Deep into the Night the City Calls as the Blacks Come Home to Roost

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Prelude to the Show

IN JEAN Genet's self-designated clown show, *The Blacks*, black actors in white masks play out the proceedings of a tribunal organized to pass judgment on the black perpetrator of the rape of a white woman. There are continuously oblique references to a scenario off-stage where a revolt by blacks which may be under way is side-tracked by having to deal with a traitor among them. In 'reality', the crime never took place, and the necessary detour of having to dispose of a traitor becomes the haunting mechanism that identifies the claustrophobic, circular game of reflections and inversions that keep black and white locked into a continuous reiteration of the normative grammars of power. The trajectories of desire, anger, freedom and subjection are held together by the very dissimulations, performances, role-playing, trade-offs and revolutions that take place. Clearly it is the way race is spatialized, and the way that the arbitrary elaboration of identities, so easily interchangeable among themselves, is put to work that holds together specific contexts of operation.

The court's demand for the proper enactment of the crime – of the blacks' criminality – is essential in order for the court to hold itself together. The performance required does not depend on the crime actually having been committed. This factual irrelevance then provides an incessant turbulence and instability to the proceedings of any court, any context – as black actors play blacks who are playing at being black. The demand for the crime and the criminal doesn't need anyone in particular – in terms of a specific

■ *Theory, Culture & Society* 2007 (SAGE, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, and Singapore), Vol. 24(7–8): 235–248
DOI: 10.1177/0263276407084706

identity or history. Rather, what is called for is a type that has no basis in reality except the need for its expression in the context of any tribunal – any site of decision-making. As such, to speak in the 'name' or with the 'mask' of blackness then necessitates complicity – a kind of love demonstrated toward the tribunal – since the tribunal becomes the only possible mode of articulation for this blackness. While one character, Newport News, repeatedly points to a world outside the hall of mirrors, it may be that this outside, now in the midst of rebellion, reiterates the very same presumptions of power at work inside. At the end of the play, when the actors shed their masks, there is some glimmer of the possibility of them being aware of their own capacity to produce an identity – but this scenario remains scripted and performed. What remains is a blackness that is not consolidated either in subjection or liberation, insolence or subservience, but shows up everywhere. It fills the show with the momentary pleasure of being able to pin every transgression on something identifiable, to constitute an original linchpin for any show, as well as the intensity that threatens to bring any show to an end. Blackness in Genet's play is a versatility without a home or clear base; a versatility never able to rest or remain still. Even as it, in a twist of Malcolm's terms, 'comes home to roost'.

Inhabiting the Postcolonial in Urban Africa

On 15 October 1958, Saifoulaye Diallo, son of a great Fula *marabout* and second to Sékou Touré in the Parti démocratique africain de Guinée, announced to some 15,000 gathered for Friday *jumaah* prayer in Mamou, 'we are now left with what we are'. In this conflation of the sense of abandonment and liberation, and of the erasure of any supplement or exterior to which a people might orient or announce themselves, what is the 'what' to which the 'we' gathered at the mosque are left with? Is it the loss of what could have happened but did not, and now never will, despite the coming to the end of the rule that produced this loss, so that the statement points to a kind of double vacancy? If so, how can *what could have been but never will be* now be linked to the possibilities of shaping the future? The statement would also seem to imply at least a tacit understanding of the components of such a 'we' – a sense of having no need to elaborate further, a presumption that everyone knows all too well what they are left with. Since the French basically left with everything – from plugs, to brooms, to national reserves – the critical componential elements of this collective identity were embedded in a sudden vacuum.

Whatever such abandonment means, what is left is what perhaps has been there all along, which is something that cannot be integrated into any normative discourse, any terms of development, sovereignty. To bring African urbanities into the mainstream of normative urban development was to assume that what the city had excluded could be easily integrated, and that whatever debt was owed for this exclusion could be paid off by ushering the excluded inside. As Hortense Spiller (2003) has said, this incorporation denies that certain aspirations and desires will have no home in language

– the black desires for freedom, for not having to struggle, for recouping loss that cannot be recouped, to make space for themselves in circumstances that did not provide any, and to put all of these issues to rest. The exclusion of that which cannot be included coincides with the way the purveyors of normative urban development attempt to exclude themselves from the city. Here, a parasitic relationship to the city – where resources, spaces and bodies have been seized without replenishment or held, detained in fixed models – has produced actors able to buy themselves out of the cityness of city life – out of its thickening, unpredictable intersections of things of all kinds.

So for most African cities, attaining even the minimum often requires complex styles of staying attuned to the shifting intersections of gestures, excitements, languages, anxieties, determinations and comportments enacted across markets, streets and other venues. The city is a field of affect where specific dispositions and attainments are contingent upon the ways actors' bodies, histories and capacities are mobilized and enacted.

Here, so-called bare life becomes something other than the constitutive moment for the sovereign exception and instead a means of what Jean-Luc Nancy refers to as 'spacing out', of a dispersal that shows no interest in defending territory or integrity, nor in suturing gaps and fractures generated by disparate powers and times, nor of trying to sum up. Despite post-colonial periods largely characterized by obsessions with autochthony, big men and women syndromes, patrimonial rule and states of war, the 'what we are left with' has nevertheless been maintained as a largely open-ended process, where a certain egalitarianism or 'common sense' – a sense opened to the contributions of all – has been sustained. No matter how hierarchical urban Africans may appear in everyday transactions; no matter how much those lower in social status may get ordered around, abused or killed; and no matter how strong the sense that disaster is just around the corner, people pay attention to what is going on around them, to what everyone is doing, seeing the social field as if from the viewpoints of everyone else simultaneously. For while the gap between rich and poor continues to grow, there are few privileged points of view or vantage points from which a person can confidently consolidate a secure position within contemporary urban life. Such practices are pursued even as the egalitarian is also acknowledged as a potential trap, and can quickly turn into an incessant preoccupation with undermining the capacities of others, with getting in their way, blocking the path, turning oneself into the satanic double.

There is of course a history to this: what was attained by Africans in terms of their engagement with cities – particularly in the areas of social cognition and social practice – could never be fully instantiated within the city. Even when substantial rearrangements in cultural life and social economy were precipitated by an urban presence, the potential interconnections among emerging networks of social practice, economic specialization and cultural reformation were constrained. Clear vehicles of institutionalization were usually foreclosed, largely by the dearth of

available public spheres that were not heavily scrutinized or repressed by existing regimes.

Therefore, these urban attainments were usually dispersed outside of the city, invested in transitional populations situated in between the distinct forms of rural and urban rule, or moving back and forth among them. The city became a site of deferral, where locally honed aspirations, emergent institutions, and economies capable of extending and deepening African uses of urban space were, for the most part, readapted toward deflecting the impositions and segregation of colonial rule. Simultaneously, they were also applied to maximizing the potentials of under-regulated spaces of operation at the peripheries of cities, but without the urban topological and social complexion necessary to really incubate and develop these nascent urban orientations and practices.

At the same time, colonial rule was always partial and heterogeneous; always rearranged or distorted through the ways in which it was implemented. Therefore, urban Africans incessantly looked for openings to actively 'partialize' and distort imposed rule, to make it work for self-conceived agendas. This was a process which often meant large measures of dissimulation, of enacting what on the surface may have looked to be highly traditional or parochial practices as covers for incipient urban styles.

Displacing the World, Replacing Africa

Today, the persistent appropriation of African resources as fodder for the industrial capacities of other regions, and the subsequent reproduction of undeveloped domestic economies unable to absorb a large youthful population, propel many residents outward along multiple migratory circuits. Increasingly, the institutional, familial, bureaucratic and social resources of many African cities are skewed toward facilitating the process of leaving. As the volumes increase, the spatialization of movement becomes fractal and its temporalities sporadic and desperate. Destinations once largely determined by colonial affiliation become less available; cooperation agreements between European and African countries that enable the deployment of sophisticated surveillance technologies force migration along more circuitous and far-flung routings. For many, movement becomes impossible in a context of what Mbembe (2005) has labelled an ontological-theological war, where the stranger, particularly the black stranger, is turned into an enemy with whom there can be no recourse to understanding or negotiation.

The surfaces of movement are less hospitable and more treacherous. Even well-organized and effective syndicates that paved the way for a steady stream of janitors, sex-workers, doormen, livery drivers, cleaners and agricultural workers to specific destinations continuously have to readapt their work to changing policies, structures of pay-offs and competing 'jurisdictions'. This makes the disposition of who gets through and how more opaque and seemingly arbitrary. The windows of opportunity to penetrate the various screens of security, with their varying permeability, are often a

matter of just hours, as the fabric of controls switches. The possibilities of continuing journeys become a matter of lining up many disparate factors and personnel.

The surface and infrastructure of movement is a kind of archipelago of geographies, textures, institutions, knowledge systems, technological applications and failures, oversights and dissimulation. Still, movement does take place and often over great expanses. There are individual trajectories and accomplishments, informed of course by various supports and complicities; and there are extensive lines of connections – channels along which money, goods, services, people and information pass. The stories of migrants, who labour in Europe or North America, save and remit money, and stay for various lengths of time are many. But in addition to these individual stories are the elaborations of circuits through which local urban economies can be tied to scenarios being developed elsewhere – scenarios which constitute platforms in other cities of the world, on which different trades, exchanges and interventions can be made.

Donald Carter (2006) has talked about migration around and across the Mediterranean as the conjunction of multiple invisibilities of different registers. There is the relative invisibility of a history that witnessed various interpenetrations of cultures and religions across spaces that today act as if they are products of some unyielding demarcation – white/black, Muslim/Christian, European/Arab. This history has left various sediments taking the form of intimate knowledges – to use Hugh Raffles' (2002) term.[1] These are the products of the overlays of various movements and circumnavigations, and entail the relations of sailors, traders, agricultural workers, pirates, merchants and politicians that map out heterogeneous enclaves of operation that have little institutional recognition in the formal regional economy. Still, they continue to generate a tradition of stories, long in circulation, about other cultural linkages of the Mediterranean, and of skills, routes, schemes and collaborations that, with few other concrete contexts of deployment, have now become the instruments of trafficking.

Movement not only requires the constant pushing at different boundaries and interdictions, and keeping up to date with different routes and schemes, but also putting together modes of being in the larger world – that is, an infrastructure of 'spreading out', of cultivating relay points and contexts that generate skills and opportunities. Some observers have called these 'migrancy projects' (Harney, 2007). The forms of these enclosures and vehicles are of course largely dependent upon the character of the destinations in which Africans find themselves – and this usually entails either the encampments that spring up along with seasonal work in agricultural and tourist areas, or the peripheral suburbs or declining central areas of major cities. My interest here is the ways in which particular modes of occupying these spaces, of struggling to secure footholds and recognition that bring about a measure of security and access to resources, combine with a certain detachment of these spaces from the prevailing norms and practices of the larger urban system. Here, these spaces are enfolded into the objective of

multiplying and diversifying livelihood practices, sources for accessing cheap goods and manipulating local consumption.

For some 20 years now I have been looking at various dimensions of small- and medium-scale translocal trade circuits nominally anchored in several different African cities. Additionally, I have followed the trajectories of my former neighbours in the Abidjan suburb of Youpougon, who had moved to Aulnay-sous-Bois and other northern suburbs of Paris during the mid 1980s. I have also followed how some of their children have moved on to the US, been stuck in French prisons or moved back to Abidjan, and how several cousins and uncles continue to pursue various opportunities in Southeast Asia. My former neighbours worked hard to establish their niche in Paris, as they pursued different approaches to stability – one turning away almost completely from any connection to Côte d'Ivoire, while the other constantly goes back and forth, always widening the channel between Paris and Abidjan in terms of what passes through and along it.

The propulsions of migration are structured along complex intersections. Elaborated regional articulations within Africa, the shrinkage of state administrations and their capacities to provide employment, the privatization of resources that are not conjoined with the growth of industrial capacity, the intensified competition for access to minerals, oil and hardwood, and the openings and arenas of past migrations all combine to configure a particular migration–development nexus (Davies, 2007; Mohan and Zack-Williams, 2002). But what I want to suggest is that, while Africans have struggled to implant themselves across different territories and to be incorporated within the ambit of citizenry, rights and opportunity, implantations are also a means of configuring a kind of extraterritorial mobility. In other words, they are a way of dispersing and keeping any particular concretization of the extension of an African city from becoming overly sedentary or recognizable in a clearly identifiable series of Diaspora sites. The *banlieue* becomes a particular extension and reworking of the *bidonville*, as both then reshape each other to make them deterritorialized vehicles of operation. This does not mean that the political, economic and social situations of either are removed from the substantial impoverishment, marginality and disempowerment that they face within the urban contexts in which they are emplaced. No matter what residents may do in many of the *banlieues*, they are stigmatized by this territorial location, as evidenced by the fact that the majority of youth are unemployed (Wacquant, 2006).

Sami Tchak in his novel, *La Fête des masques*, portrays a young man born in Paris of Senegalese parents who, in a highly vituperative style, rails against the residual African identifications of his parents, who carry them around as chains in some cartoon scenario. Unable to effectively dispense with the trappings of overly romanticized memories of cultures and places they will probably never experience again, and unable to put together a sufficiently effective and modern engagement with the city, the young man considers his family as permanently out of place and thus available to

banalities and degradation of all kinds. With no feeling for any African antecedents yet with only the most minimal of connections to the institutions, politics and possibilities of France, what remains is the passion of invective and the cynicism of the street – that is, riding the waves of being neither here nor there, far from any shore.

Such a state of suspension posits a life-and-death challenge for many young blacks in urban Europe today. Yet, it is also a critical dimension in generating practices from the way in which the *banlieues* are inhabited that inform a wider circuitry of transactions, residencies, trades and commercial activities pursued by Africans throughout the world. While a viable life at home and/or integration into societies elsewhere may remain an aspiration for most urban Africans, in scores of conversations I have had with friends and associates across the black world, there is also an albeit often begrudging acceptance of the need to live in-between, with these possibilities becoming ever more difficult. For many, there is a strong aspiration to 'get over' such predicaments by 'getting over' on more and more disparate locations – as if the pages and pages of visa stamps – both real and fake – become a critical sign of competence. These shifting patterns through which wider swathes of territory are covered intersect individual skill and guile with variegated collaborations and trades – involving particular architectures of commercial relations as well as cognition (the assessing of information and generation of practical knowledge).

Welcome to Bangkok Banlieue

Next to the Bangrak Police Station on Naret Road is a large run-down rooming house formerly known as the Welcome Palace. It is a massive structure of 450 rooms which, in its heyday, provided accommodation to mainly Chinese sojourners at a reasonable cost. Today, from the outside, it looks like the classic image of a dilapidated public housing project in the Neuf-trois suburbs of north-east Paris. In fact, the building now houses the largest African population in the city. Laundry hangs to dry from each inevitably broken window; the plumbing in many of the rooms only sporadically functions, and exposed wiring hangs from many of the hallway ceilings. The cavernous lobby contains a few pieces of broken furniture and the trappings of security are non-existent.

Given the popular reputation of Bangkok's Africans as crooks and drug dealers, there is rarely any effort by one of the city's largest police posts to monitor what is going on in the building. In fact, there is greater scrutiny of African *commerçants* in the cafe and bar at the New Trocadero Hotel on Suriwongse, which provides far more upmarket accommodation for a primarily African clientele. It is not clear whether the rumours that have circulated over the past few years about the building's imminent destruction have convinced the police that there is little need now to spend too much effort keeping things in line, or whether it is just indifference to residents who look as if they are not into too much of anything significant anyway.

Granted, the surrounding area exudes a density of people and activities that tend to soften this concentration of foreignness and its movements to and fro – perhaps with the exception of the hundred or so men one can see at mid-day on a Friday, making their way back from a mosque some 10 blocks away. Men make up 80 percent of the residents in the building and the presence of most is, in one way or another, linked to the gem and jewellery business, which is the primary commercial activity of this district. This does not mean that everyone is necessarily a gem trader. Many wait for either money or orders from home; others do odd errands for their patrons, and still others scout out various opportunities to invest proceeds from gem sales.

In addition, much of the gem business acts like an unofficial banking system. Instead of trying to move cash around through bank or wire transfers, particularly risky or unconventional deals are financed by using 'gem deposits' as guarantees or collateral in an improvisation on the *halwa* system, where cash can be distributed nearly anywhere based on a paying in – either in equivalent denominations or, as in this case, a valuable commodity – somewhere else. In the Suriwongse gem business, many of the 'bankers' also take a part of the proceeds of any deal which is financed.

Many of the Welcome Palace's residents also tend to congregate cross-town on the lower-numbered *sois* (alleys) of Sukhumvit. Massive gentrification has tended to push out cheap accommodation, but the cosmopolitan atmosphere provides an important opportunity for small-scale entrepreneurs to observe each other pursue different trades, markets, deals, uses of the built environment, tactics to deal with authorities of various kinds and financial schemes. On the basis of such observations, it is then possible for these actors to identify different ways of trying to connect their activities to the multiply situated and enacted identities of others (Carr and Chen, 2002; Dicken et al., 2001; Robinson, 2002; Sellers, 2002).

At times, large deals and investments are linked to smaller-scale commercial exchanges; at other times, legal and more illicit transactions are intertwined, then pulled apart. Some activities are clearly illicit or illegal, others are not; some are simply unconventional in terms of what a given city is used to. Some involve an intricate mesh of various national and sectoral actors (van Schendel and Abraham, 2005). Some are rash and impulsive; others are highly systematic and sophisticated, and still others combine these tendencies. Some of these activities find their niche and are protected over time, while others are incessantly mutating in terms of goods, territories and the players they are dealing with. The materials involved vary, from items like rice, radios, toothpaste, to bartered goods, currency, visas and tickets.

The Welcome Palace, as a mobile version of the Parisian *banlieue*, goes beyond simply being a sociological image derived from a history of African migration to France, while at the same time drawing upon it. This is a history that saw men from Senegal, Mali and Guinea, in particular, take up military jobs during the First World War and in the automobile factories

in the aftermath of the Second World War. This labour became a significant platform for the emigration of individuals and families from across Francophone Africa in the subsequent decades, all attempting to access various economic activities and consolidate an African presence across the city (Mann, 2003; Quiminal, 1997). As many of the important more centrally located *arrondissements* of African implantation were cleared out, both immigrants and the French-born were increasingly isolated in high-rise residential wastelands. New forms of solidarity, resistance and livelihood had to be pieced together (Gueye, 2006; Thomas, 2007).

While significant networks of shops, markets, restaurants and commercial services servicing diverse African populations remain, many have also been priced out of central Paris and have limited opportunities to install themselves in the suburbs. Lines of connection, then, in terms of the exchange of goods, information and services, have to be established much more informally within the residential complexes themselves, operating out of apartments and in the enclaves and hollows of garages, underpasses, storage rooms, lobbies and recreational centres. Associational life came to be increasingly built on the networks of dynamic individuals and a plurality of initiatives that sought various umbrellas of interconnection rather than embodying specific groups or categorical representations (Belbahri, 1987). Flexible categories of belonging were emphasized that exceeded the compensation offered by religious communitarianism or political ideology and instead aimed for a greater autonomy of individual and collective public action (Ivekovic, 2006; Naurison et al., 2004).

Whereas the street provided the concrete line of delineation through which connections among various nodes of commerce and service were navigated, the streets of the *banlieue* are either much more circuitous, filled with cul-de-sacs, or take on a foreboding character. As such, commerce and networking are enfolded into residential spaces – a process that can intensify the availability of what anyone does to the scrutiny, interference or collaboration of others, and thus at times bring both new capacities and problems to residents living in these circumstances (Avenel and de Singely, 2004; El Quandili and Hamdani, 2005; Maurin, 2004; Wacquant, 2006).

Until recently, Bangkok has been a relatively easy city for foreigners to move around in, to come and go, to move things in and out, and to purchase commodities covering the full spectrum in terms of kind and price. While not new to the city – having first established roots in the textile and rice trade some three decades ago – Africans (primarily West Africans) have also been using the city as a base to extend their acquisition base into China, Vietnam and Indonesia, which provide cheaper goods but which are somewhat more difficult to operate within logistically. Culturally and economically, there is little basis for them to enter the labour market as the professional sector only relies upon expatriate participation in very specific domains and lower-end service work can draw upon a vast reserve of Burmese, Cambodian and Laotian labour. Various forms of trade, then, are the key economic activity that grounds the African population in the city,

and for most *commerçants* it is important to keep overhead and transaction costs as low as possible and, more importantly, to be able to flexibly move money around from one opportunity to another.

Such transaction costs not only entail those related to providing for food and shelter, but also assisting others in the event that you may need their assistance in the future. It means having a little extra to explore unforeseen opportunities, or to take a chance on some deal where there are few guarantees of success. Here, circuitries of information are important; it is critical to know who others know; what kinds of collaboration are presently being put into motion; what seems to work and what doesn't. Streets have typically been the occasion and context through which such witnessing could take place, and where different configurations of actors could talk, both in perfunctory and intense exchanges. While the lobby of the Welcome Palace is exceedingly bare, a different story emerges in the upper storeys. In the hallways, both men and women prepare food using gas canisters and Styrofoam containers; fax machines are rigged up on card tables; the walls are covered with announcements of various things for sale, or requests for things like tickets, or opportunities to share cargo containers. Some of the rooms are rented just to store goods; there are prayer rooms and small chapels; the fourth floor has two adjoining rooms where the wall has been torn down and a large television installed connected to a satellite service. The hundred or so women in the building – some *commerçants*, some partners, some providing various domestic services to the resident population – even organize *tontines* and *sousou* (savings associations). The building houses a transient population, staying at most several months, although increasingly there are those who operate as the Bangkok 'representatives' of syndicates or trading groups cobbled together with varying degrees of formality.

Even though residents complain about the conditions in the building, and the ways that a certain autonomy of operation are predicated upon the management not taking these conditions and the need for repairs very seriously, the cost remains cheap, less than $10 per day. More importantly, the street can be brought inside, or at least a version of a street, where a certain visibility of various existent and possible relations can be viewed, and where there is the possibility of different kinds of intersections – among stories, scenarios, backgrounds, trades and experiences. In some areas of central Bangkok, streets remain important venues of commerce and social relations – particularly in parts of Sukhumvit, Charoenkrung, Banglamphu and Phra Khanong. Yet, increasingly, the spaces of commerce are ensconced in large shopping malls and dedicated business and wholesale districts. While not completely invisible, the performance of transactions is increasingly privatized. Folding the street into the Welcome Palace then becomes, for many of its residents, a welcome and necessary supplement to their residence – that is, a way of better preparing for the conduct of their often provisional forays into complicated worlds of enterprise. Those worlds are increasingly sectored and specialized, yet, largely relying on their wits and initiative,

most African entrepreneurs have always to keep in mind the connections between trades and retain the flexibility to convert one opportunity into another even if, on the surface, they may appear to have little to do with one another.

The Night

The notion of the 'shadow' has appeared frequently in much writing about contemporary Africa – from Castels to the Comaroffs – conventionally pointing to the disconnection between Africa and the larger world, or the domains of invisible economies and occult forces through which any articulation is rendered. Yet, as De Boeck and Plissart (2004) indicate, it is important to arrive at a 'shadowgraphy' of the city – that is, at a better understanding of the specific modes of connection and disconnection that give shape to different networks acting upon each other and intervening on different levels of social life. Because shadows lack specific solidity and dimension, they are shape-shifting topological instances formed by the relations among people, places, things and times that don't fit together in any stable way, but at the same time – for varying reasons – do not keep themselves away from each other. These instances cannot be summarized or synthesized. Again, DeBoeck points to a highly mobile and shifting connection between the desires, imaginations, aspirations and practices of urban residents with specific infrastructures, techniques and economies of livelihood and movement. Thus, the shadow is the oscillation of lines all of kinds that put material, spiritual, ephemeral and discursive worlds face to face with each other; redoing the platforms on which it is possible to reach a larger world of operations and the instruments of navigation and embodiment necessary to move – even when it means riding out highly localized movements.

Many urban Africans face situations of turbulent political contingency where it is difficult to anticipate the possible implications their everyday exchanges may have, or where the possibilities of everyday discursive transactions have become highly circumscribed. In these situations, forms of address, mutuality and intelligibility seem to foreground the materiality of linguistic *techné* and orchestrate a coordination of interlocutors seemingly inexplicable and impossible in terms of conventional notions of meaning and understanding. The apparent signs of belonging and convention, as well as a standard corpus of references that would usually permit transactions across heterogeneous localities of the city no longer are able to articulate a workable sense of 'being-together', or at least are perceived by some as insufficient to this task. Rather, speech is 'thrown' into another dimension, sometimes explicitly identified as a sacral space, where physical and social distance, with its concomitant markers of intimacy and association, do not appear to be critical elements in determining the capacity of people to communicate.

Where the reproduction and extension of a sense of belonging – whether in terms of citizenship or communalism – have a discernible

infrastructure that facilitates conveyance across national boundaries and variegated forms of distance, the 'media' at work in these more 'sacral' exchanges 'show up' with limited visibility. This emergence is a particular political practice of keeping things open, of deploying the 'cityness' of the city in structural conditions where much appears to be foreclosed, where the city is a constant reminder of foreclosure. A critical challenge is how urban residents align their actions with collective effects in situations where the speech that would be normatively seen as critical to such efforts is fractured or deeply mistrusted.

The night, then, bears witness to a capacity to act in concert in an instantiation of collective life that cannot be confidently framed in any analytical language, and that seems to adamantly put off any clear apprehension of what is going on or could go on. In other words, people enunciate their existence together, their embodied urbanity, in a way that makes it impossible to determine who is really who in relationship to anyone else, who has power and who doesn't, who has what particular value and who doesn't. And this has been the key element of observation in my work, that, from abandoned brothels in the periphery of Khartoum in which the surrounding neighbourhood assembles, to the backyards of run-down coffee shops deep into the insecure nights of Abidjan, where the scores of people gathered, often night after night, are characterized by the fact that rarely did anyone say anything clearly intelligible to each other. For example, in Abidjan, I would find myself engaged in protracted conversations with near-lunatics, street boys, maids, truck drivers, directors of statistical bureaus, clergymen and software programmers where either the French was so distorted or idiomatic as to be incomprehensible to most gathered, where the *Dyula* was so mixed with English colloquialisms as to defeat the purpose of either language being mixed, or where someone spoke in his local dialect of *Abé*, *Grebo* or *Wé* and no one else at the table knew the language, or where there was just gibberish. But the absence of linguistic consonance didn't seem to matter; for all other signs would indicate that people were attuned to whatever was going on, paying attention, responding to and fro to an nearly effortless rhythm of interchange. Anger, joy, indifference, curiosity and tenderness would all be exchanged and at moments that did not appear to be ineluctable to anyone; every affective response seemed to make sense, although there was no surface evidence as to why particular feelings might come and go.

And so, in large measure, there is much about African cities that remains full of 'events that are events' – where maps struggle to keep up, where potentialities never dare announce themselves as actualized, and where the city remains something yet to come.

Notes

1. Intimate knowledge refers to an always emergent realm of affective knowing that inserts itself as a mediation between relationships and rationalities; embodied by and situated in the specific practices that take place in a particular place.

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