a pen she had purchased similarly to what the novel mentions for Bigué.

decided and restricted by a moving vehicle. The narration digresses in the time necessary to get from one reference point to the next. The novel describes at once the obligation—“n’ayant pas les moyens de payer les transports, elle et les comparses rêveurs marchaient beaucoup”—and how that obligation transforms into a source of human wealth, since “ils découvraient et apprenaient beaucoup de choses en marchant, et rencontraient des gens” (*A&R* 121).²² Bigué and Ngoné may not have chosen their mode of transportation, but it holds a significant place in the novel which would be deeply impacted if the characters used public transportation or personal cars instead.²³ Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, a longtime dweller of Dakar, also declared in an interview that “Dakar était une ville où l’on pouvait tout faire à pied” (Fouchard et al. 48), indicating that Bigué and Ngoné’s experience of walking was likely a common one at the time, rather than an exception. However, as Sow Fall’s novel or Sembène’s *Xala* show for instance, walking nonetheless remains a social marker, and wealthy and influential characters are often portrayed in the luxury and isolation of their personal cars.

De Certeau writes that walkers write “un ‘texte urbain’ qu’ils écrivent sans pouvoir le lire” (141), setting up a dichotomy between experience—writing the urban text—and its afterthought—reading the urban text—against which Bigué’s writing and Bugul’s novel actively work. In the novel, walking, dreaming and writing are inextricably tied in causal relationships. Bigué walks to find her *xel*; she dreams as she wanders, an echo of the political dreams shared by the *comparses rêveurs*; and ultimately, once she stops walking, she writes. The *comparses rêveurs* are urban dwellers without dwelling for the most part; they refuse to participate in a capitalistic economy and rather invest in cultural production of all sorts. They walk since they

²² Walking is often not a choice in Sub-Saharan cities, a statistical truth amplified by gender and socio-economic status; see for instance Diaz Olvera, Plat, et Pochet.

²³ Movies from the 60s, for instance Jean-Luc Godard’s *À bout de souffle*, show the car as the privileged mode of experience of the city; the rhythm of the movie, the camera angles (which reproduce the effect of being seated in a car) reflect that mode and thus break away from former cinematic traditions.

have to move a lot, but also as a way to entertain their dreams. “Ils erraient et rêvaient. Ils étaient les comparses du rêve. Un rêve incertain, mais qui était bien là !” (*A&R* 65) The combination of walking and dreaming seems to be for Bigué the prelude to, or other side of, writing. Indeed, Bigué carries a notebook and a pen (“cahier et bic”) at all times; yet, she only starts writing once Ngoné has left and she can no longer practice storytelling in movement; writing requires a form of immobility. But neither dreams nor trajectories disappear when Bigué starts writing, because she presumably writes *Aller et Retour*, a tale of urban trajectories. The *comparses rêveurs* represent a form of political utopia; they refuse to abandon their dreams in the name of economic gain. Impervious to corruption, they can therefore afford the position of observers. Their dreams are funded—in the forms of housing and money—by the *compagnons confortés*, that is to say people who gave in to the system but retain ideals, since “avec les comparses rêveurs, ces compagnons confortés pouvaient combler les vides créatifs que leur travail et l’ambiance socio-politique ne leur procuraient pas” (Bugul, *A&R* 95). This form of patronage replaces state investment in cultural production and political activism and creates a collective that, arguably, steers connections away from state-sanctioned networks of support, kinship, professional hierarchies, overt political alliances or economic power, into the realm of an ideological, political, cultural *dream*. The *comparses rêveurs* and *compagnons confortés* collectively put creativity—which is an emanation of the *dream*—at the core of what it means to inhabit the city. They live together; walk to each other; participate in endless debates and further their dream *via* cultural production. In a sense, *Aller et Retour* records the dream while contributing to its construction.²⁴

²⁴ This partly explains why the novel is saturated with proper names, especially those of cultural producers from the period. Each of them, and their works of art, testifies to the dream, which Bigué participates in and defends.

Aller et Retour: A Horizontal Archeology of Dakar?

Ken Bugul writes Dakar almost as an archeologist who delicately un-covers, un-veils each layer of History, street after street. In *Oxford Street, Accra* (2014), Ato Quayson focuses on a single street of the Ghanaian capital as the point of departure for a *horizontal archeology*. Quayson explores the past, the different layers that constitute Oxford Street, but also the ways in which this street connects to the rest of the city, the country, the continent and beyond that, the world—and thus contains them. This becomes for Quayson a methodology in writing about African spaces, the scholarly and development-oriented treatments of which he criticizes heavily. This methodology finds an echo in the structure of the written city in *Aller et Retour*.

First and most obviously, temporal layers mix, influence, and respond to each other. Bigué navigates Dakar in the 1980s, carries with her the Dakar of 1958 and fiercely foreshadows that of the 21st century, as one cannot but perceive the weight of 2013 in the issues that Bugul raises. The destiny of the city since the *prise de l'Indépendance*, italicized as it systematically appears throughout the novel, becomes Bigué's semantic double: “[Bigué] était en train de ‘couler’, comme le pays” (*A&R* 39). The distinction between city and country is of course meaningful in general; yet, in *Aller et Retour*, they often seem to be one and the same, stuck in the same socio-political context, headed towards the same destiny. Only when Bigué mentions other regions of Senegal, does the difference take on meaning. Otherwise, the novel uses “ville” and “pays” often interchangeably. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that in Wolof the word “dëkk” can mean “city” or “country” depending on context. Place de l'Indépendance is the neural center of the novel; from there, Bigué and Ngoné launch their quest and Bigué later writes the first words of what will become *Aller et Retour*.²⁵ Place de l'Indépendance is also the

²⁵ Bugul also started writing her first autobiographical fiction *Le Baobab fou* in the same café on Place de l'Indépendance, as she revealed to Senegalese newspaper *Le Quotidien*. Bigué and Bugul share a lot, including phonetically; during a personal interview, Bugul used the first person and said “this young girl that I met in

location for De Gaulle's famous speech in 1958, as the novel frequently recalls.²⁶ The literary centrality of Place de l'Indépendance, also prominent in Ousmane Sembène's short story and film *La noire de...*, underscores the role of colonial urban planning and problematizes independence symbolized by a square that remains mostly empty to the exception of street hawkers. Bigué summarizes Independence as an incomplete point of departure in which the conditions for success were not guaranteed: "Pendant deux ans, le pays se chercha. Quatre ans plus tard, il cafouillait. Vingt ans après, il s'agenouillera" (*A&R* 27). The literary urban trajectories then become a gesture of memory sharing that attempt to understand and denounce how the country knelt down.

Secondly, Quayson contributes an innovative reading of the streets as profoundly connected to spaces that surround, but also exceed, them. In the case of Oxford Street, Quayson ties Brazil, the Danes and salsa to this street in Accra, in the midst of all the tro-tros.²⁷ Quayson announces: "the citational networks and practices that undergird these discourse ecologies have to be understood as strenuously local as well as remotely global" (*Oxford Street, Accra* 129—30). These connections make up the "horizontal" in "horizontal archeology" and suggest the African city as a point of entry for reading the world.²⁸ One should, however, not perceive these connections as an addition to an already existing city; they have always already been a part of the city, although the places to which the city is connected, the depth of the connections, and their

Kayar..." talking about Ngoné. Yet and importantly, Bigué remains a fictional character and all attempts to read her as a literary double of Bugul's would be reductive.

²⁶ There, on August 26th, 1958, De Gaulle famously pronounced the words: "S'ils veulent l'Indépendance, qu'ils la prennent." The novel focuses on the reaction of the people to De Gaulle's speech, especially the poster that read "Mom sa reew." According to Papa Samba Diop's *Glossaire du roman sénégalais* (2010): "Mom (posséder, être maître de) sa (son) reew (pays). L'Indépendance politique" (388).

²⁷ Tro-tros are the Ghanaian equivalent of the *car rapides* in Dakar and, according to Quayson, they constitute a mobile archive that draws "simultaneously from repertoires of both orality and literacy" (*Oxford Street, Accra* 130). This indiscernible contribution from orality and the written is essential to the making of *Aller et Retour*.

²⁸ There, Quayson comes close to the conclusions of *Écrire l'Afrique-Monde* (2017), the book project that came out of the first edition of the Ateliers de la Pensée, organized in Dakar in 2016 by Achille Mbembe and Felwine Sarr.

influence never cease to evolve. The relationship between the city and what it is not participate in two characteristics of the urban: mobility—the city is constantly also *elsewhere*—and porosity—the city is constantly also *other*.

Aller et Retour provides an excellent example since the streets of Dakar directly relate to elements of global consumption at the local scale as diverse as Hindi cinema, Hollywood westerns, French café culture, Pan-Africanism, Communism, reggae, and Vietnamese food, amongst other examples. Every postcolonial Senegalese artist, including Ken Bugul herself, also gets a mention as constitutive of the cultural scene for which Bigué expresses repeated nostalgia. Bugul also includes detailed commentaries on the presence of the Lebanese or Cape-Verdian diaspora in Dakar. Bugul seems to suggest that from the keyhole of Dakar, one can perceive an entire world—if not the entirety of the world.²⁹ Proximity and details are necessary to such an analytical approach. The streets act as local archives of a global urban reality.³⁰ Quayson uses the term “archive” when he invites his reader not to see streets as “geographical locations and rather interpret them as lively expressive archives of urban realities” (*Oxford Street, Accra* 129). Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall share a similar injunction when they call for a defamiliarization of the epistemology of Africa, by working “with new archives—or even with old archives in new ways” (Mbembe and Nuttall 352). The aforementioned postcolonial thinkers all invoke the necessity to counter, or at least not be contented with, conventional archives, for they reinforce Foucault’s power-knowledge paradigm. Over a decade later, in a discussion on the stakes of Africa for the world and the reflection that led to *Écrire l’Afrique-monde*, Mbembe declared that we must reappropriate “les archives en commun et les archives du commun”

²⁹ This level of connectivity, while conditioned by a historical context and subjected to power inequalities, is a powerful counter argument to the idea that the African city is isolated.

³⁰ Lydie Moudileno mentions a literary interest in the “local populaire” (Moudileno 2003 50), inherited from the 80s and 90s.

(“Penser l’Afrique-Monde avec Achille Mbembe”). Mbembe, Nuttall as well as Quayson, all suggest the recourse to what we could call the urban archive, as a potent example of such archives in common and archives of the common.

Aller et retour hinges on the urban archive, as the source and setting for Bigué’s stories. The urban archive always becomes for her the stage for a committed social critique. The situation of movie theaters is one such example. Bigué enumerates a dozen theaters and the memories she associates with some of them, concluding that “De nos jours il n’y a même plus de salles de cinéma. La plupart d’entre elles ont été détruites et des immeubles ont été érigés à leur place” (*A&R* 117). A joint report from the Senegalese Ministry of Culture and the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie offers a similar conclusion and speaks of an “effondrement.” The numbers are dire: from the 52 movie theaters present in Senegal in 1980, only 5 remain in 2012, 4 of them in Dakar (Diouf et al. 34).³¹ Bigué attributes this collapse of the cultural sector to Abdou Diouf’s leadership, first as Senghor’s Prime Minister, then as President starting in 1980. If Bigué’s criticism mostly spares Senghor the poet and patron of the arts, she only refers to Diouf as the “nouveau bourreau” (*A&R* 142). This nickname leaves no doubt as to the young woman’s opinion regarding the structural adjustment programs that threatened cultural production with policies of austerity. The urban experience of movie theaters closing down one by one therefore reflects a political and socio-economic situation that Bigué fiercely criticizes.

The entire novel relies upon this structure, with the urban experience bringing out historical, social, economic and cultural realities. Bigué broaches topics as varied as rural exodus, *toubabs noirs*, centralization, the lack of opportunities for the youth, emigration and

³¹ The authors attempted to assess the situation of each movie theater and confirmed that most of them were demolished or replaced. Amongst the ones cited in the novel, the Plaza became a mall, and so did El Malick; El Mansour closed and the Paris was demolished to give way to a hotel project. The opening in 2017 of the Canal Olympia movie theater by Vivendi (which owns Canal Plus, a broadcasting company that is omnipresent in Dakar) is not enough to stop the drain felt by the cinema industry.

immigration, touting, etc. Bigué's marginality—homeless in Dakar and familiar with a city she nonetheless just returned to—grants her the position of an observer, distant and close at once. The fictional character and the writer both have knowledge of Dakar *before*. At the beginning of the 1980s, after a long European ellipsis, urban change, including the political and economic choices that subtend it, is perceptible to them at all levels.³² Bugul writes about Dakar that the city “devenait une serre” (*A&R* 149) because of the buildings that prevent the maritime city from breathing. The thematic use of circulation is key here; the blocked circulation of cars, of walkers hassled by street vendors, of air even, signals that something is not right. For Bugul, this blocked circulation is the *aller* without *retour*, the interruption of circularity. Despite the hope and perhaps illusion that “contrairement à la désolation dans les régions, de l’argent circulait [à Dakar] et les gens n’y avaient pas faim, et qu’au moins ils avaient la brise marine!” (*A&R* 104), rural exodus and emigration to Europe are perhaps the most poignant examples of one-way circulation. The title of the novel does not therefore read as a description, but as a call for an ever-threatened circularity, almost a manifesto. In *Aller et retour*, nothing functions when the *aller*, the way there, does not have a *retour*, a way back.

Bugul fights against the threat of teleology through the performance of the historical and connected city of Dakar, as it gets transmitted from a woman to another during a pedestrian and sensory urban experience. The narrative that ensues reinscribes circularity through narration, counters dominant discourses, and establishes connections in the vein of Quayson's horizontal archeology. Postcolonial Urban African Studies have long discussed how to integrate everyday lives into the epistemology of African cities, including when they are messy, informal, etc. *Aller et Retour* answers with the street as an archive from which a homeless woman perceived as mentally unstable can tell, and write, her story/History.

³² These topics appear in some of Bugul's other works, including *La Pièce d'or* (2004).

Across Dakar: A Spatial Practice (“pratique de l’espace”)

The trajectories in *Aller et Retour* belong to two categories: on the one hand, trajectories that revolve around the Plateau, the historical center of the colonial city that remains the institutional, administrative and financial heart of Dakar; on the other hand, longer trajectories that move away from that center, investing new, recent, and peripheral spaces. The spatial partition between the two categories appears to espouse former colonial boundaries, with a separation between the former colonial city and areas of Dakar developed post Independence. Some porousness remains; one of the last trajectories of the novel ties all the spaces together as Bigué departs from a construction site near les Mamelles, the two hills on Dakar’s coastline, follows the way of the Corniche Ouest and enters the city center, only to end where everything began, on Place de l’Indépendance. The former colonial city demarcates the first part of the novel; Frantz Fanon describes its dichotomic structure in *Les Damnés de la terre* (1961):

Le monde colonisé est un monde coupé en deux. [...] La zone habitée par les colonisés n’est pas complémentaire de la zone habitée par les colons. Ces deux zones s’opposent, mais non au service d’une unité supérieure. [...] La ville du colon est une ville en dur, toute de pierre et de fer. C’est une ville illuminée, asphaltée, où les poubelles regorgent toujours de restes inconnus, jamais vus, même pas rêvés. [...] (8)

On the Plateau, the grandiose and ordered architecture of buildings such as the Chamber of Commerce or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirm that impression of a *ville en dur*, in contrast with the rest of Dakar. To this day, the profusion of international organizations and institutions still bestows upon the Plateau a separate status in a city where asphalt streets are far from a general fixture. Yet, Fanon’s analysis does not—cannot—take into account several decades of Independence. Many of the red-tiled buildings are not taken care of properly; some are damaged or not adapted to modern uses. The narrow paved streets can hardly accommodate the overflowing traffic of the capital city, to the point that inhabitants of Dakar advise visitors to avoid the neighborhood on weekdays and taxis can remain stuck in traffic for hours.

Outside of the Plateau, the city becomes harder to read, with few street names; the inhabitants mark space with the name of the neighborhood, and then indicate a landmark, which can be a shop, an institution, etc. As soon as they exit the Plateau, this is how Bigué navigates,

Bigué passa devant la maison de la voisine au plat de nourriture quotidien, et prit par la rue Bène Talli. Elle traversa le quartier qui la séparait des allées Niari Talli, et au niveau du quartier de Bop elle descendit vers la Zone A. Elle passa devant la clinique internationale, laissant le centre culturel Blaise Senghor sur sa gauche, puis dépassa la Zone B, et traversa le Point E en passant devant la pâtisserie les Ambassades et la boîte de nuit le Ngalam. Dans une ruelle en face, il y avait un marché appelé toubab où des femmes vendaient des légumes et des feuilles de menthe fraîche, et à côté, des Peuls du Fouta vendaient des fruits. A cette heure tout était désert. [Paragraph that describes Point E] Après le Point E, Bigué traversa le quartier de Fann Résidence par la rue passant devant le Relais, un endroit mythique [... paragraph about Fann Résidence] Bigué prit par la corniche et après Ouakam, passa devant les collines des deux mamelles, et dépassa les Almadies vers Ngor. [...] Bigué arriva à Ngor, passa devant le Casino d'où elle apercevait l'hôtel de Ngor, et atteignit le rond-point du Virage [...] En descendant la rue en pente, au rond-point du virage (*sic*), Bigué arriva sur une multitude de chantiers. (*A&R* 130—33)

This first journey to depart from the house in Baye Gaïnde is also the first one without Ngoné and the longest trajectory, at sixteen kilometers each way. The aforementioned quotation, which without ellipses extends over three pages, includes information about the neighborhoods Bigué crosses, their inhabitants and, in the case of Almadies, Ngor and le Virage, information regarding the frenetic pace at which construction sites proliferate in these parts of the city. Once more, the structure of the novel features spaces that bring about memories or socio-economic commentaries, that is to say trajectories that become stories.³³ Bigué continues her storytelling even when Ngoné can no longer hear her, using the reader as a substitute, even though she stops when Ngoné leaves the city, only to start again in written form through the novel she begins writing.

³³ In a 2003 interview, Bugul traces the influence of African oral traditions upon her writing, and explains, “On parle d’un sujet bien précis mais on va toujours faire des digressions pour revenir au sujet. [...] Je pense que c’est peut-être les digressions qui me donnaient l’occasion de parler de choses qui me tenaient à coeur.” (Bugul et al. 353) Such “digressions” have become the core of *Aller et Retour*.

Is the objective of such a passage—and there are several similar ones throughout the novel—to orient the reader across the streets of Dakar? The level of precision of the description may well suggest that this is the case; but if Dakar in *Aller et Retour* is a map, it is an incomplete, selective and committed map. On this map, space reveals historical, economic, social and societal structures. It is a spatial journey, or to paraphrase Michel de Certeau, it is a “récit.” Indeed, de Certeau writes in *L’Invention du quotidien* that “les structures narratives ont valeur de syntaxe spatiale” and that “tout récit est un récit de voyage,—une pratique de l’espace” (171). In her novel, Bugul stages spaces practiced by stories, spaces as they give life to stories. Bigué’s diatribe against urban suffocation caused by the proliferation of high rises becomes meaningful through the sensory experience of how each new construction deprives the inhabitants of essential air. De Certeau adds “chaque jour, [les récits] traversent et organisent des lieux ; ils les sélectionnent et les relient ensemble ; ils en font des phrases et des itinéraires. Ce sont des parcours d’espace” (170). Stories are not simply descriptive—they can act upon the very spaces they describe, but also organize, via the structuring nature of narrative. Bigué may be loquacious with detailed information about her trajectories but she nonetheless cannot be exhaustive. The spaces and events she chooses to highlight or denounce are not neutral; they are political in the etymological sense of the term; that is to say, they belong to the realm of the *polis*, of the city. Bugul articulates spaces like she would words in a sentence; thereby showing how literature shapes the city that in turn shapes its tales. Bugul’s Dakar is one of precision—instead of “She went from Bène Talli to the Virage via the Corniche,” Bigué gives attention to details. This tendency, which I analyze in Calixthe Beyala’s work in the fourth chapter, shows the diverse, complex city, refusing to give way to generalities, preventing Dakar from being perceived as simple iteration of a generic African city.³⁴

³⁴ Beyala’s 1994 *Assèze l’Africaine* but even more prominently her 1996 novel *Les honneurs perdus* explore areas of

Through this sustained yet not teleological spatial practice, Bugul reinvents de Certeau's trajectories for the postcolonial African city. Indeed, Bigué and Ngoné's trajectories are not reenactments of colonial nostalgia, nor are they claims on urban land in the fashion of Léon d'Anfreville de la Salle in his 1912 *Dakar et la colonisation française*. D'Anfreville de la Salle wrote about Dakar for the foreign eye as though he were giving a property tour of the city. His report of the city starts—akin to Bugul's novel—with an overview of the peninsula to later zero in on specific areas and aspects of the city. De Certeau's distinction between the flattening “tableau” and the dynamic “mouvements” comes to mind here, but remains insufficient to express the two-folded difference in gesture in Bugul's novel.³⁵ Firstly, as shown through the concept of horizontal archeology, Bigué calls on times and places that include but far exceed colonial times and rules for her stories—this is how she produces and performs the city. Conceptual readings of Bugul's novel through the concepts of Mbembe and Nuttall's defamiliarization and Quayson's horizontal archeology further underscore that Bugul writes with *Aller et retour* trajectories that acknowledge and account for the urban postcolonial. This is why stories and memories are so key in these pedestrian trajectories; otherwise, the claim to speaking of and to Dakar far beyond models inherited from the Global North could be lost on the reader's eye.

The second main difference between de Certeau's trajectories and Bugul's is audience. African urban spaces have been saturated with discourses of development. Therefore, when Bugul writes trajectories, she is writing against internal and external institutional discourses that seek to flatten out the space of Dakar. Postcolonial spaces are on de Certeau's mind to some extent in *L'Invention du quotidien*, but Bugul's overt audience in this novel is one that knows

Douala with great precision, although Beyala does not rely on toponyms as much as Bugul does.

³⁵ Through this dichotomy, de Certeau revisits his distinction between “cartes” (“maps”) and “parcours” (“tours”), this time adding the former focuses on sight and the latter on action.

Dakar in and out. Akin Adesokan has introduced the category of “New African Writing,” which he defines as “works of fiction written by mostly young Africans and marketed primarily outside the continent” (2). The material conditions of existence of the novel, which Bugul chose to publish in Dakar with a small, struggling press rather than with her more mainstream longtime publisher *Présence Africaine*; Bugul’s own age—in her late 60s at the time of the novel’s publication; the complex genre of a manifesto-like novel sprinkled with autobiographical elements all corroborate that *Aller et retour* does not belong to “New African Writing,” contrary to many contemporary urban novels.³⁶ Moreover, Bugul’s tortuous prose and the abundance of locally relevant details are not that of an “Afropolitan” writer as Taye Selasi defines the term. Bigué does not seem to address—nor seek to address—an audience foreign to her experience of the city as a Black Senegalese woman. She speaks to Ngoné, a fellow young Senegalese woman; she also appears to be telling herself stories since, after all, she is in the process of searching for the *xel* she lost after her confrontation with the former colonial power. Her intimate quest, her desire for transmission and the call for reinvented circularity all point to a complex intermingling of past and present that she can only perform through the double gesture of walking in and writing the city.

Time through Space

Temporality manifests through spatial markers in this novel. In other words, spatiality speaks the story of time, as Bugul writes the streets of 1980s Dakar in 2013. Notions of past and present hardly seem relevant, as the characters’ return in time is recorded through their steps, and thus at the same time anchored in the narrative present. The city, the population of which grew

³⁶ The related question of whether Bugul’s novel qualifies as what Eileen Julien has described as the “extroverted African novel” is more complex and would deserve more space. For more nuanced insights on the topic of the intended audience of contemporary African literature, see for instance Julien; Brouillette; Suhr-Sytsma.

by a 3.5 fold in thirty years, is in constant movement, some of which can be traced through references to businesses or local cultural landmarks.³⁷ Some features, such as the restaurant *Le Relais*, persist through time. The above-mentioned nightclub *Ngalam* closed after having been at the heart of Dakarian nights until at least 2014; the bakery *les Ambassades* still attracts passersby and locals in Point E; the clinic and cultural center have stayed in place. However, most of the businesses from the Plateau have disappeared or changed names. Bugul writes:

L'avenue Maginot était ombragée et plus calme que celle de William Ponty. Un grand immeuble s'y dressait entre la rue Victor Hugo d'un côté, et la rue Jules Ferry de l'autre, avec la même architecture que ceux situés sur la Place de l'indépendance. Sous ses colonnades, il y avait des magasins et le café le Fouquet's comme à Paris [...] En face du Building Maginot, il y avait le salon de thé-pâtisserie Laetitia [...] La boutique Chirara tenue par des Libanais était située plus haut sur l'avenue, vers la pharmacie Guignon datant de la période coloniale, à l'opposé du marché Sandaga. [...] Sur l'avenue Maginot, il y avait le cinéma ABC, les boutiques Citec, Bouchara et celles des Libanais qui diversifiaient leurs activités dans le matériel électronique et électroménager, les tissus d'ameublement, des luminaires importés, et encore des fast-foods aux senteurs de cumin. Le centre ville reflétait le désordre de la gestion du pays. (*A&R* 35—36)³⁸

In 2017, the avenue Lamine Gueye, as it is now called, is home to *l'Elysée* instead of the *Laëtitia*, and the shops have retained their functions if maybe not their name or location of origin. The avenue that Bugul described as quieter, with more shade, can hardly qualify as such anymore; there, men pray on the pavement amidst polluted air and the cacophony of honking cars. The pharmacy *Guigon* still faces Sandaga that remains as the mold of what it used to be. On Lamine Gueye and on Pompidou, the movie theaters ABC and Plaza are gone. From street names to the size of traffic jams, much has changed in Dakar. On the topic of naming, Bill

³⁷ Data from 1988, from the Centre d'études et de recherche sur la population et le développement (CERPOD) and the Département de Prévision et des Statistiques (DPS), indicate a population of over a million in Dakar (Adjamagbo et Antoine, 2002). According to the projected data of the Agence Nationale de la Statistique et de la Démographie du Sénégal, Dakar hosts 3,529,300 inhabitants in 2017.

³⁸ In contrast with the previous example, Bigué and Ngoné cannot be physically located in this trajectory; it is therefore impossible to know whether they performed it in the past, are performing it presently, have walked in that neighborhood so much that they have performed a version of it, or whether this trajectory only exists as narration. This makes little difference in the novel and confirms that the goal of the protagonists' trajectories is not so much the double quest, but what they sense and say on the way.

Ashcroft wrote: “The naming and renaming of place is a potent demonstration of the ways in which the power of a discourse may operate. Renaming operates as if it were the original and authoritative naming of the place [...]. Fundamental to this naming process is the discursive act of wiping the slate clean, of assuming that no prior naming system exists” (89). Ashcroft, Edward Said and other thinkers have thought through this naming process as an act of colonial imposition.³⁹ Like many formerly colonized cities, Dakar underwent two successive layers of renaming: the first one during colonization, and the second after Independence. Incidentally, the Place Protêt, which had been named after the governor who funded the administrative city of Dakar in the mid-nineteenth century, became Place de l’Indépendance. This toponymic movement precedes the narrative present in *Aller et Retour*, but many similar changes have since taken place: l’Avenue Roume turned into l’Avenue Léopold Sédar Senghor, rue Thiers is now rue Amadou Assane Ndoeye, and rue Maginot has become rue Lamine Gueye. Reading Dakar in *Aller et Retour* requires an act of translation where a single street carries—in parallel—two names.⁴⁰ Even the emblematic marketplaces of Kermel and Sandaga, two symbols of the cultural life of the capital that appear repeatedly throughout the novel, have not remained unscathed. Kermel burned in 1993 and was rebuilt identically in 1997. Marché Sandaga, the insalubrity of which Bigué denounced in the novel, burned in 2013 and now remains empty to the exception of rubble. Extensions of the market surround the symbolic but henceforth spectral Sudano-Sahelian building. Bugul entangles old names and new names in *Aller et retour*, in ways that unearth the complex past of a city like Dakar. Dakar appears through Bugul’s writing as an internationalized

³⁹ See for instance Brenda Yeoh’s article on colonial Singapore or Garth Myers’s study of names in Zanzibar.

⁴⁰ Or more. For instance, the street that Bigué calls « rue Ben/Bène Talli » appears as « Rue Sérigne Fallou Mbacké » or « Bis-45 », after the name of the neighborhood, Biscuiterie, on some digital cartography tools, or even as “Rue 12” on the Editions Laure Kane map, and that even though most shops on the street have a sign that reads “Rue Bène Talli,” given that Ben Talli means “one tarred street” in wolof, by contrast with the neighboring alley of Niarri Talli, “two tarred streets,” Some toponyms are historic and/or engrained in popular culture, others are administrative and others yet, those that bear numbers in particular, are inherited from colonial or postcolonial attempts at urban planning.

archive through its references to “comme à Paris” and “les Libanais.” This archive goes beyond the distinction between colonial and postcolonial city, through names and cultural references, adding yet another layer of complexity to Ashcroft’s point about names. Bugul’s narrative and aesthetic gesture is the contrary of Ashcroft’s description of “wiping the slate clean.” On the contrary, *Aller et retour* shows the slate as full as it can possibly be, to the point of literal madness. In contrast with many postcolonial novels, including Sow Fall’s *La Grève des battus*, Bugul is not invested in a synchronic writing of Dakar; she engages—and takes the reader alongside her—in a diachronic portrayal of the city that reclaims all of its successive, and often inextricable, layers.

The trajectories of *Aller et Retour* taught me that it is impossible to experience and write these streets in the same moment, and that memory and urban writing relate intimately. Ken Bugul takes this memory work further when she writes down 1980s Dakar almost three decades later. In a personal interview, she claimed that she only researched the topic in her own memories, an impressive feat considering the level of spatial precision. Bugul now lives where Bigué’s steps stopped near the Virage, by the construction sites. From there, she explained her difficulty in considering Dakar her city after such a long absence. *Aller et Retour* results from that difficulty. The writer wrote the novel in three months, in order to “retrouver les clés de la ville que j’avais perdues” (Tricoire, *Entretien avec Ken Bugul*). This novel met a personal need for Bugul before it turned into a literary project.⁴¹ Bugul claims that after writing *Aller et Retour*, she became able to consider with serenity her decision to settle down in Dakar after decades away. This process of finding the keys to the city echoes Bigué’s quest and sheds light on Bugul’s narrative process. By showing the reader Dakar as it stands and moves behind the keyhole, she crafted the key that would in turn grant her access back to the city. Around us, what

⁴¹ This can partly explain the choice of a press located in Dakar to publish what felt like an intimately local story.

used to be empty lots have grown into buildings, one construction site after the other. The speed at which the urban landscape evolved bore out a need to write the city, to inscribe its memory into the literary imagination so as to keep the past alive, through its inscription in the present. Bugul inhabits space when she speaks as much as in her writing; her anecdotes are spatial. To indicate the location of a bookstore, she mentions the name of the neighborhood, before using a gas station and a roundabout as spatial markers. About the city, Bugul declares: “Je ne regarde pas, j’absorbe” (Tricoire, *Entretien avec Ken Bugul*). *Aller et Retour* comes across as a novel about the city that is absorbed, then lost, then found again, in the full measure of temporal and spatial movement. This is a sensory process—*j’absorbe*—that turns the novel into the necessary *medium* for the memory experience, in which the narrative continuously puts memory at a distance, and summons it back. The city, which is other, past, elsewhere, is, in the same movement, made present by the performativity of the novel. Therefore, the words that the city gives to the novel shape the city in turn, in a process that is ultimately circular, urban and literary—a process of *allers et retours*.

II. Aminata Sow Fall’s *La Grève des bâttu*: Displacement and Urban Collaboration

Introduction: Explo(r/d)ing Spatial Binaries

Published in 1979, *La Grève des bâttu*, Aminata Sow Fall’s second novel, belongs to the canon and perhaps golden age of postcolonial Francophone African literature. Shortlisted for the Prix Goncourt and awarded the Grand Prix littéraire d’Afrique noire in 1980, the novel presents a comic tale of conflict between the Department of Public Sanitation and the city’s beggars. In la Ville, an unnamed city that bears all the traits of Dakar, new policies aim at ridding the city of its

beggars in order to increase tourism.⁴² The beggars represent an obstacle that must be removed at all costs, and such is the goal of the two public servants responsible for the operation, Mour Ndiaye and Kéba Dabo. Tired of being hunted down, the beggars collectively decide to go on strike; their decision precludes city dwellers from accomplishing zakat—or their Muslim duty of almsgiving—ultimately demonstrating that beggars constitute a necessary institution of urban life. A staple of postcolonial literature in French, Sow Fall’s *œuvre*—including this specific novel—has been well studied; the portrayal of islam (Bangura), kinship with Ousmane Sembène’s *Xala* (Gérard and Laurent; Kalisa, “Le palimpseste et le roman africain”), gender (d’Almeida; Cazenave and Célérier; Onyemelukwe; Andrade), or the relationship to orality (Guèye), are some of the aspects that scholars have explored. Most of these approaches evoke the urban context of novels such as *La Grève des bâttu* but also *L’appel des arènes*—often in passing—yet, no reading has placed the city at center stage, signaling that the political stakes of the novel materialize through urban policing of the streets and the corresponding resistance.⁴³ In this part of my chapter, I will show how Sow Fall’s novel is very much a work about the changing city, the precarity of space in postcolonial times and the need to recast the postcolonial African city in terms of urban ecology, in hopes of carving out the collective futures of a socially heterogeneous urban landscape. The life-and-death implications of urban inclusion or exclusion in Sow Fall’s novel ground an apparently light-hearted short novel in one of the most pressing

⁴² Sow Fall spent most of her life in Dakar, and did not attempt to disguise the capital in her novel. She names places in Dakar such as the Corniche and Parcelles Assainies; she gives to La Ville the same topography as Dakar, and she uses Wolof terms, all of which unmistakably associate La Ville with Dakar. Reasons to use the generic “La Ville” instead of Dakar include plausible deniability in the face of retribution, the desire to universalize an otherwise local discourse, and the freedom to expand upon social realities without being tied to a historical reality. The tale-like characteristics and archetypal figures of *La Grève des bâttu* confirm Sow Fall’s desire to take her novel beyond anecdotal relevance.

⁴³ There is however the exception of René Collignon’s valuable 1984 article, which treats the novel as a point of departure for a larger analysis of how Dakar treated its “encombrements humains” around the time Sow Fall wrote the novel. The article focuses on historical and administrative aspects of the story, diving into the history of déguerpissement and the legislation against “encombrements humains” in Dakar at the time. Collignon’s work does not engage with the literary stakes of reading *La Grève des bâttu* as an urban novel.

matters that discourses emanating from institutions about African cities need to reckon with: treating some of the city's people as "déchets" to discard threatens the balance of the entire urban ecology, and as such, the wellbeing of all.

In *Littératures africaines francophones des années 1980 et 1990*, Lydie Moudileno describes three binaries that have historically qualified literary representations of cities in Francophone African writing. The first one opposed village and city.⁴⁴ Then, novels increasingly focused on the split colonial city, which Fanon described in *Les Damnés de la Terre*, and Roger Chemain echoed in the first book-length study of *La ville dans le roman africain* (1981).⁴⁵ Moudileno introduces a third binary between the city of the elite and the city of the people, often split along former colonial boundaries.⁴⁶ *De Tilène au Plateau*, Nafissatou Diallo's 1975 autofiction and first published Senegalese novel written by a woman, exemplifies this dichotomy, while introducing the possibility of crossing over.⁴⁷ The 80s and 90s see these binaries explode as urban literature adopt a "quartiers"-focused approach, with concerns over demographic growth, the center-peripheries relationship and interest in the "quartier" as a locus of "quotidienneté créative" (Moudileno *Littérature africaines francophones* 51).

⁴⁴ Each symbolized different lifestyles, values and materiality: "le village symbolisait l'authenticité, la tradition ancestrale, la case, et le collectif en général. La ville en revanche renvoyait à la modernité, au béton, à l'administration coloniale, et à l'individualisme" (Moudileno 47–48). M. Bado Ndoeye builds upon and nuance the duality; he defines the African city as "espace transitionnel" (Ngaïdé 14) and introduces the concept of an urban rurality.

⁴⁵ Claire Dehon builds upon Chemain's first book-length study of cities in Francophone African literature, however dated it may appear today, to categorize what she names "roman de la ville." Many African writers, Dehon explains, write the African city as metaphor for power and modernity, often with a negative sense and by way of "lieux privilégiés" such as the marketplace, prison, hospital or school. However, both Bugul and Sow Fall push back against Dehon's definition by writing urban novels from the perspective of walking rebellions of everyday urban dwellers.

⁴⁶ Jacques Chevrier discussed the literary prominence of this dichotomy, which he called "le tableau ravageur des contrastes urbains," in a 1993 article for *Le Monde diplomatique*. Cimas Kemedjio mentions the influence of Mongo Béti's Tanga in *Ville cruelle* upon his reading of other works of fiction and sees this dichotomic city as the postcolonial city and writes, "la situation (post)coloniale qui a bien du mal à se défaire de la logique d'expropriation (symbolique ou conceptuelle) fondatrice de l'acte colonial" (Kemedjio 142).

⁴⁷ The market of Tilène is located in the popular neighborhood of the Médina. Diallo describes at length the shock and defining moment of her childhood, when her family moved from the Médina to the city center of Dakar, le Plateau. There, her social circles and education changed; for the first time, her teacher came from France and her fellow schoolgirls belonged to the local elite.

Sow Fall's novel still portrays the socially divided city, while gesturing towards the "quartier"-focused approach, through the inclusion of the Parcelles Assainies, a neighborhood built from the ground up five years prior to the novel's publication. The rural/urban dichotomy that had been so present in works such as Cheikh Hamidou Kane's 1961 *L'Aventure ambiguë*, does not feature prominently in *La Grève des bàttu*. The village remains as the symbol of traditional wisdom, through the figure of the *serigne*. But when the *serigne* advises Mour to distribute meat to beggars on the four corners of the city, an impossible task since the beggars left the city, Mour fails to seize the irony of his urban policing backfiring against his political ambition.

Besides these excursions outside the city for city-related matters, the novel takes place in la Ville, which remains anonymous in name only, since its topography, frequent uses of Wolof and references to actual locations all point to Dakar. La Ville may appear spatially divided according to economic and symbolic wealth, with the two main settings of the Plateau and Parcelles Assainies respectively representing what literary scholars Mwamba Cabakalu and Boubakar Camara called "ville des nantis" and the space of the beggars.⁴⁸ In fact, the characterization deserves some nuance. Although home to an elite, the area of the Plateau is at the same time occupied daily by the hawkers, beggars and *talibés* that the concentration of wealth attracts.⁴⁹ There never was an effective original separation to attempt to regain; in fact, the very indiscernibility of the space sparks the implementation of measures of "assainissement." The beggars matter to the official institutions because they are an eye sore in spaces occupied by

⁴⁸ Cabakalu and Camara's *Comprendre et faire comprendre la Grève des bàttu d'Aminata Sow Fall* is the only book-length study of *La Grève des bàttu* but its main ambition is pedagogical, not critical, as shown by the entire second half of the book, which features literary analyses of excerpts for classroom use.

⁴⁹ *Talibés* children are sent by their parents from their village to the city to study the Coran with a Coranic master, who often forces them to beg on the streets to provide their share of money to the group. See Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'aventure ambiguë*, in which the protagonist grows up as a *talibé*, or Mansour Sora Wade's short film *Picci mi* (1992). See also O'Brien; Perry.

the elite; otherwise, they might ignore the beggars altogether. The separation remains a myth, since, as soon as the beggars move to Parcelles Assainies, the Muslim bourgeoisie “visits” the working class neighborhood in order to fulfill their religious duty of almsgiving. One can therefore witness “des voitures luxueuses, toutes vitres fermées, affronter à vive allure le chemin sablonneux qui mène à la ‘maison des mendiants’” (Sow Fall, *GDB* 98). The novel features a strong power differential and economic segregation that never ceases to be blurred through gestures of urban policing and resistance.⁵⁰ De Certeau calls for “une théorie des pratiques quotidiennes, de l’espace vécu et d’une inquiétante familiarité de la ville” (146). Sow Fall’s novel suggests a similar call by showing that once daily practices and lived space are taken out, streets lose their value even to those who committed to policing them. The beggars appear not as “déchets,” unwanted excess, but as necessary social elements of the streets of la Ville, thereby reinforcing the urban indiscernibility of streets that foster regulation and subversion at once.

“Déchets humains”: Humanity in Question

Most characters in Sow Fall’s novel are postcolonial archetypes. Two characters predominantly represent the authority of the state, Mour Ndiaye, the head of the Department of Public Sanitation, and his loyal right hand man and technical expert, Kéba Dabo. Beyond their duty as public servants, Mour and Kéba each have personal reasons for enforcing the new policy. The ruthless Mour dreams of and is rumored to soon be named vice-president; the success of this clean up operation could be decisive for his political career. Mour fits in the archetype of the native/national bourgeoisie that Fanon describes in *Les damnés de la Terre*; the national bourgeoisie’s sole objective is to replace the—former—colonial power in profiting from a

⁵⁰ Another very important part of the plot of the novel revolves around the relationship between Mour Ndiaye and his first wife Lolli, whose influence risks being destabilized by the arrival of a second, younger, wife, Sine. I will not delve into this aspect of the plot as much, but will rather focus my reading on the political opposition at work in the novel.

political system of domination. Mour relies upon his Islamic faith and traditional spiritual guides to increase his chances, with no moral or ethical awareness at any point in the novel. His sole personal interest is at the heart of his *praxis*, including in his personal relationship with his two wives.

Kéba Dabo is the Javert (V. Hugo, *Les Misérables*) of *La Grève des battus*, the figure of the efficient technocrat whose morals rely upon a sense of normative perfection, as well as a troubled past. Kéba tirelessly fights against those he sees as “déchets humains.” This phrase, also the novel’s subtitle, adopts the narrative voice of Kéba and shows his feelings towards the beggars. “Déchets” designate unwanted excess, physiological dejection, waste, garbage. Whether biological or material in origin, “déchets” are—no longer—considered human. The combination of “déchets” and “humains” shows Kéba’s attempt to set up a specific kind of inhuman humans, that of human waste. By doing so, he taxonomically distances himself from the beggars. Kéba’s disgust and resentment run deep, and stem from having grown up in poverty. Despite singlehandedly raising two children, his mother never condescended to begging. The beggars’ presence feels like a personal affront to Kéba, who believes that they degrade poverty, so to say.⁵¹ Kéba’s confidence and identity grew based upon his sense of moral superiority, “ces mendiants, ces talibés, ces lépreux, ces diminués physiques, ces loques, constituent des encombrements humains. Il faut débarrasser la Ville de ces hommes—ombres d’hommes plutôt—déchets humains, qui vous assaillent et vous agressent partout et n’importe quand” (*GDB* 11). The repetition of the demonstrative adjective “ces” expresses the ontological distance Kéba maintains with the beggars. However, René Collignon notes that Sow Fall directly borrowed the term “encombrements humains” from a speech of President Senghor’s at a conference on

⁵¹ Kéba exhibits symptoms of what, using Fanon, we could call self-loathing, here not on a racial level but on a social one. Having internalized the rejection the society imposes onto the poor and vulnerable as a child, Kéba profoundly rejects those who make poverty visible instead of hiding it, even to the point of nausea.

urbanism in 1972.⁵² This state-condoned stigmatization furthers the link between la Ville and Dakar, and puts the desire to rid the city of its beggars back within a more global context, since several other governments express similar desires from the 1970s onwards. Thierry Paquot relates this tendency to the Habitat I conference held in Vancouver in 1976, which incited all countries of the Global South to provide decent housing to all its inhabitants. This led to many efforts to displace informal urban dwellers towards newly built “parcelles assainies,” of which the Parcelles Assainies in Dakar were an early model that inspired several other cities.

Kéba is convinced that “La Ville demande à être nettoyée” (*GDB* 11), thereby granting the City more consciousness than he bestows upon the beggars. For Kéba, the beggars only exist insofar as he has to interact with them, a constant reminder of his former condition.⁵³ Hence, his anger spikes when Mour requests that he bring back the beggars, even temporarily: “Ces mendiants que j’ai traqués, chassés, démolis physiquement et moralement et qui nous ont laissé en paix, [...] vous voulez que je souille à nouveau l’atmosphère !” (*GDB* 127) Kéba responds affectively to the request, as shown by the indexical field of hunting and destruction. The use of hygiene-related terms such as the verbs “nettoyer” and “souiller” further show how intimate the issue is for Kéba. A few pages later, he even uses the verb “déterrée” (*GDB* 130), to “unearth,” “unbury,” showing that his peace can only come at the expense of the beggars’ symbolic death, i.e. their spatial disappearance. Symbolically for Kéba and literally for the beggars, Sow Fall sets up the city as life and outside the city as death. Yet, ecologies are fragile and when Kéba and Mour believe that they can simply remove an organism without threatening the equilibrium of the entire city, they are mistaken.

⁵² Collignon writes: “Le vocable même d’‘encombrements humains’ apparaît publiquement le 19 juillet 1972 lors d’un Conseil National de l’Union Progressiste Sénégalaise (UPS) consacré à l’urbanisme. On a pu l’y entendre de la bouche même du Président Senghor qui officiait ce jour-là en tant que Secrétaire Général” (573).

⁵³ Kéba has no ulterior motive besides getting rid of the beggars. His task completed, he immediately feels “libéré du poids qu’ils constituaient pour lui” (Sow Fall, *GDB* 125).

One of the central questions of the novel revolves around taxonomic humanity in the city, as well as how much humans can impact life that they do not consider human, to read the novel through an eco-critical perspective. For as much as *Sow Fall* sets up la Ville as an ecology, Kéba and Mour dismiss the beggars as sub-human—and as good as dead in their urban ideal—through Kéba’s disgust and Mour’s cold calculations. Mour’s only allusion to a shared human condition with the beggars is a desperate rhetorical gesture to gain the beggars’ support: “Tu vois, nous sommes tous pareils, nous sommes tous de même condition car nous sommes des hommes; nous devons nous trouver en toute occasion un terrain d’entente” (*GDB* 148). A shared status can be considered inasmuch as it serves Mour’s political interests. The following pages of the novel describe a long drive across the city that Mour and his driver undertake in order to find the beggars, the conclusion of which shuts down all hope that Mour has reached some level of awareness in a single sentence: “Mour n’a rien vu de cela” (*GDB* 154). The novel performs an incremental inversion that ultimately questions Mour and Kéba’s humanity. The *serigne* had warned Mour, “La Ville est en train de vous déshumaniser, d’endurcir vos coeurs au point que vous n’ayez plus pitié des faibles” (*GDB* 38). The more the beggars collectively assert their humanity, the more the government representatives’ lack of consideration portrays them as non-human.

Systemic dehumanization primarily targets the beggars, some of the most vulnerable urban inhabitants, but also extend to other marginalized identities, such as women. The role of different women in the novel would deserve more attention, but I will restrain to mentioning that Mour’s second wife accuses him of treating her like a “vulgaire objet” (*GDB* 162). Only a certain level of dehumanization—or in Mour’s wives’ case, devaluation—can justify the strategic and oppressive use of others for the sole benefit of an elite minority. The failure of a

sanitized system constituted only of an elite is apparent as soon as the concept of biodiversity enters into consideration, which is why it is so crucial for Sow Fall to politically invest the city as ecology.

Displacing Dakar: Les Parcelles Assainies

Cabakalu and Camara describe the city center in *La Grève des battus* as a battlefield, literally invaded by beggars positioned near mosques, markets, hospitals, etc. The beggars' decision to go on strike and find refuge in Salla Niang's courtyard in Parcelles Assainies can therefore appear as a retreat. Indeed, the government representative, Mour, only knows of Parcelles Assainies from geographic maps. Yet, Sow Fall shows that the battlefield was displaced instead, de-centered perhaps, onto ground that would be more favorable to the beggars, since less invested with institutional power. This displacement is the beggars' only chance at destabilizing the powers in place, but it still does not put the beggars and the administration on equal footing. The latter only ever risks a political failure; meanwhile, the beggars risk their lives, as shown through the death of Gorgui Diop. The move to Parcelles Assainies can thus be read as an attempt to put their bodies out of the line by literally displacing themselves.

Sow Fall purposefully wrote about la Ville, not about Dakar. Nevertheless, concrete spatial and urban planning elements about the historical Parcelles Assainies can shed light upon the understudied relevance of the fictional Parcelles Assainies in *La Grève des battus*. The origin story of Parcelles Assainies as told on the website of the neighborhood states, "En 1974, l'Etat du Sénégal, en rapport avec la Banque Mondiale, décida de créer une cité pour désengorger le centre-ville et ses environs et trouver par la même occasion un toit pour les moins nantis. Ainsi est née l'idée des Parcelles Assainies" ("L'histoire des Parcelles Assainies," website). All the elements in this short history deserve consideration. Parcelles Assainies is a supra-national

project, based on the involvement of the World Bank; the aforementioned opposition between “nantis” and “moins nantis” is betrayed in this brief description; so is the fact that Parcelles Assainies provides housing for people who were evicted from more central areas of the city. The project, initiated by the World Bank in the early 1970s and taken over by the Office HLM, was researched heavily by a team of scholars from the famous IFAN (Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noire) and from the University of Leiden, in collaboration with different services of the city of Dakar.⁵⁴ The project constitutes a scholarly and institutional intervention of urban planning.⁵⁵ As many central neighborhoods were emptied of their informal housing—a process called *déguerpissement*, Parcelles Assainies was designed to offer impecunious urban dwellers access to property owning, while raising health conditions in the capital. The policy that Mour and Kéba enforce in the novel directly echoes the urban planning that engendered Parcelles Assainies.

Paquot explains that the process incites

les dirigeants à légaliser des situations hors droit, à mobiliser les ‘illégaux’ pour qu’ils déménagent sur des parcelles assainies, qu’ils s’auto-organisent afin de construire en dur leur logement (banques de matériaux, banque de temps, prêt d’outillage, échange de savoir-faire, etc.), qu’ils paient régulièrement un loyer (même symbolique) ou remboursent un modeste crédit.

Paquot cites the Dakar Parcelles Assainies as a precursor. The project exhibited signs of functionalist urban planning, that is to say a rationalization of urban and sociological needs, based upon each element’s function (Mossoa). Indeed, the reports analyzed sociological needs—such as the need for a public square where the inhabitants can gather, dance, etc.—rationalized them, and combined them with the lowest possible costs. For instance, each parcel’s orientation

⁵⁴ See the original reports of the study, published in three volumes (*L’Habitat du grand nombre* I, II & III). The reports contain a mix of sociological studies and architectural maps.

⁵⁵ Lambert Mossoa defines “urban planning,” “dans le contexte africain, comme le fruit de décisions résultant de la conjonction de différents intérêts dominants au sein de l’appareil d’Etat, de l’appareil productif, de la société civile des pays et de bailleurs de fonds multilatéraux et privés” (Mossoa 44).

was determined so that each parcel would have access to the sewers on their narrowest side, so that a set length of pipes would accommodate as many parcels as possible. Economic considerations often took over sociological ones, as the scholars dutifully recorded, for instance in the observation that the goal of lowering costs went against the sociological need for sinuous streets, ultimately leading to the implementation of straight roads (*L'Habitat Du Grand Nombre III*, sec.5.05). Each of the twenty-six units, meant to house a total of 140,000 people, was designed similarly: “un quartier comprend cent parcelles, une place pour la mosquée, une place publique et des rues de sable” (*L'Habitat Du Grand Nombre III*, sec.5.06). Serigne Mansour Tall describes in detail the pitfalls of what he calls “une urbanisation à coût minimum” (Tall 76), and Mossoa calls it “[un] échec,” even though the project inspired similar ones across Africa.⁵⁶

Parcelles Assainies came as an answer to the need to house Dakar's unwanted away from visibility, which explains Sow Fall's choice to set a part of the novel there, keeping in mind that she published the novel only four years after the project was implemented. The first time his driver takes him to Parcelles Assainies, Mour reacts:

C'est encore loin ? a demandé Mour, bouillant d'impatience.

- Après le goudron, a répondu le chauffeur, il y a un long chemin sablonneux qu'il faudra parcourir sur une longueur d'environ sept à huit kilomètres, avant d'atteindre le nouveau quartier des Parcelles Assainies.

Dès qu'ils ont perdu de vue la route goudronnée, Mour a eu la sensation que la voiture s'égarait dans un désert qui semblait s'étendre à l'infini: paysage tristement nu, sans vie, fouetté par un vent d'une rare violence dont le hurlement se mêlait à la plainte stridente des nuages échappés des dunes de sable, et au mugissement féroce de la mer écumante de

⁵⁶ Tall enumerates some of the project's failures: its occupation rate was not good the first decade; much of the built environment is high-end and rented; the price of the land rose significantly, making it inaccessible to its original target buyers today, etc. Informal occupation of the land, as well as multi-level buildings appeared, even though the plans meant for each habitation to be a single-level house surrounding a courtyard. Some of the units still display this original set-up, but many, especially closer to the more commercial streets, exhibit high buildings. The inhabitants of Parcelles Assainies in the XXIst century belong to the middle class, while immigrants and poor owners have been partly relegated to further away suburbs such as Guediawaye or Pikine. Despite efforts to regulate and rationalize the birth of this new neighborhood, several decades show how the project evolved under the influence of lived experiences and the actual needs and uses of urban dwellers.

colère.

Mour n’a jamais mis les pieds dans ces coins, il en connaissait seulement l’existence par des cartes géographiques où ils sont colorés en rouge; ce qui signifie que ce sont des zones libres pouvant accueillir une bonne partie de la population. (Sow Fall, *GDB* 137—38)

This epic description shows natural elements unleashed, to dramatize how isolated and desert the area is, as well as the distance between the actual city of Dakar and the new settlement. Mour undoubtedly exaggerates the wildness and emptiness of the area to support the claim that the area is “free” and his own effort in going to such an extent to obtain the beggars’ support. Sow Fall published her novel only a few years after the completion of the Parcelles Assainies, having no distance as to what would become of the area. The road that leads to Parcelles Assainies is entirely urbanized nowadays; there is no visible limit between Dakar and Parcelles Assainies. The neighborhood fully integrated into the city, and became an official commune of Dakar in 1996. Sow Fall’s decision to involve Parcelles Assainies in her novel, through a fictional beggars’ strike, is therefore playful, while also bearing a significant message as to how urban occupants can subvert an institutionally-devised effort, as the beggars inhabit it and force the wealthy Dakarais out of their literal comfort zone.

Michel de Certeau almost appears to borrow from Aminata Sow Fall when he defines the conceptual city as a rational, timeless and universal place where, “‘La Ville’, à la manière d’un nom propre, offre ainsi la capacité de concevoir et construire l’espace” (de Certeau 143). This, which they both call La Ville, shows through the Parcelles Assainies project and the Public Sanitation policy, in that “il y a rejet de ce qui n’est pas traitable et constitue donc les ‘déchets’ d’une administration fonctionnaliste” (de Certeau 144). Again, they both employ the term ‘déchets’ to qualify that which La Ville rejects. Schematically, functional urban planning set up a carefully designed and regulated settlement in Parcelles Assainies, which in turn served as a

stage of resistance to a policy that sought to oppress and drive away the city's beggars. Both attempts—historical and fictional—to single handedly decide who can occupy space were met with stratagems of subversion.⁵⁷

Using military parlance, de Certeau describes how *stratégie* and *tactique* relate to space: “ces espaces que les stratégies sont capables de produire, quadriller et imposer, (...) les tactiques peuvent seulement les utiliser, manipuler et détourner” (51). Strategies imply stable power structures that organize space, for instance a department of urban planning or Public Sanitation. Conversely, tactics attempt to use, manipulate and subvert strategies within which they must function. The beggars' occupation of space in *La Grève des battus* is therefore a tactical one. Tactics do not have a proper place; they act with ruse and are defined by mobility. In the more spatial chapters of *L'Invention du quotidien*, de Certeau replaces strategy with *place* and tactics with *space*.⁵⁸ In Sow Fall's novel, the city center would be the place, while Parcelles Assainies holds an ambiguous position, implemented as a perfect place and primarily practiced as a space. Sow Fall's literary endeavor hinges on this ambiguity, which de Certeau would describe as intrinsic. Indeed, de Certeau theorizes that there can be no place that is not being used, manipulated and subverted to some extent, as there can be no space that is not being stabilized and regulated. To mix vocabulary from two fields, functionalist urbanism failed because it aimed at creating *proper places* (*lieux propres*) but undervalued tactical uses and lived experiences that also characterize urban spaces. The distinction for de Certeau between *place* and *space* is only ever conceptual, for neither terms of the dichotomy can exist independently. Accordingly, the

⁵⁷ For example, the project report describes and plans single-story, single-family houses. In 2017, many of the parcels host multiple-story buildings. On some of them, the original house remains, with new stories the trace of subversion that took place as families left, sold or rented the spaces they had acquired.

⁵⁸ Throughout *L'Invention du quotidien*, de Certeau develops and multiplies and links these dichotomies with one another. In another chapter, de Certeau uses the example of Ulysses who challenges the Cyclops due to his *métis*. Ulysses lacks time and strength; he must therefore use his wits for a tactical win over the Cyclops. In linguistics, the classical distinction separates “énoncé” and “énonciation,” where énonciation would function more like a “tactic” and the “énoncé,” which has a proper place, belongs to strategies.

beggars' presence in the Plateau already was a tactical use of a place, and the displacement to Parcelles Assainies merely leveled the playing field to some limited extent.

The tension between strategies that stabilize and tactics that destabilize is strong in Sow Fall's novel. The ways in which the beggars introduce some *space* in the *place* of Dakar deserve attention, for tactics often lie in the details. For instance, soon after the strike began, the bus stop closest to the beggars' new refuge was already renamed "l'arrêt des mendiants." This move shows that what happens at the level of space or tactics can modify established places, despite the lack of institutional or consecrated power. This toponymic use also indicates that the beggars' presence is already under stabilization.

***Nit nitay Garabam*—A Tale of Urban Collaboration**

Médoune Guèye, who has written extensively about orality in Sow Fall's work, argues convincingly that she turns Wolof thought into literary fiction. Her novels' tale-like characteristics stem from this heritage, as the writer acknowledged in an interview with Peter Hawkins, "Je suis tout à fait consciente que mes romans sont des romans, mais ce sont des romans qui portent un héritage de la tradition, des contes, des histoires, des légendes" (Hawkins 21). Sow Fall's novels are replete with archetypes, traditional wisdom and the sense that each novel has a message; they also mix fiction and social critique in a way that tales—oral or written—have long embraced. Guèye's *La Grève des bâttu* chapter less convincingly presents Mour as a bad hero and Kéba as "un héros positif [qui] représente la conscience morale du roman" (Guèye, *Aminata Sow Fall, Oralité et Société Dans l'œuvre Romanesque* 106). Devoured by shame and disgust, Kéba's so-called moral conscience serves to justify his hateful phobia. Any signs of a moral compass in his actions would be undermined by his absolute lack of compassion or even interest for the beggars.

I would like to offer a reading of the novel through one of the most important Wolof values: *nit nitay garabam*, a value for which both Kéba and Mour show contempt. This proverb, which translates to “man is the man’s remedy,” signifies that regardless of who you are, and of what you have, you will always need other people.⁵⁹ Mour’s utilitarian vision of the beggars does not qualify. *Nit nitay garabam* does not allow one to choose which men will be remedy for whom nor when. It is an absolute principle that must guide one’s life and everyday actions. A life led according to this moral code considers that every person has the potential to save you, and deserves to be treated as such. My contention is that *nit nitay garabam* lies at the core of Sow Fall’s *La Grève des bàttu*, despite the phrase never being directly invoked by the author.⁶⁰ *La Grève des bàttu* can thus be read as a cautionary tale against the dangers of forsaking *nit nitay garabam*.⁶¹

The trope of the urban center as the place where traditional values go to die is strong in African literature, as evidenced to some extent by Sow Fall’s own *L’appel des arènes*. High density, heightened anonymity and cultural models imported from the Global North increase individualism, which is in turn accused of damaging old adages and life principles like *nit nitay garabam*. This dark image of cities stems from colonization; cities after colonization came to represent imperial power and oppression, and its corresponding system of forced education in colonial languages.⁶² *La Grève des bàttu* offers a unique perspective in that the strongest

⁵⁹ The proverb does not distinguish based upon gender, since *nit* literally translates to *person*.

⁶⁰ Guèye discusses the phrase in the context of other Sow Fall novels, and her 2017 novel *L’Empire du mensonge* mentions it clearly, confirming the likelihood that Sow Fall could have had it in mind when writing.

⁶¹ It is interesting to note that the novel ends with Mour’s complete defeat, but stops short of exploring the professional or personal consequences for Kéba. This might be a sign of leniency towards Kéba, who appears as a victim almost as much as he does a persecutor; his humiliation would not be satisfactory nor even funny.

⁶² In Francophone Africa particularly, the assimilative education system directly attacked local languages and values. Novels such as Kane’s *L’Aventure ambiguë* or Seydou Badian’s *Sous l’orage* treat the difficult dilemma between rejecting the ways of the city and using its benefits (such as formal education).

upholders of the value of *nit nitay garabam* are also the most urban characters. Meanwhile, Mour and Kéba represent state oppression, which is typical of postcolonial texts.

In Sow Fall's novel, there is no better, freer space outside the city that could counter such attacks on traditional values. Even though some of Sow Fall's other writing has pitted tradition against urbanity, this one subtly and significantly displaces the debate to a fully urban ground. The defense of *nit nitay garabam* and value given to collective union in the face of oppression come from *within*; they too are urban. *La Grève des bâttu* has been rightfully read as a palimpsest of Sembène Ousmane's *Xala*. There too, a group of beggars obtain revenge from oppression. The beggars in *Xala* are motivated by personal revenge, and they only become true characters of the story at the very end; this is part of Sembène's message about their invisibility in society. In contrast, Sow Fall writes in such a way that the beggars' debates and doubts, their feelings of anger or fear are given a space throughout the novel. They do not seek revenge but self-preservation, through collective, inspired, political activism. Most of all, the most urban and vulnerable characters become the guardians of *aada ak cosaan* (literally "tradition and values," but also the Wolof word for "culture"). In an interesting parallel, Fiona McLaughlin has credited Dakar Wolof—the version of Wolof that has developed in the capital—with developing a de-ethnicized urban identity; this may seem counter-intuitive since Wolof as a language relates directly to ethnicity, but its reinscription in Dakar has led to an urban appropriation.⁶³ McLaughlin also relates this emergence of Dakar Wolof with urban resistance, in this case with the emergence of the "Set Setal" movement in the 1980s. In contrast, the *serigne* fails at reasoning with Mour because he remains locked in old dichotomies when he blames urban life for Mour's heartless behavior. The beggars may appear as the least likely upholders of Wolof values, unless you actually take *nit nitay garabam* seriously.

⁶³ See McLaughlin, "Dakar Wolof and the Configuration of an Urban Identity" (2010).

Most literary analyses of *La Grève des bâttu* focus on Mour and Kéba and only ever consider the beggars as a group by default, echoing the administration's own considerations:

[Mour] n'a jamais reçu, en une seule projection et simultanément, le tableau noir de tant d'infirmités, de délabrements et de décomposition humaine d'où se détachent, il est vrai, quelques zones de lumière, comme cette Salla Niang [...] Par une association d'idées qui s'est imposée à son esprit, il s'est mis à songer à certains quartiers mal famés de la Ville, à certains bidonvilles au milieu desquels se dressent, châteaux solitaires, quelques constructions d'un luxe criard. (Sow Fall, *GDB* 140)

The term “délabrement,” which often qualifies run-down buildings shows that Mour perceives the beggars as a problem of infrastructure; to him, the beggars represent a slum in need of urban renewal.⁶⁴ “Déchets” or slum, they should be removed or evicted; they need to be “cleaned.” Yet, and perhaps like a slum, the beggars cannot simply be ‘fixed’ with some restoration work, nor driven into invisibility. In addition, Sow Fall purposefully posits the beggars as a destabilizing force that, despite reduced means of action, collectively assemble—much like a living organism. This should be an incentive to look more carefully at the beggars in the novel. I argue that they share more than socioeconomic status and marginality; they choose to act as a collective unit through what AbdouMaliq Simone calls “urban collaboration.” Since traditionally the village symbolized collectivity, whereas the city stood for individualism (Moudileno *Littératures africaines francophones* 48); the beggars need to invent a new collectivity outside of traditional definitions. Two beggars, Nguirane Sarr and Salla Niang embody this new collective, and deserve an attention they have not heretofore been granted.⁶⁵ Even Mour, despite his skewed perception, notices the importance of Salla Niang.

⁶⁴ Mour alludes to disabilities and indeed, most of the beggars in the novel have a visible disability; some have leprosy, are missing a limb or have lost one of their senses (25). Their vulnerability is therefore economic as well as physical, and shows the society's failure to provide for those who fall outside physical normativity. Dakar is not an accessible city by any means and many of its beggars are disabled people who might not be able to contribute to society in any other way.

⁶⁵ To be fair, in their corrosive review of the novel, Albert Gérard and Jeanine Laurent mentioned Salla Niang as one of the few salvageable elements of the novel, only to lament how little attention the novel grants her.

Salla is portrayed as a woman of experience and a businesswoman, whose courtyard served as a meeting point for all the beggars. Her group leadership predates the strike. An orphan and former maid, Salla began begging when her twins were born. She subsequently became eligible for a parcel in Parcelles Assainies, due to her former employer's support.⁶⁶ When Mour repeatedly asks for the "maître de maison," a masculine term, Salla answers and thereby queers the system of gendered hierarchy. Her strong leadership facilitates the success of the beggars, and her sense of humor completes the humiliation of Mour, and therein, of the entire political system.

Nguirane Sarr is the most bellicose of the beggars, and the only one to stand up to Salla. Blind, he is convinced that beggars fulfill the social contract involved in any respectable form of employment: to give and to receive. Nguirane reminds them that the Muslim majority city needs them at least as much as they need their almsgiving. The beggars' choice, according to Nguirane, is between "mener une vie de chien, être poursuivi, traqué et matraqué, ou vivre en homme" (*GDB* 73). Nguirane reintroduces choice in the beggars' lives, when they have until then endured choices about their livelihoods made by others. Nguirane convinces the beggars of their agency, and in the end, the combination of his and Salla's visions leads to the strike.

This is why questioning humanity—who is human, what makes one human—lies at the center of the novel. If the beggars are indeed human, then they are an integral part of *nit nitay garabam*. Sarr and Salla Niang insist on determining whether they, as beggars, are men or dogs. The stakes of such a question are invariably high, as it inscribes them *in* or *out* of the urban ecology. If ecology can be read as one of the movements concerned with protecting the environment, then the novel is ecologically motivated. Indeed, the novel argues that the beggars form an integral part of the urban ecology and that preserving their lives is therefore an

⁶⁶ Her former employer did not help Salla out of altruism but because he sought sexual favors.

ecological duty. This might partly explain why the death of one of them acts as such a trigger for the beggars. An eco-critical reading of the dichotomy between “man” and “dog” could problematize the exclusion of animals from the urban ecology, but “dog” here only seems to be a placeholder for non-human, especially since dogs are mostly considered with spite and fear in Senegal. *Nit nitay garabam* teaches that survival—not to mention success—depends upon receiving help from others.⁶⁷ The proverb does not distinguish between more or less helpful people based on class, ethnicity, gender or profession. As evidence, the beggars extending a hand to him seemingly represent Mour’s best chance at becoming Vice-President. In the end, the beggars’ strike can only succeed because they collectively assemble, drawing strength from each other, becoming each other’s remedy.

AbdouMaliq Simone pays unprecedented attention to the micro politics of African cities in his seminal work on urban possibilities *For the City Yet To Come*. One of his concerns is that urban micro politics must be heard and seen—he uses both metaphorical senses—so as to be recognized as aspects that contribute to making African cities “exceedingly creative” (*For the City* 1) and “productive” (*For the City* 15). One of his *foci* is urban collaboration, in an attempt to answer the following question: “What are some of the ways in which urban residents are building a particular emotional field in the city, trying to restore a very physical sense of connection to one another?” (*For the City* 12). Nguirane and Salla then clearly appear as not only political leaders, but also as corner stones of the beggars’ emotional field. The stakes are high since the beggars are isolated from traditional family structures and can only benefit from each other’s support. By coming together and defending their rights—by refusing that these rights be trampled on and by using whatever little power they have as leverage, some of the most

⁶⁷ After Dakar fishermen unload their catch of the day, the pirogue is too heavy for the two or three fishermen to carry back onto the beach. It takes as many as ten or fifteen men, helped by teenagers and children, to lift the pirogue to its resting spot on the sand. Mutual help is necessary for the system to function.

vulnerable figures of the city exert agency. Of course, this power is relative, and still exists within a global network of unequal power relations. Regardless, Sow Fall does not leave room for a reading that does not see the beggars as victors in this story. Simone answers his previous question with, “This is a micro politics of alignment, interdependency, and exuberance” (*For the City* 12). The beggars’ urban collaboration exhibits all of these characteristics; it exists on the “gap” that Simone mentions is “room for negotiation and provocation” (*ibid.*). Small gaps and “micro” politics give a sense of the scale at which collaborations like the beggars’ can take place. In many ways, all that the beggars have access to is an interstice that their urban collaboration must maneuver but that interstice is worthy of being told for Sow Fall specifically because it exemplifies *nit nitay garabam*. Simone’s compelling conceptualization of urban possibilities in the introduction to *For the City Yet to Come* is unfortunately not matched by the same strength in the case studies he provides on Pikine (Senegal), Winterveld (South Africa), Douala (Cameroon) and Africans in Jidda (Saudi Arabia). This is perhaps what has prompted Ato Quayson to pick up on Simone and other thinkers’ tendency to the “discursive creation of a ‘top’ consisting of planners, governmental agencies, and international organizations that is then set against a ‘bottom’ of ordinary people” (Quayson *Oxford Street, Accra* 6). Quayson argues that the “complicity and overlap between top and bottom (...) have constituted the African city” (*Oxford Street, Accra* 7), in a way that Simone’s argument obscures, but which can best be found in Sow Fall’s novel. In fact, despite the use of archetypal characters, Sow Fall wrote street politics in *La Grève des bàttu* with nuance, mostly due to her focus on and portrayal of the beggars. Part of the reason for Simone’s unconvincing case studies is that he advocates for infrastructures of care, set up through collaboration and micro politics, and that these are by definition threatened by public attention, especially when public attention takes the form of institutional investigation into what

remains most of the time informal structures. So, in a sense, the freedom of fiction in *Sow Fall*'s novel allows for a more compelling politically inclined model, at once because it does not fear retribution for its visibility and also because *Sow Fall* made the creative and executive decision to end the novel where it did, with the beggars' victory.

Bodies on the Streets: Possible Agency?

Through somewhat passive resistance, or at least peaceful resistance, the beggars subvert an otherwise invincible power structure. They manage to put the Muslim-majority city in front of one of its paradoxes: the officials want the beggars gone but the beggars are socially essential to the Muslim imperative of almsgiving. Even though *Sow Fall* portrays the clear victory of the beggars at the end of the novel, one cannot but wonder as to what this victory represents in context. The grip on the beggars' lives has been temporarily loosened but the victory is more symbolic than durable. The economic and social realities that bring the beggars to beg in the city center are only momentarily suspended. This does not lessen the victory, but its impact on long-term policies. Still, the beggars displaced a state-controlled issue, and regained bodily agency through collective action; the force of urban collaboration, although "micro," is one that city officials and urban planners must reckon with. Is that what David Harvey, building upon an ambiguous phrase he borrowed from Henri Lefebvre in the latter's eponymous essay, defined as "the right to the city"? The right to the city, Harvey argues, is the "right to change oneself by changing the city," a right which "depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the process of urbanization" (Harvey 23). Both Lefebvre and Harvey make it clear that neglected urban dwellers can be the only ones to demand the right to the city, as they are the ones who do not benefit from the imbalance set in place by the existing power structures and whose

livelihoods are conditioned by the city changing.⁶⁸ Sow Fall radically features beggars, who are homeless for the most part, as the ones who can subvert institutional structures, and therefore “habitent” the city to borrow Lefebvre’s term. The “dispossessed” as Harvey qualifies them can nevertheless “habiter”; in Sow Fall’s novel, the beggars “habitent” la Ville while state officials never manage to.

After his four cases studies, Simone concludes, “in situations of relative scarcity, combined with new facilities for connecting to a larger world capable of exerting extreme marginalizing effects, the critical issue is how urban residents can make new uses of what is available to them. In the end, this mean how to use the city itself in different ways through the sheer remaking of the fields of social connection within it” (*For the City* 214). His work in *For the City Yet to Come* highlights forms of urban collaboration, practices and livelihoods that can easily go unseen. Small shifts of the power paradigm can seem negligible, but they can perhaps be echoed by voices such as Sow Fall’s.

As far as Parcelles Assainies is concerned, it might not be a coincidence that the political activism independent movement of “Y’en a marre” was born there in 2011 in a gesture that Mamadou Diouf and Rosalind Fredericks have deemed exemplary of a way of rethinking the political from the community, and occupying the city (Diouf and Fredericks 374). These arts of citizenship, as Diouf and Fredericks have named them, propose a necessary reading of Sow Fall’s novel as politically engaged, relevant to increasingly urbanized urban centers and re-inscribing agency as an ephemeral, collaborative, spatial concept.

⁶⁸ Lefebvre writes explicitly about class and Harvey about capitalism, inscribing their critiques of urban structures within a leftist-Marxist paradigm. Lefebvre identifies the right to the city with the isolated blue collar worker, and Harvey with the “dispossessed,” from the victims of Haussmanian urban changes in 19th-century Paris to African Americans in the U.S. during the 20th-century, but also Mumbai slum dwellers. The overall idea that the powerless and neglected urban dwellers hold the right to the city in their hands echoes that of a possible agency on the beggars’ part in Sow Fall’s novel.

Conclusion

As the close reading and literary analyses of the two novels have shown, movement across the city can take many forms. From the wandering of Bigué and Ngoné to the social movement of the beggars; from detailed trajectories filled with spatial and cultural references, to the astute choice of a meaningful locale for collective union, Bugul and Sow Fall build a literary imaginary based on literal movement and conceptual displacement. Both pieces remain novels, with character and plot development, as well as an investment in the aesthetic of writing; yet, they also afford or perhaps invite a reading that accounts for the urbanity of each novel, and the fiction of each city. Ken Bugul's call for *aller et retour* and Sow Fall's focus on the beggars also show that both writers engage with the social challenges of the city in which they live. Both novels postulate an urban ecology that reclaims space for the many bodies that move across and within it, that inhabit and walk its streets and breathe life into all its creative possibilities. These novels embrace the fiction that is the city, they shape its imaginary as it is incumbent on city dwellers to do each day as they live out, create and recreate the temporal spatiality that grants the city its very existence.

These two novels have a lot of differences, including in style and tone. Yet, both novels put to the fore a portrayal of the postcolonial African city from the perspectives of its streets, zooming in on the narratives of those who call these streets home. This is what makes them truly urban novels; that they stop to recount the casual urban resistance that takes place daily, and often in small—sometimes invisible—acts. Their focus on the types of spaces and characters and stories that I have mentioned is a creative and political choice. These rebellious narratives, as I call them, challenge institutional archives, build up new ones, put into text that which often is not recorded. The characters of the novels do rewrite the city by foot, through their small and large-

scale movements, the ways in which they challenge the established order; but their writers also rewrite the city by pen, by presenting a poetics of African cities that favor the tales of ordinary spaces and vulnerable characters, and their crucial importance in the overall urban ecology and in the literary imaginaries of large African urban centers.

Article 15: Narrative Delinquency and the City in Marie-Louise Mumbu's *Samantha à Kinshasa*

*Les villes sont fortifiées, défoncées, désossées et décalées
Il y a des villes qui vibrent, des villes qui dansent et des villes qui pleurent
Mais toutes les villes se racontent, avec leur lumière et leurs ténèbres
—Papy Maurice Mbwiti, Kin-kiesse*

“C’est quoi l’article 15, papa?” ten-year-old Samuel asks his father as the credits for the short film *Debout Kinshasa* (2016) roll.¹ Samuel’s father laughingly tells his son the story of when, as then-President Mobutu was writing the Constitution, his secretary skipped from article 14 directly to article 16. When Mobutu noticed the mistake, he said: “Pour l’article 15, débrouillez-vous !” The story, one of the many origin myths of the popular phrase “Article 15,” launches young Samuel into an education of sorts. Article 15 represents the many tactics that urban occupants, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and in Kinshasa in particular, use to bypass apparent powerlessness in the face of hardship. The school guard does not allow Samuel in without proper closed-toe shoes. At first, Samuel bribes the guard with his lunch food, but that strategy only works once. The ten-year-old’s resourcefulness develops until he figures out he can sell for a profit individual portions of “Chinese” toothpaste he bartered for his four-colored BIC pen.² This new business venture succeeds, to the point that Samuel grows his sales team and diversifies his activities. Commercial enterprise and innovative thinking, often prompted by dire material conditions, are constitutive of Article 15. Samuel’s discovery of Article 15 ultimately leads to the collective improvement of his and his peers’ access to education, and to the liberation of his father, whom the police had arrested on a made-up minor offense in hope of

¹ Sébastien Maître’s twenty-minute César Awards-nominated short film, as well as the accompanying nine docufiction vignette series *Les petits métiers de Kinshasa* and the comic book *Mbote Kinshasa!*, all of which came out in 2016, form what Maître has called a multimedia ensemble.

² His previous business attempts included selling overpriced bread to a white woman (“Prix *mundele*, plus c’est clair, plus c’est cher”), attempting to convince a hairdresser to train him, offering to carry food for another *mundele*, and even offering to carry a woman across a flooded street. In Kikongo and in Lingala, the term *mundele* means “white person” and would be a synonym for the word *toubab* in other parts of West and Central Africa. Samuel and his family speak French and Lingala together, and they use the word “mundele” in French sentences as well.

extorting money from the family. Another conversation echoes the first one between Samuel and his father, but this time the young boy has grown into a true Kinois—inhabitant of Kinshasa—when he attributes his success to “l’article 15, le miracle congolais.” Sébastien Maître’s short film portrays urban Kinshasa’s resourcefulness and creative modes of resilience, even as economic scarcity, unfair legislation and corruption plague its inhabitants. The fact that a discussion of Article 15 bookends the short film underscores the ways in which ingenious micro-economies of survival often come as the only answer to the deficiencies that affect daily lives in Kinshasa, to the extent that even a ten-year-old must learn to master the strategies of Article 15 in order to become a full-fledged Kinois.

The prevalence of Article 15 in Kinshasa attests to a long history of systemic political turmoil from the onset of colonization to the present. The capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, then named Léopoldville, remained under Belgian rule for over a century, first as the personal property of King Leopold II, then as a Belgian colony. Hard-won independence in 1960 did not give the Congolese people the ability to “freely determine their own destiny and to use their bountiful natural resources to improve their living conditions” (2), as Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja points out in his historical study of the DRC. Indeed, after the short-lived hope embodied by the country’s assassinated first Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, the DRC faced thirty years of dictatorship under General Mobutu Sese Seko; bloody conflicts over economic and political interests in several parts of the country; human rights violations and large-scale displacements that continue to this day; and a change of regime at the turn of the century that failed to provide the democratic relief it promised. As such, the DRC remains torn by paradoxes, at once one of the countries with the most precious natural resources in the world and one of the world’s poorest and least stable countries, to such an extent that its state and political failure is deemed

exemplary.³

The organic, haphazard, pervasive concept of Article 15 provides a lens to think through the ways in which urban characters respond to systemic chaos and “reinvent order” (Trefon) in Kinshasa. Article 15 favors a study of the poetics of Kinshasa that subverts norms from the start, refusing a negative approach to Kinshasa—through what the city is not, or does not (have)—to examine instead how Kinshasa “se débrouille,” that is how its inhabitants fend for themselves through creative strategies. Like Article 15, the poetics of Kinshasa, as they are made manifest in contemporary literature from the DRC, derive from cutting across the city in a slalom-like manner, occupying spatial and social interstices, building and recording an experience of the streets that often lies outside established rules, and thus inventing and inscribing into text a “delinquent” practice of the city. In doing so, Marie-Louise Mumbu’s 2008 novel *Samantha à Kinshasa* expresses the destabilizing, paradoxical and resilient ways of living and working in Kinshasa through the stories of some of its most iconic characters. At the center of Mumbu’s novel are two underprivileged yet resourceful social groups—street youth and sex workers—each carving for themselves an interstitial space in the megacity.

This chapter thus examines and interprets the textual resourcefulness whereby Mumbu’s outlawed characters come to embody Kinshasa in what reads as a playful and innovative urban novel. Through the criminal and social delinquency of street children and the urban embodiment of sex workers known as the Filles de Molokaï, this postcolonial feminist novel focuses on urban bodies as they “débrouille” their way through the city, avoiding obstacles left and right,

³ International relations specialist Thierry Vircoulon writes that “La RDC a été diagnostiquée comme un des *failed states* les plus exemplaires de la planète” (9). For more on state failure in the DRC, see Trefon, Van Hoyweghen et al.’s guest-edited issue of the *Review of African Political Economy* on the topic. In their editorial, the authors suggest that Article 15 acts not only as a collateral consequence of Mobutu’s regime, but was an intended effect, as Mobutu kept people individually and creatively occupied in search of survival so as to avoid political mobilisation” (Trefon et al. 383), thereby drawing a direct link between state failure and Article 15.

demanding to be heard, and expressing creative accounts of life in the “insaisissable [...] monstre urbain.”⁴

Kinshasa has long been an object of literary interest, from the politically committed poetry of Tchicaya U Tam'si, through the magic realism and vulgarity of Sony Labou Tansi, to the compelling fiction of Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, to name but a few.⁵ U Tam'si's collection of poems *Le Ventre* (1964) and Labou Tansi's *La vie et demie* (1979) and *L'anté-peuple* (1983) have helped shape the literary imaginary of Kinshasa, as it gained independence from Belgium and later as it struggled with the dictatorship of Mobutu.⁶ Moreover, Labou Tansi expressed his aesthetic and affective investment in the capital in a prose poem entitled “Kinshasa ne sera jamais,” in which he reclaimed the city's unique features as worthy of poetic attention.⁷ In *Le Bel Immonde* (1976), Mudimbe wrote about nocturnal life in Kinshasa as an entanglement of politics and the erotic, explored amidst the sensory overload of a dance club. African literature scholar Janice Spleth also reports on a perhaps less canonical but significant body of urban novels published in the 1980s and 1990s.⁸ More recently, In Koli Jean Bofane's *Congo Inc.* (2014) starkly portrays a globalized, corrupt Kinshasa through the eyes of a young pygmy turned street child-entrepreneur. Fiston Mwanza Mujila has also contributed to the vibrant genre of urban

⁴ I borrow the expression from a 2017 article in the French newspaper *Le Monde* entitled “Mégapole insaisissable, Kinshasa croît hors de tout contrôle.”

⁵ A 2009 article by Ramey Ngoie Kabuya Salomon (“Écritures urbaines lushoises”) makes a similar claim about Lumumbashi based mostly on the city's role as a center of cultural production rather than on its role as a literary object.

⁶ In fact, Xavier Garnier's monograph on Sony Labou Tansi explicitly claims that the city is Labou Tansi's privileged textual space for its relationship to power, for instance when he writes “les territoires urbains de Sony ne sont pas organisés, mais sens dessus dessous, ils sont des espaces mis sous tension et très dépendants des enjeux de pouvoir” (75). That is especially the case of the postcolonial metropolis in the hands of a “pouvoir despotique carnassier” (120) such as the unnamed city in *La vie et demie*.

⁷ The poem begins, “Kinshasa ne sera jamais New York. Tant mieux d'ailleurs. Chaque ville a son âme. Chaque ville a son corps, sa peau, son intelligence, sa bêtise, son côté monstre, sa poétique, sa part de mystère...” (21).

⁸ The novels Spleth pays attention to include Emongo Lomomba's *L'instant d'un soupir* (1989), Mpoyi-Buatu's *La re-production* (1986), Ngoye's *Kin-la-joie, kin-la-folie* (1993), Djungu Simba Kamatenda's *Cité 15: roman zaïrois* (1988), and Zamenga Batukenga's *Un Villageois à Kinshasa* (1988). In the same category, we could add Muamba Kanyinda's earlier novel *La pourriture* (1978), which Silvia Riva discusses in her *Nouvelle histoire de la littérature du Congo-Kinshasa* as an urban novel in terms that echo Spleth's take on the other novels mentioned.

novels from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, earning in the process a spot on the list of internationally recognized authors from the DRC. In his novel *Tram 83* (2014), Mwanza Mujila writes about a fictional city that allegedly represents the southeastern Congolese city of Lubumbashi, yet the city shares many commonalities with modern day Kinshasa, including its vibrant nightlife, the social importance of bars and the novel's focus on ordinary urban dwellers. Alain Gomis's recent film *Félicité* (2017) also speaks to the Article 15 tactics of Kinois as Félicité, the protagonist of the film, attempts to save her son's life by all means possible. The film presents a cinematic portrayal of a sensual, fierce Kinois woman whose inventiveness grows with necessity. Yet, despite an impressive literary output, few women writers have been acknowledged as major writers in the DRC, with perhaps the exception of poet Clémentine Nzuji.⁹ For instance, Lydie Moudileno's seminal work on the Congolese novel only treats male writers.¹⁰

Montreal- and Kinshasa-based writer and journalist Marie-Louise Mumbu, also known as Bibish, stands as an "unheard voice," a powerful yet understudied exception to the male-dominated field of literary production from the DRC.¹¹ Her first published novel *Samantha à*

⁹ In 1988, Sylvain Bemba coined the expression "phratrie des écrivains congolais" to describe the intellectual and thematic proximity of writers of the Republic of the Congo. Bemba borrows the Greek term "phratrie" from Friedrich Engels to refer to a brotherhood, one that includes few women amongst these major writers who use their cultural capital to patron each other. Alain Mabankou's preface of Fiston Mwanza Mujila's *Tram 83* signals a continued use of such practices in the present day. In the Republic of the Congo as in the DRC, this intellectual brotherhood seems for the most part constituted by male writers. Riva's literary history of the DRC mentions several female writers including Nele Marian, Clémentine Faïk-Nzuji, Elisabeth Mweya Tol'Ande, whose writing are often autobiographical, but even so, these writers are portrayed as (important) exceptions to the predominance of male writers.

¹⁰ Moudileno's work zeroes in on what she calls "parades postcoloniales," where parade has the sense of both spectacle and protection, a double entendre that seems key in Congolese cultural and social life under the Mobutu dictatorship for example.

¹¹ Lloyd Brown writes about the exclusion of the "other voices, the unheard voices" (3) of female African writers as a deplorable tradition in African writing. *Samantha à Kinshasa* was first published by Belgium publisher Le Cri in 2008, and reedited in 2015 by Montreal-based publisher Recto Verso, which despite showing how Francophone publishers based outside of metropolitan France invest in Francophone writing, does not discredit the novel as a Congolese novel anymore than it does the work of her male counterparts, many of whom publish outside of the DRC. This chapter consistently references the Recto Verso edition of the novel.

Kinshasa (2008), but also her contribution to the collection of stories *Kin Kiese, les écritures congolaises* (Collectif Moziki littéraire) alongside the aforementioned Mwanza Mujila and Papy Maurice Mbwiti, show that an attachment to Kinshasa is central to her work. A journalist for the monthly publication *Africultures* where she writes about literature and the arts of Africa and the African diaspora, Mumbu edited an issue on “Logiques urbaines à Kinshasa” as early as 2002.¹² There already, she underscored the characteristics of Kinshasa as “ville-paradoxe, ville-spectacle” (*Logiques urbaines à Kinshasa* 5, 21), a trope that comes back throughout *Samantha à Kinshasa*. Mumbu has been active in the performance world, through her participation as writer and performer in Faustin Linyekula’s *Festival des mensonges*, but also by way of two theatrical adaptations of *Samantha à Kinshasa*.¹³ In a 2006 interview, Mumbu repeatedly states that Kinshasa is a muse that fuels her desire to write, to the point that “entre cette ville et moi, c’est une histoire de coeur.” Mumbu’s novel deserves an attention that it has heretofore not been granted by scholars, as a playful and masterful expression of resilient urban experience, and as an urban novel written by a woman in and about a space where internationally acclaimed women writers are still too few.

¹² The issue features articles and interviews about various forms of art such as music, of course, but also theater, painting, photography, fashion and dance. Edited by Mumbu who pens no fewer than four short articles herself, the issue focuses on the potentialities of Kinshasa, its vibrant cultural scene and some of its most dynamic cultural agents. Mumbu’s articles zero in on street artists, culture, *shégués* and opportunities for female Congolese professionals.

¹³ Faustin Linyekula’s choreographed show *Le Festival des mensonges* (2007), based on Mumbu’s text “Mes obsessions, j’y pense et puis je crie,” also features everyday urban life in Kinshasa. Linyekula declared in an interview, “Sa manière de chroniquer la vie à Kinshasa, à partir d’un regard de femme, est un peu le fil rouge de ce *Festival des mensonges*.” Linyekula put his finger on three main aspects of Mumbu’s writing: the idea of *chronicles* of urban life in Kinshasa—a word borrowed from the realm of journalism; the feminine gaze; and the relationship to performance. Catherine Boskowitz’s adaptation features a female performer on stage who weaves together excerpts from the novels and songs in Lingala, accompanied by a musician. It was first performed in 2010 with Alvie Bitemo in the title role and has then toured around France (Paris, Avignon, Nantes). Another adaptation, this time directed by Philippe Ducros, was created in Quebec in 2015 under the name “Bibish de Kinshasa,” following the re-issue of the novel by a Montreal-based press, Recto Verso.

Additionally, Mumbu's novel must be read outside the framework within which Francophone African urban literature has mostly been read up to this point.¹⁴ Indeed, this entire project relies on the assumption that, in order to change the perception of African cities in literature, we must change the paradigms according to which we read the novels that portray them. As Chemain and Moudileno express about Francophone African Literature, and Riva and Spleth confirm in the context of Congolese literature, when the city has been at the center of the novel, it has mostly been as negative force involved in apparently clear dichotomies.¹⁵ Many urban novels are read as cautionary tales; the city appears as a space in which colonial imposition or postcolonial inequalities were most present spatially and most affected urban daily lives, a space of corruption, perversion even.¹⁶ This characterization also affects the literary imaginary of

¹⁴ With a few notable exceptions, the motif of the city has been treated scarcely in the context of Congolese literature. In that sense, there is a strong difference between the critical treatment of Congolese urban novels and especially the Anglophone African critical tradition. Ato Quayson's recent *Oxford Street, Accra*, as well as the existence of a field known as Lagos Studies show that the city has been more integrated in literary criticism in English-speaking Africa. French literary scholars Aurélie Journo and Xavier Garnier have published on urban literature in Kenya, thereby reinforcing the idea that the city exists as a literary object mostly in the context of Anglophone Africa. Possible explanations for that lack in Francophone African literary criticism include the heavy reliance on "francophonie" as the prevailing category, one which has denationalized and to an extent despatialized the way novels have been read. As a result, there is a strong body of work on Kinshasa from scholars in the social sciences, but very little as far as literary criticism is concerned. Even experts of Congolese literature such as Garnier and Moudileno only evoke the role of Kinshasa in Congolese literature in passing if at all. This dissertation, and in particular the chapters focused on Francophone cities, aims at exploring the angle of the urban, thus opening up the literary critical field. In doing so, I do not mean to apply blindly an existing model onto every novel. Rather, I draw from the critical interest in urban novels that exists elsewhere to suggest that we look at the micro levels, at the people and organisms that are usually not considered the core of the city, and at the way fiction can give them space and echo their voices.

¹⁵ In the only book-length study of the motif of the city in Francophone African novels, Roger Chemain builds a dated vision of the city novel, set against the more prevalent model of "village" literature. The other prevailing dichotomy is that of the segregation of the colonizer's white city versus the colonized black city famously described by Fanon. Chemain uses examples up to the 1970s, including classics of African literature such as Mongo Beti's *Ville cruelle* or Malick Fall's *La Plaie* to portray literature as an echo of the city especially represented by what he calls "lieux privilégiés," privileged spaces such as the prison, the hospital or the marketplace. As Moudileno shows for the Francophone African novel, and Riva for Congolese novels, the 1980s and 1990s see an increase of urban novels and a diversification of stories. In a rare occurrence of literary criticism centered around fictional depictions of Kinshasa, Spleth describes yet another dichotomy, whereby "the Zairian novel of the eighties and early nineties repeatedly depicts this divided city where the abject poverty of most citizens is opposed to the comfort and privilege of a few" (216), a postcolonial version of the colonial dichotomy.

¹⁶ The novels by Lomomba, Mpoyi-Buatu, Ngoye, Djungu Simba Kamatenda, Zamenga Batukenga and Kanyinda that Spleth and Riva discuss as urban novels are all analyzed as examples of cautionary tales, although the pattern applies beyond the boundaries of novels set in Kinshasa. This pattern of assigning corruption and perversion to the

other cities, including Lagos as I show in chapter three. Riva writes that Article 15 is “[considéré] comme responsable d’une grande partie des maux du pays” (262), citing several literary examples of such negative representation. Riva writes about Emongo Lomomba’s *L’instant d’un soupir*,

Mais surtout, le roman de Emongo met en scène la rencontre entre deux conceptions du monde aux antipodes l’une de l’autre: celle des article 15 (qui rend licite tout type de comportement, aussi pervers et corrompu soit-il, tant qu’il s’avère profitable) et celle de l’esprit de sacrifice et du sens des responsabilités. (263)

Riva sets up yet another dichotomy that does not exist for Mumbu. Conversely, *Samantha à Kinshasa* departs from dichotomic visions of the city, to instead present Article 15 as an economy of resilience and adaptability, and its practitioners as full-fledged members of society. More than that however, Mumbu’s novel gives us an opportunity to move the conversation away from binaries that seem to come as much from the critical works as from the novels themselves.¹⁷ This chapter does not challenge the diachronic validity of such dichotomies in a way that would portray them as *no longer* valid; rather, the framework of Article 15 and what I will come to define as Mumbu’s narrative delinquency later in this introduction suggest a way of reading the imaginary of Kinshasa outside critical paradigms that rely too heavily on set binaries.

“Trop de bruits de bottes, trop de pleurs et de cris, trop de vacarme dans nos têtes. Trop de ruines dans notre sang. Trop de mochetés dans notre décor. Trop de poussière sur nos souvenirs. Et pourtant...” (Mumbu, *Samantha à Kinshasa* 30) On seat 19A of the Airbus A330

city appears in Western, African oral and literary traditions predating colonization, and can be found in colonial, decolonial and postcolonial accounts of the city in African literature.

¹⁷ To some extent, the reliance upon these dichotomies is symptomatic of the colonial system and of its aftermath. Of course, the use of these discourses is by no means limited to the colonial period or to members of the colonial power. Negative discourses and clichés about African spaces were internalized, and have extended well into the postcolonial period. They have also, even with good intentions, been reflected in the critique. One notable exception to the dichotomic reading is Maryse Condé’s review of Kanyinda’s *La pourriture*, in which she notes the absence of a village/city dichotomy and writes that “d’une certaine manière, [ce roman] consacre l’urbanisation populaire” (123). Condé’s review and this chapter’s argument open space up for a rereading against the grain of some of the previously mentioned novels.

that takes her from Kinshasa to London, by way of Paris, 34-year-old journalist Samantha lists the reasons why she is leaving her home city for good. Yet, as she drinks her way through her northbound flight, her mind turns not to London nor to her new life, but back to Kinshasa. Primarily narrated in the first person, the novel is a collage of urban scenes, some of which are derived from Samantha's own experiences, while others are gleaned through the quintessential social grapevine that local Kinois affectionately call "radio-trottoir." In many ways, *Samantha à Kinshasa* reads as a fictionalized glimpse into everyday life in Kinshasa, told in the form of at once tragic and funny vignettes, in which Samantha is the observer and the observed—the character, the messenger, and the critic. The novel echoes how Kinshasa functions and "dysfunctions," juggling the constitutive articulation of "Trop de... Et pourtant..."¹⁸ To understand Kinshasa, Samantha suggests, one needs to embrace its paradoxes. DRC scholar Théodore Trefon argues similarly from the introduction of his book *Reinventing Order in the Congo*,

Despite outrageous problems, Kinshasa [...] is also a fascinating and fantastic social space. [...] It is a vast stage (*une ville-spectacle*) characterized by hedonism, narcissism, celebration and myth-building. It is a city of paradox, contrast and contradiction where new and remarkable patterns of stability, organization and quest for well-being have emerged. (1, my emphasis)

Here I want to call attention to Trefon's adverbial strategy, his interpretation of Kinshasa as a place of "also's" ("Kinshasa is *also*"), not so much to highlight the city's inherent contradictions as to reject, just as Mumbu does, a singular story of this city. Kinshasa thrives against the backdrop of what scholars like Trefon and Filip de Boeck have respectively called "state failure"

¹⁸ As such, *Samantha à Kinshasa* could fall under the category of "failed state fiction." John Marx coined the term "failed state fiction" to describe fiction that "shapes a counterdiscourse" different from political science accounts of failed states. "Failed state fiction," for which Marx's main examples are Nigerian civil war novels, bring about contradictions and attempts to "democratize expertise" (599) by granting an expert status, and a voice, to those characters whose lives have been affected by the crises they describe. However, the focus on the "failed state" that Marx reinstates at the same time as he claims to counter it undermines the valency of the category to describe Mumbu's novel, the focus of which is on everyday lives and urban voices.

and “multi-crisis,” and what Samantha herself calls “État en sursis” (SK 30). Mumbu describes this “also” as “disarticulated”:

Elle est paradoxe et spectacle, des fois complètement désarticulée. Quand on pense la mater, c’est là qu’elle réagit parce qu’elle est complètement imprévisible. [...] Elle a le chic de garder le sourire et cette espèce d’air de fête malgré la galère. Les misères. C’est tout Kinshasa, ça... Une mégapole complètement désarticulée. (SK 73, my emphasis)

Mumbu’s lexical use mirrors Trefon’s, through the unexpected pairing of the words “paradox” and “spectacle.” Mumbu and Trefon each emphasize Kinshasa’s unpredictable resilience, its smile despite (“malgré”) its precarity. This is perhaps where the “désarticulation” lies, in the disrupted logic of narratives about Kinshasa, a dislocation that requires *grammatical* connectors: adverbs (“pourtant” and “also”) and prepositions (“malgré”), positing a syntactical relationship where there is none other. Mumbu’s novel thus comes as the somewhat disarticulated articulation—a term that can mean both verbal expression and joint—of a giant capital city that has grown too fast.¹⁹

The novel’s epigraph poeticizes the polarization Mumbu perceives in Kinshasa through a homophonous wordplay that reads, “Kinshasa [...] Poubelle, dit-on, mais à mes yeux la plus belle” (SK 5).²⁰ The term “poubelle” here refers to Kinshasa’s metaphorical disorder and messiness, as well as some of the institutional incapacity to meet its inhabitants’ basic logistical needs, such as access to clean water or waste management.²¹ The best and worst of Kinshasa mix to create the “très bruyante et très odorante” (SK 5) city. Kinshasa is intoxicatingly too much.

¹⁹ Kinshasa’s gigantism is often referred to as a source and symptom of its dysfunctions. See for instance Ayimpam, Ngandu Nkashama, Pain. Already in 1979, when the Kinshasa only counted 1.5 million inhabitants, Guy Lasserre mentioned the city’s “gigantisme” (417) as a source of urban problems. Current estimates vary a lot, and struggle to account for the many unrecorded inhabitants of the city, but hover around 10 million inhabitants in the 2010s, so approximately six-to-seven times what it was four decades ago.

²⁰ Kinshasa has many popular nicknames, including Kin-la-belle and Kin-poubelle, hence Mumbu’s wordplay. Other nicknames include Kin-kiesse—*kiesse* means joy in Lingala—which became the title of a collection of personal essays to which Mumbu contributed, and Kin-la-violente, as U Tam’si refers to the capital city in his famous poem “La Conga des mutins” (U Tam’si 43).

²¹ See for instance Trefon and Angéline Maractho Mudzo Mwacan, “The Tap is on Strike: Water Distribution and Supply Strategy,” in *Reinventing Order in the Congo*.

The city's melody emerges from world-famous Congolese music and the noise of immobilized cars honking in traffic.²² The fictional city that Mumbu writes is one where the smell of waste overflowing from the streets into the Congo River saturates the senses alongside the irresistible aroma of *viande ruelle* ("back alley meat") cooking in the *ngandas*, the outdoors bars where locals drink beer and eat grilled meats. The irreducible tension between "Kin la poubelle" and "Kin la belle" is foundational in Mumbu's work and points towards a paradoxical relationship of Kinois to their city. When chaos becomes the only enduring order, everyday urban dwellers establish the "fend for yourself" economy as a creative—and sometimes desperate—response to political and institutional failure.²³ In a playful novel (un)structured much like the city's "radio-trottoir" ("pavement radio"), Mumbu gives unprecedented attention to the vibrancy of those who occupy the streets of Kinshasa: the corrupt road traffic controllers, the bar hoppers, child beggars and sex workers, amongst others. In doing so, she positions Kinshasa away from narratives of failure and chaos, to capture the *delinquent* possibilities of the literary imaginaries of urban bodies in Kinshasa, and to put forward the city in *Samantha à Kinshasa* as a non normative body that poses a challenge to the very concept of "delinquency."

I use the term "delinquency" throughout this chapter not as measure of legality, nor morality, but to repurpose Michel de Certeau's concept of "delinquency" for Kinois survival practices. De Certeau writes, "Si le délinquant n'existe qu'en se déplaçant, s'il a pour spécificité de vivre non en marge mais dans les interstices des codes qu'il déjoue et déplace, s'il se caractérise par le privilège du *parcours* sur l'*état*, le récit est délinquant" (190). The distinction

²² As I show in Ch. 3, traffic takes an important role in contemporary narratives of urban Sub-Saharan Africa, in particular in megacities such as Kinshasa or Lagos, in which the authorities did not anticipate crippling everyday traffic that the existing automobile networks cannot absorb.

²³ In a recent essay about Kinshasa, AbdouMaliq Simone even claims that "popular economies [...] are (...) forms of political contestation [...] that] do not necessarily bring a coherent program into view but rather keep things unsettled, even volatile and as such aim to preclude the foreclosure of possibilities" ("Rough Towns: Mobilizing Uncertainty in Kinshasa" 142).

between *parcours* and *état* is foundational in de Certeau's work. *État* is that which is stable or always in a stabilizing process. It is an established map of a place; it is a set of rules, or plans, or even a place as it has been thought out. In opposition but always in conjunction, too, *parcours* is a destabilizing force; it is the way a place is lived, and set orders are disrupted. In the above sentence, the delinquent belongs to the side of *parcours*, quite literally since the delinquent has no proper place, is constantly moving and has to occupy an interstice in order to "délouer" and "déplacer" codes to which she is nonetheless subjected. That spatial and social interstice is that of the characters of *Samantha à Kinshasa*.

In her description of the margins, bell hooks writes: "To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body. [...] We could enter that world but we could not live there" (9). Rather than the margins, then, the concept of the interstice better corresponds to the spatiality of the *shayeurs*, of the *shégués* and of the sex workers, for they do live there, right there. The encounter between the playfulness of "délouer" and the subversive spatiality of "déplacer" is at the heart of Mumbu's textual articulation of these characters' practice of the city, which I thus call "delinquent." Take the example of the *shayeurs*, street vendors who often sell objects, in individual portions, on the side of the street or in the midst of traffic jams. Constant movement is their necessary condition, and they are restricted by a system in which they do not dominate. The *shayeurs* crisscross the city, jumping in and out of traffic. The novel unambiguously states, "L'article 15 est leur droit chemin" (SK 94), establishing delinquency as an active path, as their trajectory.²⁴ Yet what is most striking in de Certeau's quote is that social delinquency acts for him as a way into narrative delinquency. Similarly, in this chapter, Article 15 functions as a way into the poetics of Kinshasa. Narratives are delinquent, according to de

²⁴ The term "droit chemin," or "straight path" in English, can here be read spatially or metaphorically, for the path can refer to the movements of the *shayeurs* in the city or to their destiny. Ironically, neither seems straight, for to have Article 15 as a straight path is to slalom through the streets of Kinshasa.

Certeau, if they rely on mobility, diversion and interstices. Quickly, de Certeau adds that “le récit est une forme de délinquance en réserve” (190), that is to say a form of delinquency that accommodates order and remains suspended to some extent. Yet in Kinshasa, and in Kinois literature, delinquencies of all kinds are not suspended. In the Congolese context where order is disorder and disorder creates its own order, Mumbu’s version of narrative delinquency is thus enacted, and more interestingly, embodied through the characters’ delinquent practice of the city and through her portrayal of interstitial and queer urban bodies.

I. Rules of the Unruly—Ruling the Unruly?

Article 15 has gained legitimacy as a popular name for the inventive survival techniques that Kinois and more generally urban Congolese populations practice on a daily basis. News articles, institutional reports and ethnographic scholarship alike have started paying closer attention to Article 15, as evidenced by the work of Janet MacGaffey, Sylvie Ayimpam and Lye Mudaba Yoka, amongst others.²⁵ Scholars of Kinshasa such as Filip de Boeck and Theodore Trefon also treat Article 15 in their case studies and analyses of how life functions in the megacity. Yet, there is no scholarly or popular consensus as to how the concept surfaced, conferring an almost mythical status to the term. The explanation that Samuel’s father uses in *Debout Kinshasa* cannot be corroborated with any historical evidence, nor has any other explanation led to a scholarly consensus.²⁶ Political scientist Koen Vlassenroot, geographer

²⁵ See for instance a report on corruption in the DRC produced by the French OFPRA (Office de Protection des Réfugiés et des Apatrides), which speaks of a social total phenomenon. OFPRA is the institution in charge of granting or refusing the refugee status to asylum seekers, and these reports are intended to help its agents make decisions on whether to grant asylum seekers refugee status, by giving them a better sense of the country’s political situation. Such institutional reports are ideologically loaded and need to be read with caution; however, the fact that such a report takes Article 15 into account speaks to the growing attention given by institutions to what started as a popular phrase.

²⁶ Several sources mention that “Article 15” originated from an article in the *Constitution de l’État Séparatiste du Sud-Kasaï*, a region that sought full autonomy from the state on August 8, 1960. The secession lasted a bit over a year (Crousse et al.; Jouannet; Massoumou and Queffélec). Some versions allege that Article 15 mimicked an article of law to encourage the population, “Débrouillez-vous !” or perhaps symbolically completed a constitution that only

Timothy Raeymaekers, and others, are convinced that Article 15 is a product of popular imagination, for lack of a better explanation.²⁷

However, what seems clearer is that the term spread in popular culture in part due to Pepe Kalle & Empire Bakuba's successful 1985 song in Lingala "Article 15, beta libanga" (Jackson and Médard; Ayimpam).²⁸ That said, the existence of an earlier song entitled, "Article 15 oyebi y'ango," from K.P. Flammy & Begun Band, recorded as part of the album "1959-1961 Souvenir y'a l'indépendance," suggests that the expression could predate Mobutu's rise to national power and even the country's independence, which would further obscure the origins of the term. These are early references to Article 15, but far from the only ones in popular culture.²⁹ A mythical origin is appropriate for Article 15, the existence of which relies on informal and often illegal means of getting by, including petty crime. Additionally, Kinois at all levels of power may practice Article 15 to some extent, but the concept remains strongly associated with everyday urban dwellers. This social function, as well the context of state failure and economic scarcity that warranted Article 15 in the first place, explain why it remains an elusive term, mainly used colloquially, despite scholarly interest.

comprised fourteen official articles. However, the short-lived "Constitution de l'Etat Fédéré du Sud-Kasaï," established in July 1961 and reproduced in full as an annex to leader Albert Kalonji's memoir, actually included 93 articles, and only the "titre premier," or first chapter, comprises fourteen articles. None of the articles state "Débrouillez-vous !".

²⁷ Some blog posts and internet comments maintain that Article 15 belonged to the Boy Scouts' rules of conduct in the 1950s; in case the Boy Scouts lost communication with the main patrol in the jungle, they had to "make do." See for instance: <http://emmakmus.blogspot.com/search?q=article+15>, <http://www.mbokamosika.com/article-27460930.html>, <http://lelixirdudrfunkathus.blogspot.com/2009/12/lu-fuki-ya-kongo-ou-la-malediction-de.html>. The touristic guide *Petit Futé* uses this explanation without any sources in their webpage about Kinshasa and in the print edition 2017-2018.

²⁸ Sylvie Ayimpam's own translation of the lyrics shows that the song encourages listeners to find solutions, particularly through labor, as the chorus repeats, "pour vivre il faut chercher, débrouillez-vous pour vivre !" (Ayimpam 11-2). Mumbu's novel repeats the exact same words, "Débrouillez-vous pour vivre!" (52).

²⁹ See, for instance, Baloji's 2007 rap song *Tout ceci ne vous rendra pas le Congo* ("Et j'admire ton courage, ton sens de la débrouille / Ton coeur est trempé dans le zinc, il résiste à la rouille") or in journalistic accounts of Kinshasa (see for example Benetti).

Article 15 maintains a tenuous relationship to legality.³⁰ Is Article 15 a space for the law, or for the outlaw? In 1998, Africanist anthropologist René Devisch called Article 15 “the predatory economy of the street,” adding that it is “the semantic and social space of the petty thief, crafty sorts of minor aggression and resourceful predation on others and upon the state” (*Body and Affect in the Intercultural Encounter* 96).³¹ Devisch remains stuck in a dichotomy between Kinois who practice Article 15 and those who do not, whereby the latter as well as the state suffer from the wrongdoings of the former. *Samantha à Kinshasa* strongly opposes such a reading of Article 15, and so do several scholars on the question.³² The absence of a clear distinction between legality and illegality as well as the overt corruption at all levels of the state thus encourage regular citizens to follow suit and find their own ways of “débrouille.” Luca Jourdan even calls Article 15 “un espace personnel de pouvoir” (Jourdan 164) that individuals carve within society. The relationship between law and outlaw must be rethought in the context of the DRC, as Article 15 blurs the lines of delinquency on a daily level.

Like Jourdan, sociologist Janet MacGaffey has sought to dispel prejudices about Article 15; she was one of the first scholars to reclaim “débrouille” as an organizing principle of Congolese life. More recently but in a similar vein, Marta Iñiguez de Heredia writes that tactics of “débrouille” are tactics of “creative survival” (153). MacGaffey explains that activities that qualify as “débrouille” are often unrecorded and sometimes illegal and that they nonetheless

³⁰ A majority of origin myths tie the term to the drafting of a Constitution, the epitome of a legal document. The term itself mimics the language of the law, even though and perhaps because it relates to barely legal or at least less than formal economic endeavors.

³¹ The original article in French from 1998 describes Article 15 as “socialement l’espace du petit prédateur, les ruses et la débrouillardise aux dépens des autres et de l’Etat” (Devisch, “La Violence à Kinshasa, Ou l’institution En Négatif” 449). The phrasing insists more on the idea that Article 15 practitioners act at the expense of other members of society and the state.

³² As an article by Luca Jourdan reminds us, Mobutu pillaged the nation for decades. Jourdan writes that Article 15 does not exist beyond the purview of the state; instead, the concept of Article 15 represents “un pacte social implicite entre l’État et ses citoyens” (164).

constitute a “second economy.”³³ Mumbu’s fictional portrayal of Article 15 in *Samantha à Kinshasa* shares MacGaffey’s voluntary insistence that Article 15 tactics take place in the open, intersect with formal activities, and disproportionately affect poor citizens.³⁴ For instance, MacGaffey argues that low-level and badly paid positions remain attractive through the possibility they offer to exert power over and obtain money from those seeking a service or product. This would be true of the novel’s civil servants, some of whom compensate for a total lack of pay by extorting money through a process of influence peddling. One of them, the “roulage” or road traffic controller, fines drivers for “infractions routières qu’il invente, article 15 oblige” (SK 68), as a way to make a living when the government has withheld pay for civil servants for fifty-nine months, or almost five years, in the name of budgetary restrictions and in the context of accusations of embezzlement. MacGaffey and others explain that Article 15 is at once symptomatic of economies of “débrouille” that take place all over Sub-Saharan Africa, and elsewhere with variations.³⁵ Yet, historical circumstances, lower literacy rates and ongoing economic crisis have given a unique prominence to the concept in the DRC.³⁶ Overall, the duration of political and economic instability have established Article 15 as a pillar of Congolese

³³ The concept of “second economy” sheds light on the importance of that economic activity, while trying to avoid some of the stigma associated with other terms. One of MacGaffey’s main points, which she reiterates more clearly in a later work, is that the denunciation of informal economies disproportionately targets alternative economies of the poor, while alternative economies of the rich and powerful, such as tax evasion, are rarely treated in the same manner.

³⁴ Citing Keith Hart, MacGaffey insists that Article 15 is about activities or roles, not about persons, which means that a single person can be a part of the first economy and the second economy at the same time, sometimes in the same transaction. The school guard who accepts Samuel’s bribe in *Debout Kinshasa* and the street patrol officers who rely on bribing as their sole source of income exemplify the duality of first and second economy.

³⁵ Historically, the concept of “débrouille” or “système D” in the metropolitan Francophone world can be traced to the First World War, when it stood for “système débrouille” or its more vulgar equivalent “système démerde,” as a way to refer to tactics the soldiers put in place for survival in an adverse environment. MacGaffey mentions that there are equivalent phrases or terms to Article 15 all over Sub-Saharan Africa. See also Cilas Kemedjio for instances of “débrouillardise” in the Caribbean and other Sub-Saharan African countries. Anthropologist Katherine E. Browne analyzes the role of “débrouille” in *Creole Economics*, in particular through the Martiniquan phrase “débouya pa péché,” which means that it is not a sin to use the survival tactics and economic creativity of “débrouille.” Perhaps the most famous literary example of such “débrouille” in the Caribbean context appears in Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Chronique des sept misères* (1986).

³⁶ See also Yoka for another argument about the unique circumstances of Kinshasa regarding “débrouille.”

society, especially in its urban centers—as systemic political chaos has prevailed as the only lasting order.

Sylvie Ayimpam’s *Économie de la débrouille à Kinshasa* presents what is arguably the first book length ethnography of how “la débrouille” impacts daily Kinois lives. Her work encourages a reflection around what it means for something as unstable, fragile and supposedly temporary to be a staple in the lives of a majority of Kinois. Ayimpam writes, “Avec les années, la ‘débrouille’ est devenue à Kinshasa un état d’esprit général, une ‘manière d’être’ partagée, un marqueur de l’identité citadine qui traverse tout l’espace social kinois” (13). For Ayimpam, “débrouille” cannot be restrained to a circumstantial diversion of established rules; indeed, it has become a defining characteristic of urban life in Kinshasa.³⁷ Contrary to Devisch, Ayimpam acknowledges that “débrouille” is pervasive in social Kinois space, which means that it can no longer be read as the predatory economy of an outlaw minority, as though some individuals and spaces could remain immune from and stand outside of “débrouille.”

If Article 15 has *also* become a marker of urbanity; if “débrouille” more generally *also* implies notions of collective identity that ultimately *also* enable stronger human connections; if, as MacGaffey argues, Article 15 can *also* empower women to contribute to the household income and thereby to partially emancipate themselves from a system structured by men, then a language of predation cannot accurately describe Article 15 in Kinshasa.³⁸ The novel focuses extensively on urban dwellers as they practice Article 15, each in their own way. “Débrouille” infiltrates all social categories and spaces in the novel: an old woman attends churches of

³⁷ Ayimpam ties qualities such as “solidarité” and “convivialité” (13) to “débrouille” as markers of collective urban existence, in a further challenge to moral norms.

³⁸ As Cikuru Batumike notes, women held important roles in pre-colonial societies, including leading roles in some matriarchal communities. Colonization imposed a male-dominated system and Batumike argues that Congolese women still struggle to find their place in postcolonial Congo-Kinshasa, where they face psychological, cultural, social and juridical challenges. MacGaffey argues that Article 15 can provide a liberating way for women to contribute to the family income and to exert agency in their daily lives and that of their household.

different confessions to obtain more spiritual help; an unemployed underachiever founds a church that unsubtly covers a Ponzi scheme; teachers double down as taxi drivers. As the government enacts censorship through electricity shortages during a musician's concert, beer producers and local bars gather back-up generators as sex-workers mobilize the population to protest. Yoka summarizes the paradoxical role of "débrouille":

Le pouvoir de l'informel qui, par définition, s'élabore hors pouvoir, pour ainsi dire, c'est-à-dire en dehors des formules conventionnelles, 'officielles,' étatiques, s'investit comme un mouvement paradoxal: à la fois mimétique et autonome, à la fois anomique ('hors-la-loi') et généreux (généreux en termes de solidarités originales), à la fois totalitaire (il couvre tous les domaines) et éclaté en réseaux entrecroisés, à la fois ludique et pathétique. (38)

The paradox that Yoka describes echoes the paradox mentioned earlier by Trefon and Mumbu herself. The repetition of "à la fois" exposes Kinshasa as a space in tension, articulated around its own disarticulation. Mumbu's novel embraces this playful pathos; *Samantha à Kinshasa* is a narrative of *débrouille*, where the fixed nature of its material literary existence seeks to nevertheless reflect (on) the deeply unsettling possibilities of reading Article 15 as representative of living (in) Kinshasa.

Most of the vignettes Samantha shares as "memories" are not actually hers to begin with; they reach her through the grapevine of "radio-trottoir"; she then appropriates them as her own, and seamlessly combines memories from the collective voice of Kinshasa with her own experience and personal voice. As such, the question of narrative voice is tricky in the novel, as it is at once that of Samantha and that of Kinshasa rendered through the narrator. The media equivalent of Article 15 is "radio-trottoir," which is the popular way for information and rumors to get around. Literally, the term mixes a formal mode of information dissemination—radio—and a space of often-unplanned social encounters—trottoir.³⁹ Yoka adds that the main

³⁹ To paraphrase MacGaffey, we could call "radio-trottoir" the "second medium," keeping in mind that in a context

“transmitters” are often practitioners of Article 15, such as the *shégués*, the street children of Kinshasa, and the aforementioned *shayeurs* (also spelled *chailleurs*). Extremely mobile by definition, the *shégués* and the *shayeurs* are “kiosques” (Yoka 58) of information. They propagate interpersonal communication through a democratic and anti-conformist mode of collecting and spreading information. Ultimately, Yoka claims that those urban dwellers most likely to be perceived as outcasts act as essential transmitters of social contact and human connection.

Similarly, *Samantha à Kinshasa* is a compound of formality and informality. A legible literary object, the novel engages common ethnographic themes and modes of data collection; features a journalist as main character; recounts local survival tactics to ongoing political and economic trouble; and even adopts a themed chapter structure, in which each theme seems to describe the content of the chapter that it introduces. And yet, even as Samantha appears to play with the norms of ethnographic writing, we are constantly reminded that it is but a game for which Kinshasa is the playground. Narrative unreliability and lack of linear temporality give postmodern accents to the novel. For instance, the novel alternates between a first-person narrative (“je,” SK 118) and a third-person narrative in which Samantha is a named character, “C’est une Sam fatiguée comme une “député” qui rêve de sa maison pour des “urnes” plus qu’évidentes. Vu le plein de sa vessie” (SK 100). The slippage from one to the other is seamless and unpredictable. *Samantha à Kinshasa* must be read as a postmodern, postcolonial, and literary challenge to cultural and political assumptions about “order.” The stories of urban bodies on the streets are transmitted and retransmitted in a way that echoes the iterative and organic processes of “radio-trottoir.” The interruptions caused by Samantha’s bladder—of which the previous

of political censorship and difficult access to formal modes of information dissemination, “radio-trottoir” may well act as the first medium instead.

example is one amongst many—and the references to a wine-fueled narrative further disrupt the process of remembering and of retelling. The narrative is thus delinquent in that it plays with norms and themes to turn them on their head; in that it presents social delinquents and outcasts as main leads of the novel; but also in that its critique of unstable and violent political systems and unacceptable life conditions does not seek resolution through an established order. Mumbu does not intend to fix Kinshasa, but to poeticize that which is not poeticized. Delinquency—narrative and otherwise—becomes the way to write the disarticulation. In doing so, rather than discussing legality, Mumbu questions legibility. The characters of the *shégués* and of the Filles de Molokaï embody that questioning of legibility, which I will acquaint to a gesture of queering in the final section of this chapter.

The (dis)articulation of Kinshasa resonates through the novel *via* urban and narrative delinquency, particularly in the stories that feature the DRC's most infamous delinquents, the social group known as the “shégués,” or the plural *bashege* in Lingala; that is to say, the street youth of Kinshasa.⁴⁰ Mumbu reclaims the characters of the *shégués* and their delinquent practices as socially relevant to Kinois life and as such deserving of textual space and recognition.

Ils ont des prénoms très spéciaux. Il y a des Hugo Boss, des Diva, des Innocent, des Bienvenu, Fallone, Olivier Strelli, Gaultier. Des Plamedi pour ‘plan merveilleux de Dieu’, Merci pour ‘merci à Dieu’, Don de Dieu, Jean de Dieu, Glodi pour ‘gloire à Dieu’. Ils sont tous des shégués... Des enfants de la rue, sans maison et sans parents. (SK 51)

The children's names illustrate some of the most important aspects of Congolese society: a mix of religion; fashion as capitalist ideal; and some ironic-sounding hope in the case of “Innocent” or “Bienvenu.” Human Rights Watch estimates that roughly 30,000 *shege* children roam the

⁴⁰ I will use the terms “youth” and “child” interchangeably in this chapter; however the *shégués* range in age from very young to what would be considered adulthood, since those who became *shégués* as children do not stop being *shégués* for as long as they remain on the streets, regardless of their age. Mumbu herself wrote in an article about *shégués* “ils ont grandi depuis le temps que personne ne s'en occupe (“Kinshasa et sa horde de ‘shégués’, une poudrière prête à exploser !” 18).

streets of Kinshasa.⁴¹ *Shégués* are widely considered to be a symptom of all that is dysfunctional in the DRC.⁴² These children, many of whom are rejected by their families, while others have chosen to leave, survive through a mix of informal and illegal activities.⁴³ Filip de Boeck and other scholars have looked into the factors that led them to homelessness, which include abuse, poverty, AIDS—some of the elements of the “multi-crisis”—as well as accusations of witchcraft.⁴⁴ In the aforementioned quote, *shégués* are referred to as “sans maison et sans parents,” while Mumbu later adds that many of them are paradoxically “orphelins de parents vivants” (SK 229). De Boeck explains the phenomenon as such: in families struck by death, disease or poverty, a child—oftentimes a child whose mother died and whose presence is not accepted by the father’s new wife—is accused of being responsible for the family’s ill-fortune, of being a witch-child acting from the depths of the “second world.”⁴⁵ The second world is located under the surface, beyond the visible (de Boeck and Jacquemin). Some reports state that as many as 70% of the *bashege* are accused of being child-witches.⁴⁶ The child is thrown out of the family structure, or chooses to leave to escape abuse, and their only refuge becomes the

⁴¹ The combination of childhood and homelessness elicits impassioned reactions on a global scale, so much so that over 150 organizations in Kinshasa alone specialize in providing street children with assistance, including temporary housing, access to education and professional training, and family reunification. The World Bank funded a project entitled “DRC Street Children” from 2010-2015 as an attempt to limit child-age homelessness through prevention and rehabilitation (<http://projects.worldbank.org/P115318/drc-street-children-project?lang=en>).

⁴² Sociologist Jerry Hollingsworth notes that, “Children often experience the effects of political, economic, and social crises within their countries more severely than adults, and many lack the adequate institutional support to address their special needs” (85). See also Gilbert Malemba N’Sakila’s *Enfant dans la rue: le sans et hors famille* (2003) on the historical and societal impact of these children’s presence on the streets.

⁴³ Not all aspects of Article 15 are legally reprehensible, and the *shégués* rely on petty theft, but also on selling objects or services for instance.

⁴⁴ For more on this, see de Boeck and Plissart; Dugrand; Cimpric; Javangwe and Chirisa; Trefon, *Ordre et Désordre à Kinshasa*.

⁴⁵ Disability, mental illness or physical traits such as albinism, can factor in as other reasons why parents accuse children of witchcraft. Disability is a common source of rejection; for instance in the novel, a man admits to beating his grandmother because she is a witch, a diagnostic he establishes because she has become incontinent (Mumbu 186).

⁴⁶ A U.S. Department of State report on human rights in the DRC refers to a UNICEF report, but the percentage cannot be assessed precisely or accurately considering the nature of the accusation, and the difficulty to track the data and its evolution through time.

streets, where they conglomerate as gangs of children.⁴⁷ Many of the children embrace the accusation of witchcraft, as something that gives them power—through the fear they arouse—and alleviates a bit of their vulnerability. Similarly, some of the *shégués* choose to remain on the streets where they feel free.⁴⁸ Some scholars of street children in Africa have argued against visions of the child as vulnerable, passive, innocent, which they view as neocolonial impositions from the Global North.⁴⁹ Although the concept of the innocent child has always been contested, sociologist Viviana Zelizer writes about the Western “sacralization” (1038) of the child, a process that dates back to the turn of the twentieth century.⁵⁰ Zelizer makes the argument that the economically worthless child is a concept adopted by the urban middle class and imposed onto lower classes, with the use of shaming discourses about the child’s presumed innocence. Recent scholarship on African childhoods argues against the victim paradigm, presenting childhood experiences in Africa in terms of opportunities and challenges instead.⁵¹ This difference of perception is key in Mumbu’s writing of these young characters as independent minds worthy of space, textual and otherwise.

In *Samantha à Kinshasa*, Mumbu blends innocence and armed conflict, highlighting the uncomfortable paradox, for instance in the figure of the *shégué* Hugo Boss. After losing his mother at a young age and suffering from his father’s wife’s neglect, Hugo Boss becomes a child soldier, a *Kadogo*, seduced by the promise of 100 dollars of compensation, without realizing that,

⁴⁷ As De Boeck reports, there is an entire spiritual and financial economy that revolves around exorcisms of witch-children performed by “revival churches,” many of which function as moneymaking schemes. Such a church appears in the novel, under the ironic name of “La Prospérité n’attend pas!” even though Mumbu does not mention whether this church practices exorcisms.

⁴⁸ See Geenen; Dugrand.

⁴⁹ For more on this, see Biaya; de Boeck and Plissart; Trefon.

⁵⁰ The image of the innocent child can be traced back through time in the West, including by way of Rousseau’s idea of the innocent nature of the child in *Émile ou l’éducation*, and prevails in the twentieth and twenty-first century via the “sacralization” of children, which ascribes religious and moral value to children. However, that idea has also always been countered and does not exist as a consensus at anytime in History.

⁵¹ See Honwana and de Boeck; Ensor; Javangwe and Chirisa; Razy and Rodet for examples of such an approach.

“beaucoup de gens meurent [...] Qu’on doit tuer pour ne pas être tué [...] que cette guerre-là est réelle et que les kalaches ne sont pas en bois” (SK 102). His naivety and understanding of wars as games where the weapons are made of wood reasserts a childlike perspective, contrasted by its broken aftermath a few lines later, “quelque part, il est foutu, car désormais la violence, la mort, ça le connaît” (SK 102). Hugo Boss and thousands of others marched onto Kinshasa in the late 1990s, when Laurent-Désiré Kabila’s army (Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo) overthrew thirty years of dictatorial regime.⁵² The ambivalent status of these children—child *and* soldier—innocent *and* guilty—persists.⁵³ Honwana argues that child-soldiers occupy an interstitial position (Honwana and de Boeck 32), which I would add gets amplified when they are demobilized and often become homeless. As such, they occupy another interstice, as they struggle to find their place in the city. Upon arriving in Kinshasa, Hugo Boss borrows a bicycle, using his only possession of any value, his assault rifle, as a deposit: “Comme il a trop envie d’un tour de vélo et contre toute attente, faute de sous, il donne en gage au jeune ado sa grosse mitraillette, enjambe le vélo et se met à rouler comme un damné” (SK 103). Many *shégués* are former *kadogos* like Hugo Boss. At one point in the novel, Samantha the journalist does vox pops interviews at a political meeting; the people’s answers are presented under the heading of each social category: civil servants, taxi drivers, senior citizens, students, etc. Under the “shégué” heading, the main demand is “je veux juste redevenir un enfant” (SK 65). This demand implies that they are no longer children, that they are indeed “foutus”; nonetheless, this loss is also what leads to their full-fledged membership in Kinois society as evidenced by the

⁵² In his essential History of *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja explains that the children were recruited during the march from Goma, in the eastern part of the country, to Kinshasa. After they helped Kabila seize power, they became useless and unpaid soldiers. For a testimony of a former *kadogo*, see Lucien Badjoko and Katie Clarens’ *J’étais enfant-soldat* (2005).

⁵³ In “Les enfants soldats d’Afrique, un phénomène singulier? Sur la nécessité du regard historique,” africanist historian Jean-Hervé Jezequel provides a historiographic account on child soldiers in Africa that replaces the phenomenon within a larger history not geographically limited to the African continent, and also takes into account the different representations of children across time and space.

legitimacy that the journalist confers to their voices and political demands. These child soldiers, child-witches and other undesirable children find a way, through their practice of the city, to confront political discourses and social actions that seek to erase them.

Spatially as well as socially, the *shégués* abide by rules that make the best out of conditions they cannot control. They in turn impose their rules onto other street users through their practice of the urban playground. The *shégués* relate to urban space through notions of territoriality and movement. Hugo Boss is part of a group whose sector is a mall called “Galeries Présidentielles,” in the economic center of Kinshasa, adjacent to the Belgian Embassy. A few blocks south, another group rules over the Marché Central area. In between, the Boulevard du 30 juin is occupied by yet another group that claims it as their territory. The *shégués*’ use of space defines and delineates different group “ownership”—until each has to move again because the police or inhabitants of the area chase them away. Sometimes, however, they return within the hour. Territorial use is bound by rules and, ironically the markers of respective territories are described as, “des frontières mieux dessinées que celles du pays” (SK 51), in mockery of old colonial border making. The value of each territory is established by its profitability, visibility and proximity to local commercial areas. At the same time, the *shégués* cannot be too visible or too close to commercial and political spaces without risk, as these spaces are also more prone to police presence. Therefore, the *shégués* occupy the spatial interstices of the city, the small gaps in between areas of interest. This is also mirrored by *shégués*’ nocturnal shelter in the Cemetery of Gombe. Mumbu writes that the cemetery of Gombe is the place where VIPs rest forever and the *shégués* rest (“dorment” SK 228) for the night. The “repaire” and “chambre VIP” act as a refuge that Mumbu opposes to the “lieux de ‘travail’” (SK 228) of the commercial areas. The cemetery, at once at the center of the city and its own counter-city, provides yet another

interstitial space that the *shégués* occupy.⁵⁴

In the opening glossary of Kinois terms in the novel, *shégués* appear as “argot kinois signifiant ‘enfants de la rue ou délinquants’” (SK 20). The term “delinquent” arises etymologically from the Latin verb “delinquere,”—“to fail,” “to commit a fault,” “to transgress,” and by extension, to “commit a crime.” The origins of the term *shégué* are up for scholarly debate, but all the possible etymological roots negotiate different thresholds of legality.⁵⁵ Mumbu writes that *shégués* will do what it takes to fill their stomachs, in compliance with Article 15, often on the threshold or outside of legality. Yet, as Mumbu shows throughout the novel, everybody practices Article 15 in Kinshasa, from street patrol officers to teachers, from young female students to government employees. What becomes of delinquency then when even civil servants have to practice it; when the Article 15 represents the most efficient—and perhaps only—way to survive “state failure”? If the state has failed you, has committed innumerable faults, has transgressed its citizens’ rights time and again—to repurpose the definitions of *delinquere*—so much so that chaos becomes its only enduring characteristic, what then is (a) delinquent in such a system of power?

The *shégués* function in organized groups, the leaders of which are often older members. The *shégués* organize their daily lives around the prospect of making money, with little concern as to how; many of them sell objects or work on markets; steal; and female *shégués* often engage

⁵⁴ Michel Foucault’s article “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias” provides a useful reading of heterotopias as spaces that are at once physical sites that can be visited, and sites invested with a reverse form of utopia. The cemetery is a heterotopia in that it exists within the city, but also represents that other planned space spatially and symbolically organized around death.

⁵⁵ Some argue that the term comes from Che Guevara and refers to the rebelliousness of these children very much inspired by the revolutionary leader who visited the Congo in 1965. For more on Che Guevara’s visit to the Congo and lasting influence on the newly independent country’s citizens, see for instance Nzongola-Ntalaja (6) and Che Guevara’s own diary. The figure of the Che is influential enough to end the novel Djungu-Simba Kamatenda’s *Cité 15* when the sweat of two lovers on a poster looks like tears on the face of Che Guevara. Others argue that the term *shégué* comes from the Luxemburg town of Schengen, which is also the name of the European treaty of free circulation of goods and people, possibly because free circulation regulates the territories controlled by groups of *bashege*.

in sex work, as it is the most profitable activity.⁵⁶ Kristien Geenen even reports that politicians bribe *shégués* into participating in protests or political meetings, either to show support or to bring trouble.⁵⁷ The *shégués* are portrayed in *Samantha à Kinshasa* as pickpockets with rules, for instance when Hugo Boss recovers a hat that a “petit garnement” (SK 120) from another sector stole on his territory, under the pretense that “Ce sont les règles de la rue: on ne se manque pas, et surtout on ne viole pas le territoire des autres, on ne gâte pas leur coin ni leur bizness (*sic*)” (SK 120). The system has created its own rules, its own hierarchies, its own games the rules of which are decided by children upon whom adults have relinquished all authority and rights. When a character’s groceries are stolen by *shégués*, the others pretend not to have seen anything; it is their “serment d’hypocrite: ne rien voir, ne rien entendre” (SK 176), a counter Hippocratic oath as a collective form of protection, which only money can break. Indeed, the way to get one’s possessions back is to pay another group of *shégués* to steal them from the first group.

Deux secondes d’inattention... c’étaient deux secondes fatales! Le temps qu’elle retourne à ses cartons : plus rien! [...] Une autre dame, faisant semblant de la connaître, vient l’embrasser et lui signale que tous ses cartons se trouvent sous un bus stationné juste à côté. Il faut qu’elle monte les enchères et qu’elle demande à un autre shégué de les lui récupérer [...] Sans montrer que c’est la dame qui lui a donné l’idée. Sinon, cette dernière se fera systématiquement voler à son tour, puis insulter, c’est comme ça qu’ils châtient ‘ceux qui se mêlent de ce qui ne les regarde pas.’
Maman Colonel appelle dès lors un shégué [...] il convainc ses copains, et le tour est joué.
(SK 235-6)

One of the women knows the rules of the game, but she can only share them in a whisper, and neither adult has the power to make the game stop. They are forced to play according to the *shégués*’ rules. The episode concludes with “le tour est joué,” implying a playful trick. Mumbu

⁵⁶ In *Samantha à Kinshasa*, all the *shégués* are male children, but scholarship on *shégués* shows that there are female *shégués* as well, albeit in a much smaller proportion. A 2010 UNICEF report cites Emilienne Raoul, Congo Minister of Social Affairs, Solidarity, Humanitarian Action and the Family, who estimates that girls make up 5% of the homeless population.

⁵⁷ See Geenen, ““Sleep Occupies No Space’: The Use of Public Space by Street Gangs in Kinshasa.”

references the *shégués*' childhood through this delinquent game performed in the urban interstice. The tone mirrors the playfulness of the moment, rather than its gravity, and confirms Mumbu's text as *delinquent*, as riding an interstice of its own that playfully works against concepts of societal relevance. In this instance and throughout the novel, the *shégués* are not minor, in any sense of the term.

The combination of "state failure" and Article 15 blurs the lines of what we may term "delinquency" in this context, even though the presence of the *shégués* elicits strong, sometimes violent, popular reactions. In the novel, a character for example argues in favor of apprehending all of the *shégués*. The social category of the *schégués* appears to function as a safeguard, as a way to contain and scapegoat delinquency in a socially and politically legible manner. This legibility is disturbed nonetheless when the police arrests "tous les jeunes gens qu'ils considèrent comme shégués, ils prennent même certains shayeurs, ainsi que tous les 'assimilés aux shégués'..." (SK 228). A woman comments unfazed that all *shégués* are "diabes" (SK 229), or devils, as a male interlocutor answers, "Non, ce ne sont que des enfants" (SK 229), adding that the policemen are former *shégués* too. *Shégués* are thus the legible marker of chaos; of streets whereon civil servants and street children practice the same tactics of survival; of violence on all sides; of instability as law. When Dinsaure, a *shégué* leader, gets into a fight with a policeman who tried to kiss his girlfriend, and possibly kills the man, he is not punished but instead, is named bodyguard of the President's spokesperson. Thresholds and layers of legality and delinquency continually merge with only social status as a fictional but socially enforced border.

In calling Article 15 the "second economy," MacGaffey seems to echo the spiritual "second-world" from which the witch-child operates and that in turn unsettles or destabilizes an implied "first world," a world of daylight and formality. In Kinshasa, that world is but a myth.

To borrow de Certeau's terms, there is no *état*, only a *parcours*. To cast off *shégués* as delinquent and other-worldly is to confine chaos when the real problem is that, "Qui est shégué et qui ne l'est pas, est-ce qu'on le sait nous-mêmes ?" (SK 229) Mumbu's novel questions the moral assumption of social delinquency, and even the possibility for such moral distinctions in the Congolese urban context. This is why Mumbu's "et pourtant" and Trefon's "also" are so key to both of their works, and to this chapter. The disarticulated articulation forces reader to reckon with the full extent of the question, "Qui est shégué et qui ne l'est pas, est-ce qu'on le sait nous-mêmes?" This question brings together the two social groups under discussion in this chapter. Earlier in the novel, "plus personne ne sait qui est plus pétasse que l'autre. Qui l'est et qui ne l'est pas" (SK 46). Women, and more particularly the choices they make about their bodies and sexuality, also blur boundaries, further justifying reading *shégués* alongside female characters in the novel. Delinquency brings together fiction and social realities—and as corollaries the fields of literature and sociology—which explains why Mumbu's novel calls for a dislocated reading that opens space for a discussion of social roles in and about Kinshasa, most significantly through the narrative of embodied experience in the city.

II. Urban Embodiment: The Bodies of Kinshasa

The tactics of Article 15 incite Kinois to bargain with legal and moral norms, in order to make their daily urban reality work. Achille Mbembe in *On the Postcolony* (2001) has powerfully shown how bodies have been affected, first by colonialism, and then by the postcolony.⁵⁸ In the context of the postcolony, Mbembe describes the intimacy of tyranny, which

⁵⁸ The main difference between the two, according to Mbembe, is that colonial imposition on bodies aimed for productivity, while the postcolony aspires to the production of a "spectacle" (*On the Postcolony* 114). Some of the ways the postcolony impacts bodies include the fact that "[postcolonial] authorities can requisition people's bodies [...]" (115). These bodies can then be "neutered" (115), "shattered" (115), "used to entertain the powerful" (122) in

reaffirms domination through a set of intimate rituals. Ordinary citizens, Mbembe explains,

have internalized authoritarian epistemology to the point where they reproduce it themselves in all the minor circumstances of daily life—social networks, cults and secret societies, culinary practices, leisure activities, modes of consumption, styles of dress, rhetorical devices, and the whole political economy of the body. (*On the Postcolony* 128)

This reproduction of authoritarian epistemology emerges through the economy of extortion in which one responds to powerlessness by exerting whatever power one has onto someone who has less. Typically, the salary-deprived traffic controller arbitrarily fines drivers. Article 15 exists on the assumption that everyone fends for their own selves, family or community; the authoritarian epistemology—or its simulacrum, to borrow Mbembe’s term—thus trickles down to all levels of society. Yet, Article 15 also encompasses resistance, which Mbembe argues not only appears in practices of confrontation of the intimate tyranny. Instead, one must “watch for the myriad ways ordinary people guide, deceive, and toy with power instead of confronting it directly” (*On the Postcolony* 128), since “what defines the postcolonial subject is the ability to engage in baroque practices fundamentally ambiguous, fluid, and modifiable even when there are clear, written and precise rules” (*On the Postcolony* 129). Sex in the novel is one such set of practices that contributes to a writing of Kinshasa as a playful and “fundamentally ambiguous” city, since Article 15 is so intrinsic to the imaginary of the urban center.

In *Samantha à Kinshasa*, embodied experience is always also a political experience, because bodies bear the traces of and resist local and global politics. Strikes, sit-ins and political debates are not only common during expressly politicized events, but also as people simply wait for the bus or sit in a taxi (*SK* 131). The novel suggests that conversations with “tous les incompris, les enragés, les désillusionnés, les espions, les fous que compte la ville” (*SK* 81) are the only real compensation that civil servants can expect in the absence of pay; it is their “salaire

an explosion of “summary, barren violence for purposes of appropriation and extortion” (124).

‘autrement’” (SK 81).⁵⁹ As they strike for better work conditions, the civil servants become indiscernible from all other misfits produced by the state, whether they are misunderstood, enraged, disillusioned, or mad. All of them react to the politics at play in the DRC around election time, by building what AbdouMaliq Simone calls “a particular emotional field in the city, trying to restore a very physical sense of connection to one another” (*For the City* 12). That sense of connection is the only payment civil servants can hope for. Disillusioned by national and global politics, they construct their own forum, which is why in Kinshasa, they are called “Parlementaires debout,” a title Mumbu uses in two chapters on the topic. Once more, Kinois can only access democracy through a simulacrum. “Parlementaires debout” discuss laws and political events, often ones that directly and adversely affect them. This is why civil servants are the “parlementaires debout” *par excellence*. Jean-Luc Mualu, a DRC journalist who collaborated with Mumbu for *Africultures*, explains that they are always waiting around the newspaper stands that act as a Parliament chamber, hoping to finally hear the news that they will be paid.⁶⁰ That hope is always deceived. After the 2006 first multi-party elections since independence that is recreated in the fiction of the novel, characters express a mix of hope for a brighter future, while others respond with somber sarcasm, even disillusionment, complaining about past promises and allegations that the elections were in fact rigged.⁶¹

Regardless of social status, every Kinois juggles micropolitics and macropolitics on a regular basis, something the novel pokes fun at. The small and inconsequential elements of

⁵⁹ Thierry Vircoulon mentions an “Etat spectral” (9) in which civil servants are not paid, and public budget evaporates. Meanwhile, Théophile Yuma Kalulu speaks of “salaire insignifiant et intermittent” (10). Structural adjustment programs, ongoing crisis, lack of traceability of public money are all causes of the civil servants not being paid, something which Mumbu’s novel denounces in the 2000s but which continues to take place regularly in the DRC to this day.

⁶⁰ See Mualu’s short article, “‘Parlementaires debout’, ces lecteurs au dos courbé,” written for the issue of *Africultures* that Mumbu directed in 2002.

⁶¹ Mumbu’s novel shows that despite holding its first democratic and plural elections in its history, the DRC still is not a democracy. In the glossary that prefaces that novel, Mumbu explains that she mimicked some of the official terms used during the electoral campaign but changed them slightly.

everyday life prefigure, echo or work against events at the municipal, national or global scale. The novel is quick to go back-and-forth between minute details of the quotidian and larger issues, for instance when Papa Kamanda “rançonne les voitures [...] afin de [...] gagner le respect de sa famille [...] [Ses filles] ont grandi trop vite, par sa faute, par la faute du pays, par la faute de son travail, par la faute de la mondialisation...” (SK 69). The gradation does not seem to follow a logical order of importance here, from the smaller scale to the larger one, but instead to consider all these causal relations on the same level. In some sense, the role of Sam as a journalist is to reflect the influence of politics in Kinois everyday lives. As such, Sam’s new televised show involves vox-pop interviews where ordinary citizens are asked to define and comment on a given word. When asked to define the word “député,” “une maman qui vend du pain” (SK 99) from the journalist’s neighborhood does not recognize the word at first. After giving the question some thought, she answers, “Ah! Si, je sais! Député, n’est-ce pas ces filles de joie qui font le trottoir sur le boulevard du 30 juin en ville, complètement nues, et qui prennent les maris d’autrui.... Ce sont elles, non? Les pité” (SK 99) The semantic slippage from “député,” to “des putes” to “les pité” (*sic*), relies on the homophony between the terms, and can be attributed to the fact that “le ‘u’ n’existe dans aucune des langues congolaises, et même dans les dialectes, on a tendance à le transformer en ‘i’” (SK 95).⁶² Yet, this innocent linguistic slippage also groups together a political function with a social one, possibly implying that there is no major difference between one and the other, or that if there is, it is almost imperceptible to the untrained ear of the ordinary urban dweller. In a context of corruption and clientelism, it is difficult not to read this proximity as a political critique on the part of Mumbu, whose use of humor often serves to expose the shortcomings of the DRC’s political system.

⁶² The most telling example might be that *shayeurs* sell water, “eau pure,” by shouting “opir-opir-opir” (SK 96), a fact that a French character criticizes heavily as he links it to a lack of skills and education.

Expanding on Mbembe's concept, I now turn to the ways in which bodies enact and perform Article 15, and how the pervasiveness of Article 15 in Kinshasa alternatively affects urban bodies. Specifically, I will consider the effects of the tyranny of intimacy on female African bodies, as narrated through their own perspectives. It is my contention that *Samantha à Kinshasa* presents a queer feminist reading of Kinshasa in its treatment of urban bodies, specifically through sex-positive and labor-oriented representations of sex work; and the inclusion of queer expressions of gender and sexuality. Although neither qualification is construed as delinquent *per se*—sex work and (homo-/bi-)sexuality are officially legal in the DRC—my reading of the novel points to the means by which the non-normative “rules” of Article 15 also apply to urban body experiences. In the novel, Samantha narrates these bodily experiences of the city as another articulation of the “also” of Kinshasa. Samantha's own experience of Kinshasa frequently surfaces in the narrative, despite her physical absence from the spaces she remembers. No sooner has Samantha's flight taken off from Kinshasa, she claims, “Elle me collera à jamais à la peau, Kinshasa” (SK 33). The city is inscribed in her memories, and somehow also against her skin. Many of the memories that Samantha shares are attached to a sensory experience of the city. Sometimes, the urban sensory experience is so present as to appear on the page as an explosion of senses, for instance when Samantha describes the *ngandas*—the outside bars and restaurants where Kinois congregate at night to listen to music, meet friends and potential lovers. The following pages will study urban bodies, politics, and sexual labor in Mumbu's novel in order to investigate how urban embodiment, disarticulation and questions of legibility intersect. Most of the experience of what it means to be (in) Kin is narrated through the gendered perspective of women of all ages, marital statuses and even origins; yet, none are quite so telling in the novel as the sex workers known as the Filles de

Molokaï.⁶³ Although the literary figure of the sex worker recurs in African fiction, Mumbu is particularly innovative in her portrayal of the Filles de Molokaï as the novel's most Kinois characters of all.⁶⁴

Not unlike the *shégués*, the Filles de Molokaï are inherently urban characters who perform (on) the streets of Kinshasa. Congolese artist and legend Papa Wemba put together the initials of the five streets of Masimanimba, Oshue, Lokolama, Kanda-kanda and Inzia, in Matonge, a popular neighborhood of Kinshasa to express some of the social realities and musical endeavors of what he called "Village Molokaï."⁶⁵ Molokaï has gained prominence as a spatial marker, as a quick GoogleMaps search shows.⁶⁶ Molokaï also appears as a geographical marker in Mumbu's novel, where the five streets are navigated by young women, whose identity is so tied to that of the streets that they are known as "les Filles de Molokaï." The French term could be seen as a reference to their activities as sex workers, as in "the working girls of Molokaï."⁶⁷ The term also maintains the ambiguity of an irreducible plurality of meaning, to borrow Roland Barthes' concept, since the word "filles" also means "daughters," implying a genealogy whereby Molokaï produced, or even birthed, the Filles.⁶⁸ The preposition "de" intrinsically plays into the

⁶³ There are male characters as well, including a vast majority of the previously discussed *shégués*, but their perspectives are seen from more of a distance and analyzed synchronically, while the narrative follows the Filles de Molokaï's everyday movements.

⁶⁴ To mention but a few examples in Francophone African women's writing, Ken Bugul (*Le Baobab fou*, 1982), Calixthe Beyala (*C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée*, 1987; *Tu t'appelleras Tanga*, 1988), or more recently Hemley Boum (*Si d'aimer*, 2012) feature sex workers prominently.

⁶⁵ Papa Wemba declared himself *chef coutumier* (customary leader) of what originated as a "musical village." The body of Papa Wemba was in fact taken to Village Molokaï for a few hours upon his passing in April 2016. The toponym Village Molokaï has thus made its way into popular usage just like any other official part of the city. See for instance the obituary in *Le Monde* "La Dernière Rumba De Papa Wemba." *Le Monde*, Apr 25, 2016. The link to music remains at the heart of the experience of Molokaï through its ties to Papa Wemba, but also through the relationship between music and the body. UK-based specialist Vincent Luttman declared about Congolese music, "Everything [in it] involves the body" (Garbin 92).

⁶⁶ The web mapping service, which offers more precision and customization than many paper maps today, locates Village Molokaï on rue de Kanda-Kanda, under the category of "Pilgrimage Place," alongside a picture of a sign that reads "Bienvenue au village Molokaï."

⁶⁷ Indeed, the use of "filles" to refer to sex workers is common, notably in the expression "filles de joie," a synonym for prostitute, which conveniently also brings together the Filles and Kin as both relate to *kiesse*, la joie.

⁶⁸ See Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text."

plurality of meaning, since “de” can be translated in this case as “from,” to signal the Filles’ respective origins, or as “of” to signal their belonging to Molokaï.⁶⁹ “Molokaï,” a word that is illegible to the reader unfamiliar with Kinshasa—but explained in the glossary of terms that launches the novel—is part of the everyday practice of life in Kinshasa.⁷⁰ By placing Molokaï at the heart of her novel, Mumbu goes beyond writing local parlance into her text; she shifts the focus of her narrative to bring to the fore and render visible the invisibly notorious women of Molokaï. Like their nickname suggests, these women are inextricably tied to the streets, so much so that they come to signify the streets on which they live. Each of the group’s main characters—of whom there are five, called the “piliers”—lives on and represents a specific street: Asha is Madimba or Masamanimba, Mapendo is Oshue, Caro is Lokolama, Bintu is Kanda-kanda, and Véronique is Inzia.⁷¹ Just as all the streets make up the Village Molokaï, the women make up the Filles de Molokaï, referred to as a “bande” (SK 40), the same word Mumbu uses to describe the *shégués*. The word “piliers” (SK 144) is crucial to understand the many fold social roles of the Filles de Molokaï; literally translated as “pillar” or “cornerstone,” the term shows that the Filles are architecturally essential to the social making of their group and neighborhood.⁷² The aforementioned notion of belonging goes both ways, as the novel states about Lokolama, “C’est fou comme son avenue est grouillante!” (SK 42). “Son” here refers to Caro, as the possessive adjective powerfully signals belonging (of Caro to the avenue) and possession (of the avenue by Caro; it is hers).

⁶⁹ I retain the term in the original language throughout this analysis to preserve this plurality, which is constitutive of the relationship between the Filles and Molokaï.

⁷⁰ This is by no means a unique occurrence; many other examples abound in which local inhabitants refer to places by names known only to insiders, all the more so in postcolonial cities, for reasons I explained in more detail in Chapter 1.

⁷¹ In total, there are ten or so girls from the group who live in this area of the popular neighborhood of Matonge, but only five are referenced to as the “piliers.”

⁷² The concept of social cornerstone counters any possibility of a discourse about “déchets humains,” such as the one analyzed in Aminata Sow Fall’s *La Grève des bâttu*. Mumbu does not leave space for such demeaning perspectives on the Filles.

Throughout the novel, whether they are named as part of the group or by way of personal anecdotes, Mumbu wittingly peppers the narrative with references to the Filles de Molokaï. Even though a superficial reading might cover that fact under the abundance of names and lack of linearity, the Filles drive the narrative. The Filles are only formally introduced to the reader two thirds of the way into the novel; by that point, all, but one of them, have played a leading role in anecdotes comprising prior chapters. Each formal introduction ties one of the “piliers” to a specific street, then evokes their family structure and dreams for the future. Three of them live without parents, who are either deceased, in another region or not mentioned; two of the girls respectively live with their mother and grandmother, including one with her son. Finally, Mapendo is the only one to live with her entire family. The Filles de Molokaï exhibit a diversity of backgrounds, hopes for the future, and even social profiles. Even the term “sex worker”—a term I use loosely here for the sake of convenience—does not adequately describe these women because they do not identify belonging to any professional category other than “les Filles de Molokaï.” Mumbu further paints their dreams for the future; they respectively want to become doctors, stylists, and architects. One of them, Asha, never dreamt of becoming anything. Though sexual abuse, economic hardship and the death of family members are anecdotally mentioned in descriptions of the Filles, the narrative voice rejects any causal relationship between past trauma and the individual choice to become a Fille de Molokaï. For instance, the novel suggests that Asha is part of a female genealogy of prostitution, since her mother, and her mother’s mother before her, also sold sex, a fact that is held against her. A woman whose husband Asha sleeps with insults her, “Pétasse, chienne, tu n’es qu’une chienne de bâtarde sur les traces de tes ancêtres, des putes comme toi, ta mère, ta grand-mère, ton arrière-grand-mère...” (SK 118), to which Asha answers, “Je suis peut-être une bâtarde comme tous mes ancêtres réunis, mais mon

fil, lui, a un père qui s'en occupe depuis dix ans!" (SK 118) Asha acknowledges the shameful genealogy to sardonically attack the woman whose husband is the father in question. Asha reproduces the structure in which she grew up, "Gamine, elle devinait ce que sa maman pouvait bien faire avec tous ces hommes qui défilaient chez eux. [...] elle fait exactement comme sa mère" (SK 145); at the same time, she devotes her energy to maintaining her son's relationship to his father, thereby breaking the pattern. Although the novel alludes to her lack of ambition, Asha's ambition resides not in professional achievement or social status, but in making sure her son is taken care of, the material sign of which is an upcoming trip to Disneyland in France. In the case of Asha and in all others, each woman's path is presented as a personal journey that cannot be generalized.⁷³ All of them together do not simply make up the village Molokaï as Papa Wemba imagined it; they are also an image of the inherent diversity of urban lives in everyday Kinshasa, a diversity that cannot be reduced to any single relationship of causation. Furthermore, Mumbu develops an intimacy between these female characters and the streets with which they are identified, in a way that seems at once deeply personal and collectively shared within Molokaï.

The novel mentions several encounters between the two social groups of the *shégués* and les Filles. The relationship is one of protection—Héritier, one of the *shégués* leaders, "fait le 'body garde' des filles de Molokaï qui font, en ville, comme lui, l'article 15" (SK 52)—and occasional conflict. When Bienvenu, a *shégué*, attempts to steal Caro's bag, an argument ensues,

- Pétasse, sale pute à deux francs!
- Voleur, sale gosse venu au monde par hasard. (SK 52)

The young woman and the child use each other's marginal status and social function as insults.

⁷³ Another literary example of a female genealogy of prostitution would be Calixthe Beyala's first published novel *C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée* (1987). While feelings of shame and anger are associated to sex work in Beyala's work, no such feelings can be read in *Samantha à Kinshasa* where the Filles de Molokaï do not link any specific affect to their paid sexual activities.

There is no overarching solidarity among the urban bodies of Kinshasa, even though Caro acknowledges a form of kinship immediately after the argument, as she explains what took place to her taxi driver, “Moi aussi je suis une *shéguée*. (Silence dans le taxi...) En tout cas, j’aurais pu devenir *shéguée* moi aussi” (SK 53). The use of the present, immediately corrected by the past conditional is telling here; Caro likens herself to a *shéguée* because she too roams the streets of Kinshasa and lives by Article 15. Yet, she immediately distances herself from the lower-ranked status of *shégué*, anxious to establish a hierarchy. In fact, she justifies her decision to sell sex as a way to avoid violence and illegal acts such as stealing. Caro insists on her agency—she chose to be a sex worker—while she reduces Bienvenu’s existence to contingency, implying that he came to the world by chance and this alone has determined his social status. Hers is the fruit of economic labor, as she adds, “Je ne fais que me débrouiller [...] à la sueur de mon corps” (SK 53). In what sounds almost like a Marxist critique, she links her value to her production of labor, the site and object of which is her body. Sweat is the fluid excess that the sex worker associates with her professional activity, thereby underscoring physical exertion associated with labor over more sexualized or fetishized excess fluids that the body produces. Sweat is also proof that she belongs to the category of people who work for compensation, a stark difference between her life and that of the *shégué*. The spaces of the conversation also matter; the original altercation took place on the street, but Caro gives her explanation in a taxi. Caro can leave the streets where Bienvenu remains posted. Her multimodal mobility is a privilege that the kind of labor she has chosen also permits.

The Filles relate to sex as they do to the urban, through a sense of playful performance. The story of Mapendo, the first “fille” introduced in the text, travels to Samantha via “radio-trottoir.” She first hears the story from her cameraman, but it is her best friend, who studied with

Mapendo's brother, that confirms the anecdote. A few paragraphs inform the reader about some details of Mapendo's life,

Mapendo a vingt-trois ans. Dans deux ans, elle devient une "Sainte-Catherine," en tous cas elle la coiffe bientôt ! C'est pourquoi il faut très vite un mari. Tous les moyens sont bons. Elle sait qu'elle a ce que d'autres n'ont pas: des arguments essentiels, comme disent les professeurs d'université qu'elle n'a pas fréquentés ! Des arguments essentiels: un beau cul bien cambré, deux seins pamplemousse, elle fait bien la cuisine et, lors d'une conversation, elle écoute les gens... Alors, où est le problème ? (SK 40)

Mapendo's main deficiency is the lack of a husband, a problem that the text presents as an emergency requiring thorough analysis. Mapendo's assets are listed: her desirable body, culinary and listening skills are all reasons why she should have a husband. This humorous dramatization of Mapendo's concerns somewhat obscures the next line, where we are told that Mapendo met her first "client," that is to say the first man from whom she received money for sexual intimacy, at the age of 14; he was her French teacher.

Both anecdotes—the one from the past, and her present conundrum—are presented briefly; yet, the contrast in tone is striking. Whereas the latter is a "problème," the sexual encounter between Mapendo and her French teacher is presented as almost a coincidence, an exploration of grammatical nuances from the past class session. This is one of a multitude of examples in Mumbu's novel where sex—even when money is exchanged, and consent in question—is discussed playfully, underscoring the versatility of women's sexuality and lack of moral judgment in the novel. Sociologist Ronald Weitzer writes against the generalization of what he calls the "oppression paradigm," or the idea that all sex work is intrinsically a consequence and sign of oppression, inherently violent and unequal in gender relations. Weitzer further denounces the flaws of the "empowerment paradigm," which likens sex work to other forms of labor, arguing that sex work empowers its practitioners, and only highlights how human

agency shows in sex work.⁷⁴ Instead, Weitzer develops a polymorphous paradigm that attempts to recognize variety and complexities in sex work. Like Weitzer, Mumbu does not subscribe to one-dimensional representations of sex work. The novel resists defining the women according to the type of sexual acts they perform or the spaces in which they perform them.⁷⁵ Rather, the Filles de Molokaï's relation to sex is playful, provocative, and flirtatious, as echoed by the narrative tone of the novel. One such instance takes place when Mapendo walks through the streets of Molokaï, in front of the *ngandas*, in hopes that a man will be convinced by her "arguments" and will offer her a beer. Her ego is hurt when, "tous ces mecs préfèrent regarder un Zidane courir derrière un ballon au lieu d'une Mapendo bien en chair et en pagne, avec juste un petit top et le ventre à l'air" (SK 42). Soccer player and international star Zinedine Zidane steals Mapendo's spotlight as she performs her routine, and her reaction shows that she expects and manipulates the male gaze. And when she turns the gaze back on the men, she fiercely questions Zidane's masculinity and reasserts her assets, "'qu'a-t-elle de plus qu'elle, cette Zidane? Un ballon?' se demande Mapendo. 'Mais j'en ai deux, moi, deux paires de ballons même!'" (SK 43) Mapendo plays on two possible meanings of "ballons," one of which figuratively characterizes her breasts, to come up on top of a fictional battle that pitted her against soccer in the quest for attention. This example gives Mapendo's agency and power through her witty use of language and understanding that both sex and soccer are performance, spectacle and diversion.

In Mumbu's Kinshasa, sex weaves all other aspects of urban social life together. The

⁷⁴ In the Sub-Saharan African context, sex work is all the more stigmatized because of the prevalence of discourses around public health dangers. On sex work and AIDS research, see De Zaluendo. For a history of writings about sexuality in Africa, see Epprecht. He explains that female prostitution is vilified by almost everyone under colonialism, even those who partook in it, but that serious studies lead to questioning discourses of victimhood and passivity on the part of the female sex workers.

⁷⁵ For instance, the Filles de Molokaï work outdoors—they are even associated with the streets where they live and practice their trade—and indoors—in the homes or offices of the powerful men they sleep with. There, Mumbu departs from Weitzer, who differentiates between streetwalkers and indoor sex. To him, streetwalkers are not only the most vulnerable and lowest paid sex workers, but also the sex workers whose impact on community is "adverse" (Weitzer 217). This hierarchy does not function in the context of the novel.

narrative exposes the sexual economy of Kinshasa through a feminist queering of its political ramifications subverting the male gaze and desires through the narrative potency of les Filles de Molokaï. Samantha, in one instance, interviews “des putes rentrant de service” (SK 66) at a political rally. The term “service” here, or “shift,” implies labor as well as public duty, in the sense of a service rendered to society. The sex workers demand *elections* as a way towards improving *erections*, and by extension in their financial retributions, “Qu’on aille seulement aux élections. On sera mieux payé [...] qu’on aille seulement aux élections, pour de meilleurs érections!” (SK 66) The homophonic play between “election” and “erection” adds yet another layer to the relationship between these women and the system of power, linking erectile successes to financial ones. The sex workers’ marginal social position therefore occupies a narrow interstice right at the center of power, since many of their clients have political roles. Specifically, the sex workers’ position reads as central to the “anxious virility” (*On the Postcolony* 110) that Achille Mbembe claims characterizes the postcolony and its bureaucracy’s “economy of pleasure” (*On the Postcolony* 127). Despite an economic power imbalance, the Filles de Molokaï make rules in Molokaï that extend beyond the spatial boundaries of the neighborhood. For instance, Bintu, one of the “pilliers” gives out deferred payment plans for sex with the Mission of the United Nations in the Congo (MONUC) agents, bankers, phone company employees or employees of the beer production companies. Her mode of action is unique, as we are told that “elle est la seule de la bande qui ‘fait ça’ à crédit” (SK 119). Every Monday, Bintu recovers the money she is owed from the previous week, retracing her workweek along the precise route she took. The French term, “recouvrement,” suggests the task of a bailiff or debt collector, likening the sex worker’s professional duties to the world of credits and loans. Bintu only loans her services to credible, powerful, influential borrowers, who will pay her back with

interest, in this case by bringing other clients to her, or doing her another favor. Bintu has thus mastered on a personal level a financial system that is partly responsible for the “dette odieuse” of the DRC, and in this trade, she reverses a well-rehearsed power differential.⁷⁶ Indeed, African populations have contracted a public debt via their governments, and the creditor is almost always a financial institution from abroad. In Bintu’s case, she is the creditor and her debtors are influential employees, bankers themselves or international relations specialists. Nevertheless, the reversal does not obliterate entirely global power forces, and Bintu cannot access the “territoire fortifié” (SK 119) of the MONUC headquarters in order to collect her dues. The influence of the Filles de Molokaï and other women is therefore at once constrained by the power dynamics they seek to thwart. Even though the exchange of sex can appear to unsettle unspoken boundaries between Kinshasa locals and expatriates working for international organizations, they never dismantle the structural power differential completely. Even then however, she calls her client from where she can see the MONUC, “histoire d’avoir un oeil, même éloigné, sur les allées et venues de la Mission” (SK 120). The narrative privileges her gaze and puts her in a position where she can make demands; it is she who keeps an eye on the international mission’s headquarters, not the other way around.

The practice of Article 15 renders the distinction between sex work and other forms of sex murkier than it first appears. The Filles de Molokaï receive money and other forms of compensation in exchange for sexual relations. However, beyond overt forms of sex work, sexual relations are widely described as implicit or explicit forms of clientelism. Although she does not subsume the Filles de Molokaï under traditional categories of sex work, Mumbu humorously develops a taxonomy of sex-based relationships that women—and not only sex

⁷⁶ In Léonce Ndikumana and James Boyce’s *La dette odieuse de l’Afrique: Comment l’endettement et la fuite des capitaux ont saigné un continent* (2013), Mobutu’s Zaïre is the actual case study that introduces the collusion, corruption and financial strain at the heart of the debt of African countries post-independence.

workers—engage in; men can be either a *chic*, a *chèque*, or a *choc*.⁷⁷ First, “le *chic*, c’est le mec avec lequel on veut être vu, car il est généralement bel homme homme, instruit, et ne donne pas à rougir !” (SK 204) Love can be a part of the relationship with the *chic*, or not. It is mostly about appearances and social status. As the name suggests, the “*chèque*” is a financial provider (SK 205), while “[le choc] c’est le gars qui n’a pas un rond mais beaucoup de prétention, et il peut se le permettre” (SK 205) This last relationship is primarily erotic, and as such functions mostly outside the economic realm. Musicians and politicians also use this distinction in establishing relationships of patronage or financial support. For the sake of the novel, there is no hierarchy of value between diverse categories of people whose livelihoods are provided for by patrons. There can be a chain-like progression from *chic* to *choc* and *chèque*, one where the change in vowel is particularly sensitive to global forces. For instance, Gigolo is an older lady’s *choc* in Charleroi, that is to say he is literally a gigolo in Belgium (SK 213); yet, in Kinshasa, his financial power acquired in Europe makes him a *chèque*.⁷⁸

Whilst the use of sex as a threat in case of a power differential is by no means peculiar to this novel, in *Samantha à Kinshasa*, there seems to be a society-wide acceptance and public acknowledgment of sex as a form of Article 15, a “*débrouillardise*” or manner of getting by not unlike others. Such is the case of the “bureau,” which in Kinois urban-speak qualifies a woman that an otherwise married man supports financially in exchange for sex. Men associate the term “bureau” to “un objet qu’on possède, [...] qu’on achète, argent comptant” (SK 170). However,

⁷⁷ Mumbu devotes a lengthy explanation to the cultural phenomenon, but she did not invent it. The terms are commonly used amongst Kinois, and there are even some scholarly references. See Katrien Pype, Nshimbirwa Biriage Kabutu. The terms are not local to Kinshasa and are used throughout Francophone West Africa, as indicated by Françoise Grange Omokaro regarding Bamako. Biaya also mentions usage of the terms in Dakar, and a rap song by Tchadian singer Kaar Kaas Sonn also references the terms (cited in Reysoo 27).

⁷⁸ This is far from the only reference to transnational migration throughout the novel, in particular through anecdotes about several *mikilistes* (Congolese living in Europe or North America). The novel even differentiates between *djicains* (Congolese living in or back from Belgium) or *zianas* (Congolese back from Paris). This presence of migration is unsurprising considering that Samantha is in the process of emigrating, and Mumbu herself lives in between Montreal and Kinshasa.

Mumbu's novel moves away from representation of the "bureau" as a piece of furniture—in French, the term means "desk"—and towards thinking these women as collaborators in the men's personal and professional realms. The term "bureau" also means "office," and these women's bodies act as a site of labor in and through which they practice their trade. These women attempt to obtain favors, they negotiate oral contracts, they get involved in politics and practice Article 15, all while letting men think that *they* are the ones who possess. The "bureaux" women trade in politics, erotics and economics all at once. For instance, a minister's "4è bureau"—that is the third woman beyond his wife whom he supports financially—convinces him to hire her uncle for a government position. The text reads, "Elle a réussi à lui *vendre* l'idée de prendre son tonton pour direcab" (SK 62, my emphasis). The young girl does not sell her body *per se*; yet, sex here acts as leverage to obtain something in exchange; it functions as commodity. Sex flows as capital in various types of sexual encounters, but contrary to other kinds of capital—including financial, social and cultural capital—the novel presents this kind as a woman's prerogative, which makes it a subversive force in male-dominated Kinshasa.

For Mbembe, the postcolonial relationship is "not primarily a relationship of resistance or of collaboration, but can best be characterized as convivial" (*On the Postcolony* 104), alluding to the ways postcolonial subjects "guide, deceive, and toy with power instead of confronting it directly" (*On the Postcolony* 128).⁷⁹ There is no doubt that, as Mbembe powerfully describes, the Girls of Molokaï are subjected to a phallocratic system of conviviality where their survival depends on compromising with the power system; there is also no doubt that the novel describes ways in which they support their own interests within that framework. They have found ways to "live with," or another term for it could be "débrouille." Postcolonial conviviality is thus crucial

⁷⁹ The term "convivial" comes from Latin, where it simply means to live together or to live with ("convive," or "vivre avec"), and by extension, to share a meal; a guest invited for a meal is thus called a "convive."

to their practice of the city. Yet, when Mumbu and Ayimpam each use the term in their descriptions respectively of Matonge and of “*débrouille*,” they refer to the widespread derived meaning of “convivial” as friendly and warm-hearted. In a sense, that is fitting for the Girls of Molokaï; they turn the systemic conviviality they are subjected to into “*cette énorme cité à la fois conviviale et rieuse, dure et délurée, inventive et frénétique*” (SK 144). Although most likely involuntary, this echo of Mbembe’s term strikes a chord, since it can easily apply to the women’s relationship to the power structures in place in Kinshasa, and since the women are metonymies for the streets and vice versa, the adjectives used to describe one can be used to describe the other. The Filles of Molokaï are convivial in that they make use of an interstitial position in a given socio-political situation, while functioning as social glue, linking all bodies and spaces of Kinshasa together.

Mumbu’s strong association between the Filles de Molokaï and the city is meaningful for her representational choice—who are the voices of Kinshasa for her?—and takes on further signification when she overtly compares the city of Kinshasa to a prostitute. In the passage likening Kinshasa to a dislocated metropolis referred to in the introduction, the city becomes personified as a woman whose smile never fades, “*un peu comme une pute d’ailleurs, qui baise pour le prix le plus fort avec un gros bonnet, mais qui le fait gratos avec le mec sans le sou de qui elle est amoureuse*” (SK 73). Kinshasa too functions according to the rule of *chic*, *choc* and *chèque*, and similarly to the women it is identified with, the city remains attuned to the erotic even in a context that is primarily economic.

III. Samantha Queering Kinshasa

In an article anthropologist of Kinshasa Filip de Boeck penned on the concept of

Kinshasa's verbal architecture, he writes that the city "avant tout, est une ville corporelle" (de Boeck 91).⁸⁰ Although de Boeck does not investigate the link between an urban imaginary and a body-like city, *Samantha à Kinshasa* helps tie the delinquent imaginary of Kinshasa to the embodied experiences of characters for whom the novel opens a new narrative space. Samantha's recreating of Kinshasa in a A330 on its way to Paris and then London, therefore must be read through Samantha's own bodily experience and as a moment of production of an urban imaginary that gives its full meaning to the inherently spatial image with which the novel ends, "J'ai fait le tour complet de Kinshasa durant ces heures de vol" (SK 241).

Earlier in this chapter, I alluded to the intersection of spatial and social interstices; delinquency as a form of subversion made rule; markers of legibility, and urban embodiment. The lens of Article 15 here continues to provide a window into a widespread destabilization of norms in Kinshasa. I have laid out how it affects bodies, but also how social groups take advantage of it. The novel's narrative delinquency is stylistic, through its echoes of "radio-trottoir," and thematic, through its focus on neglected urban dwellers that are given the lead and act as the driving force for the novel. A consequence of having Article 15 at the heart of what it means to write Kinshasa is that the novel operates a queering of the city's urban bodies and of its own urban body. I use the verb "to queer" in its conjugated or nominal forms to express that it is a process, a Certaldian *parcours* so to speak, which destabilizes, subverts, and displaces. I want

⁸⁰ In that article, de Boeck claims to move away from generalizations of the African city as a "black hole" (80), in order to think the *ville tentaculaire* as "espace mental, dans une tentative de saisie de son imaginaire urbain spécifique" (84). Although it is possible to translate *ville tentaculaire* as "sprawling city," the concept of sprawling is tied to North American images. "Ville tentaculaire," on the other hand, takes its roots in Belgian poet Emile Verhaeren's eponymous poetry collection and title poem. Whether the reference is conscious or not for De Boeck, a Belgium-based scholar, the term "tentaculaire," that which has tentacles, appeals at the same time to an image of living organism and to a poetic reading of the city, both of which seem appropriate considering the topic of De Boeck's article. See also Fumumenza Muketa and Yoka for uses of the term. That approach seems promising in terms of bridging gaps between verbal imaginaries and physical spaces. Yet, De Boeck reinscribes a normative reading of Kinshasa he claims to escape, implying that Kinshasa's verbal architecture functions as compensation for its infrastructural "disintegration." Rhetorically, the article is problematic in ways too numerous to detail. For instance, De Boeck even calls the city a "cannibal city" as erosion causes parts of the city to collapse onto itself, a problematic term in the context of centuries-old preconceived ideas about cannibalism in Sub-Saharan Africa.

to propose the term *queering* as a destabilization that does not seek to put a higher order in the stead of the order it challenges. Michel Foucault, Eve K. Sedgwick, and Judith Butler have been some of the most prominent scholars to analyze and deconstruct the relationship between gender/sexuality and power.⁸¹ As a consequence, performances of gender/sexuality that fall outside compulsory heterosexuality and cis-heteronormativity tend to have a subversive potential, which is political in nature. In other words, that which queers does not substitute a system of power for another, but thrives in the (dis)articulation; it unsettles without then trying to settle back. José Esteban Muñoz's insistence that "[q]ueerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" (1) also exposes the potentiality of queering as a destabilizing and performative force.⁸² For Muñoz, this force is collective; Mumbu also presents queering through the collective counter-hegemony of the Filles de Molokaï. The queering I rely on is a radical and collective questioning of power dynamics that is political and subversive, while anchored in and centered on bodily experiences. Specifically, this queering echoes what Judith Butler calls in *Gender Trouble* (1990) a "subversive and parodic redeployment of power" (124).⁸³ This is why Article 15 is the quintessential tactics of this queering, and why urban interstices, whether spatial or social, constitute its ever-moving *locus*. The novel performs this queering of urban bodies throughout. Although I will focus on close readings of how norms around sexuality and gender are

⁸¹ See Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* and Butler's *Gender Trouble*, both of which rely on Foucault's take on power.

⁸² This, which Muñoz calls queer utopia, can be perceived first through "the ornamental and the quotidian" (1). The straight present against which queerness acts can be expanded to include other kinds of oppressive normative presents. Muñoz argues in favor of "aesthetic and political practices that need to be seen as necessary modes of stepping out of this place and time to something fuller, vaster, more sensual, and brighter" towards a "collective potentiality" (198).

⁸³ In a critique of Monique Wittig, Butler claims that to consider lesbianism as a refusal of compulsory heterosexuality is already to recognize it and to depend on it. Instead, Butler argues for a "parodic contest and display" (*Gender Trouble* 124) of norms. And as Butler insists that the category of women is not a *natural* category but a *political* one (*Gender Trouble* 126), so does she imply that subversions of categories of gender, and by extension of sexuality, are also *political* subversions.

challenged in the narrative, I believe that the two case studies of the *shégués* and Filles de Molokaï have shown that the novel calls norms into question beyond overt discussions of sexuality and gender.

I would like to propose that Kinshasa as governed by Article 15 blurs the boundaries around norms of erotic desire for Mumbu. Samantha's own sexual expression further participates in queering Kinshasa. In her own introduction, Samantha says of herself and her group of friends that they are "Kinois purs et durs" (SK 29). Later, she reports a dialogue during which a man tells his female colleague that Samantha is "en même temps, une lesbienne pure et dure" (SK 50); he also shares rumors of an affair between Samantha and her brother-in-law, that Samantha later confirms. The use of "pur et dur" implies a sort of absolute; usually something "pur et dur" bars its opposite from being true. The word "dur" signals little to no flexibility. Yet, in *Samantha à Kinshasa*, there is no "pur et dur" that isn't at once subversive and in question. Thus, Samantha is "kinois[e] pur[e] et dur[e]" even though she was born in another part of the country, stigmatized for her Northern Congolese name and origins, and even though she replaced her birth name ("Assali Webana Molegbe Eketebi wa Kuadeba") with a Christian name. Her origins, name change and departure from Kinshasa never threaten her "kinois" identity, only the radicality of "pur et dur." Similarly, Samantha's interest in—some—men does not detract from her sense of herself as a women-loving woman. The man describes her as being "at the same time" lesbian and not lesbian, as Samantha herself confirms when she confesses, "C'est mon autre péché mignon, les femmes!" (SK 165) In words reported by Samantha and about her, but uttered by a friend of hers, Samantha is "'bi,' ou plutôt elle est hétérosexuelle par obligation culturelle et homo par conviction sexuelle" (SK 57). Samantha's sexual identity does not fit neatly in a box. Her friend attempts to define her, only to immediately retract her own word.

Samantha escapes categories and expectations because of her open interest in women, but also through her extra-marital sexual relationship with her sister's husband. The ambivalence between her cultural obligation and what is termed her "sexual belief" is a "débrouille" version of sexual identity, one that creates its own space in order to accommodate conflicting criteria. Once more, Trefon's and Mumbu's description of Kinshasa as a city of "alsos," where apparently colliding and mutually exclusive attributes of the city coexist, must be recalled as pertinent to Samantha's erotic life. In the urban environment of Kinshasa, Samantha can maintain this (dis)articulation. Homoeroticism has been present in Francophone African women's writing, particularly in the works of Calixthe Beyala and Ken Bugul, but also in Frieda Ekotto's *Chuchote pas trop* (2005) and Léonora Miano's *Crépuscule du tourment* (2016), and discussed by scholars such as Julianna Nfah-Abbenyi, Nathalie Etoke, Naminata Diabate, and most recently Subha Xavier.⁸⁴ Etoke underscores that often, homoerotic desire is not realized in Francophone African women's writing, and remains a textual fantasy. Although Mumbu does not depict a sexual encounter between Samantha and one of her love interests, the novel clearly states that Samantha's sexuality is realized. And even such a humorous declaration as "homo par conviction sexuelle" dispels all attempts at keeping her sexuality mysterious or unspoken, therefore portraying Samantha as a queer character beyond reasonable doubt.

The mouth, the belly and the phallus are body parts most associated with the postcolony, according to Mbembe. The novels of Labou Tansi, which Mbembe uses as reference, certainly confirm that claim; U Tam'si's poetry focuses heavily on the belly through notably a collection of poems named *Le Ventre*.⁸⁵ Yoka writes that Kinshasa "parle par le coeur et le ventre" (7). De

⁸⁴ See also Jarrod Hayes (*Queer Nations: Marginal Sexualities in the Maghreb*, 2000) and Denis Provencher (*Queer French: globalization, language, and sexual citizenship in France*, 2007) for the North African context.

⁸⁵ On the motif of the "ventre" in U Tam'si and Sony Labou Tansi's respective works *Le Ventre* (1964) and *Sa Majesté le ventre* (1972), see Yengo.

Boeck supports a move beyond these undeniably important sites and functions, unfortunately only to reinscribe Kinshasa as an enormous feminine body that arouses the inhabitant, undoubtedly identified as male. On the surface level, Mumbu's portrayal of Kinshasa as a feminine figure, her insistence on bodies gendered as female and on the "arguments" of the female phenotype (such as breasts, thighs, etc.), can appear to pursue this same male fantasy-inspired trope. However and conversely, Mumbu populates the streets of her Kinshasa with inhabitants of all genders; arousal is not restricted to a hetero-normative pattern of attraction; none of the women seek serious validation from a masculine gaze. If anything, the traditional attributes of femininity are part of a set of tools that women use to cut across power structures, a slalom-like movement that mirrors their spatial practice. Although Mumbu's erotic spectrum in the novel far outdoes de Boeck's narrow depiction, the idea of Kinshasa as an eroticized urban body deserves consideration.⁸⁶ De Boeck suggests that the male passerby, the Kinois flâneur, is in a state of constant erection and constant frustration, to the point of castration. Mumbu's take on eroticism seems much more to borrow from the vision of Audre Lorde, when she writes,

When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives. (XXX)

That life force and creative energy can be read throughout the accounts of the Filles de Molokaï's urban experiences. The Filles de Molokaï refer to their bodies as weapons, the eroticization of which functions for them as an act of affirmation. Sam's erotic power is referred to as "armes de destruction massive" (SK 166), Bintu wears "une vraie tenue de combat" (SK 120), and the Filles "[vont] en patrouille" (SK 41). The use of the lexical field of war/military is not to be read lightly in a highly militarized political context. Even the UN agents can no longer differentiate between

⁸⁶ On a similar topic, poet Vincent Lombume Kalimasi also invests in a queer identity, this time in terms of gender, since Kinshasa is at the same time compared to a pregnant woman and an erect penis (in Yoka, *Kinshasa, signes de vie*).

some weapons and others, prompting one of them to tell his colleague “que, franchement, Bush s’est trompé en allant faire la guerre en Irak. N’est-ce pas ça les vraies “armes de destruction massive,” sous nos yeux et tout autour de nous?” (SK 166). The two men are gawking at women—including Samantha and Bintu—dancing in a club. Whether their bodies function as weapons or as banks that let capital out in the form of sex, these women are fully aware of their power and intend on tapping into it to the fullest.⁸⁷ That is not to say that those interactions escape a fundamentally unequal system of objectification that intersects race and gender in intricate ways. Rather, Mumbu’s female characters add to the range of body parts associated with Kinshasa in sex-positive, feminist accounts. They also integrate global discourses about conflict to divert them in a playful manner. If the conversation about Kinshasa must be about war, then the Filles de Molokaï have weapons to offer to the conversation.

Patricia Hill Collins defines sexual politics as that which “examines the link between sexuality and power” (164), once more drawing from Audre Lorde’s affirmation that there is power, albeit often suppressed power, in the erotic. Throughout the novel, The Filles de Molokaï show an awareness of their erotic power that leads them to be involved in sexual politics, to assert their power, under the auspices of course of Article 15. To return to Mapendo wondering why she cannot find a husband, perhaps, following one of cultural anthropologist Gayle Rubin’s arguments in the famous essay “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘political economy’ of sex,” it is because the function of wife has been socially constructed as an oppressive system that ultimately serves capitalism and the patriarchy, two systems in which the Filles de Molokaï have learned to play, and which they have learned to displace and distort (or to borrow de Certeau’s

⁸⁷ Here, perhaps, Hélène Cixous’ famous essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” can be useful to echo that which the Filles de Molokaï do with their bodies: “Because the “economy” of her drives is prodigious, she cannot fail, in seizing the occasion to speak, to transform directly and indirectly all systems of exchange based on masculine thrift. Her libido will produce far more radical effects of political and social change than some might like to think” (882).

term, *déjouer*) in a delinquent manner.

Perhaps a significant example of Mumbu's unique perspective as a woman writing women comes through the recurrence of the bladder as a body part heretofore underexploited in African Francophone literature.⁸⁸ Samantha's playfully announces that her bladder acts up during the flight ("J'ai trop envie de faire pipi" SK 34), a fact to which she comes back at the end of the novel to reveal that it repeatedly interrupted her narrative. Her white neighbor thus has to accommodate—by alternatively standing up and sitting down—a black African woman's bodily functions in what appears as an ironic reversal of the colonial impositions on colonized bodies evoked previously by Mbembe. The "bladder" returns in reflections on laughter-induced incontinence (SK 29), menstrual cramps and bladder control during air travel (SK 34), the pressing need to urinate (SK 98), and the homophony between urine and "urnes," the French word for ballot boxes (SK 99). Each time, the tone is humorous, playing with the fantasies surrounding some areas of the female anatomy and not others. The novel works against a vision of female bodies that includes neither their voices nor their needs. Samantha's bodily functions also serve to deconstruct male-oriented perceptions of bodily experiences in Kinshasa, while at the same time putting to the fore laughter as an essential characteristic of bodies in Kinshasa.

Laughter lies at the core of Kinois identity. For Ngandu Nkashama, in Kinshasa, laughter is a form of resistance to the absurd. From the mischief and inventiveness of Samuel in *Debout à Kinshasa*, to the *shégués*' tricks on the streets, or the Filles de Molokaï's sardonic reflections on life in the city, laughter appears as paramount to urban experience. Mbembe has described postcolonial laughter as one of the ways in which ordinary citizens respond to the grotesque of the postcolony. Laughter, Mbembe writes, "kidnaps power" (*On the Postcolony* 109). Congolese

⁸⁸ Alain Mabanckou's character of Robinette in *Verre Cassé* (2006) stands as a powerful counter-example, since she outperforms the men in a urination contest: "les urines de Robinette étaient plus lourdes, plus chaudes, plus impériales dans leur jet, et surtout elles tombaient plus loin" (101).

writer and poet Valentin Lombume Kalimasi writes about “rire-roi,” “citadelle-rire” and many other functions of laughter into a “Nuit de rire,” a poetic text about Kinshasa. Mumbu’s laughter, and Kalimasi’s to some extent, seem to differ from the postcolonial laughter of Mbembe and Nganda Nkashama, in that it only distantly relates to power and is intrinsically urban. Kalimasi adds, “Cette ville a le rire dans la peau” (Yoka 163). This image mirrors Mumbu’s almost identical image about Kinshasa: “Kinshasa me collera toujours à la peau” (SK 33), which I have previously discussed. Samantha’s body, the city and laughter would appear to be intrinsically related via the poetry of Kalimasi and the prose of Mumbu. Perhaps the key to the importance of laughter for a poetics of Kinshasa can be found, somewhat buried in Mumbu’s text, in the following sentence, “On passe de la peur au rire, de la vie à la mort” (SK 150). The constant and imminent threat of death, and the fear that comes along with it, make laughter an essential quality of life in Kinshasa, all the more so when African lives are often not seen as “grievable” (Butler *Precarious Life* 34).⁸⁹ Laughter—and humor, its corollary—is that *éclat* that defies violence, up to and including death.

Violence can sometimes appear as the sole mode of representation of the DRC on the global stage. Kinshasa is present in the global media particularly through global health concerns and discussions of its political climate, both of which are echoed by a strong institutional presence in the capital of the DRC. These concerns—poverty, AIDS, rape, displacement, political turmoil—are powerfully expressed, all the more so when none other than a mission of the United Nations, called the MONUSCO, acts as their amplifier on the global stage.⁹⁰ Yet,

⁸⁹ Butler uses the concept of “grievable life” in *Precarious Life: The powers of mourning and violence* (2004) to describe lives the loss of which is not publicly mourned, and therefore not worthy of note. The political context of violence in the DRC makes most lives not grievable, as in they cannot participate in public nation-building.

⁹⁰ The MONUSCO—United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo—has replaced the MONUC—Mission de l’ONU au Congo—in 2010 after a new UN resolution defined new goals for the country centered about the notion of stabilization and peace consolidation. The novel predates this change and

Samantha metaphorically refers to Kinshasa as a “ville caméléon” (SK 46).⁹¹ She likens the “ville caméléon” to globalization, and perhaps this is how Kinshasa finds its place in a globalized world. Alternative discourses cannot level the playing field, which might explain why scholars and writers are invested in promoting the vibrancy and inventiveness of Kinois not as a denial, but as the adverbial *also*, which does not work in opposition but as a queering, as I have here proposed. As such, *Samantha à Kinshasa* enters into dialogue with institutional discourses, which the novel twists into fiction. To use a simple—but far from the only—example, the website of the MONUSCO describes the elections of July 30, 2006 as “the country’s first free and fair elections in 46 years.”⁹² The institution was heavily involved in ensuring that the process was indeed free and fair, but Mumbu’s novel shows that those invested in political freedom and fairness are also, and perhaps most, fallible.

The novel enacts a fierce critique of the presence of MONUC agents in Kinshasa, portraying all the MONUC characters as consumers of female Kinois bodies, as clients whose neocolonial financial and institutional power often leads them away from peacekeeping and into sexual exploitation. It seems in reading *Samantha à Kinshasa* that MONUC agents do nothing but look for women to sleep with, and they devote the entirety of their strategic skills to figuring out effective ways to engage in monetized sex. In a chapter about the “NGOization” of Kinshasa, Giovanni, Trefon et al. explain that NGOs proliferate in Kinshasa as a way to access international funds, but that Kinois have grown increasingly dependent on NGOs for employment and survival.⁹³ Although the MONUC Force differs from an NGO in significant

therefore only refers to the mission as MONUC.

⁹¹ The image of the chameleon, a trope to qualify adaptability to changing conditions, also must be read as a symbol of indiscernibility and adaptivity, and through the queering image an animal that cannot be pinned down to a specific set of external representations. In addition, through its camouflaging powers, the chameleon presents another type of weapon for defense.

⁹² See <https://monusco.unmissions.org/en/timeline>.

⁹³ See M. Giovanni, T. Trefon, J. Kasongo Banga and C. Mwema, “Acting on Behalf (and in Spite) of the State:

ways, the system of economic dependency that its presence nourishes is comparable. MONUC agents' involvement in the local sex trade finances the Filles de Molokaï but also maintains unequal power dynamics, which can be seen as a critical depiction of the role of international institutions in Kinshasa and the DRC more widely. Specifically, the agents of the MONUC are portrayed as sexual consumers, often more invested in their own interests than those of the country. Ironically, one of the MONUSCO's missions is to protect women from sexual and gender-based violence and trafficking, as per their own mandate. In the novel, the first thing a new agent learns about is how to select "girls." The more experienced agent concludes, "consomme jusqu'au bout et jusqu'à la dernière goutte..." (SK 108). The Gender Office of the MONUSCO insists that women are particularly affected by conflict and are used as "weapons of war," a concept upon which the novel plays when it calls the Filles de Molokaï weapons of mass destruction (SK 120), camouflaged military (SK 120), and "aphrodisiaques kinois" (SK 121). Such a twist serves two purposes at once, throwing shade on the noble intents of MONUC agents, while also offering a narrative in which the women are weapons of their own making, as previously mentioned. As such, they have/are more than physical assets; they are at the same time the strategist and the strategy. They command their own Trojan horse. The amount and intensity of contact between the Filles de Molokaï—and presumably other Kinois women—and MONUC agents, shows that these women occupy the interstices of political and institutional power. They, who are officially amongst the most vulnerable inhabitants of Kinshasa, share the beds of some of its most powerful decision-makers.

The agents of the MONUC are referred to in the novel via the acronym made name, Monuc, which becomes in the mouths of Kinois, the "Monique"; male sex work clients hence appear collectively under a female first name. Once more, the "u" becomes an "i" for Kinois, an

apparently innocent display of what Mumbu calls “français débrouillé” (*SK* 97), which serves a denunciatory as well as humoristic purpose. This is yet another example of narrative delinquency, whereby the linguistic diversions of Kinois serves to highlight paradoxes, criticize and queer. In a framework where virility is threatened by feminine attributes, a female nickname is a humiliation. The glossary that begins the novel explains that the nickname alludes to the agents being more interested in women than in humanitarian work. Once more, the semantic slippage reveals a subversive critique, this time of the agents’ role in Kinshasa. The ambiguity that the homophonic play maintains protects Kinois, who can claim that they are simply mispronouncing the acronym. As previously discussed, naming is an important process of power assertion and/or resistance. In a context where the power differential is obvious, the feminine nickname adds to the otherwise traditional image of neocolonial sex work between a racialized woman and a wealthy white client. The mockery does not end there, “Des fois, en code, on dit Chantal ou Mireille pour les désigner, mais c’est toujours et invariablement en prénoms féminins” (*SK* 95). The nickname carries a queering of the agents’ masculinity through humor that is so typical of Kinois social life, and which even the most institutional representation in the city cannot escape. But the mockery goes further towards deconstructing the heteronormative neocolonial image of these men. In the words of the novel, “Monique est décidément une vraie baiseuse!” (*SK* 121). Just like Zidane was “cette salope de Zidane” (*SK* 43) when he stole the male viewers’ attention away from Mapendo, this reference to men as grammatically female and through derogatory terms mocks typically patriarchal acts, such as playing or watching soccer, and having sex with prostitutes. Both times, the terms “salope” and “baiseuse” come not from other men trying to doubt their peers’ masculinity, but from the women who usually are associated with these terms in the first place. In a gesture familiar to discriminated minority

groups, they re-appropriate language and reverse power, all under the guise of a joke.

Ongoing conflict, major displacements and other historical events have shuffled assumptions about social structures in Kinshasa, in particular patriarchal structures. Sentences like, “Les mères ont pris la place des pères dans le Congo d’aujourd’hui” (SK 155), manifest an unsettling of traditional roles—“la place des pères” in a way that recognizes agency on the part of “mothers” through the use of the verb “prendre.” Women in the novel are described as the only or primary providers in many instances. The word “place” here can be translated as “role,” but should also be considered spatially. Women, be it Samantha or the Filles de Molokaï, cut across the public space of the streets of Kinshasa with ease. Their “place” is the entire city, public and private spaces included; a mobility and “ownership” that is facilitated by the “order” of Article 15.

Feminist scholar Julianna Nfah-Abbenyi uses the image of weaponry in her monograph’s conclusion, entitled “African Women’s Writing as a Weapon.” This time metaphorically, Nfah-Abbenyi cites Mariama Bâ declaring that “books are a weapon” (148), and confirms that there is a war against “the patriarchal establishment’s predetermined hierarchies” (148). Through their writing,

These women writers seek to create spaces for themselves [...] They criticize such binary oppositions as either/or, mind/body, men, education / women, home, et cetera, that naturalize women’s oppression. They argue for a sexual politics that [...] show how women’s bodies and sexualities are not necessarily static areas of oppression but are/can be contested terrains where battles for control are played out. As participants (even if, sometimes, unequal) in these power struggles, women can effectively reshape gender relations. (149–150)

Mumbu’s novel, especially her portrayal of the Filles de Molokaï, seems invested in such power struggles “where multiple discourses of pleasure, domination, and exploitation can/do converge” (151). Women—here women characters whose experience of the city are the privileged material

for the novel's narrative and an African woman writer—shape, and even create, space for themselves. Nfah-Abbenyi's spatial reference must not be considered fully, for Kinshasa, and especially the interstices in which the *shégués* and the Filles de Molokaï “se débrouillent,” is that created space for Mumbu and her characters.

In the novel, the city appears as a queer space where *shégués* and sex workers blur boundaries through their social and spatial mobility. The *shégués*' occupation of the cemetery and close ties to the “second world” question the boundaries between life and death. The same term, “territoire,” is used to qualify the MONUC headquarters and the *shégués*' area of influence within a few pages (*SK* 119, 121), a semantic likeness complemented by the geographical proximity between the two spaces. Indeed, the cemetery of Gombe, the Galeries Présidentielles and the MONUSCO headquarters are all located on the Boulevard du 30 juin, which runs through the center of Kinshasa, within a few minutes drive. This is not to say that these spaces are the same, that they serve the same functions or the same bodies, but rather that *Samantha à Kinshasa* exposes the reality that apparently clear cut boundaries in the body of Kinshasa become harder to discern at times, when seen under the light of a delinquent practice of the city.

Building upon geographer Marc Pain's study of Kinshasa, Ayimpam explains that the capital city is split in two between *la ville*, the former colonial city and *la cité*, the former indigenous part of the city (Ayimpam 73). She describes *la ville* as what de Certeau would call *proper place* and *la cité* as that which he would call *space*, or an unsettling of the proper. Yet, such boundaries affect neither the *shégués* nor the Filles de Molokaï who occupy space in both *la ville* and *la cité*. For Ayimpam, “débrouille,” Article 15 and “radio-trottoir” are all elements of the *cité*, when I would argue that the *shégués* and Filles de Molokaï spread out in the *ville* as well. In a sense, Ayimpam builds on the colonial dichotomy that Fanon so powerfully described

and which I have already discussed in Chapter 2 to extend it to the postcolonial era.⁹⁴ I believe that the *shégués* and Filles de Molokaï, as well as the novel altogether, overturn such dichotomies, since the children and women at the heart of urban life in *Samantha à Kinshasa* move across physical boundaries and their words, by way of the collective transmission of “radio-trottoir,” go still farther. Even the space of the cemetery, the off-limit by excellence, is one that the children occupy with ease. Ayimpam argues that *cité* better corresponds to the lived experiences of Kinois (73), but what then to make of the *shégués*, some of whom exclusively inhabit *la ville*? If the *cité* is Kinois—of Kinshasa—and the *ville* always remains foreign to an extent, are they, or are they not, Kinois? Mumbu’s novel offers a nuanced perspective on Kinois spaces—at once united by elements such as the *ngandas* and the social circulation of some of its inhabitants, and at once always disarticulated, always already invested in alternative discourses that may or may not be contradictory.

Mumbu’s writing exhibits a playful but also political queering of spaces that relies primarily on the urban bodies of Kinshasa and the writing of Kinshasa as a queer body. In doing so, she challenges discourses about Kinshasa as a failed space, and explodes the imposed binary oppositions she claims prevail in the DRC. At the beginning of the novel, Mumbu presents choices as,

Dans la notion de choix, au Congo démocratique, il y a souvent des alternatives. Il n’y en a, généralement, que deux à Kinshasa. Quel que soit le domaine. Chrétiens ou musulmans, Skol ou Primus, Bracongo ou Bralima, Joseph Kabila ou Jean-Pierre Bemba, J.B. Mpiana ou Werrason, Wenge Maison Mère ou Wenge BCBG, Celtel ou Vocadom, MLC (Mouvement de Libération du Congo) ou PPRD (Parti du peuple pour la reconstruction et la démocratie), etc. (*SK* 36)

Mumbu’s delinquent writing of Kinshasa undermines binaries of gender and sexuality, but also questions binary oppositions such as legal/illegal through Article 15, first person/third person

⁹⁴ Fanon developed this dichotomy at the beginning of *Les damnés de la terre*.

through her radio-trottoir-like narrative, to name but a few. Just like the Congo démocratique is not really democratic, the alternatives she presents in this quote do not truly feel like alternatives. What does however is her vision and version of Kinshasa as a space of paradoxes. This is particularly evident through the urban embodiment of the Filles de Molokaï. Patricia Hill Collins writes, “From a Black feminist standpoint sexuality encompasses the both/and nature of human existence, the potential for a sexuality that simultaneously oppresses and empowers” (166). Collins’ “both/and” echoes Mumbu and Trefon’s “also” with which I opened this chapter, and further explains the importance of Mumbu’s sex-positive, feminist, queer inscription of bodily experiences of and in Kinshasa in developing this enunciation of the (dis)articulated capital. In return, this sheds light on why the term *queering* matters to a reading of this novel as invested in a delinquent narration of the city.

The Filles de Molokaï make up a chosen family outside of traditional kinship.⁹⁵ Their family structure relies on solidarity and shared experiences of the city based on their spatial proximity and occupation of the interstice. The concept of chosen family is one that is essential in structurally discriminated communities, and one that is particularly prevalent in queer politics.⁹⁶ This is the case not only because people who identify as queer or are perceived as queer face rejection from their blood relatives—which they sometimes do—but because queerness radically questions traditional family formation, and more generally the cis-hetero-patriarchal structure of power. While the Filles de Molokaï adopt and use many of the attributes of that cis-hetero-patriarchal system of power, and even though they exist in a state of conviviality with it, they also find refuge in each other’s presence. The Filles’ safety net is

⁹⁵ As Gayle Rubin informs us in her reading of Claude-Lévi Strauss, traditional kinship is akin to “traffic in women” that maintains an oppressive system in which women are merely exchanged or given away. The Filles de Molokaï’s lack of participation in such a system can be read as a destabilization of that system.

⁹⁶ In *Queer Family Values*, Valerie Lehr underscores that current Western narratives of family are rooted in liberal industrial capitalism that developed in the early 1900s (45).

Bintu's studio on rue de Kanda-Kanda, which also happens to be in the middle of the other streets of Molokaï, the center made safe by the solidarity of the girls' chosen family. "Et, pour Mapendo, pour Asha, pour Bintu, pour Caro, pour Véronique, tout est désormais question de choix dans la vie, pas de destin. Le choix fait la famille. Le choix fait les amis. Le choix fait la vie" (SK 147). This declaration must be read as radical. The solidarity at stake for the Filles also echoes what feminist scholar and poet Adrienne Rich called "lesbian continuum," or what bell hooks terms "political solidarity" or "Sisterhood," especially as a non-white, non-bourgeois form of solidarity between oppressed women.⁹⁷ That Kinshasa would appear as a queer space, or as a space of queering demonstrates thus not as much inherent chaos in the city's structures, but rather a distrust and displacement of apparent power structures that have been shown to fail time and again in the capital city. As such, nuclear family values are to a great extent complemented and replaced by chosen family formations; the *shégués* or of the Filles de Molokaï serve as probing examples of this in the novel. Choice can involve conviviality, compromise, and subjugation even; the reliance upon choice does not imply a freedom from power structures, but the emotional and social investment in alternative modes of relation. In that sense, the *shégués* and Filles de Molokaï redefine the politics of Kinshasa by negotiating their own space and role with regards to the main agents in charge, be it the MONUC or members of the national political scene.

Conclusion

Mumbu's novel brings to the Congolese literary scene and the tradition of urban novels about Kinshasa a much-needed perspective that complements literary discourses that up until then were mostly masculine and heterosexual. The novel gives space to the "order" of Article 15,

⁹⁷ Rich defines the term as the "range [...] of woman-identified experience. [...] primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support" (Rich III).

an “order” which favors the voices—chaotic, collective, and sometimes sexually transmitted voices—of Kinois such as the *shégués* and Filles de Molokaï. The megacity of Kinshasa thus emerges as the site where these social, physical and spatial bodies can express themselves, and even make some of the rules. The *shégués* and the Filles de Molokaï practice Article 15 to survive, as do most other inhabitants of Kinshasa; but more than that, they come to embody Article 15. Article 15 here must also be read as a radical redefining of sexual and political economies by ordinary urban dwellers. There is no tenable utopian reading of daily survival in Kinshasa as *only* a form of empowerment, and as such, Article 15 is not devoid of influence and power struggles, on the contrary. However, in *Samantha à Kinshasa*, Mumbu writes almost in a systematic manner the alternative spaces, social groups, and modes of living that Kinois shape for themselves. In doing so, Mumbu proposes to think Kinshasa through the complex modes of survival and relations of urban bodies, but also sets up a powerful narrative model and urban imaginary that relies on delinquent, disarticulated, queer, political, and erotic practices of the city.

The (dis)articulation of Kinshasa drives Mumbu’s novel and this chapter, as it weaves together interstices, delinquency, playfulness and performance, urban embodiment and queering to show the creative resilience and active engagement of Kinshasa’s urban bodies. Mumbu destabilizes—“dérègle” et “déplace,” to recall de Certeau’s words—the narrative to commit to paper some of the “also” of Kinshasa. Yet, lest we believe that “also” can act as the new order, the new “état,” Mumbu warns us:

Quand on part de cette ville, il faut prendre soin d’y revenir de temps en temps. Un peu comme un homme qui cherche à entretenir la flamme avec sa dulcinée. Sinon, c’est la cata ! [...] Personne ne peut bomber le torse en disant qu’il connaît Kinshasa. Et que Kinshasa le lui rend... Personne ! Tous les jours, de nouveaux tours apparaissent, de nouveaux mots naissent, de nouvelles danses s’inventent, de nouvelles lois se proclament, de nouveaux dirigeants prennent le pouvoir, de nouvelles mentalités se forgent, etc. Bref,

il faut la revoir souvent cette Kin la Belle. (*SK* 231)

Kinshasa is only legible in movement, and in person. It must always be seen again (“la revoir”) in order to grasp that which is always renewed. The accumulation of pronominal verbs and of actions the subjects of which are objects suggests that the city constantly transforms itself in a way that even Kinois can hardly follow. The love story that is the relationship to the city—Mumbu referred to Kinshasa as her muse, and the text evokes a “dulcinée”—can never be taken for granted, be set in stone and should it be set in text, then it would be in a text that itself contains a warning about the dangers of fixity. Kinshasa cannot be known, Mumbu contends, it can only be (re-)experienced.

The Literary Urban Imaginary as Palimpsest in Lagos Novels: Chibundu Onuzo's *Welcome to Lagos* and A. Igoni Barrett's *Blackass*

*Lagos is a chronicle of liquid geographies
Swimming on every tongue it lands with tales*
—Jumoke Verissimo, “Transgendered”

Lagos fiction overflows with images. In fact, the image of Lagos overflowing reigns in a city where water constitutes about twenty percent of the area. Prone to flooding and stuck in between the lagoon to which the city owes its name and the Gulf of Guinea, Lagos rises to only 20-135 feet above water.¹ In his 2005 novel *GraceLand*, Chris Abani masterfully describes Maroko, the slum where the protagonist and his father live, as a “suspended city” (*Graceland* 6), in which slum dwellers circulate on plank walkways.² A similar image, albeit this time in the stilted slum of Makoko, surfaces in Chibundu Onuzo's *Welcome to Lagos*. Jumoke Verissimo's poetic image of Lagos as “a chronicle of liquid geographies” also resonates with the material realities of the everyday life of Lagos, where tropical rains commonly cause flooding and where water surrounds and threatens even the wealthiest areas of the city. The *foci* and material concerns of daily life in Lagos find their poeticized way into fiction located in the city, in the shape of literary tropes, elements of plot and the storytelling of the “tales” that Verissimo strongly associates with Lagos. In *Every Day is for the Thief*, Teju Cole writes, “The air in the strange, familiar environment of this city is dense with story, and it draws me into thinking of life as stories. The narratives fly at me from all directions. [...] And that literary texture, of lives full of unpredictable narrative, is what appeals” (64). In Lagos, Cole suggests, life and stories share a tendency towards unpredictability, which gives daily life a story-like feel, while many stories are full of the sensations and events of the everyday. This chapter investigates what Cole calls the

¹ For example, the elevation of the easily flooded area of Victoria Island is around 20 feet, while Murtala Muhammed International Airport stands at 135 feet above sea level. Overall, this means Lagos is particularly sensitive to climate change, as reported by Adelekan; Omenai and Ayodele, amongst others.

² For more on the specific image of the suspended city in Abani's novel, see Harrison.

“literary texture” of Lagos and the ways in which that literary texture in turn contributes to producing an “urban texture” widespread in contemporary English-language Nigerian city novels.

A certain number of African cities have not been widely explored through fiction, or have only recently found fictional representation; that is not the case of Lagos. Its literary imaginary is varied, dates back at least from the 1950s and spans multiple genres and forms, so much so that Chris Dunton has argued that Lagos is “one of the world’s preeminent fictionalized cities” (“Entropy and Energy” 98), comparing it to 19th-century London or Paris in that respect.³ In that sense, Lagos is truly an outlier amongst the urban imaginaries treated in this dissertation. In the 1950s and 1960s already, Cyprian Ekwensi’s *People of the City* (1954) and *Jagua Nana* (1961) were two early examples of what had yet to become a genre.⁴ In *People of the City*, Ekwensi described the unnamed West African city that mirrors Lagos as a “city of opportunities” (3), a term that finds its echo in later urban novels and literary criticism. Already with Ekwensi’s novels comes the idea that Lagos functions as an allegory for Nigeria and modern life. Another influential and early example of a Lagos novel would be Wole Soyinka’s *The Interpreters* (1965). Its characters, some Lagosians and some part of the diaspora, struggle with concerns and questions that remain valid in contemporary Lagos, including concerns around employment and the status of the returnee, as well as the lack of basic infrastructure in daily life. Ekwensi’s and

³ In an article entitled “Imagination and the City,” writer and scholar Odia Ofeimun explains the proximity of Lagos and London, or even Lagos and Rome by what he calls their “citiness” (12). For early examples of fictionalization of Lagos, see Echeruo and Barber.

⁴ Ekwensi’s representation of the city went beyond these two novels, including *Beautiful Feathers* (1963) and a collection of short stories entitled *Restless city* (1975). Ekwensi’s engagement with the urban did not go unnoticed by literary criticism then, nor has it faded as a topic of literary criticism. See John McClusky’s article published in 1976 in which he calls Lagos a “chief character” (212) of Ekwensi’s novels. Dunton brings attention to Emmanuel Obiechina’s characterization of Ekwensi’s characters as “urban types” (103, cited in Dunton, “Entropy and Energy” 70). However, Dunton also notes “understandable continuities” (“Entropy and Energy” 71) in the Lagos imaginary between Ekwensi’s urban concerns and modern day representations.

Soyinka's novels are critical of Lagos politics, expose and denounce corruption in the city, and lay the tracks for urban literary tropes that carry on in contemporary Lagos novels.

After a notable scarcity of published novels in the 1980s and 1990s, partly due to the political context of successive military dictatorships, the turn of the twenty-first century saw a spur of urban novels set in and focused on Lagos. Some noteworthy examples of "third-generation" (Adesanmi and Dunton VII) Nigerian urban novels include Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* (2000), Chris Abani's *GraceLand* (2004), Seffi Atta's *Everything Good will Come* (2005) and Teju Cole's *Every Day is for the Thief* (2007).⁵ Through its attention given to the disenfranchised inhabitants of Morgan Street, also known as Poverty Street, *Waiting for an Angel* focuses on the lives of ordinary citizens in Lagos grappling with adverse economic conditions and Sani Abacha's dictatorship. Contrary to Habila's portrayal of the city through the lens of journalist and writer Lomba, Abani's *GraceLand* directly sets the narrative in the midst of the slum of Maroko, and features main characters heretofore neglected by literature, or mainly included as evidence of the negative influence of Lagos. The educational and often economic privilege of the characters of Atta's and Cole's novels imply a certain access to mobility and a perspective of the city that is not that of a majority of Lagosians, but reflects the social status and privilege of the authors themselves. For instance, A. Igoni Barrett's *Blackass* and Toni Kan's *Carnivorous City* both have scenes set at Bogobiri House, an artsy boutique hotel, bar and restaurant in the affluent historic neighborhood of Ikoyi, a place where the literati and artists abound but where, as one minor character in *Blackass* puts it, "Their beer nah four times normal

⁵ The term "third-generation Nigerian writing" theorized by Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton, sheds light on the filiation and ruptures between these writers and earlier generations. In the special issue of *Research in African Literatures* devoted to this new generation of writers, Dunton develops his argument about a new Lagos novel, different from the model Ekwensi set forth. Dunton uses Abani's *GraceLand*, Akin Adesokan's *Roots in the Sky*, Maik Nwosu's *Invisible Chapters* as exemplary of the "new energies" of third-generation Lagos novels. The novels analyzed in this chapter exhibit some of the "new energies" Dunton mentions, although the notion of temporal generations may no longer be the most appropriate way to categorize these novels.

price! I can't drink here o, the beer won't taste sweet in my mouth" (BA 224). This Lagos is by definition a very different place from that of Elvis, the protagonist of *GraceLand*, whose entire life revolves around Maroko and whose contact with wealth is either by trade or illegal means. Several recent novels play with geographical and economic layers of Lagos, alternating between affluent areas navigated by privileged characters and less privileged areas or characters. In 2012, Onuzo's debut novel *The Spider King's Daughter* explicitly put in relation the clash of classes that Lagos experiences on a daily basis, through the love story between a hustler and the daughter of a Lagos Big Boy.⁶ The complex role of the expatriate or returnee has also played a significant role in Lagos novels, including in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, which can be read partially as a Lagos novel, but also in Cole's *Every Day is for the Thief*.⁷

Helon Habila begins his January 2017 review of Chibundu Onuzo's *Welcome to Lagos* with the following sentence, "the Lagos novel has become a genre in itself" (Habila, "High Hopes, Big City"). This claim, reinforced by the growing volume and significance of Lagos novels in the past seven decades, is the departure point for this chapter. I will henceforth use the term "Lagos novel" to identify a longstanding tradition of writing the imaginary of Lagos into fiction, so much so that urban concerns, the characters' interaction with and integration into the city, and the way the city drives everyday life form the narrative and aesthetic heart of Lagos novels. The existence of the "Lagos novel" by no means implies a homogenous genre. First of all, that term brings together novels that would otherwise belong to separate genres; for instance, the Africanfuturist *Lagoon* penned by Okorafor or Leye Adenle's crime novels *Easy Motion*

⁶ Lagos Big Boys are defined by their wealth and illegal means of acquiring said wealth, which means that they are "always close to expiring" (Kan 10).

⁷ The writers' own status, since many of them live or have lived abroad affects what kind of imaginary of Lagos comes into writing. For instance, Ayo Kehinde examines the trope of Lagos in Ben Okri's and Chika Unigwe's short stories as a fictional city written from afar. Akin Adesokan defines Western-facing fiction often "marketed primarily outside the continent" (Adesokan 2) as "New African Writing," a category that Nathan Suhr-Sytsma's article nuances.

Tourist (2016) and *When Trouble Sleeps* (2018).⁸ Other works oscillate between genres; Kan's *Carnivorous City* stands in between literary fiction and crime novel, but can nevertheless be identified as a Lagos novel. The term "Lagos novel" seeks to recognize commonalities and intertextual conversations in these novels, and thus to allow for an analysis of recent installments in the genre that speak to and challenge some of its tropes, partly because there is a genre to which they can turn and write back.

My main entry point into the genre will be two recent Lagos novels and the ways in which they respond to and twist the urban literary imaginary of Lagos. Indeed, I argue that A. Igoni Barrett's *Blackass* and Chibundu Onuzo's *Welcome to Lagos* (2017) reimagine and rewrite a literary Lagos in a gesture inspired by the spatial rewriting and reimagining that has become a feature of the city.⁹ Onuzo and Barrett write Lagos in transition and of transitions, including transitions of class, of space, of gender, and of race. Because literary representations of the Lagos exist and have existed for a long enough time to suggest they form a genre, Onuzo and Barrett can afford to depart from conventional tropes that have in high proportions focused on war and corruption, violence and dictatorship, slums and lack of infrastructure. In addition, more recent writers do not have to bear the responsibility of trying to "explain" Lagos and do not run the risk of providing the only available fictional representation of Lagos. Whether the readers of *Blackass* and *Welcome to Lagos* have read Soyinka, Ekwensi, Habila, Abani, Atta and others, Barrett's and Onuzo's literary Lagos contributes to a multifaceted urban imaginary in literature.

⁸ "Africanfuturism" and "African jujuism" are the labels that Nnedi Okorafor uses to define her work. She strongly objects to the term "Afrofuturism." The French translation of Adenle's debut novel is titled *Lagos Lady*, making its status as a Lagos novel even more obvious to an unfamiliar reader.

⁹ Originally published by Faber & Faber in the U.K., *Welcome to Lagos* made its U.S. debut a year later under the Catapult imprint. *Blackass* was published by Grove Press in the U.S., Farafina in Nigeria, and Chatto & Windus in the U.K. Barrett worked as an editor for Farafina when he first moved to Lagos. For more on the intricate relationships that make up literary networks, and in particular Farafina, see Kate Wallis' article "Exchanges in Nairobi and Lagos: Mapping Literary Networks and World Literary Space."

In a recent poem entitled “I know what Lagos does to Dreams,” Nigerian poet Dami Ajayi calls Lagos “a palimpsest hurriedly rewritten” (20).¹⁰ The poetic metaphor of the “urban palimpsest” stems from a comparison between cities and medieval manuscripts. The same manuscripts were written over, written and rewritten, with traces of older material still showing through the new text. Materially, stretches of road and entire neighborhoods have been erased, destroyed, rebuilt, reinvented throughout time in Lagos. The scale and rhythm at which these urban planning changes occur set Lagos apart, even though the Nigerian metropolis is far from the only one to have undergone spatial modifications over time. Change, or lack of persistence, appears as perhaps the most defining traits of the city, and assuredly one of its literary tropes.¹¹ In 1990, the authorities destroyed the low-income flood-prone area of Maroko that Chris Abani narrates in *GraceLand* to build luxury housing. A similar fate has befallen Bar Beach, once a location for public executions, then a dangerous yet touristic beach featured in many Lagos novels, now the site of a new artificial city named Eko Atlantic City.¹² As multiple articles and reports attest, forced evictions and displacement are common occurrences in the name of

¹⁰ Like many—perhaps most—published contemporary Nigerian writers, Ajayi has strong ties to publishing, in his case through the literary magazine *Saraba Magazine*, which he founded alongside fellow poet Emmanuel Iduma in 2009. For more on that endeavor, see Wallis.

¹¹ Beyond transformations of the built environment, life can change dramatically in an instant in a city prone to flooding, robberies, and other unforeseen events. Many of the short stories that constitute the collection of short stories edited by *GraceLand* author Chris Abani under the title *Lagos Noir* (2018) build upon the rapidity and unpredictability of Lagos life on a daily basis. As the spatially referenced stories suggest, that unpredictability can affect people from all areas of the city and all social classes.

¹² Bar Beach appears in *GraceLand*, *Lagoon*, and Okey Ndibe’s *Arrows of Rain*. For more on the treatment of Bar Beach and Maroko in cultural production, see Whiteman (98-100). Eko Atlantic City is a development project with the apparent goal of acting as a wall that protects Victoria Island from its notorious and frequent floods. It is also a luxury housing project that aims to expand on the available landmass of the islands which wealthy Nigerians favor for housing. Lagos-based writer Allyn Gaestel calls it “the apex of (...) isolationist construction,” adding “[t]he sand-filled island being built off the coast of Victoria Island will be an expensive, exclusive, privately owned mini city” (Gaestel, “Urban Hybridity”). For mentions of executions held at Bar Beach, see Siollun.

adapting Lagos to the modern needs of its 21 million inhabitants.¹³ Erasure appears to be a part of the urban model to an extent unmatched by other African urban centers.¹⁴

This complex relationship with the past appears through Lagos novels as well, as their treatment of History is shallow at best, sometimes non-existent. The narratives seem concerned about what it means for characters to navigate Lagos synchronically, without attempting to account for its past beyond a few years back. The exception might be Atta's novel *Everything Good Will Come* as it spans a few decades in the lives of Enitan and Sheri. Even the colonial period is left unmentioned in most of the novels I identify with the genre of Lagos novels, a fact which really sets these novels apart from other urban African novels, especially in the Francophone tradition. Although the existence of several decades of Lagos novels creates its own historical path, these novels—including *Blackass* and *Welcome to Lagos*—largely focus on a narrative present and individual trajectories. The past is thus past because it has been overwritten, not because it is especially distant in time; this seems to be true for the architecture of the city as it is for Lagos novels.

The concept of “urban palimpsest” recalls de Certeau’s concept of “urban fabric” (103) that urban practitioners produce as they “write” the city. In his seminal book on urban palimpsests, literary scholar Andreas Huyssen shares “the conviction that literary techniques of reading historically, intertextually, constructively, and deconstructively at the same time can be woven into our understanding of urban spaces as lived spaces that shape collective imaginaries”

¹³ See for instance a 2017 report by Amnesty International calling global attention to the situation of evicted Lagosians. Regarding the population, I am using the approximation given by the National Population Commission of Nigeria, although estimates vary widely. Political stakes linked to representation and funding at the state level, as well as the inherent difficulty of assessing informal settlement dwellers, explain the discrepancy between estimates.

¹⁴ To use a more recent example, the area of Oshodi Junction, known for its infamous *go-slows*, or intense traffic congestion, has been partially bulldozed to make way for a wider expressway and a railway linking Lagos to the nearby city of Badagry. Half houses remain standing on the sides of the road in construction, a vertical cut the trace of what used to be.

(Huyssen 7).¹⁵ The metaphor remains scriptural even as it becomes urban, and by using it to qualify urban novels, I would like to deepen the relation between the two. Collective imaginaries are at the core of this chapter as it asks what happens when those imaginaries of urban spaces as lived spaces make their way back into literary imaginaries. As the metaphor of the palimpsest further shows, the relationship between narratives and the city is strong in Lagos in more ways than the one Cole suggested in *Every Day is for the Thief*. Ofeimun writes,

This is the essence of both the poem and the city: in them every event invokes and maps, evokes and repeats, another event. [...] In cities as in poems, the past does not overwhelm the present; its proximity speaks at once and the same time through all the events and images that you come across; which is how the present creates its own myths in which all the old myths are given accommodation. This is how the city approximates the highest forms of poetics. (11–12)

This chapter looks at Lagos novels as palimpsests that build upon structures and tropes from the past, only to reinvent them, and in doing so bear the traces of that which they made past, while recording the similar changes that Lagos undergoes at the urban planning level. How do Lagos novels map out the city in fiction and record the experiences of its urban dwellers? And more specifically in the case of *Blackass* and *Welcome to Lagos*, how do they reimagine the genre of the Lagos novel? Barrett and Onuzo reimagine the textualization of Lagos; they invest new spaces and perspectives with fiction; and finally, they widen the literary urban imaginary of Lagos. Their poetic and fictionalized accounts of Lagos reframe the complex and palimpsestic “myth” of Lagos in terms of transitions that had been missing from Lagos novels until then.

I. Literary Tropes: A Longstanding Tradition

The Beast with Bared Fangs: Lagos as Allegory

In her exhaustive study of Nigerian novels *Bearing Witness: readers, writers and the novel in Nigeria*, Wendy Griswold sets up the “city novel” genre against the trope of village life,

¹⁵ See also Samuelson, Gutleben, Mongin.

“The city is the zone of freedom, novelty, opportunity, and risk; the village, the zone of constraint, tradition, entrapment, and security. Each depends on the other for its meaning” (124).¹⁶ Villages are construed as more static and cities thus represent change.¹⁷ Griswold associates village novels with the past and with a mythical image of Africa that she claims is more popular outside of Nigeria (137).¹⁸

An urban setting is a necessary but insufficient criterion to define “city novels.”¹⁹ “In a city novel,” Griswold argues, “the city itself is paramount; the story is cast in terms of an individual’s struggle in an urban milieu where the city itself, rather than some particular antagonist, is the object against which the protagonist contends” (144). Doubling down on the image of struggle, she later adds, “Life for most urban residents can only be described as hellish” (149). In his history of the Lagos novel, Dunton notes the prevalence of difficulties, “For the better part of half a century, the identification of Lagos as a site of high entropy has been firmly established in the national literature, reflecting a worldwide—though often skewed—conception of the pronounced difficulties in negotiating this city” (“Entropy and Energy” 71). When Dunton argues that third-generation Lagos novels exhibit “new energies, new emphases” (“Entropy and Energy” 72), he does so against this longstanding tradition that Griswold describes.

¹⁶ For this study, Griswold read 476 novels authored by 261 writers, from the early 1950s to the mid-1990s. Griswold categorizes Nigerian novels into eight genres: stories of traditional village life; tales of the city; novels focusing on women’s relationships with men; romances; stories about intellectuals and academic life; novels treating the civil war; crime stories and thrillers; political novels (Griswold 120–21). She selects genres according to the most important elements of the novel and acknowledges that many novels exhibit some overlap.

¹⁷ This classic opposition (see Raymond Williams’ *The Country and the City* in the context of British Literature) echoes what Roger Chemain, Claire Dehon, and Lydie Moudileno argued about Francophone African urban novels of a certain time period. For more on this, see chapter 2.

¹⁸ That question is important in context, considering Griswold’s claim that “[a]lthough conceived in Nigeria, the Nigerian novel was born in London” (61). Certain images of Africa prevailed, contributing to what Eileen Julien has famously called the “extroverted African novel.” However and significantly, Suhr-Sytsma argues, “‘the extroverted African novel’ has always been multifocal” (4). On questions of reception, see also Krishnan. On the topic of audience, Barrett wrote, “I write for the Nigerian in all of us” (Barrett, “Whom Do We Write For?”).

¹⁹ In Griswold’s study, only 7% of the novels she analyzed were categorized as primarily city novels, although the number was surprisingly low because other novels would have been primarily located within another genre.

According to Griswold, social issues justify the increasing number of city novels as “the city has become the metaphor for, as well as the site of, the social issues that novelists feel they must treat” (157); the less Lagos is attractive as a city, the more attractive it becomes as a metaphor (154).²⁰ With this claim, Griswold buys into the stereotypical portrayal of African literature as social commentary. Even as she does so, she reveals the deeply literary gesture of using a city as a metaphor, and a literary urban imaginary as a way into social issues. And indeed, the imaginary of Lagos is saturated with metaphors, many of which reflect some of the negative sides of Lagos that Griswold mentioned. She writes, “Nobody has a good thing to say about Lagos—quite the contrary, in fact. [...] The city is the arena of money, crime, hustling, excitement, prostitution, anomie, opportunity, loneliness, high hopes, bitter disappointments” (Griswold 153). And in fact, Kan’s *Carnivorous City*—despite its publication date beyond the scope of Griswold’s study—provides a pertinent example of an allegorical portrayal of Lagos. For the novel’s protagonist Abel, who travels to Lagos upon learning about his brother’s disappearance, the city becomes the *locus* of destabilization and alienation, as evidenced by the metaphor reflected in the novel’s title of a “carnivorous city.” The trope of the corrupting city is one of the oldest tropes associated with urbanity. Kan explores that theme through the polarized characters of Abel and his brother Soni. On the one hand, Abel is an underpaid lecturer at a provincial university, whereas his brother has made it as a Lagos “Big Boy,” a businessman with a debatable business ethic and relationship to the law, as well as a seemingly unlimited disposable income. The poor and provincial public servant and the rich urban criminal could not

²⁰ When talking about “attractiveness,” Griswold refers to Lagos’ ranking in the list of most livable cities, stating that the city “came dead last” (154). After Lagos ranked 138th out of 140 in the 2018 Economist Intelligence Unit’s global livability index, outperforming only the cities of Dhaka in Bangladesh and Damascus in Syria, Onuzo wrote an article for the *Guardian* about the biases in the measure of livability, in particular as far as culture is concerned. In a discussion of the global livability index at the 2018 Aké Festival in Lagos, when Onuzo asked the Nigerian and international audience to guess the rank of Lagos out of 140 cities, a majority of voices blurted out, “140th!” showing how the negative representation of Lagos has been internalized, enough for the audience to make jokes about the poor performance.

be more at odds, and only the latter's disappearance and almost certain death brings them to metaphorically share the same space.²¹

In *Carnivorous City*, the commentary on Lagos often trumps the otherwise fairly conventional plot of a naive soul corrupted by the city vices. In fact, in its best moments, the novel feels like a book-length essay on Lagos, a city which Kan knows well and which he calls his "playground." Throughout the novel, Lagos is presented by way of a variety of images, including that of a "hungry beast" (Kan 47), a "battlefield" (Kan 50). The city is fast-paced with a short attention span (Kan 68), sleepless (Kan 175), "bursting at the seams with people" (Kan 201); its traffic is compared to an "evil spirit" (Kan 92). The closest to a positive appreciation of Lagos comes from its unpredictability (Kan 113, 127), including several mentions that in Lagos "good and bad things happen at once" (Kan 237). This characterization echoes the most positive portrayal made by Griswold, "In *Cheer up, Brother* [a 1981 novel by SMO Aka], as in all city novels, the city is a place of ups and downs, the unexpected, the unpredictable. It is the site of catastrophe and the arena of possibility. Above all it is exciting" (Griswold 158).

The image of a carnivorous city does not emerge with Kan; in fact, it has been present in Nigerian literature since at least *People of the City*, in which a policeman tells Sango, "You see, person who's not careful, the city will eat him!" (Ekwensi, *People of the City* 13).²² The chapter "The Beast with Bared Fangs," which is an explicit metonym of Lagos, explores a similar trope in the long description that opens the chapter,

Lagos is a beast with bared fangs and a voracious appetite for human flesh. Walk through its neighborhood, from the gated communities of Ikoyi and Victoria Island to Lekki and

²¹ The novel reworks the biblical trope of the enemy brothers, and this time too the righteous son is named Abel. Other comparisons could include the fact that Soni has a son, like Cain had Enoch, and that Abel remains childless.

²² In a 2003 essay written for the BBC, Habila makes a similar claim, "Anything can happen in Lagos. People see Lagos as a certain violent place. It's almost like a living thing—like some animal that's going to devour you" (Habila, "Sense of the City").

beyond, to the riotous warrens of streets and alleyways on the mainland, and you can tell that this is a carnivorous city. Life is not just brutish—it is short.

In Lagos, one is sometimes struck by the scary fact that some crazed evil genius may have invented a million quick, sad ways for people to die: fall off a molue, fall prey to ritual killers, be pushed out of a moving danfo by one-chance robbers, fall into an open gutter in the rain, be electrocuted in your shop, be killed by your domestic staff, jump off the Third Mainland Bridge, get shot by armed robbers, get hit by a stray bullet from a policeman extorting motorists, get rammed by a vehicle that veers off the road into the pedestrian's walkway, die in a fire, get crushed in a collapsing building. You could count the ways and there would be many others.

Yet, like crazed moths disdaining the rage of the flame, we keep gravitating towards Lagos, compelled by some centrifugal force that defies reason and willpower. We come, take our chances, hoping that we will be luckier than the next man, willing ourselves to believe that while our fortune lies here, the myriad evils that traverse the streets of Lagos will never meet us with bared fangs.

Abel and Santos were in Mushin when Lagos bared its fangs. (Kan 34)

The proximity between seduction and death, which Kan develops through the comparison with moths, illustrates the ambivalence of Lagos. The carnivorous city is a beast that threatens to kill and devour anyone it possibly can, or to seduce them out of being human, which in the novel appears to be the same thing. In fact, Abel, who is characterized throughout as most likely to resist the temptation of Lagos, struggles and ultimately fails to resist Lagos.²³ The novel seems to imply that there is no way to get close to Lagos, especially when money is involved, without being burned, or rather, to borrow the metaphor, without being “devoured.” The temptations are represented by the city itself as it lures Abel to *want* to be devoured, and personified through the character of Ada, the missing brother's wife. The carnal temptation implies that on top of being carnivorous, the city is also a vampire, turning those it does not kill into their own versions of the “beast with bared fangs.” The last sentence of the novel leaves no room for doubt, as Abel takes

²³ In her monograph *The City in the African Novel*, Nigerian literary scholar Lola Akande makes a case for the character's responsibility in his downfall, arguing that the city alone cannot be held responsible for his behavioral change. However, she also places *Carnivorous City* within the tradition of portraying Lagos as “cannibalistic and nihilistic” (220).

over his murdered brother's empire, and the novel concludes, "Lagos is now his home" (Kan 241).

Mobility and Lack Thereof: the *Go-slows*

Difficult circulation is common to many popular images of Lagos, with the *go-slow*, or traffic congestion, as the most suggestive example. Ofeimun has called traffic jams in Lagos "the rawest nerve" (137). Lagos *go-slows* plague the city, regulate its inhabitants' schedules, and appear in most literary representations of the city. The movement of motor vehicles and lack of movement induced by the density of traffic affect characters' perceptions of the city's geography and of time, creating conversations or trade exchanges that otherwise may not take place.²⁴ In *Carnivorous City*, "Driving in Lagos at night revealed it to be a small city with a distended belly [...] but in the daytime, Lagos was sluggish like a python that had swallowed something huge" (Kan 109). Kan pursues the digestive metaphor even in depictions of road traffic in Lagos. *Blackass* also features several scenes in traffic; in each of them, being stuck in traffic encourages conversations between the characters, including with taxi drivers and Furo's personal chauffeur. The controversial Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas writes about *go-slows*, "What seemed an improvisation proved to be a systematic layering where the enormous amount of minuscule transactions necessary to stay alive in Lagos—the endemic issue of poverty—were made possible through the arrangement, intersection, and mutual confrontation of people and infrastructure" (Koolhaas 178).²⁵ Indeed, however challenging they may be, the constant and

²⁴ In *Postcolonial Automobility: Car Culture in West Africa* (2017), Lindsey Green-Simms suggests as much, and explores the topic of car culture throughout popular culture in West Africa. The topic has sparked many reactions in the *Journal of African Studies*, by scholars such as Carli Coetzee, Moradewun Adejunmobi, Kenneth Harrow, and Ato Quayson.

²⁵ Koolhaas' project with the Harvard Design School started with a desire to understand urban conditions in an African metropolis. In "Fragments of a Lecture on Lagos," Koolhaas reports on the negative reputation of Lagos, portrayed as a dangerous city with "tragic manifestations of degraded urban life" (177). Indeed, Lagos, set to someday be the third largest city in the world, challenges every Global Northern perception of how to be a successful city. Koolhaas' work on Lagos has been criticized, for instance by Jeremy Weate and Bibi Bakare-Yusuf,

unpredictable confrontations between people and infrastructure also provide opportunities for survival in Lagos. Griswold uses the metaphor of the *go-slow* to explain, “Nigerian novelists regard themselves as traffic cops” (269) who bear witness to the vices of city life and report on it. She then corrects her own assumption, a few pages later, adding, “It may be that the heroic model was never the right one. Writers aren’t traffic cops clearing up the *go-slow*; they are people caught in it themselves, and taking notes” (Griswold 272). What happens when traffic halts? Griswold suggests that stories happen. Stories happen because of the *go-slow*, because of the density, saturation and forced interactions and because of the sudden lack of movement. Griswold’s change of figure—the person stuck in traffic rather than the traffic cop—also suggests a change of perspective that illuminates some of what Onuzo and Barrett do in writing a fictionalized Lagos.

Fluids in Lagos Novels

As the chapter introduction suggests, water plays an important role in the geography and urban imaginary of Lagos. The city is split between its “mainland” and “the island,” and organized around the lagoon that separates the two.²⁶ The traffic-ridden bridges allow and regulate the flows in between the historic Lagos Island and the sprawling mainland that slowly devours surrounding areas, reaching the ends of Lagos State. Daily life in Lagos is to a significant extent determined by water. Many Lagosians cross the lagoon from the mainland to one of the islands and back on a daily basis. However, water affects urban life in more ways than one, including through torrential rains that the infrastructures of the city are not equipped to handle, and which result in blocked roads and significant floods. That which was a road can in a

for his “aesthetizing Afrophilia” that is a reworking of “the old colonial trope [of] the African fetish” (Weate and Bakare-Yusuf 324–25).

²⁶ What people call “the Island” can either correspond strictly to Lagos Island, home to the historic city of Lagos and one of its oldest and wealthiest neighborhoods, Ikoyi. Other definitions can include Victoria Island and Lekki, often when “the Island” is used in contrast with “the mainland.” What “the Island” signifies changes based on context, location and addressee, but can often be inferred from spatial and social cues.

matter of minutes become impracticable, another sign of the lack of permanence in Lagos. The motif of water is understandably present in Lagos novels, an echo of its importance in the lives of Lagosians. *Carnivorous City* protagonist Abel reflects upon the city as he stands on Falomo Bridge, the short bridge linking Lagos Island to Victoria Island,

Atop the bridge, with the water stretching out on both sides and the lights shimmering on its undulating surface, it struck Abel, forcefully, that Lagos was a lovely city if only it could be quiet and clean and calm for a moment. But then he shook his head and laughed softly to himself. Make the city quiet and clean and calm and it would no longer be Lagos.

Lagos, named by the Portuguese after the lagoon that girded its waist, was like a river swollen with flood and every time it threw up there was chaos. (Kan 159)

Defined through what it is not—not quiet, not clean, not calm—Lagos is compared to a river that vomits water during frequent flooding, inducing chaos in the city. Kan’s digestive metaphor extends even to Lagos waters, showing how much they are a part of the “body” of the city.

Wole Soyinka’s 1965 novel *The Interpreters* places water, and more generally fluids, at the core of urban life in Lagos. About rain for instance, Soyinka writes that “[t]he rains of May become in July slit arteries of the sacrificial bull, a million bleeding punctures of the sky-bull hidden in convulsive cloud humps, black, overfed for this one event, nourished on horizon tops of endless choice grazing, distant beyond giraffe reach” (Soyinka 155). Soyinka’s image of slit arteries hints at the violence of downpours in Lagos, but also at the network which links the sky, the rain, the lagoon, and the land and people affected by the water flows. Water comes back in the novel in the forms of mud, flooding rains and of course the lagoon at the heart of the city, and in all its forms, it is permeated by human dejections, a quintessential element of life in the city according to the novel: “Next to death, he decided, shit is the most vernacular atmosphere of our

beloved country” (Soyinka 108).²⁷ Water at once links and separates social and geographical spaces. Water has the power to erase, for instance, when Soyinka writes, “[t]he rain had begun early in the afternoon, washing out every landmark and submerging huts and the smaller market stalls” (220), and in the novel, acts more as a function of death and of excess than as creator of or vehicle for life.

Nnedi Okorafor’s 2014 eco-critical dystopia *Lagoon* imagines the waters of Lagos as the site of encounter between humans and aliens, showing the importance of water in and around Lagos as well as associated concerns about pollution and exploitation of natural resources. Water brings trouble and allows encounters. Unlike in Soyinka’s novel, the lagoon acts for Okorafor as a space of possibilities, even potentially frightening or threatening possibilities. *Lagoon* also carries a strong ecological critique of the catastrophic consequences of exploiting the shores of Lagos—mainly for oil extraction—a situation that aliens are aware of and sensitive to even despite humans ignoring ecological imperatives in the name of financial profit.

Because of their extended existence, Lagos novels have developed recurring motifs that have become part of a literary urban imaginary that relies on intertextuality at the same time as every iteration redefines the genre. How do *Welcome to Lagos* and *Blackass* embrace and move beyond that established literary imaginary to put forward a reimagined fictionalized Lagos?

²⁷ Indeed, Soyinka also writes, “The wall [of the office of the newspaper *The Independent*] dropped sheer onto a canal which led water onto the lagoon. This water was stagnant, clogged, and huge turds floated in decomposing rings, bobbing against the wall” (Soyinka 72). The lack of a proper sanitation system explains one of the characters’ obsession with toilets, notably as a marker of class but also through the question of access to basic infrastructure. Going back to Victorian England, Mike Davis explains in a section of *Planet of Slums* entitled “living in shit” that “constant intimacy with other people’s waste, moreover, is one of the most profound of social divides” (138). Davis’ depiction of Africa is heavily criticized for its pessimism in Garth Myers’ *African Cities*.

II. Transitional Journeys

Chibundu Onuzo was born in 1991 and left Lagos in her teenage years to move to London, where she currently resides and studies. *Welcome to Lagos* is her second novel. A. Igoni Barrett was born in Port Harcourt and currently lives in Surelere, part of mainland Lagos, after moving to Lagos in the 2000s. In a personal interview, Barrett explained his decision to write a “Lagos novel”—the term he used—by his status as a newcomer to the city, which granted him the ability to see the city in a way that Lagosians no longer could.²⁸ *Blackass* is Barrett’s first novel, after an acclaimed collection of short stories entitled *Love is Power, or Something like that* (2013). To some extent, the two writers’ opposite paths—respectively out of Lagos and into Lagos—are reversed in their novels. Indeed, the majority of the protagonists of *Welcome to Lagos* arrive in the city as outsiders, while *Blackass*’s main character seeks to escape the city. Despite these differences and many others, *Welcome to Lagos* and *Blackass* share the fact that they are overtly Lagos novels. The title of Onuzo’s novel is self-explanatory: the narrative presents the adventures of an unlikely collective as they find their spatial and metaphoric path through the unknown streets, bridges and bus parks of Lagos. Born and raised in Egbeda, a popular neighborhood in Lagos, Furo Warimoko’s journey in *Blackass* estranges him from his life as a Lagosian when a new racial and social status allows him to discover a new perspective on the city he thought he knew.

Blackass and *Welcome to Lagos* feature spatial, social and narrative journeys for characters in quest of themselves who undergo an initiation of sorts on the urban playground of Lagos. In a sense, the two novels move in opposite directions. While Chike and his group come to Lagos as outsiders and learn to navigate Lagos, Furo Warimoko begins his journey a Lagosian,

²⁸ This interview took place in Barrett’s home in Surulere in October 2018.

an identity that comes into question after he wakes up one morning as a white man. While that difference is of importance within the narratives, the two novels place the focus on the journeys the characters undertake, their meaning and consequences, and on how their relationship to urban space affects and is affected by the transitions through which they go. Even more so, whether by portraying the experience of strangers in Lagos in *Welcome to Lagos* or by highlighting the unfamiliarity of something that seemed known in *Blackass*, the two novels show how transitions bring about new perspectives, which in turn serve to complicate the urban literary imaginary. More specifically, the journey to Lagos becomes for the characters of *Welcome to Lagos* a journey from past violent experiences towards a new collective centered on the construction of a shared urban experience. This transition is palimpsestic in that Lagos represents new beginnings that nevertheless bear the traces of past lives and trajectories. As for the transitions in *Blackass*, this section will analyze Furo Wariboko's transition from black Lagosian to a white man—white Lagosian?—only to open up onto other transitions for which this first, and more obvious, transition acts as a gateway.

Griswold writes that “In Nigerian fiction ‘the city,’ above all Lagos, epitomizes the opportunities and dislocations brought about by rapid social change” (154). In a book chapter devoted to third-generation Lagos novels, all of which were published after the end of Griswold's study, Rita Nnodim makes a not-so-different claim when she argues, “in writing the city, the novels evoke a metropolitan Lagos that astound the senses, a vibrant city of many cultures and languages, but also a dystopian space of deprivation, despair and dislocation” (321), tying this dystopian dislocation with what she calls, summoning Achille Mbembe, the “crisis of the postcolony” (Nnodim 321). Chris Dunton's history of the Lagos novel refers to “energy” instead of Griswold's “opportunities” and Nnodim's “vibrancy” and “entropy” where Griswold

and Nnodim both emphasized “dislocations.” Dunton’s diachronic study of Lagos novels and Nnodim’s synchronic approach are quite distinct, but they both rely on a binary that emphasizes ambivalence, even as they set out to find characteristics of third-generation Lagos novels. *Welcome to Lagos* and *Blackass* might lead us, however, beyond the binaries that have defined city novels from their inception.

From “Zombies” to a New Collective

Illustrator Bill Bragg designed the cover of the U.K. edition of Onuzo’s *Welcome to Lagos*.²⁹ The cover design stretches over the front and back covers, featuring several sizes of public transportation vehicles that reflect the hustle and bustle of Lagos. Bragg’s illustration is given the priority on the cover, since the title and author’s name are printed on top of the roofs of several vehicles, while the praise about Onuzo’s debut novel *The Spider King’s Daughter*, seems printed on the asphalt. Already from the cover art, Lagos appears as a busy city where *danfos*, *molues*, BRT buses and *kekes* fight for street space alongside people on foot and street vendors. The importance of movements—and lack thereof—in the novel can be perceived in the many directions that the vehicles appear to face, and the fact that most of them seem blocked in their path by other vehicles, people or even elements of the built environment.

The novel is split into three different parts of unequal size, all of which borrow their titles from songs by Fela Kuti, to whom Onuzo refers in her acknowledgements as “the bard of Lagos” (Onuzo, *WTL* 357). Kuti made a point of putting daily life in Lagos into songs, in a gesture that Onuzo echoes in *Welcome to Lagos*. The first, shorter, part, “Zombie,” alternates among three different storylines that converge in later sections. Most chapters are dedicated to the coming together of an unlikely group led by Chike, an officer who deserted the army after he was asked

²⁹ Bragg is also responsible for the covers of some of Junot Díaz’s novels and of Alain Mabanckou’s novels in English translation. Catapult used the same cover art for the U.S. edition cover. Meanwhile, Faber & Faber used a different cover with similar imagery for the paperback.

to open fire onto civilians. Originally accompanied by one of his soldiers, Yemi, Chike becomes an unplanned leader when the group grows to include Fineboy, a militant from the Niger Delta; Isoken, a young girl whose parents went missing during an attack; and finally, Oma, a woman fleeing her wealthy husband's abuse. At first only moved by their desire to leave the Niger Delta region, a chain of events motivate the characters to head to Lagos. Originally, Chike fantasized about deserting to "Port Harcourt, or Benin or perhaps even Lagos" (Onuzo, *WTL* 8). This list, repeated almost word for word a few pages later (*WTL* 14), shows that departure matters more than arrival in the characters' minds. Two other characters appear in separate storylines during this first part: Ahmed, founder and editor-in-chief of the struggling *Nigerian Journal*, and Chief Remi Sandayo, Minister of Education. All three sets of characters belong to separate spaces—respectively the Niger Delta Region, Lagos, and Abuja—but the first part ends with them all converging towards Lagos.

Habila credits the title of Onuzo's novel to the fact that, contrary to many other cities and towns across the world, Lagos has no "Welcome to Lagos" sign ("High Hopes, Big City"). When the characters reach Lagos, commercial billboards are the only welcome signs. The text reproduces these billboards with a different font and size, centered on the page. This visual emphasis echoes the emphasis of the title to show that the question of feeling welcome or not welcome in Lagos is one that runs through the novel. The two characters of Oma and Chike react differently to the billboards. Oma, who already knows Lagos well, ignores them altogether, while they prompt Chike to wonder "who would he be in this new city?" (*WTL* 73). The trope of how urban life affects one's identity can be found throughout urban literature, but it seems as though, by the end of the novel, the question has become irrelevant to Chike, who remains more focused on the details of their collective urban lives than on any large-scale moral picture.

The characters of *Welcome to Lagos* are first brought together because they are all escaping somewhere and something. They are all fleeing the Niger Delta region, where they met, a region that remains one of the most troubled in contemporary Nigeria. Their reasons are personal, but they relate to global issues. Chike and Yemi desert their unit because they refuse to shoot at civilians, an act of disobedience that, if discovered, would lead to their death. Fineboy became a militant in a rebel group, hoping to make a name for himself and acquire the means to finance his dreams of becoming a radio show host, but he has to leave because his group wants to harm him. Isoken is a young girl whose parents were most likely killed in an attack; she survived attempted sexual assault as well as the lust of the uncle responsible for her protection. Finally, Oma leaves her physically abusive husband behind as she joins the group on their way to Lagos. Onuzo narrates what has been called “the continuum of violence” (Jacobs et al. 5). The notion of a continuum of violence opposes the binary distinction between public and private forms of violence, in a way to call out a gendered treatment of violence that often dismiss women’s experiences of violence. Chantal Kalisa’s book on violence in Francophone African and Caribbean literature thus argues that “[women writers] remove intimate violence from its private and domestic sphere and interweave it with public discourses of violence” (Kalisa 3). Indeed, Onuzo brings together Isoken and Oma’s experiences of sexual and gender-based violence with the three male characters’ experiences of war and conflict in this unlikely community.

Violence is arguably one of the most pervasive tropes of African literature, “ubiquitous” according to Richard Priebe (46).³⁰ In addition, Priebe explains that “regardless of time, place, or

³⁰ There can be many readings of such a presence. In the footsteps of Fanon, Achille Mbembe and others, one can retrace the genealogy of violence in the original violence of slavery, complemented by centuries of violent imposition in the form of colonization, including violation of land, bodies and human rights. Postcolonial violence can be seen as a continuation of a cycle of violence, which then gets reflected in literary fiction. Priebe argues that literature opens up a space where violence can be told and perhaps understood, hence the strong presence of violence as a literary trope.

culture, there is a limited range of basic images to signify transformation, and among these images, those of death and violence are the most powerful” (48). The recurrence of violence in African literature, and more specifically in Nigerian literature, comes as no surprise considering the nation’s many transformations, including its colonial past and postcolonial troubles; the violence of the Biafra war and military dictatorships; the issues of corruption and the discrepancy between the country’s natural resources and its inhabitants’ median income; as well as the extreme gaps between its social classes. And indeed, some of these issues at the national level explain the characters’ individual paths away from the Niger Delta region, itself a region with recurring violence.

Yet, *Welcome to Lagos* is less interested in telling violence than in what happens *after* violence. The novel states but then mostly ignores the violence it assumes as its premise. Violence and death may signify transition, but Onuzo shifts the focus away from that transition to zoom in on the transitions that take place afterwards, on the healing process that becomes, for the characters, a collective experience. What does it mean to make violence a part of the past, and what can be built on foundations determined by violent acts? These are questions that the novel seeks to answer.

The journey undertaken by Chike and the others is a journey of reconstruction. In an essay based on Fanon’s writings, Achille Mbembe speaks of a humanity permanently in creation, adding that “[s]on fond commun est la vulnérabilité, à commencer par celle du corps exposé à la souffrance et la dégénération. Mais la vulnérabilité est aussi celle du sujet exposé à d’autres existences qui, éventuellement, menacent la sienne. Sans une reconnaissance, il n’y a guère de place pour la sollicitude, et encore moins pour le soin” (*Politique de l’inimitié* 161). Mbembe explains that Fanon’s concept of “humanity in process” takes vulnerability as a point of

departure. He adds, “Du coup, reconnaître et accepter la vulnérabilité—ou encore admettre que vivre, c’est toujours vivre exposé, y compris à la mort—est le point de départ de toute élaboration éthique dont l’objet, en dernière instance, est l’humanité” (*Politique de l’inimitié* 162). Vulnerability permits an encounter with the Other, which in turn allows a relationship to begin through what Mbembe calls a relationship of care, since “[I]l n’y a en effet d’humanité que là où le geste—et donc la relation de soin—est possible; là où l’on se laisse affecter par le visage d’autrui; là où le geste est rapporté à une parole, à un langage qui rompt un silence” (*Politique de l’inimitié* 162). By the nature of the circumstances under which they meet, the characters of *Welcome to Lagos* slowly construct a collective that recognize necessity, vulnerability, and care at its core. Care comes through the food that Oma cooks for everybody, the job search of Chike and Yemi to earn money for the group, and Fineboy’s attempts to find housing for all of them. By caring for each other, they manage to find the language that “rompt un silence,” as is most obvious with the ways in which Oma’s empathy manages to break Isoken’s literal silence. The main theme of Mbembe’s essay is enmity, and using Fanon, Mbembe portrays care and healing as an alternative mode of relating to the Other. Priebe writes, “Regardless of culture, violence in literature ultimately has to do with the individual in relation to the community” (53). Onuzo’s novel shows a journey where reconstruction also relies on the relation to the community, although more so through interpersonal relationships than through conventional social roles.

The novel grapples with war violence, political conflicts, sexual abuse and domestic violence as the past that the characters escape and presents Lagos as the future. The transition towards a new collective is at the same time a transition towards Lagos, as indicated by the last lines of the first part of the novel, “There was a new life waiting for him in Lagos. He would make his way” (Onuzo, *WTL* 68). Prior to that moment, the images of Lagos that had been

spread were mostly negative, fearful. When Chike admits being “scared of Lagos” (*WTL* 67) and its “reputation” (*WTL* 68), Oma answers, “ Armed robbers. Ritual killers. Drug dealers. It’s like that and it’s not like that. I always enjoy my visits. There’s something always happening there” (*WTL* 68). Oma enumerates the threats of Lagos, but she also opens up a possibility for another Lagos that the rest of the novel explores further.

The second part of the novel, “Monday morning in Lagos,” signals the beginning of a new step in the characters’ journey, but also of a new day, of a new week.³¹ In *Welcome to Lagos*, the transition from violence to collective journey of reconstruction and the transition from the Niger Delta region to Lagos are parallel journeys. The anonymity and opportunities offered by Lagos favor new beginnings. The novel does not seek to erase any of the characters’ pasts, but follows them as they move forward. That does not mean the novel renounces violence once the characters have arrived in Lagos, nor in fact that the characters have ever truly *arrived*; their journey continues from space to space and from adventure to adventure. The novel ultimately reads as hopeful despite the presence of death and corruption because the characters’ ties continue to deepen, as they become a stronger, more united collective. In fact, they even affect those who come in contact with them, whether it be the corrupt Chief Sandayo or the naive returnee Ahmed. As these two characters become additions to the group, they too integrate a sense of the collective within their individual narratives. Much to their own surprise, solidarity becomes a guiding notion for them as well. In the most extreme example, even Chief Sandayo, the corrupt politician whom the group holds hostage in his own underground basement and who remains resolutely selfish and concerned only about self-preservation for the better part of the novel, finds loyalty and a sense of kinship. It takes violence for him to discover the healing

³¹ Fela Kuti’s eponymous song focuses on the difficulties of starting up a new week after the weekend, but there too Monday is used as a symbol of starting something while still carrying the consequences of the previous week.

power of the collective, although that transition comes too late to save him. Ahmed's transition is perhaps more subtle but equally important. Ahmed is a journalist, an intellectual whose ideals, upper-class background and time in the U.K. have kept him in a bubble despite strong anti-corruption and anti-government political opinions. In a sense, Ahmed's experience of violence is delayed compared to the others', because of privilege that has protected him until then. His encounter with the group forces him into action and for the first time he has to face the concrete consequences of his opinions without the shield of his influential—and also corrupted—father's name.

Overall, Onuzo takes the well-rehearsed trope of the outsiders' arrival to the major urban center and turns it on its head. The corrupt and corrupting city—the trope most associated with urban centers for Griswold and much of postcolonial African literature—remains a place of transitions for Onuzo, but for her characters, that transition is mostly synonymous with collective reconstruction.

“Lagos Oyibo”: The Insider Outsider

Blackass prominently features three main types of transitions in the novel, each of which functions on its own terms, but which Barrett intentionally sets next to each other. Two of those transitions affect Furo, whose racial transition generates an economic transition with spatial consequences. The third transition, which the structure of the novel places as in a mirror position to Furo's story, is the gender transition undergone by Igoni, the writer character whose name is the same as that of the author of the novel. Each of these transitions is different in nature, but they all serve to show that being is not stable; that assumptions about someone's identity may be deceiving. The novel consists of many layers, from its provocative title to the playfulness of integrating an eponymous writer character; from its discussion of trans identity in a Nigerian

novel to the overarching question of what makes a Lagosian. Although each layer appears to pull the novel in one direction—playful, didactic, serious, critical—they all portray complex experiences by way of the urban experience. In *Blackass*, Lagos itself is depicted first as a familiar space, which becomes stranger and estranged as the narrative progresses.

The first and most obvious transition, of a racial nature, guides the narrative from the first sentence onwards, “Furo Wariboko awoke this morning to find that dreams can lose their way and turn up on the wrong side of sleep” (Barrett, *BA* 3). The parallel with Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* is overt as the sentence mimics almost exactly Kafka’s famous opening line, “As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect” (Kafka 3).³² The parallel is reinforced by intertextual references within the text and in an epigraph quoting Kafka’s story.³³ Barrett even places a tongue-and-cheek reference to a cockroach that emerges from under Furo’s bed moments after he has awoken a white man. This is, however, where the two stories part, as Furo “grabbed the hand mirror, and with a quick glance at his face, he flung it after the cockroach” (Barrett, *BA* 7). The symbolic death of Gregor Samsa opens the way for Furo’s individual story, following the equally symbolic first glance he has had of himself as a white man. In a sense, that first glance allows his individual story to unfold and for him to become, like Samsa before him, a possibly universal allegory. That option is available to white men in ways it has not been to black men and women.

³² In *Palimpsestes*, French structuralist Gérard Genette called that palimpsestic relation of rewriting a previous text “hypertextuality.” In the case of *Blackass*, Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* acts as the “hypotext,” while *Blackass* is the “hypertext.” Genette argues that hypertexts always display playfulness, and that they also always function to some extent as “metatexts,” that is to say as critical readings of the “hypotext.”

³³ Some of the direct parallels include both men discovering their transformation when lying on their backs by looking at their stomachs and legs. Where Samsa sees hard segments and many legs, Furo Wariboko discovers his “alabaster belly” and “pale legs.” Both men then go on to doubt their new appearance and invent strategies to avoid confronting their mothers.

Fanon writes in the introduction of *Peau noire, masques blancs*, “On verra que l’aliénation du Noir n’est pas une question individuelle” (8). Having just explained that black destiny is white, Fanon adds that the black lived experience is perceived as black regardless of any other individual attribute. In chapter five, “l’Expérience vécue du Noir,” Fanon talks about being object amongst objects, implying that the white man gets to be a subject in a way unavailable to the alienated Black person. The intertextuality between *Blackass* and *Peau noire, masques blancs*, is present throughout and rendered explicit by an epigraph that directly quotes Fanon. Barrett seems to twist the narrative around by locating the action in a city with an overwhelming majority of black people, where a white man is a statistical minority. However, in a sense, Furo lives out what Fanon describes as the ideal of blackness, that is to say whiteness. And *Blackass* is not a moral tale on the value of differences; once given the opportunity of being white and benefiting from the inherent privilege of whiteness anywhere, Furo never looks back. Even his minority status, which causes him a few modifications in his personal narrative and heightened visibility, does not lessen the immense gap between his lived experience as a black man and as a white man. *Blackass* features a scene that echoes the howling child scene from *Peau noire, masques blancs*; in both, a young child scared by the man’s appearance cries. The major difference comes from the fact that in Fanon’s example, the mother tries to reason with the black man, explaining to him the (white) child’s ignorance of his equal status (Fanon 91). In *Blackass*, the mother addresses her (black) child, “No be ojuju, nah oyibo man” (BA 8), because she knows that the child will have to adapt, not the other way around. The parallel emphasizes the essential difference, as Barrett often does in *Blackass*. The fact that Furo used to be black, and has retained all other attributes beyond his skin color, demonstrates that the privilege that stems from whiteness comes by virtue of being white and nothing else. The novel argues through

Furo's experience that white supremacy permeates all spaces, especially postcolonial spaces, and even black majority spaces.³⁴

Furo's sudden transformation only further highlights the unfairness in the discrepancy between opportunities available to him the day before and then. Over the course of the novel, Furo is offered several jobs on the basis of his skin color; professional partners assume that his black boss is his assistant (*BA* 238); the novel exhibits many examples of systemic privilege. His unique perspective means that he can be aware of the changes, some subtle like the fact that people are not suspicious when he approaches them, or that their instinct is to trust him, others more obvious such as the sudden interest women have in him since he has become white. Furo notices when a woman on the street treats him differently from his expectations, willfully sharing her name and lending him money; she, however, is not aware that implicit bias modifies her behavior. Despite Furo's first feelings of oppression due to his new visibility, it is essential to understand that in becoming a white man, Furo undergoes a significantly different process from Gregor Samsa's, and from Igoni's gender transition, for that matter. Furo does not transform into a historically and systemically discriminated-against minority. His "lone white face in a sea of black" (*BA* 11) may earn him stares of incomprehension and curiosity, but ultimately his status earns him respect and opens doors for him. Syreeta's interest in Furo at least partly stems from her desire to birth a mixed-race baby, a sign of social success. Even the strangeness of Furo's situation—his entire body is white except for his behind, hence the novel's title—his semi-credible explanations and his lack of money are not enough to discourage Syreeta, showing how strong of an incentive Furo's skin color is to her. Syreeta is the mistress of a wealthy man, which

³⁴ When I interviewed him, Barrett explained that he was inspired by recurring news of racial discrimination in the United States and by the treatment of such news in Nigeria, in which Barrett says Nigerians prided themselves on not being racist. On the controversial question of race in West Africa, see Pierre.

grants her access to a place of her own and generous funds; yet, Furo represents the priceless access to whiteness.

Furo's newly acquired value inverts the spaces in which he was visible and those in which he was invisible. To his friends and neighbors, Furo becomes invisible, "No one had called out his name. He'd passed houses he wasn't a stranger to, and he'd been stared at by several people he knew, people whom he had lived beside for many years, joked with, been rude to, borrowed money from—and yet no one has recognized him" (Barrett, *BA* 9). Being an *oyibo*, a white person, automatically separates him from them; they cannot recognize him, because however much they may try, they cannot see themselves in a white man's face. At the same time, the novel provides a commentary on the presence of *oyibos* in certain spaces in Lagos, as well as their almost complete absence from areas described as "outlying—economically as well as geographically" (*BA* 10), such as Furo's home neighborhood of Egbeda. As a result, Furo feels extremely visible in this space to the point that he "learnt how it felt to be seen as a freak: exposed to wonder, invisible to comprehension" (*BA* 11). This uncomfortable visibility explains his subsequent migration to spaces more amenable to white people, which I will discuss in more detail in the next section of this chapter.

As the novel features Furo's apparently unstoppable upward social mobility, a question appears: does he lose anything in the process, and more precisely, can he retain his Lagosian identity? When he woke up white, Furo kept his memories, his personal history, his knowledge and cultural background, his linguistic abilities, all strong markers of identity. Nonetheless, his whiteness negates his Nigerian identity for most of the people he meets during his journey. The combination of both is conceptually impossible for many of them, who insist on finding an explanation for his mastery of Nigerian Pidgin. During his first conversation in his new skin, a

woman on the street asks him, “How come you speak like a Nigerian?” (BA 12). In awe of Furo’s accent, she repeats versions of the same question, without managing to suspend her disbelief. She finds his accent “so Nigerian” (BA 12) only to laugh when he tells her that he is, in fact, Nigerian. Subsequent conversations express the same confusion, until Furo invents a narrative that accommodates the two conflicting identities.

Yet, for however much he manages to detach himself from his family and spaces he had previously occupied, Furo cannot seem to let go of his Lagosian identity,

Furo’s dilemma was this: he was born black, and had lived in that skin for thirty-odd years, only to be born again on Monday morning as white, and while he was still toddling the curves of his new existence, he realized he had been mistaken in assuming his new identity had overthrown the old. (Barrett, BA 111)

Furo insists on haggling, becomes frustrated and even angered when he is treated as a stranger. He does not attempt to code-switch or to pass for a white foreigner. And to some extent, he convinces his interlocutors, for instance when after having warned his taxi driver about an incoming okada, the man tells him, “So you are a Lagos person” (BA 107), and later calls him “Lagos oyibo” (BA 107). Furo’s sense of himself as a Lagosian remains a trace of everything he has left behind, the black ass of his identity.

If Lagos was the city of the future for the characters of *Welcome to Lagos*, *Blackass* tells a different story. Furo comes to realize that he can never fully embody his new self until he leaves. During their first encounter, Syreeta tells Furo, “Lagos will kill you” (BA 71), implying that a white man would not be able to handle the intensity of Lagos. In fact, in order to continue to grow as the person he has become, Furo must kill Lagos in him, which he does by assuming “a new name from the new world for the new him”: “Frank Whyte.” Once again, Barrett twists the powerful postcolonial act of renaming, which becomes for Furo a way to appropriate

whiteness, “[t]he surname “Whyte” “felt right, felt like his” (*BA* 158).³⁵ The epigraph by Fanon leaves no room for doubt, “For the black man, there is only one destiny. And it is white” (*BA* 170). In Furo’s case, his destiny is not only white but Whyte, as is confirmed by his repeated attempts to whiten his behind. As Furo tells his driver, “My name is Frank. Don’t call me *oyibo*” (*BA* 185), he makes one more step towards being an individual subject, a process he can only complete by leaving Lagos behind.

III. Mapping Narratives

In the palimpsestic rewriting of the Lagos literary imaginary, *Blackass* and *Welcome to Lagos* reimagine common tropes of the Lagos novel, turn to spaces not yet been taken up by fiction, and use intertextuality to open up and relate their novels to literary imaginaries beyond the scopes of their narratives. In a sense, their writing is like the Eko Atlantic of the Lagos novel, expanding on the available narrative “land” to occupy spaces and perspectives that Lagosians thought they knew—Bar Beach—to make them foreign in the midst of the familiar. In another sense, their writing is the opposite of the Eko Atlantic of the Lagos novel, because Eko Atlantic tries to be in Lagos without being Lagos. On the contrary, Onuzo’s and Barrett’s fiction ultimately reveals layers and nuances of Lagos without attempting to erase them or collapse them into one easily consumable object.

In his introduction to a collection of essays on literary cartographies, Robert Tally Jr. claims,

Narratives are in some ways devices or methods used to map the real-and-imagined spaces of human experience. Narratives are, in a sense, mapping machines. On the other hand, narratives—like maps, for that matter—never come before us in some pristine,

³⁵ Once again, this feeling confirms what Fanon writes, “Il s’établit entre le monde et [le Blanc] un rapport appropriatif” (103). Furo develops this relationship of ownership even with the name he chooses for himself.

original form. [...] That is, these narratives which are also maps, must be understood as themselves objects to be mapped. (Tally 3)

As the first half of this chapter has shown, narratives “map” journeys beyond the geography of the spaces under consideration. Furo’s transformation or the constitution of Chike’s “platoon” (*WTL* 78) as collective can be mapped in terms of the characters’ emotional, sensory, and narrative journeys. After all, these are stories, not maps. However, as Tally suggests, narratives “map the real-and-imagined spaces of human experience,” a gesture perhaps even more important in the case of urban novels. Indeed, it comes as no surprise that space and spatial representations matter in urban novels—that, in fact, they become a part of the narrative that must be mapped, or “read” to its full extent. Which spaces—and in a sense, which Lagos—have been mapped by Onuzo and Barrett, and how does fictional spatial representation contribute to the palimpsest of the Lagos novel? In “rewriting” Lagos, what else are the writers writing? Once again, Onuzo and Barrett have taken distinct approaches to the question of spatial representation, although both writers seek to make the city foreign, to estrange the reader—Lagosian or not—from what they thought they knew, regardless of what or where that may be. This claim calls for a rereading of the title *Welcome to Lagos*. “Welcome to Lagos” stems from the fact that the characters arrive in the city as outsiders, as foreigners, and plays around with the fact that they are not, in fact, welcomed into the city. But “Welcome to Lagos” is also what Onuzo tells her reader: welcome to an urban imaginary that has not been written like this before. Onuzo’s writing occupies new spaces, spaces lacking fictional representation. She avoids the more commonly portrayed spaces of the house, work place or even place of worship. Even when she writes about the streets of Lagos, she concentrates on the undersides of bridges and busy crossroads. In *Blackass*, Barrett takes almost the opposite stance, as he features an economic transition that moves from the outskirts of Egbeda towards the affluent spaces of the Island and Lekki, where

the spaces depicted are quite conventional. Nonetheless, the familiar spaces or non-spaces serve as a platform for the unfamiliar perspectives of Furo and, even more strongly, for the story of Barrett's namesake Igoni.

Investing New Spaces

Onuzo adds to an array of spaces in Lagos that have been made part of the imaginary. Onuzo's characters are homeless at first, during which time they establish residence under a bridge; subsequently, they "find housing" in an abandoned complex, which becomes their temporary "home." Both of these spaces in which the travelers establish residence straddle categories. The underside of the bridge is at once compared to a "cathedral" (*WTL* 93) due to its high "ceiling" and to a "market" (*WTL* 93) considering the density of circulation during daytime. The related epigraph—an excerpt of an article entitled "Lagos Snapshots," published in the fictional *Nigerian Journal*—that opens the chapter refers to these spaces as "multipurpose spaces: shade and shelter, house and office, church and mosque (...)" (*WTL* 91).³⁶ That "multipurpose space" is thus at once public and private, inside and outside, to add but a few binaries to the list. When Oma ponders whether she will join the group under the bridge, her thoughts are reported in indirect free speech as follows, "To stretch out to sleep knowing there were no walls around you; to bare the soles of your feet to passing strangers; to wake and show your face immediately to the world" (*WTL* 92). The vulnerability of their impending situation does not escape Oma's perception, and neither does the strangeness of intimacy shared with strangers and the world. Yet she ultimately decides to join the group under the bridge because "[n]o one she knew would ever see her there and even if they saw her, they wouldn't recognise

³⁶ Each of the twenty-four chapters of "Monday Morning in Lagos" starts with an excerpt from the fictional *Nigerian Journal* that highlights, analyzes or uncovers an aspect of contemporary everyday life in Lagos. In a book chat at the Aké festival, Onuzo explained that she drew from stories about newspapers that existed in her childhood, i.e. during years of dictatorship and censorship, in order to create the *Nigerian Journal*.

her” (WTL 93). Her presence in that space would be so out of character, which here also means out of class, that it would actually function as though she could become another character, one whom acquaintances would not be able to recognize. In adopting this homeless home space, Oma maintains the paradox by wearing a nightgown over her clothes and by singing herself to sleep. She mimics the *habitus* of the intimate sphere in an unlikely context. She nevertheless tries to recreate the learned behaviors of family life under the bridge, confirming her role as maternal figure, especially since that moment is also one when Oma believes that she might be pregnant.

Oma is not the only one to notice the paradoxal state of the area under the bridge, a peculiarity that Fineboy directly associates with Lagos life. Indeed, local touts protect the officially “public” area in exchange for a fee; in the words of Fineboy, presented through free indirect speech, “Where else must one pay to be homeless?” (WTL 97). Fineboy and the leader of the touts haggle the price based on Fineboy’s status as a freedom fighter, and a receipt concretizes the agreement. The gesture of establishing a receipt for an illegal levy demanded by local criminals can seem out of place. It is nonetheless a perfect example of what the *Nigerian Journal* article calls “strange chaotic order” (WTL 91), which stems from a popular response to the inability of official structures to ensure the safety of Lagosians. As I have discussed at length in my second chapter in the case of Kinshasa *shégués*, organic social structures that take matters of survival in their own hands tend to exhibit a “strange chaotic order.” This is partly because they stand in lieu of national or city governments, perhaps borrowing a sense of administrative order. In the article, an *area boy* proudly declares, “under the bridge, our government dey work” (WTL 91). Whether we read this underground system as an example of the malfunctions of Lagos or as successful alternative governance, the underside of the bridge shows Onuzo’s predilection for unconventional spaces, as is confirmed by the group’s next abode, a basement apartment

unoccupied since the 1990s. Even that which most resembles a house is not quite a conventional house.

Defamiliarizing Lagos: Ojuelegba

Onuzo occupies spaces that Lagos novels have heretofore not made central. I have previously mentioned the narrative importance given to road traffic and spatiality perceived from cars in Lagos novels. Once again, Onuzo uncovers the strangeness of a familiar experience. As is the case for the underside of the bridge, she does it by linking the epigraph that opens a chapter and the narrative events that immediately follow. The obituaries page of the fictional *Nigerian Journal* announce the death of the so-called “MJ of Ojuelegba,” a reference to the “dancing traffic policeman,” whose nickname links U.S. pop star Michael Jackson with the Ojuelegba neighborhood and eponymous crossroads where the policeman officiated.³⁷ Ojuelegba, an area known for its dense traffic, has been present in cultural production through Fela Kuti’s 1989 song “Confusion Break Bone,” and more recently through Wizkid’s song “Ojuelegba” (2014). The lyrics of Kuti’s song already underscore the frenzy of Ojuelegba with lines such as, “Moto dey come from-u East/Moto dey come from-u West/Moto dey come from-u North/Moto dey come from-u South/And police-ee man no dey for center.” Cars come from all directions and there are no police officers regulating traffic. Well, in Onuzo’s novel, there is a police officer who doubles as a dancer and public entertainer and who dies performing his dual duty. Kuti sings, “Bafuka na quench” in Nigerian Pidgin English, which can be translated as “Confusion kills.” In *Welcome to Lagos*, confusion does not kill, but red Toyota Corollas do.

What does Onuzo’s narrative version of Ojuelegba bring to a street name already present in popular culture? To some extent, she works to defamiliarize a site to which people may have

³⁷ Of course, the MJ of Ojuelegba reminds us of *GraceLand*’s Elvis, who impersonates Black Elvis on Bar Beach. There have also been accounts of dancing traffic policemen in Nigerian press, although not necessarily in Lagos.

become numb by way of the tragic tale of the dancing traffic policeman. The anecdote also works against the stereotype of police being solely linked to corruption or abuse. Chike and Yemi witness the MJ of Ojuelegba's death. Although this event could revive the former soldiers' trauma, a job opportunity arises for the two men. Onuzo alludes to popular beliefs whereby "[d]estinies are exchanged at crossroads" (*WTL* 106), only to debunk the possibility of such mythologies in Lagos. "Lagos was too sophisticated for such appeals to the supernatural, it seemed. Only noise and grit at the centre of this crossroads" (*WTL* 104). Neither the expected tale of police incompetence, nor the allegory of destinies exchanged, the episode turns common urban danger into a professional opportunity, therefore showing the often unrecorded possibilities harbored by the urban, which Onuzo's fiction sets to expose.

In an essay dedicated to Ojuelegba, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf and Jeremy Weate, who co-founded the publishing house Cassava Republic, first explain and counter the impulse to portray Africa as a "quixotic blend of glamour and decay" (324). Bakare-Yusuf and Weate write against what they call "the cool, disembodied, and disengaged helicopter-eye-view of the architect and spatial thinkers" (325), in reference to Rem Koolhaas's project with the Harvard Project on the City.³⁸ Bakare-Yusuf and Weate thus oppose Koolhaas' helicopter-eye view with their own "aim to show the richness and rhythm of this African urban scene, beyond the specular Western projection of a city in chaos" (325). Like Ato Quayson, who chose one street in Accra for his "horizontal archeology" (*Oxford Street, Accra* 30), Bakare-Yusuf and Weate choose Ojuelegba,

³⁸ Koolhaas used aerial pictures in order to make his case about minuscule transactions in Lagos, a counter-intuitive method of which Bakare-Yusuf and Weate are critical. They refer to Koolhaas' architecture students' abundant funding, to his own fear of getting out of his car and to what they call "a variant of commodity fetishism: the adventurous appropriation of an exotic object as a means of increasing one's own status and value" (Weate and Bakare-Yusuf 325). For another critical treatment of Koolhaas' "dystopic urbanism" as she calls it, see Robinson. Weate and Bakare-Yusuf's analysis echoes the separation articulated by spatial thinker Michel de Certeau in his most famous essay, "Walking in the City," in which de Certeau opposes the "panorama-city" viewed from a skyscraper from the city of ordinary practitioners who live "'down below,' below the thresholds of at which visibility begins" (de Certeau *The Practice of Everyday Life* 93).

which they approach “from a number of different perspectives, including urban morphology, historical and spiritual resonances, lived experience, politics, and economics” (Weate and Bakare-Yusuf 325). They emphasize the “polyrhythmic and contradictory complexity” (333) of Ojuelegba, as well as its “regulatory logic and internal consistency” (*ibid.*); the crossroads is “literally the throbbing heartbeat of the city, producing and distributing along its arteries clots of information, bodies, desires, knowledge, and capital” (327). Ojuelegba is located on the mainland, far away from the more narrated spaces of Ikoyi or Lekki. As such, Onuzo’s desire to tell the stories of another Lagos and of some of its ordinary practitioners shines through with this example and others. In addition, Bakare-Yusuf and Weate call Ojuelegba a palimpsest because of its etymological reference to the òrìṣà of crossroads Èṣù-Elegba, which they associate with the same “orderly chaos” (Weate and Bakare-Yusuf 333) that Onuzo has already chosen to narrate by way of the underside of the bridge. About Èṣù, Bakare-Yusuf and Weate write that “his movement defines space, rather than space defining his movement” (332), a statement that sounds equally true for the characters of *Welcome to Lagos*.

“This is Lagos”: Water City

For most of *Welcome to Lagos*, water seems fairly absent from the narrative.³⁹ Yet, the third part of the novel, entitled “Water No Get Enemy” after another Fela Kuti song, prompts a different reading of water in *Welcome to Lagos*. Fela’s song refers to the all-purpose function of water and its essential role in daily life. At first, the reason for this title is unclear, since none of the several spaces that the team occupies has been directly tied to water. That fact changes in the last part of the novel, when what first appears to be Yemi’s touristic discovery of new areas of

³⁹ One notable but minor exception comes from Chief Sandayo, who represents power and the tropes most associated with the postcolony, such as abuse of power, corruption, and political disillusion. For him, mud acts as a metaphor for the political state of Nigeria, “[t]his was a country that could not be dragged out of the mud. Mud became Nigeria” (198). This thought, related through free indirect discourses, echoes common depictions of the negative sides of water in Lagos, not too far from the images Soyinka and Kan put forward.

Lagos turns out to be the group's solace. Yemi explores Lagos on foot and by bus, falling in love with the city as he appropriates it. This "education" (*WTL* 295) gives depth to a character otherwise presented only through his subservience.⁴⁰ During one of those explorations, Yemi discovers the "water city" (*WTL* 296) of Makoko.⁴¹ Trade takes place in between houses, on canoes and waste accumulates "in small islands" (*WTL* 297). Plank bridges link houses together, a miniature version of Lagos. Yemi asks questions from his local guide,

'Where do you go to toilet?'
 'In the water.'
 'Where do you have your bath?'
 'In the water. It's enough for everybody.'
 'What work do you do here?'
 'Many of us are fishermen. Let me show you.' (*WTL* 298)

Here as in Soyinka's *Interpreters*, the water creates a network that links together all functions of life, as well as a spatial network of waterways. But in *Welcome to Lagos*, the connections that the water permits are portrayed as opportunities, and the houses on stilts as a refuge. The water city is at the same time Lagos and not Lagos, as reflected by the end of the conversation between Yemi and the fisherman.

'It's time for me to go back to Lagos.'
 'Where do you think you are?' Sabo said, turning the canoe around.' (*WTL* 298)

⁴⁰ The novel refers to his trips as his education because Yemi "steals" money from the education funds in order to pay for the bus fares. He justifies his theft by the lack of institutional investment made in his formal education, for which he compensates as an adult by this spatial and experiential form of learning. His visits include the beach and—although it is not named—the Lekki Conservation Center, both of which could be construed as "educational" spaces.

⁴¹ Nicknamed the "Venice of Lagos" or even the "Venice of Africa," Makoko is a fishing village turned informal settlement on stilts located in between mainland Lagos and the Third Mainland Bridge. Makoko has been the subject of many global health-related reports (including the Amnesty International report I mentioned earlier) and academic articles, and attracted an increasing amount of news attention (including a controversial 2010 BBC documentary entitled "Welcome to Lagos" and 2016 article in *The Guardian* by Tolu Ogunlesi). For a critique of the BBC documentary, see Akpome. City officials continuously endanger the neighborhood with threats of eviction and destruction. But perhaps one of the best accounts of the hopes, disillusion and intricate stakes of Makoko comes from Allyn Gaestel's essay for *The Atavist* on the rise and fall of Makoko Floating School.

When time comes for the group to find a refuge, the epilogue reveals that Makoko is the group's chosen shelter, for its in-between status.

Chike could pray here. It cleared his mind, to face the sunrise and scatter his prayers over the water. If you looked through the floor planks of their house, you would see the lagoon, much soiled by the waste of their neighbors but still vast, spreading beyond the filth of their settlement. He had looked at a map of Lagos and seen no mention of their new home but they were here nonetheless, their residence defying cartographers. [...] He rarely went on shore these days. He did not want to step into the stream again, the pull and eddy and swirl of Lagos, pushing him here and there. (*WTL* 352)

Makoko, a space of community and of resistance to urban planning, becomes a safe space for the characters. The filth about which Soyinka had written—"Next to death, he decided, shit is the most vernacular atmosphere of our beloved country" (108)—flows underneath the characters' home, but in their case, death, violence, and traumatic events are the waters upon which they collectively build their stilted house. As Yemi first noted, the first house he saw "stood high on its stilts, its wooden ankles bathing in salt water" (*WTL* 297). Similarly, the characters of *Welcome to Lagos* remain connected with the soiled waters of their past and present, but the house they "built with their own hands" (*WTL* 352) symbolizes the connections they have established. As such, Makoko functions as the anti-Eko Atlantic, even though they both reclaim space from the water. Life in Makoko does not require any erasure, any sand filling. Instead of turning water into the built environment, Makoko turns Lagos into a Water City. This choice is symbolic as to Onuzo's writing project. If, as the first of this chapter has illustrated, Lagos functions as allegory in urban novels, then her fictional Lagos aims to "defy cartographers" and nevertheless to exclaim, "Welcome to Lagos."

"A Map of the City"

In a personal interview held in his home in Lagos, Barrett described *Blackass* as "a map of the city" (Tricoire, "Interview with A. Igoni Barrett"). Furo's sense of identity translates to his spatial movements and his emotional journey to become Frank Whyte can be mapped almost

exactly with his spatial journey from Egbeda to Lekki. The novel occupies few areas of Lagos, but each of them is significant. Indeed, each area exemplifies Furo's mobility between spaces and social classes and the exceptional status of that mobility in an otherwise relatively rigid and segregated social space.⁴² His home neighborhood where the novel starts, where his roots and family are located, is thus one to which he can never return without threatening his newly acquired social and racial status. Once Furo leaves Egbeda, he can never go back.

Blackass features the tension between familiar and unfamiliar sites and experiences. Furo's experience of Lagos as a white man amounts to the discovery of a new city, one to which he could not have had access before: "Everywhere he turned he made discoveries about this new place he had lived in all his life" (BA 104). For that reason, the rest of the novel alternates between Ikeja, where his job interview and subsequent place of employment are located, and several areas of Lekki. Lekki represents a certain social status and ease, which Furo acquires by way of his whiteness and Syreeta's generosity. It is worth noting that Syreeta's house is located on Oniru Estate, the high-end housing that has replaced the slum of Maroko, the destruction of which Abani featured in *GraceLand*. Ikeja functions in the novel as an in-between space, since it is an affluent area but on the mainland, socially far enough from Egbeda to be safe for his new identity while geographically separated from Egbeda only by the Mohammed Murtala International Airport. Ikeja is also one of few areas on the mainland where the socialite Syreeta would not be out of place, while also being a space Furo had hoped to occupy even before his transformation, as his job interview attests. On the first day of his transformation, Furo wanders

⁴² Of course, this does not mean that upward social mobility is impossible, nor that spaces are occupied solely by members of the relevant social class. For instance, many of the wealthiest spaces in Victoria Island or Ikoyi are occupied on a daily basis by a minority of affluent homeowners and a large majority of people who commute from other areas of Lagos to provide services for them. Furo's case is exceptional in that he successively belongs to at least two social environments in a short amount of time and without any personal achievement justifying this sudden move.

around Ikeja, unsure of where to go. During this moment of disorientation, he considers all possible spaces only to realize that none would be good for him, which leads him to conclude, “There is nowhere to go” (BA 36). After a night in an abandoned building spent remembering his family, Furo decides “it is time to move forward” (BA 46), that is to say “as far from his family as he could go in Lagos” (48).

Furo’s new identity as a white male can almost be construed as a non-identity, as the absence of identity, for it is the neutral ground against which all other identities are measured. Similarly, Furo spends an increasing amount of time in what Marc Augé has famously called *non-places*, “If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place” (Augé 78). In the case of Lagos, Furo occupies places that try to be as little Lagos as they can, including malls, airports, and hotels. Furo discovers another Lagos—“No crowds, no roadside garbage, no traffic jam, no noise. The Lagos he knew was far from this place” (BA 132)—during a visit to Syreeta’s wealthy friends in a gated estate Furo thinks of as “fortified Eden” (BA 133). In a sense, Furo-turned-Frank’s ultimate decision to move to Abuja is a consecration of the *non-place*. Upon Furo saying that Abuja is different from Lagos, his new boss declares, “Lagos was built from blood and sweat and raw ambition. Abuja was designed as a playground for the rich” (BA 236). “Playground for the rich” could define many if not most of the types of *non-places* Augé discusses. And yet, Augé claims, “Place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first one is never completely erased, the second one never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is

ceaselessly rewritten” (Augé 79).⁴³ Furo’s two identities, that of Lagosian and that of white man, function similarly on this palimpsestic pattern, whereby traces of Furo’s former identity remain despite the process of erasure of most of its traits throughout the novel. Syreeta’s unborn child surfaces as a trace of that incomplete erasure, as Furo panics,

...a black baby would destroy any chance of a new life. Of that he was certain, the baby would be black. Furo’s baby. Not Frank’s. Not his.

Because he was, frankly, white. (254)

Much like Lagos officials when they bulldoze an entire neighborhood, destroy houses and displace inhabitants in order to create a Lagos that Lagosians playfully call Eko Miami, Furo attempts to get rid of all traces of the past, even if that means producing or inhabiting the identity equivalent of a *non-place*. The pun “frankly, white” shows that even Eko Miami is too much Eko for Furo-Frank, who decides to be only Frank, abandoning Syreeta and Lagos altogether after her abortion destroys the most visible trace of his past identity.

IV. “Constructed Narratives”

In this chapter, I argue that Onuzo and Barrett expand on the range of experiences that are part of the literary imaginary of Lagos as it has been depicted in Lagos novels. One way that they perform this expansion is by twisting familiar elements into unfamiliarity. The examples of the epigraphs from the *Nigerian Journal* in *Welcome to Lagos* and the character and narrative path of Igoni in *Blackass* show that Onuzo diverts the expectations of textual space, while Barrett plays off of the pervasive concept of “transition” to introduce a controversial topic. In the two cases, there is a playful aspect to the writers’ bending of conventions, at the same time as these topics

⁴³ Throughout this dissertation, I borrow de Certeau’s use of “space” and “place.” As Augé himself notes in *Non-places*, the meaning of “place” for him is closer to that of anthropological place, i.e. location, and “non-place” is thus a negation of that anthropological place. This discussion of Augé’s concept of “non-place” is thus the only part of this dissertation where I adopt Augé’s definition of “place.”

reveal a critique of how certain topics are present or absent in public debate. In doing so, the two writers bring attention to the constructedness of all narratives, including theirs. This is another way of baring the palimpsest, of showing the traces of its past iterations, and another reason why Onuzo and Barrett have chosen to play with the urban imaginary.

Epigraphs & The Nigerian Journal

Names matter. One strong common point between *Blackass* and *Welcome to Lagos* is the importance of chapter titles and epigraphs. In the case of *Blackass*, the epigraphs begin with a quote from Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and end with one from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, an echo that in and of itself favors a certain reading of the story. The Kafkian metamorphosis that opens the novel, that of Furo's racial transition, is in some ways a pretext to discuss other transitions, namely Furo's economic and spatial transition, as well as Igoni's gender transition, hence the plural "metamorphoses." Similarly, the chapter structure and titles are informative. The parts centered on Furo's story are respectively called "Furo Wariboko," "Blackass," and finally "Frank Whyte," an echo of Furo's identity transformation. The "Blackass" chapter begins with an epigraph by queer American poet Elizabeth Bishop, "I scarcely dared to look / to see what it was I was" (Bishop cited in *BA* 95), and starts with Furo's decision to acquire a passport as a white man and ends with the moment that completes his transformation, the choice of a new name.⁴⁴ Igoni's transition is similarly reflected in chapter titles and epigraphs; for instance the chapter "Morpheus" harbors an epigraph from a poem by Stanley Kunitz that reads, "I am not done with my changes" (Kunitz cited in *BA* 159).⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Bishop's poem "In the Waiting Room" is written from the perspective of a six-year old girl who reads an issue of *National Geographic* while in the waiting room with her aunt. She undertakes an emotional journey and change of consciousness as she starts doubting the boundaries of her self.

⁴⁵ Kunitz's 1978 poem "The Layers" starts with the following lines, "I have walked through many lives, / some of them my own," and directly addresses the consequences of changes and transitions.

In *Welcome to Lagos* however, some of the intertextuality is fictional and internal to the text itself, between the main body of the novel and the epigraphs attributed to articles from the *Nigerian Journal*.⁴⁶ The *Nigerian Journal* plays a significant role in the narrative, as it is responsible for revealing that the former Minister of Education embezzled millions of USD that Chike and the others decide to redistribute to finance new material for schools in need. However, the newspaper outgrows the conventional textual space, where it is discussed, and begins occupying the space of epigraphs, where it is excerpted. Italicized, these epigraphs belong to the “authorial peritext” described by Gérard Genette.⁴⁷ At the same time, these news articles, editorials and other excerpts from the *Nigerian Journal* are fully fictional, which means that the boundary between text and peritext becomes blurry, all the more so since each epigraph introduces to some extent a theme for the chapter or is revealed to be related to the content of the chapter. Each epigraph provides relevant information for and commentary on the narrative, even though the articles were published with no awareness of the plot development. About George Eliot’s use of epigraphs, some of which she herself wrote and some of which are attributed to other writers, British literature scholar David Leon Higdon has written,

With them, [Eliot] established a context and a sense of literary community. With them, she asserts another narrative voice complexly related to her own chapter. The epigraphs form a continuous commentary defining and shaping the chapters. They are a foreshadowing of what follows, and to some degree shape, control and condition the reader’s reaction to the chapter. (131)

⁴⁶ The totality of epigraphs in Onuzo’s novel originate from the *Nigerian Journal* and they are limited to the second part of the novel, stopping after the newspaper office is burned, effectively marking the end of Ahmed’s venture in Nigerian news.

⁴⁷ Genette uses the term “peritext” for the elements that surround the main text, including epigraphs, chapter titles, dedications, etc. “Authorial” means that it comes from the author of the text, rather than from an allographic source, i.e. another author. In *Welcome to Lagos*, one could even argue that the epigraphs are part of an auctorial peritext, that is to say peritext that originates from one of the characters, here, Ahmed.

The public discourse of the *Nigerian Journal* becomes entangled with the private stories of the novel's characters, much like Ahmed's own narrative becomes entangled with the destiny of the collective. Higdon's term "literary community" seems appropriate to qualify Onuzo's use of epigraphs from the *Nigerian Journal*. The epigraphs draw attention to the role played by Lagos in the narrative, as setting, plot element and as character without undermining the alleged naivety of the characters about Lagos. For instance, the first epigraph—an editorial—offers a categorization of people in Lagos bus parks—providing information that the characters would not know—to conclude "Lagos is no different from anywhere, except there are more people, and more noise, and more" (*WTL* 71). The precision of the first two uses of "more," first more people, then more noise, gives way to an indeterminate "more" that implies that "more" could apply to anything related to Lagos in comparison with anything that is not Lagos. As the epigraph closes, the chapter opens with the arrival of Chike's "platoon" (*WTL* 78) to one of these bus parks.⁴⁸ The epigraphs sometimes anticipate the narrative development, offer perspective or an opinion, and sometimes give background information on daily life in Lagos; at times, the epigraph shift purposes and do all three in one. The epigraphs also emphasize the allegorical nature of the characters; their hopes represent those of entire social classes or categories of inhabitants. Similarly, the epigraphs underline that the characters' difficulties stem from systemic or structural issues, whether they are aware of it or not.

With this journalistic intervention, Onuzo pays homage to the longstanding tradition of journalist characters in Lagos novels, while taking some distance with it. Whiteman, Nnodim, and Dunton all note the importance of journalists in Lagos fiction, with the latter writing, "As far

⁴⁸ In another example, chapter 15 ends with Chike and Yemi discussing finding employment. The epigraph for chapter 16 opens with an article about unemployment in Nigeria. The epigraph provides an opportunity for Onuzo to give her readers information about unemployment rates and informal economies without using her characters, whose preoccupations are concrete.

back as 1954, the journalist features as a character in the Lagos novel” (Dunton 74).⁴⁹ In fact, starting with Ekwensi’s *People of the City*, most Lagos novels feature at least one journalist or professional from the field of publication, including in Soyinka’s *The Interpreters*, Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come*, and Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel*. Kan’s *Carnivorous City* has no journalist, but an English professor. *Every Day is for The Thief* features a writer, *Americanah* a blogger and writer. *Welcome to Lagos* is no exception with the character of Ahmed. *Blackass* has no journalist, but the novel features a publishing press and a writer character. In fact, Verissimo’s poetic reference to Lagos as a chronicle in the epigraph of this chapter also speaks to the importance of journalism in Lagos, echoed by Lagos novels. Dunton views the strong presence of journalists and writers in Lagos novels as expressive of “the possibilities inherent in the act of writing” (“Entropy and Energy” 73), while Nnodim relates journalism to “urban political activism” (Nnodim 329), which she associates with Lagos novels. Ahmed and the *Nigerian Journal* illustrate these two aspects in *Welcome to Lagos*, but also bring forth the distance between the journalistic endeavor and daily urban life.

Onuzo uses *The Nigerian Journal* to provide a panoramic and reflexive commentary on the issues experienced by the characters, while being critical of how media representation of daily urban life can be out of touch with the concerns of ordinary city dwellers. Ahmed’s noble ambition is to report on “Nigerian news, by Nigerian people, for Nigerian people. Telling our own stories, creating our narratives, emphasising our truths” (*WTL* 39). Yet, from the beginning, Ahmed’s idealistic postcolonial project struggles because of its uncompromising anti-corruption stance. Ahmed fails to convince even his staff; meanwhile, he causes disappointment as a returnee whose expatriation in London did not bring the expected financial and social success. In

⁴⁹ See Whiteman, who also writes “Journalists are central, indeed romantic, figures in Lagos fiction” (Whiteman 108) for details on the history of Lagos newspapers and tradition of journalist characters.

addition, the novel reveals that Ahmed's anti-corruption opinions are not censored because of his father's status, his father who also committed embezzlement when he was a government official. Only Ahmed's privilege allows him the luxury of risking political threats and economic failure. The novel criticizes the privileges of journalists, the stereotypes they sometimes spread, especially in the West, and the incompleteness of the noble portrayal of journalist characters as activists. For instance, the BBC crew that arrives in Lagos to film an interview with Chief Sandayo accumulates offensive remarks. Their show, presented by white British journalist David West, is sarcastically called "*West Presents*," a thinly veiled critique of Western media representations of Africa.

"Call me Morpheus": Performing Identity

Blackass is structured around parallels that the mirroring effect ultimately reveals as false equivalences. Barrett puts different modes of transitions and identity perceptions in conversation, and even stages encounters between characters who on the surface are undergoing similar processes—processes that the reader and characters themselves may perceive as similar—but whose experiences actually differ greatly. The most obvious example is one that the organization of the novel fosters through the chapters centered alternatively on Furo and then on Igoni, the writer Furo meets on his first day as a white man. Igoni, as it becomes clearer throughout the narrative, is undergoing a transition of her own, since she presents as a man during her and Furo's first interaction. In fact, her fascination for Furo's story stems from the fact that Furo becomes a model for her as a "[f]ellow traveller down this path of self-awareness" (BA 260).

This proximity between Furo and Igoni uses the topic of Furo's transition to whiteness to introduce a subject less familiar and more controversial in the Nigerian context, that of gender identity. In an essay on the "emergent queer" in 21st-century Nigerian literature, Lindsey Green-

Simms looks at third-generation writers' inclusion of queer characters in their fiction, but also at the role of Internet in political debates about anti-gay laws in Nigeria.⁵⁰ Building upon a 1989 essay by Chris Dunton where he concluded that African writers had abstained "from a fully characterized and nonschematic depiction of a homosexual relationship between Africans" ("Wheyting Be Dat?" 445), Green-Simms claims that third-generation Nigerian writers "tackle themes previously taboo in Nigerian literature" with a "polyphony" of characters and representations (141).⁵¹ She borrows Raymond Williams' concept of emergence to express the way in which Nigerian writers "resist the dominant in ways not previously done before and [...] tell diverse stories about same-sex desire that are neither monochromatic nor moralistic" (142).⁵² For example, Jude Dibia's *Walking with Shadows* (2005) and Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015) both feature same-sex loving main characters in fictions located in Nigeria.⁵³ There seems to be a growing generation of Nigerian fiction writers and poets openly writing about homosexuality.⁵⁴ At the same time, polls by the NOI have surveyed Nigerians' perception of homosexuality and have found that media awareness of homosexuality has gone from a

⁵⁰ In 2014 the Nigerian government passed the "Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act," a law criminalizing homosexuality with a prison sentence of up to fourteen years. According to a 2017 NOI poll, the law is supported by 90% of Nigerians.

⁵¹ In his 1989 essay "Wheyting be dat?" *The Treatment of Homosexuality in African Literature*, Dunton had analyzed the stereotype that homosexuality is "un-African" by looking at literary texts from Sub-Saharan Africa, including Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, about which Dunton argued the gay character Joe Goulder provided a complex—if still negative—account of the social psychology of homosexuality. For more, see Neville Hoad.

⁵² Williams develops the concept of "emergence" in a section of his book *Marxism and Literature*. Williams does not mean merely mean "new" or "novel" by "emergent" but speaks about a relation that is often oppositional or alternative to dominant modes ("Dominant, Residual, and Emergent" 123), which is what Green-Simms builds upon in the case of queer Nigerian writing.

⁵³ Green-Simms looks specifically at Abani's *Graceland* and *Virgin of Flames* (2007), Dibia's *Walking with Shadows*, Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2010), as well as stories published online. She does not mention Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*, most likely because the article was published in Summer 2016, only months after the publication of Okparanta's debut novel. However, Green-Simms references a short story of Okparanta's.

⁵⁴ For instance, Nnanna Ikpo's 2017 novel *Fimi Silẹ Forever*, published by Team Angelica, the original publisher of Chike Frankie Edozien's *Lives of Great Men*. Award-winning poet Romeo Oriogun, has been awarded a W.E.B. DuBois Research Institute Fellowship in order to write a volume on *The Emergence of Queer Voices in African Literature*. In 2017, Oriogun won the Brunel International African Poetry Prize. Another young poet, Logan February, has published several poems that adopt a gay man's perspective. Human Rights activist and creative writing professor Unoma Azua is responsible for two recent anthologies: *Blessed body* (2016), an anthology of Nigerian LGBTQ stories; and *Mounting the Moon* (2018), an anthology of queer Nigerian poems.

reported 16% in 2015 to 39% in 2017. This low but increasing number indicates the potential effect of any media representation of homosexuality or queerness.

As far as non-fiction is concerned, Chike Frankie Edozien's memoir *Lives of great men: Living and Loving as an African Gay Man* (2017), the very first memoir by a Nigerian writer about LGBT life in Nigeria, stands out as an exceptional first.⁵⁵ Published shortly afterwards, *She Called Me Woman: Nigeria's Queer Women Speak* (2018), sets out to "tell the stories [the editors] weren't hearing, to provide a space for voices, lives and experiences missing and silenced from debate" (Mohammed et al. 3). Specific data about trans people and trans representation is harder to locate, as the topic is even more taboo than that of homosexuality. *She Called Me Woman* presents stories that span the spectrums of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. This parenthesis on non-fiction and on representation of non-normative sexual orientations and gender identities in Nigeria seeks to shed light on the groundbreaking fictional representation of a trans character that Barrett achieves in *Blackass*. More recently, Akwaeke Emezi's debut novel *Freshwater* (2018), written about a trans non-binary character by a trans non-binary writer, opens up a space for writing trans and non-binary identities outside of Western terms, in their case through the Igbo concept of the *ogbanje*.⁵⁶

Barrett strategically orchestrates the inclusion of the character of Igoni; the writer plays with the literary trope of the author-character in order to make Igoni more intriguing. Igoni shares the author's first name and occupation, while not being him.⁵⁷ The characterization of

⁵⁵ Edozien's memoir was first published by London-based Team Angelica and then published in Nigeria by Ouida Books, the publishing house founded by *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* writer Lola Shoneyin. Ouida Books also published *She Called Me Woman*, showing a concern with and interest in queer representation in Nigeria, as well as their desire to make these narratives locally available to Nigerians.

⁵⁶ Emezi published an essay about their own gender identity and the concept of *ogbanje* for *The Cut*. Prior to publishing *Freshwater*, Emezi won the 2017 Commonwealth Short Story Prize.

⁵⁷ The mystery remains beyond the end of reading the novel—was the novel a vehicle for the author to reveal something of his own identity? In a personal interview, Barrett claims that Igoni is not him, because Igoni is a

Igoni, like the novel as a whole, alternates between serious discussions of identity and playful provocation. When Furo wonders what “blackassness” (BA 227) Igoni experiences—what the trace of her former identity is—the wording is provocative but the question strikes the important chord of the relationship between sex, gender identity and gender expression. When it is revealed during sex that Igoni’s “blackassness” is a penis, Furo shows no empathy. What Igoni describes as their “shared fate, his black ass, my woman’s penis” (261), Furo finds unacceptable. He has chosen to move away from all material traces of his former identity and rejects Igoni for exhibiting a physical sign of being assigned male at birth, even though he knew that was the case based on their first encounter. At it clearly appears in the novel, Igoni’s transition makes her more vulnerable, while Furo’s transition gives him more structural and symbolic power. Igoni’s transition exposes her to heightened discrimination and a clear loss of privilege, going from being perceived and treated as a man to being a trans woman. Even if she passes as a cis woman—at first, Furo does not realize who she is—she nevertheless has to navigate life as a woman. On the contrary, Furo goes from a majority but discriminated-against position to a privileged minority status, in the context of Nigeria.

The character of Igoni perhaps best exemplifies the type of activism that Dunton and Nnodim have identified with Lagos novels and related to writing. The groundbreaking character does not find acceptance within the narrative, but she finds a textual space that she can occupy. It is no coincidence that Igoni is a writer, as different forms of writing reveal her evolving identity, but also the constructedness of all identities. The use of social media in the novel serves to

character and he is not (Tricoire). His decision was playful, as well as meant to give the reader a sense that the writer is in the book and accompanies the reading experience. However, mentioning Chike Frankie Edozien’s recently published memoir *Lives of Great Men*, Barrett underlined the major difference between his fictional character and Edozien’s memoir, in that his own gesture was meant to be provocative but he could afford to play with the concept of trans-identity specifically because of his privilege as a cis straight man. Barrett sees this gesture as a non-threatening manner to introduce an unfamiliar topic in the conversation so that perhaps it does not sound so unfamiliar when other fictional or non-fictional examples appear.

emphasize the artificiality of all public expressions of the self, as is perhaps best illustrated by a tweet that also functions as an epigraph for the first chapter that Igoni, or rather @_igoni, narrates, “The ice cream you see in TV commercials is actually mashed potatoes. @UberFacts” (*BA* 75).⁵⁸ In a sense, that epigraph serves as a key to interpret the rest of Igoni’s storyline, as well as perhaps the strongest message of the novel: things (and people) are not always what they seem to be at first glance.

Social media is the site for the gap between identity and representation in the novel. Igoni presents @_igoni by announcing on Twitter “My handle is @_igoni and I was born into the Twitter stream in January 2009.” (*BA* 86) The concept of birth or rebirth suggests the possibility of being another person. That idea gets developed through the character of Furo’s sister Tekena, who appears to be quite a different person in her brother’s recollection and through her social media presence under the handle @pweetychic_tk. @_igoni is overtly suspicious of her inconsistency. The tweets, reproduced directly in the narrative, show that she alternates between grief and a desire for attention: for instance, “10:20 | The biggest #COCK I’ve ever seen belongs to the aboki who has a kiosk near my hostel!” (*BA* 82), followed only a few hours later by, “16:01 | I miss @efyouaruoh. Where are you? Mum & Dad went to the newspapers today. This is not funny any more oh. #Furo” (*BA* 82) Tekena probably hides aspects of her personality, or rather performs different aspects of her personality depending on the context, but so do all the other characters of the novel, albeit less openly. Social media reveals the performance of being “one’s authentic self” as performance, as spectacle even. Igoni keeps referring to Furo as the model for her transition and to Tekena as a “persona” rather than a person; at the same time,

⁵⁸ Several versions of this tweet were posted by the account @UberFacts between March 2013 and September 2014. Each occurrence included a longer sentence, either “The “ice cream” you see in ice cream ads is often mashed potatoes because they will not melt during production” or “The ice-cream you see in TV commercials is actually mashed potatoes and the milk is often white glue.”

Igoni borrows from Tekena's performative stance when they finally meet: "(When she asked what she should call me, @_igoni or just plain Igoni, I joked, 'Call me Morpheus.')" (94).⁵⁹

As *Blackass* explores the gap between one's perceived identity from the outside and internal feelings and self-representation, the obvious and problematic parallel between Furo and Igoni must not obscure the unacknowledged parallel between Igoni and Tekena. Ultimately, their relationship shows more subtlety in uncovering the performativity of identity. During her first intervention as narrator, Igoni writes,

While searching for Furo's story, I too underwent a transformation. [...] The seeds had always been there, embedded in the parched earth of my subconscious. [...] Long before Furo's story became my own, I was already trying to say what I see now, that we are all constructed narratives. (Barrett *BA* 83)

Tekena's social media persona is one further example of a constructed narrative, although one where there can be a myth of self-identity between Tekena and the Twitter user @pweetychic_tk. Perhaps this is why Igoni feels closer to Furo—who rejects her—and rejects Tekena. For Igoni and Furo, the fear always remains that they will be discovered, or uncovered. They hope to pass, to become, they undergo physical and official changes to be able to pursue life under their "new" identity. Yet, the traces of whom they used to be perceived as persist as threats to the narrative that they have carefully constructed.

Conclusion

The final epigraph for the chapter "Metamorphoses" is an excerpt from Ovid, "Everything changes, nothing perishes." While this line can be read in the narrow context of the plot, Barrett's claims that *Blackass* was his Lagos novel and "a map of the city" prompt a wider reading that accounts for the ways change affects cities and characters. Indeed, Lagos may be an urban

⁵⁹ The parentheses matter here, since they show that at that point, Igoni's identity remains an addition, almost an afterthought, as this sentence ends a chapter, coming after the last sentence's period.

palimpsest, but Onuzo's and Barrett's novels both suggest that the characters of their novel become palimpsests through their encounter with the megalopolis, or rather that the imaginary of Lagos unveils in them their palimpsestic nature, at once the transitions and the remaining traces. Movement in Lagos is often halted by traffic, mediated by a vehicle, fragmented by fences, walls and gates, in an attempt to constrain the highly unpredictable character of events and spatial features. The two novels recognize these social and spatial obstacles to better transgress them through narrative. The focus on change, transition, transformation, and movement even works as the "orderly chaos" that seeks to destabilize the "chaotic order," making Lagos a powerful example of the attempt of places to regulate spaces and of spaces to instill life—and unpredictability is an intense concentrate of life—into the very places that police them. If Onuzo and Barrett are, as Griswold suggested about writers, passengers stuck in a *go-slow* taking notes, then they reflect (on) the "literary texture" of Lagos and the many transitions characteristic of the fabric urban narratives to create an urban literary imaginary that simultaneously reaffirms and challenges its longstanding motifs.

Reclaiming the City: the Ville-Bidon in Calixthe Beyala's *Les honneurs perdus*

...car un bidonville, c'est tout, c'est rien
—Calixthe Beyala, "J'écris"¹

Calixthe Beyala: Repurposing New Bell

Few Francophone African writers have attracted as much critical attention as Franco-Cameroonian Calixthe Beyala. Born in 1961, raised in the popular neighborhood of New Bell in Douala—the economic capital of Cameroon—Beyala moved to France at the age of seventeen. Her ninth book, *Les honneurs perdus*, was published in 1996 by her longtime publisher, Paris-based Albin Michel, and went on to win the Grand Prix de l'Académie Française, amidst accusations of plagiarism.² Beyala's œuvre has received a lot of attention from the general public as well as literary scholars of Francophone Africa both in English and in French, including several articles devoted to *Les honneurs perdus*, even though there is no published translation to date.³ Provocative in her writing, prone to engaging with topics rarely associated with African women, Beyala has been as heavily criticized as she has been praised. *Les honneurs perdus* presents the first-person narrative of New Bell-born Saïda and her journey from the slum—or “Ville Bidon” as she calls it—of New Bell, in the outskirts of Douala, to the streets of Belleville, a popular neighborhood of Paris then mainly populated by immigrants. The novel follows the woman's journey from one space to another, as is common with postcolonial novels written by writers who themselves undertook similar journeys.⁴

¹ Cited in Gallimore (21).

² See for instance Hitchcott, Harrow.

³ I was able to locate two translations of the first chapter of the novel, one entitled “Couscous” and published by translator Marjolijn de Jager (2000), and another one entitled “From ‘Birth of a Myth’”—the name of the first part of the novel—by Mariana Past. In “Translation and Current Trends in African Metropolitan Literature,” scholar of postcolonial African translation studies Paul Bandia also provides translated excerpts from the novel alongside a commentary on his translation choices.

⁴ Beyala's own *Assèze l'africaine* comes to mind as another example, as well as Alain Mabanckou's *Bleu, blanc, rouge*, both similarly split in halves corresponding first to the African continent, then to life in France. Going back further in time, this is also the basic plot structure of canonical works such as Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'aventure*

One significant difference between some other works of Francophone African literature such as Alain Mabanckou's *Bleu, Blanc, Rouge*, and *Les honneurs perdus*, is that New Bell appears as a full-fledged space that not only acts as background for the protagonist's point of departure, but that Beyala develops in detail, including and perhaps most noticeably its material realities. Earlier works of hers unveil a desire to write out African urban space more precisely, a desire that *Les honneurs perdus* fleshes out. For instance, *Assèze l'Africaine*, published only two years before *Les honneurs perdus*, has a lengthy description of the city of Douala, its built environment as well as the inhabitants and practices that affect the space. Assèze observes Douala as a newly arrived villager whose perception of the city attempts to mediate a foreign, strange space. Any sense of foreignness of the African urban space has disappeared in *Les honneurs perdus*, as its characters are undoubtedly and fully urban. Beyala cultivates an interest in how cities affect human experience and how spatial and material conditions influence one's movements and even feelings. That interest continues to unfold as Saïda changes continents and learns her ways in Paris. Beyala's immersion in Belleville in *Les honneurs perdus* and in later works has received more scholarly attention than her literary rendering of African space, a fact that could perhaps be linked to Beyala's own "performance of migration"—to borrow the title of Nicki Hitchcott's influential monograph—and to her controversial presence within the French cultural scene.⁵

Today, New Bell is mostly known for its market and its prison. The neighborhood was originally intended as a space for displacing and relocating some inhabitants of Douala, according to Gilles Séraphin's *Vivre à Douala: l'imaginaire et l'action dans une ville africaine*

ambiguë, amongst others.

⁵ For instance see articles on Beyala by Dawn Fulton, Ayo Coly, Odile Cazenave as well as Nicki Hitchcott's *Calixthe Beyala: Performances of Migration*.

en crise (2000).⁶ Séraphin adds that New Bell quickly became a center for political demands, and both Séraphin and Lynn Schler underscore the historical role of New Bell as a center for immigration from the creation of the neighborhood in the early 20th century. Beginning in the 1910s according to Schler, the neighborhood welcomed immigrants from other regions due to the high attractiveness of Douala's commercial activities. In the novel, New Bell, which Saïda frequently calls Couscous as well, is a Ville-Bidon. Ville-Bidon is a play on the word "bidonville," a French term for slum that originates from the material making of informal settlements by way of the word "bidon" ("jerry can"). However, "bidon" is also a familiar term for "stomach" as well as an adjective that can mean "phony" or "sham." To some extent this plurality of meanings gets at the heart of Beyala's writing of Couscous. "Bidon" highlights the material disrepair of Couscous, as well as refers to its inhabitants' constant hunger. The idea of a "phony city" also opens up space for a portrayal of the city that is not guided by facts and numbers and that may exaggerate or play with so-called realities in order to infuse them with "imagination" and "capacité d'improvisation" (*HP* 11), two terms that appear on the first page of the novel to qualify life in Couscous in Beyala's narrative. In the spatial explorations of *Espèces d'espaces* (1974), Georges Pérec lists what he finds inhabitable, amongst which "l'inhabitable: les bidonvilles, les villes bidon" (120), using the same wordplay Beyala then mines. In many ways, Beyala's novel is a novel about inhabiting that which others deem inhabitable.

Beyala's novel makes several references to the cultural *mélange* that is characteristic of New Bell, a space where "on est tout et rien: musulman-animiste, chrétien-féticheur, bouddhiste-catholique" (*HP* 15). This tongue-in-cheek list reveals that in New Bell, things and people carry

⁶ Séraphin explains that this German project was abandoned once the French took over during World War I under the guise of Société des Nations (9). Interestingly, Simone explains that New Bell itself became an overcrowded space authorities attempted to empty out into peripheral areas after Independence, including an "enclave" ("Reaching Larger Worlds" 41) known as Zone Nylon.

multiple identities and functions at once, to a point where each individual trait may be difficult to distinguish from others. In this respect, references to “tout” and “rien” in the novel—but also in a short essay that I quoted in the epigraph to this chapter—must be read as part of Beyala’s project in writing the Ville-Bidon of Coudou. This is not the well-rehearsed dichotomy of “all or nothing”; instead Beyala’s slum encompasses all *and* nothing at once. Beyala’s project moves beyond acknowledging the importance of unacknowledged daily practices and spaces perceived as symptoms of poverty or lack; she provocatively shows that nothing is transformed into everything in Coudou. In Chapter 2, I called attention to an oft overlooked “also” in Kinshasa as it appears in the work of Marie-Louise Mumbu and is echoed in the scholarship of Theodore Trefon. Beyala goes farther than simply positing an “also” when she describes slums and inhabitants of Coudou oxymoronically as “tout et rien.” She confronts and challenges ideas of slums as spaces of vacancy, opposing nothing to everything, as well as completing one with the other. Placing the two nouns side by side is a way to complicate a fraught opposition, when grammatically “rien” is “pronom indéfini de l’inanimé, capable d’assumer toutes les fonctions du substantif” according to the Trésor de la Langue Française and “rien” has also meant “quelque chose” for much of the word’s history. Most of the literary criticism of *Les honneurs perdus* and other novels heavily favor the “rien” in their analyses of urban settings; I argue that the novel calls for a reading against the stereotypical image of failed African urbanity, that is to say a reading that also takes the radical “tout et rien” into consideration.

The traditional plot structure, migration from Africa to Europe, and similarities with other novels of Beyala’s all obfuscate the originality of *Les honneurs perdus* in representing Sub-Saharan African spaces and migration.⁷ The question of migration in the novel is subtler than

⁷ Claire Dehon’s oft-cited study of *Le Roman camerounais d’expression française* underlines that “les écrivains

first appears. Odile Cazenave's analysis in "Calixthe Beyala's 'Parisian Novels': An example of globalization and transculturation in French society" implies that all of Beyala's texts about migration ultimately turn to Paris. Coly further reifies the protagonist's trajectory, "we can easily see how Saïda's itinerary from Couscousville to Paris can eventually be translated as an ascent from backwardness to progress" ("Court Poet and Wild Child" 50). Saïda's trajectory may exhibit teleological aspects, in particular through the narrative structure split in two distinct parts with different spatial locations. However, the first paragraph shows Saïda looking back at, as the first part is called, "[la] naissance d'un mythe," indicating a rather circular narrative. In addition, many may share Saïda's geographical journey, but her personal trajectory is unconventional. For example, she spent a significant portion of her life—not only her formative years—in Couscous, and the middle-aged woman's decision to leave has more to do with her difficulty fitting in than with systemic causes of migration. Subha Xavier conceptualizes the "migrant text" as an answer to some of the shortcomings in the critical treatment of Beyala's work. While my argument focuses mainly on how scholars have read urban Africa in *Les honneurs perdus*, Xavier's term allows us to tie together some of those shortcomings with others linked to critical readings of gender, homelands, as well as the poetics and economics of migrant texts. She writes, "[The migrant text] is a mode of writing that flourishes in the blind spots of continental philosophy, the poetic evasions of critical theory, and the oft-repressed survival tactics of the global subject in late capitalism" (Xavier *Migrant Text* 12—13). Migrancy is thus ascribed to the text, not to the writer, to speak to a critical lack in how some of these texts have been read. Perhaps most helpful here is the idea that "The migrant mode (...) considers the economic, poetic, and cultural

[camerounais] donnent (...) une image fragmentaire et indifférenciée du monde citadin" ("Cameroonian writers offer a fragmentary and undifferentiated image of the urban world") as a way to favor "[le] général et [le] commun" (213) ("generalities and commonalities"). Dehon does not mention Beyala in her study, most likely because it was published only two years after Beyala's first novel was published; yet it is interesting to note that *Les honneurs perdus* does not follow the pattern of city writing that Dehon noticed in earlier Cameroonian novels.

strategies put in place by the individual agency of a given writer who chooses to narrativize the experience of migration” (12). In Beyala’s case, that experience is at once personal and fictional, regional and transnational and often times the dismissal of her legitimacy as a writer of migrant texts has obfuscated the “economic, poetic and cultural strategies” at play in her writing.

Michel de Certeau’s famous opposition between “voyeurs” and “marcheurs” in *L’Invention du quotidien* is also critical in considering questions of scale and perspective in Beyala’s work. In chapter VII, de Certeau opposes the perspective of someone looking down at the city from the top of the World Trade Center to the experience of the city by those who walk its streets. On top of the World Trade Center is de Certeau’s “voyeur,” putting the observer at a distance that is not only physical but also symbolic. For de Certeau, “n’être que ce point voyant, c’est la fiction du savoir” (140). In fact, the observer believes the fiction that they can indeed encompass the totality of the city in one look. In one of many comparisons between city and text, de Certeau asserts that this fiction “mue en lisibilité la complexité de la ville et fige en un texte transparent son opaque mobilité” (141). The only way to apprehend Couscous, Beyala points out, is to zoom in, to borrow the language of the camera in its figurative sense.

This chapter therefore explores Beyala’s Couscous as an imaginary space in which inhabitants creatively repurpose what the rest of the city discards. Beyala’s literary imaginary therefore invests in abundance more than it concerns itself with scarcity. This ecological consideration serves to expose extremely unbalanced structures of power and economic vulnerability. Repurposing the city acts as a way for Beyala to reclaim a New Bell of her own, one that defies, or to expand on the parallel, redeploys traditional discourses about slums placing the creativity and resilience of New Bell’s inhabitants at the heart of everyday life in this fictionalization of Douala’s famous Ville-Bidon.

Beyala's particular literary rendering of New Bell in *Les honneurs perdus* deserves attention for the unique way in which she gives textual space to an encounter between vulnerability and resistance that empowers characters to reclaim their urban experience. Yet Beyala's urban imaginary in this novel has been read, even by Africanist scholars, as just another depiction of a slum. This oversight speaks to the microscopic and often unseen level of action that informal dwellers of cities have access to, according to urban sociologist AbdouMalik Simone. In fact, in a 2005 article on popular practices in Douala, Simone conducts interviews with New Bell dwellers that strongly echo some of Belaya's main themes in *Les honneurs perdus*. For instance, Simone interviews an artist named Malam who mentions the role of imagination, of inventing other lives in other places that may or may not exist; Mariam, a teacher, underscores the fact that people have to adapt to "so many places being brought into this place called New Bell" (Simone "Reaching Larger Worlds" 40); an unemployed man, Hervé, and a youth worker, André, respectively confess to a sense of resignation and a desire for revolt in the face of military and government-sponsored oppression. Beyala's attention to detail alone as well as her reimagining of the city's unwanted excess in Couscous certainly prompts a rereading of the Ville-Bidon in *Les honneurs perdus*; yet, the insights drawn from Simone's sociological fieldwork call for an all the more urgent return to Beyala's literary slum in order to reexamine the specific material and political potentialities of an urban imaginary too quickly dismissed as generic by scholars like Odile Cazenave.

Beyala has strongly expressed the importance of writing about slums, and specifically about New Bell in her work. In a March 1996 interview with Emmanuel Matateyou, months before *Les honneurs perdus* was released by Albin Michel, Beyala gives perhaps the strongest justification for her sustained treatment of New Bell in the novel:

E.M.: Une autre chose très marquante chez vous, c'est que non seulement il y a cette oralité, donc ce folklore traditionnel, mais il y a aussi le langage de la rue, le langage des bidonvilles, le langage des prostituées, le langage des petites gens. Comment expliquez-vous cela ?

C.B.: C'est parce que je fais partie des petites gens; c'est très important. J'ai grandi à New-Bell à Douala. L'on ne peut pas raconter ce qu'on ne connaît pas. Le monde chic africain, je ne le connais pas. Je peux l'observer de mon oeil ironique d'un enfant de New-Bell mais je ne peux le décrire de l'intérieur. Je suis du monde des petites gens et je crois profondément que c'est le monde qui, demain, pourra apporter quelque chose à l'Afrique. Il suffit de voir combien la créativité est de rigueur dans les bidonvilles. On construit n'importe quoi et n'importe comment. Le fait de vivre au pan de la misère en permanence permet une émulation de l'imaginaire de manière extraordinaire. C'est ce monde-là qui m'intéresse; aucun autre ne peut le remplacer. Je ne crois pas que ce soit l'Afrique traditionnelle qui changera. Je crois fort que ceux qui feront l'Afrique de demain sortiront des bidonvilles. (606)

Beyala's own experience of daily existence in an African urban center revolves around New Bell, which as the first chapter of *Les honneurs perdus* elaborates, is a strong social marker of class.⁸ She writes from the inside, she claims, although like her protagonist Saïda, it seems as though her experience of the outside allows her to look back at the number of obstacles and inherent creativity that New Bell inhabitants face and exhibit on a daily basis. For Beyala, New Bell relates neither to a painful past nor even to a stunted present; she associates New Bell inhabitants, and other slum dwellers, with making the "Africa of tomorrow."⁹ That is, she claims, because they have to be creative in the face of hardships. Beyala points to a direct link between economic vulnerability—here, its extreme version, misery—and the production of a rich imaginary. There is much to be gained from surviving through adverse living conditions, because it launches those to the realms of creativity and imagination, which in turn explains why literary fiction might be an evocative channel through which these urban imaginaries are indeed shared.

⁸ Coly negatively compares Beyala to "the politically sophisticated characters in the novels of such African writers as Ousmane Sembene, Mongo Béti, or Cheikh Hamidou Kane who eloquently and very critically engage with Western discourses and speak back to the reader, Beyala's inarticulate characters install him/her in a comfort zone" ("Court Poet and Wild Child" 49). It is difficult not to perceive the gender and class bias of Coly's criticism when she opposes the former male writers' eloquence and Beyala's inarticulate characters.

⁹ Mike Davis makes a similar claim, although his argument relies on predicted numbers. Indeed, Davis' *Planet of Slums* (2006) argues that the city of the future is a slum based on demographic growth, even more so in Africa where "slums are growing at twice the speed of the continent's exploding cities" (18).

I. Creative Repurposing: Ecology of Abundance

In this section, I argue that Beyala's writing of New Bell/Couscous in *Les honneurs perdus* proposes the slum as ecology of abundance based on the regeneration of material "débris" or "vomissures" (HP 12), as the narrator alternatively calls them. This process, which I recast as a literary form of creative repurposing, turns scarcity into abundance. For Beyala, abundance does not negate scarcity; she simply shifts the focus of her novel—or her lense to return to the metaphor of the camera—away from discourses overwhelmingly focused on lack and failure and towards an exaggerated—even "grotesque" as some have called it (Coly, "Court Poet and Wild Child" 47)—description of Couscous as a space of accumulation.

Beyala thus builds the ecology of Couscous as a space of circular economies based on creative repurposing. To some extent, this is similar to what Sow Fall does in *La Grève des battus* when the Senegalese writer depicts the beggars as essential elements of the city's ecology. In both novels, discarded elements are crucial to local survival though ignored by the authorities. Although my chapter on Kinshasa has also paid attention to alternate economies, the characters of Marie-Louise Mumbu's novels are agents of the opportunities they create in the interstices of the city in a way that Couscoussians are not. Indeed, in Couscous, potentialities are born out of what the rest of the city discards, and remain geographically bound to the slum area.

In Beyala's narrative, references to New Bell's lack of resources are always followed, complemented or contradicted by the creative and often humoristic ways in which its inhabitants turn every situation around. The introduction of Couscous comes as an opposition to the sarcastic description of Douala-ville as a space of complicity, mimicry and vulgarity. The fact that Couscous is "lieu de honte pour les autorités" (HP 12) is not a coincidence in Beyala's choice to center the narrative on the urban settlement rather than on the city center. Couscous mostly does

not exist for those who inhabit Douala-ville, as the distant neighborhood only appears “indiqué par une flèche sur la carte de la ville” (*HP* 12), a trace of its symbolic absence. At first, it seems that the landscape crumbles, and then breaks down, as the gaze gets further away from Douala-Ville into New Bell. Roads are a visible marker of government involvement in urban spaces; on the way to Couscous, “la route commence à se défoncer” to leave way for what soon becomes “trous béants” (*HP* 12). This typical portrayal of collapsing infrastructure is completed by an equally typified description of the material consequences of “overurbanization” (Yaeger), that is to say houses that are “collées” (*HP* 12) to each other, not architecturally sound, and devoured by termites as fast as they appear to grow. Later, the text also points to what the inhabitants of Couscous seem to be missing: local tough guys lack maturity, diamond seekers have no well, and antique dealers have no stall (*HP* 13). Humor permeates through this depiction of lack, putting into question what deficiency means and, ultimately, questioning social functions as well. That discourse of scarcity, of general lack of infrastructure, and of material wealth is certainly not surprising in the description of what is ultimately a “slum,” but even then Beyala twists that discourse with tongue-in-cheek descriptions.¹⁰

Writing about four of Beyala’s earlier novels, Ayo Coly argues that Beyala’s backwards glance shows “an Africa struck by poverty and corruption, a collapsing continent” (Coly, “Neither Here nor There” 34). Coly’s recurring use of the term “collapsing” brings to mind architecture and infrastructure, but Coly argues that the collapse is not simply material in Beyala’s novels and that the continent cannot act as a home for Beyala’s characters. Later, Coly calls Beyala’s Africa “a voracious monster” and a “dying continent” with “no hope for a better

¹⁰ Marx et al. define slums as “informal settlements in and around cities, known more commonly as “slums”—densely populated urban areas characterized by poor-quality housing, a lack of adequate living space and public services, and accommodating large numbers of informal residents” (187).

future” (“Neither Here nor There” 37), using Rangira Béatrice Gallimore’s critique of postcolonial Africa as a space where what should have been development in fact gave way to ruins. In another article, Coly speaks of a “disintegrating and hostile homeland” (“Court Poet and Wild Child” 46), while Dawn Fulton ties together the negative perspective on the continent with an accusation that Beyala writes a readily marketable Africa, by arguing that “Beyala’s own literary representations can easily be implicated in the perpetuation of a media-fed vision of an African continent in distress” (Fulton 180). Indeed, scholars have accused Beyala of writing a version of Africa marketed for easy consumption by readers from the Global North.¹¹ Like Hitchcott before her, Fulton suggests that Beyala’s narration of the African megacity in *Tu t’appelleras Tanga* fulfils the requirements of what Graham Huggan has called the “postcolonial exotic” in his eponymous monograph. In a sense, although that word is not used *per se*, scholars fear that Beyala’s portrayal of African urban spaces fall into the traps of “misérabilisme,” perpetuating stereotypes and little else about socio-economic conditions in African cities.¹² This is common concern with literary and cinematic depictions of slums, as the debates over “poverty porn” and literary prizes in Anglophone Africa attest.¹³ That, alongside the focus on Paris as

¹¹ Hitchcott devotes a chapter of *Calixthe Beyala: Performances of Migration* to analyzing the reception of Beyala’s fiction and the strong negative reactions to her persona and to her writing. It is noteworthy that even Beyala’s commercial success causes reproaches and defiance, for instance in Coly, “the evidence strongly suggests that her popularity results from exotic and neocolonial appeal” (50). Kenneth Harrow makes a similar suggestion when stating in a footnote of *Less than One and Double*, “it is little wonder that it was this totally nonsubversive version of a picturesque, ‘rocambolesque’ Africa that the Académie Française chose to honor with their Grand Prix, rather than Beyala’s more disconcerting early novels of abjection” (note 5, 328). Hitchcott, who has written extensively on Beyala, uses Graham Huggan’s category of “anthropological exotic” to analyze Beyala’s incorporation as a French and/or Parisian writer. Huggan argues that the category “allows for a reading of African literature as the more or less transparent window onto a richly detailed and culturally specific, but still somehow homogenous—and of course readily marketable—African world” (Huggan, cited in Hitchcott *Calixthe Beyala* 16).

¹² The origin of the term “misérabilisme” is attributed to sociologists Claude Grignon and Jean-Claude Passeron. For a use of the term in the African context, see Tall et al.

¹³ The term has been coined to describe works of art, photographs, short stories, that reify poverty and use stereotypical narratives arcs or images to move the audience by appealing to a sense of pity. While I cannot reflect the breadth of the debate here, the notion and accusation of “poverty porn” in African writing crystallized around Zimbabwean writer NoViolet Bulawayo’s Caine-Prize winning short story “Hitting Budapest” (2011) and subsequent debut novel *We Need New Names* (2013). See Helon Habila’s review of the novel for the *Guardian* for use of the term. See also Pucherová.

point of arrival, may lead scholars to posit urban Africa as a space to vacate; ultimately, a space that has nothing to offer the novel's characters except for reasons to leave it. That is not to say that Beyala's various interviews on Africa are not critical of the continent, but rather that Couscous in *Les honneurs perdus* functions beyond the tired image of a failed space that acts as justification and background for migration. Hitchcott offers a more nuanced reading, going through all the features highlighted by other scholars in Beyala's portrayal of Africa (corruption, poverty, death, pessimism, inertia...) to argue that Beyala's fiction "dismantles the myth of an 'authentic' Africa (...)" (55) and emphasizes the fact that the continent "cannot be reduced to a single version of itself" (53). As Hitchcott is prompt to note, the second half of Coly's article—which also represents the most-sustained attempt at engaging with Beyala's depiction of urban Africa in *Les honneurs perdus*—nuances the charges brought in the first part.¹⁴ Coly operates an almost reversed reading of New Bell that underscores its subversive, political aspects, acknowledging "sharp and subversive socio-political criticism" ("Court Poet and Wild Child" 52) in the way in which the writer centers New Bell, a neighborhood that does not even appear on the map and thus challenges discourses emerging from power. Coly concludes by calling for a reading that unearths the "multilayered make-up of this new body of literature as well as recover the otherwise stifled political subtext" ("Court Poet and Wild Child" 59). This is why a rereading of urban space in Beyala's fiction, and particularly of New Bell in *Les honneurs perdus*, is critically needed to illuminate the originality and urban potentialities hidden in Beyala's literary imaginary of the city which as I argue is most innovatively rendered through her exploration of survival as creative repurposing.

¹⁴ Namely, while the first part focused on Beyala as "court poet" who caters to a Western reader's stereotypical vision of Africa, the second part explores the "wild child" aspect of Beyala's writing, that is to say "the oppositional underground narrative that counters the often-depoliticised reading of her texts as inventing an Africa only fit for consumption by Western audiences" (52).

From the outset of Beyala's novel, the language of abundance overshadows and overturns that of scarcity through the significant introductory section that launches the work. For instance:

[Les maisons] sont construites avec les vomissures de la civilisation: des vieilles plaques commémoratives volées aux monuments aux morts; des parpaings fabriqués à la vite-fait, trois quarts sable, reste ciment; des épieux tordus souvenirs du village; de la ferraille rouillée de ce que furent autrefois des voitures de luxe françaises, des reliques des guerres mondiales qui ne nous concernaient pas—couvertures allemandes, casques G.I. ou gourdes; des boîtes de conserve ou de lait à étiquettes russes; quelques tuiles dépareillées qui se marient artistiquement avec la tôle ondulée ou la paille; un peu de sang, beaucoup de sueur, énormément de rêve. (*HP* 12–13)

Beyala accumulates material elements, often random, almost always reclaimed after having been discarded; giving the impression that New Bell is more full than it is empty. All the elements Beyala mentions appear to have had another story, another function before having arrived in New Bell. They belong to another space, another time, such as the hunting spears brought back from the villages, the relics from World War I and II, some of which originally belonged to German or American soldiers, and even former French luxury cars turned into scrap iron. In this vividly evocative paragraph, objects are mostly broken or in pieces; material elements no longer have the shape, texture, localization or container that was initially intended for them. The houses of New Bell are built, Beyala writes metaphorically, with what the civilization throws up. Vomit is a substance that results from rejection, undergoes a change of form and can no longer serve its original purpose. This is New Bell. In what the stomach expels, the belly finds its nourishment. What more 'developed' cities expel is regenerated here, making up New Bell's homes, streets, roads, and food. Discarded food rots on the streets of New Bell until its starved inhabitants turn it back into sustenance—"Jamais rien de perdu!" (*HP* 15) exclaims the neighborhood chief in amazement. The crumbling and chaotic accumulation that is New Bell becomes the physical expression of a lively, diverse neighborhood where difficult conditions of living are testimony to the "capacité d'improvisation" (*HP* 11) that Saïda associates with her neighborhood. In doing so,

Beyala reimagines the discourse around sustainability by portraying some of the poorest people on the continent—and possibly the globe—invested in practices of recycling and reusing unimaginable in many “developed” urban contexts, particularly of the Global North.

The migrational routes that extend far beyond Saïda’s move from Douala to Paris also bring light to aspects of African urban experiences often understudied in the Global North. New Bell’s inhabitants originate from everywhere. Like the objects that structure their neighborhood, it appears as though fate alone brought people together, under the spatial and socio-economic haven that is New Bell. Beyala alludes to this cultural crossroads when she writes, “C’est le quartier des cultures mêlées, Arabes-mahométans et Nègres-catho-animistes, les peuples du Nord, Peuls, Foulbés, ceux du Sud, Bétis, Bassas, ceux de l’Ouest, Bamiléké ou Bamouns, fuyant les misères de leur village et échoués là” (*HP* 13). New Bell does not simply act as a crossroads, but a place of deep contact between various cultures, ethnicities, religions that are imbricated to the point that their entanglement can no longer come unraveled. People carry multiple identities at once, including by way of religious syncretism. Beyala calls New Bell “cet enchevêtrement de vie, de couleurs, de bruits et d’odeurs” (*HP* 16). An “enchevêtrement” is the consequence of things that are so intrinsically mixed, you can no longer tell what is what, or if things were ever really separate at some point. In other words, an “enchevêtrement” is a blend that does not serve a higher, harmonious unity. “Enchevêtrement” results from creative repurposing in New Bell, but also manifests itself in the ethnic, linguistic, cultural plurality of survival in the slum. New Bell offers a space to those who have none in Douala-Ville but left their villages nonetheless. The material plurality that the quotes above and the rest of the novel portray life full of color, noises and smells in New Bell. The workers compensate for their lack of appropriate tools with noise. Life conditions in African cities, especially in impoverished

areas, may easily be judged as indecent, but Beyala shows that for the people of New Bell, this “enchevêtrement” supports life despite its vomit-like properties. In Douala, disadvantage, marginality, expulsion, abandonment tangle up in an “enchevêtrement” that uncovers and disengages their (im)possibilities.

The ecology of abundance here works its way out from a scarcity of resources and an accumulation of people thriving on repurposed materials; in the novel, it serves to present a dynamic neighborhood with a different system of value and a narrativization that goes along with it. By writing such a vivid description of New Bell, Beyala insists on how everyday urban dwellers live, how they make the city function for them, and even the need to reimagine what “functionning” means. The sensory and emotional experience of New Bell, rendered through the voice of Saïda, highlights a gap between institutional perspectives of New Bell and the experiences of its inhabitants, making use of the stylistic and narrative tools that only literature can offer.

II. Reclaiming the City: A Subversive Gesture

It is one thing to argue that New Bell is built around repurposed objects and relocated people, that it functions by giving new possibilities to that which the rest of the city, or even the rest of the nation, region or the world, has rejected. I wish to take this argument one step further, however, and offer the interpretation of this repurposed urban area as one that also claims and in fact reclaims its space within the city, particularly as far as its relations with institutions and the wider world are concerned.

In her introduction of a special issue of *PMLA* devoted to Cities, Patricia Yaeger conceptualizes “metropoetics,” acknowledging that it is difficult to do so without perpetuating prejudices, considering that “our intellectual apparatus, like the wage puzzle, is inadequate for

describing the pleasures and pounding of most urban lives, or the fact that many city dwellers survive despite all odds” (15).¹⁵ Towards the end of the introduction, she calls for “a metropoetics that remaps the intricate structures at play in non-Western overurbanized city regions: spaces that seem to have failed but remain profoundly resourceful and inventive—refusing (in every sense) to solve the West’s wage puzzle” (Yaeger 24).¹⁶ In casting off African urban spaces in Beyala’s fiction as failed spaces that exemplify a flawed postcolonial Africa, one omits the resourcefulness and inventiveness that texts such as Beyala’s brings to the fore; one also forgets that such texts do not bear the responsibility of “[solving] the West’s wage puzzle,” to borrow Yaeger’s phrase.

Beyala uses material abundance and creative repurposing to portray New Bell as a space where imagination (*HP* 59) and “irréalité” (*HP* 67) impact daily life. Indeed, the multiplicity of objects from various epochs and geographies seems to directly drive and feed into the local tendency to turn daily life into spectacle. The mythical birth of Saïda is one early example that her own father calls a “spectacle” (*HP* 29). The local journalist, who missed the birth because he was sound asleep, then also misses a fight between inhabitants of Couscous, which he then asks them to replay for posterity. Saïda’s father exclaims “Ça ne sera pas du pareil au même” (*HP* 35), to which the journalist answers, “Mais si! Mais si! Qu’est-ce ce qui distingue le vrai du faux? [...] Moi je t’offre d’entrer dans l’Histoire” (*HP* 35-6). Of course, there is postcolonial irony in this depiction of a delayed live recording of historical events that then shape people’s memories of the event in question, as is the case for the fight. One can also read in this

¹⁵ Yaeger comes closest to defining what she means by “metropoetics” in this passage: “A poetics of infrastructure, or a metropoetics, should describe the flow of literature as it pours into and out of the life of cities. But how could there possibly be a poetics for entities as large, chaotic, historically differentiated, and geographically various as world cities? (21). Although she suggests that articles in the special issue of PMLA attempt to perform the kind of metropoetics she advocates for, Yaeger remains cautious throughout about the pitfalls of such an undertaking.

¹⁶ The wage puzzle, Yeager explains, describes the discrepancy born from the fact that “real wages have become so depressed that economists cannot understand—cannot create a formula to explain—how people survive” (12).

conversation a thinly-veiled critique of early African ethnographic cinema. But Saïda also notes later that the events surrounding her birth “donnent l’ambiance générale de [leur] cité” (*HP* 57). Referring to rules about education, sexual health, and public health, the narrator declares, “Chez nous, tout cela se faisait au petit bonheur et dans le désordre, ce qui rendait la vie passionnante” (*HP* 57). Like I pointed to in the case of Kinshasa, chaos and a sense of randomness seem to be present in the architecture of Couscous and material lives of its inhabitants, and from there, to have seeped into their practices as well. Coly mentions “spectacle” as well to liken Beyala’s use of spectacle to that of Marnia Larzeg’s “theater of the indigenous” and even Trin T. Minh-Ha’s “zoo,” arguing that Beyala creates “characters who serve as objects of the Western gaze and do not seem able to return that gaze” (“Court Poet and Wild Child” 49). Such concern is understandable considering the overarching historical tendency to zooify Africa and the painstaking work done in African studies in order to upset that vision. The narrative voice’s constant references to imagination, fiction and dreams challenge this reading to propose “enchevêtrement”—or the entangled layering of reclaimed objects and voices—as the creative mode of practicing and apprehending the city. Beyala describes the fictional fabric of life in Couscous and the way constant spectacle and lack of seriousness weakens the boundaries between tangible realities and intangible fictions. In fact, it seems as though to some extent *Les honneurs perdus* presents intangible realities and tangible fictions as it dramatizes daily life to the extreme, while even the neighborhood seems unreal, made of elements better suited for a theatrical stage. When walking, Saïda remarks, “Je dérivai sans trop savoir comment à travers les ruelles de Couscous. Les toits de tôle s’étaient à mes yeux, chamarrés comme une broderie faite sur l’air. Les hommes et les choses n’étaient que fumée” (83). The lack of substantiality to Saïda’s thoughts here contrast with the detailed materiality of the opening description of

Couscous, further blurring the lines.

All attempts at apprehending Couscous, which are really efforts to fix its perceived problems, devolve into disaster and judgment. Beyala's New Bell does not function according to numbers and externally imposed rules, and the city's innate functioning bewilders outsiders and rational thinkers alike. The pharmacist is constantly surprised, sometimes shocked by his fellow Couscoussians' ways, a fact that he attributes to his scientific mind and superior knowledge. As an insider-outsider, he represents within Couscous the encounter between the slum and the wider world. At the same time, a few moments in the novel bring fiction back to its often grim reality, perhaps explaining the importance for Couscous inhabitants to infuse reality with fiction and spectacle whenever possible. Indeed, amidst the playfulness of Couscous local stories, Beyala intersperses scenes of violent repression and tragic events that bring back into focus the vulnerable political and economic status of Couscous on a national and/or global scale. The first reference to the President—a thinly veiled character double of Paul Biya named “Bida” (*HP* 122)—introduces postcolonial Cameroonian issues into the narrative at the same time as an external perspective on Couscous. Saïda acknowledges but pays little attention to her poverty. A government-sponsored distribution of food ends in a bloodbath and leads to brutal repression, showing the darker sides and actual vulnerability of Couscous: “Le sang se mêlait au maïs et à la boue. C’était ça le véritable visage de Couscous: un peu de nourriture, beaucoup de sang et énormément de boue” (*HP* 121). In the original description of Couscous, a mirroring structure presented the neighborhood as “un peu de sang, beaucoup de sueur, énormément de rêve” (*HP* 12). Blood has gone from a little to a lot, and mud has replaced dreams in the inhabitants' lives. Such moments of serious indictment of postcolonial oppression are scarce in the novel and they easily blur into the carefree attitude prevalent in Couscous, but when they can be spotted, they

carry the full weight of Beyala's critique.

This is a glimpse into the ways in which the socio-economic status of Couscous relates to more global issues, a topic otherwise little broached in the novel. This moment also sheds a different light on some of the material appearance of Couscous, since military repression causes extensive damage that can explain some of the need for repurposing broken items: "Le lendemain, Couscous ressemblait à une cité après la tempête: cases en éventail, vitres brisées, matelas éventrés, chaises cassées" (*HP* 124). Again, this short glimpse betrays Couscous's particular vulnerability to repression. It is clear that such violence has probably taken place before, feeding into and perpetuating a cycle of destruction and regeneration. The fact that many artifacts in Couscous come from former wars and conflict zones are testimony to the existing cycle of violence to which the poorest people and spaces are always most susceptible. The damage caused by militarized repression shows that this injustice extends well into the present.

A key contention to my analyses in this chapter is that the fictional New Bell in *Les honneurs perdus* cannot be read as another iteration of any African urban space, as some have suggested, nor as an expression of all urban spaces in Beyala's other works, despite obvious echoes for instance with the QG in *C'est le soleil qui m'a tuée* or other spaces in *Assèze l'Africaine* or *Femme nue, femme noire* for instance.¹⁷ Cazenave criticizes Beyala's treatment of African cities as redundant and clichéd,

Her depiction of Africa, at times, sounds generic and cliché-like: in an interview with Benetta Jules-Rosette, Beyala says that the Africa she describes has nothing to do with pastoralism, tradition, beauty etc. Instead, it is the Africa of the slums, the one she has experienced and that she knows. Yet, these depictions do sound generic as they keep coming back, almost always the same. (121)

¹⁷ Other novels of Beyala's arguably exhibit a more generic portrayal of urban space, namely through the way urban elements seemed mostly present to reflect Ateba's subjectivity or to prove points about postcolonial spaces in *C'est le Soleil qui m'a brûlée* or by way of the inexperienced perspective of Assèze that does not challenge the traditional village/modern city stereotype.

Cazenave accuses Beyala of writing a “decentered” (122) Africa, one that is tainted by her time in France and her success as a writer. A crucial nuance is missing, nonetheless, in Cazenave’s interpretation, as her generalized critique of African urban space in Beyala’s novels perpetuates a cliché of its own, namely that all poor spaces, especially in Africa, are always condemned to be iterations of one another. Beyala’s African world is not homogenous, especially where *Les honneurs perdus* is concerned, as the first part of her novel is already premised on the opposition of two vastly different African spaces, Douala-Ville and New Bell/Couscous. Beyala’s decision to write the misery and on-going urbanization of Africa, given the heavily stereotyped space of the slum, and what’s more, at the beginning of the protagonist’s migratory journey, triggers strong critical reactions because of the typically playful, even carefree manner in which Beyala, pokes at tense political and socio-economic questions.

To read Beyala beyond the obligatory triggers that she herself carefully and provocatively sets in place, is to look for the inventiveness of her literary strategies, the complexity of her characters and the resilience of a writing style that mimics the actions of those she so evocatively describes. Beyala’s vibrant descriptions of the aftermath of traumatic events invites an interpretation beyond the fear of what may first appear as any generic African slum. After violent repression takes place in Couscous, Beyala writes,

Les Couscoussiers réparèrent les dégâts et se révélèrent ingénieux. On cassa les barils vides, on en fabriqua des lampes-tempêtes, des baleines de parapluie; on en utilisa aussi pour remplacer des morceaux de tôles ondulées et les vitres cassées. Des débris inutilisables, des enfants firent des cerceaux, des roues de bicyclette et des micros. Les femmes pilèrent le maïs. Couscous reprit son visage et son sourire habituels. (HP 124)

The empty barrels that are left behind, unusable and useless to the authorities, become the source and resource for Couscoussians to rebuild what has been damaged. A single object is transformed into a variety of others, some of which will guide or protect the inhabitants, while

others entertain the children. Violent repression unveils the resilience and ingenuity of the people of Couscous, as expressed through the regeneration of an empty barrel. The binary and ternary rhythm of the sentences signal accumulation, as well as energy augmented by the returning smile of the neighborhood personified in its habitual contentment. Similarly, after a cholera outbreak that leads to many deaths plagues the neighborhood, the epidemic is ironically transfigured into opportunity. New religious leaders emerge offering unique spiritual solutions while, Madame Kimono's local bar and brothel thrives in unusual ways. Echoing the Chief's earlier exclamation, the pharmacist's wife incredulously decries, "Comme dit le chef, rien de perdu sur cette terre. Et c'est extraordinaire" (*HP* 142). Rather than irony alone, Beyala offers a model of entrepreneurial ingenuity that surpasses exploitative strategies, celebrating the creative energies that only the slum can generate.

Couscous thus first appears as a space of vacancy that Beyala quickly rewrites as a space of unseen and unimagined potentialities. These energies collapse, however, whenever they are taken beyond the space of Couscous, as though the survival practices birthed in Couscous are scaled only for its own community. On a larger plain, the Ville-Bidon's vulnerability hinders its recourse for action, while in Couscous, this perceived weakness generates the most creative forms of repurposing. When the inhabitants decide to revolt against a certain number of -isms—"capitalisme," "libéralisme," "conservatisme" but also "intellectualisme, fascisme, nazisme, manchetrisme et autres atrocités" (*HP* 155)—their revolt devolves into stagnancy, halted by mosquito bites that force them to "s'éparpiller tandis que notre révolution atterrissait au panier, comme toutes les révolutions" (*HP* 156). Beyala remains uncompromising on the possibility of change beyond the scale of the neighborhood. Similarly, other political events hardly seem to reach Couscous. For instance Independence from France, which Cameroon gained to great

international celebration in 1960 leaves those in the slums completely untouched and unphased: “L’indépendance avait fait du bien aux hommes et aux femmes de Douala-ville; pour les Couscoussiers, elle ne signifiait rien” (*HP* 172). All outside interventions into Couscous come from a symbolic ivory tower that believes it knows better and can fix Couscous. Authorities—whether they are political, spiritual or medical—believe that they can see Couscous from the distance of Douala-ville and that the knowledge they have grants them the right to organize people’s daily practices of the city. This kind of “blindness,” as de Certeau calls it, ignores the daily practices written by the bodies of ordinary city users. This is why outside interventions into Couscous appear out of step with the needs of the neighborhood, and also why, when the fiction of knowledge is exposed for what it is, violent repression ensues.

Apart from occasional reminders of attempts to regulate Couscous from outside, Beyala heavily favors narrating that which de Certeau calls “les seuils où cessent la visibilité” (141). In fact, he writes “Les chemins qui se répondent dans cet entrelacement, poésies insues dont chaque corps est un élément signé par beaucoup d’autres, échappent à la lisibilité” (141). As often with de Certeau, that which he describes spatially—here trajectories, bodily movements—also applies at a metaphorical level. The “entrelacement” he describes echoes Beyala’s “enchevêtrement” and calls for a rereading of New Bell not as an iteration of a general African city as it has been suggested, but as Beyala’s homage to the “poésies insues” that often escape legibility.

The type of cholera outbreak that decimates Couscous provides from a rare, heretofore unknown, microbe. For the population, this is further evidence that Couscous is unique, “Ces découvertes nous démontraient que Couscous recelait des trésors de toutes sortes, encore inexplorés mais réels” (*HP* 168). These newly discovered—even deadly—treasures can either come from repurposing elements, or from observing existing practices on a microscopic scale.

De Certeau suggests,

on peut tenter une autre voie: analyser les pratiques microbiennes, singulières et plurielles, qu'un système urbanistique devait gérer ou supprimer et qui survivent à son dépérissement; suivre le pullulement de ces procédures qui, bien loin d'être contrôlées ou éliminées par l'administration panoptique, se sont renforcées dans une proliférante illégitimité, développées et insinuées [...]. (145)

De Certeau's concept of "microbial practices" that resist institutional regulations has little to do with Beyala's new cholera microbe, except that both proliferate despite attempts to annihilate them because the ways that they are treated assumes neither the right form, nor the right scale. In an article about Mumbai, architect and urban planning scholar Rahul Mehrotra has influentially conceptualized the "Kinetic City," which he opposes to the "Static City." The "Static City" is "a two-dimensional entity on conventional city maps and is monumental in its presence" (206), much like Beyala's description of Douala-ville at the beginning of *Les honneurs perdus*. Indeed, Beyala underscores the presence of palaces, schools, universities, research centers, banks, administrative offices, cafés-théâtres, as well as "des avenues du Général-de-Gaulle, des squares Félix Faure" (HP 12). Her ironic description of Douala-ville brings to light the mimicry of the colonial *assimilé* and pokes fun at colonial structures by using stereotypes usually associated with the colonized ("des banques d'État cannibales," HP 12). In doing so, Beyala also reveals the importance of the built environment in the social order, even as she shows that the order is not as ordered as it seems, for instance through the mention of "faux coups d'Etat et des vraies intrigues d'alcôve" (HP 12).

The Kinetic City, according to Mehrotra, can only be understood as a "three-dimensional construct of incremental development" (206). Indeed, maps no longer suffice as New Bell only features as an arrow on the map. Beyala describes the astonishment of urban planners in front of "des maisons de bric et de broc, de toc et de miradors infernaux" (HP 11) in New Bell. In terms

of its built environment, “[t]he Kinetic City is temporary in nature and often built with recycled material: plastic sheets, scrap metal, canvas, and waste wood. It constantly modifies and reinvents itself” (206). In many ways, Mehrotra’s binary corresponds to de Certeau’s description of the “voyeur” and “marcheur,” but Mehrotra attempts to describe the social fabric of the Kinetic City. To do so, he highlights movement and process, rather than a set economic status. He also refers to the “spectacle” of life since “the processions, weddings, festival hawkers, street vendors, and slum dwellers all create an ever-transforming streetscape—a city in constant motion, where the very physical fabric is characterized by the kinetic” (Mehrotra 207). In Beyala’s novel, the public event of Saïda’s birth is one amongst a variety of elements that create the spectacle-like feeling of the kinetic city. In Mehrotra’s conceptualization as in de Certeau’s opposition or in Beyala’s dichotomy description of Douala-ville and New Bell, the boundaries between one and the other are murkier than it originally appears. That being said, when Mehrotra writes, “[t]he Kinetic City recycles the Static City to create a new spectacle” (208), Beyala’s narration of Couscous comes to mind.

Conclusion

In my concluding section of this chapter, I would like to offer a parallel between Beyala’s treatment of urban space and her oft misrepresented and misunderstood migrant feminism, because critics have largely received them in similar ways—setting off discursive triggers that generate unforgiving reactions. I remain convinced, however, Beyala’s depiction of African city spaces and her discussions of Black female empowerment both play with and respond to scholarly and critical expectations about what and how she should be writing. For instance, Kenneth Harrow writes, “What Beyala has become is the complete modernist, one whose feminism is now comfortably arranged, like the depiction of Africa, so as not to disturb” (*Less*

than *One and Double* 285). In fact, perhaps Harrow's *rapprochement* between Beyala's depiction of Africa and her feminism can be useful. Xavier theorizes Beyala's "migrant feminism" in the context of the erotic novel *Femme nue, femme noire*, a novel which Xavier claims "looks to unearth the politics of feminist discourse in the African context through a narrative blend of violence and sexual commentary that destabilizes male power schemes in the novel" (*Migrant Text* 187). It seems to me as though Beyala's repurposing of New Bell unearths politics of urban discourse in the African context through a similar mode of narrative blending, between violence and an ironic play on the discourse of abundance that ultimately serves to undo spatial power schemes in the novel. Beyala's feminism and her engagement with urban space require a reading that takes into account the radicalness and discomfort caused by her depictions of Africa and female sexuality as in fact, disturbing images that may appear to pander to a white reader's expectations only to turn them around, to subvert them by being, doing and writing something so unexpected of her that it is too easily misunderstood and subsequently rejected. It is perhaps because African spaces are presented in *Les honneurs perdus* as more complex, and to borrow Coly's conclusion "multi-layered," than is usually acknowledged that they are quickly dismissed and rarely studied in the detail that Beyala invites. On sensitive questions of gender, sexuality or in this case of poverty in urban Africa, Beyala plays with discourse, triggering strong reactions from her African counterparts and critics. Perhaps this is her way of reclaiming these questions, of showing discursive ownership of topics that often omit the voices of those whose bodies and livelihoods are directly affected and rarely heard beyond the spaces they inhabit. Beyala does not ask for permission before writing and she has defined her narrative style by the triggers she sets off for those who come to the work of a Black African female writer with predetermined designs. But, in the case I wish to make for the reclaiming of African urban

spaces, Beyala's novel provides an insightful, funny and subtle portrayal of an African slum, showing how New Bell is creatively repurposing and creatively repurposed in the text. Beyala's camera-like zoom onto the unperceived details that constitute New Bell takes us closer to its underbelly, one that is strikingly and revoltingly made of the "vomissures de la civilisation" (*HP* 12). Perhaps even more uncomfortably, it is impervious in its very vulnerability to all outside efforts to 'fix' it. In fact, as Saïda explains in conclusion one of her vivid descriptions, "Tout ceci pour vous expliquer que nous ne nous plaignons pas" (*HP* 15). New Bell repurposes and reclaims the city in a way that may seem generic but that ultimately refuses a clean, whitewashed or bourgeois version of recycling. Instead the neighborhood claims, in the voice of an unnamed character foraging in the garbage that only get taken away once a year, "Qui a jeté ça? Mais c'est très bon!" (*HP* 15), further recasting the slum of New Bell as a space where discarded objects are opportunities, and where the literary urban imaginary becomes a way of retelling the multiple, entangled layers of the Ville-Bidon.

Writing the Transparent Voices of Luanda: Ondjaki's *Os Transparentes*

*numa cidade onde, durante séculos, o amor tinha
descoberto, entre brumas de brutalidade
um ou outro coração para habitar*
—Ondjaki, *Os Transparentes*

On December 10, 1975, only one month after Angola became an independent country, its first President, writer and poet Agostinho Neto, established the União dos Escritores Angolanos (UEA), which closely tied together the revolutionary politics of his party the MPLA—still in power in Angola to this day—with literacy and literature.¹ In a speech proclaiming the launch of the new writers' union-cum-publisher, Neto made his agenda explicit by saying “a literatura em Angola [...] esteve sempre ao serviço da Revolução” (*Sobre a Literatura* 19) [“Angolan literature always served the Revolution”].² Two years later, as he took on the role of founding President of the UEA, Neto reiterated the strong bond between writing and national building, a defining characteristic of the writers' union to this day.³ He also declared, “O povo e o meio ambiente, estarão sempre presentes em cada pensamento, em cada palavra ou frase escrita, como a sombra coexiste com a luz e a folha com a raiz” (9) [“the people and the environment, they will always be present in every thought, every word or sentence written, like the shadow coexists with the light and the leaf with the root”]. That very same year, in 1977, Ondjaki was born, one of the first Angolan writers born after Independence.⁴ As Phillip Rothwell notes, Ondjaki has only ever known Angola under MPLA's rule, which is significant considering the strong bond between literary production and political leadership in the country. In a short essay, Ondjaki points out the

¹ MPLA stands for Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola.

² All translations from Ondjaki's *Os Transparentes* come from Stephen Henighan's published translation *Transparent City*. All other translations are my own.

³ See for instance the perspective of Carmo Neto, general secretary of the UEA, in an article for the German newspaper Deutsche Welle in 2015.

⁴ As such, Ondjaki is one of three writers included in this dissertation who were selected to be part of the Africa39 project, a collaborative project that aimed to recognize 39 promising Sub-Saharan African writers under the age of 40. The other two are Nigerians Igoni A. Barrett and Chibundu Onuzo (chapter 3).

influence of the type of ideology laid out by Neto on his own education: “(...) naquele tempo, em pleno socialismo angolano, disseram-me—e ou acreditei—que a caneta era a arma do pioneiro” (“As Raízes Do Arco-Íris” 52) [“at that time, in the midst of Angolan socialism, they told me—and I believed it—that the pen was the weapon of the *pioneiro*”].⁵ Literature is presented as a discursive tool, possibly even a medium for political propaganda, a necessary device for political consciousness. From 1975-2002, that is to say during most of Ondjaki’s life and immediately after the country gained independence from Portugal, Angola was torn by a civil war—with global implications and Cold War stakes—that opposed the MPLA to another political party, UNITA.⁶

Stories and the city have always been intricately linked for Ondjaki who writes in the same essay, “Cresci nesse lugar cheio de estórias urbanas, portanto a oralidade que conheço e que me foi passada aconteceu num cenário urbano, alimentado pelas constantes faltas de água, de luz, e pelas referências a todas as guerras que aconteciam muito mas a Sul de Luanda” (“As Raízes Do Arco-Íris” 52) [“I grew up in this place full of urban tales, so the orality that I know and that was passed on to me took place in an urban setting, fueled by constant water shortage, power cuts and references to all the wars that took place much farther South of Luanda”]. Many of the stylistic elements that characterize Ondjaki’s writing are already mentioned here: the importance of childhood (in) narratives, the role of orality and transmission, the material conditions of life that fuel and interrupt storytelling, and the looming presence of wars that supposedly take place outside the city. Again and throughout Ondjaki’s work, the relationship between the city, politics—insofar as it affects people—and writing emerges as a through line. The Angolan writer’s fascination for the city of Luanda is visible in other works of fiction such

⁵ Pioneiro, which means “pioneer,” describes young MPLA liberation fighters.

⁶ For more on the recent political history of Angola, see Patrick Chabal’s *History of Postcolonial Lusophone Africa* (2002) and Justin Pearce’s more recent *Political Identity and Conflict in Central Angola, 1975-2002* (2017).

as the novellas and novels *Bom Dia Camaradas* (2001) (*Good Morning Comrades*), *Quantas Madrugadas Tem a Noite* (2004) and *AvóDozenove e o Segredo do Soviético* (2008) (*Granma Nineteen and the Soviets' Secret*), as well as his 2007 documentary film *Oxalá cresçam Pitangas* (*Tales of Luanda: Hope the Pitanga Cherries Grow*).⁷ Yet Ondjaki's most urban-centered work yet is a novel entitled *Os Transparentes*, published in 2012, and translated into English in 2018. In *Os Transparentes*, Ondjaki reflects on postcolonial Luanda through the eyes of the inhabitants of a building in the neighborhood of Maianga, as the prospects of underground oil found beneath the city bring about large-scale construction—or rather destruction—work. The novel is replete with corrupt politicians and businessmen, informal sector activities, sex work, and the overall principle of “depois logo se vê o que acontece, primeiro vamos ainda encher os bolsos” (*OT* 127) [“we'll see what happens later, but first we're gonna fill our pockets” *TC* 96], as one character describes it. The many characters, including Odonato, the Luandan who brings the story together, navigate everyday life and exceptional circumstances as the fictional city faces a fire that threatens its very foundations.

Throughout the novel, the social and political critique is strong, most often geared at politicians and businessmen whose private interests take precedence over the collective good. *Os Transparentes* tells a tale of disillusion with the national building project, a tale of postcolonial grim and nonsense. As it denounces the ways in which the government and its representatives have forgotten the interest of the people, Ondjaki engages Neto's statement about “o povo e o meio ambiente,” the people and the environment, appealing once again to notions of African urban ecology that I conceptualized in earlier chapters. As the city collapses and burns in the background, affecting the lives of the characters in ways that cannot be undone—including

⁷ As the English translation of the title Ondjaki chose suggests, the documentary seeks to tell stories of and about Luanda, rather than a larger focus on stories of or about Angola, as Ondjaki explains in a lengthy interview with Marissa Moorman and Michael T. Martin.

through death—Ondjaki maintains the focus of his narrative on the funny and often tragic daily lives and decisions of those who should have been at the center according to Neto’s literary and political manifesto. The macroeconomic and political stakes intertwine with microeconomics and daily urban lives in a novel where Luanda comes to life. The role given to the imaginary of the city, its demise that bookends the novel and the vertigo-inducing number of characters—at least 21—betray an attempt to portray urban experience as a layered one that is endangered by environmental decay. It is my contention here that *Os Transparentes* personifies Luanda as a living organism, as part of an environment physically and symbolically endangered by manmade disasters—prompting an ecocritical reading that sets Ondjaki’s novel apart from other Angolan novels.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate that Ondjaki rewrites the poetics of what Luanda—and life as a *Caluanda*—feels like, mobilizing the resources and creativity of language to translate into his literary urban imaginary the experience of a city under attack. Ondjaki fills Luanda with texture and color as the Angolan capital simultaneously resists and succumbs to being hollowed out. In *Os Transparentes*, the city’s infrastructure and the natural world reflect the lives, experiences, and sensations of its inhabitants. Ondjaki does not hesitate to blur the boundaries between literal and figurative meanings; he engages and challenges myths about nation building; and he inscribes power into a sensory and creative approach to the city. The novel reads as a sensorial—visceral—experience of readership, engaging all five senses in its depiction of the urban everyday.

The urban world depicted in Ondjaki’s *Os Transparentes* is one where things that are usually separated or easily recognizable from one another become indeterminate. This is not the “enchevêtrement” of Beyala’s *New Bell*, but rather a blurring of boundaries between different

types of matter and energies. It is not so much a dystopian world as it is one where metaphors take on their full meaning, where feeling invisible makes you transparent and where weighing on your family actually makes your body heavy. As Arenas notes, “Manuel Rui and Ondjaki opt in varying degrees for strategies of poetic transfiguration such as the use of metaphor and allegory in order to discuss the multifarious fate of post independence and post—civil war Angola” (173). In the tradition of Angolan writing, Ondjaki thus offers a reflection on language by mixing the literal and the metaphoric.

Such a poetics, that is enacted at the level of language, style and content, reimagines what I propose to call “Luandanidade,” to echo and challenge the “Angolanidade” (“Angolanness”) that has been so critical in the building of the nation and of its literature.⁸ Chabal describes the tension between two desires representative of Angolanidade: “One desire was to write a specifically Angolan literature, anchored in the Angolan oral tradition. The other was the imperative of producing a literature relevant to the anti-colonial ambition of this generation of writers” (Chabal “Aspects of Angolan Literature” 19). Without resolving this tension, writers like Neto and Luandino Vieira shaped Angolan cultural identity. The concept of “Angolanidade” became embodied by the MPLA, based on principles of a mixed race (Creole) society, gathered around the Marxist socialist ideology of the ‘New Man,’ with Portuguese as a unifying language. This description fits the profile of the MPLA membership, and it comes as no surprise that Angola’s national anthem “Angola Avante!”—the lyrics of which were written by fellow writer Manuel Rui—unites the country under the concept of “Um só povo, uma só Nação!” Angolanness is inextricably tied to the MPLA rhetoric, and although Neto’s speech shows the role culture played in building “Angolanidade,” Ondjaki builds a different kind of belonging

⁸ The concept of “Angolanidade” is widely used in political discourse and in critical works. Hamilton, Chabal and Arenas all refer to it. See Angolan historian Patrício Batsikama’s detailed explanation of “Angolanidade” for *Por Dentro da África*.

with “Luandanidade.” In doing so, Ondjaki takes his distance with the leading party’s concrete political rhetoric even as he reaffirms some of its ideals.⁹ Ondjaki activates a micro-poetics of Luanda that is all the more invested in “Luandanidade” that it expresses disillusion about the institutional pretense of “Angolanidade.” In the novel, the characters—such as the fictional President—who still embrace the national discourse repeatedly miss the point, endangering the lives of all in the name of “national” interests that hide or expose personal political agendas, thus leading to the physical and symbolic collapse of the city. This disappointment with the failed promises of the national project lead Ondjaki to lend textual significance to the sensory and creative experiences of the inhabitants of a single building in Luanda. This dissertation’s first and second chapters mapped and conceptualized the creative energies of the urban streets, while chapter four restricted the potentialities of such energies to a specific neighborhood outside of which external forces overpower them. This fifth chapter sets its sights on an even smaller scale, that of a “breathing building, in search of unforeseen urban solidarities and creative possibilities. This is perhaps why *Os Transparentes* paradoxically achieves in fiction something akin to what Neto advocated for in his speech, that is to say to keep the people “in every thought, in every word, in every sentence written.”

Luanda is a city of many paradoxes, in that sense perhaps closest to its geographical neighbor Kinshasa. The capital city of Angola ranks amongst the most expensive cities in the world, as it is rich in many precious natural resources, including oil.¹⁰ Fernando Arenas summarizes the paradox as such, “[Angola] is simultaneously an exceptionally wealthy country

⁹ Ondjaki’s personal relationship to the MPLA is complex, as his own father held a high rank in the party. For more on the topic of the writer’s political engagement, see his 2017 interview with his English translator Stephen Henighan for the *White Review*.

¹⁰ According to Mercer’s cost of living survey, Luanda was the most expensive city in the world in 2015 and 2017, falling to number 2 in 2016 and number 6 in 2018. The primary aim of this survey is to provide a sense of the cost of living to calculate relocation expenses for expatriates.

and yet one of the poorest in the world” (xxxii). Its status as urban center for the region was established early and its prominence never challenged. Cultural and racial *mélange* that led to the growth of a creolized society was a significant part of Portuguese colonial rule; Angola is no exception, a strong example of what has been defined—and defended—as Lusotropicalism by sociologist Gilberto Freyre.¹¹ Angolan literature has embraced and criticized this mixed race identity and ensuing ideological color blindness that sets Lusophone Africa apart from its Francophone or Anglophone neighbors.

In *Os Transparentes* however and significantly, race is simply not mentioned, which is Ondjaki’s attempt—in typical Angolan fashion—at moving the conversation “beyond” race and skin tone.¹² Though *Os Transparentes* is a novel full of color, none are attributed to people’s complexions. Perhaps to justify such a glaring absence, Ondjaki begins “As Raízes Do Arco-Íris” with, “cresci num tempo e num lugar onde havia gente de todas as cores e peles para todos os tons” (51) [“I grew up in a place and time where there were people of all colors and skins of all tones”]. In the same way that the novel at once criticizes the political system in place in Angola while ultimately writing a novel very much in line with the ideals of the MPLA, the text exhibits a color blindness that reaffirms a form of Lusotropicalism, even as it attempts to move away from race-based discussions of urban experience.

I. Conceptualizing “Luandanidade”

¹¹ Writing about the case of Brazil, Freyre who argued that Portuguese colonialism was different from other forms of imperialism because it did not discriminate on race and promoted miscegenation. Portuguese dictator Salazar adopted this discourse in an attempt to increase the global reach of his Estado Novo. Salazar proudly stated that the multi-continental Empire extended far beyond Portugal, going “de Minho a Timor,” so from a Northern province of Portugal to East Timor. For instance, see Corkill and Almeida. Angola’s relationship to Lusotropicalism is complex since the MPLA rhetoric and songs also exalt nationalist sentiments by talking about Angola “de Cabinda a Cunene,” echoing Salazar’s slogan.

¹² As Freyre’s example in Brazil shows, this form of colorblindness pervades the entire Lusophone world in fact.

This first section will conceptualize “Luandanidade” as it is deployed in the fiction set in and about Luanda, and specifically as it affects language and as language in turn shapes this so-called Luandan-ness. To my mind, this is a crucial relationship through which Ondjaki writes the sensations of Luanda, one that is mired in a postcolonial tradition of Angolan writing that reenacts the paradoxical relationship between Angolans and the Portuguese language. The linguistic status of Luanda somewhat differs from some of its Francophone and Anglophone counterparts. Luanda is influenced by the presence of Kimbundu, which predated colonization, but also other languages such as Umbundu and Kikongo. That being said and as Hamilton points out in “Lusofonia, Africa and Matters of Languages and Letters,” many Luandans have Portuguese as a mother—and sometimes only—tongue. Hamilton reports on Luandino Vieira’s description of Portuguese as a “troféu de guerra” (cited in “Lusofonia, Africa, and Matters of Languages and Letters” 613) [“war trophy”] in an interview with Portuguese journalists. The war metaphor is powerful in context since it took a 13-year war with Portugal for Angola to gain Independence.¹³ There is thus a strong movement in favor of appropriating Portuguese as Angolan. Infusing the language with “Angolanidade” has been construed as an act of resistance, one that has become a trait of many Angolan writers whose writing inspires Ondjaki, such as Luandino Vieira himself, but also Manuel Rui. Once more though, Angolanidade is rooted in Luanda, as Leite writes, “Writers have attempted to create an Angolan-Portuguese language rooted in the local linguistic traditions, in particular that of the Creole urban environment of Luanda, since the nineteenth century” (Chabal *Post-colonial Literature* 129). Because Luanda has been such an uncontested center in Angola, sometimes Angola and Luanda can be almost synonymous. At the same time, whenever writers criticize the Angolan nation, they mostly do so

¹³ That and the death of then dictator of Portugal, Salazar, who had until then held tight onto his country’s colonies as symbols of Portugal’s global power.

from the urban perspective of Luanda, at least until the end of the war.¹⁴ Despite—or perhaps because of—these influences, Ondjaki appropriates “Luandanidade” in his writing, and brings the concept to new heights in *Os Transparentes*. Luanda comes through beyond the numerous references to the city proper, by way of the grandmother’s litany in *umbundu* and the influence of telenovelas in the characters’ language choices; through the texture of shells and running water; through the taste of whisky and of the fries offered by a concerned father to a corrupt policeman. Ondjaki invents a language of the city, one that sometimes forgoes conventional grammar, creates words, congregates all proper names, and seeks to reproduce in writing the transparent voices of Luanda.

The paradox is manifold and important in understanding the development of Angolan literature, including the space claimed by Ondjaki within this literary tradition. In fact, many Angolan writers held high ranks within the leading party of the MPLA, while also being critical of the regime. Writing of the 1980s is particularly associated with “social consciousness” (Arenas 165) and “critical consciousness” (Chabal *Post-colonial Literature* 112) as

Angolan fiction writers such as Manuel Rui in addition to Pepetela vividly document the shift from the collective euphoria surrounding the socialist project as initially posited by the MPLA to its transformation into an oligarchic state largely divorced from the needs and aspirations of the poor majority, reflecting not only “class colonialism” but also the mechanisms of the ‘coloniality of power’ at work. (Arenas xxvii)

In terms of style, the literature of the 1980s that inspire Ondjaki’s writings is associated with irony and humor:

In Angola there is also a strong critical consciousness which finds an expression in the irony of much of the literature of the 1980s. The work of Manuel Lima, Manuel Rui and

¹⁴ Indeed, few Angolan urban novels were set outside of Luanda during the first thirty years of Independence. As peace solidified, and especially after the second presidential elections of 2008, writers invested other Angolan spaces more than in previous decades. See for example Pepetela’s *O Planalto e a Estepe* (2009) and *A Sul. O Sombreiro* (2011), Manuel Rui’s *A Casa do Rio* (2007), which starts in Luanda but gets away from the capital and *Janela de Sónia* (2009). Interestingly, the same historical moment is the one Ondjaki chooses for his grand Luanda novel, since *Os Transparentes* came out in 2012.

Pepetela, for example, gives evidence of humour, parody and even the grotesque. To be ironic about Angolan society is one way of being critical about the social and historical changes which have (or have not) taken place since independence (Chabal *Post-colonial Literature* 112).

Politically committed texts and humor thus go hand in hand in Angolan writing, which is also a way of making the criticism palatable considering that the regime being criticized was still and remains in power to this day.¹⁵

Urban narratives have been a strong trait of Angolan literature since before Independence. Although in terms of volume, it would be difficult to speak of a genre of the “Luanda novel” in the way I have in the case of Lagos, in terms of ratio, the term might be warranted. The most-well known texts of Angolan literature are novels set in Luanda, and many of them are “urban novels,” dating as far back as 1963. Often, these texts have served to document the discrepancy between ideal and social reality, especially in the writings of three major figures of Angolan literature, Luandino Vieira, Manuel Rui, and Pepetela.¹⁶ Vieira, a writer who chose Luandino as his pen name and named his collection of short stories *Luuanda* (1963) can also be credited with bringing “Luandanidade” into fiction writing. In chapter 1, I discussed Ken Bugul’s choice to use the Wolof spelling of Ndakaaru; similarly, Vieira uses the Kimbundu spelling of Luuanda for his short story collection title.¹⁷ *Luuanda* represents perhaps the first attempt to write an imaginary of the city from the perspective of its *musseques* (its

¹⁵ More specifically, Ondjaki was two years old when Neto died, after which Angola’s second President Eduardo Dos Santos ruled the country from 1979 until 2017, that is to say for 38 years. In all likelihood, at the time he wrote *Os Transparentes*, in which there is a President character, Dos Santos would have been the only presidential leader Ondjaki ever remembered.

¹⁶ These three male writers, arguably Angola’s most important prose writers and all of them founding members of the UEA according to Adebayo Oyeade (58), participated in the national and literary building project that Neto exposed in 1977. Beyond that, they share many characteristics as Leite underscores in her chapter, as Gititi also notes in his foreword to Manuel Rui’s *Yes, Comrade*.

¹⁷ Scholars have also commented on the collection’s subtitle of “estórias,” which underscores orality in a way the more conventional term “histórias” does not. See Chabal and Hamilton, but also Tania Macêdo and Phyllis Peres. In his foreword to the English version of *Yes, Comrade*, Gititi builds upon this term to relate it also to Manuel Rui’s writing and the relationship between the nascent Angolan state and orality (Gititi xv).

slums).¹⁸ In the three short stories, Vieira innovates formally with Kimbundu mixed in the narrative, a formal echo of Vieira's narrative focus on the underrepresented lives of poor Luandans. In a special journal issue devoted to *Luuanda*, Ondjaki wrote in homage to Vieira, “o português, tão seu, era de uma aspereza poética e perturbadora” (Passos and Brugioni 71) [“his Portuguese, so unique, had a poetic and disturbing roughness”]. As Paul Melo e Castro notes, *Luuanda* portrays oppression in colonial Luanda but also possibilities from the perspective of the “musseques.” An important fact to keep in mind with regards to other African spaces is that in 1963, Independence is still a decade away for war-torn Angola; another is that at the time of publication of *Luuanda*, Vieira was in prison, where he would remain for another 8 years, a further sign of the presence of conflict that gives more *gravitas* to the term “war trophy.” After Independence this time, Manuel Rui's *Sim Camarada* (1977) is the first collection of stories published by the UEA—the year of Neto's speech—that addresses post-independence Luanda, and more precisely the moments leading to and immediately following Independence. A few years later, Rui's *Quem me dera ser onda* (1982), the story of two children who sneak in a pig they have adopted in their building, continues to challenge the boundaries of Portuguese while performing a subtle and playful criticism of the socialist ideals that Rui himself helped enforce in his official role in the regime.¹⁹ Pepetela's *O Cão e os Caluandas* (1985) presents the city through the encounters between a German shepherd and the *Caluandas*, the inhabitants of Luanda, as the former wanders around the city.²⁰ More recently, urban novels set in Luanda include José Eduardo Agualusa's *O Vendedor de Passados* (2004)—a novel about selling

¹⁸ For more analysis of this text, see Hamilton, Chabal, Melo e Castro.

¹⁹ Manuel Rui held several official institutional and diplomatic roles, including the position of minister of information in the transitional government and, after Independence, head of the MPLA's Department for External Relations, amongst other positions (Gititi x).

²⁰ For more on this novel, see *Portanto... Pepetela*. For an analysis in French on the city in Pepetela's fiction, see *Pepetela et l'écriture du mythe et de l'histoire*.

invented pasts; *A Teoria Geral do Esquecimento* (2013), about a woman who walled herself in her Luandan apartment for three decades out of fear amidst the anti-colonial conflict and ensuing violence in the capital; and of course Ondjaki's own work.

Now, where does *Os Transparentes* fit within the strong tradition of writing humorous social critiques set in Luanda, as they have been most identified with Luandino Vieira, Manuel Rui, and Pepetela? In many ways, Ondjaki's novel sets itself up as heir to the tradition. The novel's acknowledgements start with Manuel Rui, who shared with Ondjaki the anecdote that bookends the novel, about the color "lazy red." Ondjaki comes in the wake of the most prominent Angolan writers, but much like the other writers included in this dissertation, he was not part of the generation responsible for establishing and shaping postcolonial Angolan literature. Although the filiation between the writing of the 1980s and Ondjaki is strong, Ondjaki brings his own twist to Luanda-based urban novels, including through his focus on bodies, but also by pushing the boundaries between literal and metaphorical in an unparalleled way.²¹ Arenas also sees a difference in that "the heavy utopian investment by writers in the creation of a free and just society under a Marxist-Leninist banner, even among those writers who served in government positions, has receded in favor of a multiplicity of cultural, sociopolitical, and historical concerns at a macro- and micrological level" (165). Like in chapter four on New Bell, the question of scale is crucial to understanding Ondjaki's project in *Os Transparentes*. The number of characters and perspectives point to a large-scale panorama of Luanda, and so does the size of the novel, a breach in the tradition of shorter texts, many of which qualify as novellas rather than novels. That is true of Ondjaki's other works, but also of *Quem me dera ser onda*—

²¹ Ondjaki's influences also include Mozambican writer Mia Couto, as well as Brazilian regionalist writers such as João Guimarães Rosa. Angolan writers read other Portuguese-speaking writers perhaps more so than they do Francophone and Anglophone African writers, another sign of what Arenas called the double subalternity of Lusophone Africa.

48 pages, *Luuanda*—around 120 pages—and *O Cão e os Caluandas*, longer with 165 pages, but still a fairly short novel. Hamilton relates the prominence of short stories in Angola to several criteria, including lack of resources and a sense of “dramatic urgency” (*Voices From an Empire* 129) on the part of committed writers. The 430 pages of *Os Transparentes* offer a stark contrast with this tradition of shorter fiction.²² *Os Transparentes* is a third-person narrative that follows a plethora of characters through their experience of the city. Whenever the narrative “zooms in”—like in Beyala’s novel, the cinematic metaphor is warranted here by Ondjaki’s writing style—on a set of characters, their voices come through by way of indirect free speech. Ondjaki keeps with the tradition of writing everyday anecdotes and interactions but in such a long novel, the multiplication of characters and events has a dizzying effect. Considering the allegorical nature of characters, there seems to be on Ondjaki’s part a desire to paint as much of Luanda as possible. Although the novel mainly centers on the characters living in the building—as Manuel Rui’s *Quem me Dera ser Onda* did in 1982—the novel provides a panorama of Luanda that to some extent narratively expands upon the main character’s view from the terrace of the building. At the same time, each character is presented with little context, mainly through interactions as dialogues prevail, and each scene appears as a close-up rather than a long shot, to redeploy the cinematic metaphor.

Os Transparentes reads as one long story of Luanda made of a plurality of voices. At the syntactical level, sentences start with a lowercase letter and there is no punctuation at the end of paragraphs; the ensuing effect is that of paragraphs that seemingly melt into one another. Frequent line breaks also create a visual effect whereby the text resembles the stories of the

²² *Os Transparentes* is not the only example, as post-war Angolan fiction from the 2000s onwards includes longer novels; for instance Manuel Rui’s *Janela de Sónia* stands at over 450 pages. This would tend to confirm Hamilton’s argument that part of the reason for shorter texts was a sort of urgency. After the war ends is also the moment when writers can begin to earn a living from their art, which changes the practical conditions of creation and allows for longer works of fiction.

building, stacked up one onto another. Endless sentences punctuated mostly by commas mimic a flow of urban thoughts that does not stop when scenes or characters change. For instance, two scenes collapse at some point, when a first character gives something to a second character, but it's a third character's "Thank you" that appears on the page, for something a fourth character did in a different location. This explosion of orthographic and typesetting boundaries exposes, on another level, the conditions of urban confusion in a city on the verge of—literal—collapse.

Of all the novels under study in this dissertation, *Os Transparentes* belongs the least to a realist genre. Ondjaki's Luanda is clearly set as a literary urban imaginary, a poetic construction alone. Social elements are caricatured to show the irony of the postcolonial regime. There also seems to be a desire for Ondjaki to create a world where known references do not quite apply. For instance, all proper names in the novel are written as one word, with capitalized letters indicating where a new word would have started. Ondjaki does something similar in *Granma Nineteen* as well as in *Quantas madrugadas tem a noite*. About the latter, Arenas writes, "Quantas madrugadas tem a noite involves a gallery of eccentric characters with outlandish names [...] Even though all the human characters (who happen to be the narrator's friends) are marginalized figures in their society, none is presented as a victim. They all survive creatively amid the chaos of Luanda in a picaresque twist" (182). Arenas' analysis applies to this novel as well. In addition, names given by others or linked to one's social function matter more than first or given names, indicating that people represent social categories and not only individuals. For example, the names of the tax inspectors—DestaVez and DaOutra ["This Time and Next Time, the tax inspectors" *TC* 169]—expose the two men whose bureaucratic function does not allow any distinguishing factor between them. There is irony also in the name of DomCristalino (Crystal-Clear), a shady businessman who attempts to privatize the water system in the city, and

even more so in the name of the Church IgrejaDaOvelinhaSagrada (Church of the Sacred Little Lamb). Ondjaki plays with the absurd, adding to the sometimes-surrealist tone of the novel. Beyond playful irony, names also serve to reveal important and sometimes silenced or contradictory aspects of the characters. In the case of Paizinho, a war orphan who was separated from his mother during the conflict, his name that translates to Sweet or Little Father also seems to encase questions about role or status in a post-war society.

Ondjaki also plays with ambiguity in language, using terms that usually characterize animate beings to talk about inanimate objects and vice versa. For all intents and purposes, Luanda is alive in the novel. Verbs like to “shake,” to “sweat,” adjectives like “agitated,” “sleepwalking,” “howling” and “blood-drenched” give subjectivity to the city’s suffering. The building, used as a metonym for the city, “tinha sete andares e respirava como uma entidade viva” (*OT* 16) [“had seven floors and breathed like a living body,” *TC* 12]. The building functions like a haven that “o prédio tinha este dom de acolher quem entendesse dever acolher” (*OT* 185) [“the building welcomed whoever it understood must be welcomed” *TC* 138], while rejecting others, in particular government representatives. When the two tax inspectors imply as much, the young Paizinho laughs at them: “o prédio anda ‘a deixar cair’? o senhor tem certeza que esse português tá bem formulado? Um prédio é um imóvel que, por natureza própria não se mexe” (*OT* 136) [“the building’s ‘letting them fall’? are you sure that Portuguese is correctly formulated? a building is immobile, by its nature it doesn’t move around” *TC* 103]. The cheeky and innocent question is quite ironic, as the entire novel suggests the contrary. There are countless examples of this throughout the novel.

Ondjaki’s Luanda is fueled by metaphoric presence/absence, and the impact of the senses—stimulated and/or disabled—over everyday urban life. The mix of these two strands in

his writing makes *Os Transparentes* at times reads as sensorially very close to the daily experiences of Luandans and at other times like a Surrealist animated painting. Much like in Calixthe Beyala's *Les honneurs perdus*, the sense of reality is constantly challenged. The novel intersperses black pages with white text within the narrative. Allegedly, these pages present documents related to the narrative that complement it, including transcriptions of recordings, (fictional?) author's notes, and even the last thoughts of a character whose death the previous chapter just announced. The alleged author's notes start, "Era um prédio, talvez um mundo" (*OT* 74) ["it was a building, maybe a world" *TC* 58]. The intended function and texture of animate or inanimate matter is not to be trusted in *Os Transparentes*. Of three references to "maps" that I have noted, none refer to a visual representation of land. First, there is a broken mirror that resembles a map (*OT* 148). Later, the dying Paizinho sees "desenhado no chão o mapa do seu próprio sangue," but the blood that forms a map also represents "[a] saudade da sua mãe" (*OT* 379) ["saw the map of his own blood spread on the ground (...) longing for his mother" *TC* 285]. Finally, the dirty waters that run in between two *musseques* form a topographical reminder of the map of Angola (*OT* 397), a comparison that is symbolically significant considering the importance *musseques* have played in framing "Angolanidade."

Overall, the linguistic inventiveness of Ondjaki's novel seems to spring at once from a long tradition of appropriating Portuguese and using humor and irony for social critique, as well as from the writer's poetic project of infusing life into the fictional city of Luanda as the novel animates it.

II. "Um jejum social": Odonato as Urban Allegory

Odonato, the character whose transparency is alluded to in the title, refers to the fact that the people that so mattered in Neto's speech have become, physically and symbolically, transparent. Like in chapter two's focus on urban bodies in Kinshasa, this section will pay particular attention to how bodies sense the city and how they are affected by it through a close reading of Odonato. The character, whose body records and speaks the collective voice of Luandans, calls for an interpretation of "body politics" in this novel.

The ecological implications of the fire that begins and ends the novel are echoed by the semiotics of the main character and location of the narrative. Odonato is one of the most central characters, since he is the one who is slowly becoming transparent. To return to the importance of names, "odonatos" ("odonatas" in English) are an order of carnivorous insects with transparent wings, to which dragonflies belong. Miguel et al. call *odonatas* "bioindicators" that can signal the quality of a certain—aquatic—environment because of their sensitivity to environmental changes, and particularly to what in ecology is called anthropogenic disturbance, or the negative impact of human presence on the environment. Like his insect namesake, the character of Odonato in the novel functions as a bioindicator for Luanda. His character is the first and most affected by the negative impact of men on the city, bearing the traces of the anthropocene on his own body. The natural milieu for dragonflies is aquatic, which is interesting in parallel with the novel, since Maianga, the upscale neighborhood where the narrative takes place, used to be submerged in water. In fact, Maianga comes from a Kimbundu word that means "lagoas" ("pond" or "lake"), and "lagoas" are at once where Odonato lives and where *odonatos* (used to) live.

Maianga somewhat differs from the other spaces considered in this dissertation in that it is a central, expensive area where artists reside.²³ In that sense, although poverty and decay play a significant role in the lives of the characters of this specific building, the neighborhood they inhabit does not belong to a marginalized, peripheral area of Luanda akin to New Bell (Douala) or Parcelles Assainies (Dakar).²⁴ Once an area beneath sea level, Maianga threatens to disappear again, this time at once caving in and destroyed by fire.

The parallel drawn between Odonato and the city itself accentuates the impression that the city and the man are both alive and suffering. At first, Odonato's predicament seems physical. Having stopped eating, the character becomes increasingly transparent and lighter. In a novel that already features a blind character that listens to smells and a man with an unusually sized testicle, Odonato's loss of body matter does not appear out of place. After all, the entire building functions in an unconventional manner, including the water that "speaks" in the constantly flooded first floor, and the otherwise lack of running water. Odonato later explains that he started refusing food out of principle, not wanting to depend on the scraps or generosity of others. His gesture must be read as a political one; the character becomes increasingly overt in his critique of the government as the novel progresses. He reveals to his wife almost halfway into the novel: "Não somos transparentes por não comer... nós somos transparentes porque somos pobres" (*OT* 203) ["we're not transparent because we don't eat... we're transparent because we're poor," *TC* 152]. This is a key sentence in the novel, because, for the first time, Odonato here links his invisibility with that of the city's poor. In other words, those who *have nothing* soon *become nothing*, and in Luanda, they are not *seen*. Ironically, everybody starts paying

²³ Ondjaki—the only writer amongst the ones I have mentioned who was born and raised in Luanda—comes from and still resides in Maianga, and so does Manuel Rui. Maianga is also the setting for Rui's *Quem me Dera Ser Onda*.

²⁴ In fact, a 2008 news article from the Portuguese newspaper *Público* reports that Maianga is one of the two most expensive areas of Luanda.

attention to Odonato only because they can see through him. Interestingly, Odonato becomes transparent to everybody, not only to representatives of the state. There is no viable life for those who are not taken into consideration, no space outside the state that could offer respite. In that, Ondjaki's Luanda is different from Beyala's New Bell, where Couscoussians are "transparent" to the rest of the world but manage to survive within the confines of New Bell. For Odonato, transparency follows an inevitable and degenerative progression that affects his appearance for all to see.

The other key to interpreting this sentence is Odonato's use of the personal pronoun in its plural form, "we," suggesting, as the title of the novel also does, that he is not the only one that is transparent. Odonato's transparency carries the invisibility of many beyond him; his awareness of his collective power only seems to add weight to the character, ultimately increasing his transparency. At some point, Odonato asks the two tax inspectors, "por acaso, vocês, sabem quem sou eu?" (*OT* 143) ["by chance, do you know who i am?" *TC* 108], a question he answers himself, "eu sou parte deste povo! do povo angolano. o povo... conhecem essa palavra? é uma palavra cheia de gente!" (144) ["i'm part of the people! the Angolan people, the people... do you know that word? it's a word that contains human beings!" *TC* 108]. Odonato embraces the "we." References to the people are a common discursive tool of socialism, and were particularly important in the rhetoric of the MPLA, as indicated by one of its most famous slogans "o MPLA é o povo, e o povo é o MPLA." Neto's speech, with which I opened this chapter, similarly underscores the importance of the people, present in every word, every thought. By way of Odonato, Ondjaki denounces the failure of the socialist promise of placing the people at the center of the political agenda, a recurring feature of Angolan literature. In fact, in the novel, all the characters close to the government show selfishness, allowing corporate interests to guide

urban development and overtake ecological needs. Perhaps the strongest example of that is the government-supported project of privatizing water transportation, and in the end, water itself. Odonato's character and discourse imply something else as well; if the government cannot represent the people perhaps he, who is one of them, can, even if it is only by making his body the bearer of the pain suffered by the people of Luanda.

What I would like to show here is the triangulation in Ondjaki's novel, by way of which Odonato = Luandans = Luanda. Perhaps the most overt discussion of Odonato's role comes in a conversation with a BBC journalist. The woman questions Odonato on his transparency after admitting *she* has never been transparent. Although her statement can be read at the individual level, her position as journalist of a major foreign media outlet further relates physical transparency to a lack of consideration on a local and global stage.

- disse que acha justo a aparência?
- porque é um símbolo. a transparência é um símbolo. e eu amo esta cidade ao ponto de fazer tudo por ela. chegou a minha vez, não podia recusar
- como assim?
- não sei explicar muito bem, e é sobre isso que fico a pensar, quando me ponho sozinho no terraço a sentir o vento e a olhar a cidade. um homem pode ser um povo, a sua imagem pode ser a do povo...
- e o povo é transparente?
- o povo é belo, dançante, arrogante, fantasioso, louco, bêbado... Luanda é uma cidade de gente que se fantasia de outra coisa qualquer
- não é o povo que é transparente...—tenta a jornalista
- não, não é todo o povo. há alguns que são transparentes. acho que a cidade fala pelo meu corpo...
- é esta a sua verdade—murmurou a jovem jornalista
- é preciso deixar a verdade aparecer, ainda que seja preciso desaparecer. está a gravar? (OT 283-4)

“you said you felt the appearance was fair?”

“because it's a symbol, transparency is a symbol, and i love this city to a point where i'd do anything for it, it was my turn, i couldn't refuse”

“what do you mean?”

“i don't know how to explain it very well, and that's what i keep thinking about, when i go and sit by myself on the terrace and feel the wind and stare out at the city, a man can be a people, his image can be that of a people...”

“the people are transparent?”

“the people are beautiful, merry, arrogant, fantastical, crazy, drunken... Luanda is a city of people who fantasize about anything they can imagine”

“it’s not the people who are transparent...” the journalist tried

“no, it’s not all the people, there are some who are transparent, i figure this city is speaking through my body...”

“that’s the truth of your life,” the young journalist murmured

“it’s important to let the truth appear, even at the cost of disappearing, are you recording?” (*TC* 213)

Here the triangular relationship appears clearly. “a man can be a people” leaves no doubt as to the symbolic role that Odonato perceives for his transparency. What perhaps appears less clearly at first but is crucial to the novel is how that relationship between an individual and the people relates to the city. The symbolic nature of his transparency, Odonato explains to the journalist, comes as his way to serve the city, showing a strong tie between body politics and urban politics. The physical transparency of the man reproduces the social transparency of the people and is duplicated by the holes drilled into the city, literally hollowing it out. Odonato loses substance at the same rhythm as the city loses stability.

The city is how Odonato relates to the people. From the rooftop terrace, he observes the city, but not the bird’s eye view that Michel de Certeau describes in the case of high rises. For de Certeau, that view introduces distance and a kind of coldness. On the contrary, Odonato seems to absorb the city from the terrace. The communion, almost fusion, between his being and the city can only end in annihilation; the wellbeing of the city—its structure, infrastructure and architecture—and the wellbeing of its people—their bodies and social beings—are ignored, transparent to those who vowed to protect them. Similarly, walking the streets of Luanda does not bring any relief to Odonato, nor does it bring the kind of perspective de Certeau describes in “*Marches dans la ville.*” Instead, Odonato is overwhelmed by nostalgia that encompasses his own and a collective form of nostalgia for a utopia that never came into being. Walking in the

city, he imagines it as a “desert” (*OT* 181, *TC* 136) where forms of collective empathy no longer apply. His loneliness and pain increase as he experiences the city from down below. Considering the fact that Ondjaki personifies objects, it is quite possible that Odonato does feel the pain of Luanda by empathy. Sentences like “Odonato viu-se de peito revolto a sentir claras saudades de uma Luanda que ali havia sem já haver” (*OT* 182) [“Odonato’s chest was agitated as he felt an undeniable yearning for a Luanda that was there without being there,” *TC* 136] seem to indicate a direct correlation between the fate of Luanda and his own. He acts as a bioindicator that not only records the ways in which the city is physically affected—like dragonflies in aquatic areas—but also its disillusionments and failed promises; Odonato is bioindicator for memory as well.

The question—“are you recording?”—relates of course to the journalist’s recording of the conversation, but also seems to have a deeper meaning. If the people become transparent, if his body records invisibility, then how can that transparency be memorialized? The novel becomes the archive that records the experiences, hopes and disillusionments of Luandans. Although the character of Odonato sometimes wallows in nostalgia for how the city used to be, the novel as a whole strives to present a more complete image of Luanda, one where Neto’s political project never became reality. To mourn it as Odonato does is to mourn a fantasy. This is why the novel presents a narrative choir with multiple storylines crossing and echoing one another as many recordings of Luanda playing all at the same time.

III. Traces of Destruction: Holes, War and Fire

Fiction acts as the repository for the pains of Luanda that become visible because they are see-through. These pains are of a physical nature—holes, fire, collapse—and of a more psychological nature—war, corruption. Questions of memory and forgetting and what constitutes

traces of the city's story recur throughout the novel, be it through the references to the holes being dug into the streets of Luanda or by the underlying presence of war throughout the narrative. Ondjaki channels his social critique by showing how characters are affected by and respond to different events. Luanda and Luandans are under attack throughout *Os Transparentes*, from the concrete digging of holes in the search of underground oil that threaten the structural stability of the city, to the fire that destroys entire areas of the city, and including the looming trauma of war. The images of holes and fire are at once powerful social and political images, while capturing a poetic potentiality that Ondjaki mines in the novel. They are, in their way, relatively transparent images, which makes them didactic. They are strong visual markers of destruction. War is also a visual sign of destruction, except war functions in the opposite way in *Os Transparentes* and in Luanda. In his personal essay, Ondjaki relegated war to South of Luanda. Yet the narrative keeps going back to the war(s) as something that affects people in invisible and uncountable ways that memories and war narratives may not sufficiently account for. Behind the more obvious critique of neoliberal political and corporate interests, the holes and fire are also traceable attacks on the city and on its inhabitants that also mean to express less visible wounds.

Holes are the perfect metaphor. Much like Odonato's body, the city is affected by the institutional treatment of it. Prospecting for underground oil cause the digging of holes all over the city and particularly in the Maianga neighborhood by an entity mysteriously hidden behind the acronym CIPEL: the Comissão Instaladora do Petróleo Encontrável em Luanda. CIPEL signs retrace the ongoing and upcoming hollowing out of the city by way of literal holes. Mysterious acronyms are a characteristic of global capitalism. The holes signal how Luandans are locally affected by decisions taken by individuals high up the command chain, somewhat distanced from

the city's "ground." Policies are enacted in the streets and neighborhoods the characters call home in the name of hypothetical profits these inhabitants will never see. Oil is of course an important topic in Luanda and the source of much of the city's riches. The gap between its extremely wealthy and powerful minority and the majority whose poverty can no longer be accommodated by the city widens. However, much of the oil drilling takes place offshore. By bringing oil back in Luanda, and by drilling fictional holes into the very structure of the city, Ondjaki discursively shows that such decisions affect all Luandans in a way that may be obscured when spatial distance comes into play. The effect of holes being drilled up against the stability of the city express the emotional toll and physical threat of the holes rather than the economic aspects other modes of communication—such as the President's speech in the novel—may underscore.

Fiction gives words to the daily attacks on everyday Luandans, and Ondjaki includes but also moves beyond the underground oil holes. It seems as though Luanda is a body that suffers through the same indifference the people does. The city does not become transparent like Odonato, but instead it threatens to cave in on itself because of all the holes caused by the oil prospect. The holes represent the presence of an absence; holes show what is no longer there, implying that something was there in the first place. Transparency works in a similar manner. Odonato's body is never as present as when it is no longer there, no longer visible, therefore making it worthy of narrative visibility. Luanda is actually full of holes:

a cidade estava um caos com obras novas e antigas a acontecer ao mesmo tempo, mais as tais escavações da CIPEL, mais os buracos para instalação de televisão a cabo, mais os buracos da chuva e os buracos abertos que nunca ninguém se lembrará de pavimentar e os dos miúdos que viviam no subsolo da cidade e que agora, coitados, deveriam ser expulsos pela vinda da nova canalização ou mesmo pela instalação da perigosa maquinaria que deveria extrair o petróleo. (OT 112)

the city was in chaos with new and old construction projects competing for space, and then there were the CIROL excavations, as well as the holes for installing cable television, as well as the holes from the rain and the open potholes that no one remembered to pave over and the holes of the kids who lived beneath the city's streets and who now—poor saps—would be expelled to make way for new pipes or even for the installation of the dangerous machinery that would extract petroleum (*TC* 86)

In this passage, children are replaced by machinery, a perverse version of the boundaries being blurred between animate and inanimate. Disembodied decisions made for financial profit or political gain affect people, especially vulnerable inhabitants, here represented by homeless children. These children are not the *shégués* of Kinshasa I discussed in my second chapter, whose bodies are threatened with displacement but who fight back. The two characters described as children—one is an actual child, the other is Odonato's adult son—in the novel exhibit a lot of resilience, but they are ultimately unable to defeat the system, nor even to survive within it. Indeed, despite its poetic, often playful, tone, *Os Transparentes* imposes death as a common ending in the characters' trajectories, especially of the young characters, perhaps because Luanda as it appears in the novel fails to provide a future for its youth.

The deaths of Odonato's son CientedoGrã and young orphan Paizinho are meaningless and uncomfortably mix humor—from ridiculous situations—and tragic outcomes. There perhaps, the unspoken influence of many decades of war also influences the narrative. There too, metaphors and literal meanings converge in sometimes confusing, often striking ways. When a thief admits he killed the young Paizinho over a stolen phone, he repeats twice, “furei o gajo” (*OT* 373), using a verb that literally means “to perforate, to open a hole” and which Henighan translates first as “I robbed the guy” and then as “I drilled the guy” (*TC* 280). Holes are therefore not simply drilled into the ground, but into people as well, and from them, only destruction ensues.

The novel begins and ends with a fire that devours everything and claims lives on the way, its path facilitated by the tunnels that have been dug in the quest for oil. The fire is another element that affects the city and people. Even more so, the fire that devours the city echoes that which started in the loins of a character, after a blank section break,

Beijaram—se de bocas abertas, desajeitadas, estreando nos seus ventres um fogo que assim se autorizava a chegar.

o fogo
começou num curto-circuito no coração do LargoDaMaianga (...) (*OT* 410)

they kissed with open, clumsy mouths, inaugurating a fire in their stomachs that took this as its cue to grow and spread.

the fire
began with a short circuit in the heart of Maianga Square” (*TC* 306)

Body parts—mouths, stomachs, heart—are attributed to the two humans and to the city in an indiscriminate manner, and they seem traversed by the same fire, as indicated by the definite pronoun that starts the second sentence: “o fogo,” “the fire.” Nothing grammatically affirms that the heart of Maianga Square is not beating with life. A couple of pages later, a new chapter starts with “a cidade estremecia a cada curva do fogo” (*OT* 415) [“the city writhed at each twist of fire” *TC* 311], using the same reference to “o fogo” and the image of a trembling city that reminds us of a body shaken by desire as much as it does a burning city. In fact, the sensual descriptions of the fire perhaps celebrate its cleansing—albeit destructively so—properties, as the novel appears at times to suggest that a clean state is the only way forward for Luanda, a lesson that “only fire can teach” (*TC* 10).

Amongst the traces of destruction, the visibility of which is questioned within the narrative and made present by the novel, one of the most complex and least easily accessible ones is the war. Present in touches throughout the narrative, the war mostly belongs to details,

side anecdotes, secondary characters. A unique factor in Angolan History and literature is that as soon as the War for Independence ended, an internal war for power began, leading to over four decades of almost uninterrupted armed conflict in the country. In the words of Leite, “Angolan literature reflects this history of sustained armed violence and unimaginable destruction” (Chabal *Post-colonial Literature* 117). Perhaps a difference between Ondjaki’s novel and the socially conscious novels from the 1980s is that Ondjaki writes *after* the War a narrative temporally situated *after* the War; yet, the absent War remains ever present in the narrative and in the minds of Luandans. That being said, Ondjaki does not narrate the war, neither in *Os Transparentes*, nor for instance in *Bom dia camaradas*. The war is this transparent trauma that people passed through whether they actually were aware of it or not. The war circulates as “o fantasma da guerra” (OT 208), fueled and to some extent circumscribed by stories that are part-memory, part-fiction. It’s a “cicatriz social” (OT 209). To attempt to express that trauma—which is what cannot be expressed—*Caluandas* make up stories that they call memories (“os impressionantes episódios que efabulavam por força de necessitarem deles” OT 208, “the breathtaking episodes they concocted because they needed them” TC 155), to a point where memories and stories become indiscernible.

The war is another paradox between presence and absence. People process their experience—real or invented—through stories that allow them to deal with the “cicatrizas” (OT 208, “scars” TC 155), physical and otherwise. The narrative voice describes this process:

um modo, digamos assume, coletivo de vivenciar a guerra e os seus episódios, os combates e as suas consequências, memo que fosse de ter ouvido falar, ou de se ter escutado na radio, antigamente, nos dias em que a guerra de facto havia sido um elemento cruel mas banal da realidade e, ainda hoje, dissociar a guerra do quotidiano era quase um pecado (OT 208)

to put it another way, a means of experiencing the war and its episodes at a profound level, the battles and their consequences, even if it were just from hearing about them, or

listening to them on radio broadcasts, in the time before, in the days when the war, in fact, had been a cruel yet banal part of reality, and, even today, dissociating the war from daily life was almost a sin” (TC 155)

The war permeates the narrative in several ways and always seems related to a collective form of grieving. For instance war orphan Paizinho’s quest to find the mother from whom he was separated during the war becomes a collective task for the building.

When the fire spreads, leading to explosions throughout the city, people immediately assume it’s the war again, showing how present it remains in the minds of Luandans.²⁵ This is represented in the narrative by an old woman “que se havia cruzado na vida com todas as guerras da cidade,” [“whose path had crossed all of the city’s wars”] to whom an unnamed voice says, “às vezes não é isso!” (OT 411) [“it’s not always a war!” TC 307]. Nevertheless, “os ruídos misturavam-se às memórias das gentes de Luanda” (OT 411) [“the sounds blending into the memories of the peoples of Luanda,” TC 307] writes Ondjaki. War and memory are intricately, intimately mixed in the narrative. Every new catastrophe is a reminder and a trigger of wars that traumatized Angola at the dawn of its Independence and for over thirty years afterwards.

IV. A City Ablaze with Color

If Ondjaki is invested in sharing a sense of literary “Luandanidade” with *Os Transparentes*, this project must be read as a socio-political and aesthetic project, one that takes readers on a cinematic, sensory and sensual journey through Luanda. Just as he portrays hollowness and destruction, Ondjaki infuses the city with sensory and artistic experiences. In Ondjaki’s own words, “what resonates in Angola is music and image” (Martin and Moorman

²⁵ Ondjaki uses a similar device in *Bom Dia Camaradas* by way of a supposed guerilla group known as Caixão Vazio (or Empty Crate), which terrifies children even though they turn out to be an empty threat. All signs that they might exist and might choose the school as their next target, is enough to throw panic around. In the fear the characters feel and in the narrative, there is little difference between what actually happens and what it could be.

42); *Os Transparentes* is a prose gesture towards that echo of music and image. Despite the pain shared between Odonato, Luandans and Luanda, the capital city shines through the narrative, taking in color against all odds. There is an intense cinematic quality to *Os Transparentes*. This section will hone in on the images developed in the novel, the role of imagination, and the importance of the senses in particular as they are reflected through cinema, colors, and dancing. In Ondjaki's novel, all three involve the body and the sensory experience of the city. The novel sets these three elements particularly as potentialities and movements that counter the pervasiveness of transparency. In fact, and considering how much synesthesia plays in the poetics of the novel, they are all key factors in giving characters a voice, whether that voice may be made of sound, movement, or sensations.

The first artistic "voice" is that of cinema, and it comes by way of the illegal silent rooftop theater created on top of the building in Maianga by JoãoDevagar, another tenant and in many ways an anti-Odonato.²⁶ The movie theater first emerges not as an artistic venture, but as a business one. This is one of many such endeavors JoãoDevagar pursues, including the Church of the Sacred Little Lamb. Odonato's body bears the stigmas of global capitalism and corruption in the city. JoãoDevagar on the other hand reacts to the same socioeconomic conditions with enthusiasm and seemingly unending energy, a contradictory and ironic trait for a character whose name literally means João Slowly. He turns around and takes advantage of every opportunity in order to survive and even thrive. In that sense, JoãoDevagar is closer to Kinshasa's *shégués* or New Bell's Couscoussians. He asks, "aqui em Luanda há alguma coisa que não se pode fazer?"

²⁶ The theme of movies and movie cinemas is dear to Ondjaki as he directed a documentary film on Luanda. Ondjaki regrets that the documentary was not shown in Luanda despite his attempts (Martin and Moorman). In a journal article, Marissa Moorman also underlines the poor state of cinematic production and circulation in Angola (103). In Ch. 1, I noted that Ken Bugul laments the state of cinema in Senegal; Moorman argues that Angola is in a much worse situation than Senegal partially due to—and Ondjaki mentions that in the interview as well—lack of external funding.

(OT 27) [“is there anything you can’t do here in Luanda?” TC 20] and, when threatened by tax inspectors for his *kínguilas*—illegal currency exchange street “office”—“e como é que vão me fechar o negócio? fecham a rua?” (OT 104) [“and how are they gonna close my business? close the street?” TC 79]. JoãoDevagar rests his entire philosophy on the principle of endless opportunities born in the urban interstice, however nonsensical said business endeavors may appear. Ondjaki paints these opportunities as ingenious and absurd, often both at once. They are a tribute to the powers of imagination, while presenting a cynical image of the postcolonial city as a place where “sempre se pode falar de ‘quanto’, meus amigos, estamos em Luanda” (OT 356) [“one can always talk about ‘how much,’ my friends, we’re in Luanda!” TC 267]. JoãoDevagar is best fit to adapt to the absurdity of the global capitalist system where corruption and personal gain trump all ideals.

The project of the silent cinema, however, ties the monetization of everyday spaces with creativity. João seeks the approval of the other inhabitants for his project of open-air cinema, “agora vais poder imaginar o resto, à tua frente, num cenário de fim da tarde. Olhem para estes telhados, para esta cidade cheia de poeira, cheia de gente que vibra, e cheia de gente que, desde longe, não nos pode ver aqui... nós é que os podemos ver...” (OT 159) [“now you’ll be able to imagine the rest, in front of you a late afternoon scene, look out at those roof tiles, at this city full of dust, full of people who flutter about, from a distance they can’t see us... it’s we who can see them...” TC 119]. One character’s nostalgia becomes another’s sense of possibility. The gaze here is empowering, and echoed by the project, which suggest a sense of agency for the inhabitants. The project is such that “não vamos ter som, senão o som que as pessoas quiserem. são as pessoas, isoladamente ou em conjunto, que são convidadas a esboçar pelas suas próprias bocas o som do filme... você consegue imaginar? Vai ser uma maravilha!” (OT 163) [“we’re not

going to have sound, but rather the sounds that people want, it's the people, individually or together, who are invited to create the film's sounds from their own mouths... can you imagine that? It's going to be wonderful!" *TC* 122]. The reason for the lack of sound is the lack of electricity, but João twists adverse conditions into opportunities. By creating the sounds of the film, the audience—the people—can invent a collective voice, one that would give sound to an image and allow the collective to be not only heard, but also seen at the same time. Although the voices would still make up dialogues from images they did not create—specifically and whenever possible, adult films—the character of João represents the hope that the people may use an artistic medium to speak. The location of the rooftop, on top and at the epicenter of the city, is the space where such hope may be expressed, although the novel leaves little doubt as to the limited scope and scale such hope can reach.

In a visually striking way, Ondjaki imbues Luanda with colors. The novel opens and ends with the difficulty to compensate a lost sense—sight—with words. As the city burns, the Cego (Blind Man) asks the young Seashell Seller, “ainda me diz qual é a cor desse fogo” (*OT* 11) [“you still haven’t told me what color the fire is...” *TC* 9]. The first section of the text ends with the blind man repeating the same question (*OT* 13) before the narrative jumps to another scene. The question comes back on the page before last, which is to say within seconds for the two characters, and the end of a whole novel for the reader. This time, the young man answers, “é um vermelho devagarinho, mais-velho... é isso: um vermelho devagarinho” (*OT* 425) [“it’s a lazy red, elder... that’s what it is: a lazy red” *TC* 318]. Obviously the symbolism of red—at once socialism and fire—is powerful. Several times over, the red of the fire is contrasted with the pitch black of the night, with both colors forming the flag of Angola. The conversation also points to something else, as the old man needs the words of the young boy to make sense of what

is taking place around him. About his own childhood, Ondjaki writes, “Na Luanda em que cresci respeitávamos os gestos, as vozes e as histórias dos mais velhos” (“As Raízes Do Arco-Íris” 51) [“In the Luanda in which I grew up, we respected the actions, the voices and the stories of the elders”]. “Mais-velho” is the term SeaShell Seller uses for the Cego. Ondjaki’s work is generally concerned with childhood, which he represents many times over, and with elders.²⁷ The transmission he implies in the essay about his own childhood seems inverted at the scene that bookends *Os Transparentes*, as the youngster is portrayed as the protective figure, and the one who has access to words, and uses them to invent a color.

When colors come back throughout the novel, they are infused with a creative energy, “a luz não tinha explicação de cor, inventava tons amarelos no branco sujo da parede, servia-se da água para se reinventar em novos cinzas que não sabiam ser escuros; a água devolvia aos olhos do Carteiro pequeníssimos feixes azuis, avermelhados, cascatas concentradas” (*OT* 28-9) [“the light’s color couldn’t be explained, it invented yellow tones on the dirty white of the wall, dipped into the water to reinvent itself in greys that didn’t know how to be dark; the water reflected tiny blue beams, reddened, concentrated waterfalls, back into the Mailman’s eyes” *TC* 22]. The light invents and reinvents colors; there is life in the colors of the building to the point that the mailman assumes hunger makes him hallucinate. The entire experience becomes full of sexual energy for the Mailman, in a way that will be echoed in another scene with dancing. Colors recur, time and again, adding to the cinematic tone of the novel. Whenever they are mentioned, they are surprisingly vibrant, seemingly unexpected. The Blind Man feels an ode to colors,

o Cego sentia saudades das cores, de todas as cores
isso de algum dia ter visto o mundo era uma lembrança confusa—neblina de um sonho recentemente esquecido—, sentia dentro de si uma sólida saudade das cores, sabia imaginá-las, a quentura de um amarelo avermelhado, a tranquilidade de um azul céu, o

²⁷ See for instance Cardoso; Coutinho and Nascimento; Santos; Sarmento-Pantoja.

rosa fresco da parte interna de um mamão, a brandura de um verde seco e até mesmo a simplicidade implacável do branco (OT 61-2)

Blind Man yearned for colors, all colors
this business of once having seen the world around him as a foggy memory—mist from a recently forgotten dream—he felt within him a tenacious yearning for colors, he knew how to imagine them, the warmth of a reddish yellow, the peace of sky-blue, the fresh pink of the inside of a papaya and even the implacable simplicity of white (TC 47)

In a novel entitled *Os Transparentes*, such a strong presence of colors, and the association of colors with energy—even the destructive energy of the fire—speaks to the ways in which the city’s transparency can carry the many colors of urban experience. There also seems to be a message about how the colors of the city can be perceived, through the character of the blind man again:

- eu estava a lembrar cores
- então você já viu as cores
- sabe, as cores não são só de ver. há cores que eu sei na minha pele, nas minhas mãos. a vida tem muitos lugares... (OT 62)

‘i was remembering colors’
‘then you’ve seen colors’
‘you know, colors aren’t just for seeing, there are colors i know in my skin, in my hands, life has lots of different spots’ (TC 47)

As the voices of the audience can fill the silence of films without dialogue, unseen colors can be made visible in other ways. This perhaps explains why the senses matter so much in the narrative, including senses that are “disabled”—the Blind Man, the Mute—as way to promote alternative ways of sensing, and ultimately another discourse about sensing the city. The novel is intensely visual, but not only and it’s a full sensory experience that Ondjaki recreates poetically in his imaginary of Luanda, one that requires that one uses skin and hands to perceive life as it may not occur where and how it was supposed to.

In a novel where body politics matter so much that bodies become transparent as a result of people not being seen, the way bodies move to fight “transparency” is crucial. The

relationship between music and the body, particularly through dancing, appears to provide another way of engaging the city. In the interview with Moorman and Martin, Ondjaki declares, “I’m sorry, but I must tell you, in terms of dancing we are the best in Africa (57), followed by a more profound statement “There is this inexplicable relationship between Luanda and music. I can sense but not explain it” (59). The fire dances—“um fogo maior consumia a cidade numa gigantesca dança de amarelos a ecoar no céu” (*OT* 14) [“a huge fire consumed the city in a gigantic dance of yellows that echoed to the sky” *TC* 11]—a colorful dance that animates at the same time as it destroys. Dancing, like colors, creates or expresses energy, for instance in the mentions of the erotic nocturnal encounters facilitated by *kizomba* (*OT* 48, 180). After the death of Odonato’s son, music takes over the building. The sound of the grandmother’s song in *Umbundu* is then echoed—on the rooftop again—by the lovemaking of two young characters, followed by the song again.

Dance adds corporality to the immaterial, actively fighting against transparency and forgetting. The building—a haven—causes dancing, which once again is tied to an erotic energy. The Mailman, who does not belong to the building, but visits it in his professional capacity, feels this energy,

ali, entre as estranhas águas, o seu corpo inventava, por dentro, uma dança de sabor esquecido

- eu digo que este prédio tem feitiço...

os pés mexiam—se como notas de um piano epilético, tremiam os seus joelhos, espasmavam-se os músculos do pescoço e era nítido o repentino avolumar das calças reclamando um exercício impróprio para aquela hora

o Carteiro deixou-se estar, numa subida frescura que lhe invadia a alma, ébrio mas sóbrio, cerrou os olhos e passou a ouvir o orquestra de sons brandos que o prédio lhe trazia (*OT* 215-6)

there, among the strange waters, a dance of a forgotten flavor sprang up from inside his body

‘i tell them this building is bewitched...’

his feet stirred like notes on an epileptic piano, his knees trembled, muscle spasms gripped his neck, and the sudden swelling in his pants gave clear evidence of an exercise unsuitable for the hour
 the Mailman stood still, in the sudden coolness that washed over his intoxicated but abstemious soul, closed his eyes, and listened to the building's orchestra of soft sounds (TC 161)

A communion with the city, with the building, takes place in a sensory and sensual dance that provides and uses a form of collective energy. The Mailman feels drunk while sober. There seems to be something ancient, primal in the “dance of a forgotten flavor,” which again involves *umbundu*, and is followed by a song that brings memories back for the Mailman. Ruy Mingas’ song, the lyrics of which are partially reproduced in italics on the page, comes from a poem by Agostinho Neto.²⁸ In the poem “Adeus à hora da largada,” the narrator addresses a “mother,” which is a motherland, to list life’s difficulties, as the “I” becomes a “we” searching for light and life. The strong intertextuality between Neto’s poem and Ondjaki’s novel can go unnoticed, as the song is part of a “constante banda sonora—mesmo quando silenciosa—daquele prédio misterioso, roto, pobre, por onde a vida se passeava em celebração” (OT 217) [“a perpetual soundtrack—even when silenced—of life rambling in celebration through that mysterious, broken, poor building” TC 162]. Neto’s name is not explicitly mentioned, but Ondjaki’s decision to include this poem within the narrative further justifies the relation made in this introduction to this chapter between Neto’s and Ondjaki’s projects, especially since the poem “Adeus à hora da largada” was published as part of a collection in 1977, the year of Neto’s speech to the UEA and the year of Ondjaki’s birth.

²⁸ Another piece of evidence that Ondjaki avoids discussing race is that part of Neto’s poem refers to race, directly using the words “branco” and “preto,” white and black; those lyrics are systematically avoided as part of the lyrics reproduced in the novel. Instead, Ondjaki focuses on the parts that refer to social class, and poverty, as he does throughout the rest of the novel.

Conclusion

In the beginning of the novel but at the end of the narrative, “Odonato listened to the voice of the fire” (*TC* 10). What is or what are the voice(s) of Luanda, and how can they be heard, seen, felt? Metaphors of sight, sound, touch intertwine in provocative, unpredictable ways, moving through boundaries of all textures. Images and music—the colors that make them and the dances that they engender—seem to be the energies that fill Luanda while it is being emptied. The novel answers Odonato’s concerns about recording his voice, about keeping traces, with an unconventional 430 pages of ode to Luanda and its people, about whom Odonato declares, “the people are beautiful, merry, arrogant, fantastical, crazy, drunken,” thereby going against ideas that they are or can be reduced to one thing as ideology might want it. The narrative appears to argue that death is the only way for those voices to be heard, but the novel, its red cover and title prominently featured, suggests that literature can provide the textual space for the urban and transparent voices of postcolonial Luanda. The narrative records and speaks the transparent voices of Luanda, thereby reclaiming Neto’s original project for literature as a literary and poetic endeavor. The color of the fire, “lazy red” [“vermelho devagarinho”], is not only telling in the context of the socialist Angola, but also in that it is an invented color, one that necessitates a poetic reading. The young boy says to the Blind man, “se eu soubesse explicar o cor do fogo, mais-velho, eu era um poeta” (*OT* 424) [“if i knew how to explain the color of the fire, elder, i’d be a poet” *TC* 318]. Yet he does, and is, ending the novel with the idea that the urban imaginary of Luanda needs a poet to record—and thus counter—transparency.

Conclusion: Vitality in the African City

In Ondjaki's *Os Transparentes*, the BBC journalist no longer reports to the BBC because “ninguém quer as minhas estórias, parece que são demasiado boas [...] ninguém quer boas notícias sobre Angola ou sobre África. boas de mais, entende? uma coisa é uma noticiazinha boa de vez em quando, outra é contar sempre coisas interessantes” (*OT* 280-1) [“nobody wants my stories any more, it seems they’re too good-news! [...] nobody wants good news about Angola, or about Africa, not too good, you see? a small good-news item from time to time is one thing, but always reporting interesting things is something else” *TC* 210]. The journalist escapes the imposed victimization and negative portrayal of the African continent in global media by recording her own version of the city, one that gives space to stories that the BBC—here, symbol of the Global North—otherwise dismissed. In a sense, this is the paradigm shift that the urban novels analyzed in this dissertation propose—and by extension, the paradigm shift that I aim to mirror with this project. Choosing narrated and embodied experience over overdetermined public discourse, the journalist and the scientist who knew that drilling into the underground of Luanda would cause the city to collapse respond to institutional powerlessness with eroticism. The sex scene, the end of which I mentioned in chapter 5, causes a fire that starts in the lovers’ stomachs and metaphorically extends to the whole city, fusing their bodies with that of a city in literal explosion. There, as is often the case, pleasure ties in to death, which it defies while remaining dangerously close to it.

This dissertation journeyed from Dakar to Luanda, by way of all the literary imaginaries that compose this body of work. I have kept vulnerability and creativity at the heart of this inquiry, looking at how the two affect and are affected by movements and lack thereof, including the walking rebellions of Ken Bugul and Aminata Sow Fall, but also the stalled movement of

Lagos' *go-slows*, and the debt collection rounds of Marie-Louise Mumbu's *Filles de Molokaï*. I have also investigated the liminal positions of Sow Fall's beggars, of homeless women in *Aller et retour* and of a homeless collective in Chibundu Onuzo's *Welcome to Lagos*, as well as the delinquent practices of *shégués* children in *Samantha à Kinshasa*. I have extended my reflection on liminal positions to epigraphs in Onuzo and Barrett's novels, and to the gender transition of Igoni in *Blackass*, amongst other examples.

I have argued that the contemporary African writers under study push us to recast ecologies as fragile holistic spatial and social concepts that must include the most vulnerable members of society and unseen spaces. The creative repurposing of Calixthe Beyala's *New Bell*, as well as my reading of the Wolof value of *nit nitay garabam* in *La Grève des bàttu* act as counterpoint to discourses on urban "déchets." These texts serve as literary models for rethinking urban Africa—and possibly beyond—through new ecologies. These ecologies do not obey epistemologies of Africa inherited from colonial oppression, nor do they function within flawed sociological urban models that take the Global North as standard for how cities must work. I see this dissertation as a contribution to the field of African urban studies' attempts to conceptualize new paradigms in the past couple of decades, arguing for the necessity of interpreting literary fiction to understand African urban experience. I hope to have shown that urban literary imaginaries can bring to light the necessary role of vulnerability, solidarities, resistance and survival in creating new interpretative models. Literature has the potential to showcase unseen narratives and unheard voices and as such to poeticize the untold city, bringing into the limelight potentialities that have heretofore been insufficiently considered.

Now in this conclusion, I would like to suggest a paradigm for reading African urban imaginaries that has appeared tangentially throughout this dissertation, but which deserves

further thought. For this, I return to the lovers who set the city ablaze in *Os Transparentes*, but also to the mailman's erections whenever the energy of the building infiltrates his body. To Ondjaki's sensual, sexual energy, I add the pleasure that the iconic Filles de Molokaï find in Mumbu's novel, as well as Igoni and Furo in *Blackass*, but also the desire that grows between Chike and Oma in *Welcome to Lagos*, a few examples amongst many, to claim that pleasure ignites the African city.

I would like to offer the term “vitality” as a way to think through African urban literary imaginaries, and possibly the cities that they transpose.¹ The Oxford English Dictionary points to three relevant meanings of “vitality”: first, the term is defined as “vital force, power, or principle as possessed or manifested by living things”; second as “the ability or capacity on the part of something of continuing to exist or to perform its functions; power of enduring or continuing”; third as “active force or power; mental or physical vigor; activity, animation, liveliness.” Vitality can thus indicate survival or growth, with varying degrees of passivity and agency. The term also implies—or at least does not deny—adversity with the ideas of “continuing to exist” and “enduring.” Yet, the term can also include a form of joy, or pleasure even, in the “animation” and “liveliness” of “active force.”

I propose this term as a counterpoint to the image of the African city as stalled or failed space. That counterpoint does not erase difficulties, and in fact recognizes them in the adjective

¹ Anthropologists Peter Probst and Gerd Spittler develop the concept of “local vitality” as a framework in their introduction to *Between Resistance and Expansion: Explorations of Local Vitality in Africa* (2004). They provide an interesting context for the term, which they compare to European “vitalism” and linguistic theories on vitality, and which they situate within African anthropology. However, the kind of vitality I am proposing is inherently urban and finds its expression within a poetic discourse, whereas they situate their own scholarship in all locales and within various cultural traditions. Nonetheless, in their use and the term as in mine, notions of resistance and appropriation are key to understanding how vitality functions with regards to external forces. For more on linguistic vitality in Africa, see Cécile Vigouroux and Salikoko Mufwene. Jane Jacobs also defines the concept “urban vitality” in the context of urban planning in American cities. What I mean by “vitality” here is closer to the way in which Karin Barber uses the term to qualify popular arts—which incidentally she associates with the urban mass and people who “tend to be invisible and inaudible” (Barber *Popular Arts in Africa* 3).

“vital” that evokes notions of survival. Recasting the literary expressions of the African city in terms of vitality accounts for other meanings that have been at the core of writing African urban imaginaries without receiving the critical attention they deserve. I started this conclusion with Ondjaki since *Os Transparentes* may be the most open example of what characters and the city—as protagonist in its own right—use to counteract the destruction and hollowing out of Luanda. In Ondjaki’s novel, metaphorical and literal meanings blur, which explains why the novel’s characters reenergize the city in such physical, sensorial, even visceral ways. Indeed, a vital force relates intrinsically to the organic and to the body, a relation that can bring bodies back into the epistemology of Africa through considerations that do not exclude but contrast starkly with Mbembe’s discussion of subjected bodies in *On the Postcolony* (see chapter 2).

“Vitality” remains a question of life and death. In “Near Life, Queer Death,” Eric Stanley states, “Besieged, I feel in the fleshiness of the everyday like a kind of near life or a death-in-waiting. Catastrophically, this imminent threat constitutes for the queer that which is the sign of vitality itself. What then becomes of the possibility of queer life, if queerness is produced always and only through the negativity of forced death and at the threshold of obliteration?” (1). Stanley repurposes Mbembe’s question “what does it mean to do violence to what is nothing?” (Mbembe *On the Postcolony* 174, also cited in Stanley 1) for queerness, and in turn I wish to take Stanley’s statement and question back to Africa, where Mbembe had first located his inquiry. In doing so and in Stanley’s footsteps, I keep in mind the specificities of queerness as well as the connections with other “negated subject[s] deprived of power” (Mbembe *On the Postcolony* 173).² I think Stanley’s question deserves attention, and should prompt a careful reading of vitality, as this power of life can be closer to death than naive readings might

² Stanley makes a convincing and nuanced case for these connections using not only Mbembe but also Fanon, that is to say two thinkers who have theorized (post)colonial experiences of embodiment.

recognize. There is, in the fleshiness of urban experiences that come back throughout the novels I analyze, the threat of—and proximity to—death.

Death hovers around many of the novels, sometimes influencing the narrative in dramatic ways, often in close proximity to the bodies of the characters. The beggars of Sow Fall's novel find in the death of one of their own the strength to fight for their lives. "Creativity" is not strong enough of a paradigm to defy—or even exist alongside—death; vitality is, by definition. For many of the characters in fictional Lagos, Kinshasa, Dakar, Douala or Lagos, death is a looming threat that in fiction at least, gives rise to extraordinary vitality. Paizinho, the young orphan in *Os Transparentes*, dies over a stolen cellphone shortly after having made love on the rooftop with the young Amarelinha. The novel narrates that intimate scene at length, linking it to renewed energies that extend to the entire building. Amarelinha, the daughter of transparent Odonato, wears the color "yellow" in her name, another representation of the fire that devours the city and of the life forces that defy destruction in the narrative. In contrast, Paizinho's death comes by surprise a few pages later. This reverberates the shock and pervasiveness of sudden death—common enough that it takes little textual space—but also the novel's intended focus on vitality. For characters systemically deprived of power and for the writers in this dissertation, vital force thrives in the urban interstice better than anywhere else.

Vitality encompasses but moves beyond the paradigm of creativity. Another difference is that all three definitions of vitality include the word "power," an essential word in the existence of the powerless, vulnerable characters whom these novels feature. To claim vitality decenters the experience of systemic precariousness that has characterized media perceptions of postcolonial Africa to favor everyday practices through which life persists. A form of empowerment becomes accessible that other terms may not convey to the same extent. Vitality is

not constrained to the creative realm, since it permeates all aspects of urban life, at least when literary fiction expresses it. In Marie-Louise Mumbu's novel, Samantha's own sexuality exhibits vitality that translates as empowerment, and so do the inhabitants of Couscous in *Les honneurs perdus* when they transform an episode of violent repression into ground corn, i.e. nourishment, and recycled objects, i.e. shelter and opportunities. Sow Fall's beggars' discussions on whether they deserve to exist leads to active resistance, perhaps the most visible form of vitality. Ken Bugul's protagonist Bigué, who becomes the voice for the city even after being cast aside as mentally unstable, also represents that life force born out of adversity.

In my introduction, I mentioned that all the novels under study in this dissertation were linked together by a certain degree of playfulness in language that is not unique to them, but somewhat sets them apart from some earlier urban literary fiction. I would now like to offer the thought that this playfulness is a linguistic form of mixing survival with liveliness, of continuing no matter what, or, as I have argued in the case of Kinshasa, "in spite of." In Beyala's *Les honneurs perdus*, the character of the carpenter roams the streets of New Bell in search of opportunities for selling coffins at discounted rates for people he knows. In language too, vitality represents life in the face of death, prompting the need for an alternative interpretative framework.

Questions of pleasure in the context of African studies, including urban African literature, have often been theorized in terms of vice. That is the case in many earlier urban novels, including Abdoulaye Sadju's *Maïmouna*, or even Cyprian Ekwensi's *People of the City* and *Jagua Nana*. The city often personified all of these vices, including and perhaps most noticeably sexual vices centered on women's bodies. In the constitutive chapters of this dissertation, I have explored the paradigm shift in how the literary works under study express the city. Some of the

porosity, fluidity, and polyphony at play in these novels accompany a move away from pleasure as vice, hinting at a more holistic approach to pleasure. This shift, which I argue takes root in literary fiction, may enable new readings of African urban spaces and daily experiences of the city beyond problematic concepts such as resilience. By recognizing the “vital” in vitality, the concept also takes us beyond an assessment of “creativity” that can sometimes appear to celebrate dramatic life conditions in the name of inventiveness, especially when such commentary is made from outside of the continent.

Finally, “vitality” is a meaningful term in the context of recasting ecologies. Indeed, I argue in this dissertation that vulnerable members of society and the neglected spaces they occupy are vital to the African cities that they—perhaps more than any other urban participants—embody. The urban solidarities they set in place in the face of adversity, the micro-level possibilities that are born out of their inventive practice of the city, breathe life into these spaces. To prohibit them from fully inhabiting the city—as many governments and institutions do and as most of the novels under study report—is to deprive the city from some of its vitality.

In the midst and as constitutional of this energy, I also recognize what Karen Bouwer conceptualizes—in the context of African urban cinema—as “suspension,” that is to say:

a continuum of mobility: from inertia (forces of stagnation and death) to flow (not simply motion but also moments of possibility and affirmation of life). Between these two poles, suspension represents intermediary states, moments of temporary stillness, or vulnerability to the forces of inertia, moments of ambiguity and uncertainty as to the possible re-insertion into some form of flow. (70)

Adding that suspension also means “uncertainty,” Bouwer uses suspension as a way to understand the relationship of the vital to the vulnerable, and the consequences of the interactions between the two. Bouwer mobilizes the example of Congolese photographer Kiripi Katembo’s series “Un regard,” and particularly the picture entitled “Moving forward,” which, as

Bouwer mentions, also appears on the cover of In Koli Jean Bofane's *Congo Inc.*³ The photograph features a puddle of water that reflects the movement of women near a market. On the sides, allowing the puddles to form in the first place, trash lines the streets of Kinshasa, justifying one of the city's many nicknames—Kin-Poubelle. With this in mind, I would like to return to Mumbu, whose epigraph to *Samantha à Kinshasa* said, “Poubelle, dit-on mais à mes yeux la plus belle.” Mumbu maintains in a single sentence the two extremes of the continuum, the “inertia” of the uncollected trash and the “flow” of beauty, oscillating between the two, often narrating the suspensions that precede what Bouwer calls “re-insertion into some form of flow.” The ambiguity, contradiction even, of “suspended vitality” may explain some of the writings that this dissertation engages.

Now, I would like to end this dissertation where it started, in a circular movement that befits the texts that I have discussed, but also the ecologies I have endeavored to conceptualize. As discussed in the introduction, Mwanza Mujila wrote in *Tram 83*, “Il est des villes qui n’ont pas besoin de littérature: elles sont littérature. Elles défilent poitrine bombée, la tête sur les épaules. Elles sont fières et s’assument en dépit des sacs-poubelles qu’elles promènent. La Ville-Pays, un exemple parmi tant d’autres... Elle vibrait de littérature” (125). Despite placing the emphasis on heads held high, writers do not forget or dismiss the garbage bags that the cities drag along. Similarly, Mumbu does not deny perceptions of Kinshasa as “poubelle.” She, much like Mwanza Mujila and the other writers whose urban novels have constituted the core of my interpretations, nevertheless write urban literary imaginaries that vibrate and reenergize cities with vitality that has yet to be fully fleshed out. This profoundly literary gesture challenges

³ For more on this specific picture and on Katembo's artistic creation, see an interview with Jenny Stevens for *The Guardian* that took place in 2015, shortly before Katembo's untimely death from malaria at the age of 36: https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/aug/13/kiripi-katembos-best-photograph-the-heroic-women-of-kinshasa?CMP=share_btn_link.

prevailing paradigms through radically new, original, and playful narratives of resistance and solidarities. In doing so, postcolonial African urban literary fiction opens up avenues for rethinking African cities by way of the multiplicity and vitality of its poetic energies.

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