



## CHAPTER 10

**Demonstrations at Work:  
Some Notes from Urban Africa***AbdouMaliq Simone*

**A**n unrelenting feature of urban life no matter where it takes place, impoverishment seems to be an inextricable aspect of all that cities promise and accomplish and a by-product of the city's capacity to create dense interchanges of materials and bodies, which the city puts to unanticipated uses that mark a space for aspirations, energies, and lives that cannot be productively used. At the same time, cities have always made a large proportion of their residents available to service the agendas of others, limiting the cost of their incorporation as labor and circumscribing their ability to use urbanization as a resource for a much broader range of projects and desires.

The political and economic relationships of cities cannot be separated from the particular and contingent forms through which cities have acted as mediators in the intersections of distinct imperial incursions, as incubators of accommodations among different kinds of actors and economic interests, or as concretizations of particular ways of using and adjusting to shifts in globalization (Chatterjee 2004; Prakash 2008; Roy 2008). For example, to invoke the notion of "postcolonial cities" does not explain much what goes on within them, since highly differentiated practices, temporalities, and modes of subjectification must be included in the concept of colonialism in order to maintain it as a significant event. The ghetto is another such concept. Just because



we can identify slums, *barrios*, *bidonvilles*, *favelas*, and *kampungs* across all major cities of the global South gives us no indication of what they have been used for, when and how they arose, or what they “do” for the rest of the city and areas beyond. These kinds of generalizations make it difficult to identify viable courses of political action (Barnett 2006).

Cities have been places in which many different kinds of actors, both local and nonlocal—and including administrators, traders, proletariats, sojourners, missionaries, teachers, compradors, commerçants, bandits, academics, artisans, and domestics—worked out ways of relating to shifting forms of domination and autonomy and made the necessary realignments incurred by their own activities as a result. Therefore, there is no overarching model that accounts for the specific relational fields that exist within given cities—whether in terms of who constitutes a particular population (for example, “the poor”), the spatial profiles of where people reside, or what they do with given territories across the city (Bayart and Bertrand 2006; Leitner, Sheppard, and Sziarto 2008).

Yet such uncertainty has historically been experienced as a portent of danger. Dividing lines must be drawn as a way of constituting and anticipating particular vectors and agents of antagonism. Concentrations of poor and lower-middle-class residents in close proximity to factories, offices, and markets are socialized into making certain assumptions about themselves and their possibilities through the use of planning, service provision, and administration as control mechanisms. Control functions mainly through underfunding such districts, enforcing shifting expenditures of time, labor, and money that households have to make in order to maintain their residence, and specifying procedures through which residents have to make themselves accountable. What makes residents eligible for certain opportunities and services, on what conditions residents are entitled to use public and private spaces, and what constitutes infractions of acceptable demeanors become key considerations (Donald 1999; Joyce 2003).

Given the densities of the potential relationships spawned from the intricate ways in which city residents must be involved in each other’s lives—in the workplace, on the trading floor, in neighborhood streets—solidarities, reciprocities, and collaborations are always being generated that exceed the frameworks through which these residents are to be included in the city. Economic transactions proliferate that circumvent dependence on formalized provision



of goods and services, and they configure networks of interdependency and translation in which goods are exchanged according to locally specific valuation. As such, this density of concentration gives an apparently subjugated population dangerous leverage to act on the larger city in its own interests. When policymakers respond by deeming these districts to be beyond repair, as they so often do, the population has to be spread out, dispersed in the name of better living conditions (Duda 2008).

On the other hand, the opacity of boundaries that define specific populations and forms of economic activity can also make it unclear who is to be displaced. As metropolitan governance networks grow increasingly dependent on transactions that cannot be pinned down by any legal framework or standards of efficacy—but at the same time must usually cover up the fact that they do so—who will do the everyday work in the “trenches” to ensure that these myriad provisional deals and accommodations among key institutions are made? Those actors who constitute the prospective threat to projects of capital accumulation and social control may be precisely those who are turned to in order to keep projects together or at least demonstrate the wide range of possibilities for operating outside conventions and laws (Ruggiero and South 1997).

### SKILLS AND RESISTANCE

For Vera da Silva Telles and Daniel Veloso Hirata (2007), residents in this situation are neither simply the subjugated nor the purveyors of skilled survival. Rather, they continuously navigate a world where no one set of assumptions or clearly delineated trajectory of efficacy and livelihood applies. Here residents must simultaneously avoid everyday violence and take into account all of those friends, family members, and neighbors who have not “made it”—who have not survived. This need to be incessantly cautious turns everyday transactions into an unrelenting scrutiny of what can be said to whom and how different worlds and alliances can be “ducked into.” At the same time, residents have to do whatever it takes to not become poorer than the next person and to avoid becoming an object of charity or solely a beneficiary of the supports of others. Thus, whatever is constant in one’s life as a platform of social supports must be experimented with and taken in unknown directions, but without “bringing down the house.” What is important is the capacity to alternate continuously



between acting in networks as if they are based on trust and cooperation and acting as if they are simply vectors of strategic manipulation where spaces are opened by immobilizing others (Grabher 2006).

In part, these issues concerning the social composition of cities have emerged in the political strategies and technical instruments that have predominated in efforts to organize the urban poor since 1976, after the first international gathering, the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat 1), to consider urban settlement issues. Despite substantial rates of urbanization across the global South and the exigencies entailed in accommodating a swelling population of former peasants, agricultural workers, artisans, and traders, a lack of political will and financial resources made it difficult to keep up with this urban growth. Policies gravitated instead toward sites and service schemes that provided basic demarcations of plots and skeletal services that would be “filled in” over time through the initiatives and resources of the poor themselves.

The idea was to establish a basic, identifiable platform on which residents could establish a secure foothold in the city. This security could then be progressively mobilized to affect the development of the settlement. Without having to worry about the basic right to be in the city, residents could get on with the business of using the city to build a livelihood and accumulate savings. By applying their own logics of spatial development, they also would “domesticate” the city in ways that would enable them to “recognize themselves” within it. In other words, they would build settlements that, by reflecting their practices, aspirations, and values, would constitute a particular capacity and set of rights materially inscribed within the built environment (Benjamin 2000, 2008; Boonyabanha 2001, 2009; Khosla et al. 2002; Mitlin 2002, 2008; Sharma 2000).

Although such policies have been contested all along, implicitly they defer difficult challenges about rights, inclusion, and responsibilities to a future time. Everyone can then argue that development is under way, that a trajectory of progressive inclusion in urban life has been charted. This policy logic has been reinforced by pointing to all of the failed projects undertaken by states to comprehensively house and service low-income residents. Observers attribute this failure, in part, to low-income residents not being fully prepared to deal with urban life and having behaviors of habitation that are out of synch with the expectations embodied in these public housing projects. Thus, there has been

little political distance between supporting the capacities of residents to build the city in ways that reflect different aspirations and collective arrangements, on the one hand, and concluding that the poor fundamentally lack the capacity to come to grips with urban life. Exclusion is reframed as lack of competence, which is addressed with various capacity-building programs centered on teaching the poor how to save and govern themselves (Appadurai 2002).

Faced with relentless hostility from institutions of municipal power, resident associations and political mobilizations of the poor coupled the demands for citizenship rights with discourses that valorized the capacities of the poor to manage their own lives and settlements. In order not to internalize the violence directed toward them—as manifested through forced removals and the harassment of livelihood activities—urban social movements emphasized the unyielding capacities of low-income residents to make the city their own regardless of efforts to exclude them. Thus, when residents looked upon the dense, underserved, and insalubrious urban environment, they would also recognize their specific abilities to be part of urban life, to concretize their rights to the city.

These efforts by thousands of local associations—made visible to a larger international audience through the efforts of organizations such as Habitat International, Shack/Slumdweller International, and the Asian Coalition on Housing Rights, to name a few—helped generate a broader interest by researchers, architects, and artists in various city-making practices “from below.” Urban literature in recent years has been replete with examples of the efficacies of slums or the productivity of urban frisson. This proliferation of interest once again raises the question about representation and the politics of a subaltern urbanism. Here there are a wide range of claims, from more modest ethnographic examinations of the toiling poor just managing to keep their heads above water to claims that the subaltern shows us what all cities “really are”—essentially de-stabilized, fluid assemblages of bodies, materials, and affect on a field of constant improvisation.

All of this long-term detailing of urban life—its descriptions of people, neighborhoods, and conditions—has been fraught with ethical dilemmas. It is almost impossible to explore the sociality of the “slum” without the obligation to recognize the essential vulnerability of those who live within it. But what is the recognition of vulnerability? What is the relationship between the

purported sense of weakness or precariousness that exists in the present and the elaboration of the events and conditions that are probably forthcoming as a result of such weakness? Development discourses have long raised the issue that what is important is not what takes place now—not the characteristics of conditions in the present—but what is likely to happen in the future as a result of those conditions. What is it, then, that is recognized as vulnerability? In other words, how do the limitations of the present turn into the inevitability of some future disaster? How is all that is practiced or accomplished now in the present subsumed under this inevitability?

Lack of sanitation, for example, will mean shortened lives, household conflicts, and depreciation of livelihood. Although it is certainly possible to enumerate all kinds of causal effects, it is this positing of an original state of vulnerability from which causal chains then “take off.” But who recognizes vulnerability? Who determines that a place is unlivable? When residents across a city look at themselves, who sees vulnerability, and under what conditions? What is important is not so much the truth value of such attributed status, but the extent to which the recognition facilitates or forecloses an engagement with the “vulnerable” in ways that exceed their anticipated trajectory—a trajectory that takes them “away” from us. For as Radhakrishnan (2008, 82) points out, “In our recognition of vulnerability, we as humans admit the unrepresentability of death and dying within human discourse and, at the same time, create a normative framework governed and informed by the very phenomenon that we cannot represent.” Given this, what obligations and latitude exist to engage the vulnerable as “ordinary” urban citizens in ways that do not exaggerate commonalities as a means of also dismissing them from our lives?

Whereas cities embody a critical inability to hold together stable relationships among such elements, it is another thing to insist that this notion of the city is “proved” by its most vulnerable inhabitants—thus equating vulnerability and the exigencies of constant compensation and adjustment with some “essence” of urbanity. The actions of the poor certainly can point to how the city is not all that it is “cracked up” to be. Still, these fissures in the normative—that is, the constituent gaps that enable urban governance and urban norms to consolidate themselves—do not become visible and usable by unveiling a prior and more “real” version of the city. Rather, they become instrumental through the active disruption of municipal power and capitalist relations. It



is in the fight of the poor to overcome the very conditions that supposedly embody the fractal character of urban life that its potentialities are concretized.

We know many things from studies of cities in the global South, yet what do they mean, and for whom? What does all of this subaltern capacity mean in the long run? Must it mean anything in particular? Can all of this “skilled action” exist simply as what it appears to be—skilled action—without having to be mobilized for an instrumentality outside of its own surface applications? Since cities seem so resistant to being swayed by any particular evidence of their functioning, does it really matter what claims are made on behalf of and through a subaltern urbanism? Does the need to address the provision of urban rights, citizenship, and services and to remake the structural conditions that link urban growth to dispossession mandate against demonstrations of efficacy and vitality on the part of poor in ways other than their political actions? Are there ways of representing, or at least pointing to, the practices of city-making that are cognizant of the city as a fundamental aspect of global capitalist relations, yet that recognize the city as a viable arena of experimentation that continuously hones the aspirations and concomitant practices for different ways of living? In the following section, I take up some of these questions with reference to contemporary urban central Africa, and Kinshasa in particular.

#### **SHELTERS AND STAND-INS, HEDGES AND VALUES: THE OSCILLATING ECONOMIES OF AFRICAN URBAN LIFE**

Across much of today’s urban Africa, most residents seem to tend to their own waiting games—waiting either for something to drastically change or simply for time to run out. There are few opportunities and resources to construct narratives of any discernible progression, and inordinate effort may be expended to maintain a provisional sense of sameness—of holding on, putting food on the table, keeping a roof over one’s head, and minimizing the intrusions of others. Although there may be large measures of circulation, mobility, resilience, and innovation in the ways in which residents navigate volatile spaces and livelihoods, these rarely constitute a platform for the conviction that things are getting better.

At the same time, many urban residents—rich and poor alike—obsessively adhere to the trappings of modernity, playing the game by the book. Regardless



of whether school fees take up half of a household's income, kids are properly dressed in spotless school uniforms and ready at the school door exactly on time every morning. It matters little that all of the evidence points to the fact that this education will have minimal impact on what happens later. A woman civil servant in a municipal agency is at her desk every morning on time, brings her own lunch to eat at her desk, and completes the day's paperwork after twelve hours even though there is no guarantee that she will receive a paycheck at the end of the month.

Still, cities continue to spill over their bounds, often across places barely accessible by two-wheeled vehicles, pushing back hinterlands. Although most residents at these new peripheries seldom venture very far into the interiors of older urban sediments, they are convinced that proximity to the city exists and that it constitutes a basis to at least service forthcoming expansions. However, without solid links to the histories that have socialized workable structures of urban authority or to the traditions of the often volatile, depleted regions they came from, these nascent residents will sometimes "live on each other" (as they say in Douala's Brazzaville district). They insert themselves in whatever stands out in the particular details of each other's existence, such as bodily and social practices or ways of getting and doing things. As a result, even the simplest activities—eating, loving, talking—may have too many unanticipated implications, and so it is important to "let the wind take you places"—that is, to not be overly concerned about holding one's ground or being known as one thing.

In some central African cities, such as Douala and Kinshasa, notions of economy manifest in the practice of interweaving discrete people and things with others in relations that often are unfamiliar and make little sense. Things that do not readily belong are assembled into provisional bundles, not only to create new forms of consumption but also, more importantly, to keep the discreteness of things intact, as a shelter against the easy parasitism. Economy, then, is reassemblage of valuation or keeping the value of things open to new uses and sites (Callon 2008). Thus, to grasp the fierce ambivalence of many clearly impoverished urban districts requires an appreciation for the oscillations of value as bodies, lives, built environments, and materials continuously enjoin and break from associations that enable the temporary shelters and opportunities where the civil and uncivil, the benevolent and the manipulative, propel each other somewhere else, momentarily away from homogenized misery or individual advantage. No one can go it alone; it is not clear



with whom one should or could go; and one must go somewhere or else be swallowed by “more powerful mouths,” which are always plentiful.

Urban living has been associated not only with the individuation of selves from an encompassing social context but also with individuation of persons from associated webs of things, infrastructure, and territory. The body and self stand out because they step out of a meshed world, and then things take on a support role at the service of personhood—creating an environment for it that maintains proximity to virtuous inputs while keeping the deleterious at bay (Sloterdijk 2008). Personhood requires a particular spacing-out, a field of attention that allows culpability and capacity that is claimed and attributed, as well as a narrative line through which objectives are set and to which subsequent action is directed.

But one of the aspects that makes slum life normatively intolerable is the intense proximity of lives, as well as organic and inorganic matter in various states of composition that seem to make it impossible to account for, let alone imagine, a line of progression. This is the case despite the plenitude of available stories about the rise and fall of built environments, social projects, and individual lives. In contrast to the routinized middle-class orderliness that creates the veneer of an endless, stable present, the slum shows its daily wear-and-tear, but in ways and in response to events too numerous and variegated to provide a discernible account. The highly visible acts of responsiveness—the impacts that events have on each other—become the arena of daily interventions. Since there are no “strong narratives” that steer these interventions in a readily identifiable direction, some residents depend on “stepping into the middle of things” to see what kinds of advantageous scenarios can be put together. This is why African urban markets are full of people, the majority of whom are neither buying nor selling anything in particular. Rather, they are present in the market simply to take their chances, to act as if there are deals about to be made, or simply to be the person called upon to be the extra hand or the stranger nobody knows ready to stand in at a moment’s notice.

### BLOOD ECONOMIES

Kasa-Vubu, a centrally located district in Kinshasa, is named after one of Congo’s most prominent political leaders. It had been developed as a combined commercial-residential area just on the other side of the southern limits of



the former colonial enclave. Its advantageous location enabled it to develop a cosmopolitan edge, reflected in the varied backgrounds of its traders and residents. The commercial area has been redeveloped several times, but each such effort seems to invite more overuse and overcrowding. The surrounding residential areas have some of the highest density levels in the city and are places of rough conditions and rough characters.

For a crew of guys I know in Kasa-Vubu, it is hard to tell when the work really begins or even what it is. The most intense activity seems to occur in the late afternoon in the intersection of various satisfactions and apprehensions. Some are relieved to have made more than they anticipated and can look forward to treating their friends to a beer. Others have barely sold or made anything and are reluctant to return home. There are those who will hide from creditors and those who will under-count the day's receipts. And some will bundle what they have left with the surplus of others and try quickly to pass off the package deal to those who roam the markets at this hour looking for last-minute bargains.

Cedric, Lumanu, Makoto, Bazana, and Armando are the titular heads of the "Bloods" in the quarter of Kasa-Vubu just south of Kinshasa's central market area. With their red bandanas, they have styled themselves around the American gang and indeed are well informed about its history, personalities, and organizational structure. The K-V crew intends not so much to be a "branch" of a global organization as to appropriate certain "themes" and ways of operating in order to instantiate themselves into the local economy. With the exception of Makoto, all are university graduates, and their grooming and eyewear convey the look of young professionals rather than thugs. They all occupy a parcel left to Armando when his family unexpectedly departed for Europe without informing him; he recruited his present "associates" to help him hold on to the parcel in the face of competing and aggressive claims from kin.

The crew spreads across Marché Gambela at the start of the trading day. They canvass the initial expectations—for a market is a field of affective textures, from indifference to driven urgency, and these forces compel an array of discursive tactics and deals. With the decaying infrastructure of the market and the various cloggings of the transport routes in which it is embedded, the trading day must also circumvent incessant delays from dealing with grid-locked traffic, waiting for deliveries, setting aside goods for pickups that are

slow in coming, coping with sporadic supplies of electricity, and getting into unanticipated arguments that are not resolved quickly. Given that marketing entails getting what one has access to out into the largest conceivable world of consumers willing to pay a good price, trading is concerned with opening up vistas of sight and perspective. Marketing is not just about what traders can actually see but also about what they can anticipate, what they imagine to be taking place beyond their immediate field of vision. To a large extent, this is what the Bloods do: At the outset of the day, they try to get a sense of what the market, in all its various individuated and grouped sensibilities, anticipates, how the market "feels" about how it is situated in the larger context of events.

As hopes, anxieties, exigencies, and indifference swirl around in the market, each trader interferes with the capacities of others. Whether crowding in or stepping away, the traders shape the spaces of transaction, for it makes little sense in an overcrowded arena of small transactions to simply wait for customers. Traders have to circulate, to round up possible sales, to make certain products, services, and prices readily available to those whose intention was only to acquire a specific good and not others, to try to convince them of certain associations between discrepant items. Although some traders stay still in the recesses of this mobility, as a means of offering discretion and limited visibility, Gambela is a stage for showing cards by those who mostly do not hold them. Nevertheless, they are convinced that, once the cards trade hands, they know enough about where they are to make them appear almost immediately.

For the Bloods, it is important to assess how the traders they deal with think about their location at the start of the day: Is this the day they have to pay off the big Lebanese creditors? Is this the day wives will collect from their *tontine*? Is this the day groups of buyers will come in from the distant suburbs beyond the airport? Traders in the market are rarely alone—they belong somewhere—and in Gambela the company includes the West Africans, who have been in the market for generations, and traders affiliated with Chinese, Lebanese, or Indian wholesalers or brokers, who can mobilize credit and connections to facilitate supply and advantageous prices. There are those who walk in various uniforms, which, in the market, tend to obscure rather than clarify representation, as many try to invoke an authority from somewhere. There are traders linked to big politicians and others with ties to churches or to the growers and brokers whose provinces supply the bulk of specific goods.



As traders try to put together an expansive vantage point—that is, a plane along which they can envision a ramifying series of events and people to articulate what they have access to—the actions of others in the market become fundamentally ambiguous, for they can both block and facilitate, both elucidate and dissimulate.

In a city of intense scarcity and constantly shifting possessions, where there are a limited number of games and resources to work with, success is often a matter of slowing others down to allow one time to get to some piece of information, some money, some customer, before others have a chance. This means throwing up detours and deviations. At the same time, straight paths, while often enabling speed, have their own limitations. When people are forced into deviations and onto circular paths, they may pay attention to scenes and people they otherwise would not have thought twice about, and in these encounters they may discover unforeseen possibilities. Here, regardless of the spatialization entailed, a straight path means little to someone who is unable or unwilling to move fast, and the circuitous path means little to those who are too impatient to take in the view. All of these factors are the “materials” that the Bloods work with.

But at the beginning of the day, they simply try to “take it all in”—to get a sense of the intensity of aspirations, the willingness of certain traders to assume various ways of seeing and figuring, and the way the market is “coming together,” how the transports, goods, stalls, affects, and openings are interacting. They spend no more than an hour at this, and then they go back to sleep, as if to make any dreams they may have an important modality for designing what they will attempt later.

The crew returns to Gambela in the late afternoon just as things are both winding down and thus speeding up. It is a time when those who are trying to unload, to make some money, are most desperate, and this feeling intersects with the accruing patience of those who feel that they have done as well as possible, that it is important to sit tight and not make any mistakes, that it is not the time to go out on a limb. It is also a time when the market is at its messiest, and not simply because it has been “worked” all day, although the mess is certainly a sign of that work. It is also messy because traders have been holding goods for others, bundles may have been proposed but are not going anywhere, and things now have to be disentangled and returned to their proper

places, but just as they are on their way back, something else may intervene to convince the traders of other possible last-minute destinations. This is one facet of what the Bloods do. They wait until the last minute and try to force through different kinds of "alliances" between these goods on "their way back." Given what they observed in the morning—the various assessments of location, moods and expectations, and opening prices and bottom lines—it is time to reassess these sentiments, expectations, and assessments now that the trading day is almost at a close.

Additionally, no matter how much a trader has made at the end of the day, the reality remains that he or she owes something to someone—creditors, family members, fellow traders, patrons. These others may not need to be paid that day, but at least in the abstract something must be set aside. What the Bloods do is to "suggest" (and sometimes compel) that this extra something be put into "play"—for example, to help fund a last-minute purchase; to cover an urgent debt in return for a favorable volume of a certain good or service; to join in a collective purchase of a service, such as protection; to expedite a delivery; to circumvent a tax or duty; or to help fund someone who is traveling and has a good jump on a favorable price for some bulk purchase. Because the Bloods have nothing easily discernible to buy or sell themselves, they put all of their efforts toward reading the potential willingness of traders to take actions they would not readily consider and toward getting a sense of how traders think they are connected, not only to each other but to wider scenarios. For example, since relations between Lebanese wholesalers and Gambela retailers can be characterized by the latter's docility in the face of manipulation and sometimes extortionary merchandising, the Bloods will identify ways to try to "go back door." They might arrange for a theft to occur at a warehouse, or see that a wholesaler's kid goes missing for a few days, or capture a competitor's wife in a compromising position, or spread rumors about certain big merchants holding back on payoffs to their guys in the government. Although reluctant to use violence, they find it necessary to maintain a reputation for violence as a kind of guarantor of authority in the market that cannot rely simply on threat or extortion.

For at the end of the day the task is to work with the loose ends and concretize potential futures from what is left over, not because this is the only way to concretize potential futures but because the task of working with leftovers



reconfigures relations within the market and beyond. Cajoling, seducing, steering, sometimes forcefully bringing different actors to each other's attention, the Bloods "suggest" ways of packaging leftover food, recently arrived bundles of clothes, and "diverted" electronics that did not quite find their way to the expected pickup into a nearby waiting van that could quickly arrive at a mega-prayer meeting in Matete and park near the bevy of food-sellers hoping to catch the pre- and post-meeting multitudes. As everyone rushes from the market and into the crowded thoroughfares and minivans and buses, a Blood or two makes sure that certain vehicles are able to jump the queue, as long as their drivers are willing to make room on their rooftops for a few bags of cement and deliver it for free to a group of construction workers willing to do a few hours of underpaid overtime at a trader's little satellite shop in the suburbs in return for a connection he has with the ministry handling a big project in Gombé.

The end of the day also requires the management of impressions. The appearance of success is critical. Traders often mask their desperation and insist on certain prices until the end. But this adamancy can also be thrown into the mix: It can hedge those who want to get rid of something for almost any price because they need something for the dinner table that night. The work of the Bloods is to bring together all these divergent expectations and levels of desperation or patience, as well as those who think long and those who think short, those who see far and wide and those who see only the immediate area around their stall. The "today I will do for you if you will do this tomorrow" is founded on these differences. There will be those who can wait to be paid a month, two months down the line because they see the fluctuations in the supply chain and know that they can afford to have someone hold something now—a good, a price, a service—because its value will be markedly different later on. There are those who know that in a few weeks a client or potential customer will probably need a certain quantity of an item just when supply is constrained, and thus they are willing to acquire now and hold on. Then there are those who are willing to take a chance on an item or class of goods that they would not have considered before, but can now easily acquire, and simply put it into play as an instrument to affect the price of something they really want.

The Bloods' work is the choreography of these intersections and exchanges. What counts first and foremost is extricating a good or service from the use

and value that is anticipated for it at the beginning of the day, seeing later on the extent to which this “hold”—the association between the good and its framing—has been maintained, and deciding whether there is now flexibility to dislodge the equations that link trader, good, price, and use and set other connections in motion. Again, there are goods that are left over, those that arrive late or never come, those that come in the wrong quantities or are delivered to the wrong hands. There is spillage and scarcity; things that circulated during the day may have assumed advantageous locations and bundles but are now on their way back to their “proper” owners. In the first instance, the Bloods attempt to link these materials—food, wire, cement, cloth, hardware, pharmaceuticals—regardless of their designated uses. They are simply things making a last-minute appearance (or disappearance) in the market, and the objective is to interrupt the flows normally suggested by their marketing to carve out transactions that may have little to do with the actual or potential number of customers for a particular type of commodity, either now or tomorrow.

Of course, all these materials in circulation belong to someone; they have actual or potential value to someone, and they are someone’s property and set of possibilities. Things are not easily dissociable from what they represent. Once held and then exchanged, it is not always clear under what conditions they can be replenished. In a city where the institutions of mediation are weak, claims to authority are suspect, and predictable trajectories of input and output are usually provisional, there may seem to be little room for maneuver. Such conditions may emphasize the need for steadfastness, trust, and stringent codes of reliability. These characteristics are certainly on display in the market. At the same time, in a city where individuals try to embed themselves in the lives of others and where performing consistently in any endeavor is fraught with unforeseen contingencies, since people are weakly anchored in ongoing institutional roles, keeping goods and services within strict parameters of specific uses is difficult and often not in people’s best interests. Things have to be converted into unexpected uses and values in order to keep them moving and use that movement to maximize a person’s exposure to a wider playing field.

This is precisely what the Bloods trade on: They use the circulation of objects, infused as they are with various intensities of expectation and guile, as a way to piece together relationships that promise, if never guarantee, a widening of the field of vision. The “promise” is that traders can have access to contacts and experiences that might not otherwise be available to them, and the



first step is to disinvest from the particular sentiments and calculations with which they have approached the things that pass through their hands. Such opportunities ensue only if they can let go of the particular meaning that these things have and let them exert their “own forcefulness.” At the same time, things are imbued with meaning, and this disjunction is not something to be reconciled or negotiated. Instead, it produces volatility—a moment when things could go in many different directions. It is this volatility that the Bloods attempt to both provoke and steer.

The Bloods can do the work they do—trying to put things into play, trying to use them as instruments to bring different scenarios and actors into an unanticipated proximity—only because they do not care about what these things mean. Although they may be bearers of intensities of expectation, disappointment, need, and imagination, these sentiments are important to the Bloods only because they signal a difference from other sentiments and uses, and that difference then opens up an opportunity for a deal.

As I skim the surface here of complex microeconomics, what I am trying to illustrate is the importance of broadening the usual notions of livelihood. Livelihood as a domain and problem has been too often reduced to considerations of employment, business, or discernible production activities. It is taken to refer to the amassing and deployment of material resources and money, usually as these activities are applied to the effective management of households. But livelihood can also refer to a field of maneuverability, to the act of creating spaces where living can be exercised and deployed. Life seeks to perpetuate itself and maintain stability by producing conditions that bring its critical details into view and minimize the uncertainties incumbent in the stretching of its capacities. The increasing complexities and aggrandizements necessary to secure life can undermine its largely improvised efficacy.

The market operations described here, performed repeatedly as much as possible, also act as ways of taking things apart—and some of these things are long-established relationships and organizations that persist but increasingly with varied “half-lives.” If what the Bloods attempt to do is to circumvent the effects of actors and things on the market according to particular redundant arrangements, the “stuff” of the market is also catapulted, or returned, to a different phase of existence—not necessarily transformed but rendered in a form that makes it available to different calculation and sometimes simply to the





“highest bidder.” This practice constitutes a particular limitation on the productivity of experimentation, for it comes to devalue certain hard-won accomplishments of consistency. It could problematically signal that all that has been accomplished—through negotiations and practice over the years—can be simply superseded by an “experimental moment” and that the problems of legitimacy and available resources in the larger society authorize experimentation for its own sake.

In Kasa-Vubu, the Bloods have no job, official position, or discernible future. In the time I spent with them, I was not even able to determine how in the end they get paid. They have money, but not large amounts. They exert some kind of authority, but it is not clear exactly what. Sometimes what they do works; more often they are laughed at or met with complete indifference. They are a highly visible presence in the quarter, but only for short spurts of time. They never socialize locally and are apprehensive about being too exposed. Some are wanted for crimes and make a big deal about avoiding the police, but at other times they could not seem to care less. Clearly a particular kind of force field is being “played” here—the ebbs and flows of intersecting ambitions, constraints, claims, losses, hopes, calculations, tactics, impressions, and manipulations. Kinshasa is a city full of tricks and deceptions, as well as grinding boredom and limited options. How speech, dress, words, gestures, timing, speculation, reading, and intuition are deployed becomes a critical aspect of livelihood—that is, making a “hood” for life, a place, a cover, and a performance that interweaves various instantiations and expressions of living in order to move life somewhere else, if only for the time being. In many ways, the Bloods in Kasa-Vubu would not appear out of place in the marginalized urban spaces of U.S. cities or elsewhere.

#### DEMONSTRATING URBAN CAPACITIES, LIMITATIONS, AND POTENTIALS

At the heart of urban modernity has been the attempt to circumvent demonstration—to bring to a close the need to make visible how things work, how things are put together. For demonstrations can be contested and offset by other kinds of demonstrations. So the built environment is used as a language of summation that brings to a close what can be remembered and what can be said about what the nation is—its eventuality and composition.



But cities clearly have always been places of experimentation through the application of different ways of being urban, and new exceptions to the predominant constellations of urban form and economy are always coming to the fore. These exceptions require particular intellectual tools and technologies of navigation and habitation. What are these tools and technologies, particularly as they assume specific modes of visibility? In other words, the very process of their construction and deployment constellates and cuts across so many different sectors and walks of life that they become increasing “invisible.” This may entail the relationship between dissimulation and the empirical, speculation and survival, degradation and potentiality, or the confluence and interdependencies of divergent social groups and cognitions. To return to the example of Kinshasa detailed earlier, the simultaneity of the incongruities that point to the apparent absence of effective regulation and clear market rules is also a demonstration of potentials that are difficult for conventional analysis to apprehend.

The postcolonial conundrum, then, is how to reconcile the need to demonstrate difference where the difference that would be most clearly demonstrable lies in the relatively invisible piecing together of aspects of city life—people, things, spaces—that are not conventionally thought to be associable. The convergence of actors, things, speech, and spaces that are not easily seen as having a basis to associate is something that always must be demonstrated. In other words, to use Latour’s language, it must be made a matter of concern, a matter that not only opens up new discussions and explorations but mobilizes attention and publicity, assembles an audience, and generates a willingness to remain engaged and take seriously that which is demonstrated as a matter of reality (Callon 2004; Latour 2004). A demonstration does not remain within its own terms, although, as a demonstration, it is has to be more than a proposal; it must also be an indication of something that really exists. This is not simply to reiterate a matter of accepted fact but to open up a space where new connections among disparate elements and events can be debated and recognized.

If cities embody different possibilities of both inclusion and exclusion, of life and death, of power for and power against, then there is no one way to address the political challenges of urban life. This means that the demonstrations of intersections among different districts, actors, economies, and ways of life cannot simply reiterate evidence that cosmopolitan urbanity, more efficient

urban governance, and the rectifying of fundamental inequalities are needed. These demonstrations must open up new questions about the unacknowledged relationships and forces acting on the city that in the long run signal something different being enacted in relationship to the cosmopolitan, to governance, and to inequality.

### References

- Appadurai, Arjun 2002. "Deep Democracy: Urban Governmentality and the Horizon of Politics." *Public Culture* 14: 21–47.
- Barnett, Clive. 2006. "Reaching Out: The Demands of Citizenship in a Globalizing World." In *A Demanding World*, edited by Clive Barnett, Jennifer Robinson, and Gillian Rose. Milton Keynes, U.K.: The Open University.
- Bayart, Jean-François, and Romain Bertrand. 2006. "De quel 'legs colonial' parle-t-on?" ("Which 'colonial legacy' do we speak about?"). *Espirit* (December): 134–160.
- Benjamin, Solomon. 2000. "Governance, Economic Settings, and Poverty in Bangalore." *Environment and Urbanization* 12: 35–56.
- . 2008. "Occupancy Urbanism: Radicalizing Politics and Economy Beyond Policy and Programs." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 32: 719–729.
- Boonyabancha, Somsook. 2001. "Savings and Loans: Drawing Lessons from Some Experiences in Asia." *Environment and Urbanization* 17: 9–21.
- . 2009. "Land for Housing the Poor—by the Poor: Experiences from the Baan Mankong Network Slum Upgrading Project in Thailand." *Environment and Urbanization* 21: 309–322.
- Callon, Michel. 2004. "Europe Wrestling with Technology." *Economy and Society* 33: 121–134.
- . 2008. "Economic Markets and the Rise of Interactive Agencements." In *Living in a Material World: Economic Sociology Meets Science and Technology Studies*, edited by Trevor Pinch and Richard Swedberg. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Chatterjee, Partha. 2004. *The Politics of the Governed: Popular Politics in Most of the World*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Donald, James. 1999. *Imagining the Modern City*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Duda, John. 2008. "Naturalizing Urban Counter-Insurgency." *Critical Planning Review* (Spring): 61–76.
- Grabher, Gernot. 2006. "Trading Routes, Bypasses, and Risky Intersections: Mapping the Travels of 'Networks' Between Economic Sociology and Economic Geography." *Progress in Human Geography* 30: 1–27.
- Joyce, Patrick. 2003. *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City*. London: Verso.
- Khosla, Romi, Sikandar Hasan, Jane Samuels, and Budhi Mulyawan. 2002. "Removing Unfreedoms: Citizens as Agents of Change." Brussels: United Nations Habitat Program Liaison Office.
- Latour, Bruno. 2004. "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." *Critical Inquiry* 30: 25–248.



- Leitner, Helga, Eric Sheppard, and Kristin Sziarto. 2008. "The Spatialities of Contentious Politics." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 33: 157–172.
- Mitlin, Diana. 2002. "Addressing Urban Poverty Through Strengthening Assets." *Habitat International* 27: 393–406.
- . 2008. "With and Beyond the State—Coproduct as a Route to Political Influence, Power, and Transformation for Grassroots Organizations." *Environment and Urbanization* 20: 339–360.
- Prakash, Gyan. 2008. "Introduction." In *The Spaces of the Modern City: Imaginaries, Politics, and Everyday Life*, edited by Gyan Prakash and Kevin M. Kruse. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Radhakrishnan, R. 2008. "Grievable Life, Accountable Theory." *Boundary 2*, no. 35: 67–84.
- Roy, Ananya. 2008. "The Twenty-First-Century Metropolis: New Geographies of Theory." *Regional Studies* 43, no. 6 (July): 819–830, available at: <http://rsa.informaworld.com/10.1080/00343400701809665>.
- Ruggiero, Vincenzo, and H. Nigel South. 1997. "The Late City as a Bazaar: Drug Markets, Illegal Enterprise, and the Barricades." *British Journal of Sociology* 48: 54–70.
- Sharma, Kalpana. 2000. *Governing Our Cities: Will People Power Work?* London: Panos Institute.
- Sloterdijk, Peter. 2008. "Foam City: About Urban Spatial Multitudes." Translated by Antonio Petrov. In *New Geographies 0*, edited by Neylan Turan. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Graduate School of Design, pp. 136–143.
- Telles, Vera da Silva, and Daniel Veloso Hirata. 2007. "The City and Urban Practices: In the Uncertain Frontiers Between the Illegal, the Informal, and the Illicit." *Estudos Avançados* 21: 173–191.

